# Rabbit Boy's Quest and Ohiyesa's Similes in *From the Deep Woods to Civilization:* The Spiral Journey of the Hero in Native American Mythologies

Joseph M. Faulds
Northeastern State University

A young girl named Wincincala (Little Girl) was walking along one day when she spied a little bird lying on the earth on his back with his wings spread out on the ground and his little talons up in the air. At first she thought the little bird might be dead, lying with his back on the ground in that unusual way, but when she looked at him intently, she saw that he was very much alive, and she walked over to find out whatever he might be doing.

She could see that the little bird was now looking back up at her, and so she asked him: "Zitkala, (Little Bird) what are you doing there on the ground, lying on your back with your wings spread out on the earth and your little feet stuck up in the air? I thought for a moment that you were dead, until I saw you looking back at me."

"Well, Wincincala, I heard today the sky is going to fall," said the little bird, as he turned his eyes back up toward the sky.

"The sky is going to fall!" Wincincala replied, looking up at the sky with great concern, and then back down to the little bird with his little feet held up in the air and his back to the earth with his wings spread out. Then she looked back up to the sky and then back down to the little bird, and up to the sky and down to the bird, and then she realized what Zitkala was trying to do. "Zitkala," she said in wonder, "Zitkala, you don't think that you can hold up the sky with your little feet, do you?"

"You do what you can, Wincincala; you do what you can," answered the little bird.

Among the distinct universals of the many highly varied Native American cultural traditions is the spiral pattern of repetition with variation which embodies purposive tension. This pattern is not exclusive to Native American Traditions, but it is emphatically present in and characteristic of Native American Cultures, and this sacred spiral, which is true to life, endures from the contexts of the traditional sources throughout periods of conflict and oppression into a modernity and post-modernity in whose alien spiritual context it inculturates, yet retains its essential identity, surviving as a living mythos which transfers and re-establishes traditional cultural content in a way that transcends the destructive and repressive forces of the nightmare of history over these past five centuries, persisting amid the genocidal virulence of the age of modern imperialism and remaining vitally coherent despite the existential angst and the deconstructed disillusionment of post-modernity. This affirming spiral pattern of repetition with variation is inherently comic in the purposiveness of its tension, comic in the broad literary sense of

the genre, including not only funny but also profoundly serious forms of the comic as expressive of hope and perseverance, and it is a great source of affirmation and strength, since it allows the survival of identity and traditional thought patterns amidst grave injury and dramatic shifts and reversals in situation; that is, this sacred spiral pattern empowers shape-shifting in traveling from one world or epoch to the next, even in the potentially tragic face of cultural genocide, of language loss or alteration of ritual, and the spiral lives on without the loss of the essential characteristics of a world view. Thus, the sacred spiral which may be described as repetition with variation survives both as traditional thought and as the preserver of traditional thought, as both content and form, and it flows like blue analogical water in the minds and hearts of Native American peoples down through the harsh rocks in the river of history, flows throughout the centuries as it embodies a continuance of an interpretive mode which allows for adaptation, even in oppressive historical contexts such "kill the Indian" or the later "kill the Indian and save the man": intensive attacks on traditional peoples and their cultures. For at its heart, this spiral pattern of repetition with variation is the story of life, death, and rebirth.

As such, the spiral provides a living interpretive mode which empowers adapta-ion without the loss of the original paradigm within the deep structure of the thought, which it preserves in the process of adaptation. In other words, this sacred spiral pattern is a moving and adaptive circle and cycle where the wobbling of the prayer wheel, rather than being the sign of weakness and injury to the mythos, becomes the empowering of the wheel's balance and the impetus of the wheel's dynamic movement; because it wobbles, that is, it varies amid its repetition, in its normative state, this spiral can remain essentially itself even when struck to the point of wobbling by outside forces, simply incorporating the forced variation into its own varying spiral movement, absorbing the impetus of the hostile blow into its own spiral flow, and transforming the force into its own movement in order to survive and continue. You cannot destroy the turning of a wheel by striking its balance to cause it to wobble if its regular movement includes wobbling because wobbling is an essential aspect of its balance. In other words, you cannot threaten a mythos with winter when the mythos in itself sees life as a cycle of spring, summer, fall and winter, and spring, summer, fall and winter, and spring .... In such a mythology, even winters different from past winters are absorbed into the enduring spiral pattern.

To put it succinctly, can you threaten the Phoenix with death? So this living spiral persists as a mode of mimesis across the boundaries of time and historical context; the sacred spiral of repetition with variation lives in the hearts and minds of the peoples in times and cultural topographies far removed from its original context. So the Earth Divers always succeed after several cycles of drowning.

And we can perceive numerous, distinct examples of this sacred spiral in Native American traditional stories, historical rhetoric, and the adaptive literature of the past two centuries. For example, consider the Lakota traditional story I told you a moment ago of the encounter of Wincincala and Zitkala in the mythic realm. This brief serious comic story expresses both humor and transcendent courage in a mythic conversation about the

catastrophic potential of life. Ultimately, it is a response to our sense of our own mortality, of our being mortal creatures with immortal dreams, here emphasized by the smallness of the bird's feet and the largeness of the pending disaster of the falling sky. But it is not a thematic equivalent of the despairing response of the European Chicken Little who runs about spreading panic in his tragic view of life. Rather, here hope remains, in spite of the enormity of the potential disaster, an amazingly resilient hope is implied potently and effectively through the little bird's "You do what you can, Wincincala; you do what you can." This story is an embodiment of the sacred spiral of repetition with variation in the life of the hero and the people.

Notice the basic points in the process of revelation and interpretive response: The little girl (Wincincala) sees the little bird lying on the earth by himself in a way that living birds do not ordinarily do. The question of death presents itself and her tensive curiosity is evident. She has entered a cyclic process of question and discovery embodied in purposive plot tension. Though he seemed the very image of death, the bird is not dead, but alive.

Now she pursues the essential question in a second form, that is, she repeats with variation, voicing a second interrogative (whatever is the little bird doing lying on the ground in this variant of bird activities looking as if he were dead ?), asking the living bird for an explanation of his unusual behavior. The second aspect of the discovery cycle (an expression of the sacred spiral pattern) comes in his response: he has heard that the sky is going to fall today. Whatever our initial response to this seemingly eschatological utterance, though, the heroic ethos of facing mortality with courage implicit in Zitkala's response to a falling sky flows through the image of his holding his little feet up and engenders the continuation of the spiral cycle of seeking and discovering.

In the third basic form of the question's variation, Wincincala now asks, "You don't think you can hold up the sky with your little feet, do you, Zitkala?" And in reply, she (and we) receive the climactic revelation which with its didactic and open-ended resolution both fulfills the purposive tension of the spiraling cycle and implies the continuation of the spiral in whatever variant context may yet come: Whatever happens, whatever catastrophe threatens or occurs, even in the face of the falling sky of mortal life, "You do what you can, Wincincala; you do what you can." And notice that even the thematic injunction is repeated twice, varied with the noun of address to the little girl.

Thus runs one wonderful traditional Sioux story from an ancient oral tradition in an offering of insight and a description of the flow of sacred power, a description which is like the self-portrait the wind paints in a field of dancing wild flowers, but there are many fields of highly varied flowers, myriad such spiral canvases surviving and persisting throughout the cycles of demanding and dangerous centuries in Native American tribal cultures and histories. Once you become aware of the sacred spiral, you can see its flowing form in a thousand expressions of life, death, and rebirth in the living stories and words of the people, both in the ancient and modern, in the old stories and in the new, in the chants of tradition and in the poems of today. The people live, because life flows in

the sacred spiral in their minds and hearts, in their cultures and in their very souls, and in the stories of their heroes.

So in one Cherokee story of creation's etiological continuing process the purposive tension of the people's need for light in a dark world sends Possum on a mission to steal the sun from some greedy people on the other side of the world, who were refusing to share it with others. But when he tries to conceal the sun in his once bushy tail, his tail is burned bald by the sun's heat, and he fails, which explains the state of Possum's tail today. Then Buzzard tries to carry the sun away on his head, but his head is burned bald, as it is today, and he fails as well. But then Grandmother Spider takes up the mission as the next repetition movement in the spiral pattern, but this time in a variation she succeeds in carrying the sun off in a walled pot which she made out of clay, as a culture hero bringing fire and inventing pottery, and the people have light all over the world (Erdoes 154-155). And every night turns into day, but each day and each night are different days and nights simultaneously in the very repetition of their sameness, flowing in the purposive tension of the cycle of life and death and rebirth in the life of the people and in the story of the hero.

So a historical hero of the Dakota people, Charles Eastman, Ohiyesa, in his autobiographical *From the Deep Woods to Civilization* recounts his inculturating journey from the traditional world of the Dakota culture and language to the European-American world of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, using the spiral pattern of metaphor to find a common ground of understanding amid the repetition of the universal aspects of humanity, so that he can identify to a degree with the civilization of the non-Native Americans who surround his people, and yet he retains his specific identity as a traditional person as well, consciously remembering and respecting the variations constituted in substantive differences between the two different mythologies. So while he serves his people as both a medical doctor and a tireless advocate, he remains the son of Many Lightnings, fulfilling the warrior's quest of education in the language and ways of the strange new people, the Wasicu, who have overrun Dakota country, a great quest given to him by his father, who describes the quest to his son, saying, "Remember my boy, it is the same as if I sent you on your first warpath" (Eastman 31-32). The purpose of this quest is to help Ohiyesa's people.

In this, Eastman is like the great Lakota mythic hero Rabbit Boy, or We Ota Wicasa, whose mysterious origin is in blood and the divine energy of Takuskanskan and is shaped by the concomitant playful creativity of a mythic anthropomorphic rabbit-person, his adoptive father, who sends him on a quest to integrate with a village (at that primordial time, the only village) of two-legged persons (humans) to fully establish his identity as one of them. Rabbit Boy, driven by a sacred vision of his spiritual relationship with the Sun, finds love and purpose among the villagers, who, however, attack him at the instigation of his jealous fellow trickster Iktome (Spiderman). Rabbit Boy dies yet rises again to fulfill his vision of his relationship with the Sun, and he will return to the people of the village to marry the girl who loves him and continue his purpose of using his sacred power for the life of the people (Erdoes 5-8). So Eastman survives the

Charles Eastman, Ohiyesa

educational ethos of "Kill the Indian and save the man" to retain his identity of Ohiyesa, while also being Dr. Charles Eastman, writer and unfailing advocate for the Native peoples, never despairing of his quest, even after he gazes upon the slaughtered dead at Wounded Knee, even after he picks up the wounded there to try to save his people with his physician's skill.

Eastman uses a prolific number of similes in *From the Deep Woods to Civilization,* his memoir of his liminal journey from a completely traditional person who knows no English at the age of fifteen, to a medical doctor whose undergraduate degree is from Dartmouth, who knows the best of Western civilization and has adopted Christianity, yet who has retained his Dakota language and heritage, and who remains always Ohiyesa while having become Dr. Charles Eastman. The similes clearly reflect the spiral in the form of a cultural interconnection both in their theme and structure. It "was as if a little mountain brook should pause and turn itself to gather strength for the long journey toward an unknown ocean" (1). Thus he characterizes the significance of the day his father reappears seemingly from the dead, but actually coming from a Wasicu prison where he had been incarcerated for his part in the 1862 Santee uprising against the oppression they experienced in Minnesota. He refers to himself in the early months of his transformative process as "something like a wild cub caught overnight, and appearing in the corral the next morning' (23); but he describes the motivation for his continuing determination to achieve a bi-cultural mastery for the good of his people as the realization that "one would be like a hobbled pony without learning to live like those among whom we must live" (25), though he sometimes felt "like a wild goose with his wings clipped" (44) in the beginning of his educational quest, and he describes the denizens of a large city in this new civilization as people who "hurried along as if the grey wolf were on their trail" (65). And when the analogic stretch of the cultural connection becomes a bridge too extreme for metaphor in the form of simile, Eastman with another turn of the screw reshapes metaphor into irony, as when he describes his time at Dartmouth college as a time in "tumultuous east. It was here that I had most of my savage gentleness and native refinement knocked out of me" (67). Thus Ohiyesa (the champion) and Charles Eastman the graduate of Boston College Medical School survive in one person to work for the good of native peoples through his long life as physician, writer, and unfailing advocate for Native Americans. Rabbit Boy's quest for identity to save the people from Iktome's treachery and Ohiyesa's bicultural journey together move in the spiral pattern of analogy, which is concomitant with the archetypal bridge-making and salvific pattern of life, death, and rebirth.

So N. Scott Momaday in "The Way to Rainy Mountain," follows in a sacred spiral of narrative the history and life of his grandmother's people, the Kiowa, so that her mythos like the image of her praying (Momaday 73) lives on in the flow of a spiral of the memoried text in the living memory of both the author and the reader of his text. So Leslie Marmon Silko in her poem "Where Mountain Lion Lay Down With Deer" re-engages and identifies with the movement of First Man and First Woman "down/the memory/spilling out/into the world"(Silko 962), in a movement of archetypal repetition with variation; and Joy Harjo portrays so very powerfully the sacred spiral of living and

dying, past and present, repetition and variation in the consciousness of "The Woman Hanging From the Thirteenth Floor Window," whose hoping grasp leaves open the possibility of surviving a sky-falling situation as dreams of wild rice (Harjo 696-698), and all her relations remain in the midst of her poverty, her cultural dislocation, and her seeming despair, and the poem itself is her hope and rebirth.

So Mary Tallmountain tells of her aunt's reply to a question of lost language and lost years away from her people while she was living as a journalist in the non-Indian's world in her beautiful poem "There is No Word For Goodbye." For as her Athapascan aunt, a culture preserver, replies to Mary Tallmountain, you can in the hearing of the text see the structure and the gentle power of the sacred spiral of repetition with variation in "the river flash" flow of the imaginative discourse and you feel the spiral in her "light as a bluebell" touch; you can know the sacred spiral in the thematic affirmation of her aunt's response: "She looked as me close. / We just say, Tlaa. That means, / See you. / We never leave each other. / When does your mouth say goodbye to your heart? / ....We always think you're coming back, / but if you don't, / we'll see you someplace else. / You understand. / There is no word for goodbye" (787-788).

This is a heroic and inexorably optimistic comic ethos (of both humorous and serious comedy) found universally among the many varied and highly diverse traditional tribal cultures of Native America and it involves the intrinsic relationship of the hero and the people. The hero lives for the people and the people honor and remember the hero for the deeds which make the people live. This living timocratic remembrance handed on from one generation to the next constitutes a spiral of immortality for the hero, the expression of which in the experiential memory of the people's stories also continues to give life to the people and to help them to maintain their identity in the face of the difficulties of history. As the hero's honor is remembered in the stories in each generation, the life of the people lives in their retelling of the stories, reborn in the re-inspiration of this spiritually symbiotic relationship, and the civic education of the young is shaped in the emulation of the hero's virtue in each new day in the life of the people.

For example, Glooscap is a great mythic hero of the Algonquin tribal peoples of the Northeast. He is both a creator and a transformer, as well as a bringer of culture. He periodically returns to the people when they are in need. One story tells of a time when the rivers were drying up and what water was left was befouled, because a great water monster had blocked the source with his massive bulk, so that he could consume all of the water himself. The people sent a representative to the water monster to negotiate, but to no avail. Then Glooscap remembered his people and returned to them, and he fought the giant water monster, in the end freeing the water for all the people by squeezing the massive monopolistic beast between the hero's great hands until the monster was small. And you still see the little transformed water monster in swampy areas, for he had been transformed by Glooscap into the harmless bullfrog of today (Erdoes 181-184). So Glooscap saved the people from a deadly lack of life-giving water, and the people honor in turn Glooscap by telling the story of his saving deed from one generation to the next,

and the hero lives forever in the heart and the temporal deeds of the people, as the people live in the storytelling.

Both the heroes of the mythic realm who live and die and live again, and the flesh and blood heroes of legend who live but once in this world, represent an inspiration and a continuing source of strength for the people, as they honor the living memory of those who gave their lives to give life to the people. At the heart of this ethos is the mythos of all my relations, a sense of the oneness of creation and its sacramental significance in an animistic world view where everything is alive to the Creator and everything is connected, so that the people live within an organic sense of relatedness, in which individual identity is inextricable from the corporate reality of the people and the tapestry of universal life. It is, then, important to note that we are not dealing with the degenerated image of the hero in modernity, the leader who tends to see the people as those who are meant to serve and die for him, or the leader who in Orwellian parody gives voice to the dynamic of service to the people, but in actuality exploits his relationship with the people to enrich himself and his cadre or simply to hold on to political power as an end in itself. The will to power has nothing to do with the traditional hero. The last words of Ta-Sunka Witko as he died for the integrity of his undying devotion to the people expressed his heart-felt concern for the life of his people.

The Flathead people of Montana tell the story of their Trickster-hero, the great giant-slayer Coyote, who, when he heard that many of the people had been swallowed by a terrible giant, went in search of this titanic malefactor. He wandered far on his quest looking for the giant, until one day he happened upon an old woman who, weakened by starvation, was crawling on the ground. The great Coyote informed her he had come to slay the giant with the stick he was carrying, only to be told by the poor elder that "You are already in the giant's belly." Coyote was astonished, threw his stick away, but kept on walking until, seeing in the distance a fiery hill, he identified the giant's heart, which was a puffing and beating volcano. And so the hero plunged his hunting knife into the mountain, and the terrible earthquake that followed was indeed the death throes of the giant. Then Coyote took all of the people the giant had swallowed and led them to safety through the open mouth of the dying giant (Erdoes 223-225). So the people honor the Coyote hero with the living remembrance of their stories throughout the ages, and the stories they tell of the hero give life and identity to the people.

The hero and the people are then intrinsically one living context, even if the people reject the hero for a time, even if the hero leaves the physical presence of the people in the quest, or when the hero departs for another world; even then the hero remains essentially who he or she is in the life-breath of the people, for all identity is shaped in relationship, and there is no identity apart from relationship. So the life, death, and rebirth of the hero empowers the life, dying, and rebirth of the people from one generation to the next in whatever historical difficulty, from every winter into each new spring, whether the rebirth be in the stories of the people of history or in the realm of the ancient divine myth, whether the hero is immortal or mortal, or whether he or she

exchanges one ontological state for the other, living for dying or dying for living, in the struggle to make the people live.

The Oneida people tell of a time long ago when they were under attack by a strange group of barbarians who had driven them into the mountains to hide. A brave young woman came up with a plan to save the people. She allowed herself to be captured by the barbarians and even tortured to give credence to her finally promising them, after much suffering, to lead these terrible enemies to a place where the people were hidden at the base of a cliff, while she had prearranged with the surviving warriors of her people to trap the barbarians in an avalanche. Though Brave Woman lost her life, she saved the lives of her people from the onslaught of the menacing enemy, and she lives forever in the fragrance of the honeysuckle; for when they found honeysuckle growing on her grave her people named the honeysuckle in her honor, "The Blood of Brave Woman," so she lives forever in the sweet odor of her immortal courage and sacrificial love (Erdoes 252-253).

Thus the traditional Native American tribal stories of monster slayers, transformers, tricksters, and culture heroes share this same spiral ethos of the people and the hero with the great men and women of legend, who live to serve, nourish, and save the people in these mythic stories flowing with the life of the old and the new in amazingly resilient traditions, which are shaped in spirals of repetition with variation over the centuries and amid dramatic historical changes.

So it was that the previously mentioned Charles Eastman was born in 1858 in Minnesota to the Dakota people and named Ohiyesa. After a tragic war in 1862 which the Dakota fought with the United States, and with Ohiyesa's father Many Lightnings imprisoned and then presumed executed, the four-year-old child was taken by his maternal grandmother and uncles to a refuge in Canada, where he grew up as a traditional Dakota youth, until at the age of 15, the age of his being recognized an adult warrior, when his father whose sentence had been commuted, reappeared to take Ohiyesa back to the States to be educated as an American; for as his father told him, the best way to fight for his people in that day and age was to learn everything the white man knew, and then to use that knowledge for the good of this people. So Ohiyesa, who at the age of 15 knew no words of English, entered elementary school in North Dakota, determined to serve his people. By the time he turned 32, Ohiyesa, Charles Eastman, had graduated from Dartmouth with Honors and from Boston University Medical School. He spent the rest of his long life working in the purposive spiral of repetition with variation for the good of his tribe and all the other Native tribes as an M.D., as a writer, as an educator, as a preserver of culture, as an advocate for Native people, and as a promoter of inter-cultural understanding between Native Americans and other Americans, while never losing his identity as a Dakota. He continued doing all of these things even after he had gone out as the agency physician to pick up the wounded and the dying of his people scattered across the massacre of Wounded Knee. And his people continue to honor his memory today, remembering his example of a true hero, whose name, "Ohiyesa," translates appropriately as "the champion."

So today we have this living spiral dynamic as an example before us from the living mythopoesis of the old stories and the history of our great, ancient cultures which have the power to adapt and change, yet remain in essence the same, to live still like running water from an inexhaustible stream through the spiral journey of the mythic hero, who lives for the life of the people and who is reborn in their hearts each time the old stories are retold, repeated in all the variations of Changing Woman's changing world, and making the people live anew. For beyond the corruption and the shamelessness of the mundane world we live in today, the spiral spirituality of the hero and the people yet lives in the stories of the people which are repeated with adaptive variation, reborn with each telling throughout the generations and the ages. "You understand? There is no word for goodbye."

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