THE RENEWAL OF THE SELF IN JOSEPH MATHEWS' TALKING TO THE MOON

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Autobiography, as Rubin defines, "is both a valid record of social history and an exploration of personal identity." (Rubin 1992: 25) Until the mid 1950's autobiography was seen "as little more than a special variety of biography and as a kind of step child of history and literature", never being granted full recognition as a respectable genre; after the 1960's , with the increasing interest in multicultural studies in the US, more scholars began emphasizing the importance of autobiographies to the study of relevant cultures. In "Autobiography and the Making of America", Robert F. Sayre attributes this tendency to American autobiographers who have "generally connected their own lives to the national life or to national ideas." (Sayre 1980:147)

Although, by its very nature, autobiography is an assertion of the power of the individual aiming to express personal awareness it is, at the same time, inevitably historical, reflecting the dichotomy between society and culture. Because autobiography recreates historical past, it has become a particularly practical means of understanding cultural history. Though every autobiography is "unique..., it is also general, reflecting patterns of cultural and historical development. This essential duality – existing as both

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subjective and objective reality", has made autobiography an especially rich mode for minority expression. (Rubin 1992:179) For the ethnic autobiographer, self examination and cultural analysis have always been complementary. In the hands of an oppressed people such as the Indian, autobiography is often a direct response to a society that has denied them their full individual freedoms. As James Olney maintains, "autobiography renders in a peculiarly direct and faithful way the experience and the vision of a people." (Olney 1980:12)

While the dynamics of personal change are unique to each author's own case , the theme of individual growth and development that emerges is one shared by many ethnic autobiographers. The pattern of this development are: an early enstrangement from mainstream America, feelings of isolation, an identity crisis marked by the pull of dual loyalties, a journey (either physical or spiritual) of "return" to a place or culture of personal significance, a renewed connection with one's people, and finally, a better understanding of self in relation to the group and its shared history.

Like their Afro-American and white American counterparts, Native Americans too, have turned to autobiography in an effort to understand and define the ethnic experience in America by mostly concentrating on the interrelation between the individual and the tribe, and the impact of Indian-white relations on Indian life. In retelling the stories of their lives American-native autobiographers too re-created the collective history of their people. Krupat, Gretchen, Bataille, O'Brien and Ruoff are among many scholars who turned their attention to the study of life histories and autobiographies, having realized that these works constitute one of the mainstream

American Indian literatures.

Full-length autobiographies in the Western European literary tradition are not part of American Indian oral tradition of course. Even today some Indians, as Brumble indicates in American Indian Autobiography are hesitant to write or narrate full-length autobiographies because their tribes consider it an inappropriate indulgence.

In the early nineteenth century, as a result of the popularity of the slave narratives and the increasing interest in the "noble savage" who no longer threatened the white Americans, the stories of assimilated Indians converted into Christianity gained popularity in the white community. For this reason, the early autobiographies of Indians were either the stories of completely assimilated natives that were applauded by white Americans or stories that were published as racist response to this attitude that had become "forceful weapons" in native Americans' never ending battles against white injustice. Nearly all of these early examples of Native American autobiographies were about spiritual confessions and missionary

reminiscences in which the authors used personal and family experiences to illustrate the suffering the natives had endured against white Christian injustice.

Joseph Mathews' Talking to the Moon, referred to as "the most sophisticated and polished autobiography by an Indian author to be published up to 1945 ..." contributes to a great extent not only to Native American autobiography but to the cultural heritage of autobiography genre.(Ruoff 1992:91) Being only one-eighth Osage blood (Plains Indians living in the blackjacks in Oklahoma), and having observed this culture only from a distance during the early years of his childhood, Mathews as reflected in Talking to the Moon depicts a radical story of the transformation of a white Christian into Indian-ness. The crucial event that forced Mathews to search for a way to cope with the dehumanizing power of the contemporary world was his active participation in World War I. After experiencing the most meaningless and destructive of all human actions at first hand, he found it very difficult to integrate himself to the dehumanized mob whose indifference towards each other and to nature were at an extreme. To overcome the intense feelings of isolation and separation he felt in himself compassion to live in uncorrupted nature where he could listen to his inner voice which caused him to move and settle down in 1932 in the blackjacks. (A region named for the tough oaks that covered the sandstone region near Pawhuska, Oklahoma)

Talking to the Moon challenges the Western myth of progress through the industrial and technological development associated with civilization. Mathews' decision to move to this undeveloped area reminds one that of Thoreau's about a century earlier. Thoreau explains the reason why he settled near Walden Pond as, "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived". (Thoreau 1962:89) The similarity between Thoreau's and Mathews' reasons for leaving civilization behind is clearly reflected in the opening pages of Talking to the Moon :

To learn something of the moods of the little corner of the earth which had given me being; to learn something of the biological progression and mysterious urge which had inspired it, until the biological changes within myself had dimmed the romance of it. I had kept my body fit and ready, but my perceptive powers had been dulled by the artificialities and croding and elbowing of men of Europe and America, my ears attuned to the clanging steel and strident sounds of civilization, and the range of my sight stopped by tall buildings and walls, by neat gardens and geometrical fields; and I begun to worship these things and the men who brought

them into being—impersonalized groups of magicians who never appeared to my consciousness as frail, uninspiring individuals. (Mathews 1981:3)

In the first part of the book, Mathews attempts to rediscover nature, that is, he attempts to rediscover the being of his inner nature that he had lost long ago in the "civilized" world of white men. The first part of the book is full of similarities of tone, attitude and response with Thoreau's Walden. Mathews like Thoreau organized his autobiography as of seasons which would be of help to describe his observations of nature and also to show his personal growth in terms of natural cycles. Both authors have in common a strong sense of place and location as revealed in Thoreau's loving descriptions of the area around the Walden Pond and Mathews' poetic descriptions of the ridges and prairies in eastern Oklahoma. They both chronicle the changes these places undergo through the seasons and years emphasizing that these areas transcend and reflect time.

Through the eye of a scientist Mathews analyzes nearby limestone ridges to learn the history of rain, drought, and fire they endured over the passage of time. He is very vivid in his colorful descriptions of animals, birds, and insects. Because his sense of community includes not just humans but all living things, he considers the animals and plants as direct sources of the balance and unity within nature. He has an acute awareness of living nature, a potential of intelligence to be found there, and a respectful, observant, participatory relationship with it akin to the Osage life. "You should really know what the complete natural world of your region is and what all its interactions are and how you are interacting with it yourself," Mathews indicates. "This is just part of the work of becoming who you are, where you are." (Mathews 1981:7)

Identification with nature --belonging without possessing– is central to Mathews' chapters about the natural life in the blackjacks. One example of this quality is his futile attempt to domesticate a coyote whelp, which spent her days looking out of the pen with her eyes filled with "hatred and courage" Mathews comments: "She taught me nothing except the fact that even at her age her mother was still interested in her and made valiant attempts to save her. She also confirmed my experiences that coyotes suffer and die in silence and thus do not endanger the other members of the band by calling for help." (Mathews 1981:121-123) Another example is his setting a chicken free out on the prairie near a coyote den to determine the mother's reaction. Although the mother coyote clearly sees the chicken, she pretends the fowl is not there. Being fascinating and frustrating for Mathews, the coyote becomes "a symbol of cupidity and double-dealing" for him. (Mathews 1981:188) These episodes exemplify that the humans egoistically and destructively attempt to control nature thus disturbing its balance, as he

experiences himself. He is very well aware of the self-destructiveness inherent in contemporary culture alienated from nature.

Although, Mathews' wife calls Talking to the Moon "Mathews' Walden... of the plains and prairies" , when compared to Thoreau who shares Romantics' secret fear of the destructiveness of nature -- the natural cycle of growth, decay, death and rebirth – and to his concept of nature and of the harmony in nature Mathews seems far less fearful of the dark side of nature.(Ruoff 1992:89) In the chapter "The Single Moon By Himself" (January), he comments on the constant battle to keep the harmony:

> The peace of my ridge is not a peace but a series of range-line skirmishes and constant struggle for survival. The balance is kept by bluff and a respect for that power which backs it up, and it utilizes and protects an area large enough and fruitful enough to sustain that power. The laws of the earth for survival are laid down and man is not far enough away from the earth to supersede them with those of his own creation; he can only go back to the earth to ascertain where he has diverged from the natural processes. (Mathews 1981:226)

The second part of **Talking to the Moon** consists of the colorful descriptions of the traditional Osage people's lives, history and culture where Mathews finds alternatives to the fragmented, materialistic culture of modern America. A recurrent theme in his chapters about the traditional Osage way of life is the need for modern man to return to the perception of the earth as a living organism to whom each one of us is related; "the civilized man" must break through geopolitical abstractions, he tells us and begins to see it as it actually is: "this [world] of water sheds and life communities –plant zones, culture areas, following natural boundaries"(Mathews 1981:120). The most important implication of such a renewal of natural perception, Mathews has written, is that it will ultimately enable us to "see ourselves more accurately." (Mathews 1981:121) Mathews believed that renewed understanding of ourselves and the land can come from communing with Indian peoples like the traditional Osage, whose relationship to nature and whose techniques for meditative and visionary explorations offer hope for the deeply disturbed body and mind of modern man. Native American cultures have been dedicated to exploring what consciousness is for thousands of years, and though they have not developed a technology comparable to the West's, they have exceeded us as "technicians of the sacred"(Mircea 1964: 69).

Mathews makes Talking to the Moon an account of the Osage culture that had survived for centuries, and the reason he focuses on his tribal ancestry by giving details from its myths, history and customs is because he believes the traditional Osage, the human inhabitants of the

blackjack region, were perfect parts of the harmony in nature. This oneness with nature was their religion:

> [The traditional Osage man] built up in his imagination the Great Mysteries and he walked, fought, hunted and mated with the approval of them. When the force urged him to expression, he turned his eyes to Grandfather the Sun; the colors he saw under his closed eyelids, he put into beadwork, quillwork and painting as inspirations from one of the greatest manifestations of the Great Mysteries, the sun, Father of Father Fire, impregnator of Mother Earth. (Mathews 1981: 221)

The Osage way of oneness with the earth and with the creatures on it also suggests the oneness within each person, of body, mind and spirit and a sense of overall oneness of material and spiritual reality. For Mathews this oneness with nature was never achieved by white man and was lost by the Osage after being forced to abandon the old free way of life being converted into Christianity, being alienated from the gods of their ancestors. Mathews describes this oneness in the chapter on the "Planting Moon" (April), the time of planting and growth associated with female potentials allegorically articulated in ceremonies. He retells an old story about Osage planting customs which reflect the old tribe's belief in "holistic" oneness with nature:

> Purty soon womens go to them little-hills, I guess, and they make hole with that pole on south side of that there hill. They used to say Grandfather sure would see them in them hills, in them little holes; and when we have all of'em with corn in it, we put our feets on it. We stand on them little hills and make drum against the earth with the poles and sing purty song. (Mathews 1981:48)

The women stamp hills with the left foot for Chesho (Sky People, Peace Division) and the right for Hunkah (Earth People; War Division). The Osage believed that both the nature of the world and humankind included both of these polarities, which must be kept in balance. They also recognized that at various times one would dominate the other. Certainly this division of the Osage into Chesho (associated with war and physical action) influences Mathews' attitudes toward his own state of mind which moves between these polarities. When the author first moved to the blackjacks, he exulted in the physical: "I wanted to express my harmony with the natural flow of life on my bit of earth through physical action." (Mathews 1981:16) Another example of action during a Hunkah state of mind is his narrative, in the chapter called "Deer Breeding Moon" (October), where he narrates about joining in a hunt to track down a bear which had killed some of a neighbor's sheep: "Bear hunting, with its frenzied action and the deep voices of the

bloodhounds echoing from the savage walls of the mountain canyons, awakens every nerve to incautious action." (Mathews 1981:168) He notes that, ten years later, his desire for action had been tempered. In the chapter "Single Moon by Himself" (January), Mathews describes his thoughts as "Chesho, as they should be, and there are no longer Hunkah thoughts of youth and action, when "Single Moon by Himself" comes to the blackjacks and I am inside the dark little sandstone house by the fire." (Mathews 1981: 224) Mathews at this moment in time is well aware of the fact that to be able to function as a part of the balance in nature one has to learn to balance within oneself.

Experiencing to become part of the Oneness in nature by reaching the balance within himself, Thoreau explains the reason why he left Walden Pond as: "perhaps it seemed to me that I had several more lives to live, and could not spare any more for that one. It is remarkable how easily and insensibly we fall into a particular route and make a beaten track for ourselves."(Thoreau 1962:258) Feeling this renewal within himself he urges his readers to search for new continents and worlds within oneself, expecting them "to open new channels, not of trade, but of thought."(Thoreau 1962:259)

In his conclusion Mathews seems to take up the challenge offered by Thoreau to seek out new worlds of thought. He matures sufficiently to end his isolation in the blackjacks and reenters the world of social responsibility as an Osage descendant. By writing his autobiography, Talking to the Moon, he recaptures the experience of renewal in nature. He manages to give life to the traditional Osage , who achieved harmony with nature, in his poetic prose, and that humankind is seeking even today. The breakdown of spiritual norms, the alienation of the individual from nature and the self attribute urgent importance to the healing properties and unifying forces of Indian culture. On a social level Indian awareness anticipates and parallels the ecological thinking of people who have lately come to see the dependency on technology as destructive and unnatural. On a spiritual level, it parallels the modern quest for integrity of the self articulated in the works of many scholars in various disciplines throughout the century. Mathews' successful attempt at harmonizing the world and the spirit suggests the way to rejoin what has become so fragmented on the threshold of the new millennium.

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