Truth and Fairy Tales: Comments for a Discussion of Murray Murphey's *Philosophical Foundations of Historical Knowledge*

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"How often have I said to you," Sherlock Holmes admonishes Dr. Watson, "that when you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, *however improbable*, must be the truth" (Doyle, 111). Reading Murray Murphey, for this obtuse Watson, is Sure a Lockean experience. He confirms my belief that "there is a real world of which true knowledge is possible" (Murphey, x). I am convinced also that relativism and narrativism are something less than true, that "the primary task in the study of any society is the delineation of the culture and the environment" (Murphey, 280), and that past cultures and environments can be causally explained. I happily leave to others the task of critiquing Murray's arguments with Quine, Wittgenstein, and White; my task is to consider how Murray helps historians find truth.

A crucial tenet of Murray's system is the important role he gives to theory, which creates the reality of the past by positing reality as explanations of our experience with "real" objects in the present (Murphey, 263). The necessity of evidence in the form of documents and artifacts is what makes the work of the historian so much like that of the detective. Just as good detectives need to believe in truth in order to believe in justice, historians should believe in truth in order to

believe in, well, *history*. History without truth is simply Disney. As defined by Murray, history is not what happened in the past, nor what we write about it, but "our knowledge of what happened in the past" (Murphey, 264). As I understand his argument, unless we believe that our knowledge of the past can be true, however incomplete, it can't be history.

Despite the seeming circularity of the argument, I think it is unassailable once you accept that we can have true knowledge of the present. There is another problem, however, one that has opened the door to the nattering nabobs of narrativism and the raving rajahs of relativism, to borrow a phrase, and that is that it's impossible to write about history without using language, which, Murray is quick to point out, is posterior to and poorer than thought (Murphey, 1). Because our knowledge of the past must be put into words that are subject to multiple interpretations, we introduce another layer of hermeneutics. If, as in the case of the controversy over the proposed exhibition on the Atomic bomb and the end of World War II at the Smithsonian's National Air & Space Museum, the presentation of historical knowledge includes objects as well as text, the possibilities for misunderstanding are compounded.

Although Murray gives artifactual data the role of offsetting biases in documentary evidence of the past and urges the creation of theories that can integrate a wide range of data types, the difficulties involved in recontextualizing objects that have been made numinous through association with some widely admired act, or simply by their inclusion in a museum collection, may be insurmountable. History for many people is closer to religion than to science and they see no reason to substitute empiricism for faith in their experience of the past. Like science, history based on the best theory may have predictive value, but, unlike science, it offers little in the way of control over nature. Rather, history shows that faith in technological solutions to environmental problems is often misplaced. Which brings me to the point where I want to try to supplement Murray's argument for equating truth with our best confirmed theories.

For the past decade I have been struggling to write a history that would delineate both the cultural and environmental causes of our current complex and paradoxical attitudes toward snow and, by extension, nature. As part of this process I have read many of those who profess to be environmental historians. The best of them (e.g., Cronon, 1993) reject the currently fashionable notion that since nature is a social construction it is impossible to know or manage any ecosystem. Environmental historians argue, as Murray does, that while our knowledge may be incomplete, it has steadily improved, and that unless we assume the active presence of nature in human affairs, our histories, our theories about the past, will not be true. The necessity of treating both nature and culture as real and knowable is especially crucial in environmental history.

As soon as someone learned that I was working on attitudes toward snow, they inevitably asked if Eskimos have 12, or 40, or 100, or x number of words for snow. Thanks to a colleague who called my attention to the work of Laura Martin,

I am reasonably certain that the answer to those questions is, no, because Eskimos have only two distinct "roots" that refer to snow. Nevertheless, because Eskimo words "are the products of an extremely synthetic morphology in which all word building is accomplished by multiple suffixation . . . the number of 'words' for snow is literally incalculable" (Martin 1986, 419). The work of another anthropologist, Keith Basso, on the necessity of putting linguistic taxonomies in the context of cultural rules, which used the ice terminology of the Fort Norman Slave Indians, an Athapaskan speaking group on the MacKenzie River in Canada's North-West Territories, showed me another "truth" about the delineation of nature. The Fort Norman Slave hunter has thirteen categories of ice, but knowledge of this terminology to predict whether he will cross the ice or detour is useless until you understand the morphological attributes of each of the thirteen kinds of ice—thickness, color, air pockets, texture, etc.—and know whether the hunter is traveling by foot, snowshoes, or dogsled (Basso 1972). The environmental context as understood through cultural norms determines the behavioral response. Knowledge of all of these allows an observer to predict the hunter's specific action. Studying American taxonomies of snow, the criteria on which they are based, and the contexts in which they are used ought, I believe, to yield similar results.

The second most frequently asked question of the historian of snow is, "are any two snowflakes ever alike?" This question makes no more sense than if "humans" were substituted for "snowflakes." As in all questions of quiddity, the answer depends on the degree of difference sought. The more interesting question is why we like to think that no two are alike. The Vermont farmer W. A. Bentley took thousands of micro-photographs of snow crystals between 1884 and 1931 and when he published a selection he made sure they were all different. In the same years, however, meteorologists began to classify all falling snow into seven basic types and later reduced these to five. Skiers have created dozens of names for snow—powder, corn snow, ball bearings, kitty litter, and crud (Mergen, 1992, 87). The morphological attributes used to define these types may be similar to those used in the snow sciences, but the cultural contexts in which the terms are used are different. A ski area manager will use the term "packed powder" to describe conditions because it sounds better than "harbor chop," and will avoid the term "slush" at all costs.

Thus, we have two examples in which it is possible to say with some certainty that there are right and wrong answers to the questions "do Eskimos have *x* number of words for snow?" and "are any two snowflakes alike?" The answer to the first question requires elaboration of its meaning by hypotheses about linguistic terms and about the relation of taxonomies to behavior, but it is possible to say "truthfully," no, Eskimos do not have *x* number of words for snow, and, moreover, the words only make sense in the context of cultural rules for acting on the knowledge of the environmental reality that the words approximate. An Eskimo, an anthropologist, and an historian tell the truth if they select the word(s)

which best describe the specific physical and cultural situation they seek to explain and their explanations are confirmed by repeated observations of similar situations.

Similarly, the answer to the second frequently asked question is an unequivocal, no, if by "alike" we mean identical in every detail, since every atom has a unique origin. On the other hand, an historian may hypothesize certain similarities among snow flakes (or storms) and truthfully predict environmental and cultural responses.

Early in my research I had the good fortune to contact Sam Colbeck, a geophysicist with the Snow and Ice Branch, Research Division, U.S. Army Cold Regions Research and Engineering Laboratory (CRREL) in Hanover, New Hampshire. Sam is one of the world's foremost authorities on snow metamorphism, chair of the Working Group on Snow Classification of The International Commission on Snow and Ice of the International Association of Scientific Hydrology, and a historian of the snow sciences. What I learned from Sam is that after a century of research on snow-cover, there is still no general agreement among meteorologists, hydrologists, chemists, and physicists as to what snow is or how to explain the behavior of snow-cover under various conditions. Although snow science has moved beyond the purely descriptive stage, current models are unable to predict the results of snow metamorphism in a wide variety of snow types. This has not, however, prevented engineers from accurately predicting the spring run-off from the melting snowpack or building safe runways for large aircraft to land and take-off on snow. Colbeck argues that "the success of current efforts will be determined in part by our ability to characterize snow as an assembly of particles" (Colbeck 1987, 64). The most recent classification of snow grains based on morphology lists thirty-three subclasses and a process-oriented classification allows for the description of hundreds of other snow types (Colbeck 1990). Students of snow and of human behavior have at least two things in common: newer and better instruments provide more and more detailed information about their subjects and the objects of their study keep changing.

The existence of truth requires the individual historian to relinquish his/her authority and remain unsatisfied with social constructions, a position as untenable to elitists as it is to pluralists, relativists and narrativists. Truth, determined by the best possible hypothesis based on the best available evidence, is not just as good as some other hypothesis, it is better. Reasonable persons can disagree, but they must be willing to revise their beliefs in the face of theories that are repeatedly confirmed with different methods by different investigators at different times. Revision is not the same as relativism, in fact it is incompatible with a pure relativism that seeks refuge in agnosticism. The outpouring of historical monographs in the past fifty years has resulted in our knowing more and more about less and less. The dream of everyman his own historian has become a nightmare, but, in Murray's eloquent argument: "once it is accepted that concepts, desires, intentions, and so forth are legitimate scientific constructs in terms of

which behavior can be explained, it becomes possible to approach problems such as meaning and reference in ways that do not warrant the skeptical results lately so popular" (Murphey, 324).

In his brilliant essay on poetry and history, the Mexican poet Octavio Paz argues that "like all human creations, the poem is a historical product, fruit of a time and a place; but it is also something that transcends the historical and is situated in a time prior to all history, at the beginning of the beginning" (169). Paz calls this "archetypal reality;" Murray calls it truth, the reality of past events. The historian and the poet both use words to go beyond words, to discover the things that give meaning to human "concepts, desires, and intentions." Paz offers a further insight relevant to the problem of establishing truth in history.

> If the essence of history were nothing but the succession of one instant by another, one man by another, one civilization by another, change would be resolved to uniformity, and history would be nature. Indeed, whatever their specific differences may be, one pine tree is the same as another pine tree. But the opposite occurs with history: whatever their common characteristics may be, one man is irreducible to another man, one historical instant to another instant. And what makes the instant an instant, time time, is man, who fuses them to make them unique and absolute. History is exploit, heroic act, conglomeration of meaningful instants because man makes of each instant something self-sufficient and thus separates the today from the yesterday. In each instant he wishes to realize himself as a totality, and each one of his hours is a monument to a momentary eternity. . . . He creates a unique and unrepeatable instant and thus gives origin to history (172-173).

I would say more than I mean if I claimed that poetry and history are the same, but both require a theory of truth and the ability to behold the "Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is," to borrow a line from Wallace Stevens' "The Snow Man." For me, the attraction of American Studies is the possibility that history is both science and art.

Ontological truth does not change because epistemologies differ or are revised. One of the wisest observations I found in my research was made by the great British meteorologist Sir Napier Shaw. In writing the history of the science of weather, he remarked that the theories of the early eighteenthth-century natural philosopher George Hadley on trade-winds "belong to the fairy tales of science because they explain the complexity of nature by a simplicity which is suggestive of a fairy's wand." But, Shaw continues, "They are none the less attractive on that account. Every theory of the course of events in nature is necessarily based on some process of simplification of the phenomena and is to some extent therefore

a fairy tale" (Shaw, 1926, vol. 1, 123). As in nature, so in culture. Our theories of historical facts and our explanations of the past may be simplifications, but experience of the world we live in leaves no question that they can be true or false. If we believe that history is anything more than entertainment, or "edu-tainment" as the Disney "imagineers" put it, then we believe in a theory of truth. A theory, which like other fairy tales, however improbable, reveals a (snow) particle of truth.

Murray Murphey challenges historians to recover the "noble dream" of establishing the truth of their observations through the use of theory and by formulating general theories of causality. Without that dream, the belief in truth, the past is trivialized and the future terrifyingly chaotic.

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