



Mythical and Logical Thinking : Friends or Foes ?

Michael Pomedli

Volume 42, numéro 3, octobre 1986

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/400263ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/400263ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Faculté de philosophie, Université Laval

ISSN

0023-9054 (imprimé)

1703-8804 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Pomedli, M. (1986). Mythical and Logical Thinking : Friends or Foes ? *Laval théologique et philosophique*, 42(3), 377–387. <https://doi.org/10.7202/400263ar>

MYTHICAL AND LOGICAL THINKING: FRIENDS OR FOES? *

Michael POMEDLI

RÉSUMÉ. — *L'auteur soutient qu'en principe les deux intentionnalités radicalement différentes qui prédominent dans les cultures « primitive » (mythique) et « avancée » (logique) peuvent agir l'une sur l'autre efficacement. Le fondement de cette interaction se trouve dans les exigences latentes en chaque intentionnalité.*

SUMMARY. — *The author argues that two radically different intentionalities predominant in "primitive" (mythical) and "advanced" (logical) cultures can, in principle, fruitfully interact. The basis for this interaction is found in the latent demands in each intentionality.*

INTRODUCTION

In this article I focus on the tension of two intentionalities embodied in two life-worlds: that of the native North American and that of the European. The European confronts the uniquely oppositional other and labels him savage, materialistic and godless. Despite the more aggressive European tendencies, I see the tension of intentionalities as proceeding not exclusively from the Europeans who challenge the sinister other; I see the other itself as providing an ontological basis and even a demand for a European type of response.

As I proceed to examine the coincidence of two life-worlds, I find, on one level of tension, that the European, more sophisticated scientifically, philosophically and theologically, challenges the import of a foreign way of life. The native lifestyle nourished on dream forms and legends as the energy for thought and action has to be demythologized and deconstructed. Thus the impetus for alteration and the marshalling of a more analytic and logical framework emanates from the very being of Europeans, whether explorer, trader or missionary. Europeans are restless in the face of equivocation embedded in a way of life that is mythical, i.e., a non-literal or symbolic and holistic presentation of truth in the cosmos which harbors potential explanations.

* This article has been funded in part by a grant from the Canadian Plains Research Center.

For Europeans, myths must cede to clear expressions and univocal meanings, and accord with preformulated plans. Europeans, therefore, employ a blue-print whereby native myths are interpreted according to what I term logical thinking. Such thinking engages in a dialectic with all phenomena, seeks explanations by analysis, distances and frees the inquirer from the object at hand while striving for clarity.¹

On another level of tension, the surpassing of the culturally given, that of the native, is achieved ontologically, at least to a certain extent, by the culturally given itself. The culture in question does not lie there inert and lifeless. A cultural structure, that of the native in this instance, not only harbors and recounts experiences; it also invites and provokes thought; the symbol wants to be reflected upon and interpreted. In Paul Ricœur's words, "Le symbole donne à penser."² The symbol lures reflection; the latent wants to be manifest. Thus the European logical intentionality is not merely an external imposition on native mythical forms, but also snatches the bait offered by mythical symbols themselves. In the myth, consciousness is not a given but a task.³

While the mythical symbol demands and needs to be surpassed, the logical, analytic forms also have an internal demand and need to be surpassed. This demand and need express the relational and derivational aspects of logical thinking. While logical thinking frees itself from mythical forms, it must at least acknowledge its presuppositions, that from which it is freed, its initial belonging to myth. A critical and creative response to mythical thinking⁴ can result in a restorative symbol. Two quite opposed intentionalities can unite into a third: foes can become friends, at least in theory if not in fact.

I engage in a dialectic with these two diverse intentionalities in some relevant 19th century texts, including those of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, missionaries in Western Canada, and the native lifestyles evidenced therein. Such a dialectic explores five areas: 1) Early Ambiguities; 2) European Intentions; 3) Radical Spiritual Intentionality of the Natives; 4) Mythic, Analytic and Restorative Intentionalities, and 5) Cosmic Sensitivities. At the basis of this personal and cross-cultural dialectic is the recognition that myths display a potential for logical reflection and that logical formulations can embody and lead to some form of restorative mythical thinking.

-
1. My dependence for terminology and its clarification is principally on Paul Ricœur. See *The Conflict of Interpretations*, Evanston: Northwestern, 1974, 12. Ricœur's later thinking includes events within symbol; see *Paul Ricœur: Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, ed. John B. Thompson, London: Cambridge University Press, 1981, 208.
 2. *The Philosophy of Paul Ricœur, an anthology of his work*, ed. Charles E. Reagan and David Stewart, Boston: Beacon, 1978, 37.
 3. Hermeneutics, 18. See Paul RICŒUR, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, New Haven: Yale, 44.
 4. Elsewhere I argued for a non-logical thinking, but a thinking, nevertheless, among natives; see "The concept of 'soul' in the *Jesuit Relations*: Were there any philosophers among the North American Indians?" *Laval théologique et philosophique* 41 (1985) 57-64.

1. *Early Ambiguities*

Right from the beginning of their meeting, the European and the native North American displayed different ways of observing reality, differing intentionalities :

At daybreak they [Columbus and his crew] saw an island full of green trees and abounding in springs... and inhabited by a multitude of people who hastened to the shore, astounded and marveling at the sight of the ships, which they took for animals. These people could hardly wait to see what sort of things the ships were. The Christians were no less eager to know what manner of people they had to do with.⁵

The date : Oct. 12, 1492 ; the place : San Salvador.⁶

The natives judged the ships to be inhabitants of the sea, and the Europeans to be gods, Columbus noted.⁷ Columbus judged the natives to be Indians, although they were not the sophisticated Orientals he had imagined. Nevertheless, Columbus called the region an earthly paradise in the East, perhaps an island separated from the Asiatic mainland.

Columbus, a practical and astute seaman, curiously blended facts with fiction, reality with fantasy. The natives became in his mind the idealized Orientals he had heard about. Indeed, he created as well as discovered the phenomenon that was "Indian".⁸

In sum, the natives display a naïveté in their encounter with Columbus and his fleet, and give a spiritual interpretation to the events. Columbus classifies, sometimes going beyond the evidence at hand.

Besides the ambiguity of the trek — going West to get East — subsequent encounters between Caucasians and natives furthered an ambiguity of perception : the natives were called both noble⁹ (godly) and savage. In French, the term "les sauvages" better carries this ambiguity and the nuances throughout history. As Remi Cadieux notes, the Vatican department for handling missionary affairs, *Propaganda Fidei*, referred to the natives as "silvicolae" — those who inhabit the woods, versus the "agricolae" — those who cultivate the soil. Etymologically, "sauvage" is from the Old Latin, "salvaticus/silvaticus",¹⁰ one who can survive in the forest, one who is

5. *The Life of the Admiral Christopher Columbus by his Son Ferdinand*, trans. Benjamin Keen, New Jersey : Rutgers, 1959, 59.

6. The natives called this place in the Bahamas, Guanahani, but Columbus christened it San Salvador. *The New Century Cyclopedia of Names*, ed. Clarence L. Barnhart, New York : Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1954.

7. "Letter to Rafael Sanchez, March 14, 1493," *Great Documents in American Indian History*, ed. Wayne Moquin, New York : Praeger, 1973, 3.

8. W. Richard COMSTOCK, "On seeing with the eye of the native European," in *Seeing with a Native Eye*, ed. Walter Holden Capps, New York : Harper & Row, 1976, 61.

9. See Francesco Gioseppi Bressani's account in *Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents, travels and explorations of the Jesuit missionaries in New France*, ed. Reuben Gold Thwaites, New York : Pageant, 1959, 38 : 257-263. Future : *JR*.

10. Paul ROBERT, *Dictionnaire alphabétique et analogique de la langue française*, Société du Nouveau Littre, 1964, 339-344 ; *Le Petit Littré*, 6, Gallimard-Hachette, 1961, 1936-1939, in Remi CADIEUX, "Qui sont les Amérindiens ?" *Kerygma* 12 (1978) 173.

living totally free, not socialized, in the state of nature, without ambition and dishonesty, uncorrupted by civilization.¹¹

The “noble savage” myth then became one of the ways of responding to differences in life-worlds, a romanticized way by letting another myth speak to myth! This, however, needs further development which is not possible here.

2. *European Intentions*

Our backgrounds, or enculturation tints our lenses. The Oblate missionaries in Western Canada did not escape this tinting, a contemporary Oblate, Claude Champagne, notes.¹² In France, priests who were to serve on the foreign missions received the same ministerial preparation as other candidates. “This scholastic formation did not prepare them for adaptation and innovation,”¹³ Champagne states. The assumption was made that the missionaries would use the same catechetical tools and methods as those in France. It is no wonder then that natives were measured according to Parisian standards!¹⁴

The perception of who the natives were and their future was determined not only by the missionaries “in the field” but especially by the central organization of the Oblates in France. In 1853, Eugene de Mazenod, head of the worldwide Oblate order, issued a series of directives which, according to Joseph-Étienne Champagne, “... exercised a considerable influence in eastern and northern Canada as well as in Africa and Asia.” Number six of that directive reads: “Force them [the natives] to change their nomadic life to a sedentary one. Use every means to attain this goal: teach them to build homes, to cultivate the land; teach them the most elementary civilized trades; establish schools in each mission if possible.”¹⁵

-
11. CADIEUX, *ibid.*, 173-174. When did a pejorative meaning of “sauvage” gain ascendancy? An editorial footnote in Alexandre Taché’s 1851 letter to his mother, “Bishop Alexandre Taché, O.M.I. and the Chippewa Nation,” *Études Oblates* 34 (1973) 225, states that “sauvage” had no disparaging connotation around 1846. But in the letter itself (235), Taché states: “To say savage is to say ferocious and barbarian”!
 12. *Les débuts de la mission dans le Nord-Ouest Canadien, Mission et Église chez Mgr Vital Grandin, o.m.i. (1829–1902)*, Ottawa: Éditions de l’Université d’Ottawa, 1983, 251. Lest we be too harsh on 19th century missionaries’ attitudes toward indigenous cultures, Antonio Gualtieri notes that even today there is generally a “negligible indigenization”. “Canadian missionary perceptions of Indian and Inuit culture and religious tradition,” *Studies in Religion* 9 (1980) 299–314.
 13. Claude CHAMPAGNE, *ibid.*
 14. Charles Arnaud’s letter in “Visite du R. P. Joseph Vandenberghe,” *Missions de la Congrégation des Missionnaires Oblats de Marie Immaculée* 4 (1865) 171-172. Future references will be *Missions*. In his letter to his mother (233), Taché states that “the principal vice of these [Chippewa’s] narratives lies in their lack of chronology.” According to Albert Lacombe, “les sauvages” can at best become half-civilized. *Missions* 7: 247; 9: 264. Émile Petitot notes in *Monographie des Dènè-Dindjié*, Paris: Leroux, 1876, 32, 43, that the natives had no idea of beauty, goodness; they ignored literature and poetry. According to a contemporary rereading of history, Sam D. Gill states: “In the Amassalik Eskimo language, the word for ‘to breathe’ is the same as the word for ‘to make poetry,’ and it stems from the word referring to the soul or stuff of life.” His conclusion is that “to breathe is to make poetry”. *Native American Religions*, Belmont: Wadsworth, 1982, 42.
 15. Joseph-Étienne CHAMPAGNE, *Les Missions Catholiques dans l’Ouest canadien (1818–1875)*, Ottawa: Éditions de l’Université, 1949, 203-204.

There was some recognition, however, that European standards might be stifling for the natives. Around 1856, an unnamed native instructor to Bishop Vital Grandin in the Montagnais language was sent to a school in Quebec. He soon took sick and died for seemingly inexplicable reasons. Grandin began to realize, Champagne states, that natives cannot be totally withdrawn from their own lifestyle and their people. Grandin stated: "They die even in our institutions if we do not give them fresh air, some outdoor work and native sustenance."¹⁶

The European intentions are quite clear: to reinterpret the "text" of the native lifestyle according to European patterns; to systematize and domesticate a way of living that seemed to have little focus and direction.

3. *Radical Spiritual Intentionality of the Natives*

Native symbols, however, speak quite a different intentionality from the European logical forms. Although it generally escaped European perceptions, native cultures give evidence of a radical spiritual dimension. In his book, *Keepers of the Game*, Calvin Martin states of the natives: "By operating in a spiritual realm, man found himself able to communicate — to have a dialogue — with Nature around him."¹⁷ All of the cosmos is perceived as upheld by spiritual forces. In a certain sense, the native spirit sees spirit; the reality apprehended is the spiritual. In this way, the reality of man and other beings is connected, on the most tentative level, as an understanding of the differences, leading then to an acknowledgement of their affinities, and culminating in a communion or the near identity of one spirit with another.¹⁸ Man and animal on this level are not that easily distinguishable.¹⁹

In one form or another, the natives' rather undifferentiated spirit imparts instruction in ritual, suggests a formula with every gift, gives directions on how to plant corn, how to hunt their brother the buffalo, how to carve their masks and how to make sacred bundles.²⁰

16. *Ibid.*, 201-202. The fact remains, Champagne states (194), that the missionaries did not acknowledge and build upon the Indians' religious ideas.

17. Calvil MARTIN, *Keepers of the Game, Indian-Animal Relationships and the Fur Trade*, Berkeley: University of California, 1978, 38. For a critique of Martin's controversial thesis about the natives' exploitation of nature, see Ake Hultkrantz's review in *Studies in Religion* 9 (1980) 248-250. Because the external organizational aspects of religion were frequently lacking, the missionaries judged the natives to be irreligious. More recent authors are unequivocally positive; thus, Annette Potvin states: "From the beginning, the Blackfeet were religious." *The Sun Dance Liturgy of the Blackfoot People*, unpublished Master's thesis, University of Ottawa, 1966, 140.

18. Stan FONTAINE, "The Amerindian Reality: As an Inner Reality," *Kerygma* 15 (1981) 174-184. For the mediating role of nature — trees, fire and rocks — in the "steam tent" (sweat lodge), see Adrian TANNER, *Bringing Home Animals*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979, 116-117.

19. According to J. G. Nelson the literature of the 18th and 19th centuries shows that man was subordinate to the animals. It took the Europeans over 200 years to make any major changes in the ecosystem. Draft copy of *The Last Refuge*, Provincial Archives of Alberta, Edmonton, 274-280.

20. Le Roy H. APPLETON, *American Indian Design & Decoration*, New York: Dover, 1950, 1971, 17.

It is no accident then that even the acknowledged historical event of Methodist missionary James Evans' invention of the syllabic form for the Cree language²¹ takes on a mythical twist. Indian Fine-day re-interprets that linguistic event :

A wood Cree named Badger-call died and then became alive again. While he was dead he was given the characters of the syllabary and told that with them he could write Cree. Strike-him-on-the-back learned this writing from Badger-call. He made a feast and announced that he would teach it to anyone who wanted to learn. This is how I learned it. Badger-call also taught the writing to the missionaries. When the writing was given to Badger-call he told (*sic*) "They (the missionaries) will change the script and will say that the writing belongs to them. But only those who know Cree will be able to read it." That is how we know that the writing does not belong to the whites, for it can be read only by those who know the Cree language.²²

4. *Mythic, Analytic and Restorative Intentionalities*

Fine-day creates a myth in which he appropriates the syllabary technique and situates it within his own life-world. The myth does not question the proximate origin of the technique but expands that genesis. Such an invention then is from the spiritual realm ; it is a given. Those with a festive, open spirit can receive it.

In appropriating this European historical event, Fine-day believes he gives to the syllabary and the Cree language its authentic import : only the person who has this mythic perspective can learn the language fully, is able to read it, à la spirit speaking to spirit, and is able to impart it to others.

In the invention and the mythical adaptation we see the cultural differences writ large. For the European the factual recounting of the event has its own merit. For the Cree only the mythical form can embrace the totality of what happened. The mythic can depict the mystery and wonderment of language ; it can entwine present with past and open up the future. The syllabic myth can name but also efface the individuality of the new "discoverer" by rooting the event in a cultural context which then becomes a legacy for all. For the native, the event is restored, has now come home, or in Claude Levi-Strauss' image, the myth has acted as liberator of an event by expanding the domain of its meaning.²³

From the above example we have seen how the linguistic and the Indian intentionalities display divergent tendencies. In *The Reenchantment of the World*, Morris Berman contrasts the technological approach to rainmaking with the Indian

21. John MACLEAN, *James Evans, Inventor of the Syllabic System of the Cree Language*, Toronto : Wm Briggs, 1890. Missionary Evans "... used a variety of triangles, angles, arcs and pothooks... each with four positions — up, down, left, right — to depict the thirty-six open vowel sounds which largely constitute the musical language of the Cree," Bruce Peel notes. The acute angle < in the four different positions can become pay, pe, po and pah. Europeans and natives could learn to read the Cree language in a matter of days or even hours ! *The Invention of the Cree Syllabic Characters and the First Printing in Rupert's Land*, Montreal : Osiris, 1974, 7.

22. David MANDELBAUM, "The Plains Cree," *Anthropological Papers American Museum of Natural History* 37 (1940) 264.

23. *The Savage Mind*, London : Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966, 22.

rain dance. In one approach, technicians and their workers sow dry ice on the clouds to make them rain. In the rain dance, on the other hand, natives invite the clouds to join them, to respond to their invocation. They do not presume an automatic response from the heavens. (And a negative response — no rain — is not interpreted necessarily as a malfunction in the dance technique.) Like any normal lover, the clouds may or may not be in the mood. In this way, however, natives learn about the reality of the cosmos, about the moods of the earth and the skies. A delayed response is understandable; the cosmos, after all, needs more time to make up its mind!

Berman insists that the disenchantment of the world evident in the scientific world view embodies an instability. Restabilization is possible only with a re-enchantment of the world. Toward this end he relies on the perspective of psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich who states that having certainty about reality is dependent upon loving. Only in loving does one get to know who/what is really there. Conversely, perception based on the intellect alone is “impaired reality-testing”, the clinical definition of insanity.²⁴

While the characterization of the scientific comportment to the world as insane is too strong, it does point to a danger of such a specialized approach. Distancing oneself, freeing oneself from phenomena and engaging in analysis yields a certain truth about them. One can explain phenomena and thereby alter them according to new conceptions. The danger of such a liberating scientific comportment is the forgetfulness of the basis for the technique: that the scientist and technician began their reasoning process from the cloud formations. The danger is that thought and technique become independent of their moorings, self-referential and idolatrous. Nevertheless what can happen in the disenchanting dry-ice technique is a man-effected liberation of a significant potential in the clouds.

The myth, on the other hand, gathers the cosmos together and sees reality as inherently interrelated with significant potential held in suspense. A human response, then, to reality is to see it in its interrelatedness and interdependence, not merely in proposing an autonomous human will. In addition, however, the myth needs not merely the understanding of the totality but an explanation also.

Are there any guidelines for a rapport between the technical and the mythical? Re-enchantment seems like a romantic approach which glosses over the burden of a reconciliation. A clue for the legitimacy of moving toward an interpretation of myths is the inherent tension whereby the bounded whole harbors the potential for thought. An added dimension of myth then is an explication of what is there.

In turn, the openness of myth to some measure of demythologizing provides a clue for the legitimacy of explanation and for every other particular hermeneutic. Every discipline that approaches the myth must use a self-referential critical approach whereby it recognizes the limits of its own hermeneutic.

Only if early explorers, traders and missionaries sense and perceive the legitimacy of a culture foreign to their own is there the possibility of a *modus vivendi*

24. MORRIS BERMAN, *The Reenchantment of the World*, Toronto: Bantam, 1984, 9-10, 172-173.

between them. On the other hand, only if natives recognize that there are latent possibilities in their myths and lifestyles that can be made explicit is there a possibility of harmony of cultures. Only if the scientific, philosophical and theological disciplines recognize their limits can some measure of rapport be achieved with native traditions. Obviously the restorative intentionality will not be absolutist thereby erasing the tensions which were already latent in both mythical and technical thinking.

The neat characterization of one culture as logical and the other as symbolic cedes to a more seesawing-back-and-forth approach. This oscillation is illustrated in a 1866 letter of the missionary-philologist Émile Petitot. Petitot's Montagnais (Chippewa) are all ears and full of admiration for his tightly discursive preaching about the Holy Mysteries. While the European-Canadian acknowledges the church's articles of faith as the basis for his teaching, the natives imagine that his previous night's dreams were the sole substance and inspiration for his instructions. They are held spellbound by his fertile imagination, believing that God himself had revealed all this to him.²⁵ Petitot, however, recalls the efforts he himself had made to deliver reasonable, clear and convincing arguments.

As a logical sequel to their restoring grandiloquence to its source, the deity, the natives bestow on Petitot the nickname "Intranzetchot" which means great doctor, large phantom, or huge silhouette which is equivalent to great sorcerer, much, I am sure, to Petitot's great embarrassment. For the natives, he notes, those who lay claim to the title of "Inkranze" or Shaman, believe that they see the full dimensions of reality in their dreams. The dream then gives a certain order or perspective to experiences of everyday life. One can compare these deep dreams, Petitot continues, to the fixed ideas of monomaniacs or to the dreams of visionaries. Natives are unable or unwilling to transcend these idolatrous oneiric fixations.

This Oriental-like rootedness in dreams forms the backdrop to the natives' very lifestyle. It is always the "Inkranze" who is consulted in sicknesses, famines, the hunt, and the arrival of company boats. Petitot comments:

They have a shameless imagination which joined to their natural love of religion, or rather to everything that pertains to the supernatural order, must lead infallibly to mysticism and to folly. These ignorant Indians while still catechumens enshrine among themselves Nicholas and Marcion,²⁶ who as the early fomenters of heresies, hearing only their foolish pride and adding openly faith in the bizarre dreams and the ridiculous, think themselves to be priests and inspired by God.²⁷

25. "Lettre de Petitot," *Missions* 6 (1867) 460-461. William K. Powers suggests that although many native cultural forms were purged, not all the rigors of restriction were imposed with regard to music and dance. Because these were judged to be quaint and harmless, colonizers permitted them. Their language of peace and understanding served the cause of stability; they were, therefore, not judged worthy of control or suppression. "Plains Indian Music and Dance," in *Anthropology on the Great Plains*, ed. W. Raymond Wood and Margot Liberty, Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1980, 224.

26. Nicholas probably refers to the "Nicolaitans," an early Christian sect, perhaps fanciful, which advocated a return to pagan worship. Marcion founded a heretical sect in Rome in 144 A. D. which taught that the Christian Gospel was wholly a Gospel of love to the absolute exclusion of law. He is often numbered among the Gnostics, "but he would have had little sympathy with their mythological speculations." *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, ed. F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone, London: Oxford, 1974, 973, 870.

27. PETITOT, *Missions* 6 (1867) 461.

The natives are aware of a kindred spirit and acknowledge it publicly. Since Petitot wants uniformity he reasons that his faith embodies nothing of contradiction in it. Such is not the case with native practices, he asserts, for they can readily be proven to be absurd. It is on his own terms, therefore, that Petitot wants to counteract their idiotic ways by forbidding them baptism and giving them the stiffest penance: abandon their superstitious practices.²⁸ Disconsolate and exhausted with the futility of meeting them on the level of reason, he ironically finds solace in the mysteries — the Eucharistic and the breviary!

While Petitot is concerned about adherence to the rational formulations of dogma and its corresponding conduct, the Chippewa perceive him as going much beyond formulas and codes of conduct. They apprehend a rich fountain from which he draws, the mysteries, the unfathomable. And Petitot discloses to them what they eagerly and habitually want: he is the mouthpiece of the sacred, which makes them joyful and ecstatic.

The reality the natives perceive is not Petitot the learned linguistic alone but his relatedness to his rich cultural heritage, his finely honed sensitivities, his kinship with them and with the sacred and mysterious. They perceive the total reality of who he is and accord him their highest honor, that of Shaman who engages in like practices, who moves from the shadows to the light, who retrieves recipes for potions, moving incantations and wise words from reveries. Not least of all, and perhaps even above their Shamen, here is a man who is so zealously devoted to them, entralling them with such a quick mastery of their language and serving them unstintingly.

Petitot's intention, however, is clear: to convert the savages. This means a change in their thinking, lifestyle, customs and religious practices to another world view. From such a perspective it is understandable how almost everything that the native represents has to be altered, how little if any of the customs and practices can be preserved. Both intentional structures, however, provoke thought for the other: Petitot responds to his perceptions of natives' foolish mysticism by clearly delineating the articles of faith and the moral precepts; the natives respond to Petitot's catechesis by reinserting his formulations within the context of myths and mysteries.

On the native side, there is the beginning of a movement to a restorative intentionality. For the natives there is a recognition of the radical other, whether in culture or person, a difference that is subsumed in the myth. Evidence for this is the welcome accorded to Columbus, the restoration of the syllabary invention into a mythical form and, here, the acceptance of another religious belief, although not the application of its reasoned and critical approach to their lifeworld.

Although one could argue that Petitot's own Christianity embodies a restorative intentionality insofar as it is a *mélange* of both faith and reason, he displays a restrictive restorative intentionality toward the natives. His position is absolutist: to convert the savages to European Christian ways, following de Mazenod's directive for the whole missionary endeavor. From such a perspective it is understandable how few native customs can be preserved.

28. *Ibid.*, 462-463.

5. *Cosmic Sensitivities*

From the foregoing incidents it is evident that Petitot's lifeworld was not entirely analytic; his religious practices were more than a rational endeavor. On the other hand, the natives did not bask in superstitious practices and reveries alone. For them, too, the symbol provoked thought, although not as rigorous a one as the European. It is true that they were stupefied at the map-making of the whites, as Petitot recounts.²⁹ Writing on paper seemed such a magical process for members of the Neutral Nations, whereby the physical ink traces on paper the musing of the mind, as Jesuit Paul Le Jeune recalls.³⁰ "Cultured" Europeans as distant in time as Plato and Martin Heidegger, however, also confess the uniqueness and mystery of language.

Associations with animals and a perceived spiritual kinship with them help natives understand animals' natures. Their dependence on animals for survival and their dissection of them very early in life enable them to name all of their organs, Petitot states. "By analogy, they know perfectly every part of the human body; there isn't a muscle or vein which hasn't a place in their vocabulary. With great composure they perform operations which would frighten even medical students."³¹

These "infant souls in giant bodies" had an uncanny knowledge of the heavens. Their vocabulary includes the names of the Great Bear, Little Bear, Orion, the Pleiades, Venus and the Northern Lights, Petitot claims. The spirit dimension, however, is not extinguished, for the Slave Indians pretend that these shifting pyramids of fire, the Aurora Borealis, are the spirits of the wicked who perform celestial dances. Others, more scientifically, think they are only the refraction of the phosphorescence of the sea.³²

In their tentative movement to the factual and cognitive, natives never lose sight of their mythic home.

Conclusion

The symbol or myth embodies a remembering intentionality, a synthetic distillation of images and reveries.³³ On the one hand, this myth can solidify and become an object of idolatry. On the other hand, it invites interpretation and thought. In a sense, it wants to be surpassed.

29. "Lettre au T.-R. P. Supérieur Général," *Missions* 9 (1870) 82-83.

30. *JR* 15: 121. See also 21: 189, 219; 39: 59.

31. "Étude sur la Nation Montagnaise," *Missions* 6 (1867) 544.

32. *Ibid.*, 544-545. This observation certainly tempers Alexander Taché's letter to his mother that the natives had no knowledge whatsoever of positive science, *op. cit.*, 233. For further elaboration of the Crees' "limited" knowledge of the globe in the mid-1850's, see Edwin THOMPSON DENIG, *Five Indian Tribes of the Upper Missouri*, Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1961, 133-136, and *Sixteen Years in the Indian Country, the Journals of Daniel Williams Harmon, 1800-1860*, ed. W. Kaye Lamb, Toronto: MacMillan, 1957, 230-233.

33. Joseph Epes BROWN, *The Spiritual Legacy of the American Indian*, Lebanon, Pennsylvania: Sowers, 1964, 23.

Interpreting and explaining are much needed expressions in a contemporary comportment to symbols. According to Ricœur, interpreting and explaining are both an expression of today's distress and also a remedy for it.³⁴ To be that remedy, however, the interpreted text must in turn be surpassed, lest it either become an item for unwarranted veneration or be dismissed as a reductionist fiasco. Logical thinking is one form of that surpassing, but not its definitive one, for logical thinking has to be mindful of its origin — the explicandum — and its own limits. The logical, in turn, needs and demands to be surpassed.

Surpassing the analytic should lead to a participation in the interpreted myth, to self-understanding mediated by the myth. Thus the conflict of interpretations need not be divisive, but can be mutually beneficial insofar as it results in both a recreation and an embodiment of both intentionalities. The mythic and logical can become friends in theory. It is another story whether Indians and Europeans can become friends in fact.

A much needed restorative intentionality was not transparent to the early explorers and missionaries but is nevertheless as much needed today as then.

34. Paul RICŒUR, *The Symbolism of Evil*, Boston: Beacon, 1967, 167-168.