

they create the inhabitants of the Earth and ordain the principles of life.

Some eons later, America is "discovered" by Europeans. As Anglo-Americans spread across North America in the nineteenth century, the first written mentions of Coyote begin to appear. In one of the earliest and best known of these, by Mark Twain, Coyote appears in a double aspect. To be sure, he is an unprepossessing member of the animal kingdom—"a long, thin, sick and sorry-looking skeleton, with a gray wolf-skin stretched over it, with . . . a general slinking expression all over" (1933:37). But Coyote is also a figure of tall tales, indeed a legendary trickster whom Twain describes with unconcealed sympathy (1933:31-36).

THE COYOTE

[From Chapter 5 of *Roughing It*, by MARK TWAIN, volume 1.]

Along about an hour after breakfast we saw the first prairie-dog villages, the first antelope, and the first wolf. If I remember rightly, this latter was the regular *coyote* (pronounced ky-o-te) of the farther deserts. And if it *was*, he was not a pretty creature, or respectable either, for I got well acquainted with his race afterward, and can speak with confidence. The coyote is a long, slim, sick and sorry-looking skeleton, with a gray wolf-skin stretched over it, a tolerably bushy tail that forever sags down with a despairing expression of forsakenness and misery, a furtive and evil eye, and a long, sharp face, with slightly lifted lip and exposed teeth. He has a general slinking expression all over. The coyote is a living, breathing allegory of Want. He

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Before there was a written American literature in English, there was an oral American literature in the hundreds of Native American languages. And in dozens of the Native traditions of western North America we find Coyote, present at the very creation of the universe, as in this account from the Maidu tribe of northern California (Shipley 1991:18-19).

And Earthmaker, they say,
 when this world was covered with water,
 floated and looked about him.

As he floated and looked about,
 he did not see anywhere, indeed,
 even a tiny bit of land.

. . . Thereupon, he sang:
 "Where are you, little bit of earth?"
 He said it, singing.
 He kept singing and singing.

. . . Coyote said:
 "Indeed, there are not many songs that I don't know."
 And then, after that, *he* sang,
 kept on singing and singing.

Together, Earthmaker and Coyote discover a bird's nest, and they stretch with ropes until it becomes the Earth. Together

is *always* hungry. He is always poor, out of luck and friendless. The meanest creatures despise him, and even the flea would desert him for a velocipede. He is so spiritless and cowardly that even while his exposed teeth are pretending threat, the rest of his face is apologizing for it. And he is so homely!—so scrawny, and ribby, and coarse-haired, and pitiful. When he sees you he lifts his lip and lets a flash of his teeth out, and then turns a little out of the course he was pursuing, depresses his head a bit, and strikes a long, soft-footed trot through the sage-brush, glancing over his shoulder at you, from time to time, till he is about out of easy pistol range, and then he stops and takes a deliberate survey of you; he will trot fifty yards and stop again—another fifty and stop again; and finally the gray of his gliding body blends with the gray of the sage-brush, and he disappears. All this is when you make no demonstration against him; but if you do, he develops a livelier interest in his journey, and instantly electrifies his heels and puts such a deal of real estate between himself and your weapon, that by the time you have raised the hammer you see that you need a minie rifle, and by the time you have got him in line you need a rifled cannon, and by the time you have "drawn a bead" on him you see well enough that nothing but an unusually long-winded streak of lightning could reach him where he is now. But if you start a swift-footed dog after him, you will enjoy it ever so much—especially if it is a dog that has a good opinion of himself, and has been brought up to think he knows something about speed. The coyote will go swinging gently off on that deceitful trot of his, and every little while he will smile a fraudulent smile over his shoulder that will fill that dog entirely full of encouragement and worldly ambition, and make him lay his head still lower to the ground, and stretch his neck further to the front, and pant more fiercely, and stick his tail out

straighter behind, and move his furious legs with a yet wilder frenzy, and leave a broader and broader, and higher and denser cloud of desert sand smoking behind, and marking his long wake across the level plain! And all this time the dog is only a short twenty feet behind the coyote, and to save the soul of him he cannot understand why it is that he cannot get perceptibly closer; and he begins to get aggravated, and it makes him madder and madder to see how gently the coyote glides along and never pants or sweats or ceases to smile; and he grows still more and more incensed to see how shamefully he has been taken in by an entire stranger, and what an ignoble swindle that long, calm, soft-footed trot is; and next he notices that he is getting fagged, and that the coyote actually has to slacken speed a little to keep from running away from him—and then that town-dog is mad in earnest, and he begins to strain and weep and swear, and paw the sand higher than ever, and reach for the coyote with concentrated and desperate energy. This "spurt" finds him six feet behind the gliding enemy, and two miles from his friends. And then, in the instant that a wild new hope is lighting up his face, the coyote turns and smiles blandly upon him once more, and with a something about it which seems to say: "Well, I shall have to tear myself away from you, bub—business is business, and it will not do for me to be fooling along this way all day"—and forthwith there is a rushing sound, and the sudden splitting of a long crack through the atmosphere, and behold that dog is solitary and alone in the midst of a vast solitude!

It makes his head swim. He stops, and looks all around; climbs the nearest sand-mound, and gazes into the distance; snakes his head reflectively, and then, without a word, he turns and jogs along back to his train, and takes up his humble position under the hindmost wagon, and feels

unspeakably mean, and looks ashamed, and hangs his tail at half-mast for a week. And for as much as a year after that, whenever there is a great hue and cry after a coyote, that dog will merely glance in that direction without emotion, and apparently observe to himself, "I believe I do not wish any of the pie."

The coyote lives chiefly in the most desolate and forbidding deserts, along with the lizard, the jackass-rabbit and the raven, and gets an uncertain and precarious living, and earns it. He seems to subsist almost wholly on the carcasses of oxen, mules, and horses that have dropped out of emigrant trains and died, and upon windfalls of carrion, and occasional legacies of offal bequeathed to him by white men who have been opulent enough to have something better to butcher than condemned army bacon. . . .

. . . He does not mind going a hundred miles to break fast, and a hundred and fifty to dinner, because he is sure to have three or four days between meals, and he can just as well be traveling and looking at the scenery as lying around doing nothing and adding to the burdens of his parents.

We soon learned to recognize the sharp, vicious bark of the coyote as it came across the murky plain at night to disturb our dreams among the mail-sacks; and remembering his forlorn aspect and his hard fortune, made shift to wish him the blessed novelty of a long day's good luck and a limitless larder the morrow.

Subsequent years have produced an increasing amount of Coyoteana in English, including the work of folklorists, natural historians, biologists, anthropologists, linguists—and, in recent decades, a growing number of literary scholars, poets, and other creative writers.

A type of Coyote literature that has become well established in the twentieth century is that kind of popular writing which

combines informal and anecdotal natural history observations of *Canis latrans* with folkloristic accounts of Old Man Coyote. Both Spanish American and Native American sources are likely to figure in such works.¹ This class of writing overlaps to some extent with the coyote literature produced by biologists, especially those concerned with ecological aspects of coyote behavior (Marie 1940; Young and Jackson 1951; Pringle 1977; and Lauff 1978). Such works give a revealing picture of those characteristics of Coyote that have enabled him to fill so well the role of trickster in oral and written literature. A closely related field study looks at the ecology of the coyote in urban areas, giving special attention to his ability to adapt and survive (see Gill 1975; Gill and Bonnett 1973:87-108).

A different type of attention, focusing on the transcription, translation, and interpretation of American Indian traditions, has been pursued by anthropologists and linguists since the late nineteenth century. Monuments of this literature, presented by such scholars as Franz Boas, Edward Sapir, and A. L. Kroeber, can be found in serial publications such as the *Annual Report and Bulletin* of the Bureau of American Ethnology (in the Smithsonian Institution); in the *Publications of the American Ethnological Society*; in the *Publications in American Archaeology and Geography* of the University of California; and, in more recent years, in the *Publications in Linguistics* of the University of California and in the *Native American Texts Series* published by the University of Chicago as a supplement to the *International Journal of American Linguistics*.² In all these sources, as might be expected, tricksters make frequent appearances. And, in material from California, from the Plateau and Great Basin areas, and from the Southwest, the trickster role is frequently played by Old Man Coyote. The value of these materials lies in their authenticity, especially for readers who are able to follow the native language texts. Their weakness is that the technical linguistic format and the awkward literal translations have tended to

the Coyote stories in several ethnopoetic traditions. They are by preference those that follow Hymes's model and they include my own translations from the Karuk language of California.⁶ Parallel with ethnopoetic work on Native American narrative, there has grown up what might be called, in contrast, a "poetic" literature in which poets and other creative writers of Anglo, Latino, and Native American background have introduced Old Man Coyote and other figures of oral tradition into their own English-language work. There seems little doubt that the entrance of Coyote into contemporary poetry was given its major impetus by Gary Snyder in his poem "A Berry Feast," originally published in the historic Grove Press collection (1957, 110-114) that first drew wide attention to the "beat" poets of the San Francisco area.

Snyder here introduces Coyote as the self-contradictory master an "old man," yet a puppy; "ugly" and self-indulgent, yet the "bringer of goodies." Coyote announces that "The people are coming"—the human species, the Indians for whom permission should be made: "you will grow thick and green, people / will eat you, you berries!" The end of the poem, however, depicts Coyote as outliving humanity, whether Indian or Anglo. He is the ultimate survivor.

 A BERRY FEAST

By GARY SNYDER. Published in *Evergreen Review*. Reprinted in *Back Country*.]

I

For the color of mud, the smooth loper
 Capricious old man, a drifter,
 makes Of Coyote the Nasty, the fat
 coyote

limit readership to an academic audience. There have also been some books intended to present English translations of Coyote stories in nontechnical format and relatively popular style, these, whatever the authenticity of their sources, lose much of the "feel" of the Native American originals. The best such work is clearly that of Jarold Ramsey, who adds the extra dimension of being a gifted scholar in English literature.³

A direct outgrowth of the anthropological-linguistic tradition in the presentation of Native American texts is that which can be called "ethnopoetic." The term, and the group of approaches that it covers, were introduced in the journal *Alcheringa*, inaugurated under the editorship of Jerome Rothenberg and Dennis Tedlock in 1970. The two editors subsequently took separate routes: Rothenberg, more the poet and literary scholar, developed his controversial method of "reinterpreting" American Indian literature—as previously translated by anthropologists and linguists—in terms of contemporary English-language poetry. As might be expected, Coyote as trickster appears again in the materials.⁴ Tedlock, more the linguistic anthropologist, has focused rather on translations that are as faithful as possible to the originals and on a verse format that reflects the poetic qualities inherent in traditional performance.⁵

A somewhat different but also linguistically oriented approach has been that of Dell Hymes, who has reanalyzed the structure of published texts from societies in which narrative traditions are now extinct or moribund and has shown that such texts can best be appreciated not as prose but as "measured verse." Here, units such as lines and stanzas are defined not by the phonological units of old-world verse, such as rhyme, meter or syllable count, but rather by morphosyntactic, lexical, and semantic features (see Hymes 1981a). Other scholars have experimented profitably with the approaches of both Tedlock and Hymes. And of course Old Man Coyote makes frequent appearances in all this work. In the chapters that follow, I will