Popul Vuh and Lacan

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The themes and actions of any creation myth reveal issues central to its culture. Thus in itself that analysis is of intrinsic and enduring interest. This essay interprets the *Popul Vuh* Mayan creation myth from highland Guatemala, and attempts to do justice to its rich eloquence and peculiar complexity. Yet the poem intrigues beyond its own merits, for its texture bears a striking resemblance to the psychoanalytic thought of Jacques Lacan. Each, in its own way, is a creation story, the Mayan one of cultural origin, and the psychoanalytic, of individual development. Each depicts an interwoven latticework of dynamic flux. In part, their similarities are particular; in part, they reflect shared qualities as tales of origin. It is their similarities that attract notice, but it is their differences —at first, so unsurprising—that engage attention, for those differences illuminate some few shadows in the enigma of social and individual experience.

Written with different intent for different audiences, the authorless creation myth and the philosophical psychoanalytic theory are clearly distinct: what characteristics might draw a common texture across so great a divide of time and space? And to understand the constraints imposed upon those similarities brings fresh interest to differences we might otherwise assume. This essay presents first the myth and then the theory, each a self-contained explication. Then it turns to a consideration of the two in concert, to examine their similarities and the narrative and descriptive constraints that the theory of individual development and the myth of social origin impose upon them.

Popul Vuh: The Presentation and Analysis of the Poem

The *Popul Vuh* is the ancient sacred myth of the Quiche Maya of highland Guatemala. The eight-thousand-line poem tells of the Quiche nation; its lilting couplets depict the creation of man and earth, the birth and growth of the noble Quiche lineages, and the generation of their gods. The mythico-historical account includes the adventures of the divine hero twins Hunahpu and Xbalanque. The themes of this interpolated tale reinforce and supplement those of the larger story, but space forbids their analysis here.

The poem opens upon an empty sea and sky, devoid of life and movement. The sun has not yet risen; the earth does not yet exist. Divine creators Tepeu and Gucumatz lie in the water, wrapped in queztal feathers, but there is nought to break the stillness: "there was nothing whatever / silenced / or at rest" (Edmonson 1971:11. 122-124). Creation is initiated when the "word" mysteriously arrives, and the queztal-feathered deities begin to speak.

> So there came his word here.
> It reached
> To Tepeu

And Gucumatz
There in the obscurity,
In the night-time.
It spoke to Tepeu
And Gucumatz, and they spoke.
Then they thought;
Then they pondered.
Then they found themselves;
They assembled
Their words,
Their thoughts.
Then they gave birth. [1971:11. 157-171]

The emphasis on verbalization echoes throughout the poem. Words become a creative force, the means by which an unknown world is brought into existence. Humanness is defined as the ability to address the gods by name, and worship, the specific act of naming them. At times, in the text, it is the words themselves—rather than their agents—which carry the ultimate creative responsibility. All three forms which Tambiah ascribes to the magic in words—power by virtue of itself, power by virtue of the might of gods, and power by virtue of its sacred human agents—are evident (Tambiah 1968:182). Their presence underlines the importance of the verbal metaphor for the gradual creation of the Quiche universe.

The poem states that it records the birth of the Quiche nation with the opening phrase, "this is the root of the former word" (1.1); it promises "the decipherment / the clarification / and the explanation" (11. 10-12). A prescriptive summary of the creation declares that "then [the gods] said everything / and did it furthermore, / in bright existence / and bright words" (11. 41-45). Historical and creative action is always metaphorically verbal; change is recognized only when it can be linguistically mapped.

The gods pull existence out of nothingness by thinking and naming objects into tangible reality.

Only their word was the creation of it.
To create the earth, "Earth," they said.
Immediately it was created. [11. 216-218]

Thus are born mountains and valleys, rivers and ravines. Trees appear, and vegetation covers the bald ground. Critically, the object created depends upon the precision of the chosen words. Animals are named to people the landscape, and in turn asked to name their makers in worship. When they only croak and grunt, the deities are dismayed: "we shall therefore change / our word" (11. 387-388). Verbal commands have creative priority over the intentions of their seemingly omnipotent speakers.

The gods demand that their own names be articulated by a source external to them: they will create man to satisfy this need. They express this demand in their dismay over the alingual beasts:

> How then can we be called upon
> And be remembered upon the earth?
> We have already tried with the first of our formings, Our shapings.
> We did not attain our being worshipped
> And being glorified by them. [11. 435-440]

Here verbal worship is as necessary to the gods as food to men; a worshipper is "a nourisher" and worship is their "support / in words" (11. 446; 519-520). The basic narrative sequence of the poem describes the different attempts to find such worshippers and their subsequent organization into the Maya tribes.

But the ability to speak depends upon material constraints. The first men are molded from mud, and cannot stand; their soggy bodies soon dissolve back into the sludge around them. "As soon as it spoke / it made no sense" (11. 463 464). Their speechless minds are presented as an obvious consequence of their formless state.

> "If it should just get wet
> It couldn't walk
> And it couldn't be made to multiply.
> So be it.
> Its mind is dark there," they said.
> And so they destroyed it. [11. 470 475]

That such a figure cannot hold together as an individual is perhaps a reasonable complaint. That it can neither multiply nor think, and that its mind is dark, is a less obvious failing of mud-molded men.

Another, more propitious, material must be found, and through divination the gods conclude that wood will best serve their needs. At first, these stickmen look promising, for they talk and multiply, and they resemble the people we know today. But they lack hearts and — crucially — memories.

> But they had no hearts
> And they had no minds.
> They did not remember their Former
> And their Shaper. [11. 637-640]

And they too are destroyed.

As with the men of mud, their difficulties are perceived and presented as physical issues of cohesion and rigidity. Although their shape seems right, they lack precisely that element which in excess destroyed the men of mud. "They spoke all right / but

their faces were dry" (11. 647-648). The sogginess which incapacitated the mudmen is absent in these wooden sticks; their mindless, heartless state comes directly from their literal lack of fluidity. They are too rigid and predetermined, "puppets," mannequins with the appearance of humanity but not its vitality. They lack "blood and serum," "sweat and fat" (11. 651-654). It seems that the mental characteristics which represent humanness are conceptually dependent upon the physical notions of the regulation of fluid and the nature of the chosen material form. The lack of cohesion under variable circumstances (too wet, too dry) prohibits thoughts from forming, and the metaphor to describe this is a physical phenomenon—the absence of light.

To destroy this second generation the gods send a deluge of the missing water: "the face of the earth was darkened / and there began a rain of darkness" (11. 713-714). Jaguars tear their flesh, killer bats devour their heads, and the rippers-of-eyes force these organs from their sockets. Domestic animals complain that "you have eaten us / and now we are going to eat you back." Pots and griddles whine about the fire's heat: "you burned us ... so you try it" (11. 690-820). Even the hearthstones rebel. The revolt assumes the failure of an acknowledged reciprocity, an almost contractual relationship, between man and his surroundings.

The last and successful attempt to produce the ancestors of the current Quiche sculpts them from ground maize. This material is daily pounded from the dried and separated kernels into formless gruel, and then reshaped into the articulated tortillas which form the staple of a Maya meal. At midday a Mayan village echoes with the rhythmic pats of tortilla against the stone, the shaping of the shapeless mass. This sculpted gruel uniquely possesses the capacity of being shaped in many different ways, but once shaped and cooked, to maintain that form; it is the literal mediation of rigid form and fluid formlessness.

The water which was unbalanced in the previous two generations is appropriately meted here.

> And water was their blood;
> It became man's blood . . .
> The food came
> With water to create strength,
> And it became man's grease
> And turned into his fat. [11. 4767-4768; 4803-4806]

Both in the first and last generations water acts as a binding agent which gives unity to particulate dirt and corn. But only in the maize form of the latter is water successfully incorporated—in fat and blood—as an undifferentiable and integral element of the body.

Corn exists for the Central American Indians in two well-defined states, as articulated, individual kernels and as a mass of shapeless gruel. Perhaps conceptually they are equivalent to the harsh sticks of the second generation and the soft clay of the

first. Water disperses the clay, and cannot merge with the sticks; the sticks later perish in excessive floods. Man is rendered acceptable to the gods in a material in which both states of formlessness and particulate rigidity are strongly marked but not natural to it — for women must shell the ears, grind the kernels and cook the gruel for each individual tortilla. The food of man creates him to feed the gods with his verbal worship.

Man is spoken of as "born of light / engendered of light" (11. 4721-4722). Yet "no woman bore them / nor were they engendered / by Former / and Shaper" (11. 4837 4840). These gods are seemingly only responsible for man's body: "this is the beginning when man was invented / and that which would go into man's body was sought" (11. 4709-4710). They "found / and they maintained / what came to be / man's body" (11. 47 35-47 38). There is a clear distinction between mind and body, and the gods are verbally responsible only for man's form. Yet man must speak in order to be human, and to fulfill his role for the gods.

The actions of creators Tepeu and Gucumatz are called "illumination," and are described as "bright existence / and bright words" (11. 14; 43-44). "Brightening" is a metaphor for maturing corn, and the common couplet "the planting . . . the brightening" is used to denote creation (Edmonson 1971:12, 193*ff*.). The wisdom of the gods is "bright and clear" in the pre-creation night. When the word arrives to Tepeu and Gucumatz, "then was the / invention / of light / and life" (11. 190-193).

"Light" seems to represent a dynamic process —the growing of corn, the speaking of words, the seeing of the world, the living of life. Seeing and knowing are equivalent states, and "darkness" describes unthinking or nonexistent minds. A dynamic conception of life proposes criteria of humanness based on interaction, a parallel to the contractual relations with the environment present but unsatisfied by the second generation stickmen. Man's material form captures this light only when he speaks, acts and — ultimately — changes himself in continuous self-reproduction.

The two features which distinguish men from gods reflect these themes. At first the gods shape man with pure vision and unclouded gaze. But able to see the entirety of the world, no knowledge is forbade them, and they realize the truth of all nature and being.

> They came to know
> Everything under heaven
> If only they could see it. [11. 4870-4872]

The deities cannot allow such unfettered freedom, for with it men will be as gods.

> But quite like gods
> Will they become then
> Unless they begin to multiply
> "Won't they just equate their deeds with ours

If their understanding reaches too far
And they see everything?" they were told. [11. 4967-4969: 4978-4980]

This is not phrased as a question of mortality, where man's uniqueness lies in his death, and the deities' in their immortality. The important distinction concerns man's reproduction — articulated process and continuous change. The critical emphasis is not upon death but on successive growth of generations, in contrast to the constant and enduring stasis of the gods. At the same time their knowledge must be limited—curiously, their multiplication is described by the gods as the means to halt it. The inherent nature of knowing does not differ for man and god: to be other than god the sight of man must lessen. And so "their eyes . . . were blinded like the clouding of the surface of a mirror" (11. 4997-4999). Such misting limits their knowledge; as their "undoing," it is also the only material change which causes men to die and reproduce. Only after men's eyes are misted to they acquire wives and begin their lives as forefathers of the Quiche tribes.

But the sun has not yet risen; men are still far from their future homeland. The next step distinguishes the first four men from all their offspring. The "Balams," they are uniquely differentiated by their nonhuman birth.

They had no mother;
They had no father.
Just heroes by themselves
We have said. [11. 4833-4836]

Born from no human form, once possessing full knowledge, these Balams have transgressed both human limitations. The unfolding tale gradually constructs a complex nexus which builds their identities as separate yet interdependent with those of man and god.

According to the tale the Balams are demarcated from man because the simple duality of man and creator is insufficient to sustain the gods. Although the ability to speak is the stated prerequisite for worship, alone this worship does not satisfy the gods. They demand the further intervention of idols, temple images to reinvoke their presence. Simultaneously men separate into tribes, and they maintain their unique tribal identity by finding different images of wood and stone to commemorate these shared creator gods. At the distant city to which the Balams and their offspring repair, "the coming of their gods was in order."[1]

[1] It would be unwise to postulate a direct relationship between the Quiche forefathers and contemporary prehispanic deities from elsewhere in the Maya area. However, one should note that the characteristics of the Balams reappear in current ethnographic accounts of the region.

Ethnography stresses the religious importance of Mayan ancestors to their people, despite official and powerful Catholicism. In Chichicastenango, the ancestors are "the powers whose influence on human affairs is continuous and unremitting . . . the great moral force in the universe" (Bunzel 1952:269).

With different gods the tribes vary and differentiate: "their speech became different" (1. 5316), and they separate to await the dawn. The Balams are now fully distinct from the rest of mankind, but they remain ill-defined, hovering in a vague limbo between man and deity, until men later learn the correct pattern of their worship.

This pivotal point establishes further distinctions and relations. The Balams plead fire from the Tohil gods for themselves, their people and the other tribes of men. By giving fire to them, and receiving their thanks, the Tohil gods specifically accept and embark upon their obligations as deities.

> "Are you our god?"
> [The Balams] said as they gave thanks
> "Very well. Truly I am your god; so be it." [11. 5356-5359]

Their role as gods depends solely upon the reciprocal exchange of protection and praise, and the deities affirm their existence by delivering the fire to the shivering hordes.

However, the Tohils maintain direct reciprocity only with the Balams. There comes a great rainstorm, and hailstones quench the fires of the earth. Once more the Balams beg fire from their protectors, and indeed Tohil has saved some for this purpose, "stuffed down inside his sandals" (1. 5378). He now gives the fire to the Balams. But they in turn deny the non-Quiche people, and refuse to rekindle their dampened wood.

Freezing and trembling, these tribes are refused access to the Balams because their tribes are different: "and then the hearts of the tribes cursed / already different was their speech" (11. 5405-5406). When language was shared amongst them, "all the same was our eminence / and origin" (11. 5417-5418). Now they are "lost," rejected by the fathers who gave them life. As in the creation of man, the Balams feel no obligation towards a people who cannot speak their tongue.

Into the breach steps a spokesman from Xibalba [Hell], a previously unmentioned protagonist. Pointing to the tribes, he announces to the Balams, "These are your gods here. / These are your origins" (11. 5431-5432). The Balams are meant to respond

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Ancestral gods are the most prominent of the Tzotzil Zinacanteco deities. They live in hills and sacred mountains where they are believed to have gone in the distant past (Vogt 1969:16). Deified ancestors in Guatemalan Todos Santos directly influence the life of those within the village (Oakes 1969).

Sets of four gods—each for one corner of the earth or sky —have been common and important throughout the Maya area since prehispanic times. In the 16th century Spanish missionaries reported a belief in four brothers who escaped —and perhaps initiated —the destruction of the world by flooding, and were subsequently placed at the four corners of the earth to hold up the sky. These "Bacabs" were the "year-bearers," important calendrical deities, and were perhaps the most important of the three sets of agricultural deities stationed at the corners of the world. (Landa 1941:135*ff*.; Roys 1967:170-172). They may have also been known as "Balams" (Landa 1928:fnte. 232), as are the contemporary Yucatec derivations from prehispanic religion (Redfield and Villa Rojas 1934:112*ff*.). These protective agricultural deities stand at the corners of each individual cornfield and town; the majority of non-Catholic rituals are addressed to them. "Balam" is a common term for "jaguar," and denotes magical powers and great strength (Thompson 1978).

to the tribes because they are "reminders" and "substitutes" (11. 5433; 5434) of the creators; they then persuade them to honor Tohil in exchange for the fire. "Don't give the tribes their fire then / unless they give something to Tohil" (11. 5437-5438). Once the Balams view their interaction with the people as a means to glorify their own creators, they are enmeshed with them as indirectly participating intermediaries in a circular web of worship. The essential bond is inaugurated by a messenger from the bowels of the earth, otherwise unmentioned, entirely external to the relationship between man, god and Balam.

Yet while the Balams are closely involved with the Tohil gods, they are still undeified. Therefore the sacrifices offered by the tribes in return for the fire are somehow inappropriate, for at this point the Balams are not legitimately able to accept such sacrifice as representatives of the gods.

> It wasn't drinking [the blood sacrifices to Tohil]
> To be done
> When it was prophesied by Tohil,
> They were always fasting. [11. 5563-5565]

Unsettled in the spatio-temporal universe, with their deified mediators still living as humans, man and god are still unable to communicate properly.

But then men verbally identify themselves: "they set their names" (1. 5669). They become individuals, and no longer "all look alike" (1. 5643). They journey forth from the sacred city where the Tohils were found and reach their Central American homeland through parted seas. There the Tohil gods demand to be permanently fixed in individual mountains, secreted away from the warriors of the enemy tribes and the sight of their own people.

Only now does the sun appear: "greatly they rejoiced" (1. 5913). And here the emphasis on interdependency becomes curiously apparent as the isolated sun becomes its own duality. At first rising the sun was "just like a man when it showed itself' (1. 5984). But the heat was unbearable, and never again does he manifest himself.

> So he only showed himself when he was born,
> And it is only his reflection which has remained.
> It is not true that it is the sun himself that one sees. [11. 5992-5994]

In this context neither man nor god, the sun should be autonomous and unique. But this concentrated power is too overwhelming, and the sun we see is a reflection of a hidden source. Interdependency is again substituted for isolation even when that relationship must be created within a single entity.

Under the intense heat of the first sun the Tohil gods are petrified into the stone idols worshipped by the Quiche. Burning their sharp resin incense, the Balams now prostrate themselves before their immovable idols, who instruct them in their care. They structure a dynamic symbiosis between their own divinity and the Balams as their representatives to men.

When you are asked,
Where is Tohil?
That is when to point out the Deerskin ["our substitute"] to them
And don't show yourselves either. [11. 6217-6220]

A more complicated instance of the sun's reflection of itself, the relations between man, Balam and Tohil god, involve chains of hidden and reflected power. The Balams must disguise themselves and hide their gods, yet represent them to their own people; the Tohil gods reveal themselves only behind the masking fumes of burning *pom.* Concentrated power is diffused through multiple layers of representing and represented individuals.

Although now invisible, the Balams are still in some measure human. Tohil demands a blood sacrifice: to appease him, they snatch non-Quiche travellers off deserted mountain roads and bear them away to deadly altars. When the tribes learn who is murdering their relatives, they wage war —angry but futile — against the Balams. Deception upon deception routes these human foes as the Balams, outnumbered by incalculable odds, easily triumph over their weaker opponents. They have become no longer human. They are "spirit people" (1. 6741) and to attack the Balams is to attack the Tohils.

Despite another desperate effort, the non-Quiche tribes are subjected by the Quiche. Now the Balams choose to die, their office apparently accomplished. Gathering their people around them, they disappear, leaving behind no physical remains except the "Shrouded Bundle," glory of the Quiche tribe and the essence of Balam Quitze. Men now find houses and found towns; they exchange their daughters for acceptable bridal payments; they raise their corn for food. The subsequent narration is historical in texture, depicting the struggles and victories of the Quiche generations and their kings. With the established equilibrium of work and worship, the Quiche world begins.

Within the tradition of structuralist analyses there are variety of styles. That style most sensitive to narrative movement, a study of the synchronic patterns in a diachronic storyline, became notorious through Levi-Strauss's interpretation of the Oedipus tale. This approach relates various actions within the myth under the assumption that they are framed by thematic oppositions. The actions themselves are not contradictory, but can be grouped in pairs of complementary opposites; in theory the narrative development gradually relates these opposing categories. The bald opposition between two concepts which seem contradictions of each other —life and death, for instance —are metaphorically replaced by or related to a less mutually exclusive pair —hunters and herbivores. The gradual replacement of one pair with another less extreme mediates the initial inconceivable contradiction. The latter, theorists claim, is more conceptually palatable. Figure 1 is such a classic analysis; the diachronic narrative progression is grouped around synchronic themes.

The tension between form and formlessness recurs throughout the poem. Initially, this can be cast in terms of the amorphous gods' attempt to create mortal, individual man. Gradually the relations between man and god become more complex as the

Tohils and Balams are introduced. Formless gods are given stone shapes and mortal men immortalized. The myth treats an untenable relation which is central to the culture, the opposition of form and formlessness, and equates it like a metaphor with the relation of god and man. As this latter relation is worked out within the story the former contradiction becomes metaphorically transformed into an emotionally and intellectually graspable relation. Form is to formlessness as man becomes to god.

FORMLESSNESS	FORM	GOD	MAN
		Gods in sea	
	word arrives		
			attempt to create man:animals
	animals created		
but cannot speak			
	mudmen created		
			attempt to create man:mudmen
but are dissolved			
			attempt to create man:stickmen
	stickmen created		
but are flooded			
			successful creation of man from maize
	maize is both highly articulated and formless		
the mass of men			
	separated into tribes		
			Balams
		Tohil gods accept role as gods	
		Tohils identify Balams as mediators for men	
	Tohils frozen into stone		
		Balams deified	

Figure 1.

This approach is valid and useful. But it fails to make explicit what is the most striking feature of the poem, the necessary creation of independent reciprocities set in motion by language and governed by certain material constraints. The formless stasis of the gods is opposed by the materiality and changeability of men, a materiality and changeability which the gods themselves have demanded to maintain their superior status. Yet this is apparently inadequate, for other elements are introduced. The materially represented Tohils appear, frozen into enduring stone when the sun emerges. They are quickly counterbalanced by the Balams, men who become immortalized as spiritual beings when man takes up the cycle of correct worship. Always there is the emphasis on continuity and change, matter and spirit, in which transient man—matter-misted spirit—is locked into a cycle of reciprocities with the endurance of material and spiritual reality.

In the creation tale the stasis of sea and sky would have endured with neither time nor change had not the arrival of the word unbalanced this perfect harmony, and the whole of the *Popul Vuh* can be seen as a self-conscious attempt to recover that balance with a more complex and interwoven structure. The point is that the issues of dynamics and change are revealed in the process of the poem's unfolding, and an analysis which emphasizes the synchronic will overlook this essential aspect. Levi-Straussian analysis is not incapable of treating these concerns, but those concerns are not uppermost in its approach.

The creative power of the word is a universal motif, in itself and in the mouths of gods and men. Less common perhaps is this poem's stated need for self-reference and the pronounced demand for rational, verbal explanation. There is little which is arbitrary in the *Popul Vuh.* The touted purpose of the poem is the rational, historical ordering of an otherwise unnatural creation—its "decipherment, clarification, and explanation." Man's creation is justified as a divine necessity, not as an unsought miracle. The emphasis on definition emerges as abstract words come to carry the burden for physical existence. The myth exploits their ability to impose an order upon a chaotic world.

Words freely create something out of nothing by carving out existence with a name. The interesting failure of verbal creation in the *Popul Vuh* is its failure to create man immediately, the inability, as it were, to demarcate an object with a preexisting but contentless name. Certain criteria are established for man's existence: before he may speak and call upon his deities by name, he must have a certain form. In a sense, the deities are distinguishing between a "direct" statement which freely creates the nonverbal trees and rivers, and the "self-referential" statement which produces a being defined by its ability to name its producer. For the latter, certain external material requirements must be fulfilled, requirements not recognized by the deities themselves.

Man's material form, once adequate, integrates form and formlessness in a material which man will continue to make and eat. The remarkable aspect of this metaphoric harmony is the great stress laid on process. The maize of man's body must be acted upon to be shelled and ground into common gruel. And as maize dough his form is

malleable, neither rigid nor shapeless and yet able to retain a moulded form. Individual words have physical correlates, but the act of speaking is itself a dynamic process physically embodied in light. Knowledge becomes metaphorically the physical seeing of the world. Man's existence is perceived as active interaction within his environment and with his gods, and the point of his failed creation is that his body must allow such interaction between man and god, matter and light.

As names words cannot easily identify change in the objects they denote —they are, rather, static definitions of the objects' being. But the definition of man and god is dependent upon dynamic interaction, the one to name the other. The interesting point is that the static identity which links words to objects is valid—the gods' "man" referring to man—only when embedded within the balance of dynamic flux. Fluid interaction is constrained within the boundaries set by the terms of defined identity.

The separation of the Balams from human men involves the multiplying of different groups of men, and as they multiply new objects and terms become necessary to represent them; should that representation be capable of speech, or of appropriate man-god interaction, it will acquire its own identity and become a point of the web. The creation of these many ties between creator god, Tohil, Balam and man inaugurates a world of hidden realities and reflected images. No god appears directly, and even the sun is but a reflection of his secret self, the Tohils' gods swear never to reveal themselves, and counsel the Balams to likewise hide their faces. Then the Balams vanish —and leave behind a "shrouded bundle." The Quiche mourn their absence with a song—the title translates, "It is Hidden." In a search to recreate harmony after the verbal disjunction of their world, all protagonists but the creators gods are brought into existence only to represent or to externally identify another being. Man has little control over these complex, multi-faceted bonds: they provide stability in a world which he becomes incapable of destroying.

Thus the nature of this rational, ordered world describes a dynamic flux structured by the stasis of naming, and bound by certain definitional constraints: the light of the gods caught in the misted eyes of men, and passed back to the gods as speech. The enduring formlessness of sea and sky are split: one side is named to name the other, and the break is progressively fractured into the crystalline structure of a complex interactive chain. Initial disharmony is resolved in a balance of interdependent entities, a dynamic latticework in which participants are interstitially defined by innumerable interactions. And these identities are not obvious, but hidden from each other, so that each element interacts with only a restricted portion of the web.

Lacan

From an initial split a complex web of interdependencies emerges to reestablish harmony in the broken world of the *Popul Vuh.* The concern with the gradual creation of a chain of interdependent signifiers lies at the heart of Lacanian thought, and the

myth in many ways seems a fanciful description of his theoretical structure. There is a neat similarity between the progressive creation of mythical elements elements in the narrative and the gradual proliferation of signifying forms which Lacan describes for the child's development. And yet, these two origin myths are very different. One is a theory, the other, a story. One describes the inner world, the other, an outer social reality. The parallels and distinctions between the two illuminate some elements of those narrative and descriptive demands.

The structural analysis of myth and symbolism offers a powerful means by which to decipher and explicate cultural symbolism. However, the approach ignores the way in which such symbolic "knowledge" becomes meaningful to the individuals within that culture. The learning process of the individual and the construction of his symbolic framework are precisely the subject of Lacan's influential work. Both he and Levi-Strauss start from the same point of linguistic theory, but whereas the latter considers society as a unit, Lacan addresses the changing individual embedded in a social world.

Rousseau is the only philosopher whom Levi-Strauss eulogizes, for he describes man's progress from sheltered, egoistic, irrational bliss to the responsibilities of adult society (Levi-Strauss 1976:33-43). To him, the collective is ontologically prior to the individual. Levi-Strauss concretizes his metaphor, explaining the self as socially created through his development from nonconscious infancy to communicating adulthood. In his account, the preverbal child has the capacity to make any and all distinctions within the environment. But as yet no category carries meaning; the world, awash with variation, still remains a formless whole. The infant indeed perceives the red apple as discontinuous from the white rug, but as a discontinuity which perhaps conveys some notion of distance or volume, not as the point at which "fruit" ends and "rug" begins.

Slowly, from the need to interact and communicate with others, the young child learns to categorize his actions and the objects in the world around him. The distinction "apple —not apple" comes to signify, among other things, that the apple at least can be eaten. The child is taught the distinction between biting into it and into an aunt's round hand. As he learns in rough outline what he must and mustn't do to receive a desired response, these conceptual categories become the basis of his behavior, as grammar and vocabulary are the foundation of his speech.

The point Levi-Strauss stresses is that out of the vast potential to make noises and to take action, only certain behaviors and concepts emerge as conveying information. These categories, learnt through communication with others, limit the child's perceptual capabilities, as the ineffective potential categories disappear into communicational oblivion.

> Each type of social organization represents a choice, which the group imposes and perpetuates. In comparison with adult thought, which has chosen and rejected as the group has required, the child's thought is a sort of universal substratum, the crystalizations of which have not yet occurred. [1969:93]

Culture here is a fine mesh of learnt meanings which unavoidably alter and restrict the universally capable child. Levi-Strauss states that Ricouer was correct to dub his structuralism "Kantism without a transcendental subject" (1975:11); for him, the cultural creation of perceptual spectacles gives the same limiting lenses to all its members. Yet nowhere in this theory does Levi-Strauss explicitly delineate the process which constructs these conceptual lenses, this interpretive grammar. He comes closest in his earliest work, when he states that a child learns equality by compromising his desire to possess an object with the similar demands of others (1969:85). But aside from these hints, Levi-Strauss is content to simply assume an uncomplicated transformation of presocial child into cultural adult. And in this neglect, individual variation is seen as an irrelevance to a cultural norm. What matters is not the individual's actual idiosyncratic interpretation but that "the mental schemata of the adult diverge in accordance with the culture and period to which he belongs" (1969:93).

Precisely because Lacan shares a Saussurian foundation with Levi-Strauss but follows through the individual's experience from birth, he provides the theoretical foundation for individual understanding which the other so blithely takes for granted. Where Levi-Strauss turns outward to cultural *langue,* Lacan focuses inward on individual *parole* — because of this, his approach can be treated as an involuted extension of Levi-Straussian theory. One could say that the two theories have an orthogonal relationship.

Lacan's theory rests on the assumption that consciousness is created through experience. At birth the child's world is undifferentiated. He does not perceive himself as an entity, nor does he perceive anything which is not himself, for the distinction "self—not-self' has not been made. His relationship with the mother is fusional and immediate; in Freud's terms, he floats in a world of "oceanic unity." The critical Lacanian contribution explains the inevitable development of consciousness through the medium of linguistic symbolization. Lacan views himself as Freud's Luther, and demands the primacy of the original Freudian writings. But he at the same time presents the most complete—or at least most detailed—program of structuralist and poststructuralist thought.

Gradually the child is forced to recognize distinctions in his environment. The mother is not, after all, an extension of the self. She vanishes and reappears, arbitrarily responding to one's wishes. With the recognition of this otherhood part of the child's world is cut off, alienated from his being. The loss is emotionally devastating—"the trauma, determining all that follows" (1977b:55) —and the driving force of human existence (Desire, *desir)* works futilely to recreate this once oceanic union. When the child understands the mother as different from himself, he identifies with her, replacing the missing object from within. Lacan calls this early creation of internal images the "mirror stage," in which substitutes for a lost reality become the distorted images which the child sees as himself.

> We have only to understand the mirror stage *as an identification,* in the full sense that analysis gives to the term; namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image. [1977a:2]

The identification is a signifier, an internal reference to an external object, and it replaces the alienated mother of one's essential being with her signification, with which the child identifies. To retain the wholeness of initial being the child creates an internal signifier of external objects; these complex signifiers—dependent upon the external world—are also the only way he has to represent himself.

With the recognition of this difference, the relationship with the mother becomes a dual relationship, where each side reflects and yet opposes the other. This is the fundamental nature of signification, for although the signifier represents the object, it is not —and never can be —identical with the object itself: "the symbol manifests itself first of all as the murder of the thing" (1968:84). The mother has a tendency to see the child as an extension of herself; the child wishes to complete himself through the mother. Thus the child wishes to complete the mother by being what she wishes him to be. In Lacanian aphorism, he is the Desire of the mother's Desire (1977b:38). The point is that in the dual relationship the signification of the mother internally reconstitutes the subject's world, replacing his loss. But now for the first time he understands himself both as opposed to the signifier—he is not the mother, the mother is a different person—but in terms of the signifier—he has identified with the mother to replace his loss. ''Everything emerges from the structure of the signifier" (1977b:206); it is a third term, neither subject nor object but alienated from both as the subject's inner consciousness. It simultaneously defines, and by defining, transforms, the mother and the self.

Self-recognition in the mirror occurs roughly between six and eight months, and Lacan uses the concept of a mirror stage to articulate the nature of the dual relationship and its subsequent transformation into a tenary, or Symbolic, mode. At first the child is aware of himself only through being aware of the difference between himself and the external world, for he identifies with these intrusions into his subjectivity. Graphically, he responds to his mother and fellow playmates as if they were his images in a mirror; his inevitable alienation derives from a sense of selfhood grounded in others. "In the other, in the mirror image, in his mother, the child sees nothing but a fellow with whom he merges, with whom he identifies" (Lemaire 1977:78). This stage is also called the "imaginary," a term which refers to the child's creation of and identification with images of himself and others. A child who remained at this stage would be incapable of differentiating himself from others.

In the Imaginary stage there is no way of ordering or structuring the reflecting images which define the self. Moreover, they are still too close to the initial pain of separation to successfully handle this gaping wound, the unbalanced torment of the loss of being. That ordering is provided by primary repression in the oedipal situation, enabled through the development of language. "Signifiers organize human relations in a

creative way, providing them with structures and shaping them" (1977b: 20). A symbol is signifier whose signified is itself another signifier, and in the oedipal situation the child's identification with the mother is replaced by a symbol which both names and transforms it. Forced to recognize that the father also makes emotional demands upon the mother and that these are in some way prior to his own, in the oedipal crisis the child represses his intense need for fusion and substitutes a secondary identification with the father.

Language permits this repression because it allows the subject to refer to something with which he is identified; it opens a world of possibilities to an emotionally trapped child. The signifier of the Imaginary stage referred directly to that area of loss —and the image of the mother was a meager substitute for her. But the signifier of the Symbolic stage creates an internal identification with a third term, for in identifying with the father the child represses and references the longing for the mother. Because they are organized by language, these ternary signifiers can be ordered, structured and controlled. They dramatically alter the semantic range of the individual's signification.

For an individual to be aware of an event, to keep any conscious or unconscious memory, he must have a way of internally referring to it. He signifies this event as he creates meaning in language, by creating an arbitrary category (or "word") which carries meaning only in relation to other categories within the system as a whole. "Up to a certain point, all the reality of the heavens may be inscribed in nothing more than a vast constellation of signifiers" (Lacan 1977b: 151). The repression of the initial split of self and mother, and its symbolic replacement, still cannot replicate the bliss of undifferentiated union; the pain, though muted, still remains. The child as it were endlessly seeks to suffocate the pain by the creation of more signifiers, ceaselessly covering the yawning gulf of separation in the desperate attempt to bridge its chasm. In the process he becomes self-conscious.

As in a language, each new experience or perception is now referenced and identified in terms of others that have gone before. The subject as ego exists only in terms of this referencing net. *"Ich* (ego) is the complete, total locus of the network of signifiers, that is to say, the subject, *where it was,* where it has already been" (1977b:44). The repressed initial split is linked to later experience, and its pain metonymically displaced along this chain in an increasingly diffuse and complicated manner. All perceptions and experiences are so bound by the underlying emotional trauma of early childhood. Perhaps the most famous Lacanian aphorism is that "the unconscious is structured like a language" (e.g., 1977b: 149). Apparently obscure, it expresses classical Freudian ideas. One's memories, experiences, perceptions are associated with each other in a shifting network, and the rules or forces of that network—the currents which link two seemingly random events —are determined by the early and powerful relations with the primary parent. The unconscious is not so much a place as an always hidden logic which orders meaning and associations.

In Freud, the libidinal instinct provides the energy to sustain this shifting flux. For Lacan this role is played by Desire, the insatiable need to reconstitute the undiffer-

entiated unity. And in the French *desir* there is the implication of continuous force, a stronger sense than the acts of individual wishing which the English *wish* and the German *wunsch* convey. (1977a:viii). Desire forces the development of a conceptual universe of mobile, interconnected signifiers, in the driven, futile effort to replicate the initial unity, an attempt to buffer the pain of separation with the multiple associations of varied experience. Yet despite this valiant effort to defuse emotional pain, the split is only reinforced by the constant affirmation of its principles of association.

Thus in the Lacanian description we have a fractured universe in which the lines are gradually drawn and crafted with respect to each other. Their shifting but partially fixed configuration is determined by the laws which create it but—like a grammar—never themselves appear. In the fracture the individual sees himself only in terms of the break, identified and named by the side he is not on.

> Through the effects of speech, the subject always realizes himself more in the Other, but he is already pursuing there more than half of himself. He will simply find his desire ever more divided, pulverized, in the circumscribable metonymy of speech. [1977b: 188]

Both self and other demand and are created by their intermediary, language. "I identify myself in language, but only by losing myself in it like an object" (1968:63).

Reality forces the child to realize that the world around him is not a simple extention of himself, and so it structures and splits his peaceful ocean. Yet he can do so only by verbally identifying objects and experiences, providing himself with categories which make sense of this difference. He must remember these different objects and people: he must distinguish them from the category with which he refers to himself. (There is no point of an "I" unless there is also a "you.") These categories, taught behaviors, and classifications of experience are those of his society: identification with the father is both the means to repress a denied fusional relationship with the mother and the process by which the child learns to behave as a member of his group.

This is the point at which Lacanian and Levi-Straussian theory overlap, the individual acceptance of the patterned meanings imposed upon him by society. "Isn't it striking that Levi-Strauss, in suggesting the implication of the structures of language with that part of the social laws which regulate marriage ties and kinship, is already conquering the very terrain in which Freud situates the unconscious?" (1968:48). Yet the great addition which Lacan makes, in his microscopic focus upon the infant's early life, is to point out that the child accepts these social meanings in his own terms, in accordance with the structures that his earliest experience has crafted. In this interweaving of personal and social, subjectivity is a fine mesh of idiosyncratic but externally created meanings. The "very process of the unconscious forms of the society" (Lemaire 1977:92), the oedipal process crafts a unique selfconsciousness in accordance with a greater whole.

Some Thoughts

The fundamental similarities between the Mayan myth and the Lacanian account lie in the parallel creation of dynamic interlocking chains of signification. For Lacan, linking these signifiers into ordered symbolic chains is ultimately the consequence of language, the ability to name, as in the Central American myth the arrival of the word precipitated the creation of the world. The Desire which propels the signification of the Lacanian child resembles the compulsion in the Quiche re-creation of an interdependent universe. The two tales share more than the acknowledged power of the word; they assume that the ephemeral quality of naming and the asymmetry it produces must motivate the creation of their signifying chains.

With the word the Mayan gods may name, and they name the earth into existence and texture its hills, ravines, and rivers. After its arrival they must be equally named themselves, verbally specified by others to keep an identity they have created for themselves. But their mirror in man remains only a mirror. Man is limited with misted eyes and a bodily form which reproduces and dies. When the gods name a lesser and ever-changing man to reflect themselves, they activate the creation of a chain of intervening substitutes. Dynamism arises from the asymmetrically split unity. Man differentiates as he multiplies; these differences are represented by the creation of other gods, and these secondary gods then mediate between men and the creator gods. This is a third term with which men interact and by which they are defined, and this third term expands into a chain, as the Balams are deified and time and the sun arise, in turn created by the chain. Initial signifiers are hidden from each other by a host of intervening terms. They protect the fragile equilibrium of an unbalanced duality.

Man, Tohil, and Balam are created only in relation to each other to represent each other in the whole. The idiom is cast in terms of nourishment, so that man, created out of his own food, feeds the gods with words. The Tohils become true gods when they reciprocally exchange fire for worship. The Balams must initially sacrifice to the Tohils, but ultimately represent them only when men sacrifice to the Balams themselves—which action they see in turn as worship to the Tohils and creator gods. Each new addition appears in response to the needs of the preceding character, and is anchored with respect to another by the demand of reciprocal support.

As in the Lacanian schema, the gap between subject and the starkly opposed recognition of an external reality is gradually filled in by a web of others. To the creator gods, their external identification is at first too strong—they limit man, and then redress the balance with an intervening chain. The striking element of the *Popul Vuh* is the insistent quality in the creation of mediating terms, the clear sense that the dual relationship of man and creator god is too weak either to protect man or to sustain the god's worship. As each term is created it both subsumes the previous terms and redefines them. The signifier is less than what it signifies, but it redefines that which is signified within its terms.

Likewise, the Lacanian child recognizes the split-off half of an initial unity, and likewise that recognition demands an intervening chain of substitution. The signification of the Other is not limited—it is never strong enough, and the child handles that asymmetry through the creation of this chain. For the developing child the Imaginary mode of dual existence—me and my reflection, me and mother—is too painful, too raw and underbalanced to maintain itself. The Symbolic mode, with its associative ordering, attempts to rectify those limitations. The similarity is intriguing. Both tales rely upon a verbal idiom; both insistently create an interdependent chain from an asymmetrically split unity; both describe a dynamic flux in which verbal distinctions create the *points de capitón* to anchor a shifting web.

Words have remarkable qualities: they exist, but do not exist; they are an individual's product, bu* are socially defined; they reify thoughts and emotions in a nontangible reality. For these reasons a word is a seductive metaphor for the creative process, the carving out of object from unreal indeterminancy. But Lacanian and Mayan myth share a much more specific understanding than the power of words; each recognizes naming as an ephemeral and essential act. The gods must not only be named, but renamed, and different tribes of men must define their differences through separate gods. A child creates continually, because one signifier, one experience, one act of naming does not maintain his selfhood. A name creates a namer and an object named, and when it is respoken it is respoken in a different context. Both in Lacanian and Mayan myth the object or signifier which becomes a namer cannot be redefined by its creator; new terms, new namers, are introduced. The initial split is unstable; stability demands a third term, and the third a fourth. The dyad becomes latticed in an interlocking whole where each half, though interdependent, does not depend upon the primary duality.

Perhaps the similarities in fact are those of origin, the need to derive a complex interdependent universe from an initial unity. Both myth and theory share, at any rate, that obligation and that premise. And yet the differences beween poem and theory are compelling. The poem describes a particular culture, the theory an unspecified, general individual. Both their descriptive aims and their narrative forms differ, despite a general similarity in the texture of the tales. We can compare their underlying models; their variant structures, despite their similarities, provide some insight into the descriptive and narrative constraints within which we construct our concepts of society and the individual.

The Quiche gods are awoken from peaceful slumber by language; they create an external reality with its power. Once that external reality exists their own existence must be admitted and identified by it. In this they reverse the Lacanian sequence of Imaginary and Symbolic phases, where a split unity demands verbal control. When the Mayan gods become self-conscious, they create a mirror to reflect themselves and to maintain that reflexive consciousness. The word makes them self-conscious, and they create a mirror in man. The Lacanian child transcends his mirror reflection with verbal self-consciousness. In the *Popul Vuh,* such reflection precedes the reflection of the self;

the internal experience precedes an external creation. For Lacan the external world creates one which is internal.

The Lacanian ascension to the Symbolic signals a new form of signifying, a break with the static structures of the past. In the simultaneous entry into language and into the Symbolic mode, the child mediates a fusional relationship with the mother by identifying with the father—the child accepts the father's "no" to his desire to sleep, or to re-fuse, with the mother. With this identification, the child accepts also social rules and customs. In the Symbolic, he acquires some measure of internal creativity and freedom precisely through externally imposed constraints. "Man speaks, therefore, but it is because the symbol has made him man" (1968:39). The model for internal action is based upon an outside world.

In the *Popul Vuh,* it is people, actors, gods, who are the signifiers in the web of flux, placed in relation to each other with concepts taken from the inner life. The word arrives from the outside, bringing light. The light becomes a metaphor for dynamic process, the interchange of internal state and external world. Bonds are created when light is captured in men's bodies, when their minds are no longer dark; simultaneously, with words, men establish reciprocity with the gods. The word, as in Lacan, comes from the outside. But the gods create this external figure, man, to capture and reflect the qualities which they have within themselves after the arrival of that word. While for Lacan it is the relationships between people which create an inner webbing, in the *Popul Vuh* a social webbing is woven from an inner life. The one account uses metaphors from inner experience to describe the construction of the social, the other constructs the individual through models taken from his social life.

A different narrative structure imposes further distinctions between the theory and the poem. In the Mayan tale the narrative structure controls the development of the story in relation to its end. Stickmen follow the men of mud because their contrast may be resolved in the shaped formlessness of ground maize. To create man from his own food demands the foreknowledge of his nourishment. Pre-existing order dictates when the human form is found. Be they Lord's themes and formulas (1978) or Thompson's motifs (1955), external story patterns impose a diachronic structure. But the Lacanian individual acts from present circumstance; Desire, the compulsion which drives the Lacanian child, moves blindly from the patterns of the past.

Individual experience can build only upon preceding structure, where each signifier expands and is absorbed into the coherent structure of the changing whole. To the developing individual each moment is virginal; events simultaneously interpret and are structured by the past. But in told and retold myth, each moment is already established in relation to the whole. Clearly individual action is often based upon a chosen end, but this desired end is a potentiality rather than an ineluctable demand. The conclusion of a story pulls its elements away from their expected evolution; the shift from point to point may be sharper, more surprising, than in a person's growth. Perhaps the mobile sharpness of the change, and the presence of an ending, a final state, create the power and the strength we feel in mythic fiction.

Literary critics confront these issues with learned grace. Kermode explores this "sense of an ending" in fiction —the ending as a demand for the "fullness of time, for a beginning, a middle and an end in concord" (Kermode 1981:58). To be sure, his digression distinguishes fiction from myth—myths are stable, and in some sense true. They are "a sequence of radically unchangeable gestures." Fictions are "consciously false"; they "change as the needs of sense-making change" (1981:64, 39). By these terms, in an odd way Lacan's theory plays fiction to the Mayan myth, a sophisticated denial of the determinate.

But although in this sense Active, the theory stands apart from myth in the latter's movement towards a predetermined goal, the emergence of historical man from the stirrings in the pre-creation night. The selfconsciousness of an ending, of a programmed progression, shapes the text in a manner completely unlike the development of an individual (although the individual develops in relation to his death). The fictional assertion —that it tells a story—gives the myth its different essence. Narrative order breaks from realistic order to convey a different time: it denies the freedom of individual development for the constraint which "by the provision of an end, makes possible a satisfying consonance with the origin and the middle" (1981:17). The characters of fiction "have their choices, but the novel has its end" (1981:140).

And thus in myth and theory these "chains of signification" travel differently along their paths. The theoretically depicted individual hungers after signification, in his insatiable need to cover the gap within his broken world. Mythic elements arise to form specific patterns determined by prestructural constraints. Their moments are a means to a conclusion, not a fulcrum of the present. And in the myth, the web of relationships is based upon internal experience, while in Lacan the internal world is created by its external relationships. In myth and theory, the models in play, with their textured realities self-consciously dependent upon signification and built with interdependent dyads, are not so different. Each creates a division between internal and external experience, and each uses the one experience as the basis for its model of the other. The social world of the myth is constructed from its concepts of the inner mind, and the Lacanian mind is structured by its social world. Perhaps there are few metaphors, few models, for creative man to choose from; perhaps such reflected models are inevitable. Yet the narrative context of the tales allows a difference in their development.

Lacanian theory is subtle and contextual. It points attention towards the growth of meaningful terms, their relation to and impact upon the signifying chain. Dynamic change is stressed, the process whereby the mobile individual creates and recreates his world. On an abstract level Lacanian concepts are essentially shared by Levi-Strauss, and thus add little "new" to anthropology; on a clinical level his insights are unlikely to be helpful for the fieldworker. But the depth which he gives to Levi-Straussian theory, and his emphasis upon controlled dynamic change, enrich our structuralism and illuminate our interpretation. His ideas are useful in themselves.

The *Popul Vuh* is intrinsically fascinating, a creation tale which centers around change and process, form and formlessness, definition and identity. Its opening stasis fractures into a multifaceted interdependence of god, idol, ancestor, and man, a dynamic latticework of identity and change. It is beautiful, and in its way, profound; it too is worthy in itself.

The constructions of the worlds in these two tales differ partly because of the constraints inherent in the narrative form; the existence of an ending structures the sequence of created signifiers or story elements in a different manner to the child's developing consciousness. But they are similar in their uses of models, despite their different descriptive demands. Each tale divides experience into the internal individual and the external social fabric, and constructs its model of the one from its conceptions of the other. Their similarities disclose a peculiar awareness of the empheral nature of the name and the changing asymmetrical dyad, their differences suggest problems concerning narrative form and descriptive intent. Mayan sonneteers make their plea, and unlike Crispin we mind these commonplaces. But with Wallace Stevens we value the imagination in both narrative and theory in our human efforts to make sense of ourselves.

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Notes

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