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As a child in Victoria, B.C., I began to assemble my ideas of Native thinking from West Coast images, large and small, treasured in the Provincial Museum. I can't remember any words that formed; but I still recall, green as a living tree, the sense that here was something for which I had no criteria or interpretation: but its importance was self-evident. Nothing that looked like these objects could be trivial. As time went on, that sense came to include a world of things familiar to ethnography, but it started with those West Coast images.

For me, as I suppose for most folklorists, academic training in dealing with other folks' creative expression meant finding rational means of translating the meanings, context and affect of their expression into our academic expression. We would thus understand and smoothly explain to others, according to our various schools, the minds of people who did not think like us. Of course I am being simplistic here, as we all know, but I am also telling the truth. Some of our mentors, indeed, were so fluent and impressive in their academic way precisely because they got themselves inside the heads and hearts of their friends in other cultures and their translations were magnificent. But translations went only one way in the academic school, from *them* to *us*; we received the ideas and repackaged them in our own containers. Some native critics — DeLoria, for a splendidly scathing one[1] — object effectively to perceived cultural imperialism; from whatever honest and respectful motives we in turn object, that perception is not groundless.

Recently several books have appeared that wrestle more or less consciously with the problem of translation of Western Native culture, beside Harry Robinson and Wendy Wickwire's splendid collaboration[2], reviewed elsewhere. All clearly serve different aims in their authors' intentions, yet perhaps they

1. Vine De Loria Jr., *Cluster Died For Your Sins*, New York, MacMillan, 1969.
2. Harry Robinson and Wendy Wickwire, *Write It on Your Heart: the Epic World of an Okanagan Storyteller*, Vancouver, Talonbooks/Theytus, 1989.

share a common underlying notion. Native ideas need no longer be only idler's curiosities or academic's fodder, but they are ideas that are important to us all, and more than we guess depends upon our openness to them.

Assu of Cape Mudge is the autobiography of a current Kwakiutl chief on Quadra Island. It is a cleverly designed book; its cover is a slickly attractive portrait of Harry Assu, the type is large and clear, and the pages are enriched with plenty of briefly-captioned illustrations. It thus follows what has become a West Coast publishers' convention for books aimed at enthusiasts and tourists, a sort of coffee-table form too light to be intimidating and too captivating to be ignored. The co-writer, Joy Inglis, who works from long and deep local experience, has helped craft a text that follows the needs of this convention; it is fluent and popular, and difficulties tend to be buried rather than tackled head-on. This crafting defines the result; it is certainly not a primary text, but an intimate collaboration through which Assu's voice can be heard clearly. Organization follows Assu's values, not rigorous categories such as a linear chronology; hence, for the researcher, the excellent index is well-nigh indispensible.

Assu raises the common issue in this frame; how do we understand someone else's account of history? Harry Assu's voice equates mythical and factual statement (and judgement) because, as Joy Inglis presents that voice, the two kinds of statement are identical. I feel that the only weakness here is the covering of mythic depth by journalistic simplicity. I don't have the knowledge to tackle this issue thoroughly, but consider one example, the story of Assu's grandfather Jim Naknakim, who is healed of severe illness by Whales' gift of salmon. The story enters the text subtly enough:

> In those early days there were whales of many kinds moving past our village in the passage between Cape Mudge and Campbell River, mostly blackfish but grey whales and humpies too. My own grandfather, Jim Naknakim, had this special understanding with whales ..... He ate the fish as the man had told him, and by the time he finished eating he was well again. So he knew that the man who had saved him had come from the whales. Those blackfish are human all right! (p. 35)

Is Naknakim 'my own' grandfather because he is the maternal grandfather (p. 21)? Is the 'special understanding' a personal idiosyncracy, or a corollary of crest inheritance, or a shamanistic capacity; or are such distinctions important from this Kwakiutl point of view? And what are the implications of the closing exclamation; what is it, to be human in this sense? Would a Kwakiutl child who heard the story know the answer and hear the tale as an example, or would that child ask the question? Is the story told to illustrate Grandfather's character, or that of the whales; or, again, does the distinction matter, or could it not matter in this context but matter tremendously in another? It is not that the book does not answer these questions, but that its style suggests that they need not be asked, that concerns me.

Assu has one unstated but clear agendum: I suppose at this moment we would label it **land claims**, but it is really much more. It is to tie myth, geography, biography and the record of subsistence technology together as evidence for the ongoing presence of Kwakiutl people on their home ground. They lived in that specific landscape in specific ways and with specific powers, and *Assu* documents their life in depth; this is evidence from the elders, the ones who always lived that way. Tucked away in the appendices (pp. 139-151) are myths, mostly via Boas, whose content corroborates Assu's personal accounts; continuity is an important issue. Accounts of the loss and recovery of potlatch regalia (chs. 4, 7) and performance extends the same theme, the heart of the book. *Assu* is, above all else, a proof of cultural renaissance, at least, if we do not forget that renaissance is not a recovery or resurrection or birth *ab novis*, but a form of life carried on in the present with renewed — and retranslated — reference to the past. Assu will perhaps be, in the end, more successful as translation for Kwakiutl people than for those outside that native community.

The other books move us from Coastal British Columbia to the Peace River district, at the corners of B.C., Alberta and the Yukon Territory. The more traditional in form, *Wolverine Myths and Visions* is a classical collection of Dene Dháa, or Slavey, ethnographic texts; a short ethnographic introduction, myths and legends in free translation followed by Dene Dháa texts with interlinear translation and a brief scholarly apparatus, including another excellent index. This collection, however, quietly suggests some issues rarely confronted in earlier work. The first hint concludes the introduction:

> Any representation of narratives in written form raises larger questions about the purpose of the narratives and the use of written language. The Dene Dháa have a fine sense of etiquette concerning traditional narratives and elders. Elders should not be interrupted or disputed, and the audience must listen intently throughout a series of narratives. It is inappropriate to pretend to know more than the person who is telling the story, unless the storyteller is younger....Extensive analysis of written stories by academics may violate this protocol by placing the original narrator in an inferior position. Therefore, in this collection notes are used sparingly so as not to displace the voice of the Dene Dháa narrators. The written format, moreover, makes it easier for someone to use the stories inappropriately because they no longer have to sit quietly listening to an elder. The real authorities, nevertheless, remain the original narrators who are able to tell a hundred or more traditional stories in their own language — the people who themselves met animal people. They advise listeners to use the stories and songs respectfully:
>
> I will tell you this story because you have been good to me. You must learn it well and tell it to the children where you live. The songs I have sung, too, can be used whenever you want to give thanks, or if you really want to pray for something. The drum I made you can be used wherever you go, but you cannot give it away, because it was made for you. (p. xxv)

Respect is rendered further by including headnotes and endnotes by the narrators; and by the decorative illustrations by Dene Dháa artist Dia Thurston;

for me, it took till pp. 37 and 41 to realize how subtly precise was the ethnographic evidence in the images of moccasins hung by a rough thong from a trimmed birch twig, or the passing of meat held under rather than upon the giver's and receiver's hands.

The acknowledgements, citing the direct involvement of Dene Dháa translators in the preparation of the texts, show the advantage of such respect in obviously close access to essential cultural knowledge, but giving respect is not without difficulty. There are problems in translation, usually resolved by special knowledge; yet we are left in doubt when we compare the Dene Dháa and interlinear English texts with the free translations. For example, in the farce of *Wolverine and Giant Skunk* (pp. 24-25, 145-148), how do we really know that it's Wolverine who says "Oo, oo, oo!" when he clamps his jaws on Skunk's anus? Skunk, who moreover does not have his mouth full, seems a more likely candidate for so alarmed and pained an exclamation. Again, in the Dene Dháa version of the Star Husbands, *Two Sisters*, the free translation has the girls luring Wolverine amorously, while in the interlinear text it is Wolverine who says "I'll play with you all/then/only" (pp. 5-8, 102-110)

The free translation is, of course, up against a very real challenge, as the interlinear texts make abundantly clear, and it does pretty well. But I grow concerned when it appears to lose the voice of a storyteller completely, which occurs too often. For example, in the very first paragraph of tale translation, the interlinear text gives us a pretty clear example:

> "...Danger,/nothing/anywhere/," then/she said./"Nowhere/you two go/" mother/she/said to them.

the free translation conflates this into:

> "Don't go anywhere, she cautioned the girls, "there are unknown dangers in the bush,"and with these words of warning their mother left.

Why wouldn't this do?

> "There's danger out there," she said [as she left]. "Don't go anywhere, you two!" (p. 107)

But this collection has two virtues that counter the difficulties mentioned above. First, the tales are marvellous and offer subtle insights into another psychology. I was directly moved by the tale of *The Man Who Received a Vision in Old Age* (pp. 49-55). His life begins with a broken tabu (inappropriate contact with his mother's belt) and thus he fails to achieve his spirit quest at the usual time. Years later and desperate, he is prepared to cast his life away among apparently hostile strangers who instead prove to be friendly wolves. These wolves counsel him to wait for Uncle Wolverine, who turns him around in an archetypal representation of Metanoia:

> "Stranger, what has happened to you?" the newcomer asked.
> But the man didn't answer.

> "You're pitiful. Get up!" Wolverine said. "Get up, get up!" he said, walking around the man." "Stand facing away from me," he told the man, then put his mouth on him. "Now look at me!" Wolverine commanded. Wolverine placed his mouth on the man and sucked away everything, including his mother's dirty belt. (p. 49)

Secondly, it is we ourselves who are left to make the essential interpretations. Sperber, examining the structuralist approach to tales, has commented incisively on this issue, suggesting three scales of understanding:

> Manifestations of cultural symbolism systematically violate the same universal principles of encyclopaedic knowledge so that when they seem to contrast and contradict each other, they focus all the more strongly in the same direction, they illuminate by means of the same paradoxes evocational fields with similar contours, fields into which each culture puts what it knows; fields that each individual explores according to his fears and his desires. No meaning in universal myths, but, broadly, a universal focalisation, a cultural evocational field, and an individual evocation.[3]

Wolverine, as is appropriate for trickster, can even tuck his paradoxes into scholarly texts. The Dene Dháa prophet who share Wolverine's name, Nógha, still seems sharp:

> Nógha told us that they [the government] would give out papers. I think he was talking about child allowance payments. He said there would be a little window on the letter. He also told us they would give out another type of welfare in the spring. "Give thanks to God as you take the money," he said, "but be careful because the white man may try to fool you." (p. 85)

One way and another, ethnographers sometimes attempt a different mode[4] of understanding, and have not had to lose academic perspective, 'go native' in the pejorative sense, while doing so. To my mind, Robin Ridington achieves this through the process that is the core of *Trail to Heaven*. One part of this process is his entry into Dunne-za, or Beaver society (a group closely cognate with the Dene Dháa). Another is his expository method, which, despite many succinct summary comments, obliges the reader to work through the process with Ridington in a lively way, rather than just to absorb structural statements in a logical way. Again, this is not to say that the beliefs of the Dunne-za are not logical — or that they are exactly logical for that matter; it is rather to look at experience that is prior to logic, to accept Dunne-za axioms in place of (though they need not be exclusive of), the academic ones. Or, as Ridington says:

> In our thoughtworld, myth and reality are opposites. Unless we can find some way to understand the reality of mythic thinking, we remain prisoners of our own language, our own thoughtworld....The language of Western social science assumes an object world independent of individual experience. The language of Indian stories assumes that objectivity can only be approached through experience. (p. 71)

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3. Dan Sperber, *Rethinking Symbolism*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1975, p. 140.
4. As presented well in Jamie De Angulo's "Indians in Overalls", in *A. Jaime de Angulo Reader*, (ed.) Callahan, Berkeley, Turtle Island, 1979.

For Dunne-za, the world of experience includes the world of dream, which is validated by the evidence of myth. As Ridington notes,

> I struggled with the Indian teaching with which they surrounded me. Then Japasa opened his world to me. He opened it to me and then he let it go. I could not help but fall into the language of that world. I had no choice but to accept the validity of dreams and talking animals as part of the world's fundamental core of meaning. Although I retain, and continue to honour, methods of scientific enquiry and the traditions by which scholars validate their sources of information, I have used these methods and traditions to inform a different anthropological language from the one I was taught in graduate school. I know as a responsible academic that I cannot dream *up* another culture that does not exist, but I also know that in order to understand the Dunne-za thoughtworld I must be willing to dream *into* it. Japasa taught by telling me stories. Sam taught by showing me silently what he knew. Johnny fed me, both from his country and from his creative imagination. (p. 73)

While Ridington does not deal with the question in depth, it appears that Dunne-za entertain Christianity as a value system because it harmonizes to an acceptable degree with modes of thought they already know through indigenous tradition: common issues. (If this perception is correct, then European and Native thought are not so alien to each other. Perhaps we have lost or repudiated some of our more ancient experiential techniques).

Ridington's choice of title draws our attention to the Dunne-za's central images of life: the Trail & the Circle Dance. To live is to walk a Trail to Heaven, long & difficult; every error or 'sin' one has committed in this life represents mistaken routes that must be retraced in the afterlife before one can find the direct way to Heaven (p. 221+). What is alive rises from the earth, which is in some way contiguous with heaven. Thus moose are images of a huge, ideal moose who lives in the underworld close by the springs about which our moose gather; that is *why* moose gather there. Again, swans, who disappear in Fall & return in Spring untouched by Winter, clearly know the way to fly to Heaven in the interim. The Trail to Heaven is made clear by song; in dreams the dead give songs to dreamers, who awaken with this evidence of the care the dead feel for them: what stronger evidence can one demand? (p. 97-107). Dreams know no distinction between Heaven & earth. The Trail to Heaven is also invoked through the joy of communal dance; those who dance in the circle are literally on the Way itself, their action identical with that of Heaven. Alone through dreams, together in dance, they find the way.

The heart of this book lies perhaps in two of the closing chapters (pp. 252-286). Here Ridington describes what is superficially an idle night in which a christian youth, Ricky, quarrels with an older traditional man, Tommy. It is because Tommy understands his own power that he refrains from punishing Ricky. Tommy has power, even to kill, but that is nothing in comparison with his power to restrain himself. Thus Tommy vindicates himself, but in doing so, he also leaves room for Ricky to grow and perhaps to imagine a greater

power than his own violent speech. Ridington's analysis of this process is plain & deep; all very well as academic discourse, but Ridington has also led the reader into a very broad understanding of Dunne-za consciousness, in Dunne-za terms.

While preparing this review, I lost one set of my notes, hence I grumbled about the inadequacy of Ridington's index. Then it seemed that, by limiting the index to Dunne-za names, Ridington forces even the unwilling researcher to change his target from abstract topics to lively people, and to remember the topics in terms of the people. We may thus see the problem of the index as deliberate rather than negligent; Ridington is concerned here not only to inform, but to teach, whatever it takes.

The Haida artist Bill Reid said of West Coast art as expression that "...there is an enormous wealth of proof to confirm that the other truths are all valid".[5] Someone in the East, perhaps Chuang Tzu, said earlier: "The fishing net is used to catch fish; let us have the fish and forget the net. The snare is used to catch rabbits; let us have the rabbit and forget the snare. Words are used to convey ideas; let us have the ideas and forget the words".[6] Ethnography grows deeper when it can pass from precise reproduction of alien texts to lucid representation of alien thought; then alienation can disappear, not because differences between European & Native thought are extinguished, but because both are illuminated.

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5. Bill Holm and Bill Reid, *Indian Art of the Northwest Coast: A Dialogue on Craftsmanship and Aesthetics*, Vancouver, Douglas & MacIntyre, and Houston, Institute for the Arts, Rice University, 1975, p. 7.
6. Tzu Chuang, *Writings; Basic Writings*, tr. Burton Weston, New York, Columbia University Press, 1971, p. 140; *Texts of Taoism*, tr. James Legge, New York, Dover, 1962, Vol. II, p. 141; *External Things*, Book 26, part III, section iv, p. 11. The remark is not considered canonical.