

CHILDREN OF IMPURITY

Mythologies generally devote much attention to the birth of heroes and gods whose coming into the world is described as particular. Our first examples come from Greek mythology.

The Furies, goddesses of vengeance, were born of the blood of Uranus who had been castrated by his son Cronos. Athena sprang, completely armed, from the head of Zeus which Prometheus had struck with an axe, an act sometimes attributed to Hephaistos. The Centaurs came from a union of Ixion with a cloud to which Zeus had given the appearance of Hera with whom he was in love. Adonis came into the world from a myrrh tree (*Smyrna* in Greek) which opened magically to give him birth. Ten years earlier a woman named Smyrna (myrrh) had committed incest with her father, Theios, without his realizing it; when he discovered the fact, he changed her into the tree known by that name. Bacchus was drawn out, a six months old fetus, from the body of his mother by Zeus. The body was lying in coals lit by the lightning and thunder accompanying the god's chariot as he came to visit Semele. Terrified at the sound of nature's fury, she had died of shock. Zeus sewed the fetus in his thigh and, when the time came, gave birth to Dionysius. Erichonius sprang from a seminal ejaculation of Hephaistos, fallen on the leg of Athena, who, disgusted, wiped out the

Translated by R. Scott Walker.

emission with a wool cloth and threw it on the ground. In other versions he is born from the earth fecundated by the same substance. Pesiphae bore the Minotaur by copulating with a bull hidden in the effigy of a cow; that is why her offspring have a human body with the head of a bull. Polyphonte brought forth twins following her union with a bear for whom she was consumed by a furious passion; her two sons, Agrios and Oreos, became man-eating giants of extraordinary strength. Leda conceived Pollux and Helen after intercourse with Zeus, who appeared to her in the form of a swan, as well as Castor and Clytemnestra, conceived the same night of her husband, Tindareos. Helen was born of a swan's egg and raised by Leda who had found it. Persus was conceived from the stream of gold into which Zeus had transformed himself. According to Apollodoros,¹ Gaia (the Earth) conceived the giants by Uranus, but Hesiod says she was fecundated by the blood which flowed when Uranus was castrated by Zeus.

In this list, which could be extended, we find a gamut of representations ranging from the anomalous to the impure. It is understandable that extraordinary birth should be attributed to supernatural beings, if only to distinguish them from humans. But why is it necessary that their birth be not only abnormal, but that it should, almost inevitably, include aspects of incest, murder, enmity, treachery or bestiality? Even in one of the milder examples such as the birth of Apollo, his mother is hated by Hera and is forced to wander the rocky desert of the Isle of Delos seeking a place to give birth. And why, in the story of Aphrodite, the most benevolent of goddesses, who rises gracefully from the sea foam must it be added that the foam was caused by the fact that the sea had received the genitals of Uranus, severed by his son Cronos, and that, bleeding and frothing in the water, they gave birth to the goddess of love?² It would be tempting to seek a psychoanalytic explanation in the domain of sadism, if there were not another path to follow: the study of archaic thought prior to the formation of states and religions permits another kind of response to these questions.

¹ Apollodoros, *Library*.

² Grote, 1888, p. 50, quoting Hesiod.

The “mythology without gods” found in ethnology, that of North American Indians for example, constantly associates magical power and unusual birth. This is true of “Tricksters.” Protagonist of shocking adventures and dirty jokes, but also venerated as a sacred being and civilizing hero, the Trickster is always represented as having had an extraordinary birth.³

The stories about Manabozo, the Trickster of the Algonquin Indians and of other tribes from the eastern part of the United States, always emphasize the unusual and impure nature of his birth. In one myth his mother disobeys her own mother, turns in a forbidden direction and is fecundated by the winds. Non-human beings enter her womb and struggle among themselves to be the first to come out. They cause her body to burst... The grandmother finds a clot of blood and places it on a piece of bark which she puts carefully away... From time to time, naturally, she goes to look at it, and once, when opening the bark, she sees a baby which turns to her and says, “Oh my grandmother, do you know who I am? I am Nanabushu.”⁴ When Nanabushu questions the old lady about the circumstances of his birth, she tells him that he was born “of that place where a baby lays his head...,” *i.e.* the placenta. The Trickster says of himself, “That which was thrown away (at my birth) is the source from which I was born.”⁵

A story of Menomoni Indians relates that the body of the mother of Manabozo burst into fragments and that the grandmother gathered up all the pieces as well as the leaves stained with blood, and put them all under a wooden bowl. Several days later she found a rabbit there. It was the “powerful god of the earth, born to govern and to protect his people from other powers which might wish to harm them.”⁶

³ We consider the Trickster to be the mythical person who is charged with the violation of prohibitions for the benefit of his social group; this explains his contradictory aspects. Ritual clowns are the personification of this figure in ceremonial drama.

⁴ Jones, 1917.

⁵ Jones, 1917, p. 495.

⁶ Skinner and Satterlee, 1915, pp. 241-242.

Even apart from the dominating figure of the Trickster, accounts of unusual births are frequent. A child is born of a little blood spilled on the ground; another comes from a clot of blood, which earns it the name of "Blood-Clot Boy."⁷ A third is called "Taken from Guts" because it was found by its older brother in their mother's body after she had been killed.⁸ He is given magical powers. The Iowa possess Ijinski, son of a virgin magically impregnated who was then slashed to pieces by the enemy during a battle. Her parents found the baby among the remains of the body and raised it. The child was full of tricks and so was called Ijinski which means "Trickster." As in the case of "Taken from Guts," his adventures are like those of the Trickster. Both pass for women and marry the son of a tribal chief, a typical deed of the Trickster. Ijinski also has a phallic nature; his penis was so long that he slung it over his shoulder.

To accentuate even more his impure character, the story adds that he "heaped up impure things in the village." And, like the Trickster, he is called a messenger.⁹

In another version, cannibals have killed a group of people to eat them. Only a young girl who had hidden herself survived. Her mother had been killed, but the abdomen of the corpse seemed to move. The little girl took a knife, opened the mother's body and found there a child which she then raised. He

⁷ In a Sioux story, Rabbit goes hunting and kills animals for Bear, but Bear refuses to give Rabbit his share, throws him down on the ground and rolls him in the blood of the victims. Before fleeing, Rabbit takes a blood clot which he hides in his belt. He waits until night and then he speaks to it, calling it "son." He orders the clot to become a child. "Blood-Clot Boy" grows up rapidly and kills the evil Bear (J.O. Dorsey, 1892, pp. 293-304).

⁸ Speck, 1915, pp. 59-69.

⁹ Chamberlain, 1892, pp. 252-254. Another of these figures is Oxinhede, or "Foolish One," born of a virgin: a wasp flies under her dress, she struggles, a cloud covers her, she hears people singing, and then she experiences a terrible pain. The new-born disappears in the darkness. He is black with white spots. He grows up quickly (a characteristic of magic characters), his family is unable to discipline him, he leaps from one hill to another, kills the sacred snakes, separates men from their wives. He is described as painted with circles representing stars, the moon and the sun and with the feather of a raven in his hair. (Remember that the raven is a "Trickster" animal. Cf. Testart, 1978, p. 95ff.) He carries in his hand a rod crowned with a ball of hair symbolizing a human head. In the course of the ceremonies, he jumps on all the objects, even the most sacred things." (Bowers, 1950.)

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becomes Tcikabis, gifted with powers, who, among other deeds, fools the sun in imitation of the Trickster.¹⁰

We should consider also Ashish, a kind of Trickster of the Klamath Indians, whose name means "he who is hidden." A.S. Gatschet, who compares him to the god Quetzalcoatl, observes that the legend of his birth is reminiscent of that of Bacchus emerging from the thigh of Jupiter.¹¹

A particular form of impurity is prolonged pregnancy. Hare enters the body of a woman, remains there a long time, and hears the weeping of humans. When he comes out, he causes her death. In another version, he enters her womb immediately after her menstrual period, which underlines a fact of impurity. "He sat there feeling stuck and ill-at-ease, and began to worry about us (humans)."¹² A Cheyenne story illustrates well the connection made by primitive thought between unusual birth and magic power: "A child born after four years of gestation, and moreover an orphan, was given a buffalo skin. He instinctively put it on like a magician," *i.e.* wrong side out.¹³

All this imagery of unusual birth should not be considered a product of an aberrant fantasy. It finds its roots in the tribal unconsciousness which tends to express through myth the relation perceived between impurity and magical power without knowing how to explain it. Labor and birth, like all feminine functions, are impure things, and when the birth is beyond the norm, the product is more impure. This we know in regard to aborted children and twins who, in all primitive societies, are marked with an impurity which distinguishes them from ordinary children. The mother is likewise considered impure, and in the past she was often obliged to give birth all alone in the bush. Sometimes she killed one of her children to avoid the problems which she knew she could expect. In Africa there were even

¹⁰ Davidson, 1928.

¹¹ Chamberlain, 1892, pp. 252-254. In the "Dialogue of the Gods" of Lucian, Hermes addresses Zeus saying, "Congratulations! You are pregnant from head to foot! You are generating with your entire body."

¹² Radin, 1950, p. 41.

¹³ Dorsey, 1905, p. 88.

places of refuge called "Cities of Twins" in which these women, defiled for the rest of their lives, could find asylum.

The fear of the birth of twins is not limited to the black Continent and is not uniquely rooted in the difficulties which face the mothers of twins. This fear is accompanied by reinforcing ideas, particularly when the twins are of opposite sexes, suggesting the possibility that the children committed a kind of prenatal incest in the mother's womb. Thus twins incarnate the horror and the fear which incest provokes, such an act being equated with sorcery. Among the South African Tswana, twins and incest are denoted by the same term, "Botlohodi," which connotes great misfortunes.¹⁴ The Yurok of California justified the murder of one of the two children by saying that if both were allowed to live, they would commit incest.¹⁵ The Nabaloi of the Philippines believed that one of the twins was the son of an evil spirit (the "Ampasit"), born of incest between brother and sister. If twins did not marry, the Ampasit became angry and killed the male...¹⁶ In Madras twins were married to one another and then abandoned in the jungle.¹⁷ In Melanesia twins were killed, it was said, "because they had violated the law against consanguineous marriage."¹⁸ In Bali they were always designated by a term which meant "engaged twins" because in the past they were always married together. However, the ethnologist J. Belo affirms that in 1933, in Bali, the birth of twins of the opposite sexes to a peasant family was considered such a disaster for the entire community that the village was destroyed and rebuilt in another location.¹⁹ In the Ivory Coast twins of the opposite sexes are given special names: the male is called Gore and the female Gorenon, which means "Gore's wife."²⁰ (See Appendix on Twins, p. 47).

Among different peoples we find various beliefs concerning twins, such as that each child is attached to the parent of the same

¹⁴ Schapera, 1949, p. 112.

¹⁵ Kroeber, 1925, p. 45.

¹⁶ Moss, 1920, p. 273.

¹⁷ Thurston, 1912, p. 54.

¹⁸ Fison, 1892, p. 693.

¹⁹ Sumner and Keller, 1927, II, p. 1573; Belo, 1935, p. 483.

²⁰ Research of Dan and Sabine Covu.

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sex, that they should always be given like gifts and dressed alike.

A study by Alfred Schwartz in 1974 among the Guere of West Africa noted that the custom which required that twins be treated equally and that they share everything also necessitated that excision and circumcision be performed on the same day: three days after the birth of female twins, four days after that of male twins, and seven days after in the case of twins of the opposite sex. The eldest twin of the village closes himself in his hut with the new-born twins and makes them lap up red oil. If a twin refuses the oil, he will not survive. Then there is a dialogue between the elder and the babies by means of communication unknown to ordinary mortals. The twins themselves indicate their names and their prohibitions, which had been revealed to their mother in a dream.

The elder then comes out of his hut, announces officially the names and prohibitions which, of course, correspond to those dreamt by the mother, and receives his payment: a white loincloth, a white chicken, red oil (articles associated with every transaction involving a twin, whether to repay a good deed or to atone for an offence, and whose symbolic value is expressed by the colors...).²¹

In the complex of ideas surrounding twins, we have seen different forms of magic at work. Imitative magic is manifest, as we have said, in the need for equality in everything concerning them, while transgressive magic appears in the magical powers attributed to these children, powers whose source is the impurity of a birth which is somewhat out of the ordinary. Such a situation is accompanied habitually by ambivalent practices. We see this already among the Guere in the custom of sacrificing at the birth of twins both a white rooster (to implore the protection of ancestors) and a black cat (symbol of the sorcery of twins). Such ambivalent expressions are found likewise among the Luba where, according to Burton, "twins are welcome and, at the same time, feared. They are called 'children of misfortune,' and yet are spoken of as a special blessing..."²² Among the Lunda, twins and

²¹ Schwartz, 1974.

²² Burton, 1961, p. 32.

their mother have the right to draw a white chalk circle around the right eye and a red chalk circle around the left eye.²³ The red and white decorations have opposite symbolic meanings, and we see there a way of expressing the ambivalence felt towards twins. This ambivalence is also expressed in Bali where twins are said to bring good luck to the rich and bad luck to the poor...²⁴

Since incest is, in all societies, a fundamental violation, children born of incest are the most impure of all. The classic example is that of the Koyemshi, studied by Cazeneuve among the Zuni. Shivelusiwa and his nine children, born of incest with his sister, are hideous and represented by clowns dressed in black, wearing battered masks. Although the very image of impurity, they are treated with a respectful deference, for, in the eyes of the Zuni, their role is "a kind of priesthood."²⁵

How can creatures who are doubly impure, defiled by incest as well as by multiple birth, be considered sacred? Such images find their origin in the unconscious of tribal peoples which tends to express in a mythical manner the relation, perceived without knowing how to explain it, between impurity and magic power. How and why does impurity acquire magic power? We shall return to this central problem of ethnology later..., in Africa.

Considered impure, twins have necessarily played a leading role in stories related to impurity. The stories of indigenous Americans often refer to twins, one of which is more impure than the other. This impurity is related to their birth, and the stories underline the relation between the degree of impurity and the degree of disobedience, the latter a characteristic of a violator. For example, in the story of Athaensia's daughter, born before man was created, the fruit of her womb was twins, one of which, even before birth, manifested his malicious nature and his agitation by refusing to come into the world in the usual manner. He comes out of the side of his mother or from under her arm by killing her.²⁶

²³ Turner, 1953, p. 48; 1969, p. 61.

²⁴ Belo, 1935.

²⁵ Cazeneuve, 1957, p. 72.

²⁶ Brinton, 1882.

see him after discovering their murdered mother lying in a pool of blood. Strange Boy then involves his brother in a series of forbidden and evil actions such as attacking the "Thunderbirds" which they bring back to their father to work for him. Finally they destroy the gods, and the father decides that this is too much. He tells them, "There is only one place where I do not want you to go... When I tell you not to go into a certain place, you go there anyhow. I order you to go where the people live who killed your mother." The children hear this command of their father, but they do not go. The father says to himself, "I told them to go there, but they do not do it. I do not understand them." It is only when he tells them, "You must not go to that place," that they go. Strange Boy says that their father told them to go; Handsome Boy says he told them not to go. Eventually he allows himself to be influenced by his brother. This version seems to mean that it is not so much a question here of disobeying an order, but rather of challenging a categorical prohibition.²⁷ Disobedience and defiance are traits of these child Tricksters, violators of the forbidden.

The Winnebagos have a similar tale, the story of "Flesh and Stump," sons of a woman killed by her father-in-law. Flesh is raised, and Stump is abandoned; but they are later reunited. While the first child is described as obedient and passive, the second is rebellious and full of initiative; and it is he who induces his brother to disobey the orders of the father or, more precisely, who assumes the task of persuading him that the father has not imposed any limits on their activities. He enjoys inverting the commands received.²⁸

Mythical twins of the Iowa, Dore and Wharedua, are born of a woman murdered by a supernatural being. One of the twins was rejected by the father, and it is he who leads the other into mischief. They are the donors of the sacred tribal bundles. A Wichita story relates that a woman was killed who had contradicted the orders of her husband. Near her body the husband finds a child which he raises. Following the posthumous birth of another child of the victim, the murderer tosses the placenta

²⁷ Dorsey, 1906.

²⁸ Radin, 1948, pp. 137-152.

into a pond and pierces it with a stick. The stick remains stuck in the flesh of the second child, born of the placenta, who comes to play with his brother and proves his magic nature by taking all his arrows from him.²⁹

The anonymous storyteller seems to emphasize in the cryptic manner proper to a myth that it is the child born of the placenta who “takes the initiative.” It is he who is “thrown into the garbage” who leads his brother into forbidden activities. The more the child is marked by impurity, the greater is the magic power attributed to him.³⁰ In order to make this relation even more evident, the myth attributes to these *Enfants terribles* an inverted language. The more evil of the two leads the other one on, who protests in the inverted speech characteristic of these personifications of violation, the ritual clowns. Assineboïne clowns must always use the inverted speech, that is, express exactly the opposite of what they actually mean whether speaking among themselves or to outsiders.³¹ Thus a thirsty man

²⁹ Skinner, 1925, pp. 427-441.

³⁰ Here we attribute the impurity of certain magic children to the circumstances inherent in their birth. However, some stories, unclear because based on the tribal unconscious, sometimes also associate children who are in difficult or extraordinary situations, abandoned or exposed by their parents, or lost. An American author has written about these children: “Children who are lost or abandoned or exposed by their parents are miraculously saved. They grow up suddenly and are gifted with superhuman powers. They kill rats and caribou and devour them easily. They control the elements, stir up the winds, can drive away a storm or bring it on, cause it to be hot or cold, dry or wet as they desire. They can indefinitely multiply food, miraculously escape from their enemies and bring back to life those whom they have killed” (Rand, “Micmac Legends,” in Chamberlain, 1894, pp. 163-164). As an example let us note the story of the daughter of a chief who had been placed in a canoe to be sacrificed to the Spirit of Disease, but who took refuge under a waterfall and gave birth to a son so powerful that he could kill other children simply by touching them. (Speck, 1949).

³¹ The ritual clowns, according to our interpretation, represent in tribal ceremonies the function of the mythical Trickster, executor of the forbidden, violator of the norm; they are seen to mimic forbidden gestures and exercise “antinatural” behaviour. They play with fire, swallow hot coals, eat forbidden foods such as dogs or even more repugnant things, scratch themselves until they bleed, cover themselves with clothing when the sun shines and undress themselves in winter. This behaviour is sometimes emphasized by the “contrary speech,” a manifestation of their systematic inversion.

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must say, "I am not thirsty and have no desire to drink," if he wants someone to give him a drink.³² The Windicogans of the Ojibwai had the same custom of always using inverted speech.³³ The Zuni Newekwe said the opposite of what he meant.³⁴ We find, therefore, in the speech of these impure children, rather than a deliberate lie, an allusion to a relation with institutionalized violators, as it were.³⁵ The inverted speech here has a double function: to denote the evil character, and to demonstrate that the more impure child brings down the other.

Stories of abnormal birth are not restricted only to the American continent. Mawi, the Trickster of the South Pacific, is born either of a blood clot which his mother wrapped in her bloody loin-cloth, or from the umbilical hemorrhage of a pregnant woman, or of a drop of blood falling on an ornament of his mother.³⁶ Other tales put his birth in the context of a violation of dietary taboos or relate it to incest.³⁷ In Lanai we find the legend of a little boy who spoke while still in the uterus of his mother and who learned the martial arts by listening to the discussion of experts.³⁸ The same precocious quality is attributed to Mawi; it is said that a beautiful child was seen to plunge into the sea from a high rock and swim back into his mother's womb. The witnesses of this event said, "We have seen a magician born!"³⁹

A story from the Isle of Ulithi associates the premature birth of a child, whom the mother casts into the sea, and the incestuous relations which he later has with her, not only knowingly but in her menstrual hut, a further emphasis of the impurity of the forbidden act.⁴⁰ Twins are born of the decomposed body of their mother, sister to the god Quat; they are magical.⁴¹ Reisenfeld

³² Lowie, 1909, p. 5.

³³ Skinner, 1914, p. 501.

³⁴ Parsons, 1917, pp. 229-230.

³⁵ Makariaus, 1970, pp. 44-73.

³⁶ Beckwith, 1951, p. 129.

³⁷ Luomola, 1949, p. 92.

³⁸ Stimson, 1934, p. 92.

³⁹ Beckwith, 1940, pp. 230-231.

⁴⁰ Lessa, 1956, p. 63.

⁴¹ Codrington, 1881, p. 261.

writes that children born of the blood of their mother or of her miraculous fecondation later perform heroic deeds.⁴²

We find similar beliefs in Africa. In Dahomey, for example, a whole category of stories deals with prodigious children. Gifted with an exceptional physical force or a profound knowledge of magic, these children are twins or born posthumously or still-born or die shortly after their birth. The Tohuso, stunted freaks, are the most powerful of all. They are believed to be capable of speech at birth and of defying giants, witches and kings.⁴³

A recent collective work, "*Histoires d'enfants terribles*," deals with this same subject in other regions of black Africa. The troublesome children, heroes of these tales, have so much in common with the little magicians we have discussed until now that we may rightly say they are "kissing cousins."

"For the Bambara as well as for the Peuls," writes Christiane Seydou in this collection, "the *Enfant terrible* is a kind of Nietzschean hero to whom God and Evil are foreign notions. His only concern is to affirm his total independence of other beings (both human and animal) and of social laws, even the most sacred of which he violates (p. 55)." The Trickster can be described in exactly the same manner; and, like him, the *Enfant terrible* performs inverted and absurd actions such as pulling the seeds out of the furrows rather than planting them, or destroying his own property. These acts tend to express the inversion typical of such characters. They are given to gratuitously cruel acts, directed against humans and animals who have helped them and even sometimes saved their lives, thus displaying ingratitude which perhaps tends to emphasize the inversion of the norm.

Like the Trickster, the *Enfant terrible* also had an abnormal birth. In a story from Togo, a woman has one child who is born normally and another who comes out of her knee. The latter asks to be called "Good-for-Nothing" and talks at his birth

⁴² Reisenfeld, 1949, pp. 145-155.

⁴³ Herskovits, 1958, pp. 27-32. Stories of children who had an unusual birth are found also in other mythologies. For example among the Nartes (Caucasus), the hero Saslan is born of a rock on which a shepherd had "taken his pleasure" while watching the beautiful Satana who was washing clothes at the well. She called the child from then on "My baby that I didn't bear." (*Le livre des héros—Légendes sur les Nartes*, translated from the Ossetian by Georges Dumézil, 1965).

(p. 179). The Stomach Child and the Knee Child are friends of the blacksmith who makes them arrows which they never allow out of their sight. "They go to bed with their arrows, get up with their arrows, eat with their arrows in their hands... And the arrows of Good-for-Nothing are poisoned." The relation between them is similar to that between the twins of the North American tales, the more polluted Good-for-Nothing leading the other into absurd or forbidden activities.

In a tale from Upper Volta, a woman heard an inner voice one evening which said to her, "Mother, bring me forth!" (p. 67). It was the voice of the child she had conceived the night before. She replied, "The child who can say, 'Bring me forth' can come into the world by itself." The child came out of his mother. He had an older brother whom he led into dangerous adventures... "Let us kill the cattle!" ... "Let us burn down the grain stocks"... "Let us pluck out the eyes of the cows" ... "Let us kill our wives!" The older brother, unhappy, is forced always to obey the orders of his younger brother who reminds him that their dying father had told them never to argue. It seems that the African stories thus "rationalize" the submissiveness of the elder brother to the orders of his more impure younger brother.

A barren woman once wanted a child. A healer told her, "Prepare a light porridge with flour of red millet... Drink it while it is still hot, and the porridge will fall on your thigh... Don't wipe it off, leave it like that... A boil will appear on your thigh... Let the boil grow and develop, and a boy will come out of it!" The woman did as he had said. One day she went into the jungle to look for wood; a sharp splinter of wood pierced the boil, and a tiny boy came out, as big as a thumb. He spoke at his birth and asked for an iron club with which he killed elephants and an immense eagle with red eyes whose breath was like a storm and whose weight made the earth tremble... (p. 271).

In other African narratives we find the theme of the child who leaves the mother's womb and then returns to it when he wishes, as in the case of Mawi, the young Polynesian hero. This is the story of "the woman who didn't give birth." When she went into the jungle, she cried out, "Hey people, is there no one to help me carry my wood?" And the child she carried inside her protested. "Hey mother! Am I not a person?" And he came out,

helped his mother, and then went back to her uterus and settled down again (p. 35).

Like the North American trickster, the *Enfant terrible* is related to the sun. He chases the sun and kills a bird who hides it and who sings, "It is night but never day." Called "Master of the Sun," he says, "If someone very red comes out of the village, the sun comes up..." Since red symbolized blood, the principal taboo of all so-called "primitive" societies, the *Enfant terrible* is already categorized. We see in this a reference to the violation of a prohibition. It is not by accident that heroes of African stories considered themselves closely related to the blacksmith. They take part in his work and say, "Ever since God created us, we know how to work the bellows of the forge." But the smith violates a basic taboo since he is supposed to perform human sacrifices in order to make a successful cast. This explains the taboos which surround him.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ In most archaic societies, the blacksmith is always placed in a contradictory position: he is indispensable to the society for whom he creates the instruments necessary for hunting, agriculture as well as objects for daily life. At the same time he must exercise the role of surgeon, circumcisor and arbiter of differences. Nevertheless, he is considered as an evildoer and dangerous, the object of a taboo, to such an extent that his residence is normally outside the village and certain of his clients had the custom of covering their hands with grease when they went to pick up an object from him which he had made or repaired, in order to avoid direct contact with him. In Tanzania no one could touch an object which he had rubbed in his hands.

The ethnologist P. Clément (1918, pp. 35-58) deserves the credit for having found an explanation to this enigma. Having noted that the blacksmith ate raw meat and blood, he wrote, "Before this violation of dietary restrictions, moreover an essential condition for success, society responds with an ambiguous attitude of appreciation and scorn. This is an attitude which society frequently reserves for those who violate the established order by transgressing one of its most categorical imperatives."

However, the infraction of dietary taboos seems negligible in relation to other customs which he is reputed to have; for it seems that in order to obtain success in casting iron, the smith thought it necessary to add human flesh to the ore, which, of course, involved murders. Sometimes, as among the Achewa of Nyasaland, he caused a miscarriage in a woman in order to place the fetus in the foundations of his new furnace (Hodgson, 1933, p. 163). The Atonga had the custom of throwing a part of the placenta into the smith's melting pot (Cline, 1937, p. 119). In Indian and Chinese myths, we find references to human sacrifices performed in order to assure the success of these operations (Makarius, 1974, p. 108). It is, then, absolutely understandable that Veronika Görög thinks that the association of the *Enfants terribles* with the black-

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Veronika Görög notes that the attachment of the *Enfant terrible* to the smith is a kind of self-definition by which the hero proclaims his affinity with a demiurge having a number of sacred functions. This behaviour seems to mean that the hero wishes to free himself from social ties, separate himself from the “normal” world and act according to the logic of an inverted world. In fact all his actions may be seen as “inverted.” Thus even his most absurd acts have a meaning which is no longer absurd: deviance becomes the logic of action which is the exact opposite of social logic (p. 44).

This logic of an “inverted world” is exactly that of violators of prohibitions. And as a matter of fact if we consider the *Enfant terrible* as an initiatory figure, he is similar to the Kore Dugaw of the Bambara studied by Dominique Zahan.⁴⁵ The humor they create and the laughter this provokes are the expression of life which is unconcerned with rules and restrictions. The initiates of this class appear as the model of the truly wise man, the man who ignores social conventions and who flaunts all inhibitions imposed on us by life in common. We see then that the members of this fraternity adopt deviant attitudes in order to express liberty. Similarly, without pushing the comparison too far, the *Enfant terrible* frequently acts in a manner analogous to that of the wise man become a clown in initiatory societies. He voluntarily excludes himself from human society by breaking off all relations

smith is a manifestation of their relation to the Trickster, and, more generally, of their relation to the violation of taboo. This relation is seen also in the fact that when adolescents are taken aside for their initiation and they choose among themselves a chief, if there is a blacksmith's son in their group, he automatically becomes the chief (*Histoires d'enfants terribles*, p. 49).

⁴⁵ The Kore Dugaw, who participate in the initiatory ceremonies of the Bambara, are called the “Clowns of the Kore.” They wear mismatched pants and beads of red beans; they make a mockery of everything, even the most sacred of things, and ridicule taboos. They indulge in every kind of facetious action including farting at funerals in imitation of thunder. They throw powder in the faces of people, eat excrement, burn themselves with coals, play with boiling water, scratch themselves with thorns. They are, in short, typical ritual clowns. Like the American clowns, they even have a magical medicine since the sacred clown who disturbs the ceremonies and is an ally of Mousso Koroni, mythical female personage and clearly a violator, says of himself, “The mixture is in my hand,” an allusion to the magical medicine like that of the American clowns. But the lack of a comparative method allows us to attribute to them a spiritualist doctrine where the accent is placed on esoteric asceticism (Zahan, 1960, pp. 155-158).

with family, friends, subject or protégé, in order to prove his liberty. From the outset this comparison gives a primary meaning to the deeds of the *Enfant terrible* in an initiatory perspective (p. 45).

“If the hero himself creates relations which he will then subsequently break off abruptly, it is because, like neophytes undergoing their initiation, he is pursuing a goal whose objectives are beyond the immediate reason for his actions. The negativity which permeates these actions is the means by which one moves from practical objectives (which are sought out) to other values which are opposed to these objectives and even destroy them.”

Even if it is not very clearly expressed, this last paragraph allows us to say once more that we speak of the Trickster in exactly the same manner. Moreover, who are these Kore Dugaw and what do their ceremonies mean? In our opinion they are the African counterpart of the American clowns who represent the mythical Trickster on the ceremonial level.

Since the Trickster is the basic hero of all mythologies, it is not surprising to see him reappear each time it is necessary to settle a problem in the mythical order. Nor is it surprising to see all the stereotypes reappear in which it is thought possible to recognize him and to describe him, so misunderstood are his true nature and function.

The solution to the problem of the Trickster was difficult because he is a figure shot through with contradictions. Only a dialectical method which lays bare a tangle of meaning in contradictions could permit an approach to the problem with any chance of success. Moreover, it was necessary to determine that reality of social life of which he was the projection, an imaginary reality of a magical order, of course. To explain the appearance of this enigmatic and perhaps universal figure we must recall the mental (and in part unconscious) process which led to the ritual from which the myth emerged. As we know, archaic societies have taboos on blood, corpses and everything related to female sexual functions. A wealth of documentation allows us to affirm that substances under taboo, which normally are forbidden, are sometimes used for a beneficial purpose such as keeping away a harmful thing. For example, in the past menstruating women were asked to wander through the fields in order to

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drive away insects and moles. Menstrual rags were hung around the necks of sickly children to ward off diseases. The use of such objects is obviously a “violation of taboo;” taboos which should cause banishment of the violators are intentionally infringed with the idea of using dangerous objects for defensive purposes. However, the use, even defensively, of something which is taboo is obviously a reprehensible and dangerous act, similar in theory to the crime of incest. Since taboos cannot be broken by the whole group without upsetting its basic laws, the society which wants to violate its own laws can only do so by having recourse to an intermediary in whom society finds its hero, the Trickster, giver of medicines for tribal ceremonies as well as giver of all goods.⁴⁶

The African *Enfants terribles* are the descendants of the Trickster. Akin to the magical children of America of the Polynesian Archipelagoes, a curious difference separates the one from the other. While the latter are disobedient (for to disobey is their mythical function) but remain harmless, the former display an unlimited evil, a systematic cruelty of which they are also victim. For often their cruelty is turned against themselves, but the ensuing disasters are never seen as the inevitable consequences of their misdeeds. These stories, truly “terrible,” express an irrepressible

⁴⁶ See Makarius, 1974, pp. 215-265. We cannot speak of the Trickster, whose role is apparently increasingly operational as more studies are made of him, without recalling the inspired thinking of Roger Caillois, writing in 1938 (pp. 26-27), who said that the individual was the victim of psychological conflicts which are the result of both the social structures and the restraints which society imposed, and that the individual was incapable of escaping that dilemma. For he could only escape by committing an act condemned by society and consequently by himself, an act which was strongly marked in his conscience and was in a sense a guarantor of social prohibitions. The result is that he was paralyzed before the taboo and that he entrusted, instead, the execution of this act to another hero. The hero was then the one who contested taboos to find a means of escaping this unfortunate situation. He was by definition the one who violated the prohibitions.

It is true that already in 1923 Davy and Moret had formulated the hypothesis that the North American hero was the inventor of the secrets which ensured success in hunting and fishing, and thereby controlled the group. But the text by Caillois sketches an image which is at once social and magical, in which the Trickster imposes himself as the major star of all the creations of the imagination. From simple dispenser of medicines he becomes the pivot for all unreal creations.

desire, a need, we might say, to wound, to torment, to cause others to suffer, as well as an impetuous urge to destroy, to ruin, to burn... even to set fire willfully to one's own barns; senseless evil, such as when the *Enfant terrible* takes pleasure in cutting off the wings of a bird come to save him from trouble and carry him to safety.

It is difficult to understand the motivation, either psychic or symbolic, of such behaviour which constitutes the quite unchanging theme of these accounts. Equally unsatisfying is the explanation of the tolerance and impunity which perverse children enjoy. Generally they have an older brother, or sister, who tries to control them. For example, the young one says to the elder, "Let's burn this herd of goats and we'll see what the animals will do." He lights a match and throws it into the pen. Everything is burned. Later he says, "Let's go and burn the cows!" The older brother refuses. The younger one says, "Remember that our father on his death-bed told us never to disagree." The elder one replies, "Good, then, let's burn them." He burns everything (p. 44). This pattern recurs constantly. The absolute tolerance demanded by the dying mother or father places the *Enfant terrible* beyond all criticism.

We can elaborate various hypotheses about such a situation. Since the forbidden behaviour was condemned by society, these child Tricksters are seen in the worst possible light. The intention is to point to the disasters caused by parental indulgence and to warn parents that never to contradict or discipline children can produce catastrophic results. Sometimes such behaviour is attributed to Wanzo, an evil power emanating from the uncircumcized. Thus such children should be circumcized at once. Some Africans attribute the tendency to evil to the torments to which adolescents are subjected before or during initiatory rites. For others, their cruelty must be seen in the context of the kind of life which little boys in Africa frequently lead. They form gangs and organize hunting parties in the jungle where they catch small animals which they cook on a rock for their dinner. In these circumstances they remain indifferent to the fact that the bird or lizard or mouse is not yet completely dead. Any suffering on the part of the animal is not even noticed; or else it gives an impression of strength which will be

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expressed in other cruel acts even towards humans. This leads us to think that cruelty is perhaps a characteristic of hunting peoples.

It could be, as well, that that which seems to us an atrocious cruelty is actually, in the context of these stories, a kind of black humor meant to replace inaccessible joys. Michel Leiris puts it better, speaking of stories collected in Chad: "If the title 'Cruel Tales' had not already been used by Villier de l'Isle-Adam, one would be tempted to give that title to this book." And he asks if the ferocity of these tales does not indicate more often the "bitter state of mind found in varying degrees in all truly *popular* literature, a state of mind of people condemned to penury, who affirm themselves capable of everything from resisting the powerful to escaping the whims of fate..."⁴⁷

Let us remember also that these tales were not meant to be read but to be heard, and that the African story-teller has sufficient talent and sufficient practice to transform the most horrible tale by an inflection of the voice or a gesture of the hand into an enormous farce capable of producing laughter and toning down the narrative, no matter how terrifying it might be.

In an essay entitled "*L'enfant terrible ou comment s'en débarrasser*," G. Calame-Griaule writes, "We shall not attempt to find a parallel to the famous deceiver (known as Trickster in English) so well known among African peoples... His quite complex character does not seem to have been satisfactorily explained, and the very notion of "deceiver" should perhaps be challenged..." We agree completely that the term deceiver should be challenged; in our view it should even be eliminated, for it is limited, reflecting only one aspect (and the least interesting one) of his character. The question should also be raised, however, as to whether it is not only the term but also the figure, so inappropriately thereby designated, which many ethnologists would like to suppress. For the Trickster not only reveals phenomena of transgressive magic which have been as little understood as his own nature, but also many religious beliefs. By one of

⁴⁷ Tubiana, 1961, preface by Michel Leiris.

those dialectical twists of which ethnology seems to have the secret, it is the Trickster, rogue, liar and deceiver, who discloses the nature of such phenomena and beliefs, illuminating them with the fire of Prometheus.

To what conclusions are we then led by this phantasmagory of the simultaneously abnormal and magical birth, of which we have seen so many examples, as if the triad "unusual birth-impurity-magic power" were engraved in the collective conscious. How can we explain that beliefs and tales of four continents exhibit such striking similarities? In all the examples here cited (and which represent only a sampling of a richer universal folklore) we have discovered the same convergence. "The more impure the child, the greater is his magic power," say the folk tales.⁴⁸ But from where comes this power of the impure? We

⁴⁸ Stories of unusual births of heroes are common in all times and in all places. We find a famous example in sixteenth century France when Gargamelle bears Gargantua after a pregnancy which lasted eleven months. "For having eaten too much tripe... the foundation gave way... and by this misfortune the child passed into the empty vein and passed through the diaphragm all the way to the shoulders (where the said vein splits in two), took the path to the left and came out of the left ear." (This reminds us of the birth of the daughter of Athaensia). Impurity in this case is represented by the tripe. A questionable food in itself, this tripe was even more so since it was not fresh. "It was not possible to keep it a long time for it was rotten," which seemed indecent. Hence the great banquet of fat tripe at which Gargamelle participated despite the recommendation of her husband, who warned her that "this tripe was not a praiseworthy meat." Nevertheless she ate a large quantity.

However, is there not a certain incongruity between this excess of rotten food and the unlimited generosity of lords for whom savings in their festivals was of no importance? Normally this rotting meat, "not praiseworthy," would have been left for the servants. But the meal of rotten tripe is placed here by the author, certainly unconsciously, in order to endow his hero with the inevitable note of impurity of birth (reinforced with the prolonged gestation). This is borne out by the fact that in order to emphasize "this strange nativity," Rabelais becomes a mythologist declaring, "Bacchus, was he not conceived by the thigh of Jupiter?... Minerva was born of the brain through Jupiter's ear. Adonis came from the bark of a myrrh tree. Castor and Pollux from an eggshell, laid and hatched by Leda." And finally he refers to "that chapter of Pliny which speaks of strange and unnatural births." For our part we might add that the affirmation usually cited from Pliny the Elder ("The child who causes the death of his mother when he is born, is born under good omens") here finds its meaning in the context we have noted. (See Rabelais, *La Vie très honorifique du grand Gargantua*, Paris, 1968 (1535).)

Unexpected confirmation of the relationship between abnormal birth and magical power is forthcoming from the region of the Langhe, Piedmont, in Italy, where special powers were attributed to children born prematurely, after a gestatory

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know that impurity acquires power as a result of the violation of the forbidden which confers a magical effectiveness. In other words, it is through the violation of taboo that impurity acquires its magic potency. The impure is frightening and brings with it dangers which ultimately may cause death. Directed against evil influences, as when menstrual cloths are used to ward off illness, its use, as we have seen, becomes beneficial. It thus follows that this use will confer the power to obtain positive results: victory in war, fortune in games of chance, success in the most hazardous enterprises. But the use of impure substances is necessarily a violation of that which is prohibited. Consequently it is such violation that confers the power to obtain positive results of all kinds, and accounts for the power of the impure. We must thus recognize in this hidden and obscure ritual, whose meaning escapes even those who dare perform it, a universal presence, an unequalled hold over the imaginary and an inexhaustible power of mythical creation.

To the question raised by the Greek myths, "Why must there always be impurity?," the American, African and Polynesian myths have given the answer... The Olympian gods enjoy the same power as the heroes of other mythologies, and this explains their troubled destinies, their incests, their crimes.

To compare the prestigious Greek civilization with that of peoples which ethnologists study might seem abusive. But it shows that human thought follows the same stages in its evolution, and that the violation of taboos was also intrinsic to Hellenic paganism.*

period of seven months, and therefore called "settmini". The "settmini" were semi-sorcerers, consulted by those who had lost faith in official medicine. As the mysterious custodians of herb-lore, the "settmini" kept the secrets of a science transmitted from father to son. They were also rhabdomantists, capable of detecting the presence of hidden springs (Giuseppe Isnardi, 1965, "Due storie delle Langhe: "Il pozzo" e "Il figlio del ricco""). Reprinted in *Studi Piemontesi*, vol. X, fasc. 1, March 1981, Turin, pp. 172-178 and 178-185).

* The author of this article would be grateful, thanks to the international diffusion of *Diogenes*, to receive information about the Trickster from other countries. The Trickster is an imaginary character frequently «we would even say universally) found under different names in the folklore of nations. This hero of popular tales is seen as the gagster or the practical joker. The cleverest of all, he loves to tease people and play practical jokes which are sometimes even cruel. He respects nothing and nobody. He tricks the sun, mocks sacred things

APPENDIX ON TWINS

On the subject of twins we have some unpublished information collected during a study made in Bouake, Ivory Coast, in 1974 by a couple of young teachers, Dan and Sabine Covu, who had the idea of giving their students as subject for an essay, "A Letter to a Friend Who Just Had Twins." The results are all the more interesting because, as one student wrote, "In this country, according to my father, traditions concerning twins have remained unchanged for generations..."

The data collected by the Covus confirm the magical nature attributed to twins and the ambivalence which flows from this. They are both powerful and vulnerable, bringing both good luck and bad luck. They are attributed the powers of magic beings: "You should put a white thread around your house to keep them from becoming witches... If anyone hits them, abscesses will appear all over the attacker's body, because they are 'perfect witches'..." "Only twins are virgins and able to give the sacrament," writes one student curiously. Another says, "Your happiness will send you healers, seers, and even respectable people..." "At their birth they should be presented to the fetish of twins in the great forest where there are secrets which every twin has the right to know." But twins do not always have a good standing among these students. One writes to her friend who just had twin daughters, "Right now the little babies are fighting over your husband's life or your own... They probably are for you, but if they can't agree on your fate, one of them might—well, expect the worst!... Watch out that they don't bring any horrible things into the house because with their magic power, a harmless insect bite can bring on sudden death..."

"Twins are a curse for those who must raise them," said one

and brings death into the world. But he is also the benefactor, the founder of rituals, the giver of magic medicines and talismans, the master of crafts and trades, the one who assists women in childbirth. His animal counterparts are the coyote, the spider and the hare, sometimes the raven. His image is covered by a mass of contradictions which have always misled ethnologists. A thank-you in advance to those readers who would like to communicate information on this subject, care of the journal *Diogenes*.

For the interpretation of the Trickster see, by the present author, "Le mythe du 'Trickster'", *Revue de l'Histoire des religions*, 1965, pp. 2-46, or *Le Sacré et la violation des interdits*, Payot, 1974.

boy. And another wrote, "Raising twins means poverty and suffering... It is better to have just one child than twins who are bothersome and who will never succeed." "It is not pleasant to have twins; it's like marrying two wives. You should pray to God with confidence that you never have twins again..." A small boy gave the following advice to his sister who had just had twins: "Don't eat bananas that are stuck together or else your children will die. For these represent twins in the bananas. You would eat your children."

"Among the Bete where we are," wrote one student to his sister, "to have twins is more of a problem than a joy. You must confronto numerous prohibitions, and any violation of the prohibitions puts their lives in danger..." A young girl advises her friend "to consult often the great charlatans (*sic*) to prevent diseases." Another recommends prudence, "for twins sense insults, even when they are little, and sometimes they cast an evil spell on the one who insulted them. They can turn themselves into animals to destroy the crops..." For others, however, twins bring wealth: "You will enjoy your children for the constant betterment of your life..." Their gift of foretelling future was also recognized: "In our region people like twins because they foretell good harvests, drought, fire, without ever being wrong..."

As we see, opinions are divergent. Yet there is one point on which the students seem to agree: the healing power of twins and their relation to snakes. Their reputation as healers is well-founded in tradition. After the fifteenth day of their life, they must be taken into the great forest where the *griots* teach them the secret of plants. "Any plant in their hands enables them to heal. They are especially effective at healing snake bites." For this reason, "they never go to war; they have their place in the village."

At the birth of twin children, their parents are warned never to kill snakes for that would be like killing their children who have a bond with snakes. "Do not hit a twin on the head or he will turn into a snake and chase you." "If you see a snake in the yard, don't kill it. It will not harm you if you offer it two eggs and say, 'Snake, we do not refuse your visit, but your presence scares us.' It will leave calmly." It is said that twins live with snakes, scorpions and poisonous spiders which should never be killed since these are their souls. The magic powers of twins

extends also to the women who conceived and bore them. It is said, "Nothing guarantees the success of a sacrifice like the presence of the mother of twins."

The relation between twins and serpents is likewise noted by A. Schwartz in the report of a survey conducted among the Guere and the Zagne of West Africa. "A strange relation exists between twins and snakes... When a snake comes near the hut of a pregnant woman, it is a sign that she will have twins (females if the snake is a viper; males if it is a grass snake or a green snake, both sexes if reptiles of both kinds are present)." The author explains that this belief is at the basis of considering twins capable of healing snake bites and recalls that they are considered healers.

The association of twins and snakes has not been explained. Nevertheless we should ask what is the source of this relation between innocent children, apparently like others, and reptiles so dangerous that they symbolize evil. Yet we know that the strangest notions can often be explained by association of ideas if we remember what Frazer called the "sympathetic" nature of thought. And so it does not seem wrong to us to formulate the hypothesis that the relation of twins to snakes could be explained by the fact that during their birth there were two umbilical cords and not just one. These cords hang down, drag along and perhaps become entangled; and this image, added to the other already disconcerting aspects of the birth of twins, could evoke that of snakes. Hence the relation of twins to snakes.

In the first part of this appendix we have only used a part of the abundant information collected by Dan and Sabine Covu by the simple means which they thought up. This is a more sure and more fruitful means of gathering data than to have recourse to professional informers. Obviously the pupils who did this assignment on twins spoke to their parents, to their grandparents, to their older friends who were happy to note such an interest among the younger generation and searched their memories to help them. The result is a kind of referendum which not only provides the researcher with written (important) original documentation, but which also sows the seed of ethnological interest in young minds. To them will fall the task of guarding the patri-

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mony of their traditions and of recognizing their cultural value, which goes beyond simple folklore.

We therefore recommend to researchers a triple alliance: researchers-teachers-students. The Covus, however, were not the first to use this method; in 1961 Joseph and Marie-José Tubiana, who were collecting folk tales among the Zagawa of Chad, also obtained the collaboration of children who even supplied them with charming color drawings as illustrations.

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