

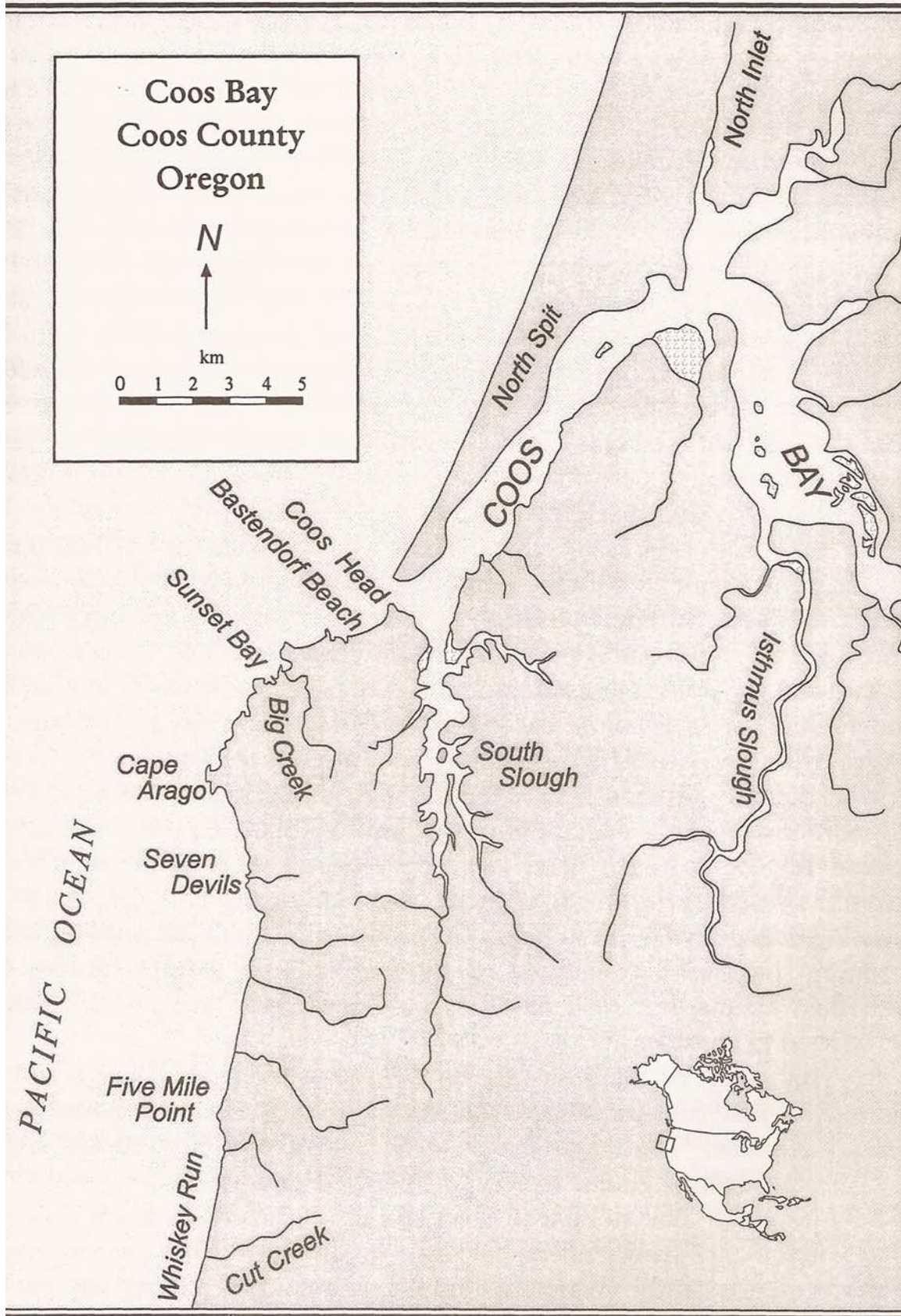
## **Coyote and the Strawberries: Cultural Drama and Cultural Collaboration**

**George Wasson and Barre Toelken**

*BT*: The collaboration in this essay is of a different—though parallel—variety from that illustrated by the other chapters in this collection, for here the text is articulated in English, the original language of the Coquelles having been demolished in the last century. As has been the case with many small tribes, however, the culture did not entirely disappear with the eclipse of the language that carried it; indeed, one could argue that in their retention of certain foods, basket designs, and stories, many of the smaller northwest coastal tribes actually intensified parts of their endangered culture by adapting them—translating them, if you will—to contemporary contexts and social needs.

In any case, it is clear from George Wasson's recollections that the stories were told in relatively recent times by old-timers in his tribe who were bilingual; that is, the original translations or renderings were articulated by intellectually capable people who felt some need to continue the performance of these dramatic narratives. Among other considerations, then, is the question: why? What was there in a story like this one that was so important that it needed to be retained in a world that was falling apart? Other stories no doubt dropped out of use, but not this one. Others were maintained as well, and those that illustrate the breaking of sexual taboos (for example) might be seen provisionally as representing tribal views of sexual conduct that were under attack by settlers, missionaries, and teachers. But what about sleeping in a hollow tree, eating too many strawberries, escaping from a whale, and exchanging eyes? How do these represent timely concerns, or tribal values too important to lay aside in the confusion of traumatic events?

We could, of course, take the know-nothing stance and simply claim that this is an engaging story, that its actions are funny and entertaining, that "Indians" just seem to enjoy coyote stories in the same way Anglos seem to like traveling salesman jokes: it's just what they do, and we don't need to encumber the merely entertaining dimension of their discourse with



our scholarly agenda. But it is perfectly evident in performance that George Wasson enjoys many aspects of this story that are not manifest in the “text” itself. The utterance is only a part of the total meaning—which is of course the case with most traditional narratives. Wasson not only savors the story and enjoys telling it, but he also has his own personal memories of growing up in the very area where the story takes place. He recollects family and tribal value systems that inform the meaning of coyote’s actions in the story—an important matter on which we have been well-instructed by Clifford Geertz, among others. Wasson also visibly registers the physical and emotional sensation of having sounds and gestures coming from his own vocal cords and hands that unite him with his father and his aunts, from whom he first heard the story. These and other factors emerge not from the fossil of the “text,” which is, after all, only a visualized skeleton of a live, interactive performance, but from a sense of the cultural matrix out of which the story has grown and to which it refers.

Our job in this essay, then, is not to cope with the difficulties of translating Coquelle into English, for this step has already been achieved by earlier Coquelle intellectuals, living tribal repositories and articulators whose expertise far outreaches ours. Here, it is a network, a constellation of cultural beliefs and assumptions, which is to be approached and understood. The primary basis for this understanding must come, of course, from the narrator’s own culture and experience. But since we know it is especially difficult to examine consciously and rationally the assumptions in one’s own culture, assumptions that seldom come up for critical review, we also need to recognize that there are a number of questions—perhaps even impertinent ones—that can come only from the questing outsider who, presumably alert and respectful of the possibilities of meaning, has not internalized or rationalized the cultural norms and “obvious” assumptions, and thus may pose questions that the insider might never need to consider.

This story, narrated on tape by George Wasson for friends, and the discussion that follows it represent an ongoing interaction between the essay’s authors. The comments of each author will be preceded by his initials, but each segment has been reviewed and revised several times collaboratively. The story text is broken up into numbered segments for clarity in the explanatory notes, but since we did not subject the narrative to a performance study (which would have included intonation, pacing, audience response, and so on), these segments are provisionally dictated by their principal themes or images.

### **Narrator's Introduction**

*GW*: This story, “Coyote and the Strawberries,” has been a Wasson family favorite for many generations. I’ve heard it told time after time by various family elders, mainly my dad (George B. Wasson), Aunt Daisy, Aunt Mary, and Aunt Laura (Lolly). Various cousins have been told the story also, but it seems that few of them carried it so personally in their memories as did my late brother Dr. Wilfred C. Wasson and I. In fact, most Coos/Coquelle tribal members do not bother to practice telling such stories, and so for many the chain of direct aboriginal contact with our ancestors has been broken. I learned the story by listening to people who had listened to the last generation of traditional full-bloods before the coming of the Whites. My learning of the story in English was from native-speaking ancestors who elected their own form of translation from the original Milluk renditions.<sup>1</sup> Whatever interpretation took place was done by the Coquelle themselves as they coped with the problems of maintaining meanings in the new language—not by outsiders who had not grown up in the aboriginal cultural context. Variations on some of the themes in this story can be found in a tale called “The Trickster Person Who Made the Country” (Jacobs 1940:184).

I’ve told “Coyote and the Strawberries” to many different groups of people—some Native, some who were totally unaware of the genre, and some who know it so well that they couldn’t wait to be titillated by the retelling in a good comfortable setting. The story must be told when there is complete control over the audience by the storyteller. The occasion must be one of suitable respect for the topic, for although the story contains humor and elicits laughter, there is no room for ridicule, disrespect, or derision in response to its content. I try to limit the number of times I tell the story each winter and to select the most auspicious occasions to present it.

This story has held fond memories for me as brother “Will” and I often listened to one another telling it and each offered corrections or additions when the other forgot an important point or aspect. Will often deferred to my telling of it since my rendition included more of the old gestures and vocal inflections of our older relatives as we remembered how they told the story to us. I’ll always remember my first telling of “Strawberries” after his death. He and I had shared that story so many

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<sup>1</sup> Milluk is a division of the Kusan language, a member of the Athabascan family. The Coos and Coquelle (later spelled “Coquille” by whites) are closely related tribes who often intermarried.

times and so personally that I can recall the places in the narration where he might “correct” me, or remind me of the next episode, should I appear to falter in my presentation. I was just starting to tell it to a group of over 200 listeners in a nicely darkened arena room late one evening during a men’s symposium in Eugene, Oregon. As I began telling the story, retreating into my own world of memory, experiences, and emotions, I heard Will make an ever so slight comment of approval—something like “Ah, yes, that’s a good one to tell now.” I was startled, and actually glanced to one side of the room where it seemed to me he was sitting back contentedly in a chair. Realizing what was happening to me, I held the state of suspension for myself and absorbed the emotional glow of his presence. His death had not been a full year prior to that event, and my mourning for his passing continued to be painful and humorous simultaneously. At length, I had to explain to the listeners why I’d stopped talking and stood crying in front of them. After a lengthy pause I resumed the story; it was a good experience for me, and I knew that that particular reincarnation of it was especially poignant and enlightening for the listeners as well.

In keeping with the taboo against telling Coyote stories out of season (winter being the Coyote story telling time), I have seldom allowed anyone to record my telling of it. However, this particular rendition was recorded at my home in the winter of 1993, in the company of a few non-Native friends including Carson Bowler, an attorney. The recording was for Suzi Jones and was included in *The Stories We Tell: An Anthology of Oregon Folk Literature* (Jones and Ramsey 1994:125-30).<sup>2</sup> Even so, I request that each reader respect the cultural dictates of my Coos/Coquelle ancestors and read aloud or discuss this story, “Coyote and the Strawberries” only during the winter. If readers do not heed such warnings, I am not responsible for any dire consequences that might befall them, their loved ones, or anyone who knowingly listens to it “out of season.”

“Coyote and Strawberries”  
told by George Wasson

(1) Coyote was going down South Slough off Coos Bay, and he was going along when a hail storm came up.

(2) Big hailstones came down and started hitting him, pelting his body, and he was jumping around, saying, “Oh, that hurts! Oh! Oh!” And

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<sup>2</sup> See also Susan Wasson Wolgamott’s Coquelle story, “The Girl Who Married a Sea Otter” (Jones and Ramsey 1994:262-63).

he had to get out of the hail storm, so over on the side of the trail there he found this big tree. I think it was a cedar tree.

(3) It had been burned, maybe even hit by lightning (which would make it a taboo tree to mess with), but anyway this big cedar tree that had a hole down in the bottom of it, a cavity had been burned to the bottom and partly hollow down there. So he rushed over, and he got down inside there, and he huddled up to get out of the hail storm. But it didn't quite protect him, so he used his magical powers, his *tamanawis*, and he commanded the tree to grow shut around him.

(4) So he said, "Tree, grow shut. Grow shut around me." And the tree did that. But he left a little hole he could see through, little hole he could look through, and he was looking through that hole and he could see outside, and he felt really proud of himself, saying how smart he was, how good he was. He had commanded that tree to grow shut.

(5) Well the hail storm passed by, and Coyote was sitting in there, and he decided, "Well I guess it's time to get out of here now," so he used his power again, his *tamanawis*, and he said, "Grow open."

(6) Nothing happened.

(7) Then Coyote says again, "GROW OPEN!"

(8) Still nothing happened. He thought, "Well, I'm not doing something right here," so he commanded the tree, "Grow open." And nothing happened, and on the fourth time, he still said, "Grow open." Nothing happened at all, and there was Coyote stuck inside of the tree. He must have been too proud of himself because his power wouldn't work, the tree wouldn't grow open.

(9) So he was looking out that little hole, and pretty soon he saw one of the Woodpecker Girls flying by, and he looked through the hole, and he called out through the hole, "Oh Miss Woodpecker!"

(10) She looked around, and she said, "Where's that coming from?"

(11) And he says, "Come over here, over here to this hole." And she flies over the tree, and she looks in there. And he says, "Yes, in here. Peck this hole bigger so I can get out."

(12) Well, she starts working away. She starts pecking on the hole, and she pecks on it and pecks on it, and it gets bigger and bigger.

(13) As the hole gets bigger, Coyote can see a little more of her, and he looks out and says, "She's pretty nice looking."

(14) He reaches out there, and he thinks, "I'm just going to stroke her on the tail feathers." And he reaches out and just starts to touch her on the tail feathers, and he grabs her, and she jumps back and says, "What are you doing?" He says, "Oh, oh, I didn't mean to do anything." He'd grabbed her by the tail feathers, grabbed her by the tail. "Oh, oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to do anything. I won't do that." And she starts work and says, "Okay. I'll work some more."

(15) She had started to fly away, and he said, "Oh, I won't do that again." And so she starts working away, pecking away, and the hole gets bigger, and she's inside pecking away, getting it bigger, working away.

(16) And he looks up. By that time he can see the front of her, and he says, “She has nice beautiful round breasts.” He said, “Oh, she’s got her head up in the air, she won’t even notice me. I’ll just reach up and just kind of, I’ll just kind of stroke and just touch them a little bit.”

(17) And he gets so excited, he grabs her, and she jumps back and flies away, says, “No more. I’m not going to help you.”

(18) Well, you might know, there’s a little woodpecker down the coast that has two marks on it: white marks across its tail and across its breast also. That’s probably where they came from, Old Coyote messing with her when she was trying to peck the hole bigger.

(19) So anyway, she flew away and left Coyote inside the tree, the hollow tree, and he’s trying to figure out what he’s going to do to get out.

(20) Then he has a bright idea: “Aha.” So he reaches up behind his braid, behind his ear, in his braid, and he pulls out his clamshell knife, and he takes his clamshell knife, and he starts cutting himself up in little pieces.

(21) Reaches down to his foot, and he cuts out a piece and he pokes that out through the hole. Then he cuts off another piece and he pokes that out through the hole, and he just goes like mad. He starts cuttin’ himself a little piece, poke, cut off a piece, poke it through the hole, cut off another piece, poke it through the hole. Working up his legs, all the way up his body, he cuts himself all up in little pieces, pokes ’em out through the hole, and then he’s going to put himself together when he gets outside.

(22) But while he’s doing this, he’s cutting out his intestines, his guts, and he throws ’em out through the hole, but while he’s doing this, here comes Bluejay flying along. Bluejay flies along and looks down and says, “What’s all that?” Looking around, down the bottom of that tree, all that interesting stuff, coming out of that hole over there, falling on the ground. Nobody’s around any place.

(23) Bluejay swoops down and grabs a string of intestines and flies away.

(24) Well Coyote gets all finished, gets all poked out through the hole, gets outside, puts himself all back together [narrator pats hands against various parts of his body, as if assembling himself]—back here, back there, everything back into place. He doesn’t notice that Bluejay has flown away with part of his intestines. And he just thinks he’s just fine, so he’s all put back together, and he goes on his way.

(25) Walking on down, and he goes on down South Slough and comes upon where Coos Head is now, and he gets up on there, and here are strawberries all over. And Coyote says, “Oooh. Oh, look at that, nice strawberries.” (Well, you can tell that this is an unusual year because here’s a hail storm when the strawberries are ripe out on the bluff out there, so unusual things are happening). And here’s Coyote, “Oh, I love strawberries!” And he reaches down and starts picking strawberries. And he picks a strawberry and he eats it, and he picks another one and he eats it and says, “Oh, these are so good.” He just keeps eating strawberries, picking and eating, picking and eating. (Well, you know right away he’s doing something wrong here because you’re not supposed to pick

strawberries and eat them yourself. You're supposed to take them back home to share with other people. So here's Coyote doing the wrong thing again. Picking and eating, picking and eating. )

(26) But he just can't get full. He just can't—he tries eating faster. So he picks faster and eats faster, picks faster, pick and pick, and he just goes as fast as he can. But he can't get full at all.

(27) When eventually he looks around behind him, he sees a whole string of strawberries lying on the ground, and they come right up to his rectum because that's when he discovers that Bluejay flew away with the lower end of his intestines and flew away with his rectum. And he's just got a straight line right through, and the strawberries just go right in one end and out the other.

(28) And Coyote's looking, and he says, "I've got to stop that." So he got an idea. He said, "I'm going to have to plug it up." (Aunt Mary always said his "bunghole," "plug up his bunghole.") And so Coyote figured what's he going to do.

(29) So he looks around there and says, "This'll do." And he walks over, and here's this old rotten log, and he kicks on one of the knots sticking out of this old rotten log, knots sticking up, everything's rotted away. These knots are out there, and he kicks one off, and he grabs that, and he says, "Oh, I'll take that." And he takes it, and he shoves it up in his bunghole and jumps—"Ouch!" And he throws it down, "Oh, that hurts! That's rough, that hurts." And he says, "That won't do. I want something that's more smooth."

(30) And he looks over, and here's a rock down there. He says, "Well, I'll try that." So he picks up this rock, and he takes it, and he starts to shove it up, and, "Oh, that's cold." And it's too big and it falls right back out. "No, that won't do it. I've got to have some way to plug it up so I can keep strawberries inside of me."

(31) So he's thinking about it, and he looks down the trail there, and here's a wild carrot, a wild carrot growing down there. And he says, "Ah, that's just the right thing." You know it's just about so long, and it's tapered, and it's nice, soft and pliable, and that's just what he wants so he reaches down and picks it and very carefully turns it and pulls it out of the ground. Yes, that's just right.

(32) He breaks off the stem and throws it away. But he's thinking, "You know, I ought to have something to make sure it stays in better." And right over on the side a little ways there's this great big fir tree that's been hit by lightning, and it's dripping pitch, pitch falling down there. So he takes this carrot—(Well, you know something's wrong here also, 'cause he shouldn't mess around with a tree that's been hit by lightning). But here's this tree hit by lightning, and Coyote goes over and takes this carrot and rolls it around and around in the pitch, gets it all pitched up, and then he takes it and very carefully slides it up into his bunghole and pushes it up and takes some more pitch and packs it in place.

(33) Oh, he gets it all nice and glued up there and pats it real tight, and it's all sealed up. And he's really happy with himself.



(34) So then he goes back to eating strawberries, and he's eating with both hands just as fast as he can go, eating and eating, more and more and more and more—eating strawberries until he gets so full he can hardly walk. His belly's just puffed way out, and by this time he's worked himself way down to the edge of the bluff.

(35) And he looks over there, and he can see a fire out there. He'd worked way out toward Bastendorf Beach. And he gets off out there, and he looks way out there, and he goes closer and closer, and he gets up on the edge of the dunes, and he looks out, and there are people out there with this fire on the beach. And he's thinking, "Oh, someone's cooking something."

(36) Well, you know, Coyote's such a glutton he's always ready to eat something more. And he calls out, "Hallooo." And the people look up.

(37) And it's the Seagull Boys out there, and they say, "Oh, hello mother's brother." And he says, "What are you doing?" And they say, "We're playing 'Jump over the Fire.'" He says, "Oh, well I'm very good at that." "Well, come over and show us."

(38) So Coyote goes over there, and he goes along and he runs over by the fire. He's disappointed it's not food, but he comes down there, going to show off, and he runs up—here his belly's so big he can hardly walk—runs up there and he takes a little jump over the fire.

(39) And they say, "Oh, well that was very good, but you really ought to jump over here where the flames are. That's where the contest is. Jump over the fire."

(40) "Oh, well, I can do that too." So Coyote circles back around, and he goes over, and he takes another run at it. He takes a run, and he jumps over, and he just barely gets over the fire, and he drags his tail right through the flames, and his tail suddenly explodes into fire.

(41) And he looks back there, and oh, his tail is burning, and flames shooting up. And he starts batting at the flames, batting at his tail, and he's running in circles, and it gets too hot, and suddenly the pitch melts, and POP!—out goes the carrot.

(42) And Coyote's running in circles. Strawberries start spewing out. He's running in circles, batting at his tail, strawberries spewing out, and they're flying all over the Seagull Boys, just spewing out, covering everybody, strawberries everywhere. And the Seagull Boys are mad. They grab rocks and they start throwing rocks and sticks at Coyote.

(43) And he runs and heads for the ocean as hard as he can go, runs and jumps out into the ocean, going to put his tail out. And he jumps out there, and what happens, but he jumps right out into the waves, and out in the waves is a big whale. And he jumps—right as the whale is coming up, he jumps right into the whale's mouth, and the whale swallows him.

(44) He goes clear down inside the whale's stomach. And everything's all quiet down in there. Coyote's down inside the whale's stomach. The tail is not burning any more; it's gone out.

(45) Coyote's feeling his way around: "How'd this happen? Where am I?" And he's wandering around in there, and BUMP, suddenly he hits his head on something. He reaches up, and there's the whale's heart, and

Coyote bumps right into it. And he says, "Aha." And he has an idea, so he takes his clamshell knife again, and he says, I'll get out of here."

(46) So he takes his clamshell knife and reaches up and cuts off the whale's heart. And the whale dies.

(47) There's Coyote, inside the whale, out in the ocean. The whale dies, and it floats up to the surface, and there's Coyote, standing up inside the whale, with his arms out, holding on. He can tell they're out in the big swells because the whale's going back and forth, real slow-like with the great big swells out there. Back and forth, back and forth.

(48) And pretty soon it gets a little rougher. They're going a little faster, and he can tell they're coming into the breakers on shore, and it gets faster and rolls some more, and the breakers are tossing him around, and he gets tossed around.

(49) Pretty soon there's a bump, and rolls over, and then everything's still. Aha, he knows then that they've washed up on the beach because the whale came ashore and washed up on the beach, and so Coyote is going to get out of there.

(50) Once again he takes his clamshell knife, and he starts cutting between the ribs, through about this much blubber, about a foot thick or more of blubber. Coyote starts cutting, and he starts cutting, and cutting between the whale's ribs, trying to get a place to get out of there.

(51) Well, that whale washed ashore right at Sunset Bay. (And that's a very famous place where whales come ashore because there's another old story about a woman who went out in the ocean and married the sea otters, and she had them send a whale ashore every year [as a present to her people]. So whales are very important to the people.) And they had been watching it. Now, they didn't know Coyote was inside it. The whale comes ashore and washes in at Sunset Bay, and all the people are watching. They've all come down. All the people come down. This great gift from the ocean. And they're coming down to Sunset Bay, and the whale is on shore. And they're all waiting for the ceremonious occasion to cut up the whale and share it with everybody.

(52) And just as they all arrive, here comes Coyote. He cuts his way, finally cuts through between the ribs, last strike just as the people arrive, and here comes Coyote, squeezing out between the ribs, and he's just covered with oil and whale blubber, just covered like Crisco all over him, just really tight. His hair is all matted down, and he's real skinny, sliding out, and his tail's all burned off. Coyote's just squeezing his way out between the ribs, and everybody's mad.

(53) Well, the Seagull Boys are there too, and they haven't forgotten the strawberries yet at all.

(54) All the people are mad because Coyote's contaminated the whole thing, this great gift from the ocean for all the people. Coyote's contaminated it.

(55) Everybody starts throwing rocks. Seagull Boys throwing rocks. Everybody throwing rocks at Coyote.

(56) He can't see anything because of all this blubber in his eyes, and it's all blurry. But he can hear. Down south he knows where Big Creek is; he can hear it running in down there, and he takes off running as hard as he can down the beach.

(57) And all the people throwing rocks at him, and he runs and runs and goes way down the beach. And he goes way up to Big Creek, and he starts running up Big Creek, and he hears the Salmon Girls going up Big Creek, and they're out there paddling, paddling in the water. And he gets ahead of the people real fast, and he runs up and he says, "Oh Salmon Girls, oh come over here."

(58) All the people are still trying to catch up with him. He says, "Oh you're so pretty. Come here, let me scratch your sides." And he reaches down and he's scratching their sides for them. He says, "Oh, you're so lovely. I could scratch better if you get up here in my lap." And so they let him. They get up in his lap, and Coyote's taking both hands and scratching both sides.

(59) Well, he's probably got other things on his mind, too, but he hears the people coming too soon. They're right on his tail.

(60) And he's scratching both sides so casually, rubbing their sides, and he gets right up to their heads, and he grabs their eyes, pulls their eyes out of their heads.

(61) He takes his own eyes out, which are all blurry and greasy, and he sticks them in the salmon's head.

(62) Because at that time salmon had bright shiny eyes, and Coyote had greasy eyes, and now he traded with them, so salmon now always have greasy eyes, and Coyote's got the bright shiny ones.

(63) And that's the end of that part of the story, as they told it.

### **Narrator's Notes**

Section 1: The South Slough estuary is now a federal sanctuary. It was the central area of the Milluk (a division of the Kusan language) speaking Coos people on Coos Bay. My paternal grandmother, Susan Adulsah Wasson, was the daughter of the principal headman Kitzen-Jin-Jn at the main village on South Slough, when the Jedediah Smith Expedition camped there in 1828. The area still holds strong family significance because the Wasson family cemetery, located on the original allotment land of Grandma Wasson, is now protected within the sanctuary boundaries.

Section 3: Port Orford "white" cedar was a special tree to the coastal people of Southwest Oregon. Its straight grain, pungent aroma, and superb durability made it especially desirable for carving special high prow

canoes.<sup>3</sup> Along with being a white cedar tree, this tree had been struck by lightning and thus had special qualities of spiritual honor and sacred power. This particular tree was not to be “trifled with.” When striking a tree, lightning often splits out a long strip of bark and sap wood as it usually runs vertically with the grain along the cambium layer. In the process, that narrow strip or sliver of wood becomes endowed with the power of the lightning and is considered highly special for medicine power and healing purposes. Therefore, both the tree and the split-out strip of wood must be treated with great respect.

Sections 3-5: *Tamanawis* is a word from Chinook Jargon (the lingua franca of the Pacific Northwest Indians that was later adopted by the early white traders, trappers, missionaries, and settlers). It means magical power, “supernatural” power, in non-Coquelle concepts. However, such powers of magical or mystical abilities were considered common and natural to native people.

Section 4: In learning this story, I don’t recall any special number of times required for Coyote to command the tree to “grow shut.” However, when his power seems to have failed him, he employs the undeniably sacred repetition of four times. When there is no response to his commands, he somewhat nonchalantly begins another approach as though he doesn’t even care about his abusive attitude (feeling proud of himself) toward his spirit power.

Section 9 ff.: Red-headed woodpecker scalps are highly honored and prized as “wealth” and medicine power items. Woodpeckers were likewise granted respect for their spirit power potential contained in their red scalps. It would have been considered disrespectful for anyone to tease or taunt a being of such high spiritual status. As unmarried women were protected from casual male interaction, it is quite forward of Coyote even to call to the woodpecker girl for assistance. His attempt at molesting her is even farther out of bounds in the acceptable social rules of the Coos/Coquelles.

Sections 20 ff.: Only the memory of clamshell knives has been retained through stories such as this. I don’t know of anyone who has actually seen one, but there are examples of clamshell cutting tools among various coastal archaeological collections. Unfortunately, clamshell does not survive well in the coastal middens. It usually decomposes quite rapidly, breaking into many small fragments within a few decades.

Sections 22-24: Bluejay is commonly a mischievous character in the tales of coastal peoples. Perhaps the noisy nature and curiosity (or plain

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<sup>3</sup> The information here is from George B. Wasson, the author’s father, as told to John P. Harrington in 1943 (unpublished fieldnotes in the Smithsonian Institution).

thievery) of Bluejay establishes an air of caution or expectation when the name comes up in a story. The act of stealing some intestines is therefore fitting for the character of Bluejay.

Section 25: Coos Head is located on the south side of Coos Bay, just between the mouth of South Slough and the south jetty, or Bastendorf Beach. It's only a few miles from the head of South Slough to its confluence with the main bay and the ocean beach.

Section 29: Knots from old rotten logs held no special sacred significance to the people but were gathered for burning in a cooking or heating fire, as they contained highly concentrated resins and burned hot. However, spruce knots were prized for their superior burning qualities. The pitch content in spruce knots allowed them to burn a long time, and, therefore, spruce knots could be used for torches to light one's way in the dark. Family stories relate the time when George R. Wasson, "Grandpa Wasson," used a spruce knot to light his way home in a rain storm one dark night, after failing to save his lead ox, "Longhorn Swan," from drowning in the rising flood.

It's interesting to note that Aunt Mary used an old New England term for rectum, "bung-hole" (the hole in a wooden barrel or keg through which the contents are emptied by means of inserting a wooden spigot). Mary's father, George R. Wasson, came from a rich maritime tradition in New Brunswick, having relatives in New England, and therefore taught many Euro-American terms to his half-Indian family.

Sections 29-33: Insertion of objects into the rectum or any other means of bodily insertion or ingestion for the purpose of "plugging up" one's excremental functions borders on a form of insanity or perhaps even witchcraft. *Berdaches* (who performed an intermediate, alternative gender role) were often the shamans or doctors; indeed, such male-females were known to function among the southern coastal tribes of Oregon—e. g., "Old Doctor" of the Tolowas (Williams 1986:60)—as wives of other men. In some tribes, however, pregnancy and childbirth among *berdaches* were often faked for emotional reasons by ingestion of certain herbal concoctions to induce constipation, and then a "stillbirth" delivery was claimed by the "mother," after a painful excretion of the rectal plug (Devereaux 1961:160). Undoubtedly such practices were known to the Coos and Coquelles, and such references to plugging up the rectum as in this story would elicit responses of humor, surprise, or even shock among the listeners.

Sections 31-32: The "wild carrot" was possibly *daucus carota* (Walters 1982:108). However, the blossoms, used for burning or smudging medicines to cure migraine headaches, were the important part of this plant, and the relationship might be in name only. Most likely the plant called

“wild carrot” in this story was one known by several different names, *yampah*, or *year-pah*, *carum gairdneri*, or *carum oreganum wats* (Haskin 1959:237).

Section 35: Nowadays, Bastendorf Beach is about a mile or so from Coos Head. In olden days, before the building of the jetties, it was a little closer, but due to the sand buildup on the south side of the south jetty, the beach is now farther away.

Section 37: When the Seagull Boys refer to Coyote as “Mother’s Brother,” they are using an honorific term generally applied to the person in one’s extended family who is most respected as a teacher and disciplinarian in place of one’s own or biological father. In many matrilineal societies, the husband, or the biological father of the children, has no responsibility or control over their discipline and education. That duty falls to the mother’s brother, perhaps as an assurance that a male with the mother’s genes will control and shape the development of offspring. Because the Seagull Boys are playing a game and have invited Coyote to join, there is the suggestion that they are deferring to his superior magical powers and are willing to enjoy the entertainment he provides.

Section 37: One can expect that Coyote is going to have problems with his attempts to participate in the game “Jump over the Fire,” since he just bragged about himself as being “very good at that.” Bragging about one’s prowess is not a socially acceptable trait.

Section 51 ff.: Sunset Bay, where this scene takes place, is just a couple of miles south of Bastendorf Beach. The gift of whales being sent ashore by the underwater people is told in “The Woman Who Married a Merman” (Frachtenberg 1913:157)<sup>4</sup> and represents an important cultural backdrop to this story. A chief’s daughter who is dedicated to taking care of her widowed father and his family is secretly courted by a sea otter. Eventually he persuades her to join him under the sea. Later, when she becomes homesick, the two try to visit her family but are driven off by hunters shooting arrows at them. They turn themselves into a handsome young couple, visit her family, and work out a family agreement in which the Sea Otter sends a whale to his in-laws every now and then, and they in turn leave a bundle of arrows in the sea for her children to play with. The story dramatizes the special meaning of a beached whale and accounts for why the Coos and Coquelle would not hunt sea otters.

Section 59: I’ve heard reference to another story in which Coyote seduces the Salmon Girls by scratching their sides and enticing them onto his lap where he proceeds to copulate with them. The resulting pregnancies

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<sup>4</sup> See also “The Woman Who Married a Merman” in St. Clair 1909:27-32.

are a puzzlement to them and all the people as well, but I don't know the details of the outcome.

### Analytical Comment

*BT:* It is tempting, in trying to comment on and analyze a tale like this, to employ a standard folkloristic approach and look for other “variants” characterized by the same or similar motifs, themes, and plot structures and then compare all the variations and constancies to see where the basic story lies. For example, in a Nehalem Tillamook tale, South Wind gets himself imprisoned in a tower of rocks and asks Woodpecker and the Yellowhammer to peck him loose. (They break their bills and get angry when he tries to touch their legs.) He gets out by cutting himself to pieces and throwing the body parts out a hole, where Raven and Seagull eat his eyes; he gets new eyes by trading with Eagle. In a Chinook story, Coyote is caught inside an immense cedar tree;<sup>5</sup> the birds try to peck a hole for him, but to no avail; he cuts himself up and throws the parts out through a Yellowhammer hole; Raven steals his eyes; he swindles a woman out of her eyes by claiming that the rose petals he has inserted in his sockets allow his *tamanawis* rays to work better. In a Cheyenne story, a character called White Man throws his eyes up into the air and, after doing it too many times, loses them; he catches a mouse and steals one of his eyes, meets a buffalo and begs one from him; now one tiny eye rolls around back in its socket, while the other hangs out over half his face. A Columbia River story describes how Coyote creates a rock fortress around him so he can perform fellatio on himself without being seen; but then he requires the birds to help him escape, and the deed becomes known. A Navajo story has Ma'ii (Coyote) beg the birds to teach him how to throw his eyes up into the air so that he can see great distances. They pry his eyeballs out and later replace them with pitch (which accounts for the yellow eyes of coyotes today). Afterwards he gets too close to the fire and the pitch melts (which accounts for the brown streak seen under coyotes' eyes). A Nez Perce tale describes how Coyote gets swallowed by a huge monster who has consumed all the local animals;<sup>6</sup> Coyote kills him by cutting his heart off with a knife and leading all the animals out through the monster's anus. In many

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<sup>5</sup> See “Coyote in the Cedar Tree” (Judson 1910:74-76).

<sup>6</sup> See “Coyote and the Swallowing Monster” in Phinney 1934:26-29 and reprinted in Ramsey 1977:9-12.

Eskimo stories, the removable eyes of the loon are related to the seeing powers of shamans. And one could go on, *ad infinitum*, for this particular group of motifs is really quite extensive.

The problem with this “comparative” approach, however, is that it skims along the surface of a hypothetically conceived story, focusing on clearly identifiable motifs—that is, noun concepts (in this case, confinement, hollow trees, berries, plugs in the anus, eyes, and so on)—and conveniently overlooks the more complex issues of relationships, ritual and social obligations, moral behaviors and responsibilities, issues that are usually the crux of Native American stories and that vary considerably in their organization and meaning from tribe to tribe. Thus, while a survey of “eye juggler”<sup>7</sup> or “swallowing monster” stories will demonstrate that the images were indeed used by a number of tribes in the northwest and west, this fact itself does not help us very much in determining what the motifs “mean” to the Coquelle who told—and still tell—the story.

For me, one of the most telling illustrations of this principle came when I took George Wasson with me to visit my friend, Yellowman, in Blanding, Utah, one winter. After we listened to Yellowman telling Ma’ii stories to his family for a couple of hours, I asked the Navajo family if they would like to hear some of the Old Man Coyote stories from George’s Coquelle background. Yellowman was clearly interested, but as George’s stories went on (and they included the one we discuss here), I could sense a kind of impatience growing in Yellowman’s demeanor. Finally, he asked me, “Where did he learn such things—from a missionary?” I explained that these were the Coyote stories from George’s tribe. “But they’re not Coyote stories,” said Yellowman. “They even describe Coyote eating fish!” he whispered. I told him that the Coquelle themselves eat fish, and so naturally Old Man Coyote would also eat fish. He shuddered and changed the subject. I had thought that especially the eye exchange motif would sound familiar to him, but as far as Yellowman was concerned, other culturally unsavory actions (like eating fish) far outweighed such insignificant details. Clearly, although Coyote seems to be the personage who can do whatever he wants (acting as what I have elsewhere called the “exponent of all possibilities”), he is limited in some ways, for if his actions fall too far outside the realm of cultural allowability, he becomes unreal. Of course, here we are speaking not of what a character like Coyote can or

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example, the Cheyenne story “The Eye Juggler” in Feldmann 1971:151-52; the Paiute story “Coyote the Eye-Juggler” in Jones and Ramsey 1994:121-22; and the Nehalem Tillamook story “South Wind Loses his Eyes and Gets New Ones” in Jones and Ramsey 1994:123-24.



cannot do, but about those culturally constructed concepts in which people will or will not think.

Motifs and story structures are among the easiest of factors to deal with because we can “see” them, and think them, but for that reason they tell us very little about the unstated, relatively invisible, assumptions on the basis of which a certain pattern of motifs may be said to achieve a cultural meaning beyond simple entertainment. Yet, especially in a case like this Coquelle story, the text may be the bulk of what we have available to work with, since we may not have access to enough people who know and can articulate the particulars of their culture’s values and logical assumptions. If motif and tale-type (the standard tools of European-based narrative scholarship) are not totally satisfactory for our purposes, then, what recourses do we have in our attempt to speculate on the meaning of “Coyote and the Strawberries”? For one thing, of course, we have the performance, and the continuing performances, of George Wasson and his family; we have the intonations, smiles, and nuances of the narrator, plus his recollections and explanations (as provided in his notes to this essay); and, combining these resources, we have a greater possibility of judging the “logic” of actions in the story by their own cultural context rather than by our own. Thus the text becomes a potentially richer document for us to work with than it would otherwise be, and we can ask better questions of it than “I wonder how many tribes believe one can exchange eyes with others?” or “Do Indians really believe that’s why Coyote has yellow eyes?” We are not as “thick” into the story or the culture as Clifford Geertz might wish us to be, but we’re further in than we were.

Another temptation in dealing with this story is to jump to the assumption that there is actually a universal macro-tradition of “The Trickster,” a concept that has become not only a handy carrying bag for anthropologists, but a passionately faddish focal point for Jungian analysts, literary critics, and New Age gurus. Although the term is widely used as if it represents an actual, consistent, self-sustaining archetype floating in the cultural air or inherited through our psychological DNA, the fact is that the conventional figure of the Trickster is so amorphous as to be useless for critical purposes: for one thing, if we look at him cross-culturally, including all the details from all cultures who seem to relish his adventures, we note that in most traditions he seldom plays tricks on anyone (though he is not above cheating and lying to gain his ends). More than a tricky personage, he is a sacred creator, a buffoon, a clown, a selfish egomaniac, and an oversexed opportunist (usually at one and the same time). When we look at him in each specific instance, however, we see that his character is constructed somewhat differently in every tribal tradition. Far from

representing the random childish urges of an unsocialized personality, the Coyote (in some tribes he is a spider, a rabbit, or a raven) usually is depicted as doing things that humans cannot achieve because we lack the power (ordering the world, killing monsters, inventing death) or that we are not supposed to accomplish because of taboo, propriety, or custom. Thus, coyote stories usually show us not tricks but colorful dramas that create vicarious experience in specific matters which are important to us but in which we normally cannot, or should not, have personal experience.

To the western mind this odd combination of sacred and secular, wise and foolish, in one character is perhaps a “tricky” idea, but in fact it makes palpable a fairly common concept among Native American tribes: good and evil, sacred and secular, smart and dumb, are not mutually exclusive qualities, but are overlapping, interdependent aspects of each other. This is a much more complicated idea than trickery would account for, and, in its avoidance of contrastive values (like Good versus Evil, which is a common construction in Euro-American worldview), it represents a set of assumptions far more rare in western thought than Trickster fans are likely to appreciate. Rather than a binary computer, in which [a] and [not-a] are mutually exclusive, the coyote character is more like an analog computer in which [a] can also be [not-a]. This is by no means an easy abstraction to deal with, especially in western culture; but it may be the reason why a dramatization of the concept works better than an explanation—in anyone’s culture.

For critical purposes, we can use this knowledge to help phrase some of the questions we wish to pursue in regard to the possible meanings and functions of any coyote story, including the one under examination here. (1) If Coyote is usually a combination of value-charged elements important to moral or cultural survival, how do his actions function to foreground or articulate some of these values in this particular story? (2) If Coyote’s actions are possibly sacred as well as secular, what do his actions here mean in cultural terms? (3) If Coyote usually is observed to be breaking significant rules or challenging meaningful taboos, what do his actions in this story suggest about rules and taboos among the Coquelle? (4) If we accept the proposition that Coyote represents the dramatic embodiment of cultural values, then what exactly is it that is being dramatized in this story? The following comments and observations apply questions like these to the principal scenes of the story narrated by George Wasson:

Scene 1: Coyote in and out of the hollow tree: Coyote gets into the tree for his own comfort and convenience, in spite of the suggestion that the lightning-struck tree is taboo; can we not read it as a culturally moral consequence that he cannot get back out without dismembering himself and

losing an important part of himself in the process? Selfish disregard for taboo, propriety, and behavior is self-destructive, if we understand this scene as a dramatic enactment of cultural value.

Scene 2: Coyote and the strawberries: berries and other gathered foods were normally brought home and shared with others. In this vivid tableau scene, because of his self-destructive behavior in scene one, Coyote is shown stuffing himself endlessly, a hyperbolic enactment of selfishness, since it does not nourish him, and indeed leads to even more anti-self (and culturally questionable) behavior.

Scene 3: Coyote and the Seagull Boys: where in scene one, Coyote is in the tree and cannot get out without trauma; now, strawberries (and the wild carrot) are in Coyote, and cannot get out without an equally traumatic explosion. That this release of selfishly-consumed-and-contained food has a negative impact on respectful relatives seems to me to be no accident: dramatically, it says that selfishness, self-destructive behavior, disregard of taboo, and now (with the fire-jump game) bragging, are like defecating on your relatives.

Scene 4: Coyote in and out of the whale: just as he has entered a powerful tree without regard for propriety and taboo, now Coyote has entered a whale, a sacramental, familial gift from the ocean. (See Wasson's explanation, and the synopsis of the Sea Otter story.) Just as he cannot get out of the tree without cutting himself up, he cannot get out of the whale without killing it and tainting its sacred flesh by digging through it like a maggot. Because the error here is intrusion into a ritual process (once again, to save his neck) and is not connected to selfish diversion of food, as it was in scene one, the consequence is not constipation but a kind of blindness.

Scene 5: Coyote and the Salmon Girls: partially blinded by the blubber, Coyote can still hear what's going on and locates the Salmon Girls, whose eyes he needs; in order to escape his current predicament, he requires clear eyes, as do we all. In another story common along the southern Oregon coast, Coyote wipes his penis off on his grandchildren's eyes as they awaken so that they will not see clearly that he has spent the night copulating with their mother, his daughter-in-law; today, when we clean the white mucus from our eyes in the morning, we are reminded to avoid incest and not to trust what we see until we can see clearly.

Overall, we have Coyote in and out of a storm, in and out of a tree, in and out of a strawberry patch; then a knot, a stone, a wild carrot, and strawberries are in and out of Coyote; Coyote is in and out of the fire; Coyote is in and out of the whale; Coyote is in and out of trouble. Strangely enough, he is not shown as sexually in and out of the Salmon

Girls, which would have been a typical possibility, given his tastes. (Clearly, the story here focuses on other modes of selfishness.) But his eyes are in them, and theirs in him. The story dramatizes several Coquelle concepts of behavior with respect to lightning, sacred or powerful trees, sharing of food, self-destructive actions, misuse of natural objects or disrupting of natural processes (knot, stone, and wild carrot in anus), bragging, respect for relatives, disruption of ritual processes (tainting the whale offering, which also entails disrespect for the familial rituals embodied by the whale), and cheating others of their ability to see clearly. Indeed, no one in the story sees very clearly in the figurative sense: in addition to Coyote, it is clear that Woodpecker Girl does not anticipate Coyote's immoral actions, Blue Jay cannot see who owns all those nice tidbits on the ground, the Seagull Boys do not anticipate getting showered with half-digested strawberries, the whale opens its mouth without seeing that Coyote is going to jump in, the people gather on the beach without knowing that their whale is inhabited by Coyote, and the Salmon Girls get up on Coyote's lap without sensing that they are about to lose their clear eyesight. The action is very much like a Greek play, in which characters act their normal parts without seeing what the aggregate consequences will be, while we as audience members, armed with the shared perspectives and values of culture, obtain vicarious experience and depth of meaning (including irony) as we witness the dramatization of abstract ideas.

It seems to me that these are only the most obvious possibilities in the story, and in fact the narrative may contain many others which are "there" by nuance only, to be registered most richly by those for whom the cultural matrix is familiar. But even at this, I think it is striking to note first of all how many cultural issues are dramatized in the story, and secondly how differently these familiar "motifs" structure a particularly Coquelle, not a pan-Indian, constellation.

*GW:* Some people have remarked to me that this is just a funny story, created with improbable situations that we know couldn't happen in real life. It seems obvious that no one could actually cut himself into small pieces, poke them through a hole, and then reassemble the parts in the manner so matter-of-factly demonstrated here by Coyote. I'd suggest that there might be a subliminal message in that event, either explaining or dictating the limits of Native medical practice, which were of course almost entirely herbal and spiritual, with almost no use of surgery on the human body.

Contemporary listeners also seem to assume that the story, while "cute," is somewhat odd or illogical: Coyote jumps into the mouth of a

whale. Yet many Judeo-Christians are familiar with a similar concept in the story of Jonah and the whale and often read or hear it as a narrative with serious philosophical implications—whether or not they believe it actually happened.

There is still another aspect of the story that I've never heard anyone accept as historical fact: Coyote picking ripe strawberries just after a severe hailstorm just doesn't seem to depict a probable situation. Today, hailstorms hit the Oregon coast in February and March, and strawberries don't ripen until about June. However, in the past 20-30 years, scientists (and west coast dwellers) have been observing a phenomenon of nature known affectionately by the Spanish term "El Niño," (The Christ Child). Due to the constant blowing of winds far out on the Pacific, a layer of water builds up, raising the sea level in the South Pacific to the point at which it dissipates in a great surge or wave. As this surge moves toward South America, the ocean currents are strongly affected, welling up water from far below, dramatically changing the food supply of plankton, and moving currents of warm water northward along the west coast of North America. These dramatic changes result in severe weather pattern changes, which in 1995 produced more rainfall in southern California than ever recorded in written history. The weather pattern also brought a heavy snowfall of up to four inches in southern Oregon. At Coos Bay and South Slough snow fell as late as the first week of April. Although the evidence is circumstantial, it could very well be that this story carries forward—along with all its cultural meanings—a record of remarkable weather changes in earlier times that were taken to have some connection with human and animal behavior.

*BT:* Consistent with the metaphorical aspects of "seeing," characters spend a lot of time in this story looking: Coyote looks out the hole in the tree, looks out and sees Woodpecker Girl, looks at her while she's working on enlarging the hole; Bluejay comes along and looks over the pile of body parts lying all around; Coyote looks at the strawberries; he looks around for something to stop up his anus; he looks out on Bastendorf Beach and sees the Seagull Boys; he looks at his burning tail. But when he is inside the whale, where it's dark (perhaps reflecting his spiritual blindness at this point), he doesn't look; he feels and hears. As he comes out of the whale, he can't see, but only hears and runs until he gets the clear eyes of the Salmon Girls and makes his escape. Does he regain his vision through the mediation of the Salmon, whom the Coos and Coquille still reverence with a salmon bake every year? Does his return to normalcy come about through his acknowledgement that the salmon provide the basis for life? After all,

he does not take them, or eat them, or desecrate them: he gains clear vision from them. Perhaps so do we, according to this drama.

In any case, it is clear to me (with the new eyes provided by this exercise) that no single answer will suffice, for the living contexts in which the story reaches articulation each time are changing constantly, and the text changes continually according to the audience, the occasion, and the feelings of the narrator; and we can probably assume (or at least allow for the possibility) that this dynamism has been a part of the picture, and thus the meanings, down through time. This was no better illustrated for me than by George's response to my editorial suggestion that we take out all the parenthetical asides in the story text and place them among the explanatory notes, leaving the story itself clear of contemporary commentary. "First of all, it's not accurate," he insisted, "because those words were actually there when I told the story that time. And besides, in that case the story was being told to some people who were non-Coquelles, and the explanations were a necessary part of the story, just as on some other occasion, maybe with my family, some of those things need not to be said, while others might be said anyhow, just so we could share the recollection of 'Yes, that's how it was,' or 'Yes, that's where it happened, all right.'"

*GW:* The reason for retaining comments is that the story itself is alive, and so, of course, it changes from one telling to the next, depending on the situation, context, or audience. Those "incidental comments" are part of the story itself and are always there. They vary depending on when, why, and where the story is being presented. Separating those explanatory parts included at that particular telling from the rest of the text would give the impression that they resulted from later analysis and could mislead the reader as to how the telling actually took place.

*BT:* Omitting explanatory comments would also add to the impressions, harbored far too long by most scholars of folklore and literature, that the text of a story has a single, discrete form and content, that a story can exist without its context, that a narrative can mean something without reference to information about the real physical and cultural world in which it operates, that the actions of a story character are understandable without reference to the culture that constructed the story.

*GW:* Coyote stories are truly like Coyote himself: each time a story is told, it experiences a new birth, a regeneration, or a fresh reincarnation. Each telling is in a different setting or location, with a different audience,

with a different reason for telling it. Therefore, each telling requires a new set of explanatory remarks for the benefit of the new audience. Some know more than others about the content and the meaning of the story elements, but—since repetition is a standard aspect of traditional oratory—there is never a need to apologize for telling or explaining something that some, or even most, of the listeners might already know. The present story, along with our discussion of it, is no exception.<sup>8</sup>

*University of Oregon  
Utah State University*

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<sup>8</sup> Special thanks to Mark Tveskov for the map of the Coos Bay area in Coos County, Oregon.

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