

Text and Context: Form and Meaning in Native Narratives

Blanca Chester

Volume 13, numéro 1, 1991

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1081700ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1081700ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (imprimé)

1708-0401 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce document

Chester, B. (1991). Text and Context: Form and Meaning in Native Narratives. *Ethnologies*, 13(1), 69–81. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1081700ar>

Résumé de l'article

Des récits enregistrés et transcrits par Wickwire, avec Robinson, un conteur de la vallée de l'Okanagan, sont comparés avec des récits recueillis par Teit il y a près d'un siècle. Certains aspects de leurs contextes de production sont comparés et leurs effets sur le sens sont étudiés dans trois perspectives: le contexte d'interprétation structurale, le contexte du discours et le contexte comme gestalt culturel. La définition de contexte est élargie pour inclure des facteurs culturels et linguistiques qui existent en dehors de la narration elle-même, et certains des avantages du traitement des récits oraux comme de la poésie sont soulignés.

REVIEWS ARTICLE/ESSAI CRITIQUE

TEXT AND CONTEXT: FORM AND MEANING IN NATIVE NARRATIVES

Blanca CHESTER

*English Department
University of British Columbia
Vancouver, B.C.*

In *Write It On Your Heart*,¹ a collection of Okanagan oral narratives, Wendy Wickwire uses Dennis Tedlock's methods to recreate in textualized form what he calls "dramatic poetry". Wickwire treats Robinson's (the storyteller's) stories as dramatic poetry rather than prose because the narratives evoke emotional states. As Tedlock notes, "What oral narrative does with emotions is evoke them rather than describe them directly, which is precisely what we have been taught to expect in poetry".² Knowledge is inferred from these oral narratives, rather than stated explicitly. Poetry provides a more appropriate medium for the translation of narratives which, through their semantic and structural ambiguity, pose the question of whether the text is opening up the world, or whether the world is opening up the text.³ To open up the text, and the world, of the Native storyteller, we must re-examine traditional anthropological and literary interpretations of the context of Native stories like those in *Write It On Your Heart*. This context, which is central to the interpretation of Native narratives,⁴ should be redefined.

Wickwire, an ethnographer currently working in British Columbia, has been able to record Robinson's stories on tape. In contrast, James Teit, an anthropologist who studied Thompson and Okanagan culture near the end of the nineteenth century, was limited to translating his stories directly onto paper.⁵ Both

-
1. Wendy Wickwire (ed.), *Write It On Your Heart*, Vancouver, Talon Books, 1989.
 2. Dennis Tedlock, *The Spoken Word and the Work of Interpretation*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983, p. 51.
 3. Tedlock, p. 240.
 4. Narrative, in the sense which I have used it, implies a story which may be either oral or (potentially) written, in some form or another. The "text" of such a continuous narrative I have assumed to be either written or oral. Story and narrative, within the context of Wickwire's and Teit's collections, have been used interchangeably.
 5. James Teit, *The Traditions of the Thompson River Indians of B.C.*, London and Leipzig, Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1898.

Teit and Wickwire have studied Native culture extensively, but each of them has nevertheless been defined, to a greater or lesser extent, by the historical and cultural context out of which he or she writes. Teit still wrote out of a largely colonial context at the end of the last century, although his writing shows an unusual sensitivity towards Native culture for his time. Wickwire moves beyond that context to use some of Teit's work in her own background, and re-create "new" written texts which emphasize both the orality of Native storytelling and the performance aspects of Native stories as cultural constructs. Bauman describes this performance as a mode of speaking which includes both the artistic action and the artistic event of storytelling.⁶ What he and Hymes refer to as the "emergent quality of performance"⁷ may be viewed, in a broader sense, as its cultural context. Bauman states, "The emergent quality of performance resides in the interplay between communicative resources, individual competence, and the goals of the participants, within the contexts of particular situations".⁸

There are three ways in which I would like to explore the question of context in North American Native narratives: the context of structural interpretations; the context of discourse; and context as cultural gestalt. While these three aspects of context within Native narratives may properly belong to anthropological discourse, they are nevertheless implicit in the stories themselves. By comparing how these contextual aspects come together in the stories of Robinson (as they are presented by Wickwire) with similar stories collected earlier by Teit, the effect of language and form on meaning may be examined more closely.

Language, form (structure), and culture come together in oral narrative to form a unique "structural" context where meaning lies both inside and outside the narrative. The three combine to form layers of meaning structured like Chinese puzzles, each story containing all the others and including the "text" outside the story. Looking at context in this way reflects Native oral narrative as both oral history and culture. Meaning is inferred from the narrative itself but its sense goes beyond the self-reference of either written text or orally performed story to lead us into a culturally specific way of thinking. As Hymes observes, by bringing out the "architecture" (or structure) of Native narratives, we gain a sense of the performance quality of the stories as well.⁹ Until ethnographers like Tedlock and Wickwire began reinterpreting Native narratives as dramatic poetry, our (European) perspectives on Native culture were created largely through written stories collected by ethnographers like Teit, general

6. Richard Bauman, *Verbal Art As Performance*, Rowley, MA, Newbury House, 1977, p. 3-5.

7. Bauman, p. 37.

8. *Ibid*, p. 38.

9. Dell Hymes, *"In vain I tried to tell you"*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981, p. 251.

anthropological writings, and whatever limited experience one personally may have had with Native peoples and culture.

An expanded context not only gives us the background that we need to read Native narratives, but it provides a new and diachronic way of looking at the relationship between Native narratives and Native culture. Oral narrative, despite its immediacy and transitory nature, contains history as well as the present time. By its nature, history is always dynamic and diachronic in its world view. This dynamic aspect of oral narrative is made explicit when new elements are incorporated into older traditions—a continual and vital process in oral cultures. The diachronic study of literature (which I will assume to include an oral literature) pre-supposes a historical stance, examining any text as part of a larger system of discourse from which it cannot be isolated.

Traditional literary theory, in particular structuralism and the New Criticism, assumes a synchronic study of text. It rigorously dissects a text into its component parts and ignores outside context. In literary studies, we often abstract the text from its history and thereby decontextualize it. The New Criticism carried this decontextualization to an extreme, disallowing any references to context—including the author's name. Dundes, however, notes that an adequate literary criticism should examine three criteria of interacting levels of analysis¹⁰: texture (down to morphemes and phonemes); text (which is one version of something and may be translated); and context (which Dundes separates from function). Recording stories in a language other than in the Native original (usually in the collector's language) has the effect of reducing Dundes's first criteria, that of texture.

Robinson, who has told his stories to Wickwire in English, has provided his own (Native) translation of both Okanagan narratives and culture. As Toelken and Scott observe, the way a thing is said is always part of what is said.¹¹ In translation, one can always move closer to the sense and meaning of the original, but the translation can never identify completely with "the" original—which may itself be almost impossible to determine. A translation, like any reinterpretation, may also move farther from the sense of the original, complicating the issue of deciding just which version is the most "authentic". Toelken and Scott argue that because the structure and style which we find meaningful in "lettered" literature may be misleading in studying Native stories, the significant part of the stories lies in their texture, rather than in their structure.¹² Their definition of texture, however, incorporates into it elements of both (linguistic)

10. Alan Dundes, "Texture, Text, and Context", *Southern Folklore Quarterly*, 28, No. 4 (December 1966), p. 255-256.

11. Barre Toelken and Tacheeni Scott, "Poetic Retranslation and the 'Pretty Language' of Yellowman", in *Traditional American Indian Literatures*, Karl Kroeber (ed.), University of Nebraska Press, 1981, p. 69.

12. Toelken and Scott, p. 81.

structure and (cultural) context, terms which I argue should be inseparable in the study of Native narratives. Hymes notes that it is only recourse to the originals which provides some control of “slips and changes” during the act of translation. He focuses on the problem of falling back upon evaluating translations by appreciation of their literary merit in English—the way in which most readers will become familiar with Native narratives.¹³ Throughout his work, Hymes argues for the inclusion of context (tradition) in the linguistic study of Native poetics, but the problem of authenticity is always hiding beneath the surface of his, and any other, ethnographic study.

Because Native linguistic forms cannot be studied when stories are recorded in English, and because certain ideas cannot be translated when they have been taken out of their linguistic and cultural contexts, there exist some serious concerns about recording Native stories in English¹⁴. Recording a story in English (where the possibility of recording in a Native language exists), however, presumes that Native linguistic forms are not the subject of a particular study. And the issue of contextual dislocation is, of course, what ethnography is all about—struggling with the difficulties of cross-cultural translation in one form or another. The quality of any translation varies depending on the particular abilities of an individual ethnographer and/or informant. It also hinges on the nature of the relationship between ethnographer and storyteller. A completely bilingual Native storyteller might, or might not, be more qualified to make a particular translation than a relatively informed unilingual ethnographer. But the issue of what has been left out of *Write It On Your Heart* (or Teit’s collection of Thompson myths) is more than a simple question of language.

Wickwire does not tell, or write, the “whole story” any more than Teit or Robinson did. As Wickwire notes, Robinson did not relate any stories with sexual or scatological innuendo to her, possibly because she is a woman.¹⁵ That she is a woman coming from a different culture may also be a factor. In addition, Robinson tells his stories from a male point of view, and stories from a distinctly female point of view are also missing from Wickwire’s collection. The stories in *Write It On Your Heart* comprise a particular cross-section of Robinson’s stories, collected by Wickwire over a twelve-year acquaintance with him. The narratives have been left largely unedited; Wickwire translated directly onto the page from recordings. Except for making the pronouns consistent, and using poetic form—she has made line breaks by following Robinson’s speech patterns as closely as possible—the words themselves are presented as Robinson performed them.

13. Hymes, p. 38.

14. Julie Cruikshank, “Legend and Landscape: Convergence of Oral and Scientific Traditions in the Yukon Territory”, *Arctic Anthropology*, 28:2 (1981), p. 68.

15. Wickwire, p. 16.

But Wickwire's textualization of Native oral narratives nevertheless separates the stories from the oral/aural discourse out of which they derive. The attempt to move closer to the meaning of an original is a never-ending process, which one is perhaps most acutely aware of when that translation represents a move from the oral into print. The movement towards a "truer" meaning which can never be captured contributes to the sense of what Derrida refers to as "differing" and "deferring" in his work on deconstruction.¹⁶ Out of the "différance" which he determines as arising from these two aspects of text, Derrida ultimately asserts a unity in difference, and between the translation of the spoken (oral) and the written. He would argue that that which is spoken has always "already been written" in the underlying grammar of the language. Whether or not Derrida's general theory is "right", one goal in translating Native oral narratives into text is to come ever closer to that unity in difference. In order to do so, the function of the text must be taken into account.

Typically, one of the problems in the analysis of Native North American stories has been how to interpret their function. Native narratives are frequently divided into "myths" and "legends", with myths viewed as extending into pre-history and the non-real, while legends are regarded as having some historical basis in fact.¹⁷ Looking at the stories as dramatic, performed poetry instead, is a more recent development. Dramatic poetry, unlike conventionally translated myths and legends, retains the repetition and parallelism which are integral components of oral performance. As Bauman points out, the function of such texts includes within it the notion of performance, and incorporates into it as well the idea of a "multifunctional" view of language use.¹⁸ Before Tedlock, anthropologists often disregarded the linguistic forms of myths and legends in favour of plot summaries. These plot summaries provided the reader with the story lines to particular narratives, but they neglected any potential for the rhythms and cadences of language forms to affect the reader emotionally. Anthropologists like Boas and Lévi-Strauss emphasized the plots of Native stories as containing the meaningful components of the stories.¹⁹ Because form was virtually ignored, myth was generally considered translatable (that is, meaningful) while poetic form itself was considered virtually meaningless. While story line is relatively easy to preserve in translation, form is more linguistically complex; thus, the translation of Native stories into poetry has meant a shift in focus from plot to the forms, structures, and rhythms of language itself—what Dundes refers to as "texture".

16. Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy* (Alan Bass, translator), Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1982.

17. Cruikshank, p. 68.

18. Bauman, p. 15-24.

19. Franz, Boas, "Mythology and Folk-Tales of the North American Indians", in *Critical Essays on Native American Literature*, Andrew Wiget (ed.), Boston, G.K. Hall & Co., 1985, p. 28-51.

To address the uniqueness which Ong terms the “primary orality” inherent in Native cultures, one needs to look at orality as a specifically cultural way of thinking. In Western oral narratives, context is usually transparent to us. It is more or less accepted as a given, and left mostly undefined. When reading narratives which have been translated across wide cultural gaps, however, meaning is often not accessible to the uninitiated. As we read Robinson’s stories, meaning, in the western sense, becomes opaque. It cannot be explicated without specific cultural knowledge. Ong notes that narratives in primary oral cultures provide a means of storing, organizing and communicating what one knows.²⁰ The social function of such narratives, then, is distinct from the function of narratives in Western society, where stories are more often regarded as “fiction” and somehow irrelevant in day-to-day life. Native myths and legends (especially many of the versions with which we have become familiar) have too long been regarded as simple (and simplistic) when, in fact, they are highly refined and complicated living creations (in the same way that language itself is a living entity). We have missed their point.

Interpretation of translated (and textualized) Native narratives has historically occurred out of context as an individual act by an individual reader. Some sense of what is missing, the presence of an absence between the lines of the text, emerges when one compares and contrasts older (often structuralist) interpretations of Native texts with more modern, contextual approaches. But contextualizing Native stories raises the problem of distinguishing between what is considered discourse (or a function of discourse) and what is considered narrative. Banfield distinguishes between narrative and discourse by asserting that discourse assumes an addressee, while narrative does not.²¹ Discourse, therefore, is communicative, while narrative is not. Oral performance, which presupposes an actively participating audience (addressee) is, using Banfield’s definition, discourse. But oral performance, once recorded in written form, becomes transformed into what Banfield defines exclusively as narrative. This line of reasoning presupposes a western context for the idea of narrative as fiction, divorced from the day-to-day communication of information. Sherzer, in contrast, argues that we must analyze all oral narrative (or performance or story) as simultaneously discourse and narrative. He states:

It is discourse which creates, recreates, modifies, and fine tunes both culture and language and their intersection, and it is especially in verbally artistic discourse...the essence of language-culture relationships becomes salient.²²

20. Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: the Technologizing of the World*, London and New York, Routledge, 1982, p. 140.

21. Ann Banfield, *Unspeakable Sentences: Narration and Representation in the Language of Fiction*, Boston, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982, p. 154.

22. Joel Sherzer, “A Discourse-Centered Approach to Language and Culture”, *American Anthropologist*, 89:2 (1987), p. 298.

How then do we reconcile the contradiction of oral discourse which is textualized as written narrative? In the act of translation to text, the communicative function changes—the stories are being communicated to another audience, one which does not have the same opportunity to interact with the storyteller, and an audience which often comes from a cultural background quite different from that of the storyteller.

By leaving the stories in the language of discourse, in an idiom of orality, the narratives at least imply their original communicative function, and the overall sense of the stories is not completely lost to the reader. This is what Wickwire attempts to do in her translation of Robinson's performances to text. Yet, some sense of meaning is always lost moving into the language of written text because, as Wiget notes, "The connection between the deep structure of a text and the actual language of performance cannot be made explicit in the structural analysis of myths".²³ Wickwire's goal, therefore, is to reduce that loss. To illustrate the structuralist's problem with translation, we can examine myth as recorded in writing by Teit and compare it with Robinson's orally recorded and textualized version:

THE COYOTE AND THE FLOOD

There was once a great flood which covered the whole country excepting the tops of some of the highest mountains. It was probably caused by the Qoa'qLqaL, who had great powers over water. All the people were drowned except the Coyote, who turned himself into a piece of wood; and three men, who went into a canoe, and reached the Nzuks'ki Mountains, but who, with their canoe, were afterwards transformed into stone, and may be seen sitting there at the present day. When the waters subsided, the Coyote, in the shape of a piece of wood, was left high and dry. He then resumed his natural form, and looked around. He found that he was in the Thompson River country. He took trees for wives, and the Indians are said to be his descendants. Before the flood there were no lakes or streams in the mountains, and consequently no fish. When the water receded, it left lakes in the hollows of the mountains, and streams began to run from them. That is the reason that we now find lakes in the mountains, and fish in them.²⁴

The brevity of Teit's version when it is compared with the four and a half pages of "The Flood" in *Write It On Your Heart* is immediately noticeable. Pages of oral text are reduced to plot paraphrase in the written version. While it may have been Teit's informant, and not Teit, who "reduced" the story, textualization leaves its distinct imprint in other ways. In addition to the reduction in length, the distant and impersonal nature of Teit's version affects the meaning of the story.

Contrast Teit's myth with a segment of Robinson's "The Flood":

23. Andrew Wiget (ed.), *Critical Essays on Native American Literature*, Boston, G.K. Hall & Co., 1985, p. 11.

24. Teit, p. 20.

Well, Coyote, just stand still there.
 And whoever, he told 'em,
 'Now you think the water was raising.
 It is.
 It's raising all right.
 That going to kill you if you don't watch out,
 if you don't do what I tell you.
 And it's going to kill you.
 They raising all right.
 You can see.
 And you think it was raising.
 And it was raising.
 Now you turn around.
 You can turn to your right
 and go up in the mainland.²⁵

and:

That's when they had a world flood.
 And Coyote is the only one that stands on the world
 when the world was flood.
 And Noah and his family
 and the animal, whatever they get 'em in that ark.
 That is in the European.
 But in this island, nothing but Coyote,
 Only the one that stands in this ground when the
 world flood.
 And God's order.²⁶

The difficulty in comparing two narratives separated as widely in space and time as Teit's and Robinson's is partly a difficulty of style, both of the individual narrator/informants and of the ethnographers. But the difference between the two versions also reveals the inevitable differences between the written and the oral. Variations in content, which may arise both from the specific contexts of the narrators themselves, and the historical time in which ethnographers collected the stories, arise as well from the tendency of the (original) oral to incorporate new elements into old narratives. Originality or authenticity becomes even harder to determine when one looks at both content and structure (e.g. style).

Robinson's version is explicitly personal. God addresses Coyote directly, just as Robinson addresses his audience directly. Theirs is an intimate relationship between the characters inside the text and those outside it. The first and second person are used throughout the narrative, giving it a sense of immediacy and personal relationship which Teit's story lacks. More importantly, at the level of meaning, God and His power are manifest in the oral myth, and the inter-

25. Wickwire, p. 115.

26. Wickwire, p. 118.

relationship of Coyote and God are emphasized and analogous to Coyote and God's relationship with each member of the storyteller's audience. In contrast, the power and communication of "Qoa'qLqaL" in Teit's story is, either intentionally or unintentionally, de-emphasized as part of personal day-to-day life.

God is not mentioned in Teit's version. Neither are the other European elements of Robinson's story, such as the storyteller's reference to Noah and the Ark. Noah may never have been mentioned to Teit by his informant, but it is also possible that Teit deleted him, and other "authorial interjections" on the part of the storyteller, to make the story "pure". But the European elements of "The Flood" not only make the story interesting to a reader versed in the Western tradition, they are integral to understanding the story as part of a living and on-going tradition. One cannot begin to understand the world context of the Okanagan Native by ignoring outside historical influences on that world. For Boas, who wrote the introduction to Teit's book, European influences on Native myths are "recent adaptations" and not integral to the stories.²⁷ Boas goes on to say that the modern creative power in such stories is weak, and this is why newer elements have been incorporated into the old myths. His view is analogous to the prescriptive grammarian's view that language change is language decay. In contrast to Boas and the structuralists, Ong looks at the ability of a culture based on orality to absorb new elements as part of "the tenaciousness of orality" and its "psychological urgency".²⁸ In *Write It On Your Heart* some of the psychology of the oral tradition is restored to Native narratives. Robinson structures important aspects of his personal experience into his stories, experiences like the building of roads, the advent of radio and television, and the astronauts' landing on the moon. His stories explain and amplify his world and the world of his audience.

The "psychological urgency" which Ong has described is part of the communicative function and meaning of oral myth. In order to understand what the myth is trying to tell us, we need to know something of the cultural background behind it. Oral Native narratives provide an example of "restricted" discourse, where everyone who listens to the story is assumed to have the same matrix of knowledge.²⁹ That knowledge is like a hologram: each individual knows a small whole versus a small part of a larger whole.³⁰ The idea of

27. Quoted in Wiget, p. 46.

28. Ong, p. 115.

29. For a discussion of restricted codes and elaborated codes, see R. Hasan, "Code, Register and Social Dialect", *Class, Codes and Control*, Basil Bernstein (ed.), London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973, p. 281-285.

30. As Ridington describes Native knowledge, "A person knows a 'little bit' about the world in its entirety rather than a little part of all possible knowledge... Knowledge is highly contextualized within experiences rather than instrumental to purposes removed from experience": Robin

knowledge as a hologram is fundamentally different from the Western idea of knowledge as specialization. The combined effect of restricted discourse and "holographic" knowledge is to reinforce both the knowledge and power of the individual and the power of the group at the same time. And in order to "get at" the Native cosmology/phenomenology hidden in restricted discourse one must look at how language and structure are used by the storyteller.

The idea that each story contains all the other stories, like Chinese puzzles, is not new in either anthropology or literary theory. In certain schools of literary criticism, like deconstructionism, texts are seen as containing and referring to all the texts which have come before them: they have a self-referential function. Native oral narratives, however, refer not only to themselves, but to the outside world. These narratives outline the importance of what the individual brings to the text, as in reader-based criticism, where meaning resides in the reader. But reader-based literary criticism is completely different in its perception of context. In Native oral narratives, the "text" does not merely refer outside itself, but an integral part of the story is supplied by the reader's cultural knowledge. This type of restricted narrative is one version of "masking". The storyteller never tells all that he or she knows: knowledge is power and revealing everything unmasks too much power—it is dangerous. Knowledge and meaning must be inferred, rather than stated explicitly.

One figure which carries implicit meaning throughout Robinson's stories, and Okanagan/Thompson life in general, is the figure of Coyote, culture hero and trickster. The trickster figure is more than a key image central to each narrative. Coyote is contained within all of the stories as an ambiguous life force; this dual force ties each story to another and exists whether Coyote manifests himself or not. Coyote is a metaphor whose image weaves between two meanings. He is a hero and a trickster "capable of incredible cunning".³¹ Yet, Coyote is never truly evil. His nature reflects the duality of life itself—a duality which repeats itself over and over again in Native narratives. Coyote reflects a world reality which can and will deceive the individual, and the group, on occasion. Knowledge of Coyote's tricks empowers the individual as hero in the same way that Coyote himself triumphs over his world. Coyote is, as Lakoff and Johnson argue all metaphors are, a conceptual metaphor. Objective truth does not exist: truth is always relative to a conceptual system defined largely by metaphor. Truth is then based on an understanding of such a conceptual system.³² In Robinson's stories that truth is accessible to one who looks for and comprehends the underlying notion of Coyote as central to everyday life. Coyote reflects the

Ridington, *Little Bit Know Something: Stories in a Language of Anthropology*, Vancouver & Toronto, Douglas & MacIntyre, 1990, p. xv.

31. Wickwire, p. 21.

32. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 1980, p. 159.

eternal ambiguity of life. In the typographically frozen stories of Teit, underlying metaphor is often edited and the connections between the stories severed. Wickwire's collection attempts to break free from the constraints of typography through the preservation of both oral style and contextual details which can contribute to the creation of metaphoric meaning.

Differences in meaning which can arise (perhaps unwittingly) through the editing process become glaringly obvious if we compare another two stories "told" by Teit and Wickwire. In Teit's "The Tale of the Bad Boy; or the Sun and the Lad",³³ a lazy boy is left by his people because he must learn to do his share of work. His grandmother seems (accidentally) to have been left behind also, and she teaches the boy how to hunt and fend for himself. He shoots magpies and bluejays while his grandmother makes skins of them which are bought by the Sun. The boy learns to become a good hunter. "Thus being thrown on his own resources made a man out of him", states Teit.³⁴ In Robinson's version the grandmother has an integral role: she is the one who has "spoiled" the boy and she must now teach him how he should behave. Robinson builds his narrative up over several pages before the boy and his grandmother are tricked by the other members of their group and left alone. God (the Sun in Teit's story) helps them learn to survive by hunting and gathering, and finally "buys" their bluejay skin, which is ornamental but practically useless. Afterwards, God ascends into heaven and the place is marked with a sacred spotted rock. The grandmother and boy are then reunited with their people.

Robinson's version, "Prophecy at Lytton", highlights the manifestation of God and his prophecies of the white man, as well as the learning experience of the young boy and his reunification with the tribe. These are absent in Teit's version. Of the white man God says to the grandmother and son:

And they'll give you from what they do or what they raise,
because this is your place.
But they going to do the work.
And what they get, they can give you some of that.
And they could use themselves.³⁵

And on the boy's relationship with his tribe God states:

.I and your people left you.
They want you to be starved to death.
But I don't like it that way.
I don't want you people to starve to death,
and also this bunch.
I want you to live.
But one thing is, these people got to come back and live
just like it was before.³⁶

33. Teit, p. 51.

34. Teit, p. 52.

35. Wickwire, p. 187.

36. Wickwire, p. 186.

The predominant image in "Prophecy at Lytton" is the image of interdependence and relationship. But, characteristics of Coyote are also present in the trickery and deceit which the group uses in hiding from the grandmother and boy, as well as in how the two triumph over their circumstances after they have learned their lessons. The two learn the importance of their relationships to each other and to their land, and their responsibilities to each. This central image is missing in Teit's story. Instead, Teit's "Tale of the Bad Boy" becomes a black and white story about the evils of laziness and the virtues of hard work. It reads into Native life an almost Calvinistic, Puritanical view. Robinson's "Prophecy" illustrates the importance of knowledge and the idea of knowledge as power in a less didactic manner. Metaphor, woven into the stories, operates like an interlocking piece of a puzzle that combines with other pieces to form a whole, but is complete in and of itself.

Putting the oral into print effectively frames it and changes its inherent meaning, especially to the outsider unfamiliar with any other meaning. In order to "interpret" the stories, the reader has to look carefully at what is not there in the text, as well as what is there. This non-text, which must be restored to Native narratives to make them come alive again, can be approached from the perspective of a cultural "gestalt". By focusing on how we perceive the text, as we did in looking at how metaphorical content and (linguistic) discursive form affect our perception of meaning, implicit assumptions about narrative texts can be made more explicit.

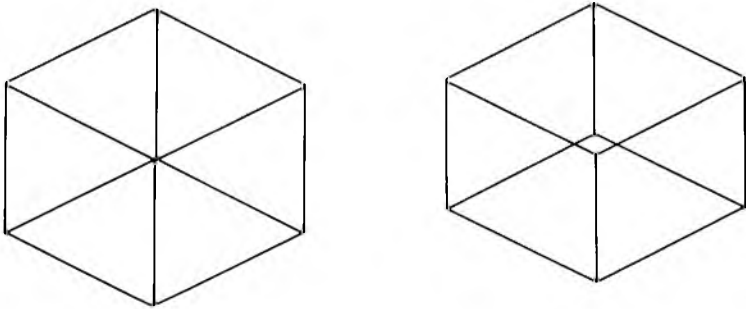
Reinhart, in "Principles of gestalt perception in the temporal organization of narrative texts"³⁷, looks at cognitive function in distinguishing background from foreground in narrative. She notes that the background provides the context for the foreground—it almost defines the foreground—and she ties the distinction between the two to the visual field. What matters is how one looks at the facts. Reinhart states that the mode of narrative organization "...does not reflect optional aesthetic choices, but rather perceptual strategies similar to those employed in visual perception".³⁸ Choices are, however, more inherent in the system of visual gestalt than Reinhart acknowledges and may be culturally specific. Visual "choices" affect how we interpret optical illusions, just as aesthetic "choices" may affect how we interpret meaning in narrative structures. Once we look at the hexagon Reinhart refers to in Figure (1b), and the cube in (1a), the entire figure/ground distinction shifts, and remains shifted as long as we look at the figures in our "new" way. In the same manner, the cultural knowledge (background) which we bring to a text shifts the meaning (foreground) of the text. Friedrich notes that meaning is always context-laden, and

37. Tanya Reinhart, "Principles of gestalt perception in the temporal organization of narrative texts", *Linguistics*, 22 (1984), p. 779-809.

38. Reinhart, p. 805.

that context itself is always shifting, always indeterminate. As a result, linguistic units are always “fuzzy at the edges”.³⁹

Since the background of a narrative affects the foreground, the shifting of background context would seem at least partly to contribute to the “psychological urgency” of oral narrative, and to distinguish the oral from the written. Krupat notes, however, that we need to acknowledge the “nearly disabling” fact that we are going to experience Native American narrative art almost exclusively in textual form.⁴⁰ Textualization remains a fact despite much recent interest in orality, oral traditions and oral poetics. Wickwire struggles against the constraints of print but must finally be bound by some of those constraints. The gap between the written and the oral is a function of our own text-based society—a function from which we cannot escape even if we so wish. Still, anthropologists like Wickwire and Tedlock re-textualize Native narratives in a way that makes them more accessible to a culture based on print. Some of the dramatic quality and vital meaning of living myth may be restored to oral narratives by paying close attention to both content and form, which finally become inseparable. The reader who takes the time to look between the lines of text, to struggle with the gap—the context both inside and outside Robinson’s stories—will be rewarded with a deeper understanding of North American Native life.



In figures (1a) and (1b) we can see either a two-dimensional hexagon or a cube. But we see the hexagon more easily in (a) and the cube more easily in (b) because in order to see a cube in (a) we have to (learn to) break up internal lines, while in (b) there are no internal straight lines.

39. Karl Friedrich, *The Language Parallax: Linguistic Relativism and Poetic Indeterminacy*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 1986, p. 119.

40. Arnold Krupat, *Traditional American Indian Literatures*, University of Nebraska Press, 1985, p. 116-133.