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CHAPTER XIV

How Myths Die

We will be concerned here with the death of myths, not in time, but in space. We know that myths transform themselves. These transformations—from one variant to another of the same myth, from one myth to another, from one society to another for the same myth or for different myths—bear sometimes on the framework, sometimes on the code, sometimes on the message of the myth, but without its ceasing to exist as such. Thus these transformations respect a sort of principle of conservation of mythical material, by which any myth could always come from another myth.

However, the integrity of the original formula may itself deteriorate in the course of this process. This formula degenerates or evolves, as you will, beyond the stage where the distinctive characteristics of the myth are still recognizable and where the myth retains what a musician might call its "lilt." In such cases, what does the myth become? This is what we now propose to examine with an example.

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The peoples of the Salish linguistic family, together with their Sahaptin neighbors to the South, occupied in historical times an area stretching almost without a break from the Rocky Mountains to the Pacific Ocean, and roughly covering the basins of the Columbia River in the south and the Frazer River in the north. In this vast territory numerous variants were collected of a complex of myths organized around the tale of a poor, sick, and despised old man, usually called Lynx. By a trick, he makes the daughter of the village chief pregnant. People wonder at this unexplainable pregnancy. A child is born, who points out Lynx as its father; the indignant villagers abandon the couple without fire or food. By himself, or with his wife's help, Lynx recovers his true nature, that of a beautiful young man and expert hunter. Thanks to him, his family lives in plenty, while the villagers who have gone away are starving. At last, they resign themselves to coming back and they ask his forgiveness. Those who did not persist in too harshly maltreating and trying to disfigure the hero are forgiven and receive food supplies (Boas 1895*a* pp. 9–10; 1901, p. 287; 1917, pp. 109–116; Phinney 1934, pp. 465–488; Jacobs 1934, pp. 27–30; Adamson 1934, pp. 193–195; Reichard 1947, pp. 109–116; Teit 1898, pp. 36–40; 1909, p. 684; Ray 1933, pp. 138–142; Hoffman 1884, p. 28–29; Haeberlin 1924, pp. 414–417; Hill-Tout 1899, pp. 534–540; 1900, p. 549; 1907, pp. 228–242).

Reduced to its essential outline, the myth is widely diffused, since one meets with it as far as tropical America, among the ancient Tupinamba of the east coast of Brazil, and also in Peru. The originality of the Salish is to have developed it in two parallel forms. In one, Lynx's son, kidnapped by an owl, then freed by his people, puts on the sanious skin of an old man; when burned, this skin will give birth to fog. In the other, a child, adventurous or out of favor (depending on the version), becomes master of the wind which in those days laid waste to the earth. Having captured and tamed it, he then exposes himself to dangers from which he escapes with the help of a character named Coyote. The fact that this second form has liberally borrowed from old French folklore disseminated in the eighteenth century by Canadian *coureurs-des-bois*, presents a problem which we have tried to solve elsewhere (see our teaching reports, *Annuaire du Collège de France*, 1969–1970, pp. 285–289) and which must not affect us here. In order to illustrate the symmetry of the two forms, it will suffice

entering into a *camera obscura* through a pin-point opening and forced by this obstacle to cross over each other. The same image, seen rightside-up outside, is reflected upside-down in the camera (see p. 184). True to this model, the Chilcotin version of the myth about the boy kidnapped by an owl reinstates as rich and developed a plot as the one existing among the Salish groups south of the Shuswap. But, significantly, several essential propositions topple over and undergo transformations which sometimes result in the meaning being turned inside out.

So how do the Chilcotin tell the myth? They say that, under the pretext of feeding him, an owl enticed and kidnapped a little boy who cried without stopping. He brought him up, made him grow very fast through magic operations, and adorned him with a shell (*dentalia*) necklace. The parents set out to look for their son and meet him. But the child, who liked living with the owl, first refused to follow them. Finally he was convinced and the small group left hurriedly after burning the owl's hut. The bird-man pursued the fugitives who hid near a footbridge that he had to pass on. Frightened by the hero who was waving about his hooked fingers (he had armed them with goat's horns which gave him dangerous claws), the owl fell into the water, swam ashore and gave up the chase. The village received the hero with open arms. He appeared adorned from head to foot with the shells he had taken away, and distributed them around. Since then, the Indians have ornaments made of *dentalia*.

One day, the hero's mother found him dirty and ordered him to take a bath. He refused and she forced him. He dove into the water and disappeared. The sorrowing mother remained on the lake shore and refused to move from there. Winter came. The village women came to the lake to make holes in the ice and draw water. The hero, still living in the depths, amused himself by breaking the pails. Two sisters caught him, using as bait an elaborately decorated pail. He was so softened up and weakened by his stay in the water that he could no longer walk. The sisters tried in vain to scrape off the mud with which he was covered and which gave him a sort of second skin. They carried him to their hut where he warmed up by the fire, and they took care of him.

That winter was unusually severe. The food supplies became scarce and the men could not get the wood they needed to make

snowshoes and go hunting. Although a convalescent, the hero dragged himself outside, gathered just enough wood for one pair of snowshoes, and asked a woman to bring the wood inside and shake it when she was halfway down the ladder leading into the hut (which, among these Indians, is partly underground and entered through the roof). Shaken that way, the wood multiplied and filled the hut. The hunters could make snowshoes and go out. But they found no game, and famine set in.

Then the hero asked the village people to give him arrows, and he too went hunting. He took off his silt skin in secret and hid it. In his original appearance, he killed many caribou and—once more covered with silt—distributed them among the people who had given him good arrows. But Raven had given him a weak arrow and received as his share only a coyote, which is poor game. So he spied on the hero and found the silt skin caught in the fork of a tree. Raven hid it. He saw the hero return young, beautiful, adorned with shells. Unmasked, the hero remained as he was and married the two sisters who had cured him (Farrand 1900, pp. 36–37).

To make apparent all the transformations or inversions which appear in this Athapascan version of a myth more widely known among the Salish, it would no doubt be desirable to quote other variants. But this would lead us too far afield, and so we will resign ourselves to proceeding by allusion. Instead of the usual sequence of the owl going into the hut to kidnap the child, he lures him outside. The Shuswap version, summarized above, had already proceeded to transform the owl, cannibalistic monster for the Kutenai, into a benefactor. The Chilcotin account pursues the transformation in the same direction. But it reverses the function of the bird-man, who among the Shuswap grants spiritual powers, and who becomes the custodian of material wealth (*dentalia*) which the hero gets hold of before running away. It is to this event that the myth traces back the origin of these jewels, thus attributing both an exotic and supernatural character to them. The Chilcotin had good reasons for fostering the mystery in relation to the minds of the Interior Salish, their inland neighbors, who could only obtain these shells by their intermediary (indeed they call the Chilcotin by a name which means "People of the *Dentalia*"). But the reality was quite different. The Chilcotin were the only ones

able to communicate with the Bella Coola, through the passes in the coastal ranges situated in their territory, and they bought the shells from these fishermen. Thus they held a veritable monopoly as regards to the plateau Salish. The latter, especially the Thompson and the Coeur d'Alêne, explained how they lost the origin (formerly a local one) of the *dentalia* shells through a series of myths symmetrical to the one under discussion. This puts their myth in diametrical opposition to that by which the Chilcotin claim to explain how they acquired the exotic source of these ornaments.

No less revealing is the episode in the Chilcotin myth in which the hero's mother wants to force him to bathe. If we list all the variants of this episode along a southeast-northwest axis, on which the Coeur d'Alêne, the Thompson and the Chilcotin follow one another, we can in fact observe a triple transformation. In the Coeur d'Alêne version, the thirsty mother asks her son for some water, which he refuses her. In the Thompson version, the son, feeling the heat, takes a bath in spite of his mother's forbidding it, which is the opposite of the Chilcotin episode (Reichard 1947, pp. 169–170; Boas 1917, pp. 26–30; Teit 1912, pp. 265–268). Therefore the semantic function of water ranges from drink to bath, i.e., from body content to body recipient, for drinking water goes into the body just as the body goes into the bath water. At the same time, the negative son reverses to the negative mother, who is in turn inverted to positive mother:

	COEUR D'ALÊNE	THOMPSON	CHILCOTIN
Water	content	recipient	recipient
Protagonists	son (–)	mother (–)	mother (+)

All the versions include the winter sequence, but whereas in the interior Salish versions the villagers lack firewood, in the Chilcotin version they start by lacking water, which the hero prevents the women from drawing when he amuses himself by breaking their pails. No doubt the wood plays a role in this version, but as lumber, thus in opposition to the other function wood may fill in feeding the fire. Furthermore, this opposition is redoubled by the manner, different in each case, in which the hero makes a small quantity of wood multiply: shaken halfway down the ladder or dumped directly from the top to the bottom. This latter method—the only one remembered in the Salish versions—certainly alludes to that used by the character called Lynx, of whom we spoke at the beginning of this chapter, to make the chief's daughter pregnant (by spitting or urinating from the top of the ladder on the young woman sleeping at the foot of it). All the more certainly that, in some of these versions, the boy captured by the owl is the son of Lynx and that, in the Chilcotin's myth where he is not his son, he still puts on a silt skin which makes him weak and sick, exactly like Lynx wearing the ulcerated skin of an old man; and Lynx's son who, barely freed from his captivity by the owl, voluntarily adopts the same dress. Remember that this skin, stolen from the hero and burned, gives rise to fog, in perfect symmetry with the silt which makes water opaque as fog makes the air opaque, and whose aquatic affinity is the counterpart of the affinity conceived between fog, smoke, and fire in the Salish myths.

Finally, the relation with the mythical series in which the hero makes himself master of wind—faintly attested among the Chilcotin—results from the appearance of coyote in a reverse position in the other myth: as poor game, the passive instrument of the hero's revenge against the raven who did not help him. In the strong versions about the origin of the mastered wind, we saw that the coyote actively provides aid for the hero, enabling him to escape from a perilous situation.

A priori, nothing seems to prevent the myth from passing other thresholds, beyond the Chilcotin. This passage would be marked by a contraction and an attenuation of the plot, beyond which the original image would be recovered and differently inverted along a new axis. But it is also conceivable that in crossing successive thresholds, the creative momentum may lessen and the semantic field of transformations, easily exploitable at first, may afford a diminishing return. Becoming less and less plausible as they beget one another, the last states of the system would impose such distortions to the mythical framework, putting so much stress on its resistance, that it would end up by disintegrating. Then the myth would cease to exist as such. Either it would vanish, making way for other myths, typical of other cultures or regions; or, in order to survive, it would undergo alterations affecting not only its form, but the very essence of myth.

We believe that this can be observed in the particular case under consideration. North of the Chilcotin lived the Carrier, also members of the Athapascan linguistic family but very different in their culture. Indeed the Carrier owed their name to their distinctive customs. Widows were subjected to particularly rigorous constraints, like the duty of constantly wearing the bones of their dead husbands for a prolonged period of time. Now we rediscover among them the generative cell of our mythological ensemble such as it existed, in the south, among the Sahaptin and the Salish, but singularly transformed. The Carrier tell the story of a poor orphan boy whose whole wardrobe consisted of a lynx fur. In the course of a walk, he came upon the chief's daughter naked. She did not see him at all, but later recognized him by the contact of his rough hands which had grazed her body. To escape dishonor, she married him. The chief graciously accepted this son-in-law, hardly worthy of him, bestowing gifts of clothing and ornaments on him, and thereby "washing" his poverty off. He was well advised to do so, as the young man turned out to be an expert hunter and killer of the monsters who persecuted the Indians. One day, however, he died tackling a gigantic man-killing lynx. His disconsolate wife killed herself over her husband's body (Jenness 1934, pp. 114–121).

When this account is compared with the story of Lynx as we summarized it at the beginning according to the Sahaptin and Salish versions, several types of changes are observed. Some appear as inversions. Instead of being old, the hero is young; he sees the chief's daughter outside the village and not inside (or very near) the hut. Moreover, everything transpires as if the Carrier version systematically replaced literal expressions with their metaphorical equivalents. A garment made of lynx fur characterizes a protagonist named Lynx elsewhere; symbolic contact with the young woman's body replaces her actual impregnation. There is a no less symbolic correlation of poverty ("washed" off the hero by the chief's presents) with the silt skin of the Chilcotin version, which the two sisters try in vain to wash off; and with the ulcerated skin of an old man in the Salish versions in which the hero, after getting rid of it, appears adorned with the riches he already owned. Finally, instead of a story inspired by the concept of a distributive justice and ending with the separation of the protagonists in two camps—

the wicked who are punished, the good who are forgiven—we have here a plot evolving to a tragic and inescapable end. These features all show that, with the Carrier version, a decisive passage occurs from a formula mythical until then to a romantic formula within which the initial myth (which was—do not forget—the "story of Lynx") appears as its own metaphor: the monstrous lynx looming up without motivation at the end, and castigating, not so much the hero adorned with all the virtues, as the narrative itself for having forgotten or failed to recognize its original nature and disowning itself as a myth.

Let us now consider another threshold: that which separated the Athapascan of the interior from the tribes of the Pacific coast on their northwest, whose social and cultural characteristics we evoked briefly on p. 259, and to which we should add the linguistic ones. Established at the mouth of the Nass and the Skeena Rivers, the Tsimshian, who speak a separate language and were perhaps related to the great Penutian family, were divided into clans bearing animal names. The Bear clan of the Nisqa subtribe justified, by a legend, its exclusive title to the wearing of a ceremonial headdress of carved and painted wood, inlaid with abalone shell and portraying the face of an owl surrounded by little manlike figures with claws. They tell how a chief had a young son who cried incessantly. He was threatened with the owl, who indeed appeared. But instead of kidnapping the insufferable little boy, the owl flew off with his sister, whom he planted at the top of a tree, from which no one could get her down in spite of her complaints. At last, she resigned herself, stopped lamenting, and married the owl. She soon gave birth to a son and when he had grown up, she asked her husband's permission to send him back among men. The owl agreed to this, composed a song for the occasion, and carved a headdress in his image. He took his wife and son to their village. After the mother had certified the identity of her son for her people, she went back with her husband, leaving the child who later bequeathed to his clan of origin the headdress carved by the owl and the song he had taught him: "O my brother! White Owl gave me this tree as my seat."

To make the discussion simpler, we will leave aside the character of the sister. Her presence in the plot is in fact explained by a

transformation, the reason and origin of which must be sought in the Salish versions found in the Frazer, especially among the Stseelis or the Chehalis which this is not the place to examine here (Hill-Tout 1904, pp. 347–352).

Let us be content to show how this Tsimshian version differs from those of the Chilcotin and the interior Salish. Whereas the Carrier referred to these latter versions by a play of metaphors, it is clear that the Tsimshian narrative, exclusively, brings into play relations of contiguity. In particular, it does not present itself as a myth, but as a legend relating supposedly historical events and meant to fill a precise and restricted purpose, that is the founding of certain clan privileges. And yet, it is without question the same myth because the carved headdress, published by Boas (1897, pp. 324–325 and plate 1; 1895b, p. 572), represents characters thrusting hands with threatening claws toward the owl they have surrounded. This is a motif which the Tsimshian legend, as collected by Boas, does not explain, but of which the informants were nevertheless knowledgeable, since they called these characters "claw men," who are mentioned in the Chilcotin myth we summarized p. 262

But, from there, one can go back much further. These claws made of goat's horns, by means of which the Chilcotin hero caused the owl's downfall, transform the basket bristling with awls on the inside, where the Shuswap and the Kutenai owls deposited the hero after kidnapping him. These awls in turn transform the vermin, the owl's food, which line the basket in the more southern Salish versions in which the kidnapper bird has the role of a loathsome master and not an ogre (Kutenai version) or a shaman presiding over initiation tests (Shuswap version). At the end of this regressive process, we rediscover among the Sanpoil, who lived in the southeast part of the Salish area (thus at the opposite end from the Tsimshian), an implicit reference to the central theme of their narrative and the ritual song that goes with it. Indeed, the Sanpoil called the fork in the central pole of their huts, used for dances in honor of guardian spirits, the "owl's perch" (Ray 1939, p. 129).

Thus, a myth of Salish origin is first inverted as a myth when it passes the linguistic and cultural threshold separating the Salish from the Athapascan; it then becomes a romantic tale when it

passes from the Chilcotin to the Carrier. When passing another threshold, it undergoes a different transformation, this time to the order of legendary tradition, as a means of founding certain modalities of an ancestral system. In one case, it swings toward the novel, and in the other toward what is certainly not history but has some pretensions to it.

To finish this survey, let us turn to the east, the geographical direction opposite to that of the Tsimshian. This will enable us to perceive a third type of transformation, beyond the cultural and linguistic threshold separating the Athapascan from the tribes of the great Algonkin linguistic family stretching to the shores of the Atlantic Ocean. Its westernmost representatives in the north were the Cree, adjacent to the Athapascan. About the year 1880, the people of the Poule-d'Eau lake region related that there was in olden times a village where a child mysteriously disappeared every night. In another corner of the village lived a little boy who cried and wept all the time. One day, his mother, annoyed, shook him roughly. The child slipped out of his skin "like a butterfly coming out of its chrysalis" and flew away in the shape of a big white owl.

The woman watched for her son's return and discovered that it was he who, changed into an owl at night, stole the other children to eat them, and who reassumed his human appearance at daybreak. She brought the villagers together and accused this son, whom she had conceived with a white man. The little ogre was condemned to death, but he pleaded with his fellow villagers and promised great wonders in return for his life. Finally, he was locked up alive, with some food supplies, in a wooden box propped on stakes, and the whole population moved away.

When the people came back three years later, they were astounded to see on the deserted site a large village of wooden houses, inhabited by white men whose language the Indians did not understand. It was a trading post. The owl-child lived there. They recognized him and questioned him. He explained that these new people were born of the children he had kidnapped and devoured. "But he, having become a great white chief, gave them Cree weapons, clothes, implements. And, from then on, the two peoples lived very harmoniously" (Petitot 1886, pp. 462–465).

It is a fact that the Cree—so named as an abbreviation of

Kristineaux (from Kenistenoa, one of the names by which they called themselves)—appeared as early as 1640 in the Jesuits' reports; and that, very early, they established friendly relations with the French and the English. Toward the end of the seventeenth century, they already served the fur trade as hunters and guides, and their subsequent history remains closely associated with that of the Hudson Bay Company and of the Northwest Fur Company. Their version of the myth of the child kidnapped by an owl obviously results from a manipulation meant to make the myth fit an aspect of their history by which the Cree differed from their neighbors, who were more reserved or even hostile to the whites.

But we also see that we are not dealing with the same type of story as the one the Tsimshian legend referred to, at the price of another manipulation of the myth. Not only because it is tribal in one case and clannish in the other, but for more profound reasons. The Tsimshian were trying to justify an order they wished to retain unchanged by a tradition the origin of which they dismissed as lost in the dawn of time. The Cree adapted the same myth to recent history, with the manifest intention of justifying a development in the making and of validating one of its possible orientations—collaboration with the white man—among others left open to them. The story of the Tsimshian legend is imaginary, because no woman ever married an owl. That of the Cree myth refers to real events, because the white men did marry Indian women and the Indians had visited a trading post for the first time. At the time when the myth was collected, their friendly relations with the white men still were part of their actual experience.

Thus, a myth which is transformed in passing from tribe to tribe finally exhausts itself—without disappearing, for all of that. Two paths still remain open: that of fictional elaboration, and that of reactivation with a view to legitimizing history. This history, in its turn, may be of two types: retrospective, to found a traditional order on a distant past; or prospective, to make this past the beginning of a future which is starting to take shape. By emphasizing with an example this organic contiguity apparent among mythology, legendary tradition, and what we must call politics, we wish to pay tribute to a scholar and philosopher who has never consented to make history a privileged domain in which man would be sure of finding his truth.

PART FOUR
Humanism and the Humanities