Metamorphosis as a Limit to the Symbolic Values of Animals

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Ethnographic experience may generate blankness: sometimes pieces of information, anecdotes, or fragments of narrative pop out that you really do not know what to do with. Although ethnographers are supposed to devote themselves to collecting any single sample of native speech, these may turn out to be more of a nuisance than anything else. Things get even worse when this piece of new knowledge does not fit the theoretical pattern the ethnographer has elaborated or relies upon to explain the facts he studies. These are the moments when, against all odds, the informant speaks too much: we cannot easily assimilate the atypical elements which he is supplying us with. We would like to throw them away as, at a particular point during the production process of a movie, the director disregards some sequences or cuts some of the ends of these sequences off when the acting begins to deteriorate, to lose its zest. And yet, such moments are the crucial ones for the ethnographer, the ones which in fact allow the experience to proceed.

Be that as it may, when I heard the following anecdote I was overwhelmed by a mixture of weariness and fear: “What am I going to do with that?” A young man, about 20 years old, told me the following story:

Once at Kaponanik I was with my mom in the tent. That’s when we heard a big noise, just like the sound of a plane and we felt a big blow of wind shaking the tent and bending the trees. We were really scared. We knew it wasn’t a plane because we didn’t hear the sound increasing the way a plane does when it comes closer and closer. At that time my dad and his brother (they are twins) were out on the lake. They heard the noise too and they also smelled a strong odour. But it was a nice day, with a clear sky and just

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1 A French version of this article appeared in the Cahiers de littérature orale, no. 2, 1987. This version is the author’s translation, assisted by Jamie Swift.
a little breeze on the lake. Later on my dad was back and he said “kwaat osha awiya” ['this is not human']. It was not the first time this kind of thing happened and each time after my dad’s twin brother was sick.

I was unable to get more details of the event or of the probable essence of the creature that might be behind it. We are in possession of an ethnographic fact as a raw material, definite because of its conciseness but undefined as concerns its nature. The ethnographer must either deal with it and its intricacies or leave it in out; in which case he will have to do with his own conscience.

“This is not human”; the comment implies two understatements. First, “this” is an animate being in so far as it manifests itself. Second, this does not belong to the animal world. The Big Trout Lake people do not see an animal as unhuman; animals are not opposed in this manner to the human species because the humans are animal if anything at all. To begin with, what we are concerned with here is a demon-like or a monstrous being but the informant does not describe it. A monster without an appearance, a monster with no face, so to speak.

The harsher the climate of an area, the less biological diversity. And in harmony with the monotony of their natural world, it appears that the different Algonquian groups of hunters who occupy the subarctic forest (Montagnais-Naskapis, Crees, or Northern Ojibwas like the Big Trout Lake people) possess a rather limited demonology. Considering the Big Trout Lake peoples’ universe, one may not assume that imaginary beings such as thunderbirds, watersnakes or lithic dwarves enter into a specific class, radically distinct from real animals. It seems, on the contrary, that one might classify the main species or varieties of beings (biological, physical, astronomical, supernatural) in the world according to their respective symbolic efficiency, which is in turn rooted into mythical knowledge. From the point of view of symbolic efficiency, new cleavages (or new rapprochements) between species appear which interfere with an objective categorization (or one which conform to our view) of the sensible world, a categorization that the mainstream of cognitive anthropologists proclaim to be transcultural.

If the motivations of the symbolic values of each being is given by myths, the resulting efficiency appears in the shamanism. The basic assumption of Big Trout Lake people is that one has the power to act beyond the limits imposed on time and space by the ordinary senses. One may act at a distance to detect the location of game in a huge area, to communicate with far-away kin who may be dozens or hundreds of miles apart. One may also deal with far-away enemies. Acting in a different time span consists for the most part in foreseeing events in order to try to influence them. This kind of manipulation of reality takes place on two different, albeit com-
elementary, levels. First, everyone is connected with one or more spirits who are supposed to provide them with help and advice in everyday life as an adult. For a man (women are also concerned by the supernatural guardianship) this help mainly concerns his hunting activities. Second, as a man advances in age, his abilities as an hunter decrease dramatically and he starts to make a much more public, social use of his connections with the spirits. The time has come for him to start to perform the ritual called kosaapachikan, the shaking tent ritual. Kichiya in Ojibwa, ‘old guy’ or ‘old lady’ in English, all these terms refer to the new role of shaman, which aging persons assume. In the shaking tent ritual they summon the spirits and rather than seeking protection and help from them they hire them, sending them far out in space or time for specific missions. And, of course, during the shaking tent performance symbolic efficiency manifests itself to the fullest.

The question of the identity of these spirits arises. Any kind of species in the universe may potentially become such a spirit, or opawaakan, may take the form of the abstract entity, prototype of the species, the immaterial form to which the linguistic form applied to each indivual belonging to the species refers. But there is one imperative condition for the opawaakan to be effective when called upon by the layman or by the shaman: the opawaakan must never reveal his identity. So we cannot really know which are the species which most generally play the role of opawaakan. It seems obvious that, for the most part, they are animals and more precisely the most remarkable animals, the ones that the myths talk the most about. But, on investigation it appeared that any kind of being may take the form of opawaakan, such as the memekwishiwak, the lithic dwarves (Desveaux 1987). The weather and astral phenomenas, like winds, stars, constellations may also play such a role; even physical elements, especially the stone, can act as surpernatural powers. It is noteworthy, on the contrary, that plants, a good number of which people credit objective therapeutic value to, do not seem to meet the standards for this purpose.

Myths draw a general pattern in which each species and being finds a symbolic assignment. In doing so the mythology associates simple symbolic meanings to a number of species; for example, wolf (mahiikan) represents the human race (anishini) as an ecological agent. Both are great predators; both pursue the same prey. In fact, both pursue all the prey. The wolf and the man are equally able to hunt alone or in packs. Wolverines (kiikwahaake) which steal food caches symbolizes marriage, from the point of view of the wife-givers because we are in a system of indirect exchange. Following the combinatory variant principle, the myth sheds lights on a single theme using and combining different species: the otter (nikik) is incarnation of language mastery; its variant is the mink (shaakweshi) which,
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according to another narrative, possesses a double, but a minor one indeed, in the person of the weasel (sikosi).

Myths also define symbolic spaces which link totally distinct species or creatures: for example the symbolic space referring to food shortage. Different animals belong to this space: hare (waapoos), owls (two kinds: hawk-owl, kwaakwaakwaa, and boreal owl, kashkeshabish), three species of grouse all together understood under the generic term of pine, category that also includes ptarmigan (waapise). All these animals share a common trait; they are all minor game animals which people start to rely upon when nothing else is available. But their meats are also much alike: they are very lean. You can eat and survive on that kind of food, but only on a temporary basis, because in a diet based exclusively on meat, a long-term deficit in lipids (organically solvent animal fats) is detrimental for health and can lead to death (Speth 1987). On the other hand the general symbolic space related to starvation breaks itself and leaves to each species which compose it a specific meaning. Each time this meaning is related to numbers: Hare, Waapoos, emanation of Nanabozo, the famous trickster-demiurge of the Ojibwas, refers to twinness on an attenuated manner (Lévi-Strauss 1978:25-33) and, more concretely, expresses all the difficulties related to bearing children and to child care. Owls are related to the number “four”. This refers to the winds or, more precisely, to the changing directions of the wind, a crucial factor in moose hunting. Changing winds bring snowfalls or freezing over of the upper layer of the snow cover, thus facilitating the task of the hunters. Grouse stick to the mathematical notion of ten, directly inspired by empirical observation. In the natural setting of the subarctic forest, no animals except grouse succeed in being so prolific as to have ten or more offsprings at the same time (Désveaux 1984).

Here is another example of a split symbolic space: Big Trout Lake mythology, taking once again advantage of empirical observation, gives to the figure of the loon the precise function of calendar indicator. His loud call which anyone can hear in the distance means, but does not foretell, the presence of spring with such regularity that it is equivalent to the stars. A symbolic space emerges in which the loon appears as symmetrical to the Pleiades constellation, called Makoshtekwaan ‘Bear’s head’, the bear occupying precisely the central spot of this space. The bear is indeed an animal with such a protean symbolism that it can take charge and articulate different expressions of the alternation of the seasons.

Myth is a kind of speech which reproduces itself with great fidelity. Accordingly, mythic knowledge of the world and even more of animals ratifies the basic deduction taken from empirical observation: the appearance of each
species is stable. The way animals look is fixed, as is their symbolic value. The former is after all the ultimate motivation of the latter. Shamanism functions according to this principle. Each species is present virtually everywhere in space in time. So, when the shaman mobilizes a given species, he mobilizes potentially all the real individuals belonging to that species whereever they are. Potentially the intended action of the shaman can be accomplished anywhere because all the individuals of a given species are regularly distributed across the space, so there is always one of these at the place or close to the place where the shaman wants his action to be taken. Is he looking for a moose? He will therefore call the raven, since there is always a raven flying somewhere over an area where a moose is wandering. Does he want to get some news from far-away kin? He will therefore send over as an emisary, either Wolf or Wolverine, who are great travellers. Wolf or Wolverine also like to prowl at night around the camps. In the morning, discovering their fresh tracks, you can interpret them as signs that someone is asking about you from a distance. Does the shaman want to show agressivity towards an enemy? He will likely choose the bear to be the medium of his ill-tempered mood. And, the target person, while in the bush, will supposedly encounter a bear and be obliged to fight with it.

If affecting reality depends on the symbolic values of certain species, it operates at the same time by slight alterations of the form of these selected species, alterations that work as signs. It is because the appearance or the behaviour of an animal is unusual and unexpected, even abnormal, that one may distinguish it as being not an ordinary animal but a specific one, an opawaakan, the supernatural vector of a shaman’s will, the emissary of a shaman sent from somewhere with a precise task to accomplish. For example, a bear encountered in the middle of winter, driven out of his den by a wave a warm weather or by sickness, might be interpreted as the emanation of someone’s will. In the same manner, I heard about a strange great blue heron. Once in a summer camp it came and sat once on top of each of the tents. Seeing this odd conduct the residents deducted that the bird was transmitting the resentment of someone outside the camp, perhaps someone who resented not having been invited to come and live among them. Though the identity of the opawaakanak connected with

\[2\text{The fact is less obvious than it seems. Most of the beavers killed today in the Big Trout Lake area are in a way deformed: they have a double claw on one of the hind legs. An old informant told me about the phenomenon and explained that it originated in the 40s. At that time, either by natural cause or overexploitation the beaver population was depleted and so agents of the Ministry of Natural Ressources replenished the species with a few individuals from outside and protected them.}\]
each one has to remain secret in a case like this, everybody understands
the meaning of the message and had a good idea about who originated it.

The principle of such shamanism, understood as the ability to act at a
distance in space or in time depends on a double manipulation, of which the
animal species are together the framework and the stake: shamanism pro­
ceeds from a double movement, speciation then individualization. On one
hand, there is choice of an animal species. This means its total investment,
the virtual mobilization of all the individuals of the species, all its incarn­
ations in the realm of reality, incarnations that are regurlarly distributed in
space. At that point, all these representatives of the species are equivalent.
On the other hand, there is individualization or singularization of one or
some of these representatives of the species. This second side of the process
is also a localization. A slight alteration of the appearance of the animal
allows it to occur. It is up to the ones who identify these alterations, these
small abnormalities, to detect their shamanistic origins. These are the ones
who can tell what is natural and is not. In a way, shamanistic practices
function a little like a radio (unless it is the other way round, as an old
informant once suggested to me). A message is emitted indifferently, on a
given wave or using a given animal, and it is up to the receiver to reproduce
the message. In one case it is an electronic device; in another a person or
a small group of persons who, by identifying the vector of the message, are
able to understand or interpret its meaning. The key element to this under­
standing is the symbolic value generally attributed to the animal. We can
really appreciate here how dialectically the shamanism operates. Although
it is the receiver who in reality distinguishes between normal and abnormal
animal behaviour, it is the active shaman — the one who is broadcast­
ing his message — who is supposed, for the purpose of singularization, to
be the cause of the morphological and behaviourial alteration of an actual
representative of the species.

We have two orders here. First, myth, a surprisingly stable (at least in
Big Trout Lake) phenomenon comprised only of words. Second, shamanistic
practices in which almost anything is possible. The shift from myth to
shamanistic practices occurs in conjunction with some kind of alteration
in the natural appearance of the animals, but it really seems that this
alteration is at the heart of the principle governing symbolic efficiency. We
could say that the shaman at work generates abnormalities which in turn
become signs, become supports for meaning or at least for interpretation.
These abnormalities in nature are made up by the shaman for his own
profit. If these kinds of operations can be ascribed to manipulations of
appearances, such manipulations are very limited (one has to recognize
which species are involved). In essence, they are kept under control. In no
way does the matter alter the main lines of the taxinomy; nor does it contest
the main symbolic values attached to this representation of the sensible world. Working within these classes but only modifying them slightly, the shaman confirms them. We must to remember here that these discrete operations are only aimed at practical endings.

This long digression on shamanism has a point. Shamanism is a phenomenon of first importance for the Big Trout Lake people, as it is, I suppose, for their immediate neighbours; a total social fact, to use the famous formula. By this point, although our approaches diverge strongly, I feel rather close to Hallowell. Shamanism allows us to show some cognitive principles at work. Being a extremely limited and, more importantly, controled manipulation of the animal appearances, it confirms a contrario that for these people, animal species and the numerous natural beings are conceived in accordance with their outer forms. The stability, the permanence and the immanency of these forms are postulated. This view, similar to that we inherited from Aristotle, is hardly universal. Picone reminds us that the Far Eastern civilizations would rather put the emphasis on the notion of metamorphosis. Taoist and Buddhist teachings are equivalent in this regard. Real animals are not defined according to a model, an abstract entity which is stable as a form; in other words, the animal world is not conceived on a species by species basis but according to a few paradigmatic models which belong, if anything, primarily to the imagination. Instead of being stable, these models are thought to be always perfectible. They are conceived as being bound to endless metamorphosis. They are virtually the sum of every possible forms. It is upon these basic models — monsters, unicorns, giant turtles, dragons, etc. — that the symbolic charges of myths graft themselves (Picone 1981). In opposition to this way of thinking, when faced with the notion of metamorphosis, Big Trout Lake Indians appear to be even more radical than we are, refusing apparently even to consider it. For them, for example, nothing is more insignificant than the change of a tadpole into a frog, the most common occurrence of metamorphosis known to them. In any case, it is certainly not for its metamorphic nature that the frog has the power to cure in the myths. Here the symbolic motivation comes from the assimilation of its call with the continuous sound of ritual drumming and of rattling while the therapeutic session goes on.

Shamanistic manipulations have almost no effect on the involved animal forms: suspicions of metamorphosis, a phenomenon designed to be perfectly limited and kept under control, eliminate the possibility of its

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3 Hallowell carried out field work among Berens River Ojibwas who are close, geographically and culturally, to the Big Trout Lake Ojibwas. While he acknowledged the vital importance of shamanism for the society he studied, it is unfortunate that he only saw the dark side of it. His use of the pejorative expression, conjuring practices, attests to his intellectual attitude (Hallowell 1942).
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development. Doing so, the shamanistic practices confirm the animal categories and strengthen their ties to their respective symbolic values. It looks as if the sum of all the possible animal forms, the totality of animal species, not numerous in the subarctic natural setting, saturates the world of appearances completely through classificatory logic and the symbolic functionalization that goes with it. And we can really appreciate this saturation by observing what is happening at the limits of the field, where I see two distinct realities. First, the insects, second the monstrous beings of the kind my informant was talking about. Two realities, marginal indeed but symmetrical; two realities which in a way should be qualified as anti-symbols.

Except for mosquitoes, the plague of the North, which are of course quite difficult to ignore, Big Trout Lake people do not seem to care much about insects either in their daily lives or in their myths. The latter do not even mention them. But insects, *manchoosh*, which means "small spirit" (*manitoo* with a diminutive ending) may interfere with the games, friendly or hostile, that shamans play at a distance, on an invisible stage. Insects are even supposed to be among the most powerful auxiliaries, especially the one called *otensi*. I have been unable to get a precise identification of this insect but according to the descriptions that I obtained, it must be a variety of waterbug. It is clear here that the extraordinary power of *otensi* is the result of two factors: on one hand, its extreme commonness (insects, contrary to all other animals, can never be characterized by their absence, at least in summer); on the other hand, its symbolic emptiness. Insects can be found anywhere; their presence alone carries no meaning; but, more importantly for us, this kind of presence does not allow the process of individualization which we saw earlier. An empty figure regarding symbolism, the insect can transmit anything, anywhere. In a way, it represents the perfect shamanistic vector, perfect but only for the very talented performer who is able, from almost nothing, to inculcate it with meaning and destination.

As opposed to insects, the monster is localized; it makes itself real only by sounding, by breathing, by stinking. Totally devoid of appearance — nobody ever sees it — it is nothing but metamorphosis, nothing but the sum of every possible and imaginable form. Metamorphosis and only metamorphosis, the monster cannot sustain any symbolic value. This impossibility makes it even more monstrous. It gives rise to even more fears that it cannot be kept under control by the shaman or put in his service. Definitely out of sphere of human reach, by words and action, monsters are neither human . . . nor natural.

Here we are: the metamorphosis, excluded from the heart of the cognitive apparatus, reappears unexpectedly on its margins, more virulent than
ever. Contrary to Sperber’s (1975) hypothesis, monsters reflect above all what is symbolically unthinkable; they are like signals of the limits of symbolic animality, the limits of this symbiosis between a wager concerning the morphological stability of animal species (and of all natural beings in general) and their semantic investment.

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