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THE CONCEPT OF THE CREATIVE WORD IN THE WRITINGS OF N. SCOTT MOMADAY

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WORD IN THE WRITINGS OF

N. SCOTT MOMADAY

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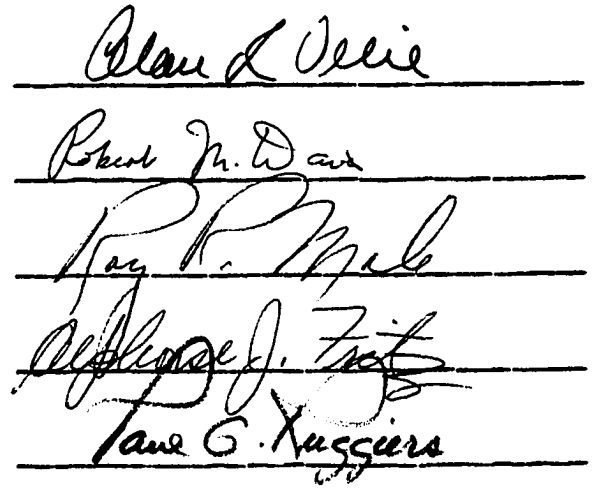

DISSERTATION COMMITTEE

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Chapter I:

INTRODUCTION

Midway through House Made of Dawn, N. Scott Momaday has his philosophical character Tosamah give voice to a memory that is central not only to Momaday's most famous work, but is also a revealing synthesis of his own philosophy of art and of life: "My grandmother was a storyteller; she knew her way around words. She never learned to read and write, but somehow she knew the good of reading and writing; she had learned how to listen and delight. She had learned that in words and in language, and there only, she could have whole and consummate being."[1] The truth the passage offers is a simple one--it is in fact a call for simplicity--but the expression of it throughout Momaday's writings is both eloquent and persuasive. The word is for him creative. It is the way to self-realization and an all-important understanding of the external universe and our place in it. Language is the way we impose order upon what would otherwise be chaos. The worst we can do is misuse it. Tosamah also describes the consequences of misuse:

> In the white man's world, language, too--and the way in which the white man thinks of it--has undergone a process of change. The white man takes such things as words and literatures for granted,

> as indeed he must, for nothing in his world is so commonplace. On every side of him there are words by the millions, an unending succession of pamphlets and bulletins, commentaries and conversations. He has diluted and multiplied the Word, and words have begun to close in upon him. He is sated and insensitive; his regard for language--for the Word itself--as an instrument of creation has diminished nearly to the point of no return. It may be that he will perish by the Word. (HMD, p. 89)

By contrast, Tosamah's grandmother, who is revealed to be in fact Momaday's grandmother in The Way to Rainy Mountain, knew the invaluable quality of words well-used: "Consider for a moment that old Kiowa woman, my grandmother, whose use of language was confined to speech. And be assured that her regard for words was always keen in proportion as she depended upon them. You see, for her words were medicine; they were magic and invisible. They came from nothing into sound and meaning. They were beyond price; they could neither be bought nor sold. And she never threw words away." (HMD, p. 89)

This attitude of reverence in regard to the word is central to Indian tradition. It is a reverence white society usually reserves exclusively for the written word, or, more specifically, for words used in creating literary art. Margot Astrov observes that

a traditional Indian belief has been that the word "lived before earth, sun, or moon came into existence," and had a "creative power of its own." The creative word, she emphasizes, came even before the creator. It "was meant to maintain and to prolong the individual life in some way or other--that is, to cure, to heal, to ward off evil, and to frustrate death."[2] A. Grove Day observes that "song among the Indians was seldom used for mere entertainment or for voicing the soul-cry of an impassioned individualist. Its function, for the Indian, was always quite definite, and was frequently associated with religious or magical ends, to obtain power over invisible life forces." "Song," he says, "was a way of tapping this superhuman force," what he terms "the good creative principle in the world."[3] Natachee Momaday, Scott's mother, has summarized this important concern for the creative word as follows: "The Indian has always used words with reverence and awe, weaving them into chants and songs to create beauty and to express his daily needs and aspirations." She adds that Scott "captures the essence of the Indian attitude toward words"[4] in describing his grandmother's use of language.

Such attitudes were central to Scott's early training, and, despite impressive academic credentials, his real frame of reference, both artistically and culturally, is the traditional Indian world. Born on February 27, 1934, near Anadarko, Oklahoma, he was raised by artist parents with a strong sense of the importance of racial heritage. His father, Al, a Kiowa, is a painter of

considerable stature in the Southwest. His mother, who is Cherokee and Choctaw, is a writer of widely recognized children's stories. Scott has said that his father "has a highly developed aesthetic sense," and taught him "a great deal about artistic process." His mother, he has said, "taught me what to look for in literature. She provided an excellent example."[5] But of primary importance to what he was to become was his parent's emphasis on his Indian heritage. Dominant in his memories are recollections of such experiences as the time when, at the age of six, he was taken by his parents to Devil's Tower in Wyoming, and then brought back over the seventeenth century migration route of his Kiowa ancestors, a journey that ended near Rainy Mountain in Oklahoma. (SI) It was an experience with immeasurable after-effects, and the germ experience for much of what he has written about his tribal past in the autobiographical The Way to Rainy Mountain and elsewhere.

The young Momaday obviously had the benefit of a wide variety of such initiatory and educative experiences, set in frequently changing locales. His parents were teachers then, and moving periodically. "I started school at Chinle in Arizona," he recalls, "and in the course of my growing up in the Southwest I went to many different kinds of schools, both on the reservation and off." (SI) The family lived in Hobbs, New Mexico, during the war years, and Scott's father worked for an oil company there in lieu of military service, while his mother worked for the War Department at Hobbs Army Air Field. In 1946 they moved to Jemez on the Navajo Reservation, where Al Momaday was Principal of the Day School and his wife

the school's only other teacher. Scott attended three years of high school at Bernalillo and at Albuquerque, and then spent his last year at a military academy in Virginia, in his words "simply because I had run out of schools on the reservation." (SI) Scott's reaction to all this moving is revelatory. He has emphasized that it affected him "for the good." "I was required to learn to go into new situations and acquire a feel for them," he has stated, adding: "There are a number of advantages to the process of integration. I found out much more about myself because of those situations. I think they helped me to acquire a good sense of self, to learn who I was." The fact that he was an only child was in his opinion "an affirmative thing" in regard to his artistic development. "It required me to exert myself in various ways, because I was alone," he has said, emphasizing that he has thought of himself as a creative writer since he was very young. (SI)

He did not, however, began writing seriously until after he entered New Mexico University. There for the first time, he felt motivated to give his creative impulses formal shape. He wrote poetry and occasional essays, and even entered some college writing contests. He did not publish his first piece, though, until 1959, the year after he left New Mexico University with a B.A. in Political Science. He was teaching at Dulce, on the Jicarilla Apache Reservation in New Mexico, when the breakthrough occurred. The New Mexico Quarterly published his poem "Earth and I Give You Turquoise," and the next issue published another poem, "Los Alamos".

Shortly thereafter he was on his way to Stanford University with a Creative Writing Fellowship.

At Stanford he came under the tutelage of Yvor Winters, who realized Momaday's potential and persuaded him to remain at Stanford to complete his doctorate. The extent of Winters' influence on him was apparently considerable. "I was emotionally very close to him," Momaday recalled recently. "I admired him a great deal. He could seem gruff, even intolerant, but he wasn't really that, I don't think." (SI) In a posthumous tribute to his teacher, Momaday wrote:

> Yvor Winters (1900-1968) was one of the truly great men of his time, I believe. Until I met him, I had only vague, motion-picture ideas of greatness. Winters, more than any man I have ever known, had the strength of his convictions; I could not have imagined such moral and intellectual integrity.
>
> And his convictions centered upon literature, especially poetry--the lyric poem in English. Poetry was the great glory of his life. "The end, the purpose of poetry," he wrote, "is the understanding of the human condition, the understanding both rational and emotional, and this is the most important activity of the human mind." Once, looking backward, he said: "I merely took literature seriously." It was a statement that seemed to comprehend him wholly; it might have been his epitaph.[6]

A position that was apparently almost immediately appealing to Momaday was Winters' much-publicized opinion of Pre-Romantic and Romantic poetry, which was later to be articulated most explicitly in Forms of Discovery. In a chapter entitled "The Sentimental-Romantic Decadence of the 18th & 19th Centuries," for example, Winters said that in the course of the eighteenth century "imagination and revery became indistinguishable." Citing poems by Dyer and Collins and Gray as examples of how passions were obscuring poetic expression, he declared that during this period "the nature and function of language disappeared from critical theory, and the quality of the language employed in poetry deteriorated."[7] Later, alluding to "the high incidence of madness" among poets of the age, he derided "a psychological theory which justifies the freeing of the emotions and which holds rational understanding in contempt."[8] He was even more emphatic in his rejection of those who in his opinion followed in the tradition. "Wordsworth is said to be the poet of nature," he observed, "but his description of nature is almost invariably pompous and stereotyped; he sees almost nothing."[9] He added that Wordsworth "gives us bad oratory about his own clumsy emotions and a landscape that he has never really perceived."[10] Of Keats he says that his poetry is "melancholy for the most part unexplained, melancholy for its own sake, combined with detail which is sensuous as regards intention but which is seldom perceived with real clarity."[11] Again, the main flaw is that "there is almost no intellect in or behind the poems,"[12] no clear and thoughtful perception of what has been experienced.

It would be a mistake to assume that Winters imposed these ideas on his student, although he obviously felt strongly about them. Rather, Momaday had been raised in an environment that emphasized the critical importance of a true and coherent understanding of the natural world, and an accurate and even reverential naming of it. Central to that was the right use of language, the clear articulation of what had been personally experienced. Winters' theories can in this light be seen as an affirmation of much of what Momaday had been taught or had personally experienced prior to his arrival at Stanford, and the motivation for Momaday to find ways to express what he truly believed.

Momaday soon became specifically interested in what he calls "anti-Romantic American literature." He has summarized that interest as follows: "I think what interests me is the way that Tuckerman and Dickinson and Melville, and to a lesser extent other people of the 19th Century, depart from what we think of as American Romanticism. It seems to me that they depart in significant ways, if you take Emerson to be the spokesman for the mainstream activity of American Romanticism." (SI) He continued to explore the idea after graduating from Stanford and joining the faculty at Santa Barbara in 1963, and in 1965 the Oxford University Press published his The Complete Poems of Frederick Goddard Tuckerman, with an approving critical foreword by Winters. The work was an outgrowth of Momaday's doctoral dissertation, and the Introduction outlines his now fully-developed anti-Romantic theory. His biographer,

Martha Scott Trimble, accurately observes that "the study tells as much about Momaday as about Tuckerman."[13] In it Momaday praises above all Tuckerman's "integrity toward nature," his "absolute dedication to the use and value of reason in the world of matter." He contrasts Tuckerman's scientific understanding of the particulars of the natural world with Emerson's naive Transcendentalism, and he accuses Emerson of looking at nature "through a veil of tradition and morality," and ignoring the fact of nature to construct "a gigantic symbol" for his abstract philosophies.[14] "There is in this context a crucial difference between Emerson and Tuckerman," he says. "Tuckerman was a keen student of the natural world. He perceived in much greater detail than did Emerson the shape and texture of his surroundings, and he was therefore able to cull and describe those details of setting which so complement the emotional content of his poems." Finally, he asserts that Emerson's idea that "intuition is superior to intellection" is a wrongful "repudiation of reason."[15] He praises Tuckerman's "departure from the Emersonian intuitive tradition" and his understanding of "the anomalies of the natural world: light and shadow, here and there, appearance and reality."[16] His summation is significant:

> It is against the background of Emersonian Romanticism that Witter Bynner's statement about Tuckerman becomes sharply meaningful. Tuckerman is indeed "isolated in an intense integrity toward nature." Superficially, he preserves the

> stage properties of contemporary Romantic literature: the spirit of isolation, a dissociation of emotional cause and effect, a preoccupation with nature. But Tuckerman's sense of isolation is defined in terms of intellectual honesty rather than self-reliance; his taste is measured in the fact rather than the celebration of sentiment; his attention is trained upon the surfaces rather than the symbols of his world.[17]

In his 1967 essay on Tuckerman entitled "The Heretical Cricket," Momaday intensifies his argument, this time contrasting Tuckerman's poem "The Cricket" with Bryant's "Thanatopsis". He labels "Thanatopsis" Emersonian, asserting that it "reveals clearly those qualities in Romantic tradition that are perculiarly American."[18] While Bryant's poem "is subordinated to intuition and faith," and "ends on a note of religious sentiment," Tuckerman's poem finally recognizes rational necessity, the need to "live in the certainty of death,"[19] in a state of conscious awareness. His poem, Momaday concludes, exemplifies "intellectual integrity in a context of intellectual dissolution."[20] It is a major nineteenth century work because "it represents a little known but significant literature of resistance to American Transcendentalism."[21]

That same year Momaday's own creative impulses were taking much more definite shape, and he was beginning to put his rapidly developing literary theories, particularly his convictions about

the right use of language, into practice. He had, in addition to the criticism, occasionally published poetry in the New Mexico Quarterly and The Southern Review over the years, but in October of 1966 he published his first prose efforts, "Three Sketches from House Made of Dawn" in The Southern Review. The Summer, 1967, edition of the New Mexico Quarterly contained "Two Sketches from House Made of Dawn". "The Way to Rainy Mountain," which was later to become the Introduction to the book by that name, appeared in the January 26, 1967, issue of The Reporter, and shortly thereafter a longer work, The Journey of Tai-me, was privately printed at Santa Barbara by Momaday and two friends, D. E. Carlsen and Bruce S. McCurdy.

The Journey of Tai-me is in Momaday's words "in a special sense the archetype"[22] of The Way to Rainy Mountain. After an introductory page, which was later to become, with some changes, the Prologue of The Way to Rainy Mountain, Momaday recounts through legend and fact the history of his people. It is the story of the origin of the Kiowas and their subsequent rise to tribal greatness, but the bitter end of their traditional culture is only briefly mentioned. Momaday's introduction emphasizes that this omission is intentional, a passing over of the "idle recollections, the mean and ordinary agonies of human history" in favor of "a time of great adventure and nobility and fulfillment."[23] The journey he describes is "preeminently the history of an idea, Man's idea of himself," that is, of a people's imagining of what they could become, and

because this is so he fittingly describes the time when the idea was most fully realized in fact. Of utmost importance is that what no longer physically exists still "has consummate being in language," and can be spiritually recreated each time the story is told and listened to. Momaday concedes that the verbal tradition "has suffered a considerable deterioration in time," but "the idea itself" is still "as crucial and complete as it ever was." It is a "miracle," and the journey "an expression of the human spirit," and the story is therefore necessarily told "in terms of wonder and delight." If he chooses his words honestly and carefully, he can reconstruct the all-important idea of which he speaks. It is an ambitious undertaking, with impressive results.

He begins with the purest forms of the idea, the origin myths, expands progressively through tribal legend and fact with representative retellings, and then narrows and personalizes the focus with stories that involve his grandparents and, at the last, the old woman Ko-sahn, to whom the book is dedicated. Finally, she is speaking directly to him, explaining about the Gourd Dance and the Sun Dance, and how they came to be. The storyteller is in an intimate relationship with her listener, personalizing the account for him in a uniquely intimate manner that also personalizes it for the reader. There is an immediacy, almost an urgency, to the telling, as the creative idea reasserts itself anew as it is verbally defined:

The old woman Ko-sahn went on, and this is what she said: When everything was ready a certain man appeared. In his hands there was a long pole. He shouted once, and then he jumped in the air. He shouted again, and everyone began to sing:

Wait! Wait! Wait for this man!

All in all, he shouted four times. He went in four directions, and each time he lay down. That was the beginning of the sun dance. The dancers treated themselves with buffalo medicine, and slowly they began to take their steps. You know they were the four societies: the O-homo, the Gourd Dance, the Black Leggings, and the Hunting Horse. And all the people were around, and they wore splendid things--beautiful buckskin and beads; the chiefs wore necklaces, and their pendants shone like the sun. There were many people, and oh, it was beautiful! That was the beginning of the Sun Dance. It was all for Tai-me, you know, and it was a long time ago.

In line with his increased productivity and rapidly expanding recognition, the New Mexico Quarterly published a collection of Momaday's poems in its Spring, 1968 issue. Then, later that same year, Harper and Row published House Made of Dawn. The idea for the book had been conceived in the early 1960's. Momaday had originally

intended for it to be a book of poems, but early on he "felt a little more comfortable with the flexibility of prose" in regard to the project, and so wrote it that way "over an extended period of time" while at Santa Barbara. (SI) As Martha Trimble has noted, initial reviews were not at all indicative of the acclaim the book was to receive later. A few reviewers seemed to recognize the book's general literary merit, but, in Professor Trimble's words, most of them "overlooked important aspects of the novel in order to comment on the author's Indian background."[24] In general, the reviewers who praised the book seemed to do so because some of the things it expressed were the right things at the right time, that is, at the time of a rapidly emerging Indian rights movement. In 1969, however, the literary world was taken completely by surprise when the Pulitzer Prize judges bestowed their award for fiction on Momaday's book. Later that year Signet printed it in paperback, and it was on its way to popular as well as critical success.

At that point success began to follow success. The University of New Mexico Press quickly published The Way to Rainy Mountain, and in 1970 Ballantine reissued it in paperback. This time the reviews were decidedly more favorable, although most reviewers made bows in the direction of the prestigious Pulitzer Prize, and virtually all of them again evaluated the work almost solely in terms of its American Indian context. And again, some were stubbornly snobbish and obtuse. The New Yorker, for example, labelled it "sentimentality and a kind of Fenimore Cooper nostalgia."[25] Only the Atlantic Monthly

seemed to recognize its real merit, describing it as "beautifully written, full of gentleness and dignity."[26]

Momaday's own essay on one of the legends, "The Story of the Arrowmaker," appeared in the New York Times Book Review on May 4, 1969.[27] It is by far the best expression of what The Way to Rainy Mountain is about. The legend itself is of an arrowmaker who catches a glimpse of someone in the dark outside of his tepee, watching him at his work. Continuing his work, he says: "I know that you are there on the outside, for I can feel your eyes upon me. If you are a Kiowa, you will understand what I am saying, and you will speak your name." There is no response, and so he takes one of the arrows that he has made and aims it all around, as if testing it. Then he aims the arrow at the spot where he knows his enemy to be, and sends it through his heart. Momaday notes that until now the story "has been the private possession of a very few, a tenuous link in that most ancient chain of language which we call the oral tradition." His recording of it is an important step, because now it is, in his words, "a link between language and literature," ensuring the preservation of an all-important idea. Describing it as one of a collection of stories that are "the milestones of an old migration," he explains how it and its companion pieces "record a transformation of the tribal mind."

Speaking specficially of the arrowmaker's story, he says: "It is a remarkable act of the mind, a realization of words and the world that is altogether simple and direct, yet nonetheless rare

and profound, and it illustrates more clearly than anything else in my experience, at least, something of the essential character of the imagination--and in particular of that personification which in this instance emerges from it: the man made of words." Importantly, "the story of the arrowmaker returns in a special way upon itself," because it is "after all, about language," that is, the creative power of language, and the point of it "lies not so much in what the arrowmaker does but in what he says--and indeed that he says it." "The principal fact," Momaday says of the arrowmaker, "is that he speaks, and in so doing he places his very life in the balance." It is what Momaday values most about the story. He further explains the arrowmaker by emphasizing that he "ventures to speak because he must; language is the repository of his whole knowledge and experience, and it represents the only chance he has for survival." Therefore, "he deals in the most honest and basic way with words." In short, the primary and climactic action in the story is the moment of speech. It is at that moment that the arrowmaker risks everything. The subsequent physical action is secondary to that, because the issue is decided at the instant the man in the dark fails to actualize himself in language, and from that moment he is doomed and the arrowmaker is secure. In summarizing the arrowmaker, Momaday says that he is "pre-eminently the man made of words. He has consummate being in language; it is the world of his origin and of his posterity, and there is no other. But it is a world of definite reality and of infinite possibility."

Finally, Momaday emphasizes the continuing importance of the original storyteller, a "nameless and unlettered" man who is in fact "one with the arrowmaker," and "has survived, by word of mouth, beyond other men." All in all, it is a persuasive argument for the importance of such legends, creatively re-created, and by extension for the sum total of the collection of them that is The Way to Rainy Mountain.

Momaday remained at Santa Barbara until 1969, except for the 1966-67 school year, which he spent in Amherst, Massachusetts, studying the works of Emily Dickinson as a Guggenheim Fellow, and then he joined the University of California at Berkeley faculty as Associate Professor of English and Comparative Literature. While at Berkeley he developed a course in the oral traditions in American Indian literature "under the rubric of comparative literature." (SI) His syllabus instruction to students of the course reflects an attitude of major importance in regard to the central thrust of his creative endeavors: "I want us to understand something of the nature of language and of the oral tradition in particular. In order to do this, we shall have to think of language in a new and different way. It will not be easy, but it will be worthwhile. We shall use the experience of the American Indian in this context as our point of reference."[28] He was above all becoming concerned with "the nature of language" and with "new and different ways of looking at it" in his writings. Most importantly, he was using what he knows best, "the experience of the American

Indian" as a literary "point of reference" to vivify his attitudes. His writing was not, as many critics were assuming, cause-oriented in the sense that the message was exclusively racial, a strict speaking out on the behalf of a long oppressed segment of our population. It included that, and justifiably so, but that inclusion was attendant to the real universality of the message. In another context, he has himself emphasized that all-important distinction: "I don't want to write about other, that is to say, non-Indian things, because of pressure to prove that I can. I am very much involved with my racial experience, and I think that my work will probably always reflect that involvement. I'm happy with that. I think it should. But let me emphasize that I've never felt compelled to do 'message writing'. I feel no particular compunction to speak for the Indian." (SI)

It was becoming increasingly apparent that Momaday's traditional American Indian background was in fact uniquely well-suited to his theories of creative art and creative living. "There's a potential integrity to the Indian that is very important," he has said. "It has to do with his concept of himself and his world. I don't think that that sort of thing is exclusive to the Indian, but he does often exemplify it." (SI) His 1970 essay, "An American Land Ethic," further pursued that point. He began it by telling of the writing of The Way to Rainy Mountain, and of his sense of incompleteness when he first thought he had finished the task. So he began to write again, producing what would be the Epilogue to

The Way to Rainy Mountain. This time he focused once more upon the old woman Ko-sahn, and what it was she meant to him. He wrote of her "delight in language and in remembrance," and how she "conjured up the past, imagining perfectly the long continuity of her being."[29] In the process of imagining her he was drawn back into the work, in his words "projected myself--imagined myself--out of the room and out of time." But when he had finished, and had reread what he had written about her and her past, it "did not seem real." Then he describes a miracle:

> In desperation almost, I went back over the final paragraphs, backwards and forwards, hurriedly. My eyes fell upon the name, Ko-sahn. And all at once everything seemed suddenly to refer to that name. The name seemed to humanize the whole complexity of language. All at once, absolutely, I had the sense of the magic of words and of names. Ko-sahn, I said. And I said again KO-SAHN.
>
> Then it was that that ancient, one-eyed woman Ko-sahn stepped out of the language and stood before me on the page.[30]

It was this humanization of language, making the word live, that was becoming Momaday's central concern. What follows is a dialogue between the writer and the old woman, during which she significantly declares: "You imagine that I am here in this room, do you not? That is worth something. You see, I have existence, whole being,

in your imagination. It is but one kind of being, to be sure, but it is perhaps the best of all kinds. If I am not here in this room, grandson, then surely neither are you."[31] He learns her lesson well, for when she has returned to her place within the language that he has created, he concludes poetically that he then "imagined I was alone in the room."[32] It is a reversal with a powerful impact.

In the remainder of the essay Momaday explained how important the land, the physical universe, is to this process of imagining and expressing that imagining with the creative word. He says:

> We have sooner or later to come to terms with the world around us--and I mean especially the physical world, not only as it is revealed to us immediately through our senses, but also as it is perceived more truly in the long turn of seasons and of years....We Americans need now more than ever before--and indeed more than we know--to imagine who and what we are with respect to the earth and sky. I am talking about an act of the imagination essentially, and the concept of an American land ethic.[33]

In describing her response to the explosion of Leonid meteors in 1833, he concluded eloquently with an explanation of the immensity of Ko-sahn's creative achievement:

> And in the racial memory, Ko-sahn had seen the falling stars. For her there was no distinction between the individual and the racial experience, even as there was none between the mythical and the historical. Both were realized for her in the one memory, and that was of the land. This landscape, in which she had lived for a hundred years, was the common denominator of everything that she knew and would ever know--and her knowledge was profound. Her roots ran deep into the earth, and from those depths she drew strength enough to hold still against all the forces of chance and disorder. And she drew therefrom the sustenance of meaning and of mystery as well. The falling stars were not for Ko-sahn an isolated or accidental phenomenon. She had a great personal investment in that awful commotion of light in the night sky. For it remained to be imagined. She must at last deal with it in words; she must appropriate it to her understanding of the whole universe. And, again, when she spoke of the Sun Dance, it was an essential expression of her relationship to the life of the earth and to the sun and moon.[34]

Of primary importance is the fact that while her understanding was in part mythical, it was not romantically naive. It was informed

with a deep knowledge of the physical universe and of her place in it. Because her real knowledge was so profound, the myths act primarily as poetic reinforcement for what she knows.

In "A vision beyond time and place,"[35] an essay printed in the July 2, 1971 issue of Life magazine, Momaday discussed another excerpt from The Way to Rainy Mountain. This time the account is factual, as told to him by his father. It is the story of the old man Cheney, yet another arrowmaker, who used to visit Momaday's grandfather, and of how he would "pray aloud to the rising sun" each morning. "He was a lean old man in braids and was impressive in his age and bearing," Momaday says, and then adds significantly that he can still picture him "as if he were there now." In fact, he is "there now" in an important symbolic way for Momaday, and the rest of the description is present tense: "I like to watch him as he makes his prayer. I know where he stands and where his voice goes on the rolling grasses and where the sun comes up on the land. There, at dawn, you can feel the silence. It is cold and clear and deep like water. It takes hold of you and will not let you go."

Despite the fact that Cheney died before Momaday was born, and he "never knew where he came from or what of good and bad entered his life," Momaday felt that he "knew who he was, essentially." Cheney "saw very deeply into the distance," with "vision extended far beyond the physical boundaries of his time and place." He saw so deeply that he "perceived the wonder and meaning of Creation itself," and, most importantly, "In his mind's eye he could integrate

all the realities and illusions of the earth and sky; they became for him profoundly intelligible and whole." Momaday then tells of standing where the old man stood one morning, to see the dawn:

> It was an irresistible and awesome emergence, as waters gather to the flood, of weather and of light. I could not have been more sensitive to the cold, nor than to the heat which came upon it. And I could not have foreseen the break of day. The shadows on the rolling plains became large and luminous in a moment, impalpable, then faceted, dark and distinct again as they were run through with splinters of light. And the sun itself, when it appeared was pale and immense, original in the deepest sense of the word. It is no wonder, I thought, that an old man should pray to it. It is no wonder . . . and yet, of course, wonder is the principal part of such a vision. Cheney's prayer was an affirmation of his wonder and regard, a testament to the realization of a quest for vision.

It is again "the deepest sense of the word" that is Momaday's primary concern. His literary expression of what he has seen and felt is analogous to Cheney's prayer, which is most importantly an articulation of what the old man has experienced, an affirmation by naming, a saying of what is. Momaday's whole

literary tone is in fact prayerful, for that very reason. The remainder of his explanation of Cheney's vision, and of the vision of the American Indian generally, is also a description of the kind of vision he himself frequently demonstrates in his prose: "This native vision, this gift of seeing truly, with wonder and delight, into the natural world, is informed by a certain attitude of reverence and self-respect. It is a matter of extrasensory as well as sensory perception, I believe. In addition to the eye, it involves the intelligence, the instinct, and the imagination."

Momaday concluded by suggesting that Cheney at dawn "saw as far into himself . . . as he saw into the distance," knowing "of his existence and of his place in the scheme of things." Part of the modern dilemma, he adds, is a "cultural nearsightedness." We concentrate too much on "the superficial, and artificial, aspects of our environment," and, he concludes, "we might do well to enter upon a vision quest of our own, that is, a quest after vision itself." It is what he learned from Indian tradition, and an attitude which informs all of what he writes.

On April 16, 1972, Momaday began writing a weekly column for Viva, the Sunday magazine of the Santa Fe New Mexican, and continued it on a regular basis until December 9, 1973.[36] He wrote on a wide variety of subjects during that extended period, but he returned again and again to the several and related topics that were becoming increasingly important to him as he continued to develop his art.

He wrote recurrently of the natural world, of the importance of an honest perception of it, and above all of the crucial role of language in the necessary process of articulating that perception. He had been developing and refining these ideas both creatively and critically for a long time, and so his newspaper columns are revealing summaries of his major tenets at that time.

The June 4, 1972, column, for example, was entitled "Singing about the beauty of the earth," and begins with a Navajo ceremonial song which, he says, "celebrates the sounds that are made in the natural world, the particular voices that beautify the earth." Terming the idea of the song "especially relevant to our time," Momaday observes that "we have failed in our time to articulate the beauty of the world, for we have failed to perceive that the world is beautiful." He adds that "we seem to be repudiating the very planet upon which we live, removing it beyond the reach of our senses," and he labels this "madness." Significantly, the Navajo singer "is a man of deep ethical conviction; his perception is keen and comprehensive; he holds the whole world in his regard, and he celebrates his possession of it." "His whole attitude, together with the very act in which he is engaged," Momaday adds significantly, "is in the best sense ordinary, that is to say appropriate." There is an important progression here. The singer's perception of the beauty of the world is his "attitude," and his song is the articulation of that attitude, his communicative "act." His expression affirms his relationship to the whole. He is in

no way eccentric or isolated from his world. Thus, his communion is importantly "ordinary."

The June 18, 1972, column, entitled "The Woman who knew Africa," is devoted to Karen Blixen, whose Out of Africa was published in 1937. Momaday calls it "one of the great books of our time," because "she entered so completely into the landscape of the place that it became at last the landscape of the mind." She was, in other words, fully sensitive to her natural surroundings, and re-created them so completely in words that she succeeded in bestowing the reality of them upon the reader. This communication of an environment through language was for Momaday the supreme accomplishment, and it is why he held Karen Blixen in such high esteem.

In the July 30, 1972, column, Momaday wonders, almost wistfully, "What will happen to the land?" He speaks apprehensively of modern progress and the changes involved, and then summarizes the importance of the natural landscape:

> Landscapes tend to stand out in my memory. When I think back to a particular time in my life, I tend to see it in terms of its setting, the background in which it achieves for me a certain relief. Or, to put it another way, I am inclined closely to associate events with the physical dimensions in which they take place. Perhaps this is true of most of us, but, as for me, I have become

in recent years more and more conscious of this associative process and its implications.

In his December 10, 1972, column, entitled "Three personalities, one landscape," he adds: "The sense of place, as I think of it, is an equation in which Man and the landscape are related. My own writing, much of it, is focused upon that relationship. It is an equation that interests me particularly, and I believe that it is important." By way of example, he praises a friend with a highly developed "sense of place": "He knows the immediate landscape of his worldas well as any man can. His idea of that landscape--and of all the vital forces which inform it, the wildlife, the seasons, the rhythms of language and community--is also his idea of himself."

All of these things are predicated on the necessity for a realistic appraisal of one's surroundings, and are diametrically opposed to the kind of romanticizing that ignores or obscures that occasional harshness that is also a part of nature. And, as stated in the Tuckerman essays, it is especially opposed to the notion that the universe is morally manipulative of mankind. In the May 13, 1973, column, entitled "Finding a need for nature," Momaday tells of camping out with a friend, and being reminded of Camus' reference to "the benign indifference of the universe." Momaday concludes that "there is great solace in that idea," but adds poetically that "perhaps you have to see the stars in order to believe it."

Finally, in the June 3, 1973, column, entitled "An opportunity to speak out," he summarizes his concern for the land and man's place in it:

> It is time to hold the land in our regard, to appropriate the earth to our imagination, to express our sacred interest in everything that extends to the skyline and beyond. . . .
>
> For we are held by more than the force of gravity to the earth. It is the entity from which we are sprung, and that into which we are dissolved in time. . . .
>
> And unless we know this to be true, unless we have the sense of this communion, we are lost, uprooted, severed from our source and our destiny. And we can no longer imagine who, or what, or even that we are. . . .
>
> I want to say that my notion of the earth, if not the earth itself, is inviolate. And by virtue of reverence and belief and imagination are the earth and my notion of it one and the same thing.

The newspaper column had been a good thing for Momaday. In the March 11, 1973, column, entitled "A columnist recalls...", he tells of "discovering muscles, tissues, nerve ends of perception that I didn't know I had," adding that it was "rather a special occupation," demanding "a different kind of energy and imagination."

He concluded: "It has been good for me to know of these demands and to act upon them." But of course the regular demands of such a public and essentially narrative writing exercise also imposed too many limitations upon an artist increasingly concerned with refining his poetic voice, and, having explored the possibilities inherent to the form, Momaday eventually gave it up.

In the fall of 1972, Momaday had returned to Stanford as Professor of English and Comparative Literature. He was immediately granted a year's leave of absence to go to New Mexico State University at Las Cruces, New Mexico, with the title of Distinguished Visiting Professor. He returned to Stanford in the fall of 1973 and began his teaching duties there.

His major creative effort in 1973 was the explanatory text for Colorado: Summer, Fall, Winter, Spring, a handsome pictoral published by Rand McNally and Company.[37] Photographer David Muench has captured all of the wild beauty of the Colorado landscape, and Momaday vividly imagines it in words, and himself and his people in the process. The opportunity to do so at this point seems uniquely appropriate.

He begins by calling the figure on a map "an intelligent fiction," which "bears no real relation to the land." Terming it "the most emphatic geology in North America," he declares that it is "a wilderness that geometry does not comprehend." (CS, p. 7) One must know it in personal terms, and imagine it as it was and

is in terms of the creatures which inhabit it. Later, for example, he says that "the Kiowa remember that they hunted antelope in the vicinity of Bent's Fort," (CS, p. 12) poetically demonstrating that the experience with the land is collective, a timeless tribal or group involvement which establishes all-important continuity. In another place he adds that "the Kiowa remember having hunted antelope on foot and with clubs in the vicinity of Bent's Fort," (CS, p. 64) implying a much earlier but analogous tribal experience.

This idea of timelessness and the "irresistible continuum of life" is further emphasized through a consideration of bristlecones:

> The Bristlecones are the thorns of the ancient earth. And they are vital. It is that, the impulse of life in them, that sets them apart from other wonders, I believe. There have been moments, a few, in which, by means of some extraordinary act of the imagination, I came suddenly upon a full awareness of the life force within me, intensely conscious of my being alive, of sharing in the irresistible continuum of life itself. And those moments have been as much of immortality as I can comprehend. Such moments are concentrated in these trees, and they have neither a beginning nor an end in time. (CS, p. 51)

Throughout the text is an emphasis upon the necessity to "see clearly into the physical world," to examine it firsthand and

realistically and to know all of what it is. For example, there is his close scrutiny of buckwheat: "There are meadows of buckwheat and grasses on the lower slopes. I walked for a long time one day and lay down in a meadow to sleep. Later, when I awoke, I looked through a bunch of buckwheat at the sky. At point-blank range, I noticed for the first time that buckwheat grows in horizontal layers. On a miniature scale it bears a resemblance to the thorn tree of Africa." (CS, p. 61) Later, he considers buttercups from both near and far, defining the varying perceptions:

> In late spring buttercups ring the lakes of the high country. From a distance they create a field of color in the eye, a vague circle, or a ribbon that has fallen down to make a bright and indefinite pattern on the land. They trace the water's edge and give it to a hard and brilliant relief. The eye can integrate such juxtapositions; they suggest the first idea of cartography in the mind.
>
> On closer view there are white and blue and sand-colored stones among the bells and buttercups. There is at once an elaboration and a disintegration of color, confusion in the best sense. It is not easy to see clearly into the physical world, but it is eminently worthwhile to try. I am told by an old Indian that it is good for the eye to behold a sky-blue stone. (CS, p. 110)

The overriding importance of all of this landscape is the effect it has upon the viewer. "Here is my imagination realized to its whole potential," Momaday declares. "Nothing of what I behold is lost upon me here; the wilderness fulfills my sphere of instinct, and I am as intensely alive as I ever was or will be." (CS, p. 86)

Then he was called upon to do the introductory essay for the National Geographic Society's impressive new publication, The World of the American Indian, which was published in 1974.[38] The essay is entitled "I Am Alive...," and in many ways is similar to "A vision beyond time and place." It begins with Momaday's recollection of an experience his grandfather, Mammedaty, had years before he was born. He remembers it "in the way that we human beings seem at times to remember Genesis--across evolutionary distances." It is something "that persists in the blood, and there only." (WAI, p. 11) It was an event which took place near Rainy Mountain in the summer of 1920. His grandfather, a member of the Gourd Dance Society, was presented with a beautiful black horse during the giveaway ceremony attendant to the Gourd Dance. Momaday describes the event as a moment of great excitement which was at the same time "a moment of great meaning and propriety." "All was well with the Kiowa," he adds, and "everything in the world was intact and in place, as it ought to be." (WAI, p. 14) Momaday's retrospective reaction to it summarizes what tribal tradition is to him and, by implication, to his art:

> This blood recollection, which is an intricate image indeed, composed of innumerable details, is especially vivid and immediate to me, a whole and irrevocable act of the imagination. I have the sense always that the event, the dramatic action, is just now, in a moment, taking place in the real world. I have held on to this vision for many years, keeping it within my reach, bringing it into focus in moments of peace and quiet. I have walked about in this vision, taken it into account from many different angles, across many distances, in many different lights. And I have thought about it; I have tried to understand it in its own terms; I have tried to perceive myself in it. (WAI, p. 14)

He concludes that his grandfather's experience is "a synthesis of other, more general experiences," an "exposition of racial memory." Then he explains more specifically in terms of the American Indian:

> The American Indian is distinguished by certain things, certain perceptions of himself in relation to the world around him. This is to say that the American Indian--or indeed any man--is someone who thinks of himself in a certain way; he is precisely equal to his own idea of himself. In the case of the American Indian the idea of the self is based upon a number of equations. They constitute a

philosophy, a world view that is peculiarly native, indeed definitive:

> You see, I am alive.
> You see, I stand in good relation to the earth.
> You see, I stand in good relation to the gods.
> You see, I stand in good relation to all that is beautiful.
> You see, I stand in good relation to you.
> You see, I am alive, I am alive. (WAI, p. 14)

What follows is a point by point discussion of this poetic creed. Following the introductory "I am alive" assertion of vitality, the first affirmation is of the earth. The natural world is the source and the foundation for all else. For the Indian, "the sense of place is paramount." It provides him with his "true identity." (WAI, p. 14) Therefore it logically cannot be individually owned. Momaday emphasizes that the Indian is one whose "imagination of himself," his all-important self-image, "is also and at once an imagination of the physical world from which he proceeds and to which he returns in the journey of his life." "By means of his involvement in the natural world," Momaday concludes, "does the Indian insure his own well being." (WAI, p. 23)

A related perception is of course the Indian's profound sense of the religious. At this point Momaday speaks of his personal experiences. He tells of his boyhood life at Jemez Pueblo, and how he "entered into the current of life there and perceived the

great spiritual tides that move upon that world and determine virtually everything within it.":

> I have seen the ancient races which are run at dawn, the descent from the hills at first light of men who are buffalo and deer, and the harvest dances, in which all the sound and motion of the universe is the one dimension of the music and the dance.
>
> Once I went with the people of Jemez to plant the cacique's fields--those fields which are reserved for the chief of the village, and which are planted ceremonially by the townspeople in his honor. And I felt that I had entered into some primordial migration of man through time. I felt the seeds in the earth and ate of their yield, and all of this culminated in the profound reality of spiritual affirmation and fellowship. (WAI, p. 23)

Then he tells of the last time he visited his grandmother, and how they went together to see the sacred Tai-me doll. He was allowed to make a symbolic offering to Tai-me, and then his grandmother prayed in Kiowa. "During those moments," he says, "I felt that I had come to the full religious meaning of my life." (WAI, p. 24) After speaking proudly of his membership in the Taimpe, or Gourd Dance Society, Momaday concludes: "The Indian exerts his spirit upon the world by means of religious activity, and he

transcends himself in a sense; he expands his awareness to include all of creation. And in this he is restored as a man and as a race. Nothing in his universe is exclusive of him, but he is part of all that is and forever was and will be." (WAI, p. 25)

Speaking next of the beautiful, Momaday states that "there is a remarkable aesthetic perception which marks the Indian world, a sense of beauty, of proportion and design." The Indian child, he says, most obviously exemplifies this virtue, seeing "with both his physical eye and the eye of his mind." He sees not only "what is really there to be seen," but also "the effect of his own observation upon the scene." "It is the kind of vision," Momaday adds, "that is developed in poets and painters and photographers, often over a span of many years." (WAI, p. 25) Of the art that this kind of creative thinking produces in the Indian world, he terms it "at once universal and unique. It is the essence of abstraction, and the abstraction of essences." (WAI, p. 26) He concludes by applying this generalization significantly to the creative word:

> Perhaps this quality of abstraction, this understanding of order and spatial relationships, proportion and design, is most fully realized in language. The oral tradition of the Indian, even more than his plastic arts, is vast and various. His stories and songs, his legends and lore and prayers, are exceptionally rich and imaginative. They reflect an understanding of, and belief in,

> the power and beauty of language that is very nearly lost upon us who have, by and large, only the experience of a written tradition. So great is this oral tradition of the native American that in the increasing light of it we must begin to revise our understanding of our American heritage, I believe. And in this respect, too, the Indian affirms his commitment to an aesthetic ideal. (WAI, p. 26)

Finally, he stresses that "the Indian's perception is human." It is "an ethical perception, a moral regard" for all life. Most importantly, "His best idea of himself is, after all, an idea of all men, an idea of humanity." He calls it "a cardinal principal of life in the Indian world, and a sacred trust," and the closing repetition of the "I am alive" phrase is in those terms a fitting description of a man at the center of his natural universe. (WAI, p. 26) The final paragraph of Momaday's introductory essay is a poetical retelling of his grandfather's acquiring of the beautiful black horse, and its vivid present tense form dramatically emphasizes the dynamic and continuing message of the piece.

After teaching the fall quarter of 1973 at Stanford, Momaday took another leave of absence in the winter and spring, and spent that time in the Soviet Union as Visiting Lecturer at the State University of Moscow. That summer, his first book of poems, Angle of Geese and Other Poems was published. In the fall of 1974, he returned to his teaching duties at Stanford. His new book The Gourd Dancer, is currently in manuscript form.

These two books are interesting combinations of various styles of poetry and some prose. Angle of Geese contains Momaday's early, free-form poetry, as well as some quite rigidly structured poems he apparently wrote as a result of Winters' influence. The book also contains several essentially prose passages which have only the slightest hint of line arrangement and enough poetic repetition and alliteration to justify their inclusion with the rest. The Gourd Dancer is a refinement of that pattern, intermingling varying poetic expressions with basically prose passages, and in general passing back and forth between the two genres to the extent that generic distinctions are minimized.

Momaday's efforts, in summary, demonstrate a marked progression in regard to both subject matter and technique. His Indian heritage enabled him to begin writing with a profound understanding of the natural world and a reverence for the creative language that best describes it, both as it was and as it should continue to be. His academic training, and in particular his experience with Winters, influenced him to define more clearly his frame of reference and more closely structure his expression. As will be pointed out later, these influences led to perhaps too much structuring for a time in regard to his poetry, but in general they were invaluable. Winters helped him to avoid many pitfalls, particularly the tendency toward excess, and increased his understanding of the difference between a true perception of the universe and a romantic misrepresentation of it. House Made of Dawn is among other things a vivid re-creation of

the natural world while for the most part avoiding exaggerations and distortions of it. It seems apparent that Momaday wrote House Made of Dawn in prose rather than poetry because he felt the need for a greater flexibility of expression than his training with Winters allowed, but even it, as will be pointed out, has a highly lyrical quality, and The Way to Rainy Mountain heightens that effect, both structurally and in regard to its language. For that reason, it is most instructive to consider both books chronologically at first, to see the basically poetic departure and return, question and refrain structures of them, and to see how those structures and the lyrical, imagistic intensities of language in the two books prepare for the essentially poetic expressions that have followed.

Most of what Momaday has written has finally been a progression in language, a coming to terms with the best ways to make the physical landscape and what it signifies "the landscape of the mind." Along the way he has rejected only those approaches which create artificial barriers between his two basic methods of expression. He does not even now deny the useful distinctions between prose and poetry, but his prose, particularly in The Gourd Dancer, is now used as narrative connectives between poems and is incorporated into the larger structure of what is in the final analysis poetry. It is a method that Momaday has arrived at during a long writing apprenticeship, and one that he is obviously most comfortable with, and he is now, in his words, "writing at a good, furious pace." [39]

FOOTNOTES TO CHAPTER I

[1]N. Scott Momaday, House Made of Dawn (New York: Signet Books, The New American Library, Inc., 1969, an authorized reprint of a hardcover edition by Harper and Row, 1968, New York), p. 88. All further quotations from this text are identified parenthetically by the abbreviation HMD followed by the page number.

[2]Margot Astrov, ed., American Indian Prose and Poetry: An Anthology (New York: Capricorn Books, 1962, originally published as The Winged Serpent, 1946), p. 19.

[3]A. Grove Day, The Sky Clears: Poetry of the American Indians (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, Bison Book edition reprinted from the Macmillan Company 1951 edition), p. 2.

[4]Natachee Scott Momaday, American Indian Authors, the Multi-Ethnic Literature series (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1972), p. 1.

[5]This writer interviewed N. Scott Momaday on 19 and 20 November, 1974, at Stanford University, and these statements were recorded then. All further quotations from those Stanford interviews are identified parenthetically by the abbreviation SI.

[6]N. Scott Momaday, "The Man Who Took Literature Seriously," Viva, the Sunday magazine of the Santa Fe New Mexican, 2 September, 1973, p. 8.

[7]Yvor Winters, Forms of Discovery: Critical and Historical Essays on the Forms of the Short Poem in English (Alan Swallow, 1967), p. 149.

[8]Winters, p. 158.

[9]Winters, p. 171.

[10]Winters, p. 172.

[11]Winters, p. 178.

[12]Winters, p. 179.

[13]Martha Scott Trimble, N. Scott Momaday, Boise State College Western Writers Series, No. 9 (Boise: Dept. of English, Boise State College, 1973), p. 13.

[14]N. Scott Momaday, ed., The Complete Poems of Frederick Goddard Tuckerman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. xxiii.

[15]Momaday's Tuckerman, p. xxiv.

[16]Momaday's Tuckerman, p. xxv.

[17]Momaday's Tuckerman, pp. xxv, xxvi.

[18]N. Scott Momaday, "The Heretical Cricket," The Southern Review, 3, Winter, 1967, p. 48.

[19]"The Heretical Cricket," p. 49.

[20]"The Heretical Cricket," p. 50.

[21]"The Heretical Cricket," p. 43.

[22]N. Scott Momaday, The Way to Rainy Mountain (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1969), the "Acknowledgments" page.

[23]N. Scott Momaday, The Journey of Tai-me (produced in collaboration with D. E. Carlsen and Bruce S. McCurdy at the University of California, Santa Barbara, in a fine edition limited to 100 hand-printed copies). This work is not paginated, and all further quotations from it are identified only by quotation marks.

[24]Trimble, pp. 19, 20.

[25]"Briefly Noted-General," The New Yorker, 45, 17 May, 1969, p. 152.

[26]Phoebe Adams, "Short Reviews: Books," Atlantic Monthly, 223, June, 1969, p. 117.

[27]N. Scott Momaday, "The Story of the Arrowmaker," New York Times Book Review, 4 May, 1962, p. 2. The entire essay appears on page two, and further quotations from it are identified only by quotation marks.

[28]Taken from Momaday's Fall, 1974 English 068/168 course syllabus.

[29]N. Scott Momaday, "An American Land Ethic," in The Craft of Prose, ed. Robert H. Woodward (Belmont, Calif: Wadsworth Publishing Company, Inc., 1972; reprinted from the Sierra Club, 1970), p. 360.

[30]"Land Ethic," p. 361.

[31]"Land Ethic," p. 362.

[32]"Land Ethic," p. 363.

[33]"Land Ethic," p. 364.

[34]"Land Ethic," pp. 365-366.

[35]N. Scott Momaday, "A vision beyond time and place," Life, 71, 2 July, 1971, p. 67. The entire essay appears on page sixty-seven, and further quotations from it are identified only by quotation marks.

[36]All remaining Viva columns referenced in this chapter appeared on page two of the Santa Fe New Mexican.

[37]N. Scott Momaday, Colorado: Summer, Fall, Winter, Spring. Photography by David Muench. (Chicago, Rand McNally, 1973). All quotations from this text are identified parenthetically by the abbreviation CS followed by the page number.

[38]N. Scott Momaday, "I Am Alive . . .," in The World of the American Indian, ed. Gilbert M. Grosvenor (Washington: National Geographic Society, 1974). All quotations from this essay are identified parenthetically by the abbreviation WAI followed by the page number.

[39]From a letter from N. Scott Momaday to this writer, 27 February, 1975.

Chapter II:
HOUSE MADE OF DAWN

Momaday's first novel focuses upon a young American Indian who has lost his native voice, and with it his spiritual vision:

> Abel walked into the canyon. His return to the town had been a failure, for all his looking forward. He had tried in the days that followed to speak to his grandfather, but he could not say the things he wanted; he had tried to pray, to sing, to enter into the old rhythm of the tongue, but he was no longer attuned to it. And yet it was there still, like memory, in the reach of his hearing, as if Francisco or his mother or Vidal had spoken out of the past and the words had taken hold of the moment and made it eternal. Had he been able to say it, anything of his own language--even the commonplace formula of greeting "Where are you going"--which had no being beyond sound, no visible substance, would once again have shown him whole to himself: but he was dumb. Not dumb--silence was the older and better part of custom still--but <u>inarticulate</u>. (HMD, pp. 56, 57)

Abel has experienced things which have deprived him of his wholeness by separating him from his natural landscape and from

the all-important traditions related to it. He can no longer define himself in terms of his land and his heritage, and for him there is no substitute. He must find his way back. As the action begins he has returned to try, and the natural landscape surrounding his birthplace is the logical place to start. As he wanders in it, he recalls his recent inability to articulate, to "enter into the old rhythm of the tongue," but he also senses that he is still very close to it, that it is "in the reach of his hearing." That is because in the traditional Indian world the creative word is eternal, and what it means takes shape anew each time someone speaks it. That utterance, however, is possible only when a spiritual wholeness has been achieved. It is impossible for a disillusioned and bewildered boy whose native vision has been clouded by confusingly contradictory 20th Century experiences. House Made of Dawn, then, is the story of how a young American Indian finds his way back to the kind of native spirituality that at last enables him to creatively articulate who he is, and what he is in relation to his heritage and to his natural universe.

The phrase "House Made of Dawn" comes from the last song of a nine-day Navajo healing ceremony called the Night Chant.[1] The song calls for wholeness, for restoration of the total being, and the "House Made of Dawn," the natural dwelling that is earth and weather and sky, is a perfect metaphor for that totality. Of equal importance is the idea that the individual can be completely restored only after he has achieved oneness with his natural universe, and that of course is the nature of Abel's quest.

The major sections of the book are the Prologue, a ritualistic race at dawn which is simultaneously the final symbolic gesture of the last section; "The Longhair," an account of Abel's first return to the land and the consequences of that return; "The Priest of the Sun," an intermingling of Tosamah's sermonizing and recollecting with Abel's agonized remembrances, all in a Los Angeles setting; "The Night Chanter," Benally's memories of his own past and of his experiences with Abel, and his analysis of life in the city; and finally "The Dawn Runner," which describes Abel's return and Francisco's death prior to his grandson's final run at dawn. It is essentially the story of a physical and a spiritual departure and a physical and a spiritual return, but the narrative thread of these movements is poetically counterpointed by flashbacks with many-sided implications. The book is Abel's story, but it is a number of other stories as well, and the composite is the story of the clash of two cultures as well as a poetic retelling of the traditional Indian ways.

The Prologue begins significantly with a verbal re-creation of the natural world at dawn: "Dypaloh. There was a house made of dawn. It was made of pollen and of rain, and the land was very old and everlasting. There were many colors on the hills, and the plain was bright with different-colored clays and sands. Red and blue and spotted horses grazed in the plain, and there was a dark wilderness on the mountains beyond. The land was still and strong. It was beautiful all around." The emphasis is on the variety and

strength and endlessness of it. There are "many colors" and the land is "still and strong" and "very old and everlasting." The summation of it, that "It was beautiful all around," concludes a picture of wholeness and totality, told with a simple but dignified tone that emphasizes the symbolic quality of what is described. Abel the dawn runner is introduced only after the universal scene is set. Then he appears as part of it, the rain streaking the ashes marking his body. As he runs through his pain he blends into the scene, at last running "easily and well," and the final descriptive lines have a still-life pictoral quality which seems to place him outside of time. Outlined against the dawn, the runner appears "almost to be standing still, very little and alone." (HMD, p. 7) The image is striking and forceful, and provides a kind of emblem backdrop against which the subsequent narrative unfolds.

The first major section, "The Longhair," is subdivided into the significant days following Abel's first return to Walatowa in July of 1945. He is returning from the scarring experience of war, and his grandfather goes to meet the bus. The old man travels slowly across the land in his ancient wagon, enjoying the slow pace of the journey and recalling the times when he too ran at dawn. The recollection is jarringly juxtaposed against a cruel present as Francisco reaches his destination. Momaday has an extraordinary talent for describing the symbolically vivid present moment, and as Francisco arrives Momaday describes such a moment with dramatic effectiveness. The bus appears suddenly over a rise in the distance,

and for a paralyzed instant its windows flash sunlight back at the watcher. Then it comes on in a rush, a huge mechanical thing that wheezes to a dusty halt and emits the drunken Abel into the shamed old man's arms. The suddenness of its intrusion is as striking as the contrast which it provides.

The day after Abel's return, July 21, he goes alone at dawn into the mountains. The accompanying description reiterates the immensity of the land, a vastness which in the early light is "discernible only as a whole." (HMD, p. 14) Of equal importance to the meditative mood of the description is the statement that "Silence lay like water on the land." (HMD, p. 14) Momaday places a high premium on silence, which to his way of thinking is an importantly creative pause. "The modulation of sound and silence, the conjugation of sound and silence," he has said, "is really the equation in the oral storytelling tradition, and it works in various and profound ways." (SI) Referring to current "noise pollution," he notes with regret the difficulty of finding silence, suggesting that the problem could adversely affect "our understanding of language." (SI) Abel goes to the mountains alone to find the kind of silence that will enable him to order his chaotic thoughts and find his voice. He has experienced "noise pollution," and still knows the value of creative silence. The land Momaday describes is the perfect metaphorical backdrop for such philosophical searchings. It is above all spacious, with an untamed vastness that imposes silence and all but demands contemplation.

Abel's subsequent reminiscences are concerned with the juxtaposition of sound and silence. He recalls his youthfully exuberant shout as he and his brother and the others travel out into the chief's field. He remembers that his mother's voice was "soft as water," (HMD, p. 15) an interesting descriptive reversal of the earlier silence "like water." He thinks of the frightening old Bahkyush woman who appeared suddenly and "screamed at him some unintelligible curse," and how in running from her he came upon the wind in the rock, which would become for him for all time "the particular sound of anguish." Then he remembers being older and hearing the old men praying over the body of his brother. He "never really heard" the words, so profoundly impressed was he by "the low sound itself, rising and falling far away in his mind, unmistakable and unbroken." (HMD, p. 16) Later, "because he was alone," and perhaps to recall him totally one last time, "he spoke his brother's name." (HMD, p. 16) For Momaday, sound is truly as important as sense. It is in fact part of that sense, and the vital function of silence is to accentuate and magnify sound by providing contrast to it. In the above examples, the sounds are intensified by their silent settings.

Then Abel remembers the time he saw the golden eagles. He recalls that it was "an awful sight, full of magic and meaning." (HMD, p. 18) The ensuing description is so extended and passionate that it is obvious that the author is asking his readers to share Abel's response. Although literal, it is a picture similar in mood

and impact to the great vision of the Sioux medicine man Black Elk, and the same sense of tragic regret at man's inability to fully understand seems also to be present. Just prior to the detailed description of the experience, Momaday describes the Eagle Watcher's Society of the Bahkyush, and explains the misfortunes that brought them close to extinction. Significantly, because these people had "come so close to extinction," there was "a look" about them. Because of the experience, "they had got a keener sense of humility than their benefactors, and paradoxically a greater sense of pride." "They had," Momaday concludes, "acquired a tragic sense, which gave to them as a race so much dignity and bearing." (HMD, p. 19) In other words, they had looked inward, and had learned more about themselves in relation to their world than those not pushed to such perilous extremes. The idea that knowledge is linked to suffering is at least as old as the Garden of Eden of Biblical tradition, and it is a central philosophy of most Indian cultures. There are many ways to self knowledge, and because the Bahkyush have suffered so greatly they are medicine men and rainmakers and eagle hunters.

When Abel first sees the eagles, it cannot be with the sense of understanding the Bahkyush have. Nonetheless, he is awed, at once by the "spatial majesty" of the physical setting, the valley "almost too great for the eye to hold, strangely beautiful and full of distance," (HMD, p. 20) and by the soaring power and strength of the birds. Again, the landscape is intensely and persuasively described, made indispensable to the specific symbolic objects that

are the focus of the narration. Above all, the sheer dramatic motion and energetic vitality imposed upon the silent backdrop creates an extended prose poem of impressive proportions:

> They were cavorting, spinning and spiraling on the cold, clear columns of air, and they were beautiful. They swooped and hovered, leaning on the air, and swung close together, feinting and screaming with delight. The female was full-grown, and the span of her broad wings was greater than any man's height. There was a fine flourish to her motion; she was deceptively, incredibly fast, and her pivots and wheels were wide and full-blown. But her great weight was streamlined and perfectly controlled. She carried a rattlesnake; it hung shining from her feet, limp and curving out in the trail of her flight. Suddenly her wings and tail fanned, catching full on the wind, and for an instant she was still, widespread and spectral in the blue, while her mate flared past and away, turning around in the distance to look for her. Then she began to beat upward at an angle from the rim until she was small in the sky, and she let go of the snake. It fell slowly, writhing and rolling, floating out like a bit of silver thread against the wide backdrop of the land. She held still above, buoyed up on the cold current, her crop and hackles

> gleaming like copper in the sun. The male swerved and sailed. He was younger than she and a little more than half as large. He was quicker, tighter in his moves. He let the carrion drift by; then suddenly he gathered himself and stooped, sliding down in a blur of motion to the strike. He hit the snake in the head, with not the slightest deflection of his course or speed, cracking its long body like a whip. Then he rolled and swung upward in a great pendulum arc, riding out his momentum. (HMD, pp. 20, 21)

The passage is analogous in many respects to Gerard Manley Hopkins' description of the awesome motion of a bird in his "The Windhover," and the similarly reverential tone is more subtle while at the same time more all-pervasive. In the traditional Indian world the eagle, possessor of a strength rivaling that of most ground creatures plus the magic of flight, has special significance, and what Abel has been privileged to witness has meaning and importance that he can for a long time only vaguely and incompletely comprehend. Yet it will be an important resource to him as long as he is able to retain it, and if he is able to progressively refine his re-creation of the experience, it will take on increasing spiritual significance, and become an important verbal legacy to be passed on to others. It is by virtue of its intensity a prototype for subsequent descriptions throughout Momaday's works, for it conforms closely to

his aesthetic ideal of accurately re-creating the "best idea" one is able to conceive of something and then preserving that idea, "whole and intact." The eagles, wild, strong, free and beautiful, truly seem to epitomize the best of the natural world and all it signifies.

Later, the description of the release of the old eagle, a description which rivals the earlier one, is accompanied by Abel's emotional response:

> Then it took leave of the ground and beat upward, clattering through the still shadows of the valley. It gathered speed, driving higher and higher until it reached the shafts of reddish-gold final light that lay like bars across the crater. The light caught it up and set a dark blaze upon it. It leveled off and sailed. Then it was gone from sight, but he looked after it for a time. He could see it still in the mind's eye and hear in his memory the awful whisper of its flight on the wind. It filled him with longing. (HMD, p. 24)

Understanding Abel's "longing," both in response to such experiences and in subsequent recollections of those experiences, is central to an understanding of his increasing emotional turmoil. Longing involves need and lack of fulfillment, and above all in Abel's case a lack of understanding in regard to one's place in the scheme of things. The Bahkyush had suffered through to a position of stasis,

and they could accept their role in the timeless and essentially unchanging scheme of things, but Abel is at the time of his recollection of the eagles restlessly dynamic, changing, and confused.

He recalls also his disgust later that same night at the sight of the caught eagle, which in captivity seems "too large and ungainly for flight." (HMD, p. 25) His negative reaction to its unnatural and degraded condition is understandable, but the fact that he is so shamed by the sight that he kills it seems to indicate a measure of fear and misunderstanding not consistent with the spiritual meaning of his heritage. It is significant that Benally later suggests that "Maybe he was sick a long time, always, and nobody knew it." (HMD, p. 151) Certainly there are indications throughout the work that he was uncertain before encountering the modern problems and pressures that disoriented him. He in fact succumbed to those pressures because he did not at the crucial time have the requisite inner quiet he needed. When he left Walatowa the first time he "centered upon himself in the onset of loneliness and fear," and from the beginning struggled "to know what it meant." (HMD, p. 25) The old way did not fully prepare Abel for life in the modern world, and here and elsewhere Momaday seems to be implying that it must share the blame for what his isolated protagonist suffers.

At this point Momaday interjects what seems to be a pivotal passage in regard to an understanding of Abel's dilemma: "This--everything in advance of his going--he could remember whole and

in detail. It was the recent past, the intervention of days and years without meaning, of awful calm and collision, time always immediate and confused, that he could not put together in his mind." (HMD, p. 25) Abel left his childhood home before he had time to digest and interpret his early experiences, and himself in relation to them, and he had little chance of coping with the much faster rate of the new experiences, especially when they were for the most part the overwhelmingly negative experiences of war. Additionally, time in the new sense was precise clock time, and thus necessarily "immediate and confused" in comparison to the seasonal time flow of his childhood.

There is, however, "one sharp fragment of recall, recurrent and distinct," from his "recent past," (HMD, p. 25) and that recollection seems heavy with symbolic meaning. Abel remembers being awakened on the battlefield by the coming of the tank, and the ensuing description is another classic juxtaposition of sound and silence, which in this instance also juxtaposes the natural and the mechanical. Part of what wakes Abel is the silence that is the backdrop to the machine, a silence contrasting to "the whir and explosion of fire," of war. The sound of the machine is "low and incessant," and its approach is inevitable, "full of slow, steady motion and approach." It is irresistible, and "moved into the wide wake of silence, taking hold of the silence and swelling huge inside of it, coming." (HMD, p. 26) It intrudes upon the silence in a way that contrasts strikingly with the sound on silence of

Momaday's earlier descriptions, agressively assuming an unnatural and continuing dominance over it. A later flashback reveals that Abel leaped up to defy irrationally the noisemaking thing, pathetically attempting to reassert his humanity in the face of the monstrous force. It is little wonder that his memory of it is "recurrent and distinct."

On July 24 Abel meets Angela for the first time, and she is perplexed by his reserve. She is also puzzled by the "useless agony" of his woodcutting, "sensing some hurt she could not have imagined until now." (HMD, p. 33) It seems a kind of "sacramental violence" to her, and she knows no precedent for it or for the physical naturalness of him in the civilized world of her birth. Significantly, she abhors the physical, and is appalled by "the raw flesh and blood of her body, the raveled veins and the gore upon her bones," and she is most sickened by "the monstrous fetal form, the blue, blind great-headed thing growing within and feeding upon her." (HMD, p. 36) Hers is the classic renunciation of all things physical at this point: "She did not fear death, only the body's implication in it. And at odd moments she wished with all her heart to die by fire, fire of such intense heat that her body should dissolve in it all at once. There must be no popping of fat or any burning on of the bones. Above all she must give off no stench of death." (HMD, p. 36) Still, she is almost immediately attracted to Abel, because of his mysteriousness. She associates him with the corn dancers she saw several days earlier, and

wonders about his similarly detached manner. She had been fascinated by the seeming endlessness of the dance, and the emotionless demeanor of the dancers:

> Their eyes were held upon some vision out of range, something away in the end of distance, some reality that she did not know, or even suspect. What was it that they saw? Probably they saw nothing after all, nothing at all. But then that was the trick, wasn't it? To see nothing at all, nothing in the absolute. To see beyond the landscape, beyond every shape and shadow and color, <u>that</u> was to see nothing. That was to be free and finished, complete, spiritual. To see nothing slowly and by degrees, at last; to see first the pure, bright colors of near things, then all pollutions of color, all things blended and vague and dim in the distance, to see finally beyond the clouds and the pale wash of the sky--the none and nothing beyond that. To say "beyond the mountain," and to mean it, to mean, simply, beyond everything for which the mountain stands, of which it signifies the being. Somewhere, if only she could see it, there was neither nothing nor anything. And there, just there, <u>that</u> was the last reality. Even so, in the same attitude of non-being, Abel had cut the wood. (HMD, p. 38)

Mark Porter, in an article entitled "Mysticism of the Land and the Western Novel," speaks persuasively of this sublimation of ego, this submerging of self in the totality of the natural universe that the Indian achieves:

> It is into the powers of the universe that those of an individual flow and then return. They restore body and mind, they shroud one with their spell and refresh him. Only by participating in them, submerging oneself in them, does one become whole--walk in beauty.
>
> This oneness with the land is a negation. It is the negation of personality, separateness, and alienation. It is a negation of what has made white society great, the will to power. It is a negation of the possibility of manipulation and rationalistic morality.[2]

It is this loss of conscious self, "this attitude of non-being," that so fascinates Angela as she recalls the dancers, and as she watches Abel. She also senses, though, that his vision "had fallen short of the reality that mattered last and most," because he too was contaminated by "the everyday dense, impenetrable world." (HMD, p. 38) He is strangely afflicted, and although she cannot know the nature of his affliction, her knowledge of his mysterious vulnerability enables her to "stand up to him." (HMD, p. 38)

The July 25 subsection introduces the albino, perhaps the most puzzling of all of Momaday's characters. As Carole Oleson notes in an article entitled "The Remembered Earth: Momaday's House Made of Dawn," there are strong indications that he stands for the white race, although he is a 75 year old Indian. He is "large, powerful, very skillful and brutal in contest," he is "unnatural," and, perhaps more importantly, he is almost blind.[3] He is, in short, forceful and acquisitive, and he lacks vision. There seems to be more to the character than the obvious, however. Momaday has suggested, for example, that "there is a kind of ambiguity that is creative in the albino." (SI) The idea of ambiguity seems central to the characterization, for at times Momaday seems quite sympathetic to the isolated nature of the albino's existence. Interestingly, he has stated that there is "a strong strain of albinism at Jemez," one of the places where he grew up, and that an important medicine man there is an albino. Citing another medicine man he knows who is an epileptic, he has suggested that possibly there is a "causal relationship". (SI) Certainly there are many precedents in the traditional Indian world for associating unusual qualities with the supernatural, either for good or for evil. Homosexuality was another indication of magic power in some cultures. Lame Deer, Seeker of Visions, by Richard Erdoes and John Fire, for example, contains an extended explanation of Sioux beliefs concerning the powers involved.[4] Such people, by virtue of their difference, were believed to have

had unique visions and insights, and perhaps strange abilities. In short, there is something so mysterious about the albino in House Made of Dawn that safe categorization is virtually impossible. Martha Trimble suggests that "Momaday, in making his points about the range of relationships possible between cultures, wishes to leave at least the non-Indian reader with an abiding sense of what he does not know."[5] In summary, the meaning of the albino seems to vary according to context, as is the case with most truly complex symbols.

In his first appearance, during the surrealistically described ritual with the rooster, the albino dominates the action, and the connotations are, perhaps, by virtue of his frightening dominance, overridingly evil. He is "huge and hideous, at the extremity of the frightened bird." (HMD, p. 44) He creates "a perfect commotion, full of symmetry and sound," yet there is "some flaw in proportion or design, some unnatural thing." (HMD, p. 44) When he begins to beat Abel with the bird, that flaw becomes apparent: "The white man leaned and struck, back and forth, with only the mute malice of the act itself, careless, undetermined, almost composed in some final, preeminent sense." (HMD, p. 44) There is no humanity involved in the act, no emotional investment to sanctify it. There is only "the act itself," disassociated from motive.

In contrast, Angela is emotionally drained by watching the experience. At the outset, she is moved by the drum, which "held sway in the valley, like the breaking of thunder far away, echoing

on and on in a region out of time." (HMD, p. 44) The Sioux medicine man Black Elk summarizes the importance which she senses in another context: "It is because the round form of the drum represents the whole universe, and its steady strong beat is the pulse, the heart, throbbing at the center of the universe. It is as the voice of Wakan-Tanka, and this sound stirs us and helps us to understand the mystery and power of all things.[6] What Angela subsequently sees is above all rhythmic, "A perfect commotion, full of symmetry and sound," (HMD, p. 43) and it causes a "strange exhaustion of her whole being":

> Like this, her body had been left to recover without her when once and for the first time, having wept, she had lain with a man; and it had been the same sacrificial hour of the day. She had been too tired for guilt and gladness, and she lay for a long time on the edge of sleep, empty of the least desire, in the warm current of her blood. Like this, though she could not then have known--the sheer black land above the orchard and the walls, the scarlet sky and the three-quarter moon. (HMD, p. 45)

She has much in common at this point with Kate Leslie of D. H. Lawrence's The Plumed Serpent. Kate's experience in Old World Mexico moved her from a modern and sophisticated outlook to an emotional involvement with a ritualistically primitive society.

Angela is not yet aware of the implications of what is happening to her, but she is nonetheless being irresistibly returned to a oneness with the natural world.

In the next passage, Momaday makes maximum use of contrast for dramatic effectiveness. Father Olguin is reading Fray Nicholas' journal, which is, by virtue of its meanness, a kind of hideous perversion of natural human response, and a textbook example of the dire consequences of emotional repression. Most striking is how Fray Nicholas' distorted lifestyle has corrupted his language, to the extent that the journal is an inadvertently obscene parody of Biblical language laced with a peevish and self-pitying holier-than-thou attitude that borders on the despicable. It is perhaps Momaday's classic example of language and life distortion. Some examples:

> But this afternoon the sun did shine thro' the storm & I took heart in it or so until I went in to see old Tomacita Fraqua. She declined in the bad weather near to death & I am glad to have gone there at once & do commend her wretched soul to Thee. Coming back I was taken off in another fit & leant over & spat blood on the snow & was it Thine? (HMD, p. 47)

> Lord Thy Nativity. For this Day in the town of David a Saviour has been born unto Thee Who is Christ the Lord.

> Thou sayest Nicholas take up thy strength in Me for the day shall come that I must take thy heft upon My back & go out into the streets. Yes Lord yes yes yes. I fed upon Thee in the Night & still I am full of Thee & have taken no thing other nor shall I this Day & Night. (HMD, p. 48)

And in a letter to his brother J. M.:

> Surely it is a mean thing to ask & I suppose you set yourself up there as my benefactor do you? You covet me my place with Him & do seek therefore to purchase a good word from me. Be uncertain of my good intercession brother until you have piled on your account. I have friends & patrons before you be assured & they have some better claim & to be true I scarce can get you in. You had better think hard on it your need & mine. Confide in me if it be so that Catherine does speak ill of me. It returns on you & your children. I think she does slander me round about but you can tell me the nature of it & I will bless you outside of it & know you my best brother & my friend. You know I have the way of saving you. I have studied on it for a long time tho' it is truly a most difficult thing but after all nothing to me. (HMD, p. 51)

In addition to his perversion of his own religious ideals, Fray Nicolas stands in unbending opposition to all native ritual and belief. He sanctimoniously complains to his brother about the then young Francisco's supposed sins:

> Listen I told you of Francisco & was right to say it. He is evil & desires to do me some injury & this after I befriended him all his life. Preserve this I write to you that you may make him responsible if I die. He is one of them & goes often in the kiva & puts on their horns & hides & does worship that Serpent which even is the One our most ancient enemy. Yet he is unashamed to make one of my sacristans & brother I am most fearful to forbid it. You will be reviled I believe to hear that he lays hold of the paten & the Host & so defiles me in the sight of my enemies. Where is the Most Holy Spirit that he is not struck down at that moment? I have some expectation of it always & am disappointed. Why am I betrayed who cannot desire to betray? I am not deceived that he has been with Porcingula Pecos a vile one I assure you & she is already swoln up with it & likely diseased too God grant it. (HMD, pp. 50, 51)

He ironically demonstrates the kind of uneducated superstition frequently attributed to primitive cultures, and he completely

misunderstands the meditative nature of the kiva experience. Additionally, he woefully misinterprets native willingness to include his Catholicism in their ritualistic existence. Frank Waters' explanation of the old way's acceptance of the new is illustrative of the greater flexibility of the Native American culture, as well as reflective of how inflexible Christianity had become:

> Indeed, the whole strength and universality of the Christian Mother Church owed its validity to the countless and ceaseless adaptations from the past. Even the sacrifice of the Mass, as Toynbee points out, was but a mature form of the most ancient and universal religious rite of the worship of the fertility of the earth and her fruits by the earliest tillers of the soil.
>
> Hence there was no reason against the ready acceptance of Christianity by the Indians of the Four Corners from the start. The Christian worship of the Mother and her dying and rising Son, deriving from Cybele-Isis and Attis-Osiris, was echoed here in the Navaho's Changing Woman and Monster Slayer, and the corresponding Pueblo forms.[7]

Father Olguin is not as bad as Nicolas, but his reading of the diary as "a particular glimpse of his own ghost, a small, innocuous ecstasy," (HMD, p. 52) is a similarly distorted interpretation of the nature of religious experience. He has one seeing eye, and makes a progressively greater attempt to understand the nature of

all things, but the other eye is symbolically blind, "cracked open and dull, . . . the ball . . . hard and opaque, like a lump of frozen marrow in the bone." (HMD, p. 52)

Momaday begins the "July 28" subsection with an extensive and poetic description of the land and the creatures that inhabit it. His emphasis is upon the natural hierarchy among all living things, and he reserves his highest praise for the eagle, which "ranges far and wide over the land, farther than any other creature." The eagle is the supreme unifying symbol, for "all things there are related simply by having existence in the perfect vision of a bird." (HMD, p. 55) Again, the concept of totality, wholeness, is central to the descriptive idea, with a special emphasis on seeing the complete picture. In contrast to the wild creatures are the domesticated animals:

> The other, latecoming things--the beasts of burden and of trade, the horse and the sheep, the dog and the cat--these have an alien and inferior aspect, a poverty of vision and instinct, by which they are estranged from the wild land, and made tentative. They are born and die upon the land, but then they are gone away from it as though they had never been. Their dust is borne away in the wind, and their cries have no echo in the rain and the river, the

> commotion of wings, the return of boughs bent by the passing of dark shapes in the dawn and dusk. (HMD, p. 56)

Finally he considers the human presence, and what that has come to. He imagines the beginning, and then conjures up a return to it, in a manner reminiscent of the vision that inspired the ghost dances in the wake of the last Indian wars:

> There are low, broken walls on the tabletops and smoke-blackened caves in the cliffs, where still there are metates and broken bowls and ancient ears of corn, as if the prehistoric civilization had gone out among the hills for a little while and would return; and then everything would be restored to an older age, and time would have returned upon itself and a bad dream of invasion and change would have been dissolved in an hour before the dawn. (HMD, p. 56)

Momaday concludes his foundation description with a specific summary of the people of Abel's town. It is a capsule study in culture contrast:

> The people of the town have little need. They do not hanker after progress and have never changed their essential way of life. Their invaders were a long time in conquering them; and now, after four centuries of Christianity, they still pray in Tanoan

> to the old deities of the earth and sky and make their living from the things that are and have always been within their reach; while in the discrimination of pride they acquire from their conquerors only the luxury of example. They have assumed the names and gestures of their enemies, but have held on to their own, secret souls; and in this there is a resistance and an overcoming, a long outwaiting. (HMD, p. 56)

Into all of this Abel returns, but he has not yet learned the secret of adaptability and self preservation. It is at this point that he realizes that he is inarticulate, and no longer attuned to his native tongue, although he feels the need to be:

> He began almost to be at peace, as if he had drunk a little of warm, sweet wine, for a time no longer centered upon himself. He was alone, and he wanted to make a song out of the colored canyon, the way the women of Torreon made songs upon their looms out of colored yarn, but he had not got the right words together. It would have been a creation song: he would have sung lowly of the first world, of fire and flood, and of the emergence of dawn from the hills. (HMD, p. 57)

He will of course at last be able to make the dawn song, but now he only realizes the need. His search has taken him back to the physical place where "nothing lay between the object and the eye,"

and the connection between that and uncluttering his experience in order to re-structure his language is important.

This day ends with the lovemaking of Abel and Angela, an event more spiritually meaningful to her than to him because of her new-found involvement in the attitudes of the town; and with Francisco's nighttime experience with the albino. This event is shrouded in mystery. The old man senses "some alien presence" hovering nearby in the dark as he tills his crops, but he is curiously unafraid: "He was too old to be afraid. His acknowledgement of the unknown was nothing more than a dull, intrinsic sadness, a vague desire to weep, for evil had long since found him out and knew who he was." (HMD, p. 64) His is the ultimate acceptance of the inevitable, even to the exclusion of physical fear. It is, however, more difficult to generalize about the albino. Certainly he seems to be a personification of evil at this point, in this ominous setting, and Momaday has asserted that the albino is "manifesting the evil of his presence," (SI) there in the dark. He has further suggested that "witchcraft and the excitement of it" are also involved (SI), and anthropologists like Kluckhorn and Leighton have emphasized how central the beliefs in ghosts and witches can be to Indian mysticism.[8] Still, after the old man's departure, the albino's "nearly sightless" eyes "flutter helplessly" in the darkness (HMD, p. 64), and he still seems more pathetic than reprehensible. It is tempting to equate him with Mary Shelley's Frankenstein monster in his inability to communicate because of his unnaturalness.

"August 1" begins with Father Olguin's feeling of contentment at having finally "begun to sense the rhythm of life in the ancient town," (HMD, p. 65) and his place in it. His self-confidence is at last such that he even seems to welcome the forthcoming rituals in the village streets. Unfortunately, he has arrived at this magnanimous position through a largely intellectual process, almost exclusive of the spirituality of what he thinks he understands. His intellectual acceptance of the natural rhythms of the primitive does not effectively counterbalance his emotional reaction to the reality of what he abstractly accepts, and immediately following his generous description of the town's ritual, he is "horrified by Angela's confession, which seems to include her experience with Abel, and Olguin returns to town to be seized by "fear and revulsion" at the sight of ceremonial revelry.

Angela was by contrast stimulated by the rituals, and as the priest speaks academically of the structure of the native religion, she listens "through him" to the natural sounds of the storm. (HMD, p. 68) Later, she stands alone in her doorway and receives the meaning of the storm and its aftermath:

> And in the cold and denser dark, with the sound and sight of the fury all around, Angela stood transfixed in the open door and breathed deep into her lungs the purest electric scent of the air. She closed her eyes, and the clear aftervision of the rain, which she could still hear and feel so perfectly as to conceive of

> nothing else, obliterated all the mean and myriad fears that had laid hold of her in the past. Sharpest angles of light played on the lids of her eyes, and the great avalanche of sound fell about her. (HMD, p. 71)

At the close of the day, when the festival has finally spent itself, Abel and the albino come together for the last time. The description of what happens is almost mechanical, as if the two are playing out some old ritual they both know well. At first they talk, with the albino's occasional laugh ending in a "strange inhuman cry--as if of pain." It is "thin and weak as water," and his hands shake "helplessly." (HMD, p. 77) In contrast, Abel's smile is "thin and instinctive, a hard transparent mask upon his mouth and eyes." (HMD, p. 77) Then they move outdoors, and the albino embraces Abel as Abel is knifing him in a scene with explicit sexual implications, emphasizing the close correlation between sex and death, and something else not quite as definable. It is if the albino recognizes his own unnatural evil and welcomes, in fact forces, the ritual of death that is inevitable. He places his hands on Abel's shoulders "in benediction," and stares steadfastly past him "into the darkness and the rain." (HMD, p. 78) Abel is terrified in the frenzy of the act, but when the rain washes the knife clean and the albino finally dies, Abel's attitude is at first "cold", (HMD, p. 78) and then almost reverential as he carefully removes the albino's glasses, kneeling there beside him in the rain.

It seems probable at the close of this macabre scene that the participants shared a mysterious knowledge that justified what happened for each of them.

Section Two, "The Priest of the Sun," begins almost seven years later, on January 26, 1952, in Los Angeles. It continues the story of Abel, but of equal importance is the interwoven account of the activities and attitudes of "The Right Reverend John Big Bluff Tosamah," the "Priest" of the title. The worldly and adaptable Tosamah is not only a striking contrast to Abel; he is a vehicle for what seems to be Momaday's most imaginative expression of his philosophy of the creative word.

Tosamah first appears at the pulpit of his "Holiness Pan-Indian Rescue Mission," delivering a sermon entitled "The Gospel According to John." (HMD, p. 84) He is specifically concerned with the nature of the Word, which is the focus of John's introductory comments, and he examines it with a rambling and sometimes digressive mixture of "Conviction, caricature, (and) callousness." (HMD, p. 86) As the sermon implies, "Word", or "Logos", as it is called in some earlier versions, is a familiar term with sometimes conflicting connotations. The Oxford English Dictionary offers the following distinctions:

> Logos . . . word, speech, discourse, reason . . . . A term used by Greek (especially Hellenistic and Neo-Platonic) philosophers in certain metaphysical and theological applications developed

> from one or both of its ordinary senses "reason" and "word"; also adopted in three passages of the Johannine writings of the New Testament (where the English versions render it by "Word") as a designation of Jesus Christ; hence employed by Christian theologians, especially those who were versed in Greek philosophy, as a title of the Second Person of the Trinity. By modern writers the Greek word is used untranslated in historical expositions of ancient philosophical speculation, and in discussions of the doctrine of the Trinity in its philosophical aspects.

Tosamah is more concerned with the active, dynamic quality of the spoken word than he is with the older Greek connotations of it as the rational and governing principle of the Universe, and so he focuses upon the Christian approach. It is soon apparent, however, that the title for the sermon is ironic, for much of what he says has to do with how the Word was distorted after it became "Gospel."

He begins with an explanation of the nothingness which prevailed prior to the first sound, and then he declares dramatically that "something happened." (HMD, p. 85) He repeats the phrase again, and this time the author has italicized it for added emphasis, to highlight the coming of the word that was the first dramatic action: "It was almost nothing in itself, the smallest seed of sound--but it took hold of the darkness and there was light; it

took hold of the stillness and there was motion forever; it took hold of the silence and there was sound." (HMD, p. 85) The crucial fact, Tosamah says in summary, and again Momaday employs italics for added emphasis, is that the Word "was." It had active and independent existence by virtue of its sound, and therefore even the silence "was made of it." (HMD, p. 91) That fact, he declares, was John's "instant of revelation, inspiration, Truth." (HMD, p. 86) John saw the immediate, dynamic, creative quality of the spoken word, that is, the word in its total environment of voice and thought, and he was overwhelmed by it. But then "the perfect vision faded," and "the instant passed," (HMD, p. 87) and John made the mistake that men have been making since the beginning:

> He went on to lay a scheme about the Word. He could find no satisfaction in the simple fact that the Word <u>was</u>; he had to account for it, not in terms of that sudden and profound insight, which must have devastated him at once, but in terms of the moment afterward, which was irrelevant and remote; not in terms of his imagination but only in terms of his prejudice. (HMD, p. 90)

But there is a way, Tosamah emphasizes, to preserve the original intent of the Word as creative and eternally present tense happening. That way involves not only the oral tradition and the physical act of telling, but also the reciprocal act of listening, which is "crucial to human society." (HMD, p. 88) It is at this point that

he uses his grandmother as an example of how the language is best utilized, with an important emphasis on his childhood ability for creative listening:

> When she told me those old stories, something strange and good and powerful was going on. I was a child, and that old woman was asking me to come directly into the presence of her mind and spirit; she was taking hold of my imagination, giving me to share in the great fortune of her wonder and delight. She was asking me to go with her to the confrontation of something that was sacred and eternal. It was a timeless, <u>timeless</u> thing; nothing of her old age or of my childhood came between us. (HMD, p. 88)

Later he gives an example of the kind of storytelling he is describing, as he recounts how his grandmother told him about the coming of the sacred Tai-me to the Kiowas. After the retelling, he explains the special significance of the story for him: "The story of the coming of Tai-me has existed for hundreds of years by word of mouth. It represents the oldest and best idea that man has of himself. It represents a very rich literature, which, because it was never written down, was always but one generation from extinction. But for the same reason it was cherished and revered." (HMD, p. 90) Above all, it is the physical recreation of the idea by the teller's voice that is crucial. It is the re-enactment of symbolic truth.

Walter J. Ong, in his book, The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History, explains how meaningful the experience of the word was for oral cultures, and what modern society may be losing. He speaks of the word "in its original habitat of sound," as "something that happens." He further declares that it is "an event in the world of sound through which the mind is enabled to relate actuality to itself."[9] The immediacy of the experience has in his opinion highly significant results: ". . .in an oral-aural culture there is no history in our modern sense of the term. The past is indeed present, as to a degree the past always is, but it is present in the speech and social institutions of the people, not in the more abstract forms in which modern history deals."[10] It is thus the attitude of the experience that has "continuous recurrence in the word as event."[11] In contrast, what is committed to past tense written matter is often strikingly narrow: "The letter only seem to be the definitive action. In reality it is a mere footnote to a complex of interrelationships . . . Our literate and now electronically computerized culture relies on the recorded word as never before . . ."[12]

Because he speaks so passionately for the value of the oral tradition in literature, Momaday seems at first glance to be vulnerable to charges that his own written art contradicts what he says. In fact, his writing is not only consistent with his theories, it is in most instances an affirmation of them. His is a poetic, that is, heavily symbolic word, for he is as he says primarily a

poet, and House Made of Dawn for example, is densely poetic. More than that, it is, like all of his writing, composed with an acute sensitivity to the spoken word. It recaptures a kind of oral tone, so that the storyteller's voice seems always present. The words are not as dramatically complete as they would be if Momaday were speaking them, but at times they come amazingly close to that ultimate poetic state. Momaday does not deny the practical value of the recorded and hence preserved word, but his is a record of what is essentially and more importantly oral, and therefore most appropriately a frame of reference for the total artistic experience.

It is in that light that his emphasis upon the importance of myth can be understood and appreciated. The literalness of the story of Tai-me is not at issue, or even a significant consideration, for it is the idea of it, "the oldest and best idea that man has of himself" that is all-important. Paula Gunn Allen, in an important article entitled "The Mythopoeic Vision in Native American Literature: The Problem of Myth," has vigorously attacked the modern assumption that "myth" is synonymous with "lie". Rather, she says, "The mythic narrative, as an articulation of human thought and experience not expressible in other forms, must be seen as a necessary dimension of human expression and experience." It is not "determinable fact," but "an articulated system of reference that allows us to order and thus comprehend perception and knowledge."[13] The definition seems synonymous with a definition of poetry, and

certainly consistent with Momaday's mythic-poetic intent. Ms. Allen's summation of the value of Native American myths emphasizes the importantly poetic and participatory quality of them:

> In the culture and literature of Indian America, the meaning of myth may be discovered, not as speculation about primitive, long-dead ancestral societies, but in terms of what is real, actual, and viable in living cultures within the boundaries of America. Myth abounds in all its degrees; from the most sacred stories to the most trivial, mythic vision informs the prose and poetry of American Indians over the Western Hemisphere.
>
> A Native American myth is a story that relies preeminently on symbol as a vehicle of articulation. It generally relates a series of events and uses a supernatural, heroic figure as the center of focus for both events and symbols incorporated. As a story, it demands the immediate, direct participation of the listener. Detached, analytical, distanced observation of it will render the mythopoeic vision inoperable for the listener. Native American myths are magical in this way, for magic depends on relationship and participation for its realization. Because of this, these myths cannot be understood more than peripherally by the adding-machine mind;

> for when removed from their special and necessary context, these stories are no longer myths; they are dead or dying curiosities. Only a believer in mythic magic can relate to a story, can enter into its meaning on its own terms. This is not to say that only a devout Oglala can comprehend the Myth of White Buffalo Cow Woman, or that only a practicing Cheyenne can comprehend the presence of Sweet Medicine; it does mean that only those who accept the nonmaterial or nonordinary reality of things can hope to comprehend either figure. All others are, of necessity, excluded.[14]

For Momaday, active participation is the key, and so his cultural experience is a constant and sustaining source for his poetic achievement.

Altogether, Tosamah's sermon is more than a statement of poetic theory. By virtue of its imagistic language, its emphasis by example on the importance of sound with sense, and its rhythmically repetitious discussions of the Word, it is itself a kind of poem. Even what at first glance might seem to be redundancies concerning the nature of the Word can be seen in a larger sense as poetically illustrative of the sort of verbal excess that is counterproductive. In the final analysis, although Tosamah speaks magnificently, he says too much, and that is movingly demonstrative of Momaday's message. Tosamah has a traditional understanding of

the importance of the word well-used, but he is so much a part of modern society that he cannot resist the temptation to misuse it. Thus the controlling device of the sermon is itself a poetic illustration of how a dynamically vital and present-tense language can show as well as tell.

Tosamah's second appearance in this section is equally dynamic and dramatic. This time he is the presiding official at a peyote prayer meeting, and his magnetic presence again dominates the proceedings. He is "a holy, sinister sight," (HMD, p. 101) the same mixture of showman and prophet, of "conviction, caricature, callousness," that he was during his sermon. And his setting is again dramatically vivid, as Momaday recounts the effects of the drug which has become for some twentieth century Indians a substitute way of achieving the old spiritual vision state:

> At last there was nothing in the world but a single point of light, brilliant, radiant to infinity; and from it there arose in the radiance wave upon wave of purest color, rose and red and scarlet and carmine and wine. And to these was added a sudden burst of yellow: butter and rust and gold and saffron. And final fire--the one essence of all fires from the beginning of time, there in the most beautiful brilliant bead of light. And flares of blue and green emerged from the bead and burst, and it was not the blue and green of turquoise and emeralds, or of water and grass, but

> far more intensely beautiful than these, crystalline and infused with the glare and glitter of the sun. And there was sound. The gourd danced in Tosamah's hand, and there was a rushing and rolling of rain on the roof, a rockslide rumbling, roaring. And beneath and beyond, transcendent, was the drum. The drumbeats gathered in the room and the flame quivered to the beat of the drum and thunder rolled in the somewhere hills. The sound was building, building. The first and last beats of the drum were together in the room and the gulf between was growing tight with sound and the sound was terrible and deep, shivering like the pale and essential flame. (HMD, p. 104)

In this passage Momaday demonstrates again his ability to re-create the moment in all of its intricacy, all of its color and sound. In fact, his vivid mixing of sense perceptions in this and other instances emphasizes the simultaneous nature of experience. The blending he achieves is a poetic rendering of the totality of what he describes.

Contrasting with this descriptive excellence, however, is a pathetic example of how a majority culture can impose an unnaturally alien language upon a minority people, and in so doing all but totally deny that minority a legitimate means of expression. The prayers the peyote ceremony participants offer are a tragic-comic

perversion of essentially sincere and heartfelt albeit misguided emotions. The "prayer" of Napoleon Kills-in-the-Timber is illustrative:

> "Great Spirit be with us. We gone crazy for you to be with us poor Indi'ns. We been bad long time 'go, just raise it hell an' kill each others all the time. An' that's why you 'bandon us, turn you back on us. Now we pray to you for help. Help us! We been suffer like hell some time now. Long, long time 'go we throw it in the towel. Gee whiz, we want be frens with white mans. Now I talk to you, Great Spirit. Come back to us! Hear me what I'm say tonight. I am sad because we die. The ol' people they gone now . . . oh, oh. They tol' us to do it this way, sing an' smoke an' pray. . . Our childrens are need your help pretty damn bad, Great Spirit. They don' have no respec' no more, you know? They are become lazy, no-good-for-nothing drunkerts. Thank you." (HMD, p. 105)

But following this graphic example of language distortion, Momaday again teaches by contrast, for Ben Benally's answering cry is clear and poetic: "Look! Look! There are blue and purple horses . . . a house made of dawn . . ." (HMD, p. 105)

In Tosamah's final dramatic appearance of this section, his Rainy Mountain narrative comprises all of the January 27 entry.

It is, as previously noted, essentially the same account that Momaday had already published independently, and would again publish as an autobiographical introduction to The Way to Rainy Mountain. The striking difference is that it is Tosamah, "orator, physician, Priest of the Sun," who is doing the telling this time.

He begins with a description of the Rainy Mountain area. He notes that "the hardest weather in the world is there," (HMD, p. 117) which is not at close examination an overstatement, but a subtly meaningful way of emphasizing that for Rainy Mountain residents it is the hardest, because it is what their people have personally experienced, and they can imagine nothing as vivid as what they and their ancestors have known. Imagination is central. What they know or can remember imaginatively is in fact the world for them, and Tosamah closes the passage with the suggestion that his landscape can cause him to "lose the sense of proportion," make him see it as synonymous with all landscapes, and imagine that it is "where Creation was begun." (HMD, p. 117)

Tosamah's grandmother died "in the spring," (HMD, p. 117) but he had waited until July to return to Rainy Mountain. The time interval allowed the land to heal over her grave, and gave him sufficient distance from his personal grief to articulate her continuing importance to him, and to express what she meant to his past, present, and future. Significantly, he likes to think of her "as a child;" (HMD, p. 118) not only because she was young when his people were "living that last great moment of their history,"

(HMD, p. 118) but because there is a natural permanence to his imagining of her as a child. He confides that he "was told that in death her face was that of a child." (HMD, p. 118)

His grandmother had a childlike faith and a natural wisdom, and although she never left Rainy Mountain, "the immense landscape of the continental interior," through which her ancestors had journeyed, "lay like memory in her blood." (HMD, p. 119) At this point Tosamah digresses to tell of his own pilgrimage from the Yellowstone area to Rainy Mountain, and the reason for it. He "wanted to see in reality what she had seen more perfectly in the mind's eye." (HMD, p. 119) He goes because he is farther removed than she was, and his powers of imagination are not as strong.

Obviously, the personal journey that he then describes is not only physical, but also spiritual, for the actual landscape reveals to him to what he has always known, but never before experienced. For example, he eschews a physical description of Devil's Tower, although it inspires "an awful quiet" in his heart, and turns instead to the legend that his ancestors made of it, "because they could not do otherwise." (HMD, p. 120) In the earlier magazine version of this narration, entitled "The Way to Rainy Mountain," Momaday is even more explicit. The Kiowas "made" the legend about the tower "because of their need to explain it."[15] It is Tosamah's "need to explain," that is, verbalize the tribal experience, that prompted his pilgrimage and his return to his

grandmother's grave. In the modern world, this creative impulse sets Momaday apart as an artist, but in the traditional Indian world he harks back to, there is an artistry to existence. The artistic act is tribal as well as individual, by virtue of shared experience, and shared communion with nature. Tosamah concludes the passage poignantly by asserting that as long as the legend of the Big Dipper lives, "the Kiowas have kinsmen in the night sky." (HMD, p. 121) It matters not that legend is not literal fact, because a communion has been established through the legendary process, and that is more real than objective and changing "reality."

When he returns to specific recollections of his grandmother, he remembers her "most often at prayer." (HMD, p. 122) He doesn't speak Kiowa, and didn't understand her words, but sensed "something inherently sad in the sound of them, "some merest hesitation upon the syllables of sorrow." (HMD, p. 123) It is shared racial memory that makes him sympathetic to the sound of her sorrow, a sorrow that is also his. He recalls that at that moment "she seemed beyond the reach of time," but then adds sadly that he was deluded, because, he admits, "I think I knew then that I should not see her again." (HMD, p. 123) To take him literally at this point is to merely share his physical loss, but one has only to refer back to the passage's beginning to transcend those momentary regrets, as he himself has already done. "Now that I can have her only in memory," he had begun, "I see my grandmother in the several postures that

were peculiar to her . . ." (HMD, p. 122) It is all that he has of her now, but it is enough, because it is present and lasting.

Finally, he must turn away from his grandmother's physical environment just as he turned away from the physical journey, in order to preserve her and her meaning more vividly in his mind. Momaday dramatically emphasizes that truth with his interpolated description of deserted houses, "sentinels in the plain, old keepers of the weather watch." (HMD, p. 123) They are more clearly and meaningfully imagined there. At the last "the walls have closed in upon" Aho's house, and Tosamah sees "for the first time" how small it actually is. (HMD, p. 124) But then he is consoled by looking to the skies and finding the Big Dipper, and feeling the kinship with the night sky that transcends time and place. It is then that he sees the cricket on a handrail, only inches away, and enjoys the illusion that the little creature, framed against the white moon, has gone there, and consequently its "small definition," against so timeless a backdrop, has been made "whole and eternal." (HMD, p. 124) It is an important act of imagination on Tosamah's part.

At dawn he goes for the last time to Rainy Mountain. It is as it always has been for him, and, "at the end of a long and legendary way," (HMD, p. 125) he views his grandmother's grave, now become one with its natural surroundings. There is an intensity of reconciliation and understanding in his final sentence. "Looking back once," he says meaningfully, "I saw the mountain and came

away." (HMD, p. 125) His final glance did not linger over the temporal; it focused once, and not upon the grave alone but upon the mountain, the totality of the landscape symbolizing the totality of his recollection, and he "came away."

Tosamah clearly dominates the action in this section in his various roles of preacher, priest, and spiritual autobiographer. He is at least in part Momaday, for, as Carole Oleson points out, the author "gives Tosamah credit for his own fine artistry and even loans him his own grandmother,"[16] although finally it is apparent that he has succumbed to temptations rejected by his creator. The intensity of Abel's interpolated suffering, however, still gives top priority to his story. He remains at the emotional core of the work despite Tosamah's eloquence, and his pain is in fact highlighted by Tosamah's contrasting adaptability. Stylistically, he is by implication object lesson and poetic reinforcement for what Tosamah has to say.

The introductory paragraph of "The Priest of the Sun" precedes the contrastingly realistic beginning description of Tosamah and his surroundings. It is an exaggerated nursery rhyme poeticizing about the self-destructive grunions of the California coast whose actions seem to symbolize some of Abel's tendencies: "These fishes come by the hundreds from the sea. They hurl themselves upon the land and writhe in the light of the moon, the moon, the moon; they writhe in the light of the moon. They are among the most helpless creatures on the face of the earth. Fishermen, lovers, passers-by

catch them up in their bare hands." (HMD, p. 83) The words "light" and "moon" are at the fore of a set of words poetically repeated throughout the account of Abel's suffering on the beach. The sea "lay under the spell of the moon," and "bent to the moon," and "the moon made a bright, shimmering course on it." (HMD, p. 91) Later when Abel recalls telling his lover Milly of the water birds he remembers the "full white moon" and how the geese "pointed with their heads to the moon and flew through the ring of the moon." (HMD, p. 111) Following specific recollections of Milly, he again thinks of "the cold white track of the moon," and the fishes "in the track of the moon," and the geese "riding under the moon." (HMD, p. 112) He remembers hunting with his brother Vidal in "the moonlight glistening," in the "low light." (HMD, p. 109) The flying geese are outlined against "the bright fringe of a cloud," and the wounded goose's "bright black eyes" are seen when he is carried "into the moonlight." (HMD, p. 110) The contrasting present is "dark and cold and damp," and Abel is "numb with cold," and "mindless in the cold." (HMD, p. 92) Later he is "shuddering with cold and pain." (HMD, p. 95) He remembers that the wounded goose had been in the "cold black water" watching him. (HMD, p. 110) Finally all of the images are vividly brought together:

> His mind was buckling with fatigue. He thought of the fog, stumbled and rolled his shoulders on the wet brick walls in the swirling fog, and in his pain and weariness he saw Milly and Ben running on the

> beach and he was on the beach with Milly and Ben and the moon was high and bright and the fishes were far away in the depths and there was nothing but the moonlight and the long white margin of the sea on the beach. (HMD, p. 116)

Intermingled with these highlighting images are Abel's attempts to understand what has happened to him, and to name what it is. At first he only vaguely grasps at implications of things, and he is correspondingly saddened by the plight of the fishes, and filled with "unnamable longing and wonder." (HMD, p. 91) Then he focuses upon the physical pain so synonymous with his emotional anguish: "His body was mangled and racked with pain. His body, like his mind, had turned on him; it was his enemy." (HMD, p. 93) The point here is of course that his body is only responding to what he has allowed to be afflicted upon it, and that is true of his battered psyche as well. He has placed himself, both physically and emotionally, in alien environments for which he has no frame of reference, and has all but lost the identity he once had in the process.

Fittingly, he next recalls his trial, and the total lack of understanding of his prosecutors. Father Olguin, who understood only imperfectly, had tried nonetheless to explain Abel's actions at the trial, emphasizing that he had been "moved by an act of imagination so compelling as to be inconceivable" to an outsider, (HMD, p. 94) but the State could not conceive of such a thing: "When he had told his story once, simply, Abel refused to speak . . . Word by word by

word these men were disposing of him in language, their language, and they were making a bad job of it. They were strangely uneasy, full of hesitation, reluctance. He wanted to help them. He could understand, however imperfectly, what they were doing to him, but he could not understand what they were doing to each other." (HMD, p. 95) The rhetoric of the trial that so bewilders Abel is a perfect example of the perversion of language and its all-inclusive effects, and how the victimizer suffers with the victim. The absurdly non-communicative questionnaires he subsequently recalls having to fill out are yet another example. Questions like "Which would you prefer to watch, a tennis match or a bullfight?" (HMD, p. 97) or "People who laugh loudly are _____" (HMD, p. 99) depersonalize and reduce, imposing the question as well as the supposed right answer upon the intimidated individual. They are, like Abel's prison walls, "symbols of confinement," (HMD, p. 97) and so restrictive as to inhibit imagining beyond them. Abel recalls that in prison he at last "could not imagine anything beyond the wall except the yard outside." (HMD, p. 97) A visionary flight of the imagination is impossible in such surroundings.

Finally, Abel has lost his spiritual sight and his voice, and consequently his "place" in the world. He had once been "at the center" of his natural universe, but "had lost his way, had wandered to the end of the earth, was even now reeling on the edge of the void." (HMD, p. 96) Lying on the beach in his agony, he tries desperately to speak out against what he has become, but "only

a hoarse rattle and wheezing" issues forth. (HMD, p. 106) There are no words, and at the end of this section Abel is speechless and helpless.

The third section, "The Night Chanter," takes place in Los Angeles almost a month later. The narrator is Benally, who is at once the reciter of the old songs and Abel's priestly confidant. He speaks in two distinct voices. There is his matter-of-fact narrative voice, frequently modernized to the degree that his cultural background is all but obscured, and his spiritual voice, in which he recalls meaningful experiences closely analogous to the ones Abel has had. The latter recollections are usually italicized, and provide the kind of poetic contrast that the intermingled account of Abel's suffering frequently did in the previous section. Benally begins with the day of Abel's departure from the city, works backward to Abel's arrival, and then forward again with additional details leading up to his departure. The technique is poetically circular and repetitive.

At the outset Benally ponders the implications of Abel's departure, and in particular the meaning of the previous night's ceremonial experience. They had been on a hill overlooking the city, part of a group that was drinking, singing, and playing the drums. Then Abel and Benally went off by themselves, and talked like they often had before, remembering things and making plans:

> We were going to meet someplace, maybe in a year
> or two, maybe more. He was going home, and he was

> going to be all right again. And someday I was going home, too, and we were going to meet someplace out there on the reservation and get drunk together. It was going to be the last time, and it was something we had to do. We were going out into the hills on horses and alone. It was going to be early in the morning, and we were going to see the sun coming up. It was going to be good again, you know? We were going to get drunk for the last time, and we were going to sing the old songs. We were going to sing about the way it used to be, how there was nothing all around but the hills and the sunrise and the clouds. We were going to be drunk and, you know, peaceful--beautiful. We had to do it a certain way, just right, because it was going to be the last time. (HMD, p. 133)

In this passage, getting drunk is obviously seen as a way of getting outside the self, and back to a kind of spiritual universality. They will be drunk "for the last time" because they know that it is a poor method that is temporary at best, and no substitute for a truly spiritual experience. Still, there is the feeling that it is at least one way back to a peacefulness that they will thereafter be able to maintain. Most importantly, Benally stresses the necessity of employing the exactly correct method, doing it "a certain way, just right." On one level, his Navajo background is

reflected in this obsession for ritualistic exactness, for even in the chant ceremonies that lasted for days his people traditionally insisted upon a rigid and undeviating format. For example, many Navajos believed that the translator Washington Matthews suffered deafness and a paralytic stroke because of some missteps in translating the healing chants.[17] On a more general level, Benally's words are yet another reflection of Momaday's dedication to the proper naming of things as a way to self-realization and wholeness, and therefore Abel's suffering is directly attributable to his inability to "sing the old songs" the way they should be sung.

The others on the hill are singing "the wrong kind of thing," (HMD, p. 133) and so Benally sings the "House Made of Dawn" song only to Abel. He sings it softly so that the others won't hear, assuming an almost priestly role in his relationship to his friend. The song he sings is a condensation of the last song of a nine-day Navajo healing ceremony called the Night Chant. As Carole Oleson points out, the rite traditionally took place after the first killing frost,[18] and so its significance in regard to Abel's dilemma can hardly be overstated. Katherine Spencer's explanation of the beliefs behind the Chantway myths is also strikingly similar to Abel's pattern of experience. She describes heroes who are for a time misunderstood and even rejected, but eventually restored by supernatural aid. She emphasizes that for the victim "illness or injury is caused by an attack which emanates from an external agent,"[19] and the hero "feels unaccountably weak and loses powers of speech and

mind." "Restoration, or cure of illness," she adds, "is effected by ritual action,"[20] which is of course exactly what Abel and Benally seem preoccupied with. "We find restoration of harmony," Spencer concludes, "as the keynote to the procedures that restore health."[21] Frank Waters summarizes the implications of the chant quite aptly: "Its immediate aim is to restore the patient physically and psychologically. His illness, what ever it may be, is never regarded as being solely organic; this is only its effect. Its cause is a basic disharmony which can be righted in him, the microcosmic image of the macrocosmic universe, by bringing him into harmony with his cosmic duplicate."[22]

At this point, though, the song is still being sung <u>to</u> Abel. He does not yet sing it himself. There is now a premonition that things are going to be "right and beautiful," but the "Restore my voice for me" (HMD, p. 134) portion of the incantation has not yet been realized in fact, and Abel must return to his native environment, his "House Made of Dawn," to accomplish that. Benally is left behind to ponder what has happened.

In reconsidering Abel's city experience, Benally grapples with the enigmatic character of Tosamah. He emphasizes what it is that Tosamah "doesn't understand," in spite of the fact that he has a modern education: "That, you know, being so scared of something like that--that's what Tosamah doesn't understand. He's educated, and he doesn't believe in being scared like that. But he doesn't come from the reservation." (HMD, p. 137) Momaday, by

virtue of having lived many years on the reservation, of course did, and at this point he parts company with the character he has lent so much eloquence to. Tosamah can ritualize his past, but his "Priest of the Sun" ritual for the present is an almost obscene parody of that past, and he is finally in league with those modern forces that oppress Abel. And again, this time in Benally's words, that oppression is accomplished by the abuse of language: "They have a lot of words, and you know they mean something, but you don't know what, and your own words are no good because they're not the same; they're different, and they're the only words you've got. Everything is different, and you don't know how to get used to it." (HMD, p. 144)

A final foreshadowing of Abel's eventual recovery is Benally's account of how Angela visited Abel at the hospital, and told him of the sustaining myth that he had added to her life and to her son's. In the course of it, it is apparent that Abel is symbolically the father of her child, by virtue of his involvement in the experiences that spiritualized her, during her pregnancy:

> Peter always asked her about the Indians, she said, and she used to tell him a story about a young Indian brave. He was born of a bear and a maiden, she said, and he was noble and wise. He had many adventures, and he became a great leader and saved his people. It was the story Peter liked best of all, and she always thought of him, Abel, when she

> told it. It was real nice the way she said it, like she thought a whole lot of him, and I could tell that story was kind of secret and important to her, you know, and it made me kind of ashamed to be there listening. (HMD, pp. 169, 170)

Again, the almost magical power of the creatively imaginative word is emphasized. Angela has given voice to her true emotions in a mythical manner, and in so doing has found her "voice."

Throughout his recollection, Benally seeks to assure himself that despite what he knows spiritually, the city is now the place for him:

> There's always a lot of rain this time of the year. It isn't bad; it lets up after a while, and then everything is bright and clean. It's a good place to live. There's always a lot going on, a lot of things to do and see once you find your way around. Once you find your way around and get used to everything, you wonder how you ever got along out there where you came from. There's nothing there, you know, just the land, and the land is empty and dead. Everything is here, everything you could ever want. You never have to be alone. You go downtown and there are a lot of people all around, and they're having a good time. You see how it is with them, how they get along

> and have money and nice things, radios and cars and clothes and big houses. And you want those things; you'd be crazy not to want them, too; they're so <u>easy</u> to have. (HMD, p. 164)

The flatly prosaic and hackneyed stating of it emphasizes its absurdity. The poetically stated memories that Momaday gives to Benally are in striking contrast to that. His account of being out with his grandfather and experiencing the wonder of the natural world is a moving example. He concludes: "And you were little and right there in the center of everything, the sacred mountains, the snow-covered mountains and the hills, the gullies and the flats, the sundown and the night, everything--where you were little, where you were and had to be." (HMD, p. 143) Then he recalls his journey to Cornfields, and the beauty of the dawn: "But at first light it was soft and gray and very still. There was no sound, nothing. The sky was waiting all around, and the east was white, like a shell. At first light the land was alone and very still. And you were there where you wanted to be, and alone. You didn't want to see anyone, or hear anyone speak. There was nothing to say." (HMD, p. 154) Finally he describes the moment at the Cornfields dance when, one senses, he may have been the happiest and the most complete. He sees the beautiful girl he will be with only once. Again, the re-creation of the experience is so vivid as to preserve almost whole its comforting emotion:

> Her laughter was a certain thing; it made you careless and sure of yourself, and you always wanted to

> hear it. She gave you her blanket and led you out in the open by the fires. And you let the blanket fall over your back and you held it open to her and she stepped inside of it. She was small and close beside you, laughing, and you held her for a long time in the dance. You went slowly together, slowly in time around the fires, and she was laughing beside you and the moon was high and the drums were going on far out into the night and the black horse was tethered close by in the camps and the moon and the fires shone upon the dark blue velvet of its rump and flanks and your hand lay upon dark blue velvet and looking down you saw the little footsteps of the girl licking out upon the firelit sand, the small white angles of the soles and the deep red sheaths and the shining silver dimes. And you never saw her again. (HMD, p. 157)

He does "see" the girl again, though, as he imagines how she was, and so does the reader. The passage is stylistically reminiscent of Faulkner in its movement from a prosaic beginning to a progressively more powerfully poetic rhythm, culminating in an unpunctuated rush of swirling images, and it is symbolically central to the book by virtue of its magnificent and soothing definition of human experience.

The final section, "The Dawn Runner," takes up the narrative a week after Benally's account. Again, there is a narrative thread, this time recounting Francisco's death and Abel's response to it, juxtaposed against the poetic accounts of Francisco's life, and culminating in Abel's symbolic run in the dawn. Everything comes together in these final brief pages, and Momaday's point/counterpoint technique of poetry and prose intensifies into a highly poetic finale.

At the outset, everything is in bleak contrast to what it will become. The river is "dark and swift," the valley "gray and cold," the mountains "dark and dim," and the fields "bare and colorless." (HMD, p. 173) Significantly, Father Olguin is described immediately following the dreary opening paragraph. He has adapted somewhat, and is more philosophical about his duties, but it is immediately apparent that he is still partially blind. His rationalizations keep him from the real truth of his surroundings: "In the only way possible, perhaps, he had come to terms with the town, and that, after all, had been his aim. To be sure, there was the matter of some old and final cleavage, of certain exclusion, the whole and subtle politics of estrangement, but that was easily put aside, and only now and then was it borne by a cold and sudden gust among his ordinary thoughts." (HMD, p. 174)

Abel, in the meantime, is sick and in pain. He is listening to his grandfather's voice, but it has "no meaning", and the words make "no sense." (HMD, p. 175) Finally his voice is "scarcely audible," and the words are "no longer words." (HMD, p. 175) But

each day the old man's voice has "revived in the dawn," (HMD, p. 175) and six times "the voice of his memory" had been "whole and clear and growing like the dawn." (HMD, p. 177) The passage is significantly introductory to Francisco's memories.

He begins with an account of the time he took his grandsons out to teach them the importance of their natural surroundings. Taken as a whole, it is a highly emotional summation of what Abel has lost:

> They were old enough then, and he took his grandsons out at first light to the old Campo Santo, south and west of the Middle. He made them stand just there, above the point of the low white rock, facing east. They could see the black mesa looming on the first light, and he told them there was the house of the sun. They must learn the whole contour of the black mesa. They must know it as they knew the shape of their hands, always and by heart. The sun rose up on the black mesa at a different place each day. It began there, at a point on the central slope, standing still for the solstice, and ranged all the days southward across the rise and fall of the long plateau, drawing closer by the measure of mornings and moons to the lee, and back again. They must know the long journey of the sun on the black mesa, how it rode in the seasons and the years, and they must live

according to the sun appearing, for only then could they reckon where they were, where all things were, in time. There, at the rounder knoll, it was time to plant corn; and there, where the highest plane fell away, that was the day of the rooster race, six days ahead of the black bull running and the little horse dancing, seven ahead of the Pecos immigration; and there, and there, and there, the secret dances, every four days of fasting in the kiva, the moon good for hoeing and the time for harvest, the rabbit and witch hunts, all the proper days of the clans and societies; and just there at the saddle, where the sky was lower and brighter than elsewhere on the high black land, the clearing of the ditches in advance of the spring rains and the long race of the black men at dawn.

These things he told to his grandsons carefully, slowly and at length, because they were old and true, and they could be lost forever as easily as one generation is lost to the next, as easily as one old man might lose his voice, having spoken not enough or not at all. But his grandsons knew already; not the names or the strict position of the sun each day in relation to its house, but the larger motion and meaning of the great organic calendar itself, the emergency of dawn and dusk, summer and winter, the very cycle of

> the sun and of all the suns that were and were to come. And he knew they knew, and he took them with him to the fields and they cut open the earth and touched the corn and ate sweet melons in the sun. (HMD, pp. 177, 178)

Then Francisco recalls his youth, and the process by which he became a dawn runner. He begins with a bear hunt that becomes a ritualistic communion between hunter and hunted, in the old Indian way. The ceremony of it is intense and all-encompassing. A bond is established in the process:

> And it was there now, off in the blackness, standing still and invisible, waiting. And he did not want to break the stillness of the night, for it was holy and profound; it was rest and restoration, the hunter's offering of death and the sad watch of the hunted, waiting somewhere away in the cold darkness and breathing easily of its life, brooding around at last to forgiveness and consent; the silence was essential to them both, and it lay out like a bond between them, ancient and inviolable. (HMD, pp. 180, 181)

It is a description of a time when life was so harmonious that even killing could be assimilated into the totality of things.

Next he recalls the relationship with Porcingula that incurred the old priest's wrath. Despite the tragic nature of its ending, a spirituality is achieved that was beyond the range of

understanding of the man of the cloth who bitterly condemned the lovers. Porcingula is briefly but dramatically changed by the naturalness of the experience:

> She laughed and wept and carried his child through the winter, and as her time drew near she became more and more beautiful. The wild brittle shine fell away from her eyes and the hard high laughter from her voice, and her eyes were sad and lovely and deep, and she was whole and small and given up to him . . . And sometimes in the night, when she lay close beside him, he thought of who she was and turned away. The child was stillborn, and she saw that the sight of it made him afraid, and it was over. The shine came again upon her eyes, and she threw herself away and laughed. (HMD, p. 185)

Francisco tragically "thought of who she was," that is, labeled her what she had been, a wanton, and turned away from her, and when she loses what made her different than that, the child, she returns to her old ways. There is a special poignancy to the passage, and overtones of regret that Francisco did not "see" enough to save her from herself.

Most of what follows, to the end of the book, is an intricate and many-sided poeticizing. Its tone is very reverent, and it has the rhythms of an incantatory song. Francisco first remembers taking his grandsons out to the red rock at dawn to listen:

> The sun took hold of the valley, and the morning breeze rose out of the shadows and the long black line of the eastern mesa backed away. Far below, the breeze ran upon the shining blades of corn, and they heard the footsteps running. It was faint at first and far away, but it rose and drew near, steadily, a hundred men running, two hundred, three, not fast, but running easily and forever, the one sound of a hundred men running. "Listen," he said. "It is the race of the dead, and it happens here." (HMD, p. 186)

The old man is requiring a powerful act of the imagination on the part of his grandsons, for the multiplication of the runners indicates that they are in fact the dead, and the sound the living hear in the wind is an imaginative confirmation of the continuity of things. The runners will press on as long as there is someone to imagine them. What was impressed upon Abel's consciousness at this point has special significance in regard to his final symbolic act.

Francisco then recalls his first significant role in the gourd dance, and what he felt in relation to his drum:

> The drum rolled like thunder in his hand, and he had no memory of setting the deep sound upon it. It had happened, and he no longer had fear. He was mindless in the wake of the dancers, riding high like the gourds

> on the long bright parallels of motion. He had no need of seeing, nor did the dancers dance to the drum. Their feet fell upon the earth and his hand struck thunder to the drum, and it was the same thing, one motion made of sound. He lost track of the time . . . there had been nothing of time lost, no miss in the motion or the mind, only the certain strange fall of the pitch, the deeper swell of the sound on the warm taut head of the drum. It was perfect. . . .And from then on he had a voice in the clan, and the next year he healed a child who had been sick from birth. (HMD, p. 187)

The experience dispelled Francisco's petty fears and attuned him to the larger world. It gave him wholeness and self-possession, which enabled him to step outside himself and accomplish the healing of the child. It is another important foreshadowing for what Abel will achieve.

Finally Francisco again recalls his race in the dawn. He had started wrong, and had been floundering and in great pain, and in danger of failing, and then the essential miracle of the experience occurred: "The moment passed, and the next and the next, and he was running still, and he could see the dark shape of the man running away in the swirling mist, like a motionless shadow. And he held on to the shadow and ran beyond his pain." (HMD, p. 188) The stage is now set for what Abel must do.

On the seventh day of his return, Abel again awakens before the dawn. It is cold, and "pitch black," (HMD, p. 189) and his grandfather is dead. After dressing the body in "bright, ceremonial colors," (HMD, p. 189) he goes to the priest and tells him simply, and with no sign of emotion, that Francisco is dead. The priest's response is ironic to the extreme: "'Yes, yes. I heard you,' said the priest, rubbing his good eye. 'Good Lord, what time is it, anyway? Do you know what time it is? I can understand how you must feel, but--'" (HMD, p. 190) His preoccupation with clock time in the face of what is happening and in relationship to the timelessness of the ritual that Abel is about to complete is ludicrous, and as he stands looking after Abel he senses some of the wrongness of his reaction: "'I can understand,' he said. 'I understand, do you hear?' And he began to shout. 'I understand! Oh God! I understand--I understand!'" (HMD, p. 190) His final impassioned cry is yet another example of his pathetic lack of understanding.

It is then that the final miracle occurs. Abel goes directly to the edge of town, removes his shirt, rubs his cold body with ashes, then moves toward the growing light. It is nearly dawn when he sees the runners "standing away in the distance." (HMD, p. 190) It is at that point that Abel and the reader are drawn into the most basic and essential kind of imagining. It seems unlikely that the old man's death could have been coincidental with the date of the actual run, and Abel had no time to cause the runners to be assembled there ahead of him for any other purpose. For those

reasons, it seems highly probably that they are there only in his now fully active imagination; but intensely so, and his interaction with them is total:

> He came among them, and they huddled in the cold together, waiting, and the pale light before the dawn rose up in the valley. A single cloud lay over the world, heavy and still. It lay out upon the black mesa, smudging out the margin and spilling over the lee. But at the saddle there was nothing. There was only the clear pool of eternity. They held their eyes upon it, waiting, and, too slow and various to see, the void began to deepen and to change: pumice, and pearl, and mother-of-pearl, and the pale and brilliant blush of orange and of rose. And then the deep hanging rim ran with fire and the sudden cold flare of the dawn struck upon the arc, and the runners sprang away. (HMD, pp. 190, 191)

He is still sick and physically broken, and initially his body is "cracked open with pain," and in his intense effort to maintain contact with "the slim black bodies of the runners in the distance, gliding away without sound," (HMD, p. 191) he over-extends himself, and falls painfully into the snow. But he rises, with what one senses is the supreme effort he has been moving toward throughout the book, and runs on. This time he is alone, in the act of becoming one with all of those who have run before:

> All of his being was concentrated in the sheer motion of running on, and he was past caring about the pain. Pure exhaustion laid hold of his mind, and he could see at last without having to think. He could see the canyon and the mountains and the sky. He could see the rain and the river and the fields beyond. He could see the dark hills at dawn. He was running and under his breath he began to sing. There was no sound, and he had no voice; he had only the words of the song. And he went running on the rise of the song. House made of pollen, house made of dawn. Otsedaba. (HMD, p. 191)

In speaking of Pueblo ritual, Frank Waters aptly summarizes what Abel has at last accomplished as a "complete surrender of mind and soul and body to the invisible forces, the great creative oneness . . . undivided from the breathing mountains, the house of the dark cloud, of dawn and evening twilight." It is, he adds, "a surrender to the great creative oneness which is recreative also."[23] Speaking specifically of the dawn race, he terms it "the race of the individual against his own flesh," and "the valiant expenditure of man's puny efforts and unfaltering courage to run forward with the everlasting wonder of creation."[24] Abel has at last found his spiritual voice, and as he runs he soundlessly sings the healing song.

FOOTNOTES TO CHAPTER II

[1]Frank Waters, Masked Gods: Navaho and Pueblo Ceremonialism (New York: Ballantine Books, 1970, reprinted from The Swallow Press, Inc., 1950 printing). pp. 229-240.

[2]Mark Porter, "Mysticism of the Land and the Western Novel," South Dakota Review, 11, Spring, 1973, pp. 83, 84.

[3]Carole Oleson, "The Remembered Earth: Momaday's House Made of Dawn," South Dakota Review, 11, Spring, 1973, p. 64.

[4]John Lame Deer (Fire) and Richard Erdoes, Lame Deer: Seeker of Visions (New York: Touchstone Books, 1972), pp. 149, 150.

[5]Trimble, pp. 23, 24.

[6]The Sacred Pipe: Black Elk's Account of the Seven Rites of the Oglala Sioux, recorded and edited by Joseph Epes Brown (Baltimore: Penguin Books, Inc., 1972, reprinted from the University of Oklahoma Press, 1953 printing), p. 69.

[7]Waters, p. 398.

[8]Clyde Kluckhohn and Dorothea Leighton, "The Supernatural: Power and Danger" in The Navaho (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1962, revised from the 1946 Harvard University Press printing by Lucy H. Wales and Richard Kluckhohn), pp. 178-199.

[9]Walter J. Ong, S. J., The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1967), p. 22.

[10]Ong, p. 23.

[11]Ong, p. 33.

[12]Ong, p. 116.

[13]Paula Gunn Allen, "The Mythopoeic Vision in Native American Literature: The Problem of Myth." The American Indian Culture and Research Journal, 1, 1974, p. 3.

[14]Allen, p. 5.

[15]N. Scott Momaday, "The Way to Rainy Mountain," The Reporter, 36, 25 January, 1967, p. 42.

[16]Oleson, p. 72.

[17]Waters, p. 260.

[18]Oleson, p. 72.

[19]Katherine Spencer, Mythology and Values: An Analysis of Navaho Chantway Myths (Philadelphia: American Folklore Society, 1957), p. 31.

[20]Spencer, p. 32.

[21]Spencer, p. 33.

[22]Waters, p. 259.

[23]Waters, p. 233.

[24]Waters, p. 199.

Chapter III:

THE WAY TO RAINY MOUNTAIN

As previously noted, much of what makes up The Way to Rainy Mountain had already appeared in print. The Prologue and many of the legends first appeared in The Journey of Tai-me, and a version of the Introduction was first published in The Reporter, and then later as part of Tosamah's recollections in House Made of Dawn. Despite this, The Way to Rainy Mountain seems in no significant way repetitive. It is a poetic rearranging and reworking of previous materials, with Momaday exercising a poet's prerogative in repeating many of the images and attitudes that dominate his thinking. Most importantly, what has been added, both textually and technically, helps transform previously used materials into something uniquely different. Momaday's emphasis is always upon "angles of vision," new ways of looking at familiar things, changing perspectives, and The Way to Rainy Mountain is in that sense a logical progression from what has come before.

The poetic nature of House Made of Dawn, particularly its circular structure and increasingly poetic conclusion, signals what Momaday's next volume was to become. In The Way to Rainy Mountain, he creates successive circles, reworking germinal ideas or images in three distinct voices, the legendary, the historical, and the personal. In House Made of Dawn, such ideas or images

are frequently seen through the perspectives of several individuals, such as the analogous reminiscences of Abel and Francisco, of Abel and Benally, of Abel and Tosamah, but in The Way to Rainy Mountain, the poet's mind becomes the primary filter, and consequently a tighter, more economical structure evolves. Thus, the plan of it is explicitly poetic. It in fact begins and ends with a poem, and its alternating voices are highlighted by the drawings of Momaday's father, Al, and by what Roland Dickey of the Western Humanities Review calls "the spaces, the silences,"[1] between Momaday's printed words.

The beginning poem, "Headwaters", poses a tantalizingly dramatic question that is dealt with throughout the work:

> Noon in the intermountain plain:
> There is scant telling of the marsh--
> A log, hollow and weather-stained,
> An insect at the mouth, and moss--
> Yet waters rise against the roots,
> Stand brimming to the stalks. What moves?
> What moves on this archaic force
> Was wild and welling at the source.[2]

It is a sedentary scene, and a quiet time of day, and obviously symbolic not only of what a once dynamic culture has come to in modern times, but also of the modern poet's reflective glance backward at his energetic origins. It is also a somber scene, but there is hope implied in it, for although the "archaic force" was

"wild and welling," and no longer is, there is no reason to doubt that the source remains as it was, capable of re-creating again and again. Even despite the present stagnation, there is a potential energy in the scene, an indication of the power that lies behind it. The waters "stand brimming to the stalks" in that position which is just prior to overflow and renewed motion. It is an excellent beginning for what is at least one poet's revitalization of a cultural heritage.

As Momaday states in the Prologue, his intent is to retrace the journey of his Kiowa ancestors from the "bleak northern mountains" to the southern plains, a journey "carried on over a course of many generations and many hundreds of miles." (RM, p. 1) To do that, he will of course need to resort to some extent to history, but not slavishly, for the journey was most importantly "an expression of the human spirit," (RM, p. 3) and so its spiritual nature is his primary concern. Because it is "preeminently the history of an idea, man's idea of himself," (RM, p. 2) it is renewable, if he is sensitive enough to perceive it for what it was. The idea is still "crucial and complete," and rediscovery of it is "the miracle." (RM, p. 2) Momaday retraces his ancestor's journey with what he significantly terms "the whole memory," which he defines as "that experience of the mind which is legendary as well as historical, personal as well as cultural," (RM, p. 2) and in so doing recreates the miracle to such an extent that there is real consolation and resolution in his account in the Introduction of his last

visit to his grandmother's house. By poetically ordering his memory's responses to his tribal experiences, he has recorded the miracle, both for his future use and as at least a point of reference for the spiritual journeys of his readers. Therefore, "the journey herein recalled continues to be made each time the miracle comes to mind." (RM, p. 2)

In this context, the several versions of what is now the Introduction can be best understood. Its initial rendering as an independent essay was a factual summation of the author's past. When it next appeared, as Tosamah's story, it was illustrative of how tragic it is to have such a recollection without making full spiritual use of it. In its final form, it is an important introductory preparation for the spiritual journey of the writer which produced it. It provides the reader with a necessary frame of reference for the experience itself, that is, the process by which the artist arrived at "the miracle." In The Way to Rainy Mountain, Momaday first describes the experience for the reader, and then he takes him through the actual process of verbalizing what it was, giving him access to the creative act itself, rather than just the end result of it. He also demonstrates that he stands apart from Tosamah by affirming the continuing and perhaps increasing importance of the process in regard to his present and his future.

The first section, "The Setting Out," has as its initial symbol a drawing of the cricket he described outlined against the moon in the Introduction. The artist's perspective is identical

to his, for the cricket is "only a few inches away," and fills the circle of the moon "like a fossil," (RM, p. 14) Its visual impact is considerable. First, its stark black outline is visible through the title page, the lettering for which is so placed that it is centered in the top half of the circle. When the title page is turned, the contrast between the dim picture as seen through the paper and the heavy black print on the back side is striking. It introduces the main message of the symbol, which is essentially a demand to be prepared to see things in a different perspective, from a new "angle of vision." The cricket is only the first of a series of images which significantly reinforce the poetic idea of the text and heighten the visual nature of the reading experience.

The first "voice" in the narration proper is quite naturally the legendary one telling the origin myth of the Kiowas. It deals symbolically with the first gesture of self-definition by the people. As they emerge from the hollow log into the world, they name themselves "Kwuda," which according to Momaday means "coming out." (RM, p. 17) They have realized what they are at the outset and have named themselves, and the continuing importance of the legend has to do with that naming process. Roland Garrett, in a treatment of several of the Rainy Mountain legends in an article entitled "The Notion of Language in some Kiowa Folktales," declares that "the final phase of this transformation" of these early people is "an event in language." He emphasizes "the self-awareness that

takes place in language," because the Kiowa "have in proceeding through the log gained the ability to name themselves."[3] The action both inspires and requires definition. Garrett's summation of the legend seems also to summarize the intent of the whole of The Way to Rainy Mountain and of the body of Momaday's work: "Of crucial significance is the fact that in the first name they gave to themselves, which means "coming out," the Kiowas identified themselves as a tribe with the process that made them what they are. Thus through language they understood the meaning and importance of their experience, recognizing that it produced social union."[4]

In the historical voice, Momaday discusses the evolution of the name, and how it is expressed in sign language. Both in reference to the hair style that traditionally identified the tribe and in the sign that symbolized them he emphasizes how important the name is to the physical action that inspires it. Finally, having established the necessity of definition, his personal voice takes over, and he describes the northern Great Plains in early spring. The things he sees have "perfect being in terms of distance and of silence and of age." (RM, p. 19) He is now defining in terms of his personal experience, and so seeing the earth "as it really is," (RM, p. 19) that is, spiritually, as it is related to his own involvement with it.

The second set of voices begins with the legendary account of how the division of the kill after the antelope hunt caused a split in the tribe, and ends with the author's description of his personal

encounter with the antelope in Wyoming, the running of the frightened buck seeming to him like "a succession of sunbursts against the purple hills." (RM, p. 22) Between legend and contemporary fact is the historical voice, telling of the great antelope hunt of 1848-49, which was necessitated by shortage of buffalo. The kill was accomplished in the old ways, "with clubs and even with bare hands," out of the "necessity" which reminded the Kiowas of "their ancient ways." (RM, p. 21) In like manner, the author is reminded of the importance of recalling the old ways, of understanding the process, and his imaginative response to the antelope he encounters is proof that he does.

The next legend symbolizes the agreement between men and dogs, an agreement born of the needs of both. "Perhaps," Momaday suggests, the dog "was dreamed into being," (RM, p. 24) because of man's need. But even after the dog has become fact it was ultimately useful as an ideal. The historical voice follows with an explanation of the Kiowa warrior society, the "Real Dogs," which consisted of the ten bravest warriors in the tribe. The Kiowas experience with dogs had given them yet another definition of self. Momaday acknowledges the continuing importance of that idea by speaking finally of the dogs around his grandmother's house. He stresses the old people's attitude in regard to them, and the fact that the dogs do not seem individually owned, but simply belong there, as the idea of them does.

The next six sets of voices form a legend sequence with attendant historical and personal responses, recounting the

marriage of the earth woman and the sun, the birth of their child, the attempted escape of the mother and her death, the child's descent to earth and his encounter with the grandmother spider, how he became twins, how the twins were cornered by the giant and escaped, and finally how they killed the "grandfather" snake, which seemed to precipitate the death of the grandmother. It is obviously a sequence as important to Momaday as it was to his ancestors, because of the intense imagining involved. It moves him to insert the second major pictoral symbol to vivify his narration.

The progression from the word to that symbol is striking. Following the legendary account of the grandmother spider, the historical voice describes the time in 1874 when the Kiowas, "bone-weary and afraid," were in the process of being driven southward, and were startled by the sight of "great black tarantulas, swarming on the flood." (RM, p. 33) The sight will forever accentuate the experience in the tribal memory. Momaday then turns to his own experience with spiders, and specifically tarantulas, describing them as "always larger than you imagine, dull and dark brown, covered with long, dusty hairs." (RM, p. 34) The facing page contains only one of the book's small recurrent symbols, and the next page repeats only the phrase "always larger than you imagine, dull and dark brown." (RM, p. 36) Its facing page, however, contains a huge, almost lifesize reproduction of a tarantula. The effect is singularly persuasive.

The legend of the boys' encounter with the giant is also specifically about language. The grandmother spider had armed the

boys with a word to use against the giant, and they employed it with great effectiveness. Interestingly, the magic word meant "above my eyes;" (RM, p. 41) it enabled them to remain free of the smoke from the giant's fire, to literally retain their vision.

Momaday follows this meaningful legend with his assertion that a word "has power in and of itself" and "gives origin to all things." (RM, p. 42) He then illustrates the tradition of the sacredness of the word amongst his people by explaining that until recently it was "disrespectful and dishonest" (RM, p. 42) to speak the name of a dead man because it had been so personally his, and so representative of the essence of him. Momaday concludes this sequence of voices by describing the importance of the word "zei-dl-bei," meaning "frightful," to his grandmother. For Aho, saying the word was the way in which she "confronted evil and the incomprehensible." Momaday's recollections of her utterance of it is strong, and for him it still represents "a warding off, an exertion of language upon ignorance and disorder." (RM, p. 43)

The tenth set of voices deals with the sacred Tai-me figure so central to Kiowa religion. The legendary voice tells of the coming of Tai-me in response to the people's need. The historical voice, specifically that of the white anthropologist James Mooney, explains its dimensions and apparent significance. Finally, Momaday describes his childhood "holiness" experience with the Tai-me bundle. In the legendary account, the Tai-me appears first as a voice, and even after it has physically materialized as a "thing" with "the

feet of a deer" and a body "covered with feathers," Momaday refers to it as "the voice." (RM, p. 47) It is the creative word that goes with the Kiowas thereafter, the attitude in regard to the Tai-me, the idea of it. Mooney's subsequent historical voice, dryly describing the physical dimensions of the doll, provides a marked contrast to the verbal vitality of the legend. Then Momaday regains that vitality with his personal response to the idea of it. The origin-departure-return pattern is a capsulization of what The Way to Rainy Mountain is all about.

The final set of voices in the first section, which has to do primarily with the peyote ritual, is energetically dramatized with another full page drawing, this time visualizing what may be the cause of "some awful commotion beneath the surface" of the water. (RM, p. 54) Its particular significance seems to lie in the fact that it is an imagined thing, born so vividly of the legend that preceded it that is fully realized in the mind's eye of Momaday's grandfather and re-created on paper by his father. Because the legend establishes Kiowa kinship with the water beast, or more symbolically with the spirits which inhabit the water, the awesome figure has special significance for grandfather, father, and son. There is comforting continuity in it. Additionally, the drawing, because it is so imaginative, is a highly appropriate closing symbol for the "Setting Out," or origin section.

The twelfth set of voices, placed at the beginning of the second major section, "The Going On," are very subtly related by

the element of fire. First, there is the legend of the woman who used fire, burning fat, against the enemy, and then "from a safe distance" with her family "could see the fire and hear the screams" of the enemy. (RM, p. 59) Then the historical voice tells of the accidental burning of the "fine heraldic tipi" belonging to Dohasan's family. (RM, p. 60) Finally, the personal voice describes the late afternoon time of day as a time when "there was a deep blush on the sky, and the dark red earth seemed to glow with the setting sun." (RM, p. 61) The association between these voices seems very personal, hence not readily apparent, and there is a musing quality to the narratives, as the central image develops into recollections of seemingly diverse things.

The thirteenth set of voices begins with the story of the arrowmaker discussed by Momaday in his earlier essay. It is strategically placed midway through The Way to Rainy Mountain, when the "idea" is approaching its fullest realization in fact. Because it is, as Momaday has said, primarily about language, about the ultimate worth and power of it, it is central to the tribal ascent, which has been building upward toward this story, and the decline, which is to come. Roland Garrett also stresses the great power and meaning of it: "Obviously, the real power of the arrowmaker in the story lay in the language that he possesses, the words that emerge from his mouth like arrows. The observer outside the tipi may have all the material implements of war, but, because he does not understand what is said, he dies."[5] The enemy's inability to actualize

himself in language is in an important sense symbolic of what Momaday sees as the modern dilemma. But even simple speech, a verbal outburst, would not have saved the man in the dark. His communication must be meaningful to the man inside the tent. He must make sense as well as sound, and of course he cannot. It seems additionally symbolic that the man who is unable to actualize himself is the "enemy," and is alone in the dark. Contrastingly, the arrowmaker has language and light, all within the symbolic wholeness of the tipi circle.

The subsequent historical voice notes simply that the old men "were the best arrowmakers," (RM, p. 63) because of their patience, and then the personal voice tells of the old arrowmaker Cheney, who used to visit Momaday's grandfather. The emphasis of the recollection is upon Cheney's morning prayer, his definition of his world and his place in it in language. The vision of the old man obviously comforts Momaday greatly, and he eloquently describes Cheney in the present tense, re-creating in language the old man's symbolic act: "I like to watch him as he makes his prayer. I know where he stands and where his voice goes on the rolling grasses and where the sun comes up on the land. There, at dawn, you can feel the silence. It is cold and clear and deep like water. It takes hold of you and will not let you go." (RM, p. 64)

The next voices use storms to examine the power of language. The legendary voice tells of how the Kiowas spoke to the storm spirit, the wild horse that they had created out of clay, and so

overcame their fear of it. Garrett terms this story the one which "most explicitly describes the power of language." He emphasizes the "psychological and social power of language" symbolized by the Kiowas' naming of the storm. "Those who possess language are able to categorize the vague, shifting danger that hovers over their lives," he declares, "and they can relate it to other things," and subsequently "organize their attitudes and activities in response to it." Garrett makes an important distinction at this point. "There is no assumption here that the storm, like a benevolent god," he says, "is altered in any of its functions by prayer."[6] The Kiowas "were running about, talking to it," (RM, p. 65) according to the legendary voice, and without suggesting that there is a causal relationship, adds that "at last it was calm." (RM, p. 65) "The relationship of the people to the storm is transformed by language," Garrett says of this passage, "even though the storm remains indifferent to them."[7] The distinction seems to be essentially the same as the one Momaday makes critically in condemning the naive Romanticism of the Transcendentalists in his "Heretical Cricket" essay. The importance of the legend is that it is illustrative of the practical value of language among like-minded people. It avoids romantic Emersonian rationalizations that shift responsibility for what happens to some mystical force outside the human sphere. People do not control storms, but neither are they controlled by storms, unless they allow themselves to be. Language helps then to control themselves. Momaday concludes by speaking specifically,

in the historical and personal voices, of storms and his reactions to them, vivifying those reactions with yet another of his father's symbolic drawings. The "strange wild animal" with the "head of a horse and the tail of a great fish" is "whipping and threshing on the air," (RM, p. 65) on the concluding page, defined by the artist's pen and the author's imagination.

The fifteenth set of voices affectionately describes two of the most famous Kiowa warriors, Quoetotai and Kotsatoah, and between the descriptions Momaday recounts the artist George Catlin's impression of the Kiowa people as being "Tall and straight, relaxed and graceful," with "fine classical features." (RM, p. 71) Of Kotsatoah, Momaday says: "He is said to have been nearly seven feet tall and able to run down and kill a buffalo on foot. I should like to have seen that man, as Catlin saw him, walking towards me, or away in the distance, perhaps, alone and against the sky." (RM, p. 72) Momaday's use of the painter Catlin's impressions to reinforce his idea of the people he recalls emphasizes the importance of the visual image in his imagining. In thinking of Kotsatoah, he wants to put the man of awesome physical proportions in his proper context, that is, in a natural setting that will most completely complement him.

The buffalo is the central image in the sixteenth set of voices. "I have a deep, ethnic respect for this creature, the buffalo," he later said in his column. "It holds a special place in my heritage, my racial memory, and so I care about it; I am

concerned that it should survive."[8] The buffalo that he describes in the legendary voice is a strangely powerful creature. Its "horns of steel" and its aggressive manner make it a formidable foe. It is truly a "great bull," (RM, p. 73) and as such is an intensification of the symbol, the best idea of the thing. The man who fights it is in danger of succumbing until "something" speaks to him, telling him of the buffalo's only vulnerable area. Garrett emphasizes the importance of what seems to be an inner voice in the salvation of the hunter. "In a sense," he says, "all of our words are like the voice which speaks mysteriously from inside the man in the story, for they seem to come out of nothing that we genuinely understand and prove to be our own."[9] The voice defines not only exactly what the buffalo is, but also indicates exactly how he can be dealt with. Again, speech, the word, is the primary action. It defines the external thing and the individual in relation to it, and that is the climactic point. The actual slaying of the beast is anticlimactic, a foregone conclusion once the method has been realized. The description of the action, however, is very vivid, to intensify the recollection through language. "The great bull shuddered and fell," the voice concludes, "and its steel horns flashed once in the sun." (RM, p. 73) It is an emphatic moment, full of motion and light.

What follows in the historical voice is a pitiful contrast to that. The hunters are old, and mounted on work horses, and the buffalo is "a poor broken beast in which there was no trace left

of the wild strain." (RM, p. 74) But the really vivid contrast is in terms of the action. The legendary story had presented the hunter and the buffalo in isolation against each other, locked in an heroic struggle, but this time there is an undignified crowd making such "laughter and talk" (RM, p. 74) that the silent old hunters seem almost obscured. The crowd's small talk, words without meaning, is in ironic contrast to the symbolic expression contained in the legend. Of equal importance symbolically is the fact that the sunlight is absent, and the old men and the animal are at last "lost to view in a great red cloud of dust." (RM, p. 74)

The personal voice mediates between the contrasting impressions of the first two voices, and sounds a note of hope. It is spring, and the buffalo calf is "red-orange in color, delicately beautiful with new life." (RM, p. 75) Of equal importance is the wild spirit of the cow that chases the Momadays away. Recollection of her action moves the author to conclude that "the spring morning was deep and beautiful and our hearts were beating fast and we knew just then what it was to be alive." (RM, p. 75) The vitality of the moment is analogous to the vitality of the legendary tale, and evidence that the sadnesses of the recent past can be overcome by affirmative attitudes in the future. That impression is emphasized on the next pages with the repetition of the phrase "its steel horns flashed once in the sun," accompanying an imaginative drawing of the buffalo. The lightning streaks on the powerful body correspond with the shape of the oversized horns, and the great creature seems to be turning to charge.

The next voices consider the nature and role of Kiowa women. The legendary voice tells of the bad woman who betrayed her blind husband. He had been forced to depend upon her to direct him in the hunt, and most importantly to affirm in language the success of his arrow. But she belied the action by lying about it in order to rob him of his share. However, he knew that she lied, because he knew the sound of the arrow striking home. The sound of it becomes another kind of speech for him, as Garrett points out. It illustrates, he observes, that speech is "existentially continuous . . . with natural sounds, which also can communicate meaning."[10] In this case, the sound of the arrow communicates truer meaning than the woman's voice. Later, when she again lies, this time telling others that he has been killed, he identifies her by the sound of her lying voice, and consequently she is thrown away.

In another sense, the story is about the acquisition of a heightened sensitivity to language. At the outset, the young man is "wild and reckless" (RM, p. 78) and comparatively unseeing. Because of that, the chief talks to the wind about him, and the whirlwind makes him blind. Now he must more closely examine people and things in terms of sound, and the experience is instructive. Finally, he is able to overcome adversity because he has become sensitive to language while the woman who is now his enemy is not. Garrett notes that here "the mere form of the voice, a quality which may not even be explicitly describable in

language, determines the question of truth or falsity, innocence or guilt, consolation or punishment."[11] Momaday has said, in speaking of the character of the oral tradition, that the human voice entering the intelligence through the ear "can convey all kinds of meaning and many different shades of meaning, just in the way you say something." (SI) Attentiveness, both in regard to expression and the reception of it, is the key.

The historical voice shows that "the lives of women were hard," (RM, p. 79) in the old days. Momaday honestly recounts unfair treatment of women in two illustrative instances, demonstrating the ability to examine the totality of the past, and not just those portions of it that have romantic appeal. He follows that with a personal voice that seems again to be midway between the first two voices, providing a kind of balance to the total picture. His account of his grandfather's grandmother, who "would not play the part of a Kiowa woman," and yet eventually became a "figure in the tribe" (RM, p. 80) is a tribute to her and to the many women of similar mettle in his racial past. Finally, a composite picture has been presented.

The eighteenth legendary voice tells an imaginative story of young Kiowa men following the summer sun south to discover its origin. They are on horseback, and so are able to follow it so far that they see "strange and wonderful things," (RM, p. 81) including the little men with tails that frighten them into returning home. The story has a playful, imaginatively adventuresome quality. It is counterpointed by the historian Mooney's description of how the

horse transformed the Indian from "a half-starved skulker in the timber" into "a daring buffalo hunter" able to "sweep the plains" at distances ranging up to a thousand miles. (RM, p. 82) It is a dry statement of what the legend had said imaginatively about what the coming of the horse meant.

In the personal voice, Momaday circles back to the change of seasons which began the legendary voice. He recalls first the summer nights on Rainy Mountain Creek, and the joy of being able to see "far and wide," even by moonlight, because "there was nothing to stand in your way." (RM, p. 83) Then he empathizes with the young Kiowas in the story, feeling "a sense of confinement and depression" when winter first arrives. (RM, p. 83) But then he looks inside the arbor and remembers the summer, and with it the "strange and wonderful things" of the legend. (RM, p. 83) The idea, and with it the second section of the book, is expressively concluded on the next pages with the picture of "a daring buffalo hunter" mounted and soaring through space in dramatic pursuit of his quarry.

The third main section, "The Closing In," begins with the legend of the brave young warrior who saves his brother's life by carrying him on his back across a row of greased buffalo skulls. Because of his courage, they are both given horses and permitted to ride home. Within the context of the story, the fact that their horses are restored to them seems as significant as the fact that their lives were saved. Their warrior identity and the courage and pride with which they confront adversity are importantly related

to the mobility and freedom their horses give them. The subsequent historical voice emphasizes the tragedy of the loss of the horse. It tells how the soldiers destroyed 800 Kiowa mounts, and then of the pathetic "Horse-eating sun dance" as described by Mooney. (RM, p. 90)

Again, however, the personal voice circles back to an attitude of consolation. Momaday picturesquely describes riding out into the New Mexico countryside as a boy, and in so doing coming to know it "truly and intimately . . . from a thousand points of view." (RM, p. 91) He knows it like his ancestors, and with it is a related knowledge of "the living motion of a horse and the sound of hooves." (RM, p. 91) The closing image is characteristically personal and vivid. "I know what it is, on a hot day in August or September," he says, "to ride into a bank of cold, fresh rain." (RM, p. 91) On the next pages is the phrase "row of greased buffalo skulls," and facing that a lively drawing of the skulls, memorializing the daring and vitality of the horsemen in the legend.

The next set of voices continue to speak of the horse, in recognition of its major role in the greatness of the past Kiowa culture. The legendary voice, perhaps with a premonition of what was to come, speaks of the man who showed fear while astride the fearless black horse, causing the horse to die of shame. The death of that beautiful animal is followed by an account in the historical voice of a horse tied to a pole at the 1861 Sun Dance and left to starve, as an offering to Tai-me. Following that is yet another

account of a horse's death, this time a fine animal that is sacrificed by Gaapiatan because of a smallpox epidemic. The sequence of horses' deaths intensifies the sense of loss in regard to the passing of the once-mighty culture based on horses, and in the personal voice Momaday speaks sympathetically of Gaapiatan's loss, in a manner which seems to extend that sympathy to all of the Kiowa people: "I think I know how much he loved that animal; I think I know what was going on in his mind: If you will give me my life and the lives of my family, I will give you the life of this black-eared horse. (RM, p. 96) There seems to be little symbolic difference between the horses killed by the white soldiers in the earlier account and the horse sacrificed because of the white man's smallpox epidemic. Finally the people are deprived of the animals that are so much a part of their tribal identity, and left with incomplete lives without them.

The remaining four sets of voices break the established pattern and "close in," in a more concentrated way, on Momaday's personal past. The effect is one of immediacy, and there is an ultimate poignancy in the author's recollections of his own colorful ancestry. His grandfather Mammedaty dominates those recollections, symbolizing at once family and tribal greatness, in a sequence very similar to the book's overall sequence.

First, in the twenty-first set of voices, is the intense imagining process. Mammedaty's visions of the head of the child, the three alligators on the log, and the mole blowing the powdery earth are recounted, and his account of the water beast tracks is recalled. The

experience of seeing the mole make the ring of "fine dark earth" stand around his hole is discussed in order to emphasize that Mammedaty, by virtue of his closeness to nature and his attention to it "had got possession of a powerful medicine." (RM, p. 99) He had seen "things that were truly remarkable." (RM, p. 99) The phrase is repeated on the next page, and faced by an impressionistic symbol that stresses the universal quality of his imagining.

The next voices begin to tell of loss, and again the horse is the symbol for that. The first voice tells of the time Mammedaty lost his temper, shot at a troublesome horse, and sent an arrow "deep into the neck" of another, unoffending horse. (RM, p. 102) The next voice tells of the Pawnee boy who escaped with the fine hunting horse called "Little Red." (RM, p. 103) Describing it as "the most important event of the winter," Momaday describes the loss as "a hard thing to bear." (RM, p. 103) Finally, he tells of the theft of the bones of his grandfather's fine racing horse, also called "Little Red." "There have been times," Momaday concludes meaningfully, "when I thought I understood how it was that a man might be moved to preserve the bones of a horse--and another to steal them away." (RM, p. 104) The next page repeats the phrase "the arrow went deep into the neck," and the facing page shows the beautiful animal in agonized motion, with the arrow cruelly embedded in the direction of that motion.

What follows in the final two sets of voices is recollections having to do with both of his grandparents, told in a manner that increases the sense of loss. In the first of the twenty-third set

of voices Aho's memory of the time the Tai-me bundle fell to the floor is ominously recalled. Following that is her recollection that the bundle could grow "extremely heavy around the neck" of anyone failing "to show it the proper respect." (RM, p. 108) Momaday closes in the personal voice with a seemingly unrelated account of the great iron kettle which stood outside his grandmother's house. There is a connection, however, in the fact that, as a child, Momaday "could not imagine that anyone had strength enough" to lift the kettle, (RM, p. 110) and so could not understand how it got where it was. His inability to imagine that demonstrates his lack of understanding of his powerful ancestry at that point, and corresponds symbolically to the failure to understand the importance of showing the proper respect to the Tai-me bundle.

The final set of voices begins with the description of the "woman in a beautiful dress" buried near his grandmother's house, "somewhere within the range of your vision." (RM, p. 111) He dwells longingly upon the fact that the dress "is still there, under the ground." (RM, p. 111) For a moment in the narration there is profound sadness, what Kenneth Fields, in an article published in The Southern Review, terms "the desire for what cannot be had."[12] But then, right at the end, there is an upturn. Momaday describes Aho's beautiful high moccasins, in the present tense, and then returns once more to the landscape which contains the woman in the beautiful dress. It is his "remembered earth," the "particular landscape in his experience," (RM, p. 111) and there is comfort in it, and so hope for

the future. At the conclusion of the narrative proper he is, having reviewed his tribal past, at the height of his personal imagining powers as he asserts what he believes each man should come to in regard to the land: "He ought to imagine that he touches it with his hands at every season and listens to the sounds that are made upon it. He ought to imagine the creatures there and all the faintest motions of the wind. He ought to recollect the glare of noon and all the colors of the dawn and dusk." (RM, p. 113)

In the Epilogue, Momaday first establishes the poetic symbol, describing the shower of Leonid meteors of November 13, 1833, which he terms "the beginning as it were of the historical period in the tribal mind." (RM, p. 114) He then summarizes the decline of the Kiowa culture, but adds immediately that "it is within the reach of memory still," (RM, pp. 114, 115) as long as the "remarkably rich and living verbal tradition" is preserved. (RM, p. 115) Then he uses the old woman Ko-sahn as an example of the preservation of the idea. Her poetic account of the experience of the Sun Dance is further vivified by the last of Al Momaday's expressive drawings, depicting the crucial event of the falling stars.

The closing poem, "Rainy Mountain Cemetery," is a somber description of his grandmother's grave:

> Most is your name the name of this dark stone.
> Deranged in death, the mind to be inheres
> Forever in the nominal unknown,
> The wake of nothing audible he hears
> Who listens here and now to hear your name.

The early sun, red as a hunter's moon,
Runs in the plain. The mountain burns and shines;
And silence is the long approach of noon
Upon the shadow that your name defines--
And death this cold, black density of stone.
(RM, p. 119)

The tone is at last melancholy, but the poem is after all very personal and elegaic in nature, and not indicative of the resolution Momaday has accomplished in regard to his tribal past. In context, his grandmother's grave is, as he notes in the Introduction, "where it ought to be, at the end of a long and legendary way." (RM, p. 14) The Way to Rainy Mountain is a triumph of language. Momaday has said that language "can be powerful beyond belief," and in it "you can even deflect the force of time,"[13] and in this book he has used it so persuasively that he has in fact preserved the "living verbal tradition" that is his primary concern. More than that, he has created a bridge linking the verbal and the written tradition, and in so doing has guaranteed the permanence in language of his tribal past. In a 1973 Viva column entitled "In praise of books since 868," he begins with a general explanation that seems to summarize his achievement in The Way to Rainy Mountain: "It occurs to me that we have our best existence within the element of language. And the book is a concentration of that element, a whole realization of our experience in the world of ideas, and, as such, it is a thing of infinite possibility. What in the world is there that cannot, in some viable way, be contained within the pages of a book?"[14]

FOOTNOTES TO CHAPTER III

[1]Roland F. Dickey, review of The Way to Rainy Mountain, The Western Humanities Review, Summer, 1970, p. 291.

[2]N. Scott Momaday, The Way to Rainy Mountain (New York: Ballantine Books, Inc., 1970, an authorized reprint of a hardcover edition by The University of New Mexico Press, 1969), facing p. 1. All further quotations from this text are identified parenthetically by the abbreviation RM followed by the page number.

[3]Roland Garrett, "The Notion of Language in Some Kiowa Folktales," Indian Historian, 5, Summer, 1972, p. 33.

[4]Garrett, p. 33.

[5]Garrett, p. 34.

[6]Garrett, p. 35.

[7]Garrett, p. 35.

[8]N. Scott Momaday, "A few thoughts about buffalo," Viva, the Sunday magazine of the Santa Fe New Mexican, 18 March, 1973, p. 2.

[9]Garrett, p. 36.

[10]Garrett, p. 36.

[11]Garrett, p. 37.

[12]Kenneth Fields, "More Than Language Means: A Review of N. Scott Momaday's The Way to Rainy Mountain," The Southern Review, Winter, 1970, p. 202.

[13]N. Scott Momaday, "Letters: a window to the past," Viva, 15 April, 1973, p. 2.

[14]Momaday, "In praise of books since 868," Viva, 8 April, 1973, p. 2.

Chapter IV:

THE POETRY

> The first word gives origin to the second, the first and second to the third, and third to the fourth, and so on. You cannot begin with the second word and read the poem, for the poem itself is a cumulative process, a chain of being. There is a poem in me; I have been writing it for a long time, truly, as I have heard it in my heart. It matters that, having heard it, I should write it down.[1]

These sentiments, voiced in the December 17, 1972 edition of Momaday's newspaper column, are not merely an imaginative description of the artistic impulse, although they are important in those terms. Of greater importance, however, is the fact that they are descriptive of the course of Momaday's career and of the totality of his work. He has always considered himself to be "primarily a poet," despite the greater acclaim he has received for his prose, and he has been working toward acquiring a definitive poetic voice for some time. As mentioned in the first chapter, his prose efforts have contributed toward that goal, and have emphasized the similarities while minimizing the differences between the two genres. His prose, with its symbolic compression, its rhythm, its alliterative and repetitive quality, and its vivid images, is frequently separated only by line

length from poetry, and in many instances the distinction is fine indeed. His recent summation of his method of expression is an important indication of his plans for the future: "I believe that poetry and prose are much closer than most people think. They should overlap, in fact. That is what happens in House Made of Dawn. Rainy Mountain is even more poetical than House Made of Dawn, I think. It is lyrical prose. My new book of poems, The Gourd Dancer, is almost prose poetry." (SI)

When he first arrived at Stanford, he had already written poetry, but he had little understanding of poetic technique. His "Earth and I Gave You Turquoise," which had just been published, shows an early concern with plain lyrical statement and a sensitivity to life's contrasts. It begins:

Earth and I gave you turquoise
when you walked singing
We lived laughing in my house
and told old stories
You grew ill when the owl cried
We will meet on Black Mountain.

There is in this verse a contrast not only between the happy and the sad, sickness and health, but also between the past and the present. The closing line speaks vaguely but hopefully of some future state. The pattern is repeated in subsequent verses, and the poem concludes:

I saw a crow by Red Rock
standing on one leg

It was the black of your hair
The years are heavy
I will ride the swiftest horse
You will hear the drumming hooves.

The final mood is one of longing, with the accompanying impression that what has been imaginatively re-created in verse has its only existence there. The style is simple, almost conversational, and there is an incantatory quality to the words.

When Momaday arrived at Stanford with a poetry fellowship in the fall of 1959, he began to think of himself "even more concretely as a writer," and wrote "consistently" thereafter. (SI) Most importantly, he came under the influence of Yvor Winters. He recalls: "I had no traditional frame of reference when I first came to Stanford. I had written some things, but I had no real technique. I didn't know what an iamb was. Winters taught me technique. I came to understand poetic forms under him. . . .The training I received under Winters was invaluable. Those exercises gave me a great basis, a foundation, for writing poetry." (SI) For some time to come, Winters' concern with structure and with "carefully controlled association"[2] was to be reflected in Momaday's poetry, and Winters' intensely maintained opinions, many of which were at odds with the rest of the literary world, were in general to profoundly influence both the academic pursuits and the creative efforts of the young poet. Winters, Momaday has recently recalled, was for him "something of a father figure," and they were "emotionally very close." (SI) So, it is important first

of all to recall Momaday's affection for Winters and his essential faith in him, as demonstrated by the eulogy quoted in the first chapter, and then to consider what Winters' positions were.

In The Function of Criticism, Winters declared: "I believe that a poem . . . is a sentiment in words about a human experience. . . .In each work there is a content which is rationally apprehensible, and each work endeavors to communicate the emotion which is appropriate to the rational apprehension of the subject. The work is thus a judgement, rational and emotional, of the experience--that is a complete moral judgement in so far as the work is successful."[3] Using the above criterion as a standard in Forms of Discovery, he attacked the "sentimental-romantic decadence of the 18th and 19th centuries"[4] and what he felt to be its influences and offshoots in the 20th century. Deriding what he asserted to be "the idea of the poet as inspired madman," he vowed that "if poets have any value, it is because of their superior intelligence, not because of their flashing eyes and floating hair."[5] He lashed out against the "simple-minded sentimentalism" that could result in the reduction of "conceptual understanding"[6] in literature. Then he summarized in a way that indicates how much Winters influenced Momaday's ideas about language and reinforced the attitudes he brought from the traditional Indian world:

> It is in language that we live the life of human beings; our language is the great reservoir of communal knowledge and perception, which has been accumulating for thousands of years, on which we can draw in proportion

> as we have the will and the talent; it is in the fullest command of language that we live most fully. Even Rimbaud and Joyce cannot escape entirely from the conceptual nature of language, but they can reduce the conceptual content greatly, and, no matter how sensitive they may be to the connotative aspect of language, they reduce the total efficiency of language. . . .For connotation itself is diminished in proportion as denotation is diminished; connotation depends for its existence on denotation; a sound which denotes nothing will connote nothing.[7]

Winters praised the subject of Momaday's doctoral dissertation, Frederick Goddard Tuckerman, for having written "The Cricket," the poem he termed "the greatest poem in English of the century," and one of the greatest of all time:[8]

> . . .instead of the obscurity which we find in Rimbaud, we have a theme of some intellectual scope with enough abstract statement to support the theme; theme and abstract statement charge the imagery with meaning, with the result that the imagery has the force of abstract statement. The imagery is not ornament as it would be in the Renaissance, nor is it merely the pasturage for revery as in much of the poetry of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries, nor is there anything obscure about its intention.[9]

Similarly, Emily Dickinson was a poet of major importance because "in the best lines sense-perception and concept are simultaneous; there is neither ornament nor explanation, and neither is needed."[10] Winters termed these poets "Post-Symbolist," in that they demonstrated the "clarity of perception" in regard to sensory details of the French Symbolist school, and added "intellectual perception" which the French usually lacked.[11] His justification for a label which seems to contradict chronological time is as follows: "I use the term "Post-Symbolist" to describe a kind of poetry which develops most commonly and most clearly after the French Symbolists but which sometimes appears before them or independently of them. Logically, it should follow them and should follow from them, but these things happen as they will."[12]

It is apparent in retrospect that Winters influenced his pupil both critically and creatively. Momaday was to adopt many of the older man's critical stances, generally sharing Winters' anti-Romantic views and reserving highest praise for writers like Tuckerman and Dickinson. Additionally, he soon began to put the theories they shared into practice in his own writing.

Much of this is evident in Momaday's "The Bear" and "Buteo Regalis," both published for the first time in the spring of 1961. Winters was later to term these poems "remarkably fine"[13] in his discussion of Momaday in Forms of Discovery, and his specific comments about them are central to an understanding of what Momaday was doing at that point.

"The Bear," as Winters pointed out, probably owes something to Faulkner's bear, is written in carefully structured syllabic

verse, and is in the main descriptive:[14]

What ruse of vision,
escarping the wall of leaves,
rending incision
into countless surfaces,
would cull and color
his somnolence, whose old age
has outworn valor,
all but the fact of courage?

Seen, he does not come,
move, but seems forever there,
dimensionless, dumb,
in the windless noon's hot glare.

More scarred than others
these years since the trap maimed him,
pain slants his withers,
drawing up the crooked limb.

Then he is gone, whole,
without urgency, from sight,
as buzzards control,
imperceptibly, their flight.

The first two stanzas are difficult, even obscure, because of their highly academic language. Still, the pace is slow and precise, encouraging the kind of hesitation and contemplation that sets the stage for the still life description that is to follow. Winters

called the language "very quiet," and added that it "could as well be the language of distinguished prose." He concludes that it is poetry "by virtue of the careful selection of details and the careful juxtaposition of these details . . . which result in concentration of meaning, and by virtue of its rhythm."[15] These remarks, while valid, do not seem complete. The language is quiet, but what sound there is significantly influences the poem's sense. The mood of somnolence is reinforced throughout by sibilant sounds, and by the recurring l's, and the frequent comma and period pauses further isolate and accentuate these sounds. It is as if the poet, who obviously knows truly what it is he describes, is himself in the scene he depicts, and whispering so as not to break the mood. In that sense, there is finally an immediacy to the description which draws even the difficult first two stanzas into the physical experience.

The poem's major accomplishment, however, lies in the fact that it is a vitally physical environment somehow devoid of motion, and so outside of time and strangely eternalized. The bear is "forever there," although he is in fact only momentarily motionless "in the windless noon's hot glare." Then the physical description of him is abruptly and dramatically juxtaposed against the announcement that he "is gone, whole," from the scene. There is no account of his going, no graduating description that can diminish what he is, and so he remains forever whole and magnificent in the mind's eye. The scene is thus in contrast to the <u>House Made of Dawn</u> scene in which

Francisco ritualistically slays the bear. For a moment after the bullet struck, that animal had also "remained motionless," with "eyes level" upon the hunter, but then the bear had reflexively retreated, and for a moment there was "a sad and meaningless haste," an inglorious going. (HMD, p. 182) Throughout Momaday's writing there is this meaningful contrast between the dramatic and symbolic moment and the diminishing action which re-introduces time and the temporal. The concluding scene of "The Bear," now empty of its central figure, maintains the poem's stillness despite the paradoxical fact that there is the flight of birds in it. The buzzards move "imperceptibly," that is, they seem suspended momentarily without physical motivation, as such large birds can in a still sky. It is an exquisite touch, and one that could be effected only by a poet who has seen what he describes and contemplated it many times.

"Buteo Regalis" is contrastingly full of motion. It describes another dramatic moment, this time the instant of a hawk's attack:

> His frailty discrete, the rodent turns, looks.
> What sense first warns? The winging is unheard,
> Unseen but as distant motion made whole,
> Singular, slow, unbroken in its glide.
> It veers, and veering, tilts broad-surfaced wings.
> Aligned, the span bends to begin the dive
> And falls, alternately white and russet,
> Angle and curve, gathering momentum.

Again, Winters praised the economy and control of the description, and the language, which "could be that of prose, except for the rhythm, but of absolutely distinguished prose, free of all cliche."[16] He pointed out that there are ten syllables in each line, and that lines two, four, five, and six are in iambic pentameter, while the other lines are syllabic, and then instructively showed how Momaday handled this "change of movement": "The first and third lines, in their syllabic rhythm suggest the sudden hesitation; the four pentameter lines suggest the smooth motion of the soaring hawk; the last two lines in their syllabic rhythm and fragmented phrasing, suggest the rapid and confusing descent."[17] Winters emphasis was upon the intellectual technique of it, and what it, like "The Bear," might have to say abstractly about "the essential wilderness." He saw mainly "the abstract movement of the abstract rodent,"[18] and pondered its intellectual implications. All of that is of course present in the poem. Momaday's knowledge of poetics was by now impressive, and his technical expertise unquestionable. Additionally, his intellectual analysis of the action, as in the "frailty discrete" of the rodent, a description that transcends the moment and considers all such creatures and the immensity of nature which dwarfs them, is an important part of the poem. Still, the focus seems again to be primarily on the physical moment described, and only secondarily upon the implications of it, which is apparently why Winters terms it and "The Bear" "remarkably fine, but minor poems." In this and the preceding poem, the movement is from observation to involvement,

and at last the physical setting seems to dominate. "Buteo Regalis" closes with a rush as the hawk abruptly breaks his slow glide and dives. Before the break he was "distant motion made whole," that is, an anonymous shape that was part of the landscape, its motion not discernible, but when he dives his color is individualized "white and russet," and the poem's landscape vision narrows sharply to focus only upon the "angle and curve" of the falling bird. This time the sibilant sounds reinforce the illusion of the fall, and the helpless rodent is all but forgotten in the excitement of the hawk's motion.

At this point, Momaday seems to have been effectively combining what he had learned about structure and the use of the language from Winters with his own sensitivity to language and his subjective responses to his past experiences. Nevertheless, Winters was, in Momaday's words, "something of an absolutist," while Momaday considered himself to be "more of a relativist," (SI) and there must have been at least occasional tension between academic theory and creative impulse in those days. In any event, Momaday "got interested in prose" when he went to Santa Barbara in 1963, and began writing House Made of Dawn. It is useful to bear in mind that he originally intended it to be a book of poetry. The "flexibility of prose" which he was enjoying at that time would eventually lead him back to a more flexible kind of poetry. (SI)

Momaday did, however, continue to write quite carefully structured verse, and in 1965 he published what Winters was later

to call his "most impressive achievement,"[19] and the poem that qualified him, according to Winters, for the label of "great poet."[20] The poem was "Before an Old Painting of the Crucifixion," subtitled "The Mission Carmel June 1960," and elicited a detailed explication in Forms of Discovery. It is considerably longer than his other attempts at such tightly structured poetic expression, but it seems even more cohesive, adhering to what Winters called the method of "controlled association"[21] throughout:

> I ponder how He died, despairing once.
> I've heard the cry subside in vacant skies,
> In clearings where no other was. Despair,
> Which, in the vibrant wake of utterance,
> Resides in desolate calm, preoccupies,
> Though it is still. There is no solace there.
>
> That calm inhabits wilderness, the sea,
> And where no peace inheres but solitude;
> Near death it most impends. It was for Him,
> Absurd and public in His agony,
> Inscrutably itself, nor misconstrued
> Nor metaphrased in art or pseudonym:
>
> A vague contagion. Old, the mural fades. . .
> Reminded of the fainter sea I scanned,
> I recollect: How mute in constancy!
> I could not leave the wall of palisades

Till cormorants returned my eyes on land.
The mural but implies eternity:

Not death, but silence after death is change.
Judean hills, the endless afternoon,
The farther groves and arbors seasonless
But fix the mind within the moment's range.
Where evening would obscure our sorrow soon,
There shines too much a sterile loveliness.

No imprecisions of commingled shade,
No shimmering deceptions of the sun,
Herein no semblances remark the cold
Unhindered swell of time, for time is stayed.
The Passion wanes into oblivion,
And time and timelessness confuse, I'm told.
These centuries removed from either fact

Have lain upon the critical expanse
And been of little consequence. The void
Is calendered in stone; the human act,
Outrageous, is in vain. The hours advance
Like flecks of foam borne landward and destroyed.

As in "The Bear" and "Buteo Regalis," the immediacy of the action in this poem is accentuated by the use of the present tense. The speaker stands before the painting and looks from it to the sea and back again, pondering the meaning of what is before him. The soundless mural leads him to think of the contrasting cry which was Christ's last,

and the remainder of the poem is a working out of the implications of sound and silence, motion and deathly stillness. The "vibrant wake of utterance," a moving wave of sound, is dramatically juxtaposed against motionless "desolate calm." He sees "no solace" in such a calm, the same calm that "inhabits wilderness, the sea." It is a reaction reminiscent of an experience Momaday was to later tell of having in the Santa Barbara Channel. In his November 26, 1972 newspaper column, he recalled having once seen the hump of a grey whale emerge and then submerge again near his boat. "It thrilled and frightened me at once," he wrote, "and afterward I felt profound isolation had been confirmed forever there in the dark troughs of the sea."[22]

Momaday then contrasts the public sound and motion of Christ's agony with the ultimately inscrutable calm of Christ's despair. The mural represents the timelessness of that calm, as had the endless sea before the motion of the birds returned his gaze to the temporal and changing land. The "endless afternoon" of the immobile and unchanging picture reminds him that "Not death, but silence after death is change." Dying is the final part of life, but what immediately follows is in contrast to that. Then he reflects upon the consequences of the crucifixion. Finally, the Passion, like all sound and motion, "wanes into oblivion;" that is, it fades into desolate silence, and the subsequent centuries are a confusion of "time and timelessness," a living and dying that is pathetically temporal and in contrast to the only constant, death. The closing

simile, "The hours advance/Like flecks of foam born landward and destroyed," vividly illustrates the futility of "flecks" of time, that is, motion and matter, in the context of the mute and immobile timelessness of eternity. Christ's "human act," tragically, could have no effect upon the inhuman constancy of death, which forever continues.

In Winters' explication, he especially praised Momaday for his awareness of the limits of human understanding, as demonstrated at two key points in the poem. The first was Momaday's description of Christ's experience as unique, "Inscrutably itself," and therefore undefinable: "Momaday does not try to render the unique experience but instead gives us a statement of the nature of uniqueness, in relation to the inner experience of Christ, after the line on his outer and public appearance. These lines are as powerful as any I know; they illustrate a way in which abstract statement can be utilized effectively."[23] In the second instance, what Momaday leaves open-ended has to do with the mural itself: "'The mural <u>but implies</u> eternity.' I have italicized two important words. The mural does not render eternity, nor explain it; Momaday is too cautious an observer of his experience to suspect anything so foolish. It merely implies eternity but it does imply it, and it implies nothing else."[24] Winters' concluding summation of the poem is at once a summation of what he called his "post-symbolist" theory of poetry and an indication of the influence he must have had on Momaday's early attempts:

> The poem displays both of the post-Symbolist methods which I have been discussing. First we have controlled association: this is seen most clearly in the third stanza and in the movement back and forth thereafter between the mural and the ocean, but it occurs throughout the poem. Second, we have post-Symbolist imagery, imagery weighted with intellectual content; the fifth stanza is the most obvious example, in "the cold unhindered swell of time," but we can find it elsewhere. And there is purely abstract statement on occasion, and very powerful abstract statement.[25]

"Before an Old Painting of the Crucifixion" does seem remarkably close to what Winters wanted poetry to be, and it is not surprising that he liked it as well as he did. The physical presence of the viewer before the painting is real, and reinforced by repetition of the first person pronoun throughout the poem, but for the first time in Momaday's poetry the action of the poem's setting seems subordinate to contemplation and meditation. The poem is, in Winters' words, "a complete moral judgment" about the ultimate human experience, but it also seems strangely static at times, even given the natural quiet of the experience described.

Perhaps in this poem Momaday went too far with some of the techniques that worked so well in "The Bear." In that poem the sibilant sounds are counterpointed by comparatively short line

lengths, creating the illusion of somnolence while at the same maintaining an immediacy in the speaking voice. In "Before an Old Painting of the Crucifixion," the whispering, immediate quality is for the most part gone, although the sibilant sounds have ironically been intensified. Most of this seems attributable to the greater line length, and the fact that the philosophizing has been increased to the extent that the pauses in the poem have been replaced by virtual halts. Finally, the poem has an almost ponderous quality that seems to fulfill too completely Winters' desire for intellectualizing in poetry.

"Angle of Geese" was published in the same issue of The Southern Review. Its short lines and stanzas are in contrast to those of its companion piece:

How shall we adorn
Recognition with our speech?
Now the dead firstborn
Will lag in the wake of words.

Custom intervenes;
We are civil, something more:
More than language means,
The mute presence mulls and marks.

Almost of a mind,
We take measure of the loss;
I am slow to find
The mere margin of repose.

And one November
It was longer in the watch,
As if forever,
Of the huge ancestral goose.

So much symmetry!
Like the pale angle of time
And eternity.
The great shape labored and fell.

Quit of hope and hurt,
It held a motionless gaze,
Wide of time, alert,
On the dark distant flurry.

There are two main subject matters in the poem, linked by the conjunction "and" at the beginning of the fourth stanza. The poem is first of all occasional, as Kenneth Fields notes in an article entitled "More Than Language Means." Momaday wrote it, Fields says, as "an attempt to talk about the death of a friend's child."[26] The second part of it is Momaday's recollection of a boyhood experience that had a profound effect upon him.

As in "The Bear" and "Buteo Regalis," Momaday begins this poem with a question. It is a question that inquires about speech, and by extension examines the problem inherent to the writer's situation. How do we express what we feel? More than that, how do we "adorn," that is, embellish or decorate, that which we plainly

sense or intuit? The question examines the very nature of language and its limitations. In the case of the dead child, the "wake of words," the conventional, generalized language of condolence, is a negative thing, obscuring meaning. Some things are finally inexpressible, and Momaday recognizes that, as he did in "Before an Old Painting of the Crucifixion." Fields speaks of "those elusive perceptions that resist formulation, that are "never entirely apprehensible, but just beyond the ends of the nerves," and suggests that Momaday shares an awareness of "this strange region of feeling" with one of his favorite poets, Emily Dickinson.[27] Fields' implication, though, seems to be that this "strange region" should be avoided, because of its elusiveness. Momaday's approach is quite different than that. He purposefully approaches the inexpressible, carefully juxtaposing what can be said against the kind of creative silence that implies what cannot be said. In another context, speaking of the oral storytelling tradition, he has emphasized the importance of "the modulation of sound and silence, the conjugation of sound and silence," (SI) underlining his concern with the effective utilization of creative silence. Language after all is intended to provoke thought and feeling, and insofar as it does it is vitally important.

The second stanza of "Angle of Geese" continues to describe the perversion of language, the kind of meaningless communication that "custom" and the obligations of being "civil" produce. Then that which is "More than language means" is recognized as "mute presence,"

leading into the third stanza, in which the grieving friends are "almost of a mind." In the intensity of their grief they are very close in spirit, perhaps as close as they can ever be, and certain words are unnecessary. Still, the poet is "slow to find" the comfort he seeks, and continues to search for that comfort by recalling a related experience in the last half of the poem. The fact that he makes that transition is crucial to an understanding of Momaday. While on the one hand he has criticized language without meaning, sound without sense, he continues to move as close as he can, in words, to the inexpressible.

The method of movement is roughly what Winters termed "controlled association." The goose's death, occuring as it did when he was perhaps most impressionable, and shocking him with its unexpectedly tragic quality, had an impact analogous to that of the child's death. Most importantly, it, like the present tragedy, was an experience universally representative of life's pain, with a symbolic quality which gave it permanence in his mind. It is an "ancestral," or archetypal goose, forever present in his mind's eye. When it falls out of "the pale angle of time/and eternity," its "great shape" becomes temporal, and it is at last physically defined within the encircling arms of a boy. Then in the magnificent closing stanza, a transcendence is accomplished. The bird surrenders hope and with it fear, and is at last "wide of time," that earthly boundary, and one with "the dark distant flurry" in the sky.

In his September 23, 1973, column, under the heading of "One of the Wild, Beautiful Creatures," he re-created the experience in prose, beginning with a discussion of his attitudes prior to it: "I was thirteen or fourteen years old, I suppose. I had a different view of hunting in those days, an exalted view, which was natural enough, given my situation. I had grown up in mountain and desert country, always in touch with the wilderness, and I took it all for granted. The men of my acquaintance were hunters. Indeed they were deeply committed to a hunting tradition. And I admired them in precisely those terms." Then he describes the actual experience of the goose hunt:

> And suddenly they exploded from the water. They became a terrible, clamorous swarm, struggling to gain their element. Their great bodies, trailing water, seemed to heave under the wild, beating wings. They disintegrated into a blur of commotion, panic. There was a deafening roar; my heart was beating like the wings of the geese.
>
> And just as suddenly, out of this apparent chaos there emerged a perfect fluent symmetry. The geese assembled on the cold air, even as the river was still crumpled with their going, and formed a bright angle on the distance. Nothing could have been more beautiful, more wonderfully realized upon the vision of a single moment. Such beauty is inspirational in itself; for it exists for its own sake.

> One of the wild, beautiful creatures remained in the river, mortally wounded, its side perforated with buckshot. I waded out into the hard, icy undercurrent and took it up in my arm. The living weight of it was very great, and with its life's blood it warmed my frozen hands. I carried it for a long time. There was no longer any fear in its eye, only something like sadness and yearning, until at last the eyes curdled in death. The great shape seemed perceptibly lighter, diminished in my hold, as if the ghost given up had gone at last to take its place in that pale angle in the long distance.[28]

The passage, which is also quite similar to the account of a night hunt in House Made of Dawn, is dramatically illustrative of how a writer's art can be shaped by the nature of his experience, and of how key experiences can reoccur symbolically throughout a writer's works.

It can be inferred from both the poem and the subsequent prose account of the experience that Momaday's greatest consolation came from a knowledge of the beautiful and vibrantly alive thing that the bird at its most exuberant moment had been, and from an understanding of what the creature meant to him, but there can be no safe assumptions in that regard, or in regard to how those comforts might be applied to the present loss. In this poem, Momaday has, in direct and concise language, come as close to the inexpressible as he can

without narrowing and thus distorting the emotions involved, and the creative silence that is part of his poem must finally speak as movingly to his reader as he does in words, or his intent is lost.

In the Spring, 1968, issue, the New Mexico Quarterly published the first representative collection of Momaday's poetry. Entitled "Eight Poems," the group included those poems already discussed; "Los Alamos," originally published in the Autumn, 1959, issue of the New Mexico Quarterly; "Pit Viper," which was originally published with "The Bear" and "Buteo Regalis," and is similar to them in its description of a wild creature; "Rainy Mountain Cemetery," which has already been discussed in terms of its place at the conclusion of The Way to Rainy Mountain; and a poem entitled "Simile," which was originally published in Sequoia. "Simile" seems to mark a departure from the intellectual poeticizing of some of its predecessors, and a return to the most direct statement of "Earth and I Gave You Turquoise":

> What did we say to each other
> that now we are as the deer
> who walk in single file
> with heads high
> with ears forward
> with eyes watchful
> with hooves always placed on firm ground
> in whose limbs there is latent flight

The beginning line poses the now-familiar question, and the qualifying lines that follow are full of the "wh", or interrogatory sound. The last line breaks into an "L" sound, reinforcing the idea of motion which is the sense of the line. Sound and sense are adeptly blended to make what would otherwise be essentially a prose statement into poetry.

In June, 1974, Momaday's first book of poems, Angle of Geese And Other Poems was published by David R. Godine. It contained all of his previously published poems except "Los Alamos," and nine new pieces. David Bromwich of the New York Times Book Review said: "Momaday is a relatively unknown poet who has written one very fine poem, "The Bear," and two or three others nearly as strong. He is a good descriptive writer because his ear is wholly at the command of his eye: the deer 'with hooves always placed on firm ground/ in whose limbs there is latent flight' is part of a simile that works. He has mastered a terse and dignified language that would be incapable of preening."[29] While the review shows scant recognition of what Momaday has at this point achieved, the label of "terse and dignified" seems an apt description of his poetic language, particularly in such poems as "Simile." Additionally, the new poems in the volume demonstrate an interest in a more flexible form of expression, while retaining some of the best symbolic features of the formal poetic training Momaday has received.

A good example is "Comparatives," which combines a highly imagistic prose statement with a multiplicity of poetic technique and a severely poetic structure:

Sunlit sea,
the drift of fronds
and banners
of bobbing boats-
the seaside
of any day-
except: this
cold, bright body
of the fish
upon the planks,
the coil and
crescent of flesh
extending
just into death.

Even so,
in the distant,
inland sea,
a shadow runs,
radiant,
rude in the rock:
fossil fish,
fissure of bone
forever.
It is perhaps
the same thing,
an agony
twice perceived.

It is most like
wind on waves-
mere commotion-
mute and mean,
perceptible-
that is all.

As in "Angle of Geese," there are two focal points in the poem, this time linked together by the phrase "Even so." The poet first examines the "cold, bright body" of a freshly killed fish against a vivid backdrop of "Sunlit sea" and "banners of bobbing boats." The short alliterative lines reinforce the image of any carefree summer day, until the word "except" introduces the fish, which is "bright," but also paradoxically "just into death." The reader is reminded to retain this scene for further consideration by the "Even so" that begins the second scene, and in that scene the "shadow" of the fossil in the rock immediately contrasts with the radiance of the sun on the sea. The long dead fish is thus compared to the recently killed one to show that there are no degrees in death: the two scenes are merely "agony/twice perceived." The final stanza describes the inscrutability of death in a manner reminiscent of the description of Christ's despair in "Before an Old Painting of the Crucifixion." It is "mute and mean," merely "perceptible," and nothing more. The poet has studied two extremes, the freshly dead and the long dead, and wisely does not try to force a conclusion about the nature of death in either instance. The most he can do is sensitively perceive

what is there, and accept it for what it is. Again, Momaday seems to have come close in language to what finally cannot be expressed.

Most of the other new poems in the volume experiment even more freely with the similarities between prose and poetry. "Plainview:2" and "The Delight Song of Tsoai-talee," for example, are songs in the old spoken tradition, dependent upon beginning repetitions for a kind of rhythmic, incantatory effect. The latter piece, a significant self-realization in language, begins:

> I am a feather in the bright sky.
> I am the blue horse that runs in the plain.
> I am the fish that rolls, shining in the water.
> I am the shadow that follows a child.
> I am the evening light, the lustre of meadows.
> I am an eagle playing with the wind.
> I am a cluster of bright beads.
> I am the farthest star.

Tsoai-talee is, as Martha Trimble points out, Momaday's Indian name, given him early in life by an old Kiowa neighbor,[30] and the poem that is his song is yet another example of how involved Momaday is with his tribal experience, and with the natural world.

Three other pieces in Angle of Geese are in the shape of prose paragraphs, but with a compression and a vividness that is poetic. The last of these is "The Horse That Died of Shame." The legend of the proud horse from The Way to Rainy Mountain is italicized beneath the title, followed by the poet's reaction: "In the one color of the

horse there were many colors. And that evening it wheeled, riderless, and broke away into the long distance, running at full speed. And so it does again and again in my dreaming. It seems to concentrate all color and light into the final moment of its life, until it streaks the vision plane and is indefinite, and shines vaguely like the gathering of March light to a storm." The only readily discernible poetic line arrangement occurs with the first line, which ends with a generally descriptive summation of what will be vividly described in particular. However, the remaining lines build, through word and sound repetition and especially through a gradually heightened poetic language, to a symbolic moment outside of narrative sequence. At the end there is a blur of pure color as the horse "streaks the vision plane" and imagistically <u>becomes</u> "the gathering of March light to a storm."

The prose passages in <u>Angle of Geese</u> seemed to mark the beginning of a new phase of Momaday's writing career. He recently summarized the change that is occurring:

> For one thing I am much more productive, more prolific, as a writer of poetry now than I was at one time. And along with that there seems to be a difference in the character of the expression. Its more flexible. It is I hope less self-conscious than the earlier works, which were, it seems to me, rigid. And I think that my attitudes toward the poems that I have written quite recently are more appropriate

> in certain ways. I feel good overall about the things I have written, I suppose, but now I feel especially good about the change of pace, and the change of volume. (SI)

Despite the fact that "the character of the expression" is changing, however, Momaday continues to incorporate most of what he has already written into what he is writing now. Thus, The Gourd Dancer contains almost all of his previously published poetry, plus poetry that he obviously wrote some time ago and is publishing now for the first time, as well as his recent, less structured materials. It is a history of a poet's development as well as a cross-section of poetic forms. He seems increasingly determined to let only mood and subject matter dictate the shape of his future writing. His only overriding and continuing consideration is the honest and sensitive utilization of the creative word.

In its present form, The Gourd Dancer is divided into four main parts, each generally representative of some major phase of the poet's experience.[31] Part One, "The Gourd Dancer," has to do primarily with his Indian heritage and upbringing, beginning with the all-important story of his grandfather, continuing with recollections of places like Dulce and Canyon de Chelly and things like the dream wheel and the eagle feather fan, and concluding with traditional Kiowa legends. Part Two, "The Strange and True Story of My Life with Billy the Kid," focuses upon what seems to have been a central fantasy of his childhood. Part Three, "Anywhere is a Street into the Night," consists

of several poems apparently written during his stay in Russia. Part Four, "Angle of Geese," is with several additions, essentially the same collection that he had published previously.

Part One begins with a four-part prose poem called "The Gourd Dancer," which was previously published in Momaday's November 4, 1973, newspaper column.[32] The progression in the poem is from "The Omen," an owl "intricate with age;" to "The Dream," in which his grandfather Mammedaty dreams "of dreaming, and of the summer breaking/upon his spirit;" to "The Dance," in which Mammedaty also dreams; to "The Giveaway," which traditionally followed the dance. A prose account of the same experience is contained in the National Geographic Society publication, and this poem is also slightly different in form from its first publication as poetry. In the earlier version, all of the lines in the second section except the first and the last were out to the margin, and all of the lines in the final section were also out to the margin. In this revised version, the second and fourth sections are two and six lines longer, respectively, so that the lines can be ended at points of poetic pause, and not as the margin dictates. It is a subtle shift to a more poetic arrangement.

The poem is among other things Momaday's recognition of the power and importance of imagining. The final section opens with "Someone spoke his name, Mammedaty, in which / his essence was and is," and closes with "And all / of this was for Mammedaty, in his honor, as even now / it is in the telling, and will be, as long as there / are those who imagine him in his name." His grandfather's

name defines what he was and what the nature of his experience was, and as such represents the ultimate creative power of the symbolic word. Because they are the key to Momaday's greatest imaginings, the words for what his grandfather most proudly was appropriately entitle and begin his most imaginative work.

The next poem, "New World," is a universalized description of a natural setting, styled in the tight poetic structure of "Comparatives." It is strikingly descriptive and there is a kind of melancholy in its dawn to dusk progression:

1
First Man,
behold:
the earth
glitters
with leaves;
the sky
glistens
with rain.
Pollen
is borne
on winds
that low
and lean
upon
mountains.
Cedars

blacken
the slopes--
and pines.

2
At dawn
eagles
hie and
hover
above
the plain
where light
gathers
in pools.
Grasses
shimmer
and shine.
Shadows
withdraw
and lie
away
like smoke.

3
At noon
turtles
enter

slowly
into
the warm
dark loam.
Bees hold
the swarm.
Meadows
recede
through planes
of heat
and pure
distance.

4
At dusk
the gray
foxes
stiffen
in cold;
blackbirds
are fixed
in the
branches.
Rivers
follow
the moon,

the long
white track
of the
full moon.

The experience, beginning with "First Man," seems archetypal, yet Man is also in contrast to the timeless motions of the natural world, and the short poetic lines ask the reader to "behold" and slowly contemplate what he is in relation to all of that.

The poem that follows, "Long Shadows at Dulce," is a similarly melancholy account of cyclic time, this time from early to late fall:

1
September is a long
Illusion of itself;
The elders bide their time.

2
The sheep camps are lively
With children. The slim girls,
The limber girls, recline.

3
November is the flesh
And blood of the black bear,
Dusk its bone and marrow.

4
In the huddles horses
That know of perfect cold
There is calm, like sorrow.

There is almost perfect imagistic reinforcement in this poem, as the lively sheep camps and slim girls of September give way to the huddled horses and perfect cold of November. As "New World" wound down to "the long / white track / of the / full moon," this poem ends in a similar setting, in a "calm, like sorrow."

The remaining poems in the section are variations of essentially the same subject matters. "To a Child Running With Outstretched Arms in Canyon de Chelly" describes the child in relation to her magnificent natural surroundings, while "Winter Holding off the Coast of North America" has the cold calm of "Long Shadows at Dulce." "Carriers of the Dream Wheel" and "The Eagle-Feather Fan" echo the call for vivid imagining found in "The Gourd Dancer," and "The Monoliths" returns to the idea of timelessness found in "New World." In short, there is a "controlled association" of sorts throughout the section. The concluding piece, a long prose poem of eight sections entitled "The Colors of Night," uses legend to show the interrelatedness of things, and the importance of the imagination in regard to a spiritual definition and understanding of the natural universe. The first section of it, "White," is illustrative:

> And old man's son was killed far away in the Staked Plains. When the old man heard of it he went there and gathered up the bones. Thereafter, wherever the old man ventured, he led a dark hunting horse which bore the bones of his son on its back. And the old man said to whomever he saw: "You see how it is that

> now my son consists in his bones, that his bones are polished and so gleam like glass in the light of the sun and moon, that he is very beautiful."

The legend, like those in The Way to Rainy Mountain, obviously implies many things, but what is of first importance in this context is the stark white color that it communicates. The legend poetically reiterates the Melvillian idea of the ambiguity of whiteness by contrasting the observer's reaction to the ghastly color of the skeleton's bones with the old man's conception of them as beautiful.

Following legends that have to do with the colors yellow, brown, red, and green, the sixth section of the poem, entitled "Blue," specifically examines the nature of language:

> One night there appeared a child in the camp. No one had ever seen it before. It was not bad looking, and it spoke a language that was pleasant to hear, though none could understand it. The wonderful thing was that the child was perfectly unafraid, as if it were at home among its own people. The child got on well enough, but the next morning it was gone, as suddenly as it had appeared. Everyone was troubled. But then it came to be understood that the child never was, and everyone felt better. "After all," said an old man, "how can we believe in the child? It gave us not one word of sense to hold on to. What we saw, if indeed we saw anything at all, must have been a dog from a neighboring camp, or a bear that wandered down from the high country."

Here again is the familiar idea of establishing identity through language. While the strange child "spoke a language that was pleasant to hear," it failed to give the people "one word of sense to hold on to," and so its existence was denied. The story seems to be similar to the legend of the arrowmaker, in that it is very much "about language." The child failed, like the watcher outside the arrowmaker's tent, to actualize itself in language, and so was denied existence in the minds of the people. The implication finally is that it must have been an illusion. The story places the power of creative words above even sensory perception.

The seventh legend, "Purple," gives suffering life to the sunset, vivifying in language the bleeding colors of the sky:

> There was a man who killed a buffalo bull to no purpose, only he wanted its blood on his hands. It was a great, old, noble beast, and it was a long time blowing its life away. On the edge of the night the people gathered themselves up in their grief and shame. Away in the west they could see the hump and spine of the huge beast which lay dying along the edge of the world. They could see its bright blood run into the sky, where it dried, darkening, and was at last flecked with flares of light.

The purple of the last dying light leads into the black of the final section, and the spectrum from white to black is completed. Significantly, while all of the preceding colors have of course

been dependent upon some kind of light to give them their color, black, which is the absence of all light, is not. The legend fittingly dramatizes that fact in closing:

> There was a woman whose hair was long and heavy and black and beautiful. She drew it about her like a shawl and so divided herself from the world that not even Age could find her. Now and then she steals into the men's societies and fits her voice into their holiest songs. And always, just there, is a shadow which the firelight cannot cleave.

Much is happening in this closing legend. All of the colors have become the last one, the only true color of night, and in the absence of light there is also no chronological time. The ultimate darkness is that darkness which existed before time began, and man's puny artificial light "cannot cleave" it. The blackness that pre-existed exists still, even in the "holiest songs." The dark female presence intrudes easily, almost playfully, into the men's societies, which seem to represent the extreme of man's reaction to the dark unknown. They have banded together to more fully exert their influence and impress their "light" upon the world, but the darkness which is after all ultimate and unvaried intrudes even upon their efforts to distance it.

Part Two, "The Strange and True Story of My Life With Billy the Kid," is at once a highly imaginative recollection of a childhood fantasy and a close scrutiny of the nature of legend. This time, Momaday uses legendary materials which are essentially products of

the culture of the American West to make many of the same points he made with his own tribal legends, demonstrating, among other things, the cross-cultural influences in his life. The stories surrounding the enigmatic figure known variously as Henry McCarty or William Bonney or Billy the Kid reflect the contradictory attitudes about him and the Western era which he in many ways represents, and Momaday creatively examines the wide range of symbolism involved. Billy the Kid is at one extreme a romantically heroic gunfighter of the old West, a noble representation of a glorious period in American history, while at the other extreme he is a ruthless, cold-blooded killer who is perhaps representative of much that was wrong with that era. There is a wide area in between.

Momaday begins his recollections of Billy the Kid with a prose piece called "Riding is an Exercise of the Mind." The opening paragraph sets the symbolic mood of it: "One autumn morning in 1946 I woke up at Jemez Pueblo. I had arrived there in the middle of the night and gone to sleep. I had no idea of the landscape, no sense of where in the world I was. Now, in the bright New Mexican morning, I began to look around and settle in. It was the last, best home of my childhood." Later, preparatory to describing the "mystery and life" of the landscape and the people, he says conclusively: "I was embarked upon the greatest adventure of all; I had come to the place of my growing up." It is obviously the "place" he fictionalized so extensively in <u>House Made of Dawn</u>, this time with his own reactions and attitudes interjected, and as such it provides further insight into that book.

He describes how he "entered into the motion of life" at Jemez, and then tells of his horse Pecos, his "great glory for a time": "Riding is an exercise of the mind. I dreamed a good deal on the back of my horse, going out into the hills alone. Desperados were everywhere in the brush. More than once I came upon roving bands of hostile Indians and had, on the spur of the moment, to put down an uprising." There is of course considerable irony involved in the young Indian's imagining of "hostile Indians," and Momaday further extends that irony by telling how he imagined himself coming to the rescue of wagon trains containing young ladies from the East. The passage is at once a playful reversal of reader expectations, as is indeed much of his subsequently imagined relationship with the white gunfighter, and a more sober reminder of the influence one culture can exert upon another. Still, there is an important distinction to be made, even in regard to what is in one sense a contradiction. The young Momaday was involved with the positive aspect of the myth, that is, the rescue of the defenseless and the innocent, and his imagined relationship with Billy the Kid was largely the same. In retrospect, Momaday the writer can see the universal quality of that kind of imagining, and how interchangeable it is with similarly justifiable action throughout all mythology. In this respect, it has much in common with the patterns of action in his own Kiowa myths. The perversion in fact of what is essentially a good and noble idea is a central theme throughout Momaday's writings, and all of his myths emphasize the discrepancy.

At this point he introduces Billy the Kid:

> After a time Billy the Kid was with me on most of those adventures. He rode on my right side and a couple of steps behind. I watched him out of the corner of my eye, for he bore watching. We got on well together in the main, and he was a good man to have along in a fight. We had to be careful of glory-seeking punks. Incredibly there were those in the world who were foolish enough to cross us for the sake of gaining a certain reputation.

It is instructive to note the change from the adult narrator at the beginning to the child of this passage. The concluding paragraph is a return to an adult point of view, and a highly imaginative way of saying that the past is still importantly present:

> When it came time for me to leave home and venture out into the wider world, I sold my horse to an old gentleman at Vallecitos. I like to think that Pecos went on with our games long afterwards, that in his old age he listened for the sound of bugles and of gunfire--and for the pitiful weeping of young ladies in distress--and that he heard them as surely as I do now.

Following this extended prose passage, Momaday circles back poetically to his early childhood with a child's rhyme entitled "Billy the Kid, His Rocking Horse: a Lullaby":

Ride, Billy, Billy
Ride, Billy, ride;
Ride about the countryside.

Sing, Billy, Billy,
Sing, Billy, sing;
Sing a song of galloping.

Whoa, Billy, Billy,
Whoa, Billy, whoa;
Hold your horse and let him blow.

Sleep, Billy, Billy,
Sleep, Billy, sleep;
May your sleep be dark and deep.

This little song is at once the logical beginning for what will be a series of poems about the Billy the Kid legend and an invitation to dream along with the child as he imagines it.

The next poem is a contrastingly somber and adult contemplation of the legend, entitled "Billy the Boy at Silver City":

Already, in the sultry streets,
the mean quotient of suspicion
settles at his crooked mouth, but
just inside himself, he perceives,
in the still landscape of legend,
the cold of his dark destiny;
Already, in the sultry streets,
he resembles himself in death.

Here Momaday considers the ultimate act of imagining, the imagining of one's self. In an interesting reversal, the person being imagined is suddenly doing the imagining, and what he imagines is a kind of caricature of himself, born of the legend he himself has perhaps come to believe. The introspective melancholy of this seems to be echoed in the next poem, "Henry McCarty Witnesses His Mother's Marriage, 1 March 1873," which concludes:

> Henry envisions her death
> And his own: a compromise
> with love. He looks upon her,
> His mother, and his mind turns
> Upon him; the beautiful
> His example of despair.

What follows is a prose narration entitled "The Man in Black," which originally appeared in Momaday's November 25, 1973, newspaper column under the heading of "How It Began."[33] It is an account of the night in his imagination when he first met Billy the Kid. He recalls that "the cold was absolute," setting the mood for the dramatic encounter. The description of Billy is interestingly similar to that of the albino in House Made of Dawn in some key respects. There is a contrast in physical proportion, in that the albino was "large and thickset," (HMD, p. 43) with "heavy, bloodless hands," (HMD, p. 44) while Billy is "slight of build," with "small and delicately formed hands which are "extraordinarily expressive," but there are strange similarities in regard to their eyes and

their voices. They share an inability to see truly into the nature of things and to express that seeing in meaningful language. A detailed consideration of the parallels is again illustrative of Momaday's attitudes about experience and the necessary articulation of that experience.

From the first, the albino's eyes were not even visible because "the small, round black glasses lay like pennies close together and flat against the enormous face." (HMD, p. 44) Later, as he watched Francisco with "nearly sightless eyes" as the old man worked the field, "the barren lids fluttered helplessly behind the colored glass." (HMD, p. 64) Finally, in death, there was "no expression" (HMD, p. 77) visible on his face, and when he died, his eyes "curdled" like milk. (HMD, p. 79) The description of Billy the Kid in "The Man in Black" also emphasizes a lack of facial expression, and then explains that lack in terms which also seem to be applicable to the albino:

> It was as if the Angel of Death had long ago found out his name. His skin was nearly colorless, and his front teeth protruded to such an extent that his thin lips seemed never to come together. His eyes were blue, just the blue of water in milk, and devoid of expression, so that it was impossible to say what he was thinking--or indeed <u>that</u> he was thinking. Thought seemed somehow irrelevant to his real being, apart from his true nature. I have heard that certain organisms--sharks, for example--

> are virtually mindless, that they are creature of pure instinct. So it was with this man, I believe. If a rational thought, or a whole emotion, had ever grown up inside of him, he should have suffered a great dislocation of himself in his mind and soul. Such was my impression; he should have been like a plate of glass that is shattered upon a stone. But at the same time I had the sense that his instincts were nearly infallible. Nothing should ever take him by surprise--and no one, except perhaps himself. Only one principle motivated him, that of survival--his own mean and exclusive survival. For him there was no morality in the universe but that, neither choice nor question. And for that reason he was among the deadliest creatures on the face of the earth.

The similarities between the albino and Billy the Kid in this characterization in regard to voice seem even more striking. The albino was almost without voice, and certainly without meaningful language. In his first appearance he beat Abel silently, and when he watched Francisco, the only sound was his breathing, "rapid and uneven with excitement." (HMD, p. 64) In the final confrontation with Abel, his expression was an ineffectual and hideous laugh: "Now and then the white man laughed, and each time it carried too high on the scale and ended in a strange, inhuman cry--as of pain. It was an old woman's laugh, thin and weak as water. It issued

only from the tongue and teeth of the great evil mouth, and it fell away from the blue lips and there was nothing left of it." (HMD, p. 77) Even in the agony of his dying, "the great blue mouth still gaped open and made no sound." (HMD, p. 78)

In like manner, the ultimately dehumanizing feature of Billy in "The Man in Black" is his almost total lack of a meaningful human voice: "There was no resonance in his voice, but it was thin and hard and flat--wood clacking upon wood. He was ill at ease within the element of language; I believe that silence was his natural habitat."

In this characterization, then, Billy the Kid is seen as a negative extreme. He is ultimately amoral and ruthless, as the albino seemed to be, and, like the albino at his strongest, is perhaps even representative of pure evil. However, it is important to be mindful that here Momaday <u>is</u> examining the symbolic extreme, the worst thing that the legend of Billy ever represented. There is usually a wide range of reaction to any symbol, and in other contexts Billy, and by extension even the fearful albino, could seem much less evil, or not evil at all. Certainly, in later passages, Momaday likes Billy, and even lauds his capacity for friendship, and ultimately he seems to pity him, as the albino seemed to be pitied in the agony of his death.

The poems about Billy that follow this prose passage differ greatly in form and mood. At one extreme, for example, is "The Wound," which is free verse of greatly varying line length with an almost ghoulish subject matter:

The wound gaped open;
It was remarkably like the wedge of an orange
When it is split, spurting.
He wanted to close the wound with a kiss,
To graft his mouth to the warm, wet tissue.
He kept about the wound, waiting
and deeply disturbed,
his fascination
like the inside of the wound itself,
deep, as deep almost as the life principle,
the irresistible force of being.
The force lay there in the rupture of the flesh,
there in the center of the wound.

Had he been God,
he should Himself have inflicted the wound;
and he should have taken the wound gently,
gently in his hands, and placed it
among the most brilliant wildflowers
in the meadows of the mountains.

At the other extreme is the short and frivolous epigram, "Billy's Boast to an old Blind Woman at San Patricio," written in standard meter:

I am the desperado of these parts;
I deal in felonies and broken hearts.

These poems seem to reflect, among other things, the wide variety of reactions to Billy the Kid, and the different forms of expression underline that variety.

The next prose piece, entitled "Billy the Kid Offers a Kindness to an Old Man at Glorietta," was originally printed in Momaday's December 9, 1973, newspaper column.[34] Again the primary subject is the nature of language. He says of the old man: "The old man's real existence was at last invested in his stories; there he lived, and not elsewhere. He was nothing so much as the story of himself, the telling of a tale to which flesh was gathered incidentally. It was no wonder Billy liked him." Conversely, the old man reaffirms their existences in language:

> We passed the time of day with him, and he created us over and over again in his stories, fashioned us into a myriad wonderful things that we should not otherwise have been. Now we were trick-shot artists in a Wild West Show, and the old man, his guns blazing, shot the buttons off our vests. Again we dined on the most exotic and delicious fruits in the golden palaces of the Orient. We were there at the Battle of the Wilderness, at the very point of the Bloody Angle, following the old man into legend. Christmas was coming on, and we were the Magi, the old man said. Laughing, we half believed him. And then it was time to go.

It is then that Billy "offers a kindness," half of the tobacco plug he has purchased, to the old man, belying the earlier picture of him

as being motivated only by his instinct for survival. He is in this instance almost the direct opposite of that unthinking, almost mindless creature, as he works out in detail what manner of gift will please his old friend the most. But Momaday reminds us of the relatedness of the other symbolic extreme too, at this point, as he has Billy fall silent after his long explanation of his gift. Interestingly, at this point he adds the following lines to the original publication: "This brief sojourn into language had been for him extraordinary, and he seemed spent, and indeed almost remorseful and contrite, as if he had squandered something of which he had too little in store." Billy closes the passage murmuring "Indeed we are the Magi." In the generosity of their giving they had become in spirit what the old man had creatively imagined them to be.

Two contrasting poems follow. The first, "He Encounters a Player at Words," is quite frivolous. It consists of a short dialogue between Billy and Pat Garrett, and concludes with Garrett saying ironically and prophetically: "We'll dance a jig and dine on shoat, / And you shall be my billy goat." The other poem is a somber piece entitled "He Would Place a Chair for Sister Blandina." The story of it appeared in Momaday's August 5, 1973, newspaper column entitled "Sister of Charity and Desperado."[35] Again, Billy's kindness seems to clash with the original characterization of him. Sister Blandina, in response to his kindness, was moved to write the following: "Life is a mystery. What of the human heart? A compound of goodness and wickedness. Who has ever solved the

secret of its workings? I thought: One moment diabolical, the next angelical." Billy's ambiguous nature is instructive for the nun and for whoever hears her story. She has been moved, and, as the last line of the poem says, "Later she will weep for him."

The final prose selection of Part Two is entitled "The Dying Cowboy." Momaday begins with "I crave an audacious music, yet easy, comfortable, native," which seems to summarize his attitude in regard to his own poetry. He considers Aaron Copland's "Billy the Kid," and surrenders himself to the mood of the legend. He declares that "an epic notion of heroism" lies at its center. It is that, and not the reductive "fact" of it, that is "an authentic national treasure." Then he contemplates a familiar refrain:

> We beat the drum slowly and played the fife lowly,
> And bitterly wept as we bore him along;
> For we all loved our comrade, so brave, young, and handsome,
> We all loved our comrade although he'd done wrong.

His reaction to this song is a plain statement of much of what he has previously shown poetically:

> But if this is not precisely a false view of Billy the Kid, it is decidedly a narrow one. And the irony is that the other side of this particular coin is just as ambiguously true and false; to wit, the famous photograph (the only one known to exist, if I am not mistaken) in which Billy appears to be a mindless, pear-shaped boy--essentially innocuous in spite of the arsenal at his

hips--who stands in peculiar and pathetic relation to Man and to God.

The truth is not necessarily to be found in either of these directions. (Nor is it necessarily to be found at all)

Following another fanciful anecdote, Momaday addresses "the matter of Billy the Kid's demise" in a piece first printed in his November 18, 1973, column.[36] After recounting the known facts of the matter, the narrow historical circumstance that is the ostensible record of what happened, he addresses the more important matters of the imagination:

> Now these are the important questions, as I see it. Was Billy the Kid armed? Did the four men who stood over his body really see, in addition to the butcher knife, a pistol in Billy's right hand? --a pistol of a rare type, a Colt's double-action, .41 calibre, with a small handle shaped like that of a derringer--or did they only imagine that they saw such a thing? Finally, did the four men really see Billy the Kid there on the floor at their feet, or were they possibly dreaming? Could it be that they, in some extraordinary concert of the mind, imagined him there dead? --or, indeed, could it be that these men, in their very souls, in their most intricate mentality and absolute faith in what they saw and what they were, were four more or less equal figments of Billy the Kid's imagination?

In any event, those four men have continued existence only in terms of what is imagined about Billy. As he created himself, he also shaped what they would become in relation to him, and to those who would subsequently imagine them all.

The concluding poems are uniformly solemn and deathly, imagistically reinforcing the mood of Billy the Kid's violent end. For example, in "Trees and Evening Sky," the limbs of the "black trees" are Tangled on the mottled clouds," and in "He Foresees Disaster in a Dream," there is "The long crystal splinter / Of despair." In "He Enters upon the Afternoon of His Last Day," Billy's destruction is bleakly anticipated:

> But then and there the sun bore down
> And was a focal length away.
> The brain was withered and burned brown,
> Then gone to ashes, cold and gray.

The final poem of Part Two, "Wide Empty Landscape With a Death in the Foreground," reinforces that bleak image while at the same time summarizing much of what Momaday has had to say about legend:

> Here are weeds about his mouth;
> His teeth are ashes.
>
> It is this which succeeds him:
> This huge, barren plain.
>
> For him there is no question
> Of elsewhere. His place

Is just this reality,
This deep element.

Now that he is dead he bears
Upon the vision

Merely, without resistance.
Death displaces him

No more than life displaced him;
He was always there.

Now that Billy the Kid is dead, the legend, free of the restrictions of the temporal, can develop more fully and take on far greater significance as symbol. Finally, it is inextricably intertwined with the "huge, barren plain," the timeless landscape that represents Momaday's central concern.

In his October 29, 1972, newspaper column, Momaday created a conversation with his imagined friend, Juvenal Moskowitz.[37] The two are in his Porsche, driving toward Santa Fe at sunset. Juvenal speaks first:

> "He has been a vague reality in my mind for a long time," he says at last, "many years."
>
> "Who?"
>
> "Billy the Kid, of course." There is a strange look in his eyes--and a kind of long-distance pitch to his voice, as if he is speaking out of a far-removed realm of thought and experience.

"Tell me about it," I say. I am used to playing the straight man with Juvenal Moskowitz.

"Well, I am interested in what happened to him."

"He was shot to death in a dark room, wasn't he?" I know perfectly well that he was, and in fact we are now very close, geographically, to the scene. The Porsche is descending very fast upon Socorro. My mind is idling; I see a dim light at the window of a house, and I wonder if it is an apparition. Someone has lighted a lamp, Pete Maxwell or Pat Garrett, and he is holding it over the body of Billy the Kid.

"Yes, yes, but that isn't what I mean," says Juvenal impatiently. "I am interested not so much in the facts, but in the larger, legendary aspect of the matter."

"An authentic legend," I agree with certain inanity.

"To be sure--a kind of American literary and folk phenomenon, maybe the most intricate and durable of all."

"Perhaps that is so, Juvenal, but. . ."

"And as such, we ought to cherish it, even as we ought to cherish the vestiges of our wilderness. Billy the Kid is one of our natural resources, and an endangered species."

"It is said that he was an unscrupulous killer, a homicidal maniac," I offer, for the sake of argument.

"Ah, my friend," Juvenal intones, lavishing certain pity upon me. "You fail completely to understand my point. You see, you have fallen prey to a particular confusion. I am talking about a legend. When I mention Billy the Kid,

> you formulate an idea of William Bonney, or Henry McCarty, or whatever his real name was. That man doesn't interest me in the least. I am interested in Billy the Kid."

What had been a "vague reality" in Momaday's mind for "many years" had finally been put into words, and he was to devote five more columns to the legendary figure that had so captured his imagination, accumulating segments of what finally became Part Two of The Gourd Dancer. It is obvious that he does "cherish the legend," both for its own sake as an "American literary and folk phenomenon," and for what it has taught him about the process of imagining. "The Strange and True Story of My Life With Billy the Kid" is thus an important record of Momaday's artistic development, as well as a study of the many-sided implications of legend.

Despite the fact that The Gourd Dancer is at this writing in manuscript form and is subject perhaps even to major revision, its artful combinations of prose and poetry do seem indicative of Momaday's plans for the future. He quite obviously has decided to be less concerned with consistency of stylistic or even generic form than with dealing specifically and appropriately with each artistic impulse, and with economically utilizing each creative word.

FOOTNOTES TO CHAPTER IV

[1]N. Scott Momaday, "Way down yonder in the pawpaw patch," Viva, the Sunday magazine of the Santa Fe New Mexican, 17 December, 1972, p. 2.

[2]Yvor Winters, Forms of Discovery: Critical and Historical Essays on the Forms of the Short Poem in English (Denver: Alan Swallow, Inc. 1967), p. 253.

[3]Winters, The Function of Criticism (Denver: Alan Swallow, Inc. 1957), p. 26.

[4]Winters, Forms of Discovery, p. 147.

[5]Forms, p. 174.

[6]Forms, p. 244.

[7]Forms, p. 245.

[8]Forms, p. 263.

[9]Forms, p. 259.

[10]Forms, p. 270.

[11]Forms, p. 252.

[12]Forms, p. 251.

[13]Forms, p. 291.

[14]Forms, p. 289.

[15]Forms, p. 290.

[16]Forms, p. 290.

[17]Forms, pp. 290, 291.

[18]Forms, p. 290.

[19]Forms, p. 291.

[20]Forms, p. 289.

[21]Forms, p. 291.

[22]N. Scott Momaday, "Reflections on the uncertainty of winter," Viva, 26 November, 1972, p. 2.

[23]Forms, p. 292.

[24]Forms, p. 293.

[25]Forms, p. 294.

[26]Kenneth Fields, "More Than Language Means: A Review of N. Scott Momaday's The Way to Rainy Mountain," The Southern Review, Winter, 1970, p. 197.

[27]Fields, p. 197.

[28]N. Scott Momaday, "One of the Wild, Beautiful Creatures," Viva, 23 September, 1973, p. 13.

[29]David Bromwich, review of Angle of Geese and Other Poems, New York Times Book Review, 16 June, 1974, p. 6.

[30]Martha Scott Trimble, N. Scott Momaday, Boise State College Western Writers Series, No. 9 (Boise: Dept. of English, Boise State College, 1973), p. 11.

[31]Because The Gourd Dancer is at this writing in rough manuscript, page numbers cannot be assigned to quoted passages, and quotation marks or indentations will be the only indicators utilized.

[32]N. Scott Momaday, "The Gourd Dancer," Viva, 4 November, 1973, p. 6.

[33]Momaday, "How It Began," Viva, 25 November, 1973, p. 2.

[34]Momaday, "Billy the Kid Offers a Kindness to an Old Man at Glorietta," Viva, 9 December, 1973, p. 2.

[35]Momaday, "Sister of Charity and Desperado," Viva, 5 August, 1973, p. 2.

[36]Momaday, "Thoughts On Jemez and Billy the Kid," Viva, 18 November, 1973, p. 2.

[37]Momaday, "Cherish the legend of Billy the Kid," Viva, 29 October, 1972, p. 2.

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Note: From April 16, 1972 until December 9, 1973 Momaday wrote a weekly column for Viva, the Sunday Magazine of the Santa Fe New Mexican. Many of those columns are referenced in this work.

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