

Why Metaphor of Night in Narratives on Culture A Remark from Structuralist Point of View

KIM Sang-Hwan

Seoul National University

Abstract

In this paper, I analyze two simple poetic texts to show some basic categories of the discourses on culture in general. My analysis starts from structuralist point of view, but arrives at a turning point in which the structuralist perspective is obliged to give way to another theoretical orientation. This turning point is the metaphor of night, which seems to constitute every historical narrative on culture. Where does such a necessity come from? What does such a metaphor mean in the cultural discourses? It is to this kind of questions that I try to give answers. But this paper is not a serious dissertation in academic form, but a simple and light essay for further discussion.

On nights when the owl hoot hoots,
Hoot hooting 'cause it's cold,
We all gather together,
Sitting by Granny,
And listen to old stories.

Nowadays, I often sing this children's song, which I used to sing in my childhood, to my newborn baby. I have transcribed the lyrics here because, in my view, this brief song includes an elementary concept of culture. From a structuralist perspective, this song systematically reveals several binary oppositions. To be more specific, first, there is the opposition between what is inside home and what is outside it. It is followed by binary oppositions such as cold and warm, animal cry and human speech, solitude and society, and grown-ups and children. This system of binary oppositions is the framework of our conception of culture. Let us ruminate upon why this should be so by examining each binary opposition.

The semantic structure of this children's song is built on the central and spatial opposition between the outside, where the owl is, and the inside, where the children are. This holds true also for an understanding of culture. However it is determined, the conceptual meaning of culture is always based on this topological opposition. Indeed, culture has acquired the self-evidentiality of its significance within the oppositional relationships that it maintains with wild(er)ness, nature,

and barbarity. Constitutive meanings such as artificiality, training, and cultivation, which are included in the concept of culture, are sediments within these relationships of differences. The opposition between what is inside home and what is outside it, however, is one that precedes all such differences.

To do this, let us first reexamine the etymology of the word “culture” in Korean: “*munhwa*” (文化).¹ The Chinese character “*mun*” (文) was originally a pictograph representing a set of uniform patterns or markings. Any human community is bound to have a set of regular patterns or ways of life, which we call “culture.” If culture is a vessel that forms and preserves the order of life, such formation and preservation have been understood in terms of the metaphor of home. Indeed, the construction of houses and architecture are primary symbols of culture. This becomes even clearer when we examine the etymology of the words in many Western languages for “culture,” which is “*cultura*,” originally signifying cultivation or reclamation. In that it expands the order of human life to nature, culture can be likened to a farmer’s development of a wasteland. However, farming occurs within the strategy for human beings’ habitation and settlement on land, which in turn starts with the construction of houses. In this respect, farming is but an extension of the act of building houses. If all human activities for sustenance can be called “economy,” the etymology of the words in Western languages for this denotes the order and norms (*nomos*) of the home (*oikos*). In other words, human life and humane life are life inside the home.

Countless philosophers since Plato have likened philosophical acts to the construction of houses. In addition, conceptual architecture, which is realized through the construction of philosophical systems, has been seen as more fundamental and important than secular architecture. Philosophy and poetic creation (*poiesis*), the origin of the arts, stem from the instinct and will to build structures and architecture at the root of human thought. Secular architecture, which builds houses and cities on land, is therefore but an example of the expression of this a priori instinct. In this respect, culture is the sum of all acts of construction including the building of houses as well as that wisdom itself.

Speaking in terms of Heideggerian inspiration, what humanity ultimately builds and shapes are familiarity and comfort. Cultural spaces in opposition to nature are familiar and comfortable spaces designed to agree with human instincts. Of course, this is not so much a factual proposition as an ideal one. In the children’s song above, such familiarity is depicted as warmth. While the owl outside the house hoots because it is cold, the home, where the children are, is warm. This warmth would come from the brazier, the hearth that Granny takes care of.

Since the mythological age, fire, a source of warmth, has been a metaphor for culture as much as home and farming. Prometheus, the Titan in Greek myths, is punished for having stolen fire from the gods by having to hold up the heavens. Here, fire implies the first condition for the formation of human beings’ cultural space. Lévi-Strauss, the structuralist anthropologist, discovered that the difference between raw food and cooked food reflected the opposition between nature and culture. Here, culture is a system of processing and transforming the raw, or a mechanism that

¹ This compound of two Chinese characters, “文化,” has the same meaning in the mutually unrelated languages of Mandarin Chinese, Vietnamese, and Japanese as well, despite differences in the pronunciation—“*wenhua*,” “*vanhoa*,” and “*bunka*,” respectively.

assimilates the natural to human nature. Fire symbolizes the transformative power (energy) that makes possible such cultural assimilation and the expanded reproduction of this sameness.

The symbolic meaning of fire encompasses not only the power of cultural transformation but also brightness and warmth, the warmth and brightness that we associate with home and hometowns. This is why, in French, the word “*foyer* (hearth)” is used to mean “home” or “house.” Just as the concept of the triangle includes the number 3, the concepts of the home and the hometown connote warmth. Even the Inuit probably represent the cold North Pole as a bright and warm place when they think of home. Here, brightness and warmth signify, as metaphors, familiarity and comfort.

In the children’s song above, the warmth inside the house would come from the fireplace or the brazier. However, the story that Granny tells seems to be what transmits that warmth to the children’s hearts. Her story is in a binary opposition to the owl’s hoots. Although they may be capable of inchoate sounds or isolated signals, animals, which belong to nature, cannot create stories in the way that humans do. Human beings create new fires, new temperatures in the process of creating stories. In this respect, the grandmother who tells stories is like a cook who creates edible food out of raw provisions. (Granny in the poem probably tells her stories as she roasts potatoes or chestnuts on the brazier.) Through her stories, Granny transforms the fire in nature to the fire in hearts and presents it to the children. Herein may lie the very origin of culture. It may be that human beings have come to build bright and warm spaces on land, familiar and comfortable houses, only through language. The true fire of culture is language, and humans gather around it, within its warmth.

At times, animals live in herds as well. Objects, too, can be together. However, it is possible to be distant despite physical proximity and lonesome despite physical togetherness. On the contrary, it is possible also to be close even when far apart, not lonesome even when alone. Human beings exist and gather in such a paradox. Metaphysics, religions, and the arts may have stemmed, invariably, from this paradox that dominates human instincts. The origin of culture, then, would seem to conceal a paradox.

It is probably because of the use of language that humanity is dominated by such a paradox. Through language, human beings experience contact and proximity that are not physical. If the owl is cold and lonesome, alone outside the home, it is because it lacks warmth in its heart. Such deficiency essentially stems from the lack of a linguistic ability. On the contrary, it is in the story told by Granny that the children “all gather together.” Here, it becomes clear as to why the ideas that human beings are social animals and that they are linguistic animals are one and the same. This is because humans cannot gather physically, mechanically, but can do so in the house of language, which creates closeness. In other words, language is the house of human existence and culture.

Any human community consists of grown-ups and children. In the children’s song above, the children sit by Granny’s side. Here, “side” does not simply denote physical proximity. It is the closeness created by Granny’s story as well. Such intimacy does not disappear with physical separation or the passage of time. This shortness of distance is the link of social life and the condition of cultural transmission and instruction. Children gather and grow in the stories told by Granny—in other words, they become grown-ups.

In the East Asian context, a grown-up was someone who can teach and train others. Such an

ability was called “virtue” (德).² Interpreted in terms of the modern era, this virtue is exemplarity. Culture can be a historical space because it has transmissible examples. The more examples it has, the more dynamic and rich a culture will be. Although any human community will accumulate particular modes and patterns of life, not all ways of life are culturally respected. Cultural value is granted only to exemplary forms of life that can be transmitted and within their relationships to posterity, for the history of culture is the continuation, discontinuation, or mutation of examples.

Returning to the children’s song above, grown-ups are people who tell stories and children are people who listen to stories. In other words, grown-ups are those who possess stories. This is expressed more concretely in a poem by Gim So-wol (金素月, 1903–1934) below:

When withered leaves
Rustle down,
On long winter nights,
Sit together with Mother
And listen to old stories.

How have I
Come to be,
So that I am listening to this story?

Do not even ask,
Tomorrow, in the day,
I shall be a parent myself
And find out.

This poem by Gim establishes its semantic structure through a binary opposition identical to that of the children’s song above, especially through the central opposition between the inside and the outside and between natural sounds and human stories. Nevertheless, there is an important difference between these works. This difference lies in the disparate attitudes towards grown-ups’ stories that the speakers in the two songs exhibit. Unlike the “we” in the children’s song, the “I” in Gim’s poem does not stop at merely listening to stories. This speaker goes one step further by asking the origin of the situation in which he or she happens to be listening to stories. Moreover, amidst such inquiry, he or she is leaving Mother’s side. In other words, this speaker seeks to stand alone.

Here, standing on one’s own feet amounts to possessing one’s own story and narrative methods. This is what it means to be a grown-up in Gim’s poem. It is the limitation of children to remain contented with orally transmitted stories. On the other hand, grown-ups are people who stand at the origin of stories and, from that originary point, independently build and create stories that can be told to others. (In other words, grown-ups are people who can build houses.) The speaker of Gim’s poem, then, is not quite a grown-up but an adolescent who is just beginning to realize the meaning and condition of being a grown-up.

This enlightenment occurs on a winter night. In the children’s song above, it is also on winter nights that children listen to Granny’s stories. Is such agreement, then, merely coincidental?

² Pronounced “*de*,” “*duc*,” “*deok*,” and “*doku*” in Mandarin Chinese, Vietnamese, Korean, and Japanese, respectively, the Chinese character “德” signifies the same thing in all of these languages.

Not quite. Winter nights have characteristics (coldness, darkness) that are opposed to the warmth and brightness of home (stories, culture). They refer to what is outside culture, or the space of construction—i. e., the time of nature, which is in a binary opposition to culture. The fact that, temporally, both songs are set on winter nights is an inevitable agreement stemming from the two works' possession of an identical semantic structure.

In terms of such inevitability, the temporal settings of all discourses on culture may be metaphorical winter nights because an understanding of culture always parallels yet opposes an understanding of nature. However, there are times when the expression “winter nights” must be represented within historical temporality itself, which transcends any narrow structuralism. Hardly any critical intellectual has failed to see his or her own era as one of crisis. In fact, etymologically speaking, the word “criticism”—“*bipan*” (批判)³—refers to a decision or a choice made at the crossroads of crisis. The temporal setting of criticism should be a winter night, for, after all, winter is a season of destitution and endurance that awaits the plenitude of spring. Is night not a time in which dark despair is accumulated for the hope of the early morning? As a metaphor, the winter night is the apocalyptic time when one who is placed in the crisis that mushrooms in a corner of his or her era and has awakened to the necessity for a transition there keeps vigil all night.

At this moment, the international community is faced with a great transitional period. It is not only a chronological transition to a new century and a new millennium but also an era in which a 2,000-year old story-telling method is threatened as never before. The awareness that the ideology of modern culture, which has pervaded the world since at least the 19th century, must be revised is spreading wide. Regardless of whether or not we acknowledge this, postmodernism has been epoch-making in 20th century cultural history in that it (like the speaker of Gim's poem) has stimulated us to return to the origin of modern grand narratives, which previously were transmitted intact and without ado, and presented us with the task of creating new stories from that originary point. The advent of postmodernism reveals that this era is a cold winter night.

With the passing of the 20th century, human history has come to accelerate, seemingly beyond control. Now, we are living in an era where it is impossible even to predict the next decade. This is the origin of the cultural anxiety in which we have fallen since the last years of the 20th century. However, anxiety may always lie hidden in the heart of culture. Thus spake Freud, who found the origin of culture in the repression and prohibition of instincts, for the repressed may return at any time, in any form. If the origin of culture stems from the human will to build structures, Gödel demonstrated, in terms of mathematics, that human structures conceal a certain irresolvable anxiety. The incompleteness theorem, which states that axiomatic systems invariably have indeterminate elements as residues, points at a situation similar to that designated by the psychoanalytic theory of culture. Derrida proved, in terms of metaphysical architecture, the same thing that Gödel did. The construction of all theoretical systems includes a self-deconstructing contradiction as a residue, and this residue is the spectral return of what has been repressed and excluded for the construction of the systems.

What, then, does all of this seek to tell us? It signifies that the possible and impossible condi-

³ Once again, “批判” is read “*pipan*,” “*phephan*,” and “*bihan*” in Mandarin Chinese, Vietnamese, and Japanese, respectively.

tions of culture overlap. The inside and the outside of civilization do not constitute the two mutually exclusive loci that structuralism seeks to place. Economists today have come to realize that economic panics, which endanger capitalism, derive from the logic of capitalism (the self-propagating logic of capital). The same would hold true for cultural crisis and anxiety as well. Such crisis and anxiety come not from outside but from inside culture itself. Indeed, barbarity grows precisely where culture blossoms, according to the same logical structure. The brighter the light of culture, the darker its shadow must be, for danger and darkness lurk right under the lamp. It is therefore as necessary to look near as it is to look far. This era needs a microscopic perspective as much as a macroscopic one.

At this point, I ponder again. State-of-the-art science signifies the conquest of the microscopic system. High technology is the manipulation of microscopic units. Modern economics is microeconomics, and modern politics is micropolitics. The same holds true for culture. As many have stated, this is an era not of hardware but of software. Today, culture is not pursued or enjoyed in terms of transcendent ideologies or grand hierarchical systems. Rather, it is developed in the miscellaneous, the quotidian, the marginal, and the unconscious. Indeed, microscopicality is the cultural New World discovered at the end of the 20th century.

What, however, is microscopicality? It is the avoidance of categorical fixity and, at the same time, the substantial characteristic of the originary point to which all categories must return to be regenerated. At this originary point, existing classification methods, hierarchies, and forms are annulled for new generation. In this respect, it can be likened to a black hole. The world of digital language, which invalidates the minimal analog identity by cutting across all systems of binary oppositions including mind and body, human and animal, sound and figure, reality and virtuality, can be a symbol of such originary microscopicality. This world of microscopicality is a black hole through which 21st-century culture must penetrate. The hope, anxiety, progress, and danger of the future all await us in that very hole.