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INTRODUCTION

Every generation occupies itself with interpreting Trickster anew. . . .

—Paul Radin

We interpret always as transients.

—Frank Kermode

The first story I have to tell is not exactly true, but it isn't exactly false, either.

Once during the winter after I got out of college I was hitchhiking north of Winslow, Arizona. Just after sundown three Navajo men in an old green Chevy picked me up. The driver I remember distinctly as his hair was as long as mine, and he had lost the top of his right ear. He and his friends had been working a construction site near the New Mexico border and were headed home to Tuba City for the weekend. Two or three times in the fading light we came upon coyotes crossing the road or slinking along in the nearby brush, and there began a somewhat reverent and somewhat joking discussion of coyotes and their ability to see in the dark, which led in turn to my hearing what I only later understood to be a very old story.

Long ago, the driver said, Coyote was going along and as he came over the brow of a hill he saw a man taking his eyes out of his head and throwing them up into a cottonwood tree. There they would hang until he cried out, "Eyes come back!" Then his eyes would return to his head. Coyote wanted very much to learn this trick and begged and begged until

the man taught it to him. "But be careful, Coyote," the man said. "Don't do this more than four times in one day." "Of course not. Why would I do that?" said Coyote. (The others in the car laughed at this, but not the driver.)

When the man left, Coyote took his eyes out and threw them into the cottonwood tree. He could see for miles then, see over the low hills, see where the stream went, see the shape of things. When he had done this four times, he thought, "That man's rule is made for his country. I don't think it applies here. This is my country." For a fifth time he threw his eyes into the tree and for a fifth time he cried "Eyes come back!" But they didn't come back. Poor Coyote stumbled about the grove, bumping into trees and crying. He couldn't think what to do, and lay down to sleep. Before too long, some mice came by and, thinking Coyote was dead, began to clip his hair to make a nest. Feeling the mice at work, Coyote let his mouth hang open until he caught one by the tail.

"Look up in that tree, Brother Mouse," said Coyote, talking from the side of his mouth. "Do you see my eyes up there?" "Yes," said the mouse. "They are all swollen from the sun. They're oozing a little. Flies have gathered on them." The mouse offered to retrieve the eyes, but Coyote didn't trust him. "Give me one of your eyes," he said. The mouse did so, and Coyote put the little black ball into the back of his eye socket. He could see a little now, but had to hold his head at an odd angle to keep the eye in place. He stumbled from the cottonwood grove and came upon Buffalo Bull. "What's the matter, Coyote?" asked the Bull. The Buffalo took pity on him when he heard the story, and offered one of his own eyes. Coyote took it and squeezed it into his left eye socket. Part of it hung out. It bent him down to one side. Thus he went on his way.

The driver eventually dropped me off at a cheap motel ("Heat in Rooms!") outside Tuba City. The parting was too brief; I had wanted to offer a story of my own, or chip in on gas, though in fact I was tongue-tied and short of cash. I couldn't make head or tail of the Coyote story, and wondered nervously if it hadn't been directed at me in some way. It was weird and dream-like. It was not like anything I'd read in college. No one exchanges body parts in the transcendentalist classics I'd been reading my senior year, for example. True, in *Walden*, Thoreau likes to get himself above it all, but he never has any trouble with his eyes; there

is that "transparent eyeball" thing in Emerson, but it's a peak moment of American individualism, not a problem to be solved by helpful animals. Years later I began to get some sense of how Coyote works, but at the time I only felt that a hidden world had been briefly revealed and that its revelation belonged somehow to the situation of the story's telling—the car moving quickly through the winter dusk, the brief intimacy of strangers on the road, and coyotes barely visible beyond the headlights of the car.

I can never recall the scene without getting a little rush of pleasure, a rising sense of possibility, of horizons that melt away as the ankle joint pumps the gas. I get that feeling whenever I start on a journey. Once or twice a year for decades now I have ridden the train between Boston and New York, and invariably as all that iron and baggage picks up rolling speed my imagination stirs. So much seems possible at the beginning of a trip, so many things seem brimmed with meaning. The small towns slipping by, the unspent time ahead, herons meditating in marsh grass, a pigeon mummified beneath a bridge, the back seats of cars waiting at the clanging gate ("crossing / crossing"), the little decoration some nineteenth-century mason worked into the high peak of a factory wall, now abandoned, now disappearing over the horizon. Each thing seems all the more declarative for its swift arrival and swift departure. From a moving train I don't see the opaque weave of the real, I see the more expansive view the shuttle gets as again and again the warp threads briefly rise. I always take out my pen and begin to write, as if the landscape itself were in a manic and voluble mood and I its lucky and appointed scribe. I become convinced that just before me is the perfect statement of how things are.

That is a traveler's delusion. The writing I do on trains never turns into much. Maybe Jack Kerouac sniffing Benzedrine could do first and final drafts at one crack, but I can't. In the last book Italo Calvino wrote, he meditates on Hermes and Mercury, Europe's old quick-witted gods (the ones with wings on their shoes, the ones whose statues still adorn the train depots), and Calvino confesses that he always looked to their speed with the jealous longing of a more methodical craftsman. "I am a Saturn who dreams of being a Mercury, and everything I write reflects these two impulses," he says. Saturn is the slow worker, the one who can build a coin collection and label all the envelopes in a neat script, the one who will rewrite a paragraph eleven times to get the rhythm right.

Saturn can finish a four-hundred-page book. But he tends to get depressed if that is all he does; he needs regular Mercurial insight to give him something delicious to work on.

Not much of this book was written on a train, then, but it is full of "Saturn dreaming of Mercury." It is, among other things, a description and invocation of the kind of imagination that stirs to life at the beginning of a journey. It is about trickster figures—Coyote, Hermes, Mercury, and more—and all tricksters are "on the road." They are the lords of in-between. A trickster does not live near the hearth; he does not live in the halls of justice, the soldier's tent, the shaman's hut, the monastery. He passes through each of these when there is a moment of silence, and he enlivens each with mischief, but he is not their guiding spirit. He is the spirit of the doorway leading out, and of the crossroad at the edge of town (the one where a little market springs up). He is the spirit of the road at dusk, the one that runs from one town to another and belongs to neither. There are strangers on that road, and thieves, and in the underbrush a sly beast whose stomach has not heard about your letters of safe passage. Travelers used to mark such roads with cairns, each adding a stone to the pile in passing. The name Hermes once meant "he of the stone heap," which tells us that the cairn is more than a trail marker—it is an altar to the forces that govern these spaces of heightened uncertainty, and to the intelligence needed to negotiate them. Hitchhikers who make it safely home have somewhere paid homage to Hermes.

The road that trickster travels is a spirit road as well as a road in fact. He is the adept who can move between heaven and earth, and between the living and the dead. As such, he is sometimes the messenger of the gods and sometimes the guide of souls, carrying the dead into the underworld or opening the tomb to release them when they must walk among us. Sometimes it happens that the road between heaven and earth is not open, whereupon trickster travels not as a messenger but as a thief, the one who steals from the gods the good things that humans need if they are to survive in this world. Tricky Prometheus stealing fire is the famous Western example, but the motif of freeing some needed good from heaven is found all over the world. Along the North Pacific coast, for example, the trickster Raven is a thief of water and daylight; on the island of Japan, it was a trickster who released the arts of agriculture from their

heavenly enclosure. (It is at well-guarded barriers that these figures are especially *tricksters*, for here they must be masters of deceit if they are to proceed.)*

In short, trickster is a boundary-crosser. Every group has its edge, its sense of in and out, and trickster is always there, at the gates of the city and the gates of life, making sure there is commerce. He also attends the internal boundaries by which groups articulate their social life. We constantly distinguish—right and wrong, sacred and profane, clean and dirty, male and female, young and old, living and dead—and in every case trickster will cross the line and confuse the distinction. Trickster is the creative idiot, therefore, the wise fool, the gray-haired baby, the cross-dresser, the speaker of sacred profanities. Where someone's sense of honorable behavior has left him unable to act, trickster will appear to suggest an amoral action, something right/wrong that will get life going again. Trickster is the mythic embodiment of ambiguity and ambivalence, doubleness and duplicity, contradiction and paradox.

That trickster is a boundary-crosser is the standard line, but in the course of writing this book I realized that it needs to be modified in one important way, for there are also cases in which trickster *creates* a boundary, or brings to the surface a distinction previously hidden from sight. In several mythologies, for example, the gods lived on earth until something trickster did caused them to rise into heaven. Trickster is thus the author of the great distance between heaven and earth; when he becomes the messenger of the gods it's as if he has been enlisted to solve a problem he himself created. In a case like that, boundary creation and boundary crossing are related to one another, and the best way to describe trickster is to say simply that the boundary is where he will be found—sometimes

* Many, myself included, find the connotations of "trickster" too limited for the scope of activities ascribed to this character. Some have tried to change the name (one writer uses Trickster-Transformer-Culture Hero, which is apt but a touch unwieldy). Others stick to local names, complaining that the general term "trickster" is an invention of nineteenth-century anthropology and not well fitted to its indigenous objects.

This is partly true; indigenous terms doubtless allow a fuller feeling for trickster's sacred complexity. But his trickiness was hardly invented by ethnographers. Hermes is called *mechaniōta* in Homeric Greek, which translates well as "trickster." The West African trickster Legba is also called *Aflakete*, which means "I have tricked you." The Winnebago Indian figure is called *Wakdjunkaga*, which means "the tricky one." Trickery appeared long before anthropology.

drawing the line, sometimes crossing it, sometimes erasing or moving it, but always there, the god of the threshold in all its forms.

I have been speaking of trickster as “he” because all the regularly discussed figures are male. There is no shortage of tricky women in this world, of course, or of women in myth fabled for acts of deception, but few of these have the elaborated career of deceit that tricksters have. There are several reasons why this might be. Most obvious, all the canonical tricksters operate in patriarchal mythologies, and it would seem that patriarchy’s prime actors, even at the margins, are male. That being the case, one wonders if we won’t find female tricksters by looking to situations in which women have a substantial share of power. Such a search bears fruit, but not a lot. One of the only developed female tricksters in Native American lore, a female Coyote, can be found among two Pueblo Indian groups (the Hopi and the Tewa), both of which are matrilineal and matrilocal. This female Coyote, however, operates alongside a more traditional male Coyote, and the bulk of the tales belong to him. Moreover, there are plenty of other matrilineal and matrilocal tribes in North America, and in all of them the trickster is male.

Another line of inquiry might begin by noting the odd fact that tricksters are ridden by lust, but their hyperactive sexuality almost never results in any offspring, the implication being that the stories are about non-procreative creativity and so get assigned to the sex that does not give birth. In this same line, the consequences of trickster’s on-the-road and opportunistic sexuality are clearly more serious for women than for men (and in fact lust is *not* one of the female Coyote’s characteristics).*

In the chapters that follow, much more will be added to this initial description of trickster figures—about how their appetites drive their wanderings, for example; about their shamelessness and their great attraction to dirt. But these themes by themselves do not interest me as much as their conjunction with the final thing that must be said to round out an initial portrait: in spite of all their disruptive behavior, tricksters are regularly honored as the creators of culture. They are imagined not only to have stolen certain essential goods from heaven and given them to the race but to have gone on and helped shape this world so as to make it a hospitable place for human life. In one Native American creation story, the Great Spirit speaks to Coyote about the coming of human be-

* I elaborate these brief remarks in an appendix on gender at the end of the book.

ings: “The New People will not know anything when they come, not how to dress, how to sing, how to shoot an arrow. You will show them how to do all these things. And put the buffalo out for them and show them how to catch salmon.” In the Greek tradition, Hermes doesn’t simply acquire fire, he invents and spreads a method, a *techné*, for making fire, and when he steals cattle from the gods he is simultaneously presenting the human race with the domestic beasts whose meat that fire will cook. A whole complex of cultural institutions around killing and eating cattle are derived from the liar and thief, Hermes.

The arts of hunting, the arts of cooking meat—such things belong to the beginnings of time, when trickster was first involved in shaping this world. But he has not left the scene. Trickster the culture hero is always present; his seemingly asocial actions continue to keep our world lively and give it the flexibility to endure. The specifics of what this means will emerge in the chapters to come; I raise the point here to widen the sense of what this book is about. I not only want to describe the imagination figured in the trickster myth, I want to argue a paradox that the myth asserts: that the origins, liveliness, and durability of cultures require that there be space for figures whose function is to uncover and disrupt the very things that cultures are based on. I hope to give some sense of how this can be, how social life can depend on treating antisocial characters as part of the sacred.

Any discussion of this old mythology soon raises the question of where tricksters appear in the modern world.* A first answer is that they appear where they always have—in Native American winter storytelling, in Chinese street theater, in the Hindu festivals celebrating Krishna the Butter Thief, in West African divination ceremonies. African tricksters traveled west in the slave trade and can still be found in African-American storytelling, in the blues, in Haitian voodoo, and so on. I have been to a Yoruba diviner in Oakland, California, and seen the seventeenth palm nut set aside for the trickster Eshu.

A second answer reverses the first. Outside such traditional contexts there are no modern tricksters because trickster only comes to life in the

* As for the pre-modern or traditional tricksters, the notes to this introduction contain a list of those who will come forward in this book.

complex terrain of polytheism. If the spiritual world is dominated by a single high god opposed by a single embodiment of evil, then the ancient trickster disappears. Here it is worth pausing to explain that the Devil and the trickster are not the same thing, though they have regularly been confused.* Those who confuse the two do so because they have failed to perceive trickster's great ambivalence. The Devil is an agent of evil, but trickster is *amoral*, not *immoral*. He embodies and enacts that large portion of our experience where good and evil are hopelessly intertwined. He represents the paradoxical category of sacred amorality. One doesn't usually hear said of the Christian Devil what the anthropologist Paul Radin says of the Native American trickster:

Trickster is at one and the same time creator and destroyer, giver and negator, he who dupes others and who is always duped himself. . . . He knows neither good nor evil yet he is responsible for both. He possesses no values, moral or social . . . yet through his actions all values come into being.

It might be argued that the passing of such a seemingly confused figure marks an advance in the spiritual consciousness of the race, a finer tuning of moral judgment; but the opposite could be argued as well—that the erasure of trickster figures, or the unthinking confusion of them with the Devil, only serves to push the ambiguities of life into the background. We may well hope our actions carry no moral ambiguity, but pretending that is the case when it isn't does not lead to greater clarity about right

* In Nigeria in the late 1920s, ethnographers found their informant telling tales of the Yoruba trickster Eshu as being about "the Devil," for this is what the missionaries had taught him to do. (Translations of the Bible into Yoruba use "Eshu" for "Devil.") The same thing happened in neighboring Dahomey, where Christians were sure they'd found Satan disguised as the trickster Legba, and recast the story of Adam and Eve with Legba hired locally to play the serpent.

In America, when Paul Radin worked among the Winnebago (circa 1908–18), he found members of "the new semi-Christian Peyote cult" convinced that the Winnebago trickster Wakdjunkaga was the Devil. Commenting on a story in which trickster has fooled a flock of birds, an informant told Radin, "We, the Winnebago, are the birds and Wakdjunkaga is Satan." In the thirteenth century, a similar confusion arose around the Norse trickster Loki.

and wrong; it more likely leads to unconscious cruelty masked by inflated righteousness.

But to come back to the question of where tricksters might be found in the modern world, I've offered two answers so far: they're found where they always were; they aren't found at all, if by "modern" we mean a world in which polytheism has disappeared. Both of these are somewhat narrow answers, however. "What is a god?" asks Ezra Pound, and then replies, "A god is an eternal state of mind." If trickster stirs to life on the open road, if he embodies ambiguity, if he "steals fire" to invent new technologies, if he plays with all boundaries both inner and outer, and so on—then he must still be among us, for none of these has disappeared from the world. His functions, like the bones of Osiris, may have been scattered, but they have not been destroyed. The problem is to find where his gathered body might come back to life, or where it might already have done so.

In America, one likely candidate for the protagonist of a reborn trickster myth is the confidence man, especially as he appears in literature and film (most actual confidence men don't have the range of the imaginary ones, and come to sadder ends). Some have even argued that the confidence man is a covert American hero. We enjoy it when he comes to town, even if a few people get their bank accounts drained, because he embodies things that are actually true about America but cannot be openly declared (as, for example, the degree to which capitalism lets us steal from our neighbors, or the degree to which institutions like the stock market require the same kind of confidence that criminal con men need).

If the confidence man is one of America's unacknowledged founding fathers, then instead of saying that there are no modern tricksters one could argue the opposite: trickster is everywhere. To travel from place to place in the ancient world was not only unusual, it was often taken to be a sign of mental derangement (if a story began "So and so was wandering around aimlessly," listeners knew immediately that trouble was at hand), but now everyone travels. If by "America" we mean the land of rootless wanderers and the free market, the land not of natives but of immigrants, the shameless land where anyone can say anything at any time, the land of opportunity and therefore of opportunists, the land where individuals are allowed and even encouraged to act without regard to community, then trickster has not disappeared. "America" is his apotheosis; he's pandemic.

Such in fact was the diagnosis of many Native Americans when white Europeans first appeared on the scene. Here was a race and a way of life that took as central many things which aboriginally belonged at the periphery. Surely trickster was at hand. In pre-contact Cheyenne, the word for "trickster" also meant "white man" (I think because trickster is sometimes "old man" and the old are white-haired), a linguistic coincidence that seemed to be no accident at all after the Europeans arrived. In fact, as I was researching this book I found a Cheyenne Coyote tale recorded in 1899 that begins "White man was going along . . ." and then goes on to tell the eye-juggler story, the one I heard all those years ago in the Arizona dusk, substituting "white man" for "Coyote" throughout. Suddenly I was more convinced than ever that the story had been directed at me; it was I, after all, who was hitchhiking aimlessly around the countryside, playing by my own rules, burning up other men's gasoline. I was being offered a little advice.

The Navajo have a number of motives for telling Coyote tales. At the simplest level, the stories are entertaining; they make people laugh; they pass the time. Beyond that, they teach people how to behave. Coyote ought not to do things more than four times; he ought to have proper humility; he ought to have proper respect for his body. Part of the entertainment derives from his self-indulgent refusal of such commands, of course, for there is vicarious pleasure in watching him break the rules, and a potentially fruitful fantasizing, too, for listeners are invited, if only in imagination, to scout the territory that lies beyond the local constraints (what does Coyote see from that high tree?).

According to the folklorist Barre Toelken, who lived among the Navajo for many years, several other levels of motive lie beneath these. Most important, Navajo Coyote stories are used in healing rituals. They are a kind of medicine. "Eye-juggler" is not just a critique of Coyote's egotism; its telling also plays a role in any healing ritual intended to cure diseases of the eye. (Did I have some "eye disease" after four years of college? Maybe it was time for a break from book learning?) As entertainment, the story stirs up a fantasy of amusing disorder; as medicine, it knits things together again after disorder has left a wound. In fact, to tell the story without such moral or medicinal motives does a kind of violence to it, and to the community (so that the teller would be suspected of engaging in witchcraft).

All this makes it clear that there are limits to the idea that trickster

is everywhere in the modern world. It is true that such has occasionally been the aboriginal diagnosis of whites who take such pride in having created a mobile, individualistic, acquisitive civilization. But once one has a sense of the complex uses of Coyote tales one can see that most modern thieves and wanderers lack an important element of trickster's world, his sacred context. If the ritual setting is missing, trickster is missing. If his companions—all the other spiritual forces within whose fixed domains he carries on his mischief—are no longer with us, then he is no longer with us. Hermes cannot be rightly imagined without the more serious Apollo whose cattle he steals, or the grieving Demeter whose daughter he retrieves from the underworld. The god of the roads needs the more settled territories before his traveling means very much. If *everyone* travels, the result is not the apotheosis of trickster but another form of his demise. Here we have come back in a roundabout way to the earlier point: trickster belongs to polytheism or, lacking that, he needs at least a relationship to other powers, to people and institutions and traditions that can manage the odd double attitude of both insisting that their boundaries be respected and recognizing that in the long run their liveness depends on having those boundaries regularly disturbed.

Most of the travelers, liars, thieves, and shameless personalities of the twentieth century are not tricksters at all, then. Their disruptions are not subtle enough, or pitched at a high enough level. Trickster isn't a run-of-the-mill liar and thief.* When he lies and steals, it isn't so much to get away with something or get rich as to disturb the established categories of truth and property and, by so doing, open the road to possible new worlds. When Pablo Picasso says that "art is a lie that tells the truth," we are closer to the old trickster spirit. Picasso was out to reshape and revive the world he had been born into. He took this world seriously; then he disrupted it; then he gave it a new form.

In this book, in any event, it is mostly to the practices of art that I turn in hopes of finding where this disruptive imagination survives among us. A handful of artists play central roles in my narrative—Picasso is

* People have regularly suggested to me that tricky politicians are modern tricksters, but I'm skeptical. It isn't just that their ends are usually too mundane and petty, but that the trickster belongs to the periphery, not to the center. If trickster were ever to get into power, he would stop being trickster. The deceitful politician is a crook, not a culture hero.

one, but also Marcel Duchamp, John Cage, Allen Ginsberg, Maxine Hong Kingston, and several others. (I also devote a chapter to the American slave Frederick Douglass, whose art was oratory and whose field of action politics.) My argument is not, however, that any of these figures is a trickster. "Trickster" is abstraction enough, already distanced from particular embodiments like Hermes and Coyote. Actual individuals are always more complicated than the archetype, and more complicated than its local version, too. Ralph Ellison once wrote a peeved response to a friend's attempt to fit *Invisible Man* into the pattern suggested by West African tricksters and their American progeny such as Brer Rabbit. "Archetypes, like taxes," Ellison wrote, "seem doomed to be with us always, and so with literature, one hopes; but between the two there must needs be the living human being in a specific texture of time, place and circumstance. . . . Archetypes are timeless, novels are time-haunted." Such is the voice of the specific (the ectype) complaining about the general, the mottled evidence talking back to the refined theory. "Don't dip my novel in that vat of archetype acid."

My own position, in any event, is not that the artists I write about are tricksters but that there are moments when the practice of art and this myth coincide. I work by juxtaposition, holding the trickster stories up against specific cases of the imagination in action, hoping that each might illuminate the other. If the method works, it is not because I have uncovered the true story behind a particular work of art but more simply that the coincidences are fruitful, making us think and see again. Such goals are in keeping with trickster's spirit, for he is the archetype who attacks all archetypes. He is the character in myth who threatens to take the myth apart. He is an "eternal state of mind" that is suspicious of all eternal, dragging them from their heavenly preserves to see how they fare down here in this time-haunted world.