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Myth and Progress

Abo, Chaco, Walpi, Old Oraibi, Canyon De Chelley; Keet Seel, Ojo del Padre, and Datil. American nouns like these are as full of depths and possibilities for some of us in the Southwest as Delphi, Lesbos, Arcadia, and Eleusis are to classicists. Keet Seel and Arcadia are shadows of each other, wild places, the haunts of gods, oases in the outback of history that the Myth of Progress would define as futureless, with no progressive potential, archaeological trinkets only slightly more meaningful than Kachinas and Caryatids lathed in Taiwan. And to most people in the commodified cultures of the East and West, the ancient world, and its modern equivalent the developing world, are in fact museum souvenirs, a plastic scarab, a poured-glass obsidian butterfly, an Anasazi wind-chime made of shards. The Myth of Progress, concerned as it is with the material, the technological, and the marketable, doesn't have much room for anomalies like the American Southwest, places it defines as being merely local, of no global significance other than tourism and as a virgin territory for the various extractive and exploitative industries. Of course, it's different for people who live in such anomalies. For us who see the southwest as a mythological sanctuary, a place where the past is still alive, ennobling and energizing the present, Keet Seel and Abo and Ojo del Padre are no more mere "local color" than the Erechtheum or the Omphalos at Delphi. Oraibi, Chaco and Canyon de Chelley embody a tradition whose full meaning has yet to be realized in a possible future in which the planet has been resacralized and the adaptive ingenuity of Southwestern cultures is refigured as model of ecological sensitivity, humility and common sense.

In the meantime a more brutal view prevails. Financial and corporate America sees the Southwest as synonymous with the primitive, the backward, the undeveloped, the unevolved. Lots of potential. Good workers. Cheap labor. Coal, oil, gas, uranium. Lots of scientists. Lots of "empty" land to be subdivided forever like timber companies clear cut forests. A good place to retire, to build bombs and to bury poison. Lots of potential.

This reductionist, cost/benefit analysis of the Southwest makes clear the difference between two standard views of myth— one as a gross inaccuracy, the other as a psychic reality. The myths of Arcadia or Chaco Canyon, for instance, are living truths of the spirit and facts of the imagination; the Myth of Progress, in this context, is an error in moral accounting, a manipulative falsehood demeaning the Southwest in order to milk it dry.

The ancient Greeks would see a validation of their pessimism in such a "progressive" view. For them, progress was full of disastrous paradox. The future was not a gravity compelling perfection. What's ahead was, by definition, debased. Bronze or iron brought disaster and corruption. The golden age was long ago. The Greeks stood with their backs to the future, yearning for a golden age they could no longer see, watching the odious present rush past them, much as a daredevil motorcyclist might ride backwards on long straight stretch of road.

In the Southwest, however, the past still exerts a enlivening influence, keeping the devolving

present from complete collapse. The past here is both sublime and subliminal to our senses, sensed out of the far corner of our eye. It both transcends the chaotic exploitation of the present, and exists secretly below the historical horizon, below the conscious rim, radiant with the same synaptic light as Rodin felt when he described his feelings about the Reims cathedral, sensed even in the darkness of night. "Its power transcends the senses so that the eye sees what it sees not."

The Pueblo view of history, while not pessimistic, does have harmonies with that of the ancient Greeks. Progress is a dubious concept for them at best. The desert mind sees cyclical renewal emerging from lower worlds of cyclical corruption. In Chaco Canyon, we know, vividly, this turn-about on the past, the utopian past at once ennobling and wasting away in the terrible ever present. In Chaco, we know the past as an embryo knows its future form. And so it is with the Southwest. It's a place where cycles of decay have not extinguished the presence of the long ago, where the past exists mythologically in the land, in living languages and cultures, in places such as Abo, Chaco, Walpi, Old Oraibi, Canyon de Chelly, Keet Seel, Ojo del Padre, and Datil.

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At Abo, in low winter clouds and twilight chill, my hand rubbed and smoothed and traced a mudhead petroglyph on the cold body of the stone. Maybe a thousand years old; that's as long as the Eleusinian mysteries were performed. The mudhead mask was pecked into a huge, smooth slab of black rock above a shallow wash, not 30 feet from the frozen water of the same spring fed-stream that irrigated what is thought to have been the first wheat field planted by Europeans in the New World 400 years ago, the same stream that fed the bean, squash and corn fields of the Anasazi-Tampiro pueblo that had occupied the site since around 900 A.D. The mudhead petroglyph I found was well within mind sight of the soaring cathedral-like ruin of Abo's church, with its dead straight vertical lines of stone rising from the rounded hills as plumb as the right angle lines of lightning petroglyphs just a gaze away from me and the mudhead I'd just found. When I touched the face on the rock, the mudhead mask, I saw not six inches from my face the clay streaked, white backs of Hopi mudheads lined up in a kiva in the dead of winter at Walpi in 1969. An instant physical recall of that night when we'd been given refuge in a blizzard during the Bean Dance cycle for uninitiates. A thousand years of life between my fingers on the stone and my eyes in the drumming dark that night when snow flakes fell into the kiva squeezed onto the edge of First Mesa. Life continuous, ever flowing. That Hopi world had lived on from its golden age right through our world with its omnivorous ideas and idiocies, its barbed wire economies and hygienic savageries. I touched the stone in 1995, the past was still alive, sublime, subliminal in me.

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I've been chased off the cliffs of Chaco Canyon by lightning at least three times. And almost blown off the edge of Chacra Mesa, near La Fajada Butte, by a swirling April snow storm that appeared as if it had literally crashed through a seam in the sky, smothering the canyon with weather that only gods could like or endure. I never think of Zeus when I'm at Chaco, but I know the lightning is divine,

utterly humbling, horrifying, as beautifully clear as the eye of a shark cruising these very cliffs beneath the sea 50 million years ago. Divine lightning will kill you. Yet it is delicate and animal for all its inhuman power when you see it against black clouds before its sound. I'm always transfixed by that sight, suspended for a split second between the present and the future. And then the thunder and the black rain and wind, and the dead fear of more lightning, ancestral memory radiating eons of panic through my skin and brain. Connection with the past is immediate and intimate. Now, or a thousand years ago, or a thousand years from now, the human response to lightning on the way is galloping, roaring terror. If the lightning's close, I head for low ground, which is hard to find on a cliff, running wildly, tossing out coins and keys, tearing my belt and its metal buckle off. Once lightning struck so close to me, the noise and the light were not two seconds apart. I could smell it all around me. I froze. I couldn't move. And then a great gust of damp wind washed over me and sent me hopping and vaulting down the cliff side to an overhang of stone just large enough to protect me from the rain. I brushed some little pebbles aside, hunched down, relieved, and shifted part of my weight to one of my hands which rested on a odd flat surface.

I looked down and saw between my fingers the full body of a 14-15 inch fish dead and fossilized before the sharks could get it. It was the best find I'd ever made at Chaco, and as the sea storm passed by I wedged the fish slab into a higher shelf of stone and hoped it would glide there until the cliff eroded away.

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"They never dance at Old Oraibi anymore," the young Hopi woman told me with a sly smile. "But, they do," I protested. "We were there last year." "No you weren't," she said.

Old Oraibi on Third Mesa, some people say, is the oldest continuously inhabited urban setting in North America. Old Oraibi has been closed off and on to white people for sometime. And in the early part of this century, a great schism in Hopi resulted in the Oraibian community which split itself into two "political" parties--those hostile to whites, and those who were friendly. Before we went to the dances at Old Oraibi, a Hopi at the Cultural Center on Second Mesa told us it was permitted, otherwise we wouldn't have known about it at all. We got there around one in the morning. We were the only whites. The Pueblo had looked deserted the day before when we'd explored it, and at night, with no electricity in the city, nor any electric lights on the horizon, we might as well have been in Troy--until the Kachinas sprang out of the darkness loaded with gifts of scallions, apples and candy, frightening us and welcoming us all at once. That night, we were not allowed to enter the Kivas, but we could stand on top of them and look into the light filled chamber below with its lines of masked Kachina dancers, and the heart beat of the drums echoing underground throughout the mud walled city. We knew that these very kivas had been used for a millennium, that 50 generations of Hopis had danced and prayed in them. As we felt our way through the adobe canyons and along the sloping, stoney avenues of the old city in shadowed moonlight, we knew these streets had been walked by people who had probably made the pilgrimage to Chaco Canyon 800 years before and had returned home enlivened and refortified by the spiritual power of the religious spectacles there at the Great Kiva now called Casa Rinconada. When the moon departs,

the darkness of Old raibi is absolute, except for a soft glow coming from the three main kivas. At 3 a.m., frozen, exhausted, exhilarated, and feeling blessed, I thought of the countless others over the centuries who had seen the kivas glowing like rising suns and had been warmed by the knowledge of the dawn to come.

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On the steep peninsular outcropping of Walpi, one worries at night of falling off the edge, especially if the cow bell Kachinas are in earshot. The cow bells, held by clan priests accompanying the masked dancers, signify that these kachinas are represented by holy people who have fasted and are undergoing a special spiritual journey. Even Hopi people are afraid of them. An outsider learns in a hurry that these masked dancers radiate a dangerous power. At the sound of a cow bell near by, everyone turns their faces to the nearest wall until the dancers pass. Once they came so close to us that we had to run behind some buildings in the dead of night and dive under a truck to keep safe. The truck, we found, was parked over a pile of sheep dung and was not three feet from the fenceless edge of the mesa.

An hour and a half drive from Hopi is another edge that beckons fearfully—the intimate, distant, deep edge of Canyon de Chelley, which drops 1000 feet down from the cap of Permian red limestone to the cliff dwellings and pristine meadowed orchards along the banks of Chinle wash. So seductively deep, so forbidden. And the swallows that roam the canyon updrafts, diving and ascending, urge me to spread my arms and leap effortlessly into the intimate depths. I came close to jumping once when I was in my early twenties. The landscape I saw was mesmerizing, surreal, mythlike, so perfect, so inviolate, so utterly untouchable and safe, I thought the only way I could become a part of it was to join the swallows, to put my whole self into the view before me, to literally give myself over to the canyon. Happily, I'm more afraid of heights than I am lured by inviolable distance. I stepped back from the edge, got down on my belly, and crawled the few feet back to the rim and peered down. I felt secure in the physical truth that snakes can't join the swallows.

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There are few places on earth that seem more secure from intrusion than the Anasazi ruin of Keet Seel near Kayenta, Arizona, and the abandoned town of Ojo del Padre on the Rio Puerco west of Albuquerque.

Keet Seel is a cliff dwelling second only in size to the metropolis called Cliff Palace at Mesa Verde. But unlike Cliff Palace, you can't get to Keet Seel in a tour bus. Even as late as the 1960s, adventuring the eight miles on foot or horseback to see Keet Seel was a 19th century experience, and it wasn't hard for me to feel like Schliemann trekking off to Troy or Mycenea. Unlike other Anasazi Ruins, Keet Seel was in pristine condition when I saw it. Nothing had been carted away to museums. The Myth of Progress, which commodifies and diaramas the past, had been kept at bay. Navajo guides used by explorers and proto- archaeologists in the late 19th century kept the place a secret for years, saving it from the fate of Betatakin, another huge ruin nearby which was stripped nearly bare for sale to museums.

Even today, only the hardy can get to Keet Seel. So walking its streets you can find corn cobs from the 14th century, an occasional pot, and even roof beams intact.

Tsegi Canyon, where Keet Seel is hidden, is an American Arcadia, a wilderness completely free of anything resembling modern life, a lost place where one's imagination can find peace from the suburban cacophony of the Myth of Progress. In the Mind of the Unknown where all myths merge, Keet Seel and Arcadia are shadows of each other, Keet Seel the capital of Aztlan, Arcadia the roaming grounds of Hermes and Pan, the breeze fields of Aphrodite.

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In the 1960s, the ghost town of Ojo del Padre was even more isolated than Keet Seel, despite being not 25 miles from Albuquerque on the west bank of the Rio Puerco. In the mid-1990s, the Rio Puerco is on the verge of being colonized by subdivisions and Ojo del Padre is about to be turned under. Perhaps it's poetic justice. Ojo del Padre was an adobe farming town that had been colonized itself. Its ruins have two dominant structures— an jarring two-story, wooden, Queen Ann saloon and gambling hall, and a one story, one room, adobe morada, a meeting house and church for the Penitente brotherhood. The two buildings together is evidence of a first prophetic encounter between the Myth of Progress and pristine outback west of Albuquerque. The saloon was as garish as a strip mall. The morada still had profound spiritual integrity. Dark, cool, low to the ground, hidden from the town near the river behind a little hill, the morada radiated humility and devotion even in ruins, a spiritual energy not to be taken lightly by anyone and not to be touched by unbelievers. When I saw it, its only door had been removed, a heavy cross had been dumped in its courtyard, and there was nothing left inside. But I couldn't bring myself to cross the threshold, anymore than I could kiss the cheek of a saint I didn't believe in.

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A Puebloan myth, that tells of the destruction of Chaco Canyon, reminds me of the saloon at Ojo del Padre and the gambling mania of modern New Mexico. The myth relates how the great religious complex at Chaco Canyon came to lose its spiritual purity. The devotional culture there had been taken over by greedy overlords and profaned by a lust for gambling. The Kachinas came to warn the people of Chaco that if they didn't stop gaming and revive their religious life, the rain would desert them. Instead of listening to the Kachinas, the Chacoans slit their throats and castrated them. The surviving gods left the canyon and never returned, and Chaco dried up and its people were forced into exile. In rarely seen ceremonials today, the War of the Kachinas is re-enacted with masked dancers wearing bladders full of pig blood around their necks and waists. The death of the Kachinas, and the death of Chaco, comes at the climax of the ceremony when the bladders are punctured and the blood spills out symbolizing the exchange of death for the waters wasted on greed.

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The Myth of Progress is fickle. It will have nothing to do with Keet Seel, Walpi, or Canyon de Chelley but it loves the cross roads of Datil just west of the Plains of San Augustin in that rancher's paradise called Catron County. Datil has a history, but its present is where the action is. Datil has one business, that I can tell, the Eagle Guest Ranch, which is not a ranch, though it does has room for rent. It's mostly a restaurant, though, and a market and gas station with the best food for miles and among the most interesting conversations anywhere in America. In the Eagle, the unlikely mixing of the myth of the cowboy with the ancient history of star gazing and its practioners makes eavesdropping an almost cosmically funny experience. At one table, astrophysicists from the Very Large Array radio telescope east on the Plains of San Augustin talk about positioning the VLA's huge cup-shaped antennae, and at another table tired cowboys smoke and complain about the rain and their pickup trucks buried in three feet of mud. The power of technology feels softened at the Eagle Guest Ranch. There's a continuity there of mud and stars. The curiosities of the great Anasazi astronomers, who designed whole urban networks like Chaco Canyon to be vast solar and lunar calendars, instruments merge over smells of wet dirt and steak with the driving inquisitiveness of the modern world's best astronomers. The cowboys too have ancestral roots in the Myth of Progress, roots that follow them to Datil-Plains Indians who hunted and raided into New Mexico and Colorado, Navajo horsemen and shepherds, Apache raiders and stockmen, all as peripheral to the Pueblo core as the cowboys are peripheral to the radio telescopes of the VLA. Datil, for an habitue of cafes like myself, is a sort of mythological relay station in which energy from the past is amplified and pushed on to the future. If there was ever evidence that the field of myth is still perfect with all its potential energy radiating possibility, it's the words I thought I overheard one Christmas season having supper with my family after cutting our trees in the Crosby Mountains. Eating pie and drinking coffee at the Eagle, one fairly scruffy scientist, who looked like a cowboy, said matter-of-factly to another man in a tweed jacket and bolo tie "there's so little blight in our skies out here." Urban "light blight" I think he was talking about-the same progressive curse that's been missing from the clear night skies of Chaco Canyon and the far back pastures of Catron County since long before the first myth dawned on the questioning human mind.