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## N. Scott Momaday: Beyond Rainy Mountain

ROBERT L. BERNER

Defying generic description, *The Way to Rainy Mountain* is an abbreviated history of the Kiowa people, a re-working of Kiowa folklore, a mixture of legend, historical fact, and autobiography. More precisely, it may be considered a kind of prose poem derived from traditional materials which are perceived personally, an exercise in self-definition made possible by a definition of the Kiowa experience. Ultimately the book's subject must be understood as language itself—its origins, its power, its inevitable collapse, and finally, its re-birth as art.

As Emerson says in *Nature*, every word was originally a poem, arising out of a need for some means of referring to a concrete phenomenon; for example, he says, *supercilious* means "the raising of the eyebrow" and *spirit* means "wind." But the word, which begins as a metaphor, becomes, through common usage, a cliché and finally sinks into the common earth of denotation. Yet words are the only means by which the poet can give meaning to reality, achieve self-definition, and in the process restore vitality to the words.

The structure which outlines the progress of language in *The Way to Rainy Mountain* is basically that of the relationship of the three main divisions of the book—"The Setting Out," "The Going On," and "The Closing In," a structure to be understood in the conventional terms of beginning, middle, and end, or perhaps, more precisely, of birth, life, and death—the origins, heyday, and final decline of the Kiowas as an independent people. Furthermore, the structure of each of the twenty-four sections which compose the three divisions must be understood as three visions of the

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Kiowas—that of Kiowa legend (the stories of Aho, the author's grandmother), of Kiowa history (usually facts found in the writings of James Mooney<sup>1</sup>), and of the author's own perception of himself as an inheritor of the Kiowa experience. These three elements—Kiowa myth, Kiowa reality, and personal vision—may perhaps be understood as Kiowa soul, Kiowa body, and Kiowa (that is, the author's) mind.

But the primary consideration in the book's structure is that the three divisions reveal a movement from *myth* (the origins of the Kiowas and of their religious definition of themselves as a people) through *legend* (the stories of Kiowa freedom and prosperity as they told them to each other) to *history*, the factual account of the defeat of the Kiowas and of their fall into the reality of the workaday world. This process, in terms of myth, resembles the movement of language from poetry (metaphor) through cliché to death and, in the hands of the poet, back to poetry again. A myth arises out of a people's need for some means of defining their relationship to the world, seen and unseen. But through frequent re-telling it becomes a legend, begins to lose its original significance, and finally falls to earth under the weight of historical fact. Yet the myth—and its variants in legend and its parallels in history—is the material of *The Way to Rainy Mountain* and the means by which its author, in the process of restoring vitality to the material, achieves his discovery of his own relation to the Kiowa experience which produced the material in the first place.

Language and religious vision are related, for, as the author says, "the word is sacred."

When Aho saw or heard or thought of something bad, she said the word *zei-dl-bei*, "frightful." . . . It was . . . an exertion of language upon ignorance and disorder (VIII).

A word, therefore, possesses power. "It comes from nothing [and] gives origin to all things." Indeed it gives man his only real power to "deal with the world on equal terms" (VIII). The myths in "The Setting Out" all deal, for the most part, with the power of language to work magic.

I. The Kiowas emerge from a hollow log into the world and name themselves *Kwuda*, meaning "coming out."

II. Two chiefs quarrel over the udders of a slain antelope, and one of them leads his people away into oblivion, to be named the *Azatanhop*, "the udder-angry travellers off."

III. In a time when dogs can talk, a man surrounded by enemies is saved by reciprocity with a dog, which says, "If you will take care of my puppies, I will show you how to get away."

IV. A Kiowa girl climbs a miraculous tree in pursuit of a miraculous bird and encounters a young man, the sun, and tells her she is to be his wife.

V. The woman quarrels with the sun-husband, attempts to return to earth with her child, and is killed when the husband tells a magic ring to pursue her.

VI. The woman's son is captured by the spider grandmother, who quiets him with a song.

VII. The boy disobeys his grandmother's warning never to throw the ring toward the sky, and it falls on his head and divides him into twins.

VIII. Caught in the cave of a giant who builds fires to smoke them out, the twins are saved by the grandmother's formula, *thain-mom*, "above my eyes."

IX. When the twins kill a snake, the grandmother spider tells them they have killed their grandfather, and she dies, leaving them alone.

X. A man whose children are starving hears a voice and sees Tai-me, who says, "Take me with you, and I will give you whatever you want."

XI. Two hungry brothers find meat outside their tipi. One says they should eat it, but the other says it is "too strange a thing." The foolish brother eats the meat and turns into a water monster, and the wise brother visits him with news of the Kiowas.

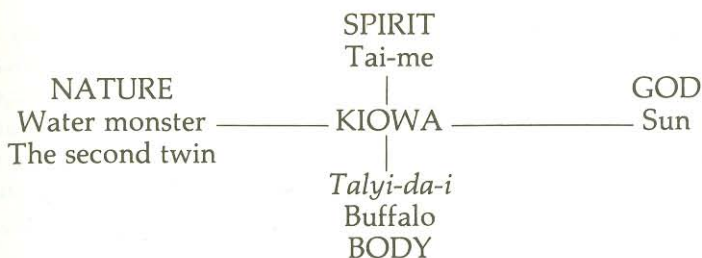
The pattern in these stories is one of language producing power: the Kiowas name themselves in terms of their miraculous origins and name their lost friends, the first domestic dog intervenes through speech to save them, the sun speaks and a culture hero is born, the culture hero is captivated by the spider's song and is saved by a magic formula, the deity Tai-me gives himself to the Kiowas in a spoken promise, and so on.

But in addition to this, the stories in "The Setting Out" define the religious identity of the Kiowas, understood in terms of the *Talyi-da-i*, the "boy medicine," and Tai-me. The former, it should be noted, is the earlier form of the religion of the sun, and the Tai-me religion seems to have been imposed upon it, re-defining it and enhancing its meaning. The crucial event in the story of the twins and the spider grandmother was what occurred after her death,

when one twin walked into the waters of a lake and disappeared forever, and "the other at last transformed himself into ten portions of 'medicine' thereby giving his body in eucharistic form to the Kiowas" (IX). The ten bundles of "boy medicine" are the *Talyi-da-i*. The story of the coming of Tai-me, who is both animal and bird—and yet neither—is a story of how the Kiowas acquired the being who represents the spiritual presence of the sun. The Tai-me figure, therefore, is kept under wraps and is exposed only at the sun dance, when the spirit of the sun is physically present to the people. At the same time, the sun dance requires the sacrifice of a buffalo, which, the author says in his "Prologue," is "the animal representation of the sun. . . ." In other words, the sun, the source of all life, is present to the Kiowas both as flesh (the buffalo) and as spirit (Tai-me). At the same time, the twin sons of the sun separate, one returning to physical nature, disappearing into a lake, the other becoming a eucharist which is divided among the people.

The relation of the twins to each other can be understood when their story is compared to that of the two brothers who find the meat outside their tipi (XI). The brother who eats the "strange" meat becomes a monster and must go live in a lake. This story is separated from that of the *Talyi-da-i* (IX) by the story of the coming of Tai-me (X). Considering the importance of Tai-me to the sun dance and considering that the buffalo can only be killed for the life of the people when they have been made worthy of it by the ritual of the sun dance, the meaning of the food left for the two brothers and the consequences of eating it are clear enough. The meat is from nature, not from Tai-me, and the brother who eats it is absorbed back into nature while the other brother, in a sense, becomes a Kiowa. What we have here is a basic theme: the people originate in nature, from which they must separate to become a people. They come through a hollow log to name themselves, they acquire a eucharist and, in a sense, a Holy Ghost, and they discover themselves as a people by means of a myth of separation from the natural world, in which they continue to recognize their animal origins. This is presumably what is meant by the myth of the domestication of the dog. As in the myths of so many peoples, it is a story of a time when animals could talk; but we are not to assume that this was a time when dogs could speak Kiowa but a time when Kiowas could only speak the language of animals—that is before they were Kiowas.

The elements of this religious vision may be diagrammed thus:



## II

In "The Going On" the stories are concerned with the prosperity of the Kiowas, a prosperity understood in terms of escape from enemies and from natural disaster, of reconciliation of tribal conflict and dismissal of those who do not adhere to tribal law; above all, they are concerned with freedom and with the horse, which makes freedom possible.

XII. A Kiowa family escapes from enemies when the wife sets fire to their tipi.

XIII. An arrow-maker saves himself and his wife by his skill and by his use of the Kiowa language.

XIV. The Kiowas make a horse of clay which turns into *Man-ka-ih*, the storm spirit, which understands the Kiowa language and always passes over them.

XV. The quarrel of Quoetotai and Many Bears over the wife of the latter is peacefully resolved.

XVI. A hunter whose life is endangered by a mysterious buffalo with steel horns is saved by a voice which tells him the buffalo's weak spot.

XVII. A blind man is deserted by his wife, a "bad woman," and she is "thrown away."

XVIII. Some adventurous Kiowas, curious as to where the sun goes in the winter, go far to the south, where they encounter "men [who] were small and had tails" (presumably monkeys).

All of these stories deal, in various ways, with the great success of the Kiowas after they have discovered themselves as a people with a tribal identity, and the historical and personal sketches balanced with them usually amplify the sense of freedom and power revealed in the legends: the references to Catlin's paintings of the Kiowas, particularly of the heroic Kotsatoah (XV); the author's memory of running from the buffalo in Medicine Park

and feeling "just then what it was to be alive" (XVI); the story of Kau-au-oıntı, the author's great-great-grandmother, a Mexican girl who endured her captive status to become eventually a person of importance with great wealth in cattle (XVII); Mooney's statement about the freedom made possible by the horse (XVIII); and the author's memory of the freedom associated with his grandmother's arbor (XVIII). At the same time, some of these reflections are ominous in nature: the destruction of the ceremonial tipi (XII); the hard lot of Kiowa women, including the woman whose feet were frozen as she waited outside the tipi of the man who had stolen her from her husband (XVII); and the reference to the old Kiowas, years after the last wild buffalo are gone, pursuing an old bull for the entertainment of white people (XVI).

Finally, in "The Closing In," there is a steady decline from the freedom and power of the middle section to death and loss.

XIX. By a great act of skill and bravery, a Kiowa saves his brother from the Utes, who award him horses.

XX. A warrior turns his fine horse aside while charging his enemy, and the horse dies of "shame."

XXI. Mammedaty sees a miraculous thing, the head of a boy above the grass, but it disappears when he goes to look for it.

XXII. Mammedaty, angry at a rogue horse, shoots an arrow at it and accidentally hits another horse.

XXIII. The Tai-me bundle, for no apparent reason, falls to earth.

XXIV. A woman in a beautiful dress is buried on the plains, but no one remembers where her grave is.

The historical and personal passages reinforce these images of loss and defeat: the defeated Kiowas lose most of their horses and must eat others because buffalo are scarce (XIX), a horse is sacrificed to ward off the white man's smallpox (XX), a great horse is stolen from the Kiowas ("a hard thing to bear") (XXII), a medicine bundle becomes heavy when it is not shown proper respect (XXIII), and so on. In all of these stories the content is increasingly historical, and the defeat, humiliation, and loss which they detail is made inevitable by the inability of the people to work their magic by means of the old language formulas. A word saved the twins from the giant, and the storm spirit passed overhead because the Kiowa language controlled it, but now, for reasons which cannot find explanation in language, things seem to go wrong.

## III

Accompanying this story of the origins, rise and fall of the Kiowa people is the story of the author's discovery of himself as a Kiowa. In each of the twenty-four sections, divided among the three divisions of the Kiowa journey, the legend and its historical definition receive a personal interpretation. The journey of the Kiowas from the mountains of their origins to the final place of rest in the Rainy Mountain cemetery parallels the author's journey, through memory, from his first sight of the Great Plains to the final vision of the Rainy Mountain toward which the Kiowas were inevitably, and tragically, destined to find their way. The author's first sight of the plains, a reflection of the Kiowa emergence from the confining mountains to the open plains where they would find definition as a people devoted to the sun, produces the discovery that "I will never see the same again" (I). The story of the girl who ascended into the sun's world by a tree reminds the author of seeing a bird in a tree seeming to ride across the sky (IV). The story of the division of the boys into twins is re-defined by the author's story of seeing his reflection in the water of the Washita River broken by a frog's leap (VII). The death of the spider grandmother reminds him of seeing Keahdinekeah, his father's grandmother (IX).

The basic pattern of this parallelism emerges without need to detail it. What should be clear is that the author becomes a Kiowa by relating his memory and his experience to the Kiowas of myth, legend, and history. When he recalls looking up at a bird in a tree which seems to ride across the sky (IV), he, in effect, becomes in his imagination the woman who climbed the tree in pursuit of a mysterious bird and encountered the sun. The water of the Washita which reflects the author's image may be related to the water into which the other son of the sun disappeared. The author's relation to his grandmother Aho is a reflection of the twin's relation to the spider grandmother, and the progress of the author to his discovery of the Kiowas parallels the progress of the boy who became in time the *Talyi-da-i*. The magic word of the spider grandmother *thain-mom*, which saves the twins from the giant, is paralleled by Aho's word *zei-dl-bei*, for both words are "an exertion of language upon ignorance and disorder" and a means of confronting "evil and the incomprehensible" (VIII). This pattern of relationship continues through the book. As grandson of Aho the author says, "I know of spiders," having discovered



them as the sun's son discovered the spider grandmother (VI). The origins of the *talyi-da-i* are in the death of the spider grandmother; the author's journey toward self-discovery begins in the death of Aho ("Introduction"). The man who became the water beast by eating bad meat is known by the author because his own grandfather, Mammedaty, once saw evidence of the water beast's existence (XI). The story of the arrow-maker is reinforced by the author's memory of the old arrow-maker Cheney (XIII). The escape of the hunter from the steel-horned buffalo is paralleled by the author's memory of running from a buffalo in Medicine Park when "our hearts were beating fast and we knew just then what it was to be alive" (XVI).

In other words, "the way to Rainy Mountain" is the journey of the Kiowas from the hollow log of their origin myth to their destiny on the Southern plains; but it is also the author's own journey from his first discovery of what it means to be a Kiowa descendant to the recognition of common mortality with the Kiowa dead in the Rainy Mountain cemetery, and of a final wisdom which makes possible the structuring of the common Kiowa experience in a work of art.

#### IV

The book, therefore, which is built of small pieces of myth, legend, and history, achieves structural unity in spite of its apparently fragmentary nature. But this unity is reinforced by two motifs which sound again and again in the fragments. They are equally important because, taken together, they are the source of the tension in the Kiowa story. On the one hand, there is the preoccupation with what might be called human duality, division, as reflected in stories of divided brothers, of tribal division, of loss. On the other hand, there is the constant presence of the grandmother, the unifying force.

In the first story in "The Setting Forth," we see why the division of the Kiowas was both a danger and a necessity. Before the people went through the hollow log to emerge into the world there were more of them, but not all of them "got out" because a pregnant woman got stuck in the log. "After that, no one could get through, and that is why the Kiowas are a small tribe in number." This juxtaposition of fertility and tribal birth, on the one hand, and of threat to the life of the tribe, on the other, is crucial. It suggests

both the positive and negative aspects of the duality which is one of the book's basic themes. If the people are to prosper, indeed even to survive in the hostile natural environment of the plains and in the inevitable military conflicts with other tribes, they must "increase and multiply," and in the case of the Kiowas they must enrich their population with captives. But the greater the number of Kiowas the greater the likelihood of conflict and disharmony.<sup>2</sup>

Many of the stories, therefore, deal with the subject of how the Kiowas acquired power through numbers. One of the tribal names, *Gaigwu*, is "a name which can be taken to indicate something of which the two halves differ from each other in appearance," and this is related to the custom of Kiowa warriors of cutting the hair close on one side of the head and letting it grown on the other—thus, in effect, symbolically doubling each man (I). When the twin sons of the sun were magically divided, they "laughed and laughed" and the spider grandmother, though her problems were doubled, cared for both of them (VII). The wife of Many Bears is the source of the quarrel between her husband and Quoetotai, and her husband is nearly killed. But when the lovers return after fifteen years with the Comanches, Quoetotai calls him brother and presents him with a gift of horses (XV). The betrayal of Kiowa by Kiowa is always punished, as when the woman who abandoned her blind husband was "thrown away" (XVII). A man saves his brother from the Utes, who reward his courage with a gift of horses (XIX). Furthermore, danger to the tribe is warded off by the acquisition of supernatural power when the tribe is enriched by union with Tai-me (X). And not only supernatural power. The acquisition of dogs (III) and of horses, of which the Kiowas owned more than any other tribe (VII), is the acquisition of power and wealth, which compensates for the small population of the tribe.

Yet division, which creates power, also poses a constant threat to tribal survival. One of the earliest tribal memories is of the quarrel of the two chiefs over the antelope, which caused the eternal loss of the *Azatanhop* (II). (Note that this story is balanced in Section II with the story of the antelope drive which was successful because all of the people united in a common effort.) The killing of the snake grandfather causes the death of the spider grandmother and the final separation of the twins (IX), and the eating of the bad meat causes the separation of the two hungry brothers (XI). A man steals a woman from her husband and then leaves her outside his tipi until she freezes (XVII). And throughout

"The Closing In," as we have seen, there is a chronicle of losses, of separation from the wealth and freedom which the horse represents, and of the fall of the Tai-me and sun dance religion.

This theme of separation is appropriate for a book which is designed to bring the divided past and present of the Kiowas together and to unite Kiowa myth and Kiowa reality in one unified vision. Furthermore, the author's real journey is his own—the story of the process by which his separation from his Kiowa identity was healed by his own journey to Rainy Mountain.

The other element which contributes to the tension in the Kiowa story, the element which may be said to be a source of unity, is the grandmother. It is the grandmother Aho whose death brings the author back to Rainy Mountain and who provides the stories which fill out the book's structure. The grandmother's dogs provide the physical evidence of the myth of the domestication of the dog (III). The spider grandmother assures the survival of the twins (VI) and gives them the magic formula for escaping the giant (VII). The *talyi-da-i* is associated not only with the spider grandmother but with Keahdinekeah, Momaday's father's grandmother (IX), and the Tai-me bundle is associated with Aho (X). The storm spirit, which passes over Kiowas because "it understands their language," is balanced by a place of shelter, Aho's storm celler, which "will be there . . . when the house and arbor and barn have disappeared" (XIV). The Kiowa women whose "hard" lives are described in Section XVII are contrasted with Mammedaty's grandmother, Kau-au-oainty, the Mexican captive who became "a figure in the tribe." Finally in Section XXIV the beautiful beadwork of Aho relates the story of the woman in the beautiful dress buried in an unknown grave on the plains to the author's final observation in "The Closing In"—that "Once in his life a man ought to concentrate his mind upon the remembered earth. . . ."

The life of the Kiowas, from their mysterious beginnings to their final decline as a society and culture, is therefore understood in terms of what might be called the grandmother principle, for it is the grandmothers who strive to maintain the unity which is constantly threatened and which ultimately dies. The death of Aho, the living presence of that principle in the memory of the author, requires that the unity of Kiowa past and present, of Kiowa myth and reality, and of the Kiowa experience and the experience of one modern Kiowa, Momaday, is to be achieved in the only way that remains once the old vitality of the culture has fallen into memory—by the ordering intelligence of the artist, which restores life to

the myths of the Kiowas as it makes yet another contribution to the ever necessary process of restoring life to language itself. Language, in Momaday's vision, is the magical element in human experience, speaking to people in moments of need out of the need itself, as Tai-me spoke to the Kiowas, and this truth is common to the wisdom of the Kiowas and to the vision out of which Momaday has produced a profoundly civilized work of literature. Seen in this way, we must recognize that all peoples, whether consciously or not, are on the way to Rainy Mountain. We discover ourselves in the knowledge of our origins; standing in the cemetery we achieve wisdom in the presence of those who lived and died to give us life; and we put together the fragments of our lives only by means of language, in the realm of art—beyond Rainy Mountain.

#### NOTES

1. James Mooney, *Calendar History of the Kiowa Indians*, 17th Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology, Part I (Washington, 1898), pp. 129-468.

2. This need to replenish the tribe undoubtedly accounts for the hospitality which the Kiowa proper extended to the Athabascan Kiowa Apaches, who adhered to the Kiowas so early in their mutual experience that they were indistinguishable from the larger group in everything but language. Momaday ignores this curious phenomenon in *The Way to Rainy Mountain*.