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The Myth of Quetzalcoatl in a Contemporary Setting: Mythical Dimensions/Political Reality

What does the stock market crash of October 19, 1987 have to do with the mythical dimensions of the Southwest? Perhaps nothing, perhaps everything. If we know anything about trickle-down economics we know everybody suffers when world markets go bust. But we are not here to take the pulse of the stock market, we are here to take the pulse of Southwest writing. What does one have to do with the other? For me the current situation implies that the creative forces which the mythical dimensions of my region inspire in me also compete with the political reality of the region. The tremendous economic changes that came with the Sunbelt boom of the past twenty years have changed the landscape, and changed the people. It is those changes, for example, that motivate the current novel I am writing, a novel about Albuquerque.

The combination of the creative force of the real and mythic landscape and the tribal ways of the old New Mexican communities has had a tremendous influence on me. Now I find myself turning my attention to the process of world politics and economics which has altered the Southwest so radically, so fast. The growth of the Sunbelt in the recent twenty years has altered our perception of our landscapes: the personal, the environmental and the mythic. The old communities, the tribes of the Southwest have been scattered, they have lost much of their power. If we do not take some action now, that creative force of the land and the people might be swept aside.

Quite frankly, our future is at stake. We who value the earth as a creative force must work to inform our public of the values of old tribal groups, the ceremonies of relationship, the harmony embedded in hundreds

of years of evolution in this land and the mythic force which we can tap to create beauty and peace. We must speak out more clearly against the political and economic process whose only goal in our land is the goal of material gain.

It is man's relationship to his tribe and his response to the elements of sky, earth, water and the cosmos that give shape to our inner consciousness. These relationships create meaning. These relationships have shaped the Indian and Hispanic Southwest, as they have shaped part of the Anglo reality and myth. But the old communal relationships are changing so radically as the new urban environments change our land that we will not preserve those relationships unless we deal with them in a setting of urgency, a setting which encompasses the new political reality.

Most of us no longer live in the elemental landscape; we no longer enjoy that direct relationship with nature. The Southwest has changed, it has become largely an urban environment. We no longer live in the basic harmony that can exist between man and the earth. A new order of things, a very materialistic view of things has entered the land, and we have little control over this intrusion. The land which nurtured us is by and large now in the hands of world markets and politics.

Yes, the people survive, in mountain villages or pueblos, on ranches and reservations, the folk survive and remain the historic link to the prior landscape we knew. But by and large, the mythic West is dead. The old view of relationships died as the world political process became firmly embedded in this land.

Urban Sunbelt population growth, renewed attention to the oil, gas, and mining industries, a federal interest in air bases and weapons laboratories, and a high-tech boom and its dream of a new economy are all part of the elements of the politicizing process which our generation has seen become reality in the Southwest. That change came into being as New York and world money markets gained control over and exploited the resources of this land.

The signs of the web of the political world are all around us. Visit any of the large cities of the Southwest and you see unchecked growth, a plundering of land and water, and a lack of attention to the old communities. Immense social disparity has been created overnight. We have lost control over our own land and much of our own relationships. The crucial question for us is: Have we been defeated? Have we let go of our old values?

And because we are interested in the power of literature, we have to ask what this means to writers from the Southwest. For some it has meant a

retreat into formula, that is, the cowboy and Indian story is still being churned out. Some writers armed with computers only make that formula longer and more ponderous to read. For some writers it means retreat, some of us move out of the city, to the suburbs, or if possible to the villages or the mountains, refusing to deal with the new, engulfing economic and political reality. We draw closer to the Indian and Hispanic communities, the old tribes of the land, seeking spiritual warmth and reconciliation from these earth people. Or we create new tribal centers: Zen centers, mosques and monasteries in the desert, Hippie communes. Some writers just drink and quarrel more, subconsciously reliving old western movies in their withdrawal.

In my lifetime, I have seen this tremendous change come over the land. I, and most of my contemporaries, left our Hispanic communities and became urban dwellers. The people, the earth, the water of the river and the acequias and the spiritual views of the tribal communities which once nurtured me are almost gone. The ball game has changed, and it is appropriate to use the ball game metaphor, because the original game of la pelota in Mesoamerican history has a spiritual orientation, a deep meaning for the tribe. Now it is played for profit. In our most common ceremonies and rituals, we see the change, we see the new view of the West.

Most of the other cultural groups, those communities I call tribes, have also become urban dwellers. Politicizing the West has meant corralling the people in the city, where homogenized goods and services can be delivered as they are everywhere else in the country, and work has become service which can be sold for wages. The pueblo or town where once the group gathered to conduct both business and ceremony has become chaotic urban sprawl. The center has been lost.

What does this mean to me? I who have now lived longer in the city than in the rural landscape, I who have seen this drastic change come over the land.

When I was writing *Bless Me Ultima* in the early 1960s I was still tied to the people and the earth of the Pecos River Valley, the small town of Santa Rosa, the villages of Puerto de Luna and Pastura. The mythic element is in that novel because it is a natural element of that world. Now the West is not in its natural state and the most corrosive element in my world is the political process which has clamped its jaws over the land and the people. How can I write and not reflect this process?

We are now informed by television, the daily dose of news, the homogenous school system and other communication media which are in the

hands of the power manipulators. Yes, many ancient ceremonies are still intact along the Rio Grande, but even the people who sustain those ceremonies are affected by who controls the flow of the river, who builds new lasers and communication systems in Los Alamos, and politicians who make laws in Santa Fe and Washington, D.C. How can this reality not affect our writings?

The old tribes are now viewed as a labor force to serve the industries which the world economic and political system imposes on us. No wonder the time is disharmonious, no wonder we gather together to discuss the changing landscape of our land. We know it has changed, and we feel we have lost something important to our nature.

Now our people are lulled into believing that every man can get a piece of the action, we set up bingo games as we pray for rain, and we train our children to take care of tourists even as they forget to care for the old ones. We begin to see the elemental landscape as a resource to be bought and sold. We do not dream the old dreams, we do not contemplate the gods, and less and less do we stand in front of the cosmos in humility. We begin to believe that we can change the very nature of things, and so we leave old connections behind, we forget the sacred places and become part of the new reality, a world reality tied to nerve centers in New York, Tokyo, London, Hong Kong.

The old patterns of daily life and growing of crops are forgotten. The cyclical sense of time which once provided historic continuity and spiritual harmony is now replaced by atomic beeps. The clock on the wall now marks the ceremonies we attend to, ceremonies that have to do with the order of world politics. It is no wonder we feel we are being watched, our responses recorded; we are being used and eventually we will be discarded.

But, there is hope. The sensitive writer can still create meaningful forms which can be shared with the sensitive reader. We still have the materials and beliefs of the old tribes to work into poetry and fiction. Reflection in our writings need not mire into paranoia. The old relationships of the mythic West need not be reduced to formula. Technology may serve people, it need not be the new god. If we flee to the old communities in search of contact with the elemental landscape and a more harmonious view of things, we can return from that visit more committed to engaging the political process. We can still use the old myths of this hemisphere to shed light on our contemporary problems.

We, the writers, can still salvage elements of beauty for the future. We can help preserve the legends and myths of our land to rekindle the

spirit of the old relationships. We can encourage the power of creativity which gains its strength from the elemental and mythic landscapes. The problems we face are not new; in some respects prior generations of Mesos-america dealt with these problems.

In exploring the legend of Quetzalcoatl while writing *The Lord of the Dawn*, I was astounded at the close parallels between the world of the ancient Toltecs of Tula and our own time. Then, as now, men of peace and understanding struggled against the militaristic and materialistic instincts of the society. Both the historical king and the deity known as Quetzalcoatl came to the Toltecs to bring learning in the arts, agriculture and in spiritual thought. Under the benign rule of Quetzalcoatl the Toltecs prospered. But a great deal of their prosperity was taken by the warrior class to conduct war on the neighboring tribes. Toltec civilization rose to its classic apex, then fell.

In the end Quetzalcoatl was banished from Tula. The materialists of the society who waged war and conducted business only for profit had their way. The deity who brought art, wisdom and learning was banished, and the Toltec civilization fell. The influence of Quetzalcoatl is later felt in the civilizations of the Aztecs and Mayas, for men in every society always aspire for truth and the correct way to live in harmony.

Even now, the story of the Toltecs and Quetzalcoatl speaks to us across the centuries, warning us to respect our deep and fragile communal relationships within nations and among nations, and our meaningful relationships to the earth.

The past is not dead, it lives in our hearts, like myth lives in our hearts. We need those most human qualities of the world myths to help guide us on our road today.

I am writing a novel about my city, Albuquerque. This city, as well as any other city in the Southwest, reflects the political process which has permeated our land. The novel is about change, the change which has come during our lifetime. In it, some of the principal characters are driven by the desire to conquer the landscape; they are driven by the desire to control land, wealth and people. Some of the characters, members of the old tribes, in order to survive urban poverty take refuge in withdrawal. Those members of the old communities withdraw to their circles of belief to wait out the storm.

We, the writers, cannot wait out the storm. We have to confront the storm. For us, the bedrock of beliefs of the old cultures provides our connection, our relationship. From that stance we must keep informing the

public about the change which has come upon our land.

The battle is of epic proportions, we are in the midst of one of those times in history which will create a new consciousness. The environment seems to reflect this struggle between evil and good, it cries out to us. We see it scarred and polluted. The people of the old tribes cry out, we see them displaced and suffering. Even the elements of nature reflect the change, acid and toxic chemicals pollute the water, nuclear waste is buried in the bowels of the earth. These are the same signs the Toltecs saw hundreds of years ago as their society faced destruction.

We, too, face a measure of destruction. The goals of material acquisition and a homogenous political process which supports that goal have taken hold, driving us deeper into the complex nature of materialism. Is it any wonder we look back in legend and myth for direction?

We are poised at the edge of a new time. We have the opportunity to look again into the nature of our hemisphere. We can see that the struggle for illumination is not easy. It was not easy for the Toltecs, and we know now that as they gave up their old knowledge and turned to militarism and material gain, they destroyed their society.

Will we preserve our old values, or let them die? Will we discover again our relationship to the earth? What of the communal relationships which are so fractured and split here in our land? Is there time to bring peace and harmony to our tribal groups?

The first step is realizing that we have turned away from our inner nature, our connection to the earth and old historical relationships. We have allowed a political consciousness from without to take control. How we engage this political and economic process not only describes us, it will also inform future generations of our values. Our writings will say where we stood when this drama of opposing forces came to be played on our land.

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The Problem of Knowledge in Jack London's "The Water Baby"

Modern American authors addressing the issue of knowledge tend to reject the closure of what philosophers call "epistemological" knowledge (knowledge as an objective, single truth) in favor of "hermeneutics" (knowledge as an interpretation amongst other interpretations), in order to invoke the value of freedom for authors, narrators, and heroes as well as readers (Rorty). While Jack London repeatedly demonstrated his preoccupation with different approaches to knowledge and thus identity—as in, notably, "To Build a Fire" and *Martin Eden*—his late South Seas stories offer his most complex statement concerning the problem of knowledge, and in particular self-knowledge.

Interestingly, both *Martin Eden* and "To Build a Fire" (both published in 1907), as well as the late South Seas stories (composed in 1916 and published in 1918-1919), were begun during visits by London to Hawaii. Hawaii seems to have been a uniquely productive environment for him; the last South Seas stories, for instance, were written after a five-year lapse in short story writing. Certainly Hawaii's gentle beauty and relaxed pace soothed him. But London was not idle in paradise; there, in 1916, he experienced what one London expert calls a "dramatic, almost traumatic shock of recognition" (Labor, letter to author) upon studying the recently published work of Carl Jung, in particular an edition of *Psychology of the Unconscious*. Jung provided London with a theory of knowledge towards which he had apparently been striving throughout his career.

In the summer of 1916, after his intensive reading and discussion of Jung, London told his wife, ". . . I tell you I am standing on the edge of a world so new, so terrible, so wonderful, that I am almost afraid to look over into it" (*Charmian London, The Book of Jack London*, II 322-23). Just