

**“the unconfined
role of the human
imagination”**

a selection of letters

richard chase and ruth benedict, 1945-46

judith modell

In 1945 Richard Chase, then a candidate for a Ph.D. in literature at Columbia University and later author of one of the grand interpretations of American literature, asked the anthropologist Ruth Benedict to serve on his dissertation committee. She was to be the outside, nonspecialist reader. (Chase worked with William Y. Tindall and Emery Neff; Lionel Trilling and Jacques Barzun also read the dissertation.) During the winter of 1945-46 Benedict was in Washington, D.C., working for the Office of War Information. Chase wrote first from Massachusetts, then from Connecticut, “far from the madding Ph.D. scramble” (12-15-45). The two discussed his dissertation by mail—with special frankness and heat after Ruth Benedict had tactfully resigned from the committee: “For I have serious theoretical objections to the way the study shapes up, —and yet I don’t think you should spend any more time over this. Can’t you quietly drop me out of the Committee because of ‘pressure of work’ and ‘absence in Washington?’” (1-6-46).

The correspondence (selections presented below) suggests Chase’s confrontation with the literary tradition he inherited. He came into a discipline that was for the moment entranced with universal themes in art and absolute criteria in criticism, standards that could be applied to any literature. The exchange of letters also suggests a tension still evident in American Studies: in simple terms the problem of culture, which is not, however, a simple problem. American Studies veers between the traditional literary critic’s capital “C” and the anthropologist’s small “c”

culture—between Art and ways-of-life.¹ From the dissertation to his major contribution to American Studies, *The American Novel and Its Tradition* (1957),² Chase explored the connections between art and culture. These explorations led him to define a particular artistic genre for a specific cultural context. For Chase, “romance” represented the art of American culture.

First, he explored existing theories of art and the experiential sources of imaginative insight, turning initially to myth critics who had energetically posed the problem of primal themes and particular manifestations—the relationship of “vision” to human preoccupations. In his dissertation Richard Chase began an inquiry into myth, into mythic structures as a powerful mode for voicing the human dilemma, and—by implication—into myth as a link between “popular culture” and art. Grappling with theories of myth, Chase found himself moving away from reigning critical theory; his doubts about method and viewpoint are evident in the intensity of his responses to at least one dissertation advisor. Chase’s doubts would form the basis of a distinctive approach to American Studies.

In 1945-46, however, Richard Chase had not fully articulated his objections to available critical theory. The terms of his argument, and the outcome in his later literary studies, begin to emerge in the letters to Ruth Benedict. In those letters, Chase reveals his discomfort with the use of myth as a critical category; from his perspective, the imposition of classic definitions of myth denied the profound particularities of human experience, true source of “great art.” Chase ultimately circumvented the principles of postwar literary criticism by investigating distinct theories of myth. He clarified myth, then substituted “romance.”

In thus reconsidering the significance of myth, Chase necessarily diverged from assumptions that became central to American Studies, first that mythic structure incorporated specific historical circumstances, and, second, that mythic content mirrored or revealed culture-character, and, alternatively, created or preserved cultural traditions (the “traits” of character). Each of these formulations *assumes* a correspondence between myth and culture, as well as the location of core myths in “lasting” literature. Assumptions of such correspondence are still a part of American Studies myth criticism.³

Over the years Richard Chase challenged these assumptions by attempting to isolate both the qualities and the dynamics of the link between myth and culture, specifically between traditional views of myth and an American culture. For Chase, the traditional views were appropriate neither to American literature nor to the American experience.

Chase had asked Ruth Benedict to be on his Ph.D. committee because, in his literary studies, he regarded art in terms of its socio-historical context.⁴ He worked towards a notion of literature as the expression of a whole culture and a culture with a distinct character. He chose Ruth Benedict on the basis of her general anthropological writings, not for her writings on myth (in the *Journal of American Folklore*, 1923; in the *Encyclopedia of Social Sciences*, 1931 and 1933; in *Zuni Mythology*, 1935).⁵ In *Patterns of*

Culture (1934), the anthropologist outlined and illustrated the idea of a whole culture, greater than the sum of parts, with a unique and definable “character.” Benedict emphasized that every culture expressed its character, and did so variously—in religion, ritual, family and marriage arrangements, economic and social organizations, and in myths and tales.⁶ The idea of a range of expressions Chase found both congenial and troublesome. Myths and tales, Benedict added, constitute a special form of expression, carrying a culture beyond the visible circumstances of day-to-day life and beyond consciously constructed solutions to human problems.

Ruth Benedict made her clearest statement about myth in *Zuni Mythology*. There she called myths “compensation”: myths make up for the inadequacies and failures in ordinary life. Myths, she also wrote, express the wishes of a culture, and she meant something commonsensical, not psychoanalytical: in myths people wish for a world they do not have, and feel better for the wishing.

Given this, Benedict had to argue for specificity. Myths and tales must be tied to specific circumstances in order to serve as compensation and wish-fulfillment. Moreover, myths survive because they perform this function, an intellectual and an emotional satisfaction. Ruth Benedict went beyond the standard interpretations of myth in her discipline to claim, in effect, that myths are a form of autobiography: accumulated revelations of an underlying, unique “personality.” Similar ideas appear in Chase’s discussions of myth, literature and the American context—a similarity obscured in the 1945-46 letters partly because Chase read Ruth Benedict as an anthropologist—a student of culture—not as myth critic or student of the imagination.

While writing his dissertation, Chase put off the analysis of myth in context, an analysis his anthropologist reader tactfully insisted *should* be his topic. He decided instead to tackle existing theories of myth, covering material from philosophy, psychoanalysis and literary criticism. Chase’s assessment of myth theory in the dissertation, and in *Quest for Myth* (1949, a revised version of the dissertation)⁷ underlay his later, and more significant, conclusions about myth and literature in American culture. In the end Richard Chase rejected “myth” as a tool of literary criticism and as a framework for American literature. He rejected the traditional Jungian and Frazerian assumptions of universal myths, death and rebirth, the eternal return, the loss of paradise; he dismissed the literary critics who adopted these assumptions.

Chase substituted “romance” to characterize American literature *and* to pinpoint the relationship between literature and American socio-historical conditions. For Chase romance, unlike myth, was an open form, incorporating the problematics and tensions of American culture: a “culture of contradictions,” he said in *The American Novel*. Romance, unlike myth, arises out of the specific conditions of its creation, a confrontation with diversity and multiplicity—the American experience of chaotic, not stable, cultural elements. While Chase replaced “myth” with “romance,” he kept some of the qualities: romance, like myth, is

fundamentally a simplifying mechanism, a pattern to dramatize and maintain the oppositions within American culture. Romance contains the disparateness characteristic of American culture. Romance does not abolish contradictions but rather displays these contradictions and holds them in balance. This theory comes quite close to Ruth Benedict's understanding of myth—holding a culture together by balancing inconsistencies, by representing the conflicts in metaphor, by offering a “dream” to palliate reality—though neither Chase nor Benedict recognized the closeness in 1945-46. Had Benedict lived to read *The American Novel*, with its account of romance as expression of values in American society, she would probably have accepted the thesis. She also would have seen her prediction come true: his focus on the specific content of literature and on the specific facts of history freed Chase from the constrictions and universalizing tendency of myth criticism in American Studies.

In the 1945-46 letters the two disagree most strenuously about the role of the individual artist. For Chase, the true expression of a culture devolved on the individual, who not only saw its values but raised those values to high significance. What emerges from these letters is the undoubted importance of the artist in Chase's thinking, an importance not matched in anything Benedict wrote and a position she did not entirely support. (Partly the difference was a matter of subject: Chase took as his subject his own complex, heterogeneous, technological civilization. Ruth Benedict's writing on myth generally referred to simple, small, homogeneous—likeminded—societies: the demand on an individual artist where values are shared is different from the demand in a new, changing, complex society.) Benedict saw the individual “teller” as a conduit; Chase saw the individual teller as a supreme visionary.

As a literary critic (not an anthropologist) Richard Chase exalted the individual artist, the user of myth. Ruth Benedict did not: “folk tales are in the last analysis individual creations determined by cultural conditioning.”⁸ In her letters to Chase she added that myths as literature “show through a glass the experience and attitudes of their culture” (1-6-46). She very nearly removed the artist, though not the art. Chase required the artist; for myth to convey values it must be the work of an artist: “Is every cliché (no opprobrium) of thought and feeling a myth? Is the same ‘coin’ always in the same degree mythical regardless of its function or the context in which it is used?” (n.d. early January 1946). These and other remarks anticipate Chase's conviction that myth is the work of an individual imagination.

Imagination is the key for both Richard Chase and Ruth Benedict. Beneath the sharp disagreement in these letters, teacher and student share a respect for and awe at the powers of the human imagination. For Chase the artist worked out the culture's imagination; the artist's creations make an impact on the perceptions and the fantasies of his fellow men. Shifting from myth *as* literature to myth *in* literature, Chase consistently holds that art resembles *mana*, a power in men's lives stemming from the vision of significance in these, ordinary, lives. For Ruth Benedict the individual

mythmaker retells the creations of his culture, effective in voicing common concerns and powerful in expressing familiar wishes.

But—and this explains why Ruth Benedict pushed the doctoral student even as hard as she did—the anthropologist also appreciated the aesthetic and visionary dimensions of myth. She appreciated the beauty and, from the beauty, the power (*mana*) in a fantasy. Folklore (myth and tale) had the power to change men's minds and to alter their worlds. Richard Chase agreed, and she urged him to concentrate on the "beauty" in order better to delineate the power. She advised him to "stay being [her deletion] a literary critic" (2-3-46). For all the self-confidence of his letters, Chase fell a step behind his teacher in assessing the strength of his literary skills.

Richard Chase did, essentially, stay a literary critic. In the subsequent decade and a half (he died in 1962; Benedict in 1948), Chase argued that Americans produced a "great" literature not because American writers incorporated and rephrased universal human themes but because American writers rephrased and rearranged the *American* experience—and did so in a genre appropriate to that experience. Ruth Benedict called folklore a culture's autobiography, and in 1945-46 she urged Chase to study the components and the qualities of such autobiographies. She urged him to attend to the *art* involved in expressing culture values. Over the years Chase followed Benedict's advice and used his literary-critical skills to outline a distinctive American imagination, an art that, incorporating experience, not only expressed but might restructure a culture's personality.

The beginnings of Richard Chase's contributions to American Studies appear in the following letters, as the student of literature struggled against the "student of man" on the way to reconciling the demands of Art with the exigencies of a culture.

Colby College

To suggest the ambience of the thesis author/advisor relationship, we have chosen to reproduce the letters photographically. The letters are from the collection of the Vassar College Library and are used by permission of Vassar College and Mrs. Richard Chase. The January 6th letter is a carbon, the second page of which is on a government form.—Ed.

933 L St. NW, Washington DC
January 6, 1946

Dear Richard Chase,

Am I right? My guess is that the whole plan of this dissertation represents a series of compromises between your own interests and academic conventions about the kind of research required for a Ph.D. For seven chapters I kept sympathizing with your misery and boredom. Now perhaps I'm wrong and this really is your baby. At the very least, it's a study which, I'm convinced, you should get accepted and printed as nearly as possible as it stands, so that you can go on to work nearer to your heart.

But this leaves me with a problem about the Committee. For I have serious theoretical objections to the way the study shapes up, - and yet I don't think you should spend any more time over this. Can't you quietly drop me out of the Committee because of "pressure of work" and "absence in Washington"?

The gap between what "myth" meant to all the students you discuss in seven chapters and your own is so great that you can hardly come to grips with them. Not one of them was talking about myth as "fusion of calm potency, grandeur and mysteriousness" or as a theater of preternatural forces". Most of them were trying to set down comments on thousands and thousands of pages of primitive and civilized folklore. Never having put yourself through that experience, you don't ~~know~~ know how boring it is and what miles away your preoccupations are from theirs. You can't check their theories against data they were using.

You say you are correcting "mistaken ideas of myth" and showing how "to study it accurately" but I don't think it's possible to do that by reading just the mythological theories that have been put forth. It takes arduous familiarity with myth itself. It needn't have been primitive. You might have picked a contrasted pair from the Niebelungen, Chinese mythology, the Jataka tales, etc. and showed how they were "literature", i.e. how they show through a glass the experience and attitudes of their culture. Confronted with concrete material, you'd have had to get down to being precise about what criteria you use to identify myth. You'd have really carried out your stated intentions.

But there's another thing equally important, which I think you overlook just because you're dealing with the mat-

From the Papers of Ruth Benedict

erial at such a great remove. The real point about the "myths" which all your first seven chapters deal with is that they are classed as folklore precisely because they had become the common coin of a whole tribe or civilization. If the culture was deeply concerned with the preternatural, they were preternatural: if not, they were secular, - even in primitive cultures. But the major point is that they were congenial ways of expressing themselves. The jump from this to "myth" as you interpret it in Donne and Auden is a leap to the moon, and to me it's free association. By all means let's have every passionate modern artist write his own passion and grandeur and mystery into his poetry, - for the "five or six people who in every succeeding generation will cherish them", - I'd put it at 5-600). But that's something else again. America's "myths" - in the sense of your first seven chapters - are our crime stories, our Westerns, our psychoanalysis (in my vocabulary that's not a slam at psychoanalysis). And what about the "white heat of reality" that suffuses our spokesmen for free enterprise. You don't like what by all counts our culture really is, - I don't either really. But I can't help seeing that America gets the kind of folklore it really wants.

As I said before, all this doesn't mean to me that you should do this over (though I think it would be a good thing to delete your statements about showing how to study myth accurately and about correcting mistaken ideas of myth). My standards are not necessarily the right ones, too. But they're mine, and I'd rather not be on the Committee. I think you should get this whole Ph.D. business settled up with as little more trouble as possible and go on to something else. It's been an illuminating experience to me to read it for obviously modern students of mythology haven't put across their basic theoretical points so that they mean much to the most intelligent readers. Of whom you are certainly one. It will come in time, just as recognition that there is such a thing as culture has come in my time. But there are very few workers in the vineyard and many other things for them to work at besides mythology.

Topic:

I'll mail the ms back in a day or two. Don't be discouraged at my criticisms; remember I wouldn't have paid so much attention if I hadn't thought it was worth it.

Date:

Region: _____ Sincerely yours, _____ Source:

Report on Incoming Press Cables

BUREAU OF RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS
COMMUNICATIONS ANALYSIS DIVISION

Box 2,
Hyannis, Mass.

on the Papers of Ruth Benedict

Dear Professor Benedict:

Thanks very much for reading my dissertation. Naturally your letter disappoints me deeply, for I had hoped that we should agree as far as possible on matters which concern us both. And I had hoped that where we could not agree on specific conclusions, we could at least agree on neutral grounds where a fruitful discussion could take place--not necessarily between us, but between anthropology and literature. ~~I~~

Let me try to answer some of your points, more or less ~~in~~ in order.

Of course, I suffered "misery and boredom" in writing the book. And I do not suppose for a minute that in writing it I was always able to generate enough verve to overpower the ~~the~~ dreariness of fact-gathering and exposition. Certainly, long passages of the book must reflect my impatience with my task. There are compromises in the book, but a compromise between my interests and academic conventions is not necessarily a bad thing. I had supposed that my enthusiasm for Hume, Vico, Herder, Freud, the modern anthropologists, my dislike of Max Muller, etc., were able to lift the writing a cut or two above the conventional dissertation. At any rate, I assure you that misery and boredom were the most unpleasant but by no means the only emotions out of which the book was written.

Perhaps your most serious charge is that there is little or no logical connection between my own opinions and those of all the students of myth I cite. (I must say at this point that your continual references to "the first seven chapters" as if they were a unit, or all the same, makes me uneasy. Surely Boas, Freud, Tylor, Otfried Muller, Vico, St. Augustine, and Zeno had somewhat different fish to fry, and different ways of frying them.) You write that "not one" of the students of myth I con-

sider "was talking about myth as 'fusion of calm potency, grandeur and mysteriousness' or as a 'theater of preternatural forces'". I quoted Cassirer as follows: "The world of myth is a dramatic world--the world of actions, ~~in~~ of forces, of conflicting powers;" and I thought I had shown that Hume, Vico, Herder, and more modern students such as Radin entertain the same or similar opinions. Vico's statement that in the mythological ages "all existence was in the energy of forces" ~~and~~ ^{and} Marett's that "myth need be no more than a sort of animatism grown picturesque" are only two assertions of a proposition held by several of my authors: that myth is in one way or another closely allied with "mana." And this is the basis of my own opinions about myth.

Now, suppose for a minute that none of my authors had described myth as I do. Would it follow that my conclusions from what they did say were necessarily illogical?

You write that "most of" the students of myth I consider "were trying to set down comments ^{of} thousands and thousands of pages of primitive and civilized folklore," as if that fact precluded the possibility that some of their comments might show that they understood myth in some such way as I do. I cannot see that the observation is anything but irrelevant. Nor do I think it relevant that the preoccupations of Boas or Freud or any of the others were miles away from my own. Investigators often throw the most brilliant light on matters far from their own preoccupations. Do you mean that I cannot learn from a writer unless I share his preoccupations?

It is true, and regrettable, that I can't "check their theories against the data they were using" with any thoroughness. But what you are implying is that the literary critic must consider the findings of anthropology ~~absolutely~~ inaccessible. It would indeed be sad if the students of art were unable to consult the students of man, as I

am sure you will agree...A pious thought! But you are in effect reproaching me with not being an anthropologist.

I must disagree with your opinion that I have not "really carried out" my "stated intentions," though you may be right in saying that I speak too cavalierly about "correcting 'mistaken ideas'" and "showing how 'to study myth accurately!'" (The fact is, however, that you use stronger words than mine. I do not say "correcting" but simply that mistaken ideas "are abroad." The other citation reads in full: "we are not trying to give a complete account of myth but only to find out how we can study it accurately", which is not to say that I am "showing how.")

But the chief point is that you have mistaken my "stated intentions," which I express as follows: "The central premise of this book is that myth is literature and therefore a matter of aesthetic experience and the imagination." The book tries to prove this and to show, furthermore, that myth is a certain kind of literature. Let me amplify this by again quoting from the preface:

The first critical step toward an understanding of mythological literature is to rescue myth from those who see in it only the means and ends of philosophy, religious dogma, psychoanalysis, or semantics. It is my hope that the present study takes this step.

I speak of my own conclusions about myth as "tentative," and I have tried to make no final doctrinal or methodological pronouncement, as you appear in your letter to assume that I have.

You are right to say that a "precise" general study of myth should carefully examine specific mythologies. I often regretted the absence of specific references of this kind as I wrote the book. But the examination of mythologies was, as they say, beyond the scope of my book. And I had hoped that the anthropological and mythical speculations of Fontenelle, Herder, etc., etc., were interesting enough to the modern reader to warrant the relatively few pages I devote to them.

There is obviously a deep methodological disagreement between the anthropologist and the student of literature. You see myth as a cultural phenomenon. I see it as the aesthetic activity of a man's mind. I am unable to conceive clearly what "culture really is." You describe myth, I take it, as "the common coin of a whole tribe or civilization" or as the "most congenial way" a people can find to express itself. To me that is simply confusing: Is every cliché (no opprobrium) of thought and feeling a myth? Is the same "coin" always in the same degree mythical regardless of its function or the context in which it used? How common does the coin have to be? Is a myth an idea, a story (if so what kind?), a theology, an algebraic equation, a concept? What of Radin's opinion that "over and above the precise form in which he (the storyteller) obtains the myth stands his relation as an artist to the dramatic situations contained in it and to his audience"? These are some of the questions which interest the literary student. And they seem to me to be some of the questions raised by your own statement that students of myth ought to notice "the unconfined role of the human imagination in the creation of mythology."

You say that "to jump from this (i.e. the view of myth as the common coin) to 'myth' as you interpret it in Donne and Auden is a leap to the moon." But of course I do not jump from "this." You have read something into my book which is not there. If you wish to insist that it should be there, I should have to ask you to show how it would help to understand myth as literature more efficiently than what is there.

It may be true (the point is debatable) that most of the authors I consider thought of myth as the common coin. If so, I have usually chosen to cite other observations which they make about myth because these observations were the ones that illuminated the problem of myth

as literature. There is no error in logic here.

I was determined throughout the book not to raise the vexed question of the individual vs. culture. I ~~NEVER~~ no where deny that myth is a cultural phenomenon. I have no desire to defend my method on any other grounds than what it is able to bring to light. Do you mean that I should consult no authors who use a method different from mine? Or that a difference in method precludes the possibility of communication?

You are quite wrong to guess that I don't like "our culture" as it appears in our folklore of detective stories, Westerns, psychoanalysis, big business, and so on. Neither the softness of liberalism nor any literary exclusiveness keeps me from admiring the often strange and poetic power worship, the wit, and even the brutality of U. S. folklore-- which contains so many interesting, half-created myths.

Do you mean that the "passionate modern artist" has no connection with myth because he is read by only a handful of people? If so, the anthropologist apparently has very little to say about him. And if that is so, I must think my own approach to myth the more fruitful, for I should have a lot to say about detective stories, popular psychoanalysis, etc., if that were my purpose.

For obvious reasons I have taken your letter very seriously, and consequently have not hesitated to speak frankly. In concluding, I shall speak even more frankly.

My basic comment on your letter is that it is not a criticism of my book as I wrote it. The letter is, rather, a series of imperfectly relevant observations arising from your own preconceptions about my predicament as a PhD candidate and as a writer who had tried to learn something from anthropology.

This seems to me, personally, a most melancholy failure of com-

munication, the ~~XXXXXXXXXXXX~~ more so because I believe you to be as anxious as I that departments of knowledge should learn from each other. That is way I am so disappointed (to be frank again) by the general tone and attitude of your letter.

Faithfully yours,

Richard Chase

I shall of course pay very close attention to your marginal comments.

935 L St. N.E., Washington D.C.
February 3, 1946

Dear Richard Chase,

I certainly lost out on my gamble that you yourself recognized the structural difficulties of your dissertation. I knew that was possible. But I hadn't reckoned on my comments seeming to you "irrelevant" and -- I paraphrase -- impertinent.

Because of my strong advice against your devoting yourself to a major revision -- and I'm still of the same mind, -- I deliberately omitted that line of criticism. I'll give it to you hoping that it will be a means of clearing up some of the entirely erroneous conclusions about my position that you express in your letter. It is this: What relevance to the proposition that "myths is a matter of aesthetic appreciation and the imagination" can a survey of the world's folklorists have? Practically all of them had chosen to tackle other problems, some of them legitimate enough, and few of them had any command of techniques of literary criticism. You had such a command and you could have given evidence for your position by examining the myths themselves. You could have chosen any nation whose myths have been collected in quantity, with a great number of variants and you could have produced substantial evidence for your position. I'm sure that your questions on page 4 of your letter to me can be answered, -- by studying folklore. They can't be tackled by a survey of folklorists. It's because I wanted them answered that I'm disappointed.

My object in making certain points in my first letter was to indicate some verbal changes which would help to obviate criticisms of your book from other folklorists. These were the "fusion of calm potency" line and what I thought an inadequate theoretical statement when you make the transition from the summaries of the folklorists to the discussion of Donne and Auden. I hoped my comments would suggest that these fairly simple changes would be all to the good.

I don't at all accept your line that what I criticized in your thesis was that you weren't an anthropologist. On the contrary I wanted you to stay being a literary critic and use your techniques on myths with the same assurance that any folklorist would use his. That is the opposite of implying that the literary critic must be considered the findings of anthropology inaccessible.

Believe me, I enjoyed your summaries of Vico and Hume (especially) and the rest. And the analyses of the poets as well. I think I've told you before how tops I thought an article of yours on Joyce was that I found in some magazine. I shall look forward to finding many more of the same quality.

Sincerely yours,
From the Papers of Ruth Benedict

Connecticut College
New London, Conn.
Feb. 6

Dear Miss Benedict:

Look at it this way. I am very much interested in myth; modern literature is unprecedentedly interested in myth. I perceive that literary critics should know more about myth than they do. Perhaps I can write a short book which will perform some of the necessary spadework. There are various possibilities but one which appeals to me is a short history of opinions about myth; a handbook showing the flux and reflux of opinion and giving an assessment of current thought on myth.

Now, am I to make the book one of those exhaustive and pedantic jumbles of facts and figures, beginning now where and ending nowhere? To escape this, I must adopt a point of view before I go ~~down~~ very far into the infinite morass of data. I do adopt a point of view (one which I did not have at the outset) and I write a selective history using this point of view as a guide through the swamp.

In our exchange of letters we have both overestimated the importance of ~~the~~ the point of view and neglected to think of the book as a history of opinion. This is partly my fault, for I now see that I have overstressed the point of view in my foreword and obscured the fact that the book is a history of opinion. The point of view is an instrument and not a dogma, which is not to say that I don't consider it the most enlightening statement which can be made about myth.

I can see only one structural difficulty in the book, and that is that the structure is more or less arbitrary: the same conclusions might have been reached in a number of other ways. True, a better book might be written as you suggest, by analyzing a mythology. But that's another book, not the one I wrote.

You wonder why I consulted the folklorists instead of folklore: because I wanted to write a book ~~about~~ about the opinions of folklorists.

You ask "What relevance to the proposition that 'myth is a matter of aesthetic appreciation and the imagination' can a survey of the world's folklorists have?" Your expression "a survey" is the joker in this pack, because I conducted my particular survey in such a way that it became relevant as I ~~proceeded~~ proceeded (or so I hope). And again, the form of your question assumes that I began with my ~~own~~ definition rather than (as I did) with the folklorists.

I am sorry we have had to flourish the banners of "folklorist" and "literary critic" so menacingly at each other. For my part I don't think such distinctions should be made any more distinct than is strictly necessary. (Thus, when I read in one of your writings that the human imagination plays a great role in the formation of myths, I don't take the remark to be irrelevant because you are a folklorist and not a literary critic or an aesthete). But when, in your first letter, you seemed to ~~me~~ substitute for logical discourse the observation that I had not read "thousands and thousands ~~xxxxx~~ of pages of folklore and consequently didn't know how boring it was", I concluded that you were hiding behind departmental barriers. And of course I had to take advantage of every weakness I perceived in your letter because your letter put me in a position where I could scarcely afford any easy tolerance. I hope this will help to excuse whatever undue asperity you may have found in my reply.

I fear our epistolary relationship has not been entirely satisfactory. I wonder if you folklorists realize the tremendous prestige you ~~me~~ enjoy among literary critics, philosophers, etc., etc.; I ~~xxxxx~~ have the feeling that you are still appalled to see yourselves quoted outside the profession and that you do not realize how people would ~~xxxxxxx~~ welcome a few general statements about myth. I rather hope that my book will help to break down the current opinion that Levy-Bruhl, Jane Harrison, Jung, or Freud are the last word on the subject of myth. That opinion will endure until someone somehow says something generally intelligible embodying the ideas of American anthropology. But meanwhile the upshot of our correspondence is (I fear) that I think you are inclined to be cryptic and departmentalized (though heaven knows that doesn't apply to Patterns of Culture) and you think me a kind of ~~xxxxxxxxx~~ dilettantish speculator. I daresay I'm all wrong about this, but the impression prevails. And that is why I say our correspondence has not been entirely satisfactory.

Your comments have led me to make several changes in the text of the book and for these I am very grateful. For that matter I am grateful to you for colliding so head-on with my book, for you have driven me to a lot more reflection than did any of the other readers. I certainly honor you for admitting that the book bored you here and there, which is more than any of the other readers would admit!

Yours very sincerely,

Richard Chase

notes

1. For a cogent criticism of American Studies approaches, see Bruce Kuklick, "Myth and Symbol in American Studies," *American Quarterly*, 24 (1972), 435-450.
2. Richard Chase, *The American Novel and Its Tradition* (New York, 1957).
3. For appraisals of American Studies, see Kuklick, *passim*; R. Gordon Kelly, "Literature and the Historian," *American Quarterly*, 26 (1974), 141-159; Cecil F. Tate, *The Search for a Method in American Studies* (Minneapolis, 1973).
4. Richard Chase, "Ruth Benedict," *Columbia University Forum*, 2 (1959), 19-22.
5. Ruth Fulton Benedict, "A Matter for the Field Worker in Folklore," *Journal of American Folklore*, 36 (1923), 104; "Folklore," *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, 6 (1931), 288-293; "Myth," *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, 11-12 (1933), 171-173; *Zuni Mythology* (New York, 1935).
6. Ruth Fulton Benedict, *Patterns of Culture* (Boston, 1934).
7. Richard Chase, *A Quest for Myth* (Baton Rouge, 1949).
8. Benedict, "Folklore," 291.