The "Primal Scene" as a Culture-Specific Phenomenon: A Speculative Rereading of Freudian — or Freud's — Psychology

Gaile McGregor

York University

This paper reopens the debate about the universality, not only of the Oedipus complex, but of all the structures of consciousness singled out by Freud as normative for or pro-paedeutic to human development. Drawing its evidence from a semiotically oriented ethnography of complex cultures, the present study uses a critique of Roheim as point of departure for discussing (1) the relations between patterns in aesthetic/expressive productions (including myth) and more general kinds of psycho-social patterning, (2) the evidence for cultural imprinting, and (3) the use of sex/gender coding for constructing/manipulating that conceptual geosphere we might call langscape. Interpreting trends in communal self-imaging as both sign and symptom of existential bias, the author suggests a tentative and partial typology of cultures based on the givens of "stance." It ends by deconstructing the private Freud in terms of these categories.

One of the things for which Freud has been most severely criticized is his insistence on the centrality of the Oedipus complex in human psychology. Since his insights into infantile sexuality reportedly derived from his own self-analysis (Jones, 1961), it has been suggested that he may have generalized unduly from personal experience; that at best the phenomenon of filial-paternal aggression, far from universal, was causally related to the strongly paternalistic bias of nineteenth-century Europe (Malinowski, 1927; Neumann,

1979). Cross-cultural comparison would seem to support the latter contention. Given that the "primal scene" may indeed encapsulate the child's first and most traumatic confrontation with "otherness," the content, and, more particularly, the structure of that scene would nevertheless seem to vary considerably according to how, in any given socio-historical context, the essential "other" is conceived. De-patriated, it would also seem less concerned with "real" domestic arrangements than with the arbitration of opposing life-modes connoted by the *symbolic* parents (see Jung, 1971). This, of course, is where the variation creeps in. In Freud's Vienna the masculine principle may have ruled supreme, but this is by no means generally true, even among the other "advanced" societies of the West.

Take the United States, for example. Judging from both overt and covert evidence, normative American familial relations are, if not exactly more complex, at least substantially different from those that Freud inferred from his European model—*especially* when it comes to the father. Far from the traditional Austrian paterfamilias and even further from the invincible primal tyrant, if we look at the national mythology cumulatively codified in art, literature, and popular culture, what we find in this country is an apparently random assortment of strong *and* weak father figures, both types treated ambivalently, both fully institutionalized. To find the reason for this we have to examine American history. The key to the modern American psyche resides in the fact that from its inception this nation has imaged itself in terms of two different and almost mutually exclusive communal ideals. From the time of the earliest explorers the European folk imagination associated the New World with the paradisaical gardens of biblical and classical myth: Eden, Elysium, Arcadia (Marx, 1964). The first groups that actually came to the New World, on the other hand, brought with them as well an image of *civilization*; they were, they proclaimed, going to build a City on a Hill, God's Holy City, the City of New Jerusalem (Baritz, 1964). This circumstance implied some serious problems for community morale. Even aside from the practical difficulties of reconciling the very different goals and values implicit in the dichotomy (see Ruland, 1976; Sanford, 1961), these two images in themselves represent the most profoundly antithetical poles in human experience. Ignoring for now the problem of whether the symbolic associations are inherent, as Jung would have it, or simply culturally conditioned, what we have here, in fact, is *Moira*, Nature, the world of the Mother, of dream and wish fulfillment and freedom from constraint, versus *Themis*, Civilization, the world of the Father, of law and technology and progress (Slotkin, 1973, after J.L. Henderson).

America thus started out with a kind of split personality. Far from healing under the press of more practical concerns, with the passage of time this split only became worse. Why? One factor was the extent to which this particular

symbolic antithesis not merely underlined but actually exacerbated certain tensions implicit in the colonial experience. Another and more important factor was the extent to which the colonial experience pointed up certain tensions implicit in the underlying myths (Slotkin, 1973). The Mother and the Father were after all more than merely propaedeutic conceptions. If the nature/culture dichotomy went back a long way in European tradition, it was precisely this distance from its roots that defused the more problematic aspects of its psycho-sexual concomitants. Transported to America, a place where, for the first time in countless generations, the idea of Utopia represented possibility rather than dream (Poirier, 1966, p. 17), these hitherto abstracted categories of human thought and feeling were yanked out of the realm of fantasy to be tested against—and implicated in—the all-too-immediate viscissitudes of "real," everyday, historic experience.

In the beginning the problems were not too acute. Given the hardships of the colonial situation, there was no question as to which orientation would form the basis of the "official" American ideology. The "practical" motives were reinforced, moreover, by the radically patriarchal bias of Protestantism. The Garden became a wilderness, the Indians were transformed into the agents of Satan, and the settlers became holy warriors in a cosmic battle between good and evil. As their position became progressively less precarious, however, and as the secular satisfactions of comfort and prosperity came increasingly to challenge the appeal of moral ascendency, both the religious fervor *and* the negative view of nature weakened their hold on the communal imagination. In the seventeenth century the garden was seen as dangerous and *horrible*; in the eighteenth century the garden was seen as dangerous and *beautiful*—indeed, all the more dangerous because it *was* beautiful, because it tempted the farmer away from his fields, leading by irresistible steps from carelessness to indolence to licentiousness (see de Crèvecoeur, 1963; also McGregor, in press, section 3.1.2); by the nineteenth century, under the influence of a romantic philosophy which idealized not only the untamed landscape but even more the untamed human spirit, the image of Eden emerged once more from the communal consciousness to claim equal hegemony with the ideal of the City (Miller, 1967).

This did not mean, on the other hand, that the Garden *took over from* the City. The commitment to progress had been far too kind to both public pride and private pocketbook to be repudiated at this point, even if the hold of the underlying mythic imprint *could* have been broken. What it did mean was that the tensions inherent in the original symbolic antithesis were both confirmed and exacerbated as both sets of values, both modes of self-imaging, were now given "official" ideological sanction. This meant that the theoretical conflict between *Moira* and *Themis* became a real fact of public life. The myth was transformed into history. Less obviously, it also meant that history was

Table 1

The Polarization of the American Communal Consciousness

GARDEN Nature/Mother		CITY Culture/Father
passiveness receptiveness irresponsibility	mythic associations	activity aggressiveness rationality
	+	
American Revolution (rejection of the Father)	history	Conquest of the Frontier (rejection of the Mother)
	=	
1. exhilaration related to release of libidinal impulses 2. guilt exacerbated by the continued "official" dominance of the God/Father	ambivalence	1. exhilaration related to release of masculine aggressiveness 2. guilt exacerbated by images of a mutilated garden and a second "Fall"

transformed into myth. The same events that marked respectively the victories of *Moira* over *Themis* and of *Themis* over *Moira* also confirmed collectively that the new American version of "reality" *just would not work*. Legitimizing the break with the Father, the American Revolution not only sanctioned the freedom of the individual, which was exhilarating, but morally devalued the "masculine" obsession with progress on which was founded the whole proto-capitalist project. The almost concurrent conquest of the frontier, on the other hand, not only confirmed the triumph of the masculine will, but in doing so, destroyed that earthly paradise the vision of which had given the westward movement its impetus in the first place (Moore, 1957). Both aspects of the American declaration of independence were thus accompanied by more than a little guilt. The result of this secondary development, as we see above in Table 1, was both to complete and to complicate the dichotomization of the American communal psyche. Mythic associations *plus* history *equals* ambivalence.

The next question, of course, is what consequences these "symbolic" developments had for the developing national consciousness of the American people. The symmetry of this diagram implies, among other things, a basic *Weltanschauung* that was not only irrational but *unrationalizable*. By the mid-nineteenth century Americans were faced with the necessity of living with — and *by* — a strongly internalized national mythology which implied on the one hand that the polarized life-modes represented by the Garden and City were both absolutely crucial to spiritual well-being, and on the other hand, that neither could be fully embraced without destroying its complement. How did they deal with this conflict? On a public level they took refuge in a kind of

serial compartmentalization. Given that both utopian ideals could be taken to legitimize the concept of rebirth, of new beginnings, of escape from history—about the only point on which they *could* be made to agree—the public American was conditioned to accept not merely change but *reversal* as normal. For the last two centuries American culture has hence alternated on a quasi-cyclic basis between two diametrically opposed mind-sets we might for convenience call primitivism and progressivism (see McGregor, in press). On a private level, unfortunately, the tensions were less easily dispersed. Here the normalized duplicity probably created as many stresses as it cured. So how did the sufferer respond? By rejecting the mythology that promised the patently impossible? Not at all. By taking the myth one step further—by creating for himself or herself a *new* myth. A myth designed specifically not to underline the benefits but to offset the dangers of the individual's integration into the community. How? Like most products of the folk imagination, in order to facilitate private adjustments which, given ideological sanctities, are "publically" unthinkable, the classic American fable of identity resolves abstract conflicts by converting them into the psycho-symbolic terms of familial roles and relations (cf. Slater, 1968). Since, unlike Freud's Oedipal prototype, the American's problem is less that key wishes are forbidden than that they are logically impossible, it achieves this resolution not by "acting out" the subversive desires but by denying them altogether. The result has been the development of a distinctive and in some ways very peculiar national "hero." James Fenimore Cooper laid down the ground rules for this typos in his *Leatherstocking* series more than a century ago.

In a superficial sense Natty Bumppo—the name with which Cooper's protagonist began his life—appears to bridge the gap between nature and culture. A backwoodsman who is at once the critic and the standardbearer of civilization, this figure functions both metaphorically and in fact to mediate the boundary between fort and forest, the white and his Indian antagonist (Cooper, 1961, p. 21; Walker, 1962, especially p. 137). This is not all he does, however. More important for our current discussion is the fact that lurking behind this exemplary fable is a kind of counter-myth in which he simultaneously functions to nullify the very resolution he was designed to effect. In marked contrast to his author's eminently pro-social intentions, that is, on a covert level, Leatherstocking incarnates the possibility not of reconciling but of repudiating both Moira *and* Themis. Orphaned and childless, he is the man who neither *has* nor *is* a parent. This does not mean that he has relinquished "parental" authority. By de-sexualizing the archetypal modes, Cooper enables his hero to claim the power of both Mother and Father without being implicated in the "sins" of either. We see the strategy at its most effective in the last book of the series. *Deerslayer*—described by D.H. Lawrence (1964, p. 54) as "the true myth of America" which goes backwards

in time "from old age to golden youth" – in fact contains not one but two mythic subplots. In the first, the young protagonist accepts from the white heroine the legendary rifle which will in later years become his trademark and the basis for his martial invincibility. In the second, he accepts from the Indian he has killed the gift not only of a new name but, by extension, of the magical capacity – amply evinced during his career-to-come – for *perpetual* metamorphosis through identity change. In neither case, however, will he accept the marriage that "comes with" the gift. Natty, in other words, will use the weapons of both culture and nature – he has absolutely no compunction about combining the father's technological prowess with the mother's magical access to the secrets of the organic world – but he will not "pay" for these powers by committing himself to either. Which is not to say that he does not "pay" in other ways. Natty remains alone to the end of his days, sexless, solitary, untouched by love or need. Lawrence called him the essential killer. It is exactly this, however – not the father, not the king, not the mother's lover – that the American in his secret self dreams of being.

The American, then, does not have an Oedipus complex – not, at least, if we interpret this in the narrow sense to mean a desire to replace the father in the mother's bed. Or does he? The Freudian – like Geza Roheim, for instance – would probably claim that the repudiation of sex, far from invalidating the interpretation, actually testifies to the *intensity* of the infantile desires. Such a reading does not to my mind provide adequate explanation for either the rejection of history or the unframing of power, but if only because it has the weight of tradition on its side, it is a claim that cannot be completely ignored. The problem is, the peculiarities of the American mythos, while revealing, also make generalization extremely difficult. Circumstances wherein relatively civilized people are suddenly confronted with a completely primitive environment can hardly be considered as normal. This "abnormality" in turn tends to obscure the whole question of cause and effect. It seems fairly obvious that it was the impact of a "real" wilderness that stimulated the shift away from traditional modes of self-imaging in America, but this is a long way from elucidating the relationship between percepts and concepts, and even further from deciding *which* particular historical and geographical factors were responsible for determining the extent and the direction of this shift. One important question that remains unanswered, for instance, is what role would nature have played in the communal imagination if it had not been offset by the strength of those imported white Christian patriarchal ideals? The only way to determine this is to look at peoples who, if hardly cultureless, nevertheless live much closer than the American colonists to a true state of nature.

What peoples? When the layperson thinks about the "natural life," the image that springs instantly to mind is, of course, a South Sea Island. In this con-

nection it is interesting that Roheim—the same eminent Freudian I singled out earlier as my symbolic antagonist—did a significant amount of field research in the South Pacific. I say "interesting" because it would obviously count for a good deal if I could use my opponent's own data to bolster my thesis. Fortunately, Roheim's work seems tailor-made for this purpose. I draw the reader's attention to *Psychoanalysis and Anthropology* (1950). Despite the fact that this book was written explicitly in order to provide a cross-cultural elucidation of the Oedipus scenario, the case studies selected not only lend themselves to *alternate* interpretations but collectively go far to disprove altogether the author's claims about the primacy and the universality of the ontogenetic process. Take the patently paradisaical Normanby Island, for instance. Here Roheim's analysis would seem equivocal at best. Here, indeed, as in America, it would seem to be environmental rather than hereditary factors that determine the specific form in which the familial myth is set forth.

What is this myth? In the simplest terms, it is a myth of normalized misogyny. For the Normanby Islander the influence of *Moira* is not only undesirable but dangerous. It is also obviously felt to be an omnipresent threat. In order to counter this threat, "feminization" must be fought on every front. The effects of such a campaign show up clearly in the structuring of familial relations. While physical dependency is biologically inevitable, the *identification* normally catalysed between infant and mother is first discouraged by extremely repressive child-rearing practices—that is, interrupted suckling, early weaning, and strict regulation of anal and genital functions—and second disparaged by means of a mythos explicitly idealizing the basic masculine virtues of extraversion and aggression (see, for instance, Roheim, 1950, p. 195). At the same time, the potential hostility toward the father is offset by making the uncle into the primary authority figure. Far from simply *transferring* the Oedipal reflex, as Ernest Jones maintained in his famous debate with Malinowski (Parsons, 1969), this substitution deflects the child's negative feelings away from the ideal ego-image altogether, directing them towards a symbolic representative of the distaff side of the nuclear family. The energizing dynamic in Normanby Island mythology is not therefore the desire of the child to vanquish the father in order to possess the mother but, rather, his wish to *escape* from the mother and the mother's brother in order to join the "fathers" in their aggressive, peripatetic escapades. What does the environment have to do with this? You will already, no doubt, have noticed an inconsistency. I said earlier that the Garden was associated by the American with "feminine" irresponsibility, wish fulfillment, and the indulgence of libidinal impulses. Yet here, in an ambience long considered synonymous with freedom from Europe's patriphilic obsession with logic and law, what we find, far from indulgence, is an even more one-sidedly "masculinized" cultural ideal. This, though, is exactly the factor that proves my point about

environmental determinism—and in doing so incidentally elucidates a number of puzzling points with regard to the etiology of America's communal schizophrenia. The degree to which the father is culturally idealized would seem to correspond directly with the degree to which the mother is *naturally* idealized. The more beneficient that nature is perceived to be, the stronger the reactionary identification with the father.

If this interpretation seems far-fetched, one need only look at *explicit* attitudes towards nature on Normanby Island to find ample confirmation. European paradisaical fantasies notwithstanding, "naturalness" is *not* highly valued by the native Normanbians. Quite the opposite, in fact. Gardening—that is, the domestic cultivation of vegetables—is not only a central feature of the economy here, but also—and more important—a primary determinant of social and moral status. Why? According to "official" explanation, the reason for the concern with productivity is a purely practical one. On Normanby Island, as Roheim points out, "the problem of the hunger months . . . looms large in the phantasy of the natives" (1950, p. 154). If we consider the physical rather than the mythological facts, however, the obsession with hunger thus cited seems even more irrational than the obsession with gardening which it is invoked to explain. The so-called "hunger months" are not in fact characterized by any real scarcity of food. "All [the term] means"—and here I quote Roheim again—"is that the stored yams have been exhausted and there are no new [ones] yet. But there is 'bush food,' which includes quite a number of wild-growing vegetables . . . [some of which] taste like yams . . . [plus] nuts, mushrooms, fat grubs . . . fruit . . . birds of all kinds, kangaroos, smaller animals . . . wild pig . . . [fish,] crabs and oysters" (1950, p. 154). How can anyone confronted with such natural abundance fear starvation? The natives themselves claim that "wild" food plants are nutritionally inferior to the cultivated varieties. "Bush food" as a whole has no strength in it. Given the patent absurdity of such a claim, however, it seems obvious that we must look further for our explanation. What I would suggest is that the whole thesis must be stood on its head. The "practical" explanation, in other words, has it entirely backwards. The Normanby Islanders are conditioned to work hard not because it is necessary to do so but precisely because it is *not* necessary to do so. Over-abundant and too easily accessible, the bounties of nature serve as an invitation to sloth and indolence. Sloth and indolence, on the other hand, not only make individuals irresponsible, and thus recalcitrant to communal control, but even more basically, they work to undermine that essential element of "masculine" assertiveness without which the group as a whole would slide back into unthinking animality. In a garden-setting such as Normanby Island, therefore, nature must be devalued for the good of the community, not because it is less, but rather because it is *more*—more beneficient, more inviting, more rewarding than culture. The same thing holds true

for the archetypal principle lying *behind* nature. The repressiveness of Normanbian child-rearing practices is thus predicated upon the covert recognition that the child must be alienated from his mother—and from his "feminine self"—as early and as completely as possible in order to condition him into resistance against the analogous allure of the earth-mother when he is older.

That the strategy is not entirely successful is evident in the obsession with gifts—one of the most notable characteristics of this society. One might speculate that the harshness of the mother initially triggers in the child an impulse to withdraw into the self. To be inward, though, is to *be* feminine, even if the recoil is *from* femininity. Before the masculine ideal can be realized, therefore, anal retentiveness must be transformed into phallic aggressiveness. The way this is achieved by the Normanbians is through a ritualized commodity exhange that accomplishes the metamorphosis by means of a kind of psychological sleight of hand. How does this work? The whole "idea" of gifts is in a sense feminine, connoting, as it does, not merely one but *both* aspects of biological femaleness, the mother's food-giving function plus the wife's sexual receptivity. To turn gifting into a competition, however, is to co-opt the activity into the masculine realm. To give gifts aggressively, in other words, is both to indulge *and* to deny one's identification with the mother. It is only a short step from this to the outright or unconditional aggression proper to "men." The *kune*, therefore, whatever it may incidentally achieve on the level of social integration (Firth, 1970), is at its most essential a public enactment of the transition from static to dynamic.

The same transition can be seen to take place in the individual's sexual development. The adolescent boy is eased into sexuality through a kind of unfocused and itinerant courtship activity in which, in Roheim's words, "the cultural pattern is . . . lying together without intercourse" (1950, p. 170). The cruel and aggressive behavior observed by Roheim in adult males would therefore seem to be achieved only after and by means of a mediating or buffering period during which the youth is not merely allowed but expected to be reticent about pressing home his claims. Having been lured so far, he is then "trapped" into matrimony by his potential in-laws. The question here, of course, is why either enticement or coercion is necessary in the first place? Why—especially given the pro-masculine propaganda to which he is exposed all his life—should the Normanby Island adolescent be reluctant to assume one of the supposedly most enjoyable perquisites of manhood? This, like the ambivalence toward giftgiving which is expressed so vividly in myths about the real and magic dangers of the *kune*, goes back to the child's first, traumatic encounter with otherness: the rejecting mother who, in refusing to be "devoured," becomes *ipso facto* a potential "devourer" (compare Slater's discussion of Greek matriphobia, 1968). Far from surficial or temporary, the impulse toward withdrawal that underlies the Normanbian's much touted reten-

tiveness, his covert greediness, his obsession with "saving up," whether gifts or faeces, is ultimately an attempt to resist this threat of identity loss. As a secondary development it is thus inevitable that the process of externalization involved in either sex or gift-giving or inter-island raiding is bound to be accompanied by a substantial amount of anxiety to be dissipated only by both social and ritual displacements of numerous kinds.

Life in a garden is not, then, precisely what the eighteenth-century primitivist imagined it to be. This is not to imply that the Normanby Islander is any more "typical" than Rousseau's noble savage. If Normanbian culture illuminates one possible response to the confrontation with nature, it is obvious if we look elsewhere that it is very far from exhausting all possible responses. Consider Roheim's other major field subjects, the Australian aborigines, for example: here we would seem to be dealing with a kind of social conditioning, indeed an entire psychology, which is not only different from but in some important ways diametrically *opposed to* the norms of South Pacific island cultures. Is this only because—as some of the earlier researchers suggested—the aborigines are more primitive, perhaps even biologically, than the islanders? (see, for example, Roheim, 1974, pp. 156-157) Not in my opinion. Different though it may be, the aboriginal mind-set is explicable in terms of exactly the same *kind* of psychic mechanism as those which we have seen at work among the Normanbians. The key factor again is the environment. Where Normanby Island is a paradise, however, nature in the Australian interior is just about as inhospitable as it could be without positively debarring human survival. And where the Normanbians were moved to defend themselves against a dangerous depletion of will by means of a reactive masculinization, the aborigines reacted in an exactly opposite fashion: by idealizing the feminine. For all that Roheim keeps harping on the aggressiveness of these natives (1950, p. 139; 1974, p. 157), no other explanation can account for the fact that here, in a setting which by all conventional wisdom should have called forth the most manly and martial virtues available in the human repertoire, the central rituals involve or re-enact a kind of penile mutilation which not only coincidentally suggests, but is explicitly related by the participants themselves with, castration. Is this merely an externalization of communal fears? The *attitudes* one infers even from Roheim's description makes such a supposition seem unlikely. Judging by both the wording of the ritual itself and the messages embedded in adjacent myths (see especially Roheim, 1950, p. 94), the subincision is viewed by both actors and auditors not merely as an ordeal but as a curative, with intrinsic as well as extrinsic value. Far from simply acting out—and thus warding off—the conventional Freudian terror of emasculation, in other words, the men who participate in these rituals, as Roheim himself points out (1950, p. 96), "are really"—that is, deliberately and voluntarily—"imitating women."

The question that arises at this point, once more, is *why*? Given that paradise really does sap the will, the Normanby Island response, if psychologically extreme, can at least be seen as a socially constructive strategy. Symbolic feminization, on the other hand, would seem a most unsuitable stance to assume in the face of adversity. I would suggest, though, that this analysis—conditioned as it is by Western categories and assumptions—misses an important point about what exactly the aborigines "feel" when they look upon the desolation surrounding them. Although it may seem an odd comparison to choose, we can actually gain a better appreciation of the aboriginal mind not by grappling with yet other primitive cultures but by looking at an example much closer to home.

Like the United States, Canada began with a group of civilized Europeans set down in the middle of an untamed wilderness. Unlike their southerly neighbors, however, Canadians did not find anything the least bit garden-like about this setting. "Official" rhetoric notwithstanding, the Canadian was in fact utterly repelled by the "rude grandeur" of the northern landscape. How do we know? Not, admittedly, from what we are told explicitly by early writers and historians. Because the reaction was not only an unconscious but—for a people conditioned by two generations of poets to view nature as a moral mirror—an unconscionable one, the development is in fact revealed most strikingly through the *inadvertent* testimony of art. Though the effect is barely noticeable at the level of individual works, a scan of the communal oeuvre (see, for instance, Harper, 1977) clearly demonstrates what closer scrutiny obscures—that certain peculiarities of composition and technique have been widespread and consistent enough in Canadian landscape painting from the late eighteenth right through to the twentieth century, despite its generally derivative character, to be identified as markers of a truly indigenous pattern of response. And if we go one step further and compare this body of work with American equivalents it becomes obvious that what this pattern signifies is not merely a difference in aesthetic preferences, but a divergence in communal psychology.

Take, for instance, the handling of perspective in the two countries. On the American side, landscape art characteristically comprises an unabashed celebration of man in nature. Beginning with the Hudson River school back in the early years of the Republic, the American painter has tended to combine almost unlimited recession with a sense of visual domination to assert the ascendency of the viewer over the vista. Not so north of the border. Far from expansive, the most notable feature of Canadian landscape painting is a tangible, almost claustrophobic foreshortening of pictorial space. Ruling out hypotheses of accident, moreover, analysis makes clear that this effect relates less to the material givens than to the peculiarities of the observer's stance. Particularly telling is the handling of sight-lines. In marked contrast

to the American preference for an elevated vantage, the viewpoint in most Canadian works is set oppressively close to the ground. At its most extreme this practice gives us what is virtually a worm's eye view of things. At its least, the observer is afoot on the field of action. In the latter case the diminished physical barriers are likely to be reinforced by psychological ones. In works dealing with open types of terrain detail and lighting are commonly used to focus attention on the foreground. Alternatively, telescoping or multiple layering of visual strata may be employed as a means of retarding visual penetration. The more the subject verges on panorama, the more blatant the attempts to deny recession. In prairie paintings, for instance, the horizon, though technically invoked, is almost always raised or obscured by atmospheric conditions. The same holds in rolling pasturelands. No matter how boundless the landscape depicted, in other words, the composition of the artifact is almost always such as to throw the viewer back upon his or her self. When the landscape is *not* boundless, the claustrophobic effect can become even more extreme. Woods are like walls. Waterfalls are like bowls. Mountains squat like huge toads in the middle distance, or form palisades across the entire picture plane. Nowhere is there that sense of opening up, of laying claim to the distance, that is the hallmark of American painting. Even if more explicit indicators were lacking, the fact that among the entire Canadian corpus it is *only* in those pieces depicting domesticated rural or urban subjects that one is likely to find any significant depth of field at all suggests that Canadian – unlike American – artists were most at ease when nature was kept cut down to a "thinkable" size.

Brief as it is, this outline should make it abundantly clear that even within the confines of a putatively identical range of subjects and idioms one finds ample evidence of a basic cleavage in the way that Canadians and Americans "see" the natural world (see Kline, 1970; McGregor, 1985). The American view is perhaps not as wholly simplistic and untroubled as the capsule summary may make it appear; for every moment that the landscape is paradisaical in American art and literature, there is always another in which it becomes once more the Puritans' waste and howling wilderness, full of heathens and demons. It is, however, a view in which both possibilities, if they are not reconciled, at least coexist in a kind of dynamic tension (McGregor, in press, section 3.3). This is not the case in Canada. Whatever one may say about individual works, when the Canadian communal oeuvre is viewed holistically, the sense of alienation is so striking and so consistent – and this even among such outspoken proponents of muscular outdoorsiness as those famous painters of the North, the Group of Seven – that it belies the very possibility nature could be benevolent and maternal. It also quite pointedly militates against any ideal of assimilation. Quite apart from the question of versimilitude, to deny depth is in effect to deny the *connection* between viewer and vista. Far

from trying to appropriate the landscape, it is apparent from their choice of pictorial and compositional conventions that Canadian artists have in fact preferred to dissociate themselves from it altogether.

Again, the big question: *Why?* Given the similarities in geohistorical backgrounds, why should the Canadian and the American have such different perceptions of the environment? Part of it, no doubt, is simply that there *is* a real if relative difference in the harshness of climate and geography. Part, too, probably relates to the fact that while the Pilgrim Fathers were well bolstered for their "errand into the wilderness" by an eminently martial theology (Brumm, 1970; Williams, 1962), given that Canada did not really exist as a self-conscious entity until after the Revolution split the continent, the earliest "Canadian" immigrants were somewhat less adequately prepared for their confrontation with nature in the raw by the little books of romantic poetry that they clutched in their hands as they sailed up the St. Lawrence (Gairdner, 1972). The real key, though, I think, is the difference between a "western" and a "northern" frontier. A western frontier is an arbitrary line denoting the limits of knowledge. A northern frontier, however, is an existential line denoting the limits of *endurance*. A western frontier can be pushed back or jumped over or redefined, but the unlucky individual who transgresses a northern frontier simply does not survive. One is drowned or frozen to death or mauled by animals or crushed by a falling tree or knocked off a cliff: Canadian literature is full of such cautionary incidents (see Atwood, 1972; Frye, 1971; McGregor, 1985). Small wonder that those who live on a northern frontier are less impressed by nature's beauty than by nature's danger.

From one point of view, then, the recoil from nature comprises the most basic element of the Canadian experience. From another perspective, it can be seen as just a beginning. This is where our comparative approach reveals its true value. Dealing with oral culture we can do no more than reconstruct "probabilities." If we trace the Canadian response through the last century and a half, however, we find hard evidence not only *that* the primal confrontation was important but—far more critical for present purposes—*how* its effects were both manifested in and transformed by history. And I do mean *transformed*. Reconstructing our not-so-distant past, it becomes clear that the defensive withdrawal of affect from the landscape not only alleviates anxiety but in effect demythicizes the erstwhile threatening object. Sufficiently distanced, in other words, the wilderness loses not merely its threat but its reality. Once this happens, the centripetal impulse stimulated in the first place by the sense of external menace becomes, at least metaphorically, a prototype for responses not merely to nature but to "otherness" in general. At the same time, the "metaphor" becomes generative rather than merely reflective (see Ortony, 1979, Part II). By this means, the defining mental movement is gradually assimilated as a wholly automatic "habit"—to borrow a term from

geology—of the communal imagination. "By the time the transformation runs its whole course what started out as the observable result of specific, isolable causes becomes internalized as, in a sense, an ideogrammatic representation of self-in-the-world, a means of *creating* experience rather than merely responding to it. The fact is, inasmuch as a mode of vision is unconscious and spontaneous, it tends to become conventionalized; to crystallize into patterns that are fixed, simple, and self-replicating. These patterns, once generated, begin not only to subsume all functionally equivalent future experience but to impose themselves on any 'free'—that is, unstructured, unsystematized—experiential phenomena that manifest themselves in the subject's perceptual set, such that these incline to express themselves in a compatible form whatever their actual content" (McGregor, 1985, p. 77). *Compatible form*. Keep that phrase in mind. Because this brings us back to the aborigines again. Considering the physical conditions of central Australia, we might speculate that the primal experience was fully as traumatic there as it was in Canada. We might further speculate that the consequences for the communal psyche were also similar. This means that we can use the much better documented Canadian cause to elucidate some of the anomalies of aboriginal culture.

Actually, given this perspective many of the aborigines' most puzzling features turn out not to be anomalous at all. We have noted, for instance, that despite the aggressively masculine elements in their mythology—the obsession with "pointing" magic, the depiction of male energy in terms of destructive symbols like spear or lightning (see, for instance, Roheim, 1974, pp. 44-45), the institutionalization of rape—these natives would seem desirous of identifying *themselves*, at least ritually, as "feminine." What I would suggest is that this is not a paradox at all; that those obtrusive phallic symbols, regardless of Western prejudices, are negative or cautionary images; further, that given the aborigines' imprinted sense of themselves, the exemplary assumption of a feminine stance, far from surprising, is well nigh inevitable. Consider Canada. The line is drawn at penile mutilation, but on a less tangible level its communal expression seems just as clearly diagnostic of symbolic feminization. Enclosure images in art, house symbols in literature, an obsession with human limitations, both social and corporeal: all of these reflect a concern with and an anxiety about boundaries, walls, edges; the interface between self and other—the numinous antithesis between figure and ground. More important, such features also document an essential introversion. In marked contrast to American celebrations of man-in-motion, the iconography of the northern frontier communicates a vision of the self, alone and static, surrounded by a diffuse, alien otherness which itself—simply by opposition—becomes defined as, and implicated with, masculine aggression. Small wonder that Canadians should prefer to keep a low profile, to pattern themselves after passive rather than active role models. And they *do*. Judging by their

literature, Canadians identify most easily with fool-saints, amputees, Indians, animals, women—the dispossessed and powerless (McGregor, 1985, chapter 8). Judging by their social arrangments, however, this identification is *not* the liability it seems from an American perspective. And why should it be? On a private level, "feminine" passivity probably offers the best chance for survival in an actively hostile environment. This is undoubtedly why, complementing the subincision ceremony, aboriginal initiation rituals include a chant underlining the importance of inconspicuousness: "Do not shout! Always sit down in the dark! Do not stand up or you will be seen!" (Roheim, 1950, p. 85). On a public level, on the other hand, feminine passivity lends itself uniquely to the kind of cooperation which is essential for group survival in marginal conditions (see Stegner, 1977, Part III). As in the case of the Normanby Islanders, therefore, it seems clear that both the aborigine and the Canadian have been conditioned if not by the environment per se then at least by the auditor's response to the environment into the particular attitudes and behavior most suited to their particular physical situation. These attitudes and behavior may in an *immediate* sense be attributed to given child-rearing practices—the Normanbian's strictness, the aborigine's protracted indulgence (Roheim, 1950, pp. 166, 173)—but both these practices and the more covert cultural cues which presumably operate to reinforce them are structured quite specifically by the givens of the material—that is, transhuman—context.

Nature rather than culture provides the key to human development, then. Does this mean that we can now simply classify cultures according to the kind of physical setting they occupy? Unfortunately, no. For one thing, "history" can affect considerably the way any given environment is actually experienced. For another thing, "environment" includes many more variables than simply the clemency of the weather. It is these variables, more often than not, that determine exactly how the physical facts get translated into formal—that is, aesthetic-cum-mythic—terms. More important, perhaps, we are a long way from understanding all the psychic mechanisms involved in this phenomenon. Counter to the American example, the foregoing case studies would seem to reveal that rather than feminine nature and masculine civilization, the operative dichotomy in primitive cultures is based on feminine and masculine nature. Counter to *this*, other examples can easily be adduced to suggest that it is the kind, rather than simply the relative benevolence of the setting that determines its specific symbolic associations. Among the Pacific northwest coast Indians, for instance, nature is conceived in adversarial terms, but because its most problematic aspects relate to the life-sustaining activities of fishing, and thus to the female symbol of the ocean, the reaction is neither mother-identification nor father-identification but a kind of ascetic withdrawal that avoids both the dangers of extraversion *and*

the "feminine" taint of sexuality (Roheim, 1950). Even among primitives, then, the environmental influence is far from a simple one. In advanced societies it is often impossible to determine what "environmental influence" even means.

This is not simply a question of classification. Leaving aside the now-sticky question of whether symbolic categories like *Moira* and *Themis* have any transsituational validity at all, it becomes apparent, considering only the North American example, that once we reach the level of *manufactured* environments, similar effects can result from quite dissimilar causes. If we look at the American south, for instance, it seems evident that since the Civil War this region has been characterized by exactly the same kind of "garrison mentality" that characterizes the northern frontier. In marked contrast to the linear dynamic of the rest of the United States, judging by its historic modes of self-imaging, the south, just like Canada, is obsessed with the inside/outside dichotomy. Just like Canada its greatest fears concern the perceived dangers of hubris, of violating boundaries, of attempting to transcend the self/other interface by means of either word or flesh. Just like Canada, consequently, it is preoccupied with the rituals of mediation, from etiquette through religion to art. William Faulkner's explorations of the problems entailed by subjective versus objective modes of "knowing"; Tennessee Williams' portraits of doomed dynasties; Flannery O'Connor's fatalism; Carson McCuller's fascination with the physically or mentally handicapped; Walker Percy's preoccupation with human isolation—not to mention the obtrusive gothic element to be found throughout the whole literary corpus: all of these clearly bespeak not just nervousness about the non-self but an almost claustrophobic sense of enclosure. Like Canada, then, the south is clearly a centripetal culture. *Unlike* Canada, however, the antagonist for the southerner is not an inimical environment—the southerner in fact *loves* nature—but an historic enemy, the Yankee. From this it appears that the role of nature is not as simple as was implied earlier. It also becomes evident that in the primal encounter itself, as in the secondary developments we have derived from it, it is the *form* rather than the content of the experience that imprints itself on the collective unconscious. The traumatic recoil produces a centripetal personality regardless of what, specifically, one is recoiling from.

This, as promised, brings us back to Freud. If the American communal psyche is saved from the Oedipus complex by a kind of normalized duplicity, the Canadian one most definitely is not. When the symbolic ego is feminine, the landscape—the "outside"—as we have seen becomes masculine by process of elimination. This makes the Father our first and most natural antagonist, not because we envy his access to the Mother (feminized, we *are* the Mother), but simply as a matter of course. Like Freud, therefore, we both revere and fear him. Unlike Freud, we do so not because we wish to *become* him—for who wants to be an alien monster—but because he represents

everything we are not. Perhaps, though, this is to mislead a little. Perhaps, in fact, Canadians are not so unlike Freud after all—or to be more accurate, perhaps he was not so unlike us. There is every reason to suppose that the nineteenth and early twentieth-century Central European Jews, like the southerners not merely engulfed by but dependent upon their historic enemies, would develop a centripetal persona. There is also every reason to suppose that inasmuch as the symbolic feminization entailed by this development would necessarily conflict with the "official," strongly patriarchal ideals of both the race and the times, it would be vigorously denied or disguised on the level of conscious response. What does this have to do with Freud? It is intriguing to note the extent to which his primal myth as delineated in *Totem and Taboo* (1918), *diverged* from the Oedipus story in which it ostensibly had its roots. Far from the willfully libidinous parricide of Freud's scenario, the protagonist of the original Greek version was tricked into sin, if sin it was, not by his own desires but by the malevolence or at least the whims of fate. According to the Greeks, in other words, Oedipus was far less villain than dupe (see Kaufmann, 1979, especially pp. 153-154). It is this, of course—as Freud no doubt sensed—that makes the fable such an apposite expression of the centripetal world view. If we look at Canadian folklore, in fact, we will find that the experience embedded in this particular myth, far from foreign, comprises a kind of communal nightmare that keeps coming up in fact and fiction, over and over again. *And sex has nothing to do with it.* The Queen, far from motive, is simply a badge of office (compare Fromm, 1951). Election, not lust, is what this myth is all about. The dangers of being singled out from the crowd. Of being powerful. Of being *chosen.* Odd as it may seem, despite communal trepidation about "otherness" the Canadian is afraid not only of suffering from but—even more—of *turning into* an aggressor. Like the Oedipus story, therefore, our favorite cautionary tale north of the border (simultaneously confirming and appeasing our worst fears) concerns the man who is transformed, involuntarily, into a monster, a hero, a "father," a wreaker of havoc, an inadvertent death-bringer simply by virtue of his "given" masculine nature—and who is then punished for his involuntary sin, not by his victims, who are by definition helpless, but by those same ponderous, impersonal forces which raised him to his unsought prominence in the first place (see McGregor, 1985, chapter 9). The Canadian folk-hero, in other words, is neither John Wayne nor Conan the Barbarian, nor even Florence Nightingale, but that misguided and ill-fated Métis messiah, Louis Riel—leader and loser, aggressor and victim together: *the only kind of hero the introvert can imagine him/herself likely to become.*

This vision, and the fear it embodies, is nothing more than the natural counterpoint to our centripetal orientation. It is also, I would claim, the counter-message that must be read between the lines of Freud's anthropological

fantasy. Freud's final version of the Oedipus myth was in all probability *not* Freud's first version of the Oedipus myth. Like the Greeks, like the Canadians, Freud was no doubt drawn to Oedipus at least initially because he exemplified the individual's fate in an uncertain universe. Why, then, did he betray that first vision? Because unlike the Canadian wilderness, now pushed back to the city limits, Freud's "other" was too immediate, too threatening to be confronted with equinimity. And I am not just speaking of his historical situation. Despite his repudiation of the Jewish Father-God, Freud carried "otherness" inside himself. He also, unfortunately, bore all the stigmata of racial and personal introversion. With all the good will in the world, Jones (1961) is unable to disguise the latent "feminine" streak in his subject: the moodiness, the fear of travelling, the fatal attraction to authoritarian personalities. With less good will, Rank and others speculate at length about Freud's terror of death (see Becker, 1975, pp. 93–124). Based on this evidence that he was indeed akin to the Canadian, what I would suggest is that Freud's transformation of the Oedipus myth from a story of victimization to a story of willful aggression, like his shift of emphasis from child abuse to infantile sexuality, in fact represented the public enactment of a private wish-fulfilling fantasy. This says nothing, to be sure, about the quality or the value of the theory itself. Motives in the long run are irrelevant to achievement. Which is just as well in Freud's case. Considering the evidence of analogues, it is eminently possible that in his entire lifelong quest for answers the founder of psychoanalysis was simply looking for more and more elaborate ways to camouflage or rationalize or perhaps even magically dispel his "unmanly" suspicions that humans are doomed to be the victims of fate. He would far rather see us as the victims of ourselves. Since this is a preference that *most*—although certainly not all—Western cultures share, the Oedipus scenario, precisely because of its covert duplicity, is valuable as a kind of therapeutic psychodrama. Insofar as it codifies a mediate rather than a truly basic phenomenon, however, it does *not* provide a portmaneau "explanation" for the mysteries of human nature.

References

Atwood, M. (1972). *Survival: A thematic guide to Canadian literature.* Toronto: Anansi.
Baritz, L. (1964). *City on a hill: A history of ideas and myths in America.* New York: Wiley.
Becker, E. (1975). *The denial of death.* New York: Free Press.
Brumm, U. (1970). *American thought and religious typology* [J. Hoagland, Trans.]. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press.
Cooper, J.F. (1961). Preface to *The Leatherstocking tales.* In *The Deerslaver.* New York: Washington Square.
de Crèvecoeur, H. St. John. (1963). *Letters from an American farmer.* Toronto: Signet.
Firth, R. (1970). The place of Malinowski in the history of economic anthropology. In R. Firth (Ed.), *Man and culture: An evaluation of the work of Bronislaw Malinowski* (pp. 209–228). London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Freud, S. (1918). *Totem and taboo: Resemblances between the psychic lives of savages and neurotics* [A.A. Brill, Trans.]. New York: Random House.

Fromm, E. (1951). *The forgotten language: An introduction to the understanding of dreams, fairy tales and myths.* New York: Grove Press.

Frye, N. (1971). *The bush garden: Essays on the Canadian imagination.* Toronto: Anansi.

Gairdner, W.D. (1972). Traill and Moodie: The two realities. *Journal of Canadian Fiction, 1,* 35–41.

Harper, J.R. (1977). *Painting in Canada.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Jones, E. (1961). *The life and work of Sigmund Freud* (L. Trilling and S. Marcus, Eds.). Harmondsworth, England: Penguin.

Jung, C.G. (1971). Marriage as a psychological relationship. In J. Campbell (Ed.), *The portable Jung* (pp. 163–177). New York: Viking.

Kaufmann, W. (1979). *Tragedy and philosophy.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Kline, M. (1970). *Beyond the land itself: Views of nature in Canada and the United States.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Lawrence, D.H. (1964). *Studies in classic American literature.* New York: Viking.

Malinowski, B. (1927). *Sex and repression in savage society.* London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Marx, L. (1964). *The machine in the garden: Technology and the pastoral ideal in the nineteenth century.* London and Oxford: Oxford University Press.

McGregor, G. (1985). *The Wacousta syndrome: Explorations in the Canadian langscape.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

McGregor, G. (in press). *The noble savage in the new world garden: Notes toward a syntactics of place.* Bowling Green: The Popular Press.

Miller, P. (1967). *Nature's nation.* Cambridge: Belknap.

Moore, A.K. (1957). *The frontier mind: A cultural analysis of the Kentucky frontiersman.* Lexington: University of Kentucky Press.

Neumann, E. (1979). Freud and the father image. In *Creative man: Five essays* (pp. 232–245). Princeton: Bollingen.

Northey, M. (1979). *The haunted wilderness: The gothic and grotesque in Canadian fiction.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Ortony, A. (Ed.). (1979). *Metaphor and thought.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Parsons, A. (1969). Is the Oedipus complex universal? The Jones-Malinowski debate. In *Belief, magic, and anomie: Essays in psychosocial anthropology* (pp. 3–63). New York: Free Press.

Poirier, R. (1966). *A world elsewhere: The place of style in American literature.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Roheim, G. (1950). *Psychoanalysis and anthropology: Culture, personality and the unconscious.* New York: International University Press.

Roheim, G. (1974). *The riddle of the sphinx, or human origins* [R. Money-Kyrle, Trans.]. New York: Harper and Row.

Ruland, R. (1976). *America in modern European literature: From image to metaphor.* New York: New York University Press.

Sanford, C. (1961). *The quest for paradise: Europe and the American moral imagination.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Slater, P.E. (1968). *The glory of Hera: Greek mythology and the Greek family.* Boston: Beacon Press.

Slotkin, R. (1973). *Regeneration through violence: The mythology of the American frontier, 1600–1860.* Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press.

Stegner, W. (1977). *Wolf Willow: A history, a story, and a memoir of the last plains frontier.* Toronto: Macmillan.

Walker, W. (1962). *James Fenimore Cooper: An introduction and interpretation.* New York: Barnes and Noble.

Williams G. (1962). *Wilderness and paradise in Christian thought.* New York: Harper.