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***SPIRITUAL CROSSROADS:
THE RELIGION OF THE INDIAN SIOUX IN THE CONTEXT OF THE
ROMANTIC REVOLUTION***

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Abstract. *The present paper is an analysis of the uncanny resemblances between the essential elements of Sioux Indian Religion and the spiritual ideas of the Romantic Revolution. Special emphasis will be laid on the organicism and unity of Sioux religion and the quaternary defining literally the whole structure of the Sioux cosmos. Also, we shall point out certain affinities between the religious system of the Lakota and the thought of a Peter Ouspensky, Emanuel Swedenborg, or Jakob Böhme, the latter being one of the fathers of romantic thought. It will be shown that one essential common ground for the two is the Sioux progressive vision quest (equivalent with the romantic journey within) and the Sioux-romantic fundamental visionariness, by the agency of which man's spiritual evolution becomes possible.*

Little critical attention has as yet been paid regarding the philosophical-cognitive relationship between the Romantic Revolution and the Native Indian cultures of America. A notable contribution was recently published by Tim Fulford, entitled *Romantic Indians: Native Americans, British Literature, and Transatlantic Culture 1756-1830* (2006), in which the fact is emphasized that “the cult of the American «Indian» with the Romantics” was very popular owing to one particular state of affairs: namely, “the warrior-Indian and his «savage» culture were imagined as the opposites of gentlemanly British writers and of the culture of domesticity to which their writing contributed” (Fulford: 5). One conclusion of this book is that “it is not too much to say that Romanticism would not have taken the form it did without the complex and ambiguous image of Indians that so intrigued both the writers and their readers,” in a context in which “most of the poets of the Romantic canon wrote about Native Americans – not least Wordsworth and Coleridge,” but also “Bowles, Hemans, and Barbaud.” Notwithstanding, as Fulford emphasizes, “Indians' formative role in the aesthetics and politics of Romanticism has rarely been considered” (Fulford: 12).

Fulford's thesis is, moreover, that the influence of the Amerindian world helped shape not only the romantics' idealized image of “savages” and tribal life such as manifest in Coleridge's and Southey's well known project of a pantisocracy to be carried out on American land, namely on the Susquehanna River in Pennsylvania, but also even the romantics' description of nature, religion and rural society. The romantic poet Thomas Campbell, for instance, explored conventional oppositions such as savage versus civilized, frontier versus metropolis, primitive versus polite, warrior versus poet. In this sense, a Mohawk warrior, for instance, did not belong in London because there his power dwindled to nought, his martial cry inspiring horror only into the most timid of poets. The savageness and fierceness of the Amerindian warrior was subdued by the technological field of domesticity that was in the making in 18th century England. Fulford mentions in fact the comfortable “padded sofa” as being the kind of medium that would absorb the martial force of the American Indian, and justifies his assertion by adding that it was no coincidence that one of the age's most popular poems was William Cowper's *The Task* (published in 1784) in which civilization was symbolized by the sofa and gentlemanliness was defined in terms of

“tamed and cosseted bodies.” For Cowper, as for many others, the bodies of the Amerindians were the most fascinating of all precisely because more than anyone else the Amerindians lived in unity and harmony with nature.

The Amerindian’s closeness to nature is most probably the most important foundation of the strong connection between the thought of the romantic revolutionaries and the spirit of native America. This connection became very visible with the publication of Voltaire’s *L’Ingénue* (1767), translated into English as *The Huron or The Pupil of Nature*, and the interest in this connection had already been anticipated by Rousseau over a decade earlier, in 1755 – when he published his famous *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality Among Mankind*, in which he first used the terms “noble savage” and “return to nature” –, as well as even earlier by John Dryden in his *The Indian Queen* (1664), in which by “Indian” the poet understood an idealized image of a noble savage, of the kind that later Robert Southey was to render more ambiguous and complex, as in his *Songs of the American Indians* (1799), in which the initially simple primitive portrait of the Indian, such as in Dryden’s version, became paradoxical, namely an assemblage of contrary or ambivalent qualities like “courage and ferocity, heroism and primitivism, honour and savagery, oratory and superstition, stoicism and violence, nature and bestiality, orality and simplicity, dignity and drunkenness” (Fulford: 18).

Samuel Johnson himself raved against British colonial practices in America in an article entitled “European Oppression in America,” published in *The Idler*, No. 81 [82], November 3, 1759. Johnson created here a first fictional Amerindian by agency of whose voice he was able to side with the oppressed. Many British writers thereafter were to use the image of the Native American, an image gradually transformed into that of the “Romantic Indian,” in order to attack British imperial practices and attitudes. In the eyes of the British, the “Romantic Indian” was thus often associated with “honour, courage, liberty and oratorical authority” (Fulford: 21).

Such an image can be found for instance in a verse drama entitled *Ponteach: Or the Savages of America*, published by the American frontier soldier Robert Rogers in England in 1766, and in which the author drew inspiration from real life, i.e. from Pontiac’s life, the Ottawa leader who between 1763-1766 had led a pan-Indian alliance – including tribes of the Great Lakes (among others the tribes Ottawa, Delaware, Ojibwa, Huron / Wyandot, Shawnee and Seneca) – in what is known as the general Northwest uprising against the new British military forces whose trading terms had been found insulting by the Indians. In this sense, it is known that the British traders cheated the Indians and debauched them with whiskey (the Sioux, ironically, called alcohol “sacred water” – in Dakota *mini wakan*, in Lakota *mni wakan*; cf. Siouan *mini* or *mni* = water; *wakan* = sacred, mysterious). Also, the British colonists poured into western lands against the decision of George III as stipulated in his Indian Proclamation Line of 1763, according to which Indian territory was west of the line running along the crest of the Appalachian Mountains, while colonists’ land was east of that line, by this an attempt being made at containing westward expansion.

The British Crown had indeed been shaken by Indian uprisings, and especially by Pontiac’s rebellion, and as a consequence, among other things, the British Crown proclaimed this boundary line in the hope of diminishing the effects of the conflicts, and at the same time enlarged Sir Jeffrey Amherst’s powers to subdue the uprising (Amherst – who was the new commander at the forts of the Old Northwest and Canada – is known, for instance, for his initiative to use smallpox-infected blankets as a weapon against the Indians, this being the manifestation of a new genocidal policy, to which the Indians reacted). As a result, Pontiac’s War became a major topic of debate in Britain (Nies: 190-195).

Rogers’s *Ponteach* thus became the first Native American hero in British literature to reach a fully dramatic dimension, resembling Shakespeare’s kings, endowed with a sense of political justice and “self-conscious interiority,” wisdom, authority, dignity, honesty (Fulford: 22), almost reminding one, in a different – philosophical – register, of Blake’s Tharmas:

Ponteach (Act I, Sc. IV): “Indians a’n’t fools, if White Men think us so;
We see, we hear, we think as well as you;
[...]

Tharmas: “& I am like an atom,
 “A Nothing, left in darkness; yet I am an identity:
 “I wish & feel & weep & groan. Ah, terrible! terrible!” (Vala, I, 58-60)

Also, Rogers’s Ponteach already shows signs of the later romantic Promethean hero with his fierce, terrifying energy that verges on the hubris of human genius:

“And since I’m Ponteach, since I am a King,
 I’ll show myself superior to them all;
 I’ll rise above this Hurricane of Fate,
 And show my Courage to the Gods themselves.” (Act, V, Sc. V).

What is more, Fulford emphasized the fact that the entire figurative power of romanticism derives in the last analysis from the encounter with the foreign (Fulford: 33), in this sense the encounter with native America being essential. We thus need to remember that the whole idea of *natural man*, so fundamental in understanding the philosophical roots of revolutionary romanticism, had entered the influential view of the French encyclopedists Dennis Diderot and Jean d’Alembert via a transatlantic osmotic process. The result was their doctrine about the natural rights of man which was theoretically adopted into the 17 articles of the Declaration of the Rights of Man issued by the National Assembly of France in 1789. Jules Michelet had pointed out that this view had become the “creed of the new epoch,” being profoundly influenced, among other things, by the constitutions of some North-American states such as Virginia and New Hampshire, in their turn being inspired by the systems of natural thinking of the Native American nations, such as the Six Nations forming the great Iroquois Confederacy, which Benjamin Franklin was much interested in studying.

For instance, being fascinated with the protocols of Indian treaty-making, Franklin is known to have collected and published – in 1762 – thirteen such Indian treaties, made between 1736 and 1762.

Man’s “naturalness” thus began to be legally established, as it were. On the other hand, later in 1810 Walter Scott was to publish a poem entitled *The Lady of the Lake*, in which he imagined the Highlands of medieval past, idealizing a courageous hunter-warrior and a bleak mountainous wilderness by building on the model of Ossian – the highland bard, alias James Macpherson – the antiquarian, who had romanticized (in the *Song of Fingal*) the Scottish Highlanders as portraits of ancient Scots molded in the image of modern Amerindians such as the Mohawk warriors. That Macpherson had in mind the image of modern Amerindians when he created his Scottish heroes seems plausible since it is known that David Hume had suggested to Macpherson that he should travel among the Chikkasah (or Chickasaw), who would in fact thus civilize him.

Likewise, historian Adam Ferguson had stated in his *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* (London, 6th ed. 1793: 133) that in the American tribes “we behold, as in a mirror, the features of our progenitors.” In this context, Tim Fulford emphasized that Walter Scott’s imaginary Highlanders clearly evince the presence of “Romantic Indians in their literary ancestry.” To be sure, Enlightenment ideas about justice, equality and freedom were used to attack monarchy and aristocracy and were based on the new notion of man in nature often derived from the descriptions registered by French Jesuit missionaries, who attempted to evangelize the Native Indians of Canada like the Huron (or Wyandot, as mentioned, in Voltaire’s *L’Ingénue* we encounter the story of an Indian belonging to this tribe).

However, as Harold Bloom had pointed out, the romantic revolution’s final goal was not unification with nature – and so not the proclamation of *natural man*, because nature still contained the principle of necessity, even if that was organic. Romanticism’s final goal was transcendence beyond Nature, the embrace of Spirit, because Spirit was the only realm of indeterminacy / unconditionality (as Kant had announced), while Nature still belonged to the realm of conditionality.

Thus, Romanticism’s final goal was the proclamation of *spiritual man*, and this new *spiritual man* was in his essence derived indeed from the Amerindian child of nature, since nature for most Amerindians was at one with the world of spirits, as we shall see most blatantly in the case of Sioux cosmology.

Bearing in mind the elements of this complex interrelationship between Amerindians and the Romantic Revolution, we can now proceed to analyze a few uncanny resemblances between the

fundamental system of Sioux Indian Religion and the system of romantic thought. We justify this analysis starting from a realization of the importance of the Sioux nation as a formative cultural power: it is thus known that publications containing descriptions of nomadic tribes grounding their life on buffalo hunting such as the Sioux and Blackfeet Indians appeared after the 1840s to the effect that they helped establish the Wild West mythology (Fulford: 16), a mythology which in fact to this day has kept on influencing – if not determining – the popular inherited image of Native Americans. Contacts between the Sioux and Christian missionaries had, of course, taken place much earlier, the earliest documented being those involving Jesuit missionaries Claude Allouez and Jacques Marquette, who first met the eastern Sioux around 1665 (DeMallie & Parks: 9), as well as involving Roman Catholic missionaries throughout the 17th and 18th centuries.

Among the most important elements connecting revolutionary romantic thought and Sioux religious thought is the organicism and unity of Sioux religion and the quaternary defining the whole structure of the Sioux cosmos. Related to this is the symbolic structure of virtually all of Lakota religion. Thus, for the Lakota (i.e. the western Sioux), as for the romantics, “the world was characterized by its oneness, its unity”; “in a very real sense, humankind and nature were one, just as the natural and the supernatural were one” (DeMallie: 27-28); “the unity of *Wakan Tanka* embraced all time and space” (DeMallie: 32). In a similar way, though not in a pantheistic sense, the romantic William Blake was to consider that mind and body are one and the same, body being just a “portion” of soul, an “inlet” into the world of generation. Wordsworth, on the other hand, saw everywhere around him Nature imbued or “deeply interfused” with spirit. This Wordsworthian “deeply interfused” spirit comes very close to the quintessential Lakota notion of the *Wakan Tanka*, meaning the Great Spirit, Great Mystery, the Great Incomprehensible, which was deciphered by Christian missionaries as an expression meaning God.

Wakan Tanka is indeed a strange Lakota/Dakota expression, because it is formed by two adjectives, sacred/mysterious (*wakan*) and great/large (*tanka*), to cataphatically define a notion that is undefinable for the Lakota (and the Sioux nation in general), much as was the notion of the infinite *Ungrund* for Jakob Böhme, who saw in it a way to describe the incomprehensible spirit of God as the deep unfathomable dark without beginning and without end, in which his seven Spirits live for ever fighting in the fight of contraries. John Clare gave a definition of God that comes uncannily close to that of the Lakota / Sioux *Wakan Tanka*, being also made up of a string of adjectives: “Omnipotent and mighty known unknown” (cf. Clare’s sonnet entitled *The Deity*).

Like Böhme’s *Ungrund* and Meister Eckhart’s Deity, *Wakan Tanka* “never had birth and so could never die. The *Wakan Tanka* created the universe, but at the same time they comprised the universe.” (DeMallie: 28). As Little Wound told James R. Walker, “*Wakan Tanka* are many. But they are all the same as one.” (DeMallie: 28). Before Christianity began to influence Lakota religion, *Wakan Tanka* was “an amorphous category most precisely defined by incomprehensibility” (cf. Densmore 1918: 85, fn. 2, qtd. in DeMallie: 29), i.e. precisely the key element in the description of the godhead in Böhme’s doctrine of *Ungrund* as divine unfathomable deep, a concept rooted in the Germanic doctrine about the *gap ginnunga*, “great abyss,” similar to the Greek *Chaos*.

The Sioux also referred to the visible manifestations of the *wakan* or sacred using a special name: *Taku Wakan* (lit. “something sacred” or “mysterious”). This differentiation also reminds us of a similar distinction in Blake, who often in his prophetic works emphasized that material creation is built as a “wondrous work flow[ing] forth like visible out of the invisible” (*Vala*, II, 260), matter always having roots in Spirit: “And every Natural Effect has a Spiritual Cause, and Not / A Natural; for a Natural Cause only seems [...]” (*Milton*, I, 26, 44). Likewise, for the Lakotas “the course of a human life was a clear reflection of the workings of *Wakan Tanka* in the universe” (DeMallie: 30).

What is more is that the Lakota thought of *Wakan Tanka* as being *Tobtok kin*, i.e. “the Four times four,” (Siouan *kin* def. art. “the”) a group of 16 benevolent powers, gods or spirits, that uncannily remind us of William Blake’s own division of the universe into an abyssal quaternary structure, based on the building block of the four Zoas or powers of the mind-body assemblage (with Los being imagination-instinct; Luvah: emotion-love; Urizen: reason-thought; Tharmas: sensation), ordered according to the four cardinal points. Each Zoa in the building block was in turn structured according to a systemic inner

quaternary of Subzoas, ordered according to the four cardinal points as well, which means that the four Zoas precisely governed 16 Subzoas or gates of creation, each of them comprising inner quaternaries ordered according to the four cardinal points, *ad infinitum*.

This structure of “deep crosses” suggests again a Sioux symbol, namely the *cangleska wakan*, i.e. the “sacred hoop,” a representation of a circle in which a cross is inscribed symbolizing the total universe (Powers: 201). Blake’s “sacred hoop” of the four Zoas symbolized precisely also the whole of the material universe. Significantly, Peter Ouspensky identified a number of four functions as independent spheres defining man: namely, the intellectual mind (equivalent to Blake’s Urizen), the emotional mind (equivalent to Blake’s Luvah), the motor mind (equivalent to Blake’s Tharmas as Parent Power) and the instinctive mind (equivalent to Blake’s Los; cf. Ouspensky: 48). The identifications are indeed remarkable.

On the other hand, the Lakota believed that after death the guardian escorted the spirit to the spirit world beyond the Milky Way or *Wanagi Tacanku* (meaning “Spirit’s Trail” or “Spirit Road,” viewed as made up of campfires of the departed). This notion is close to Swedenborg’s view regarding the existence of a spirit world that is always in very close connection with the material world, which in fact it guides and directs and determines, as in Blake’s new equation according to which “Natural Effects” have “Spiritual Causes,” a notion that appears to logically endorse such biological hypotheses as that regarding the spontaneous generation of living beings, “spontaneous” being decoded as “having spiritual roots,” as in Blake’s idea about material creation “flow[ing] forth like visible out of the invisible.” For the Lakota this seems to be a key idea, since spirit is seen as being at one with matter, nature at one with the supernatural, every thing being endowed with a spirit which was by definition *wakan* and which was called *tunwan / tonwan*, or spiritual essence / power enabling that thing to do *wakan* things. (In Lakota and Dakota: *wan* indef. art. “a”, “an”; *ton* vb. “to give birth to,” “to have”: *cinca ton* = to have a child; *ton* s. “spiritual power that makes a person or a thing *wakan*”; the Lakota *wicasa wakan* was a man who had the power to make *wakan* other things or persons, as an ordained priest had the power to bless things or persons, cf. Buechel & Manhart: 313ff; hence *ton / tun* signifies one of the four aspects of “soul”, “potentiality”, cf. Powers: 212; also, in Dakota *tunwan / in Lakota tonwan* = a particular kind of arrow; in Lakota and Dakota, *tonwan* = to look, to see; cf. Riggs: 477ff).

For example, the Lakotas believed that the buffalo and the land were as one, buffalos regenerating themselves by emerging from the womb of mother earth, who was as a matter of fact meaningless without the buffalo that lived on it (DeMallie: 32). For this reason, *tunwan* could well be considered to be the material manifestation of phenomena, outward forms being regarded by the Lakota not as being real, but as being “only physical manifestations of inner power” (DeMallie: 30). As George Sword put it, “We do not see the real earth and the rock but only their *tunwanpi*” (plural of *tunwan*). This view was characteristic of most romantics, Blake and Schelling for instance seeing in material reality just phenomenal manifestations of unfolding inner spiritual essence.

Also, the Lakota thought that “it was beyond humanity’s power ever to know it [the universe] fully.” (DeMallie: 32). And this again is a key notion in romantic thought. Romantic cognitive incompleteness became a marker of the evolutionary spirit of man, always confronted with the desire to ever more deeply probe into the essence of reality. The result of this romantic experiment was the birth of a romantic theory of man stating that in fact man, as all other living beings, already contains in himself the infinity it searches. The only problem from Blake’s perspective, for instance, was that man was blind to this infinity. Prophetic art was to correct this error generated by man’s Fall, as for the Lakota this was to be corrected by the vision quest, which the Sioux named “crying for a vision,” *hanbleceyapi* (*hanble’ceya* = to cry in vision seeking), since they literally humbly cried and wept for their spiritual vision or revelation after going through the rough purification ritual of the sweat lodge or *ini’pi*.

On the other hand, Lakota religious knowledge developed in a way similar to that developed by the romantics. Thus, each Lakota “formulated a system of belief by and for himself” (DeMallie: 34), this being much in the spiritual register announced by Blake in *Jerusalem*: “I must create a system or be enslaved by another man’s.” Thus, essential for the Lakotas was the fact that they had no “standardized theology,” no “dogmatic body of belief,” even though there was a corpus of fundamental ideas that were universally shared. As DeMallie pointed out, specific knowledge of the spirits was shared by Lakotas

only to a small number of medicine men. Individual experience was a means by which one could contribute to the general body of knowledge which was and is characterized by the fact that it kept on being resynthesized as a living body. This very aspect comes close to the romantics' view of their art as being alive, as the art of living form. In this sense, Fr. Schlegel saw in romantic poetry the poetry of infinite becoming, which for a romantic like John Clare became the poetry of the "breathing word," and which in the last analysis reminds us not only of an Egyptian god as Ptah, but also of the Amerindian way of seeing in Nature a living door to the world of spirits with which, in fact, it formed a unity. In this sense, the name of the well-known Shawnee Indian prophet Tenskwatawa (Tecumseh's brother) means "the Open Door." Tenskwatawa's name thus suggested that his Pan-Indian redemptive doctrine, springing from his direct visionary experiences, was intended by the Great Spirit to become for all Amerindians "a portal to paradise" (cf. McNally: 447).

There is a crucial common ground for revolutionary romanticism and Sioux religion related with this view, namely the Goethean notion of universal analogy – which for the Sioux is equivalent with the third soul, or *nagila*, whose function and nature are summarized by the words of the prayer known as *Mitakuye oyas'in* (meaning "I am related to all things," "I am related to all that is," cf. Amiotte: 87). This in the last analysis is very similar to the notion of *totem*, an Ojibwa word (in the Algonquian language) signifying "he is a relative of mine," which is to say that romantic art tends to be totemic, as W. J. T. Mitchell recently suggested (2001).

On the other hand, romantic and Sioux visionariness have also common traits. Thus, the presentation of a great truth in the *heyoka kaga* or "clown ceremony" was the result of a violent process: namely, when coming from the west, visions emerged in a "storm of vision," arriving in terror like a thunderstorm, much as was the case with Blake's, Shelley's and Byron's poetic revelations, Blake and Shelley being known for the fact that they often experienced a sort of linguistic inflation to the effect that their minds would like a volcano erupt into hyperfluid verbiage, a process generically called by Arthur Koestler a "Eureka act," and which is close to the Sioux notion of *waa'bleza* or *waa'mdeza*, meaning "clarity of understanding" (lit. "to be clear sighted"), explained by Black Elk as being the result of constant mastery of the vision which requires "effort and study" (DeMallie: 38).

From a Sioux perspective, then, what revolutionary romantics like Blake tended to do was in fact to speak the *wakan* language of revelation, of spirits, and for this reason that language sounded so strange. The Sioux called this practice *hanbloglaka*, i.e. "relating visions," "vision talk," the discourse or ritual speech between the medicine man and the supernaturals. This meant invoking the power of one's own vision and, since it was uttered in metaphors and aphorisms, the language of the vision was obscure to all who lacked specific knowledge of that vision. Seen in this context, the nature of revolutionary romantic poetry and of poetry in general becomes transparent: as Harold Bloom had pointed out adopting Vico's perspective, poetry was from the very beginning a divinatory act. Margaret Atwood generalized this notion to the effect that the whole of literature becomes a Shamanistic act, an act of spiritual revelation or vision, the writer being a shaman, a specialist of the sacred, i.e. one endowed with the power of mediating between the natural world and the supernatural world.

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