



'THIS BOOK IS A REVELATION'  
THE TIMES

# TRICKSTER MAKES THIS WORLD

HOW DISRUPTIVE IMAGINATION  
CREATES CULTURE

FROM THE BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE GIFT*

LEWIS HYDE

'A GLORIOUS GRAB-BAG STUFFED WITH NECESSARY  
LOOT, A JOYFUL PLUM PUDDING RICH IN TREASURES'

MARGARET ATWOOD

C

• THE CANONS •

## INTRODUCTION

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

*—Paul Radin*

*We interpret always as transients.*

*—Frank Kermode*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

---

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

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

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

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

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

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

---

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

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

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

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

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

---

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



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

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

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

---

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

---

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

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

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

---

**SLIPPING THE TRAP OF APPETITE**

*The whitebait  
Open their black eyes  
in the net of the Law.  
—Basho*

**THE BAIT THIEF**

The trickster myth derives creative intelligence from appetite. It begins with a being whose main concern is getting fed and it ends with the same being grown mentally swift, adept at creating and unmasking deceit, proficient at hiding his tracks and at seeing through the devices used by others to hide theirs. Trickster starts out hungry, but before long he is master of the kind of creative deception that, according to a long tradition, is a prerequisite of art. Aristotle wrote that Homer first “taught the rest of us the art of framing lies the right way.” Homer makes lies seem so real that they enter the world and walk among us. Odysseus walks among us to this day, and he would seem to be Homer’s own self-portrait, for Odysseus, too, is a master of the art of lying, an art he got from his grandfather, Autolycus, who got it in turn from *his* father, Hermes. And Hermes, in an old story we shall soon consider, invented lying when he was a hungry child with a hankering for meat.

But I’m making a straight line out of a narrative that twists and turns,

and I'm getting ahead of myself. We must begin at the beginning, with trickster learning how to keep his stomach full.

**T**rickster stories, even when they clearly have much more complicated cultural meanings, preserve a set of images from the days when what mattered above all else was hunting. At one point in the old Norse tales, the mischief-maker Loki has made the other gods so angry that he has to flee and go into hiding. In the mountains, he builds himself a house with doors on all sides so he can watch the four horizons. To amuse himself by day, he changes into a salmon, swimming the mountain streams, leaping the waterfalls. Sitting by the fire one morning, trying to imagine how the others might possibly capture him, he takes linen string and twists it into a mesh in the way that fishnets have been made ever since. Just at that moment, the others approach. Loki throws the net into the fire, changes into a salmon, and swims away. But the gods find the ashes of his net and from their pattern deduce the shape of the device they need to make. In this way, Loki is finally captured.

It makes a nice emblem of trickster's ambiguous talents, Loki imagining that first fishnet and then getting caught in it. Moreover, the device in question is a central trickster invention. In Native American creation stories, when Coyote teaches humans how to catch salmon, he makes the first fish weir out of logs and branches. On the North Pacific coast, the trickster Raven made the first fishhook; he taught the spider how to make her web and human beings how to make nets. The history of trickery in Greece goes back to similar origins. "Trick" is *dólos* in Homeric Greek, and the oldest known use of the term refers to a quite specific trick: baiting a hook to catch a fish.

East and west, north and south, this is the oldest trick in the book. No trickster has ever been credited with inventing a potato peeler, a gas meter, a catechism, or a tuning fork, but trickster invents the fish trap.

Coyote was going along by a big river when he got very hungry. He built a trap of poplar poles and willow branches and set it in the water. "Salmon!" he called out. "Come into this trap." Soon a big salmon came along and swam into the chute of the trap and then flopped himself out on the bank where Coyote clubbed him

to death. "I will find a nice place in the shade and broil this up," thought Coyote.

Trickster commonly relies on his prey to help him spring the traps he makes. In this fragment of a Nez Perce story from northeastern Idaho, Coyote's salmon weir takes advantage of forces the salmon themselves provide. Salmon in a river are swimming upstream to spawn; sexual appetite or instinct gives them a particular trajectory and Coyote works with it. Even with a baited hook, the victim's hunger is the moving part. The worm just sits there; the fish catches himself. Likewise, in a Crow story from the Western Plains, Coyote traps two buffalo by stampeding them into the sun so they cannot see where they are going, then leading them over a cliff. The fleetness of large herbivores is part of their natural defense against predators; Coyote (or the Native Americans who slaughtered buffalo in this way) takes advantage of that instinctual defense by directing the beasts into the sun and toward a cliff, so that fleetness itself backfires. In the invention of traps, trickster is a technician of appetite and a technician of instinct.

And yet, as the Loki story indicates, trickster can also get snared in his own devices. Trickster is at once culture hero and fool, clever predator and stupid prey. Hungry, trickster sometimes devises stratagems to catch his meal; hungry, he sometimes loses his wits altogether. An Apache story from Texas, in which Rabbit has played a series of tricks on Coyote, ends as follows:

Rabbit came to a field of watermelons. In the middle of the field there was a stick figure made of gum. Rabbit hit it with his foot and got stuck. He got his other foot stuck, then one hand and then his other hand and finally his head. This is how Coyote found him.

"What are you doing like this?" asked Coyote.

"The farmer who owns this melon patch was mad because I would not eat melons with him. He stuck me on here and said that in a while he would make me eat chicken with him. I told him I wouldn't do it."

"You are foolish. I will take your place."

Coyote pulled Rabbit free and stuck himself up in the gum



trap. When the farmer who owned the melons came out and saw Coyote he shot him full of holes.

Coyote doesn't just get stuck in gum traps, either; in other stories, a range of animals—usually sly cousins such as Fox or Rabbit or Spider—make a fool of him and steal his meat.

So trickster is cunning about traps but not so cunning as to avoid them himself. To my mind, then, the myth contains a story about the incremental creation of an intelligence about hunting. Coyote can imagine the fish trap precisely because he's been a fish himself, as it were. Nothing counters cunning but more cunning. Coyote's wits are sharp precisely because he has met other wits, just as the country bumpkin may eventually become a cosmopolitan if enough confidence men appear to school him.

Some recent ideas in evolutionary theory echo these assertions. In *Evolution of the Brain and Intelligence*, Harry Jerison presents a striking chart showing the relative intelligence of meat-eaters and the herbivores they prey on. Taking the ratio of brain to body size as a crude index, Jerison finds that if we compare herbivores and carnivores at any particular moment in history the predators are always slightly brainier than the prey. But the relationship is never stable; there is a slow step-by-step increase in intelligence on both sides. If we chart the brain-body ratio on a scale of 1 to 10, in the archaic age herbivores get a 2 and carnivores a 4; thirty million years later the herbivores are up to 4 but the carnivores have gone up to 6; another thirty million years and the herbivores are up to 6 but the carnivores are up to 8; finally, when the herbivores get up to 9, the carnivores are up to 10. The hunter is always slightly smarter, but the prey is always wising up. In evolutionary theory, the tension between predator and prey is one of the great engines that has driven the creation of intelligence itself, each side successively and ceaselessly responding to the other.

**I**f this myth contains a story about incrementally increasing intelligence, where does it lead? What happens after the carnivore gets up to 10?

There is a great deal of folklore about coyotes in the American West. One story has it that in the old days sheep farmers tried to get rid of

wolves and coyotes by putting out animal carcasses laced with strychnine. The wolves, they say, were killed in great numbers, but the coyotes wised up and avoided these traps. Another story has it that when trappers set metal leg traps they will catch muskrat and mink and fox and skunk, but coyote only rarely. Coyotes develop their own relationship to the trap; as one naturalist has written, "it is difficult to escape the conclusion that coyotes . . . have a sense of humor. How else to explain, for instance, the well-known propensity of experienced coyotes to dig up traps, turn them over, and urinate or defecate on them?"

With this image we move into a third relationship between tricksters and traps. When a coyote defecates on a trap he is neither predator nor prey but some third thing. A fragment of a native Tlingit story from Alaska will help us name that thing:

[Raven] came to a place where many people were encamped fishing . . . He entered a house and asked what they used for bait. They said, "Fat." Then he said, "Let me see you put enough on your hooks for bait," and he noticed carefully how they baited and handled their hooks. The next time they went out, he walked off behind a point and went underwater to get this bait. Now they got bites and pulled up quickly, but there was nothing on their hooks.

Raven eventually gets in trouble for this little trick (the fishermen steal his beak and he has to pull an elaborate return-ruse to get it back), but for now the point is simply that in the relationship between fish and fishermen this trickster stands to the side and takes on a third role.

A similar motif appears in Africa with the Zulu trickster known as *Thlókunyana*. *Thlókunyana* is imagined to be a small man, "the size of a weasel," and in fact one of his other names also refers to a red weasel with a black-tipped tail. A Zulu storyteller describes this animal as

cleverer than all others, for its cunning is great. If a trap is set for a wild cat, [the weasel] comes immediately to the trap, and takes away the mouse which is placed there for the cat: it takes it out first; and when the cat comes the mouse has been already eaten by the weasel.

If a hunter does manage to trap this tricky weasel, he will have bad luck. A kind of jinx or magical influence remains in the trap that has caught a weasel and that influence forever after “stands in the way” of the trap’s power; it will no longer catch game.

Coyote in fact and folklore, Raven and Thlókunyana in mythology—in each of these cases, trickster gets wise to the bait and is therefore all the harder to catch. The coyote who avoids a strychnined carcass is perhaps the simplest case; he does not get poisoned but he also gets nothing to eat. Raven and Thlókunyana are more cunning in this regard; they are bait-thief tricksters who separate the trap from the meat and eat the meat. Each of these tales has a predator-prey relationship in it—the fish and the fishermen, for example—but the bait thief doesn’t enter directly into that oppositional eating game. A parasite or epizoon, he feeds his belly while standing just outside the conflict between hunter and hunted. From that position the bait thief becomes a kind of critic of the usual rules of the eating game and as such subverts them, so that traps he has visited lose their influence. What trapper’s pride could remain unshaken once he’s read Coyote’s commentary?

In all these stories, trickster must do more than feed his belly; he must do so without himself getting eaten. Trickster’s intelligence springs from appetite in two ways; it simultaneously seeks to satiate hunger and to subvert all hunger not its own. This last is an important theme. In the Okanagon creation story, the Great Spirit, having told Coyote that he must show the New People how to catch salmon, goes on to say: “I have important work for you to do . . . There are many bad creatures on earth. You will have to kill them, otherwise they will eat the New People. When you do this, the New People will honor you . . . They will honor you for killing the People-devouring monsters and for teaching . . . all the ways of living.” In North America, trickster stepped in to defeat the monsters who used to feed on humans.

The myth says, then, that there are large, devouring forces in this world, and that trickster’s intelligence arose not just to feed himself but to outwit these other eaters. Typically, this meeting is oppositional—the prey outwitting the predator. The bait thief suggests a different, non-oppositional strategy. Here trickster feeds himself where predator and prey meet, but rather than entering the game on their terms he plays with its rules. Perhaps, then, another force behind trickster’s cunning is the desire to remove himself from the eating game altogether, or at least see

how far out he can get and still feed his belly (for if he were to stop eating entirely he would no longer be trickster).

### EATING THE ORGANS OF APPETITE

*What god requires a sacrifice of every man,  
woman, and child three times a day?*

—Yoruba riddle

Not many stories purport to explain the origins of appetite, but one may be found at the beginning of the Tsimshian Raven cycle from the North Pacific coast. A desire to escape the trap of appetite, and some limit to that desire, organizes “Raven Becomes Voracious.”

It seems that the whole world was once covered with darkness. On the Queen Charlotte Islands there was a town in which the animals lived. An animal chief and his wife lived there with their only child, a boy whom, they loved very much. The father tried to keep his son from all danger. He built the boy a bed above his own in the rear of his large house. He washed him regularly, and the boy grew to be a young man.

When he was quite large, this youth became ill, and before long, he died. His parents wept and wept. The animal chief invited the tribe to his house. When they had assembled, he ordered the youth’s body to be laid out. “Take out his intestines,” he said. His attendants laid out the youth’s body, removed the intestines, burned them at the rear of the house, and placed the body on the bed which the father had built for his son. Under the corpse of their dead son, the chief and the chieftainess wailed every morning, and the tribe wailed with them.

One morning before daylight, when the chieftainess went to mourn, she looked up and saw a young man, bright as fire, lying where the body of her son had lain. She called to her husband, who climbed the ladder and said, “Is it you, my beloved son? Is it you?” “Yes, it is I,” said the shining youth, and his parents’ hearts were filled with gladness.

When the tribe came to console their chief and chieftainess, they were surprised to see the shining youth. He spoke to them. “Heaven was much annoyed by your constant wailing, so He sent me down to comfort

your minds.” Everyone was very glad the prince lived among them again; his parents loved him more than ever.

**T**he chief had two great slaves—a miserable man and his wife. The great slaves were called Mouth at Each End. Every morning they brought all kinds of food into the house. Every time they came back from hunting, they brought a large cut of whale meat with them, threw it on the fire, and ate it.

The shining youth ate very little. Days went by. He chewed a little fat, but he didn’t eat it. The chieftainess tried to get him to eat, but he declined everything and lived without food. The chieftainess was very anxious about this; she was afraid her son would die again. One day when the shining youth was out for a walk, the chief went up the ladder to where his son had his bed. There was the corpse of his own son! Nevertheless, he loved his new child.

Sometime later, when the chief and chieftainess were out, the two great slaves called Mouth at Each End came in, carrying a large cut of whale meat. They threw the whale fat into the fire and ate it. The shining youth came up to them and asked, “What makes you so hungry?” The great slaves replied, “We are hungry because we have eaten scabs from our shinbones.” “Do you like what you eat?” asked the shining youth. “Oh yes, my dear,” said the slave man.

“Then I will taste the scabs you speak about,” replied the prince. “No, my dear! Do not wish to be as we are!” cried the slave woman. “I will just taste it and spit it out again,” said the prince. The slave man cut a bit of whale meat and put a small scab in it. The slave woman scolded him, “O bad man! What are you doing to the poor prince?”

The shining prince took the piece of meat with the scab in it, tasted it, and spat it out again. Then he went back to bed.

When the chief and his wife returned, the prince said to his mother, “Mother, I am very hungry.” “Oh dear, is it true, is it true?” She ordered the slaves to feed rich food to her beloved son. The youth ate it all. As soon as he finished, he became ravenous again. The slaves gave him more and more to eat, and he ate everything. He ate for days. Soon all the provisions in his father’s house were gone. The prince then went from

house to house in the village and devoured all the stores of food, for he had tasted the scabs of Mouth at Each End.

Soon the entire tribe's stores of food were almost exhausted. The great chief felt sad and ashamed on account of his son. He assembled the tribe and spoke: "I will send my child away before he eats all our food." The tribe agreed with this decision; the chief summoned his son and, sitting him in the rear of the house, said to him: "My dear son, I shall send you over the ocean to the mainland." He gave his son a small round stone, a raven blanket, and a dried sea-lion bladder filled with all kinds of berries. "When you put on this raven blanket you will become Raven, and fly," the chief told him. "When you feel weary flying, drop this round stone on the sea, and you shall find rest. When you reach the mainland, scatter the various kinds of fruit over the land; and scatter the salmon roe in all the rivers and brooks, and also the trout roe, so that you may not lack food as long as you live in the world." The son put on the raven blanket and flew toward the east.

Such is the story of the origin of Raven and his hunger. In the parts of the cycle that follow, Raven creates the world as we know it: he places the fish in the rivers and scatters the fruit over the land. When he arrives in this world he finds it has no light but, remembering that there was light in the heaven from which he came, he returns and steals it so that this world will not be in darkness.

To reflect on the story of Raven's hunger, note first that the shining prince in this tale is not exactly the chief's son (the corpse, after all, remains); he is some sort of emissary from heaven, come in the youth's stead as an antidote to grief. The island on which the boy's parents live lies between heaven and earth; Raven travels from heaven to the world of the animal tribe, and then he travels from that world to this one, where appetite has no end and where the berries and fish have no end. In short, as in many trickster tales, the Tsimshian Raven is a go-between, a mediator. There are three spheres of being in the story, and Raven moves among them.

From the point of view of Raven's final home—this world of hunger and food—the father who loves his son is bound to fail in his attempt to keep the boy from all harm. In this world, people die; animals die. To

desire the contrary is to desire a changeless perfection, a heaven, an ideal. Seeing that, perhaps we can now link three enigmas in the story: Why does the father have his son's intestines burnt? Why are the slaves called Mouth at Each End? What are those shin scabs?

To begin with, eating and death are part of the world of change (just as their suppression would be part of changeless perfection), so let us say that the intestines are a sign of our mutable world, and that their name is Mouth at Both Ends. The slaves are therefore the alimentary canal, that servant of the body who brings all kinds of food into our home every day. The story is built around the question of whether or not the intestines will own the boy. The father hopes they won't, and so he has his attendants remove and burn them when the boy dies, a nice image for getting rid of appetite. If he could live, a boy without intestines might be freed from hunger, freed from attachments, freed from sickness and death. In any event, the parents' grief and sacrifice summon up a weird "ideal" being who shines like fire and does not eat, as if he had been gutted.

The shin scabs seem the most mysterious image here. In the far north, Raven is sometimes called "the trickster with the scaly legs"; perhaps to native eyes when a raven rubs its beak against its legs it appears to be self-eating, the Hungry One tasting its own scabs. To read the image more figuratively, let's first remember how scabs come to be, and what their function is. Scabs bespeak some kind of rough contact with the world. They follow wounds, and are the healing of wounds. As we heal, we slough them off; as such, they are a kind of bodily excrement. They are also a kind of fruiting, flesh producing flesh out of itself, a strange fruit to be sure, but one that is actually eaten in this case.

If we begin with the idea of "rough contact," perhaps the shin scabs in the story, like calluses on the hands, represent work, the labor by which humankind must get its keep (these are food-getting slaves, after all, whose shins are scabbed). It is a widespread motif in this mythology that once upon a time we humans did not have to work for our food (every morning there was a bowl of hot acorn mush outside the lodge), but then trickster came along, did something foolish, and now we must labor. So perhaps "to eat shin scabs" is to enter the world of scarcity and work.

Because scabs are linked with wounds, they may also indicate that Raven is born of woundedness. But what wound is there in this tale? Remember that the father here hopes to keep his son from all harm, and that his hopes are twice defeated, once when the boy dies and once again

when the scabs turn his spirit into a shamefully hungry creature. I suspect the second defeat arises from the father's response to the first. He had his people cut out the boy's intestines, and then the slaves—who are in some way like intestines—appear, wounded and scabbing. Raven is not the father's hoped-for ideal youth who has escaped this world; he is, rather, a restless, hungry beast who is in this world precisely because his father's idealism wounded him, and he has tasted the fruit of that wound.

Finally, if scabs are a kind of excrement, perhaps the story means that Raven comes to life where the body sheds its wastes. (Ravens, in fact, will eat excrement, and the mythology is full of scatological episodes.) But "excrement" may be too precise a word here, for in this case what the body sheds becomes food. Perhaps Raven comes to life where waste turns into fruit, or better, where one's *own* waste becomes one's food (it is their own scabs that the slaves eat). There is a circularity to eating here which suggests that, at some level, eating is self-eating, or that all who eat in this world must eventually themselves be eaten. In this world, everything that feeds will someday be food for other mouths; that is the law of appetite, or—as we'd now say—of ecological interdependence. If I'm right to imagine that the removed intestines reappear as the slaves, then in this story, at the "beginning of things," we find Raven tasting the fruit of his own wounded guts and by that self-eating setting in motion this world of endless hunger.

Here it should be noted that there is some natural history woven into this story. When hunters kill an animal in the woods they typically gut it on the spot, then carry the carcass home; later, ravens will come to eat the guts (and coyotes and wolves will follow, drawn by the ravens). Raven is said to have told the Athabascan Indians that they would be able to catch deer if they would leave the guts for him to feed on each time the game is killed; elsewhere, the entrails of the kill are left as a gift to Coyote. Each case presents an image of appetite eating the organs of appetite.

One thing draws together these various readings: in each, Raven comes down to this world. "Raven Becomes Voracious" is a story of descent. In heaven there are beings who do not eat; in this lower world of stomachs and fish there are mortals who eat constantly. The trickster Raven is a mixture, the shining boy plus appetite, a being of considerable power who is unable to satiate his hunger. Trickster makes the world, gives it sunlight, fish, and berries, but he makes it "as it is," a world of constant need, work, limitation, and death.



• • •

As I said at the outset, there are not many stories like this one in which we learn something about the genesis of appetite, but trickster tales in most traditions are filled with examples of trickster's hunger and its consequences. To take a case in point, in a Native American (Colville) story Coyote has made a new pair of horns for Old Buffalo Bull and in gratitude Buffalo gives Coyote a magic cow and a little advice:

"Never kill this cow, Coyote. When you are hungry, cut off a little of her fat with your flint knife. Rub ashes on the wound. The cut will heal. This way, you will have meat forever."

Coyote promised this is what he would do. He took the buffalo cow with him back over the mountains. Whenever he was hungry he would cut away a little fat and then heal the wound with ashes as Buffalo Bull had said. But after a while he got tired of the fat. He wanted to taste the bone marrow and some fresh liver. By this time he had crossed the plains and was back in his own country.

"What Buffalo Bull said is only good over in his country," Coyote said to himself. "I am chief here. Buffalo Bull's words mean nothing. He will never know."

Coyote took the young cow down to the edge of the creek. "You look a little sore-footed," he told her. "Stay here and rest and feed for a while."

Coyote killed her suddenly while she was feeding. When he pulled off her hide crows and magpies came. When Coyote tried to chase them off, more came. Even more came, until they had eaten all the meat . . .

Coyote ends up empty-handed and of course his magic cow is dead and there's nothing he can do about it. The plot is typical: the trickster is given something valuable with a condition set on its use, time passes, and before too long trickster's hunger leads him to violate the condition. As a consequence, the plenitude of things is inexorably diminished. Hunger devours the ideal, and trickster suffers. There seem to be only two options: limited food or limited appetite. Coyote, unable to choose the latter, has the former forced upon him. Such is one common plot in the mythology of tricksters.

But this mythology always seems to go in two directions at once, and so at times we find the opposite plot as well, one in which trickster has limits to appetite forced upon him. I am thinking in particular of the trickster cycle told by the Winnebago Indians in Wisconsin, several episodes of which amount to a sort of “Raven Becomes Voracious” in reverse.\* At the beginning of the Winnebago cycle, trickster is pictured as having a long penis coiled in a box on his back, and his intestines wrapped around his body, an apt image of someone ridden by appetite. In the course of the story, however, these bizarre organs are reduced and rearranged until trickster looks more or less like a human being.

In the episode concerning his intestines, trickster has caught some ducks and set them roasting. He plans to nap while they cook, but before settling down he addresses his anus: “Now, you, my younger brother, must keep watch for me while I go to sleep. If you notice any people, drive them off.” As soon as trickster falls asleep, some small foxes, having scented the meat, come to steal it; the anus farts at them, but they pay it no mind and eat their fill. When trickster awakes he discovers the meat is gone and cries out:

“Alas! Alas! They have caused my appetite to be disappointed, those covetous fellows! And you, too [he says to his anus], you despicable object, what about your behavior? Did I not tell you to watch this fire? You shall remember this! As a punishment for your remissness, I will burn your mouth so that you will not be able to use it!”

Thereupon he took a burning piece of wood and burnt the mouth of his anus. He was, of course, burning himself and, as he applied the fire, he exclaimed, “Ouch! Ouch! This is too much! I have made my skin smart. Is it not for such things that they call me Trickster? . . .”

Then he went away. As he walked along the road he felt certain that someone must have passed along it before, for he was

---

\* This cycle of tales was first printed in the key early work on trickster figures, Paul Radin's *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology* (1956). Radin was an anthropologist with a 1910 doctorate from Columbia University. He lived and worked with the Winnebago in Wisconsin for many years, and his commentary places their trickster cycle in its cultural context with great finesse.

on what appeared to be a trail. Indeed, suddenly, he came upon a piece of fat that must have come from someone's body. "Someone has been packing an animal he had killed," he thought to himself. Then he picked up a piece of fat and ate it. It had a delicious taste. "My, my, how delicious it is to eat this!"

As he proceeded however, much to his surprise, he discovered that it was part of himself, part of his own intestines, that he was eating. After burning his anus, his intestines had contracted and fallen off, piece by piece, and these pieces were the things he was picking up. "My, my! Correctly, indeed, am I named Foolish One, Trickster! . . ." Then he tied his intestines together. A large part, however, had been lost.

In this way, trickster's intestines become normal.\* As for his penis, it is also a little oversized at the beginning of the story. He has trouble with it lifting his blanket up like a tent pole, and he can send it like a snake under the water to copulate with a chief's daughter bathing in the river. But late in the cycle he hears a voice teasing him about how strange his penis looks. He becomes self-conscious about the weird shape of his body, and begins to rearrange himself, placing his penis and testicles where they belong on the human body. At the same time, he is angered by the teasing voice, which turns out to come from a chipmunk. When the chipmunk runs into a hollow tree, trickster sends his penis in after it.

So he took out his penis and probed the hollow tree with it. He could not, however, reach the end of the hole. So he took some more of his penis and probed again, but again he was unable to reach the end of the hole. So he unwound more and more of his penis and probed still deeper, yet all to no avail. Finally he took what still remained, emptying the entire box, and probed and probed but still he could not reach the end of the hole. At last he sat up on a log and probed as far as he could, but still he was unable to reach the end. "Ho!" said he impatiently, and suddenly withdrew his penis. Much to his horror, only a small piece of it

---

\* Trickster eats his own intestines. He does not do this intentionally, but nonetheless it is a kind of self-sacrifice. When Carl Jung said that the trickster "is a forerunner of the savior," he had in mind this motif of unconscious agony.

was left. “My, what a great injury he has done me! You contemptible thing I will repay you for this!”

Then he kicked the log to pieces. There he found the chipmunk and flattened him out, and there, too, to his horror he discovered his penis all gnawed up. “Oh, my, of what a wonderful organ he has deprived me! But why do I speak thus? I will make objects out of the pieces for human beings to use.”\*

Trickster transforms the pieces of his penis into edible plants—potatoes, artichokes, rice, ground beans, and so on. In many tales when trickster loses his intestines they, too, become plants that humans can eat. That is, when trickster’s organs of appetite are diminished they are turned into foodstuffs, the objects of human appetite. Such foods are a mixed blessing, giving rise to hunger even as they satisfy it. To end our craving we must eat the organs of craving, and craving then returns. If the foods that nourish us are trickster’s gifts, to eat them is to become like trickster, like that Raven who can never be satisfied and who would devour all the provisions of his native village were he not banished to this world.

The general point here is that a trickster will be less ridden by lust and hunger if his organs of appetite have been whittled away. In this case, trickster simply suffers the loss; it happens to him. He may benefit from it, but the benefit is accidental, not a fruit of his own cunning or design. But perhaps the accident leads to the cunning. That is to say, just as trickster may acquire his trapping wits as a consequence of having been trapped, so the suffering that trickster endures from his unrestrained appetites may lead to some consciousness in regard to those appetites. I say this because, however one might imagine the connection, there are trickster tales in which a limit to appetite is intended rather than accidental. In fact, we have already seen such a moment: when the father in

---

\* This could be read as a strange version of the vagina-dentata motif (which does occasionally appear in trickster stories). If so, rather than understanding the toothed vagina as an image of horrific castration, we could take it as an image for the conversion of crippling desire into appropriate desire. These teeth don’t devour the sexual organ, they shape it.

the Raven story has his son's intestines burned, he consciously attempts to effect the change that the Winnebago trickster suffers witlessly.

If we turn to the Homeric Greek tradition, we will find a similar pattern, though somewhat differently elaborated. The *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* tells about the days immediately following Hermes' birth.\* He is the illegitimate child of Zeus and a nymph named Maia. At the beginning of the story, the newborn babe wanders from his mother's cave, stumbles upon a turtle, and, from its shell, makes the first lyre. After singing a song about himself on this instrument, Hermes lays it aside. "His mind wandered to other matters. For Hermes longed to eat meat." He sets off to steal cattle from the herd of his half brother, Apollo.

In many a Coyote story the phrase "he longed to eat meat" would lead willy-nilly to some sort of disaster. And the frank declaration of carnivorous desire in the *Homeric Hymn* makes it clear that this Greek trickster is a cousin to Coyote, as does a later remark that Apollo makes when he finally catches his thieving brother. "You're going to be a great nuisance to lonely herdsmen in the mountain woods when you get to hankering after meat and come upon their cows or fleecy sheep."

So the *Hymn* itself lets us know that Hermes is a meat thief like Coyote, and given his transgressive nature, we will not be surprised if he breaks the rules and eats the cow he steals. But the plot of this particular story differs in one significant detail. The crucial scene occurs after Hermes has led the stolen cattle to a barn near the river Alpheus. Having kindled a fire in a trench, Hermes drags two of the cows from the barn and butchers them.

He cut up the richly marbled flesh and skewered it on wooden spits;  
he roasted all of it—the muscle and the prized sirloin and the dark-  
blooded belly—and laid the spits out on the ground . . .

Next he gladly drew the dripping chunks of meat from the spits,  
spread them on a stone, and divided them into twelve portions distrib-  
uted by lot, making each one exactly right.†

---

\* The *Homeric Hymns* are a group of poems, each to a specific god (Demeter, Dionysus, Apollo, etc.), written in the style of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. The *Hymn to Hermes* was probably written down around 420 B.C., though the material it contains is of great antiquity. My own translation of this hymn appears in the first appendix at the end of the book.

† There is a bit of a joke here. There are twelve Olympian gods and Hermes is one of

And glorious Hermes longed to eat that sacrificial meat. The sweet smell weakened him, god though he was; and yet, much as his mouth watered, his proud heart would not let him eat. Later he took the fat and all the flesh and stored them in that ample barn, setting them high up as a token of his youthful theft. That done, he gathered dry sticks and let the fire devour, absolutely, the hooves of the cattle, and their heads.

And when the god had finished, he threw his sandals into the deep pooling Alpheus. He quenched the embers and spread sand over the black ashes. And so the night went by under the bright light of the moon.

Here, then, is a meat-thief trickster who does not eat (at an ordinary Greek sacrifice, by the way, those who conducted the rite *would* eat; Hermes is doing something unusual). I shall later speak more fully of why “his proud heart” prevails, but suffice it to say for now that Hermes restrains one desire in favor of another. It seems that Hermes’ status is not clear at the beginning of the *Hymn*: is he an Olympian god or is he a half-breed from a single-parent cave? As he himself says to his mother after returning from his night of crime:

“I’m ready to do whatever I must so that you and I will never go hungry. You’re wrong to insist we live in a place like this. Why should we be the only gods who never eat the fruits of sacrifice and prayer? Better always to live in the company of other deathless ones—rich, glamorous, enjoying heaps of grain—than forever to sit by ourselves in a gloomy cave.”

If the trickster in the Raven cycle comes down from heaven to the world of fish and work, here we find a cousin trickster hoping to travel in the opposite direction on the same road. In deciding not to eat meat, Hermes is preparing himself to be an Olympian. To eat meat is to be confined to the mortal realm, and Hermes has higher goals. He doesn’t want to be a cave boy, he’d rather be a shining prince. He is hungry for

---

them, or rather he’d like to be. Here he includes himself in the sacrifice so as to stake his claim. He’s like a politician nominating himself for high office, seconding the nomination, and counting the votes—all in secret.

the food of the gods, “the fruits of sacrifice and prayer,” not the meat itself. By *not* eating, it’s as if he’s sacrificing his own intestines along with the meat, or, in the imagery of the *Hymn*, denying his salivary glands in favor of his heart’s pride. Against the rules he stole a cow and killed it, as Coyote did, but having violated that limit he imposes another in its stead. Or rather, what I’ve translated as his “heart” imposes another. The Greek word in question is *thymos*, usually translated as “heart,” “soul,” or “breath”; it can also mean “mind,” because the Homeric Greeks located intelligence in the chest and the speaking voice, not in the silent brain. In this story, then, we see a meat-thief intelligence setting a limit to appetite and by so doing avoiding death, the hook hidden in that meat.

### MEAT SACRIFICE

It is often said that when Hermes slaughters the cattle he is inventing the art of sacrifice.\* I’m not sure the *Hymn* itself offers enough evidence for that claim. It does say clearly that Hermes invents the lyre and the shepherd’s pipes; it says he “is responsible for fire-sticks and fire”; but it is silent as to who invented sacrifice. Nonetheless, if we set the *Hymn* in the context of other trickster tales the claim becomes more plausible. In West Africa, as we shall see in Chapter 5, the Yoruba trickster Eshu is “the father of sacrifice,” having gotten human beings to offer meat to the gods in return for insight into the will of heaven. Another example, the one that will help us see Hermes in context, appears in the story of that other Greek trickster, Prometheus. Both Prometheus and Hermes dream up clever tricks to change their relationship to meat, but Hermes turns out to be the more cunning of the two, for Prometheus is a little slow to figure out where the dangers of appetite really lie.

As the ancients tell the tale, Prometheus and Zeus got into a fight toward the end of the Golden Age. Prometheus had created people out of clay; from the events that follow, it seems likely that he wished to increase

---

\* Jean-Pierre Vernant in *The Cuisine of Sacrifice*: “He establishes the first sacrifice.” T. W. Allen in *The Homeric Hymns*: Hermes “ordained the ritual of sacrifice.” Walter Otto in *The Homeric Gods*: “He is . . . regarded as the prototype for offering sacrifice.” Walter Burkert in *Greek Religion*: “He invents fire, fire-sticks, and sacrifice.” (And see Burkert’s essay “Sacrificio-sacrilegio: il trickster fondatore.”) For two who disagree, see the first chapter of Kahn’s *Hermès Passe* and the chapter on Hermes in Clay’s *The Politics of Olympus*.

their portion in the world. In the Golden Age, humankind neither grew old quickly nor died in pain, but they were nonetheless mortal and perhaps Prometheus wished them immortality. In any event, he and Zeus got into a dispute that focused on which parts of a slaughtered ox the gods would eat and which would be food for human mouths. Prometheus divided the ox into two portions, and because Zeus was to have first choice, he disguised them: the better part (the edible meat) he made unappealing by covering it with the ox's stomach (Greeks did not eat the belly, the tripe); the lesser part (the inedible bones) he covered with fat to make it look like rich meat.

Zeus was not deceived, however; he could see beneath the surfaces of the Promethean shell game. And yet he didn't choose the "better" portion, he chose the bones. Hesiod writes: "Zeus, whose wisdom is everlasting, saw . . . the trick, and in his heart he thought mischief against mortal men . . . With both hands he took up the white fat . . ." Then Hesiod adds the point that is of interest here: "And because of this the tribes of men upon earth burn white bones to the deathless gods upon fragrant altars." Promethean trickery thus leads to the first sacrifice.

It leads to much more, as well, which should be mentioned briefly. The "mischief" that Zeus "thought against mortals" took several forms: he hid fire from them and, after Prometheus stole that fire back, he sent Pandora as a sort of poisonous gift. For Hesiod, that earliest of misogynists, it is Pandora who really brought an end to the all-male Golden Age club, for with her came sexual reproduction, sickness, insanity, vice, and toil. After Prometheus, humans have fire and meat; they also age quickly and die in pain.

If we now look closely at the way in which Prometheus apportions the slaughtered ox, we will see that he is in fact a witless trickster here, abandoned by his fabled foresight. Not unlike Coyote, who gets too caught up in hunger to escape from it, Prometheus fails to perceive the true meaning of the portions he so carefully arranges. To see that meaning, to see what Zeus apparently sees, it helps to know that for the Greeks the bones stand for immortality. They are the undying essence, what does not decay (they are, for example, what was preserved when the Greeks cremated a body). Conversely, in all ancient Greek literature the belly stands for needy, shameless, inexorable, overriding appetite. In this



tradition, the belly is always called “odious,” “evil-doing,” “contemptible,” “deadly,” and so on. At one point in the *Odyssey*, Odysseus exclaims: “Is there nothing more doglike [or shameless] than this hateful belly? It always arouses us, obliges us not to forget it, even at the height of our troubles and anguish.”

The symbolism suggests, then, that those who eat the belly-wrapped meat must take the same thing as their portion in the world. When Zeus leaves for mortals that Promethean “better” share, mortals perforce become the very thing that they have eaten; they become meat sacks, bellies that must be filled over and over with meat simply to delay an inexorable death. Prometheus tries to be a cunning encoder of images, but Zeus is a more cunning reader, and the meat trick backfires.

The story of Promethean sacrifice, then, is not one in which a hungry trickster sacrifices appetite or intestines but one in which, as a result of a foolish trick, human beings get stuck with endless hunger as their portion. Like the tale of Raven eating the shin scabs, it is a story of the origin of appetite, and of descent. After Prometheus, humans are snared in their own hunger, a trap in which they quickly age and die. Prometheus does not suffer that human fate himself, nor does he become an insatiable eater like Raven, but Zeus binds him to a rock where an eagle eternally devours his liver—each night the liver grows back, each day the eagle eats it again. In his own way, then, Prometheus suffers from unremitting hunger, as do humans—and Raven.

With this Promethean trick in mind, let’s now return to the question of whether or not trickster invents sacrifice. To answer, it helps to know that, in the culture from which Prometheus and Hermes come, *sacrifice is ritual apportionment*. That is to say, the distributed portions of a Greek sacrifice represented the more abstract “portions” of the parties involved, their political and spiritual functions. The bones, for example, are the gods’ concrete portion but also stand for their spiritual portion, their immortality. Or—another example—priests cooked and ate the viscera of a sacrificed animal; it was at once their portion in fact and a symbol of their place in the community. The way the Greeks divided an animal made a map of the way their community was divided. If you saw someone eating the thigh of an ox, you could assume he was a high magistrate of the city.

In such a system, when people imagine the first sacrifice they will also be imagining an original apportioning. And if the beginnings amount to a *change* in apportionment,\* as seems to be the case with both Hermes and Prometheus, then sacrifice will probably be invented by way of some trick or deceit, for such a change usually has the less powerful taking a share away from the more powerful (in this case, for example, Prometheus hopes to take power away from the gods). Whatever trickster pulls this trick does not initially invent sacrifice, therefore; *first* he invents the trick of reapportionment, some sleight of hand by which the thigh of an ox ends up on the plate of a slave. In the case of Prometheus, the trick backfires (humans get the meat and their lot in life becomes more grim); in the case of Hermes, the trick works (he refuses the meat and his lot improves). In both cases, though, there is a change of apportionment and a form of sacrifice emerges that memorializes both the trick and its consequences, the new order of things.

We can now give a general shape to this material on the sacrifice of appetite, and link it to the earlier discussion of traps. A trickster is often imagined as a sort of “hungry god.” The image can be read from two sides: tricksters are either gods who have become voracious eaters, smothered in intestines; or they are beings full of appetite who become a little more god-like through some trimming of the organs of appetite. The stories we’ve seen have a hierarchy: at the lower levels, trickster is bound by appetite (Coyote must eat his entire cow); at the higher levels, he is either freed from appetite (that anorexic shining prince) or given an appetite for more ethereal foods (the smoke of sacrifice). Moreover, trickster walks the path between high and low (descending into hunger at the end of the Raven and Prometheus stories; ascending and restraining hunger in the *Hymn to Hermes* and the opening of the Raven story). On this path between high and low we also find sacrifice. At its simplest, it seems unintended (the devoured penis, the lost intestines of many Coyote stories); at other times, there is conscious action (the burned intestines in the Raven story, Hermes’ restraining pride).

Now let us return to the idea that trickster intelligence arises from the tension between predators and prey. Behind trickster’s tricks lies the desire to eat and not be eaten, to satisfy appetite without being its object.

---

\* I realize that there can’t be a change if we’re talking of beginnings, but we are in mythic time here, and in mythic time first things needn’t come first.

If trickster is initially ridden by his appetites, and if such compulsion leads him into traps, then we might read intentional sacrifice as an attempt to alter appetite—to eat without the compulsion or its consequences. In the Greek case, the foods identified with heaven satisfy an appetite shed of its usual, odious baggage: old age, sickness, and death. These stories imagine a final escape from the eating game in which, beyond the edge of predator-prey relationships, immortal eaters feast on heavenly foods and never themselves become a meal for worms or for time.

As I have been suggesting, in these tales of sacrifice a hook is hidden in the meat portion: mortality itself. Prometheus doesn't see it, and the Golden Age ends with humans hooked on meat, and mortal. Hermes avoids it. He changes the eating game by inventing a sacrificial rite in which he forgoes the meat and, more important, his own *desire* for meat. Figuratively, to slip the trap of appetite he sacrifices the organ of that appetite, his odious belly. So, although the *Hymn* contains no direct declaration in this regard, I think it is correct to say that Hermes invents the art of sacrifice and that he does so out of a struggle over appetite.

Moreover, when he refrains from eating he is not only sacrificing appetite, he has also gotten “wise to the bait.” Coyotes who avoid poisoned carcasses restrain their hunger and do not get killed. Hermes does the same thing, if eating the meat means becoming mortal. But for those with actual bellies, such restraint is only a partial solution. No one imagines that coyotes avoiding strychnine give up eating, and even Hermes makes it clear that he doesn't eat the cattle because he hopes *later* to enjoy the fruits of sacrifice and prayer. (Those are more ethereal foods, but they are foods nonetheless; when Hermes imagines heaven he doesn't imagine an absence of hunger, he imagines gods who eat.) Let us say, then, that wise-to-the-bait Hermes is a bait thief as well. Raven, remember, figures out how to eat the fat and avoid the hook. Hermes steals the cattle and, dedicating the smoke of sacrifice to himself, consumes only the portion that will not harm him. To say that Hermes will enjoy “the fruit of sacrifice and prayer” is an elevated way of saying we've met another trickster who eats the fat and leaves an empty hook behind.