

## THE SIGNIFYING MONKEY TALKS LITERATURE

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*William Seaton*

Deep down in the jungles, way back in the sticks,  
The animals had formed a game called pool. The baboon was  
a slick.

Now a few stalks shook, and a few leaves fell.  
Up popped the monkey one day, 'bout sharp as hell.  
He had a one-button roll, two-button satch.

You know, one of them boolhipper coats with a belt in  
the back.

The baboon stood with a crazy rim,  
Charcoal gray vine, and a stingy brim,  
Handful of dimes, pocket full of herbs,  
Eldorado Cadillac parked at the curb.<sup>1</sup>

THIS MONKEY IS one of the last representatives alive in oral literature of the grand African tradition of trickster figures, of whom the best-known from Africa is Anansi and from America Aunt Dicy, John, and, of course, Brer Rabbit. Stith Thompson gives the names and addresses of their kin around the world.

Like many similar figures the signifying monkey manages to outwit his opponents by means of verbal skill. Typically in the toasts he foments trouble and manipulates events by words alone. His signifying consists of artful use of language, language used with meaningful indirection, and metaphoric and ambiguous language. Now the signifying monkey is an excellent definition of man,<sup>2</sup> for surely the extent if not the absolute existence of human signifying practices sets the species apart from all others. Thus my title may refer to the author of an article such as this who is, after all, a signifying monkey talking literature to other signifying monkeys, delivering, like Kafka's ape Red Peter, a "Report for an Academy." And one recalls that for Kafka signification is the thin and problematic line that divides the learned gathering from the zoo. However, the signifying monkey of the toast has more specific implications for literary study. Considering him as a representative not of all mankind in its signifying practices, but,

more narrowly, of the signifying practices of oral and of popular culture, he offers insights about the definition of the literary that are too easily overlooked by theorists exclusively concerned with high art texts.

The difficulties that accumulate when one attempts to establish a general theory of literature without adequate reference to the characteristics of oral and popular forms will be evident in the briefest review of the poles about which most discussion of literary value has revolved since the Romantic era. Many critics and theorists, and not a few poets, have built their barricades around positions basically defined by the continuum of tradition and innovation. Some have aligned themselves with the romantic impulse to privilege the innovative (Wordsworth when young, Pound, Shklovsky, Artaud), while others have celebrated the neo-classical emphasis on tradition (Arnold, Curtius, Leavis). Parallel polemical positions characterize the popular art/high art controversy. Some valorize the popular specifically as tradition challenging in political terms (Bakhtin, Fiedler), while others attack it as destructive of all culture (Adorno and Horkheimer, and Leo Lowenthal who says that popular art is "spurious," and "the very counterconcept of art"<sup>3</sup>).

Is the signifying monkey, then, to be given entry to Parnassus? If he is, must that entry depend on his challenging tradition and defamiliarizing language? The simple fact is that these disputes dissolve with the realization that every instance of language, and certainly every literary artifact, is at once conforming and non-conforming. If it were not for the former it would be incomprehensible, and the latter is necessitated by the fact that every context and occasion is different and so no two utterances can be exactly equivalent. This does not deny the reality of the two poles: the most routine of morning greetings to co-workers can approach total repetition, while *Lautgedichte* and some other modernist texts approach total unpredictability. The fact that theories of art have been constructed about each and of the opposition is, however, suggestive of the critical role that each plays in the aesthetic text. When Geoffrey of Vinsauf said at the beginning of the thirteenth century that the poet's job is to "rejuvenate" the language he included both the retention and the distortion of convention.<sup>4</sup>

It is quite true that certain genres are more conventional than others. There can be little doubt that popular and oral literature are relatively predictable. This has been frequently noted and, indeed, constitutes the ground for most of the attacks leveled against these genres for being boring, repetitive, and artless. In fact, those who champion specific oral and popular works often try to demonstrate that their choices are acceptable according to the same old standards of irony, innovation, and the like. But there is an equally aesthetic function for the opposites of these qualities as well.

Like Homer and other oral literature, black American folk narratives tend to be highly formulaic. Regardless of whether their performers are brilliantly creative or uninventive, they will make frequent use of stock phrases, formulae, repetitions, allusions, and fragments of other texts. This is obviously true

of blues lyrics and Elizabethan sonnets, but Julia Kristeva notes that in fact, "every text takes its shape as a mosaic of citations."<sup>5</sup> Each of the signifying monkey texts, and the other toasts Abrahams collected from the same milieu repeats words, phrases, and episodes from others, but each is also unique.

The place of repetition in high art literary production is often masked by such terms as "learned style," "awareness of tradition," and talk of literary schools and of topoi. In popular and oral texts, where it is most emphatic, it is often denigrated. Extreme conventionalization, close repetition as a sort of intimate intertextuality, produces a familiarity with the words that is identified as automatized and algebrized by Shklovsky. But if language can only be devalued by repetition, why do the Philadelphia street-corner poets make such rich use of it? Is their use of repetition any less insistent than that in television programs, romance novels, pornography, and Homer? This is, of course, the very concept on which Parry, Lord, and their followers founded and developed the notion of the oral. Repetitiveness taken to extreme forms, such as American Indian songs in which a brief phrase is reiterated for hours, or religious liturgy where the same words are spoken weekly for centuries, is hardly the result of incompetence or artlessness. It is simply a different aesthetic strategy.

Familiarization is evident in the formal conventions, the slang (the passage quoted at the outset requires more glossing than Chaucer), and the limited repertory of the tellers of signifying monkey tales. It appears also in larger descriptive clichés, in turns of plot, in the thematic goods retailed through the work. This point is so obvious that it scarcely bears documentation. It is clear that, contrary to what Shklovsky has said, the repeated structures do not normally fade and disappear due to the automatization, rather they are underlined again and again specifically to imprint them more indelibly in the mental programs of their consumers. In fact, it is the variable data that is more likely to carry a lesser semantic load, while constant repetition delineates central cultural components: sacrifice and rhetorical exchange in Homer, the Christians against the Saracens in medieval romance, the married couples' embrace at the end of a comedy, or the police getting their man at the end of a cop show on television.

In "The Monkey and the Baboon," formulae consisting of a single word or phrase include "'bout sharp as hell," "raise" (as a challenge), "fussing and fighting," and a great many others. The poem is clearly oral by the standard of economy. On the level of larger units, formulae include such elements as the monkey-baboon contest itself (which is recorded in numerous songs and stories as well as these toasts, some identifying the combatants as "the white man and the nigger"), the jungle setting (suggesting both African origins and the harshness of urban American life), and the ritual description of clothing worn by the main characters as set forth in the first lines quoted at the beginning of this paper. His dress invests the monkey with an aura of taste and authority just as the merchandise sold at Smoky Joe's in Chicago, or the

zoot suits of the forties, or flamboyant Jamaican hairnet caps do. The verbally fluent reciter of the poem seeks to appropriate the power unavailable to him in American society by cleverness with words that identify him with the clever monkey, that is, by semiotic means. He uses the vocabulary of clothing in the same way.

Social conflicts arising from racism, poverty, and male/female relations are evoked and then resolved in oral narratives like this one, in a way that closely fits Levi-Strauss's concept of myth as the symbolic mediation of binary oppositions. Much of shamanistic practice, too, follows this model of sympathetic magic. To narrate a myth in which the god defeats the demon is to exorcise the illness from the patient, and this verbal technology is used in contemporary America as much as in tribal societies. Certain critical discussions of popular culture, such as Mattelart and Dorfman's *How to Read Donald Duck*, or Fiske and Hartley's *Reading Television*<sup>6</sup> have centered on this function as a replicator of ideological givens which masks contradiction. But these partisan views rarely consider the examples of tribal societies which inculcate social norms even more rigorously but toward ends more easily romanticized (see any issue of *Alcheringa* or the official art of socialist countries). Indeed, the "classical" Chinese opera (which, in fact, is popular) and the modern revolutionary opera are the same in the formal sense of using highly repetitive conventions to teach and reinforce ideology. This is the old Horatian ideal, upheld by E. D. Hirsch and others in the present day, of instruction as a prime function of literature. Though the signifying monkey has seen the inside of few schoolrooms, he teaches his audience a vision of the world and themselves, complete with moral, aesthetic, and prudential values.

Repetitive structures are intrinsic to the nature of literature because they bear the normative didactic information it so often seeks to transmit. But the phenomenon is insufficiently explained by the principle of indoctrination. Even Horace allowed pleasure an equal importance (as, more reluctantly, did Augustine), and quite likely Kid (from whom Abrahams collected the text) would say that he recites poetry for amusement. What sort of pleasure is available from hearing the familiar yet once again (as the parent who reads aloud to his three-year-old may wonder)?

Eco says that the Superman comic books create a myth, partially because their appeal does not reside in any single story, but rather accumulates as the regularities in a group of texts.<sup>7</sup> This idea of the mythic does not depend on specific similarities to Oedipus or any other model, but rather on formal structural repetition which creates a field of expectations which it is then uniquely able to fulfill. Just as every television program has a series of clichés, characters, remarks, and situations that viewers would be disappointed to miss, Superman and the monkey stories are highly predictable. The contest between the signifying monkey and the baboon is just like that in other texts between a monkey and lion; it is closely similar to the contest

between Shine and the captain of the *Titanic*, as well as between Stagolee and Billy Lyon (whose surname identifies him with the monkey's antagonist in the "jungle" setting).<sup>8</sup> What Eco called "the iterative scheme" in *Superman* is, according to him, "that on which most famous writers have founded their fortunes." This is only partly because audiences enjoy having the ideological presuppositions confirmed. Also contributing to the comforting mental massage is the purely formal pleasure in encountering the same words, the same ideas, the same figures again and again. The consumer delights in his own initiation. This sort of literary delectation is not confined to the naïve. Certainly in scholarly exchange in all disciplines, readers and listeners enjoy hearing jargon (that is, academic slang), familiar critics' names, and book titles. Though each individual may have an idiosyncratic list, all recognition reinforces a sense of belonging, just as the story of the monkey in part creates a community. In neither case is the sensation of pleasure necessarily dependent upon agreement with the ideas expressed by the texts in question. Pleasure in the familiar is the self-reward of competence, whether the competence is in telling dirty jokes, in spotting an archetype a mile away, or both at once.

Furthermore, familiarization is present in all language. Whenever a word is used with apparent transparency, without metaphor, ambiguity, or irony, whenever reader and text can settle into certainty that, yes, tables do exist, or that cause and effect is a reliable principle, or that stylish clothing gives an individual power, familiarization is present. It is elevated to a significant formal rule in the texts of the signifying monkey as it may be in deviantly individual oeuvres like those of graffitists and William Burroughs (who, for all his cut-ups, is more redundant than Edgar Rice Burroughs). Repetition is not, as Shklovsky thought, the opposite of defamiliarization, but rather its precondition and its complement. Referentiality must exist as a system of social conventions before tropes can twist meaning. Lack of rhyme and internal rhyme have an effect in "The Monkey and the Baboon" only against a background of regularly recurring end rhyme. Information may be more densely packed into the code of the text when a cultural matrix of highly conventional structures is available for reference and distortion.

Three main arguments have been presented here to demonstrate the constitutive role of familiarization in the literary texts. It is the dominant mode by far in the greatest part of the world's verbal artifacts, it is particularly likely to perform the didactic function of literature, and it affords *plaisirs*, as well, of a sort associated with the reading of literary texts. It remains only to qualify these claims, for, though they foreground that half of the nature of literature frequently neglected, it is still only a half.

Repetitive, non-challenging, apparently transparent structures in oral and popular literature have been devalued by some critics because they seem to declare an illegitimate certitude and discourage new thought. Culler, for instance, says that only rule-breaking literature can allow an "expansion of

self.”<sup>9</sup> The fact is that oral texts, too, like that of the signifying monkey, have self-reflexive moments in which they indicate their own hollowness, the gap or *différence* between signifier and signified. It would be possible to re-enact for this generation Norman Mailer’s feat in “The White Negro”<sup>10</sup> of naturalizing existentialism (he complained that “only a Frenchman” could produce “all but ineffable *frissons* of mental becoming” like Sartre’s) by discovering it in the synapses of the Harlem hipster and his white imitators and counterparts. The modern version of this myth of nationalities (effete French, theoretically inarticulate but inspired blacks, and the essential mediating American intellectual) would be to locate Derrida in the cultural artifacts of black American street life. This may be done, but one must bear in mind that the Derridean signifying monkey is only half the dialectic.

The word *signify* entered black American usage through the religious discourse of the New Testament.<sup>11</sup> In the Bible, it is typically used to refer to prophetic, symbolic, ecstatic, apocalyptic utterance, thus to figured speech with ambiguous or elusive meaning. In the parable of the sower and the seed, Christ says that such problematic language concealing meaning will persist until the end of days when finally nothing will be hidden, but all will be abroad and known. Thus, before the eschaton, “signifying” or speech that hides meaning is the only mode available to man. The word is used in the gospels only in John and there only in a line repeated on three different occasions in which Christ speaks of his approaching death, the passing out of the world of the logos.<sup>12</sup> Here then is the sublime myth that underlies the monkey as well as the comic trickster preacher whose words are always lies, John, the clever slave, and many similar figures. The term *signify* as well as *give* carries connotations of the essential capacity to lie which defines the sign and the poem as Eco and Hesiod claim. Language among the storytellers whose works Abrahams collected is often called “shit,” as in “I talked my shit and I talked it well,” or when the performer identifies himself as “old bullshitting Snell.” The monkey himself originates his adventures by deciding “I guess I’ll start some shit” and what more properly than shit can be called Derrida’s “always already gone”? The problematic referentiality of poetry is apparent in the formula favored by another of Abrahams’ informants, Arthur: “You won’t believe this, but . . . .” The very formulaic nature of oral narrative, its reliance on conventions of rhetoric and rhyme all underline its dubious truth value and its reciprocally emphatic intertextuality. The signifying monkey, Shine from the *Titanic*, and Stagolee all have the same motive for adopting language that Kafka’s monkey had. Language is the only available means of gesturing toward communication until the Second Coming, for one who has fallen from Eden; it is that with which one copes, makes do, gets by.

The monkey can teach critics then that familiarization and defamiliarization are interdependent and equally necessary for generating literary texts. Those who study primarily modern elite literature or who read other texts

with critical concepts derived from an exclusive bias in favor of modern elite literature are likely to ignore the kinds of structures that predominate in literature as a whole. In fact, every linguistic act both conforms and nonconforms, plays at referentiality as well as fleeing it. The anxiety of influence is balanced by a delight of influence as in fact we love our parents as well as hating and fearing them. To write or to talk is to caress others erotically as well as to strike at them aggressively. The recognition of this balance derives particularly from examination of popular and oral texts like "The Monkey and the Baboon" and points toward the development of theoretical concepts that will more accurately describe the cultural production of man. Such recognition does not dilute the canon, but rather refines it; it does not point away from literature, but rather toward its heart.

#### NOTES

- 1 Roger D. Abrahams, *Deep Down in the Jungle*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Aldine, 1970), p. 148.
- 2 Compare the decorous Latin of Culler's *homo significans* in Jonathan Culler, *Structural Poetics* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), p. 130.
- 3 See Leo Lowenthal, *Literature, Popular Culture, and Society* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1961).
- 4 Line 769 of the text in Ernest Gallo, *The Poetria Nova and Its Sources in Early Rhetorical Doctrine* (The Hague: Mouton, 1971), p. 54.
- 5 Julia Kristeva, *Semiotike* (Paris: Seuil, 1969), p. 146.
- 6 Armand Mattelart and Ariel Dorfman, *How to Read Donald Duck* (New York: International General, 1975) and John Fiske and John Hartley, *Reading Television* (London: Methuen, 1978).
- 7 Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), pp. 107-124.
- 8 In each case a clever but vulnerable hero is pitted against a more powerful opponent. The texts are all printed in Abrahams, Chapter 5.
- 9 Culler, p. 129.
- 10 Norman Mailer, "The White Negro," in *Advertisements for Myself* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1959), pp. 337-358.
- 11 Since "signify" entered slang usage as a learned rather than a vulgar term, it seems obvious that it derived from religious usage, though no documentation of the connection has been published. Perhaps the best discussions of "signifying" as an urban American art form are Thomas Kochman, *Rappin' and Stylin' Out* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972) and William Labov, *Language in the Inner City* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972).
- 12 In John 12:33, 18:32, and 21:19. There are at least four occurrences of the word in Acts and more in Hebrews, I Peter, and Revelation.