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S t u d i e s i n

A m e r i c a n I n d i a n

L i t e r a t u r e s

With this monograph, *SAIL* inaugurates a series of publications devoted to extended critical and scholarly studies of contemporary or traditional Indian literatures or of aspects of American literature impinging on Native American concerns. Those interested in having their work considered for inclusion in this series should send two copies of the manuscript, no more than 55 pages including notes, to the editor of *SAIL*.

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Introduction

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Monograph No. 1

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Some Notes on Oliver La Farge

by

Paul Kleinpoppen

Introduction

The position of Oliver La Farge in modern American fiction is a curious one. Depending on how carefully one reads his books, he can appear to be one of several things: a minor modernist who, at his best, is almost as good as Hemingway; a major Western regionalist and nothing more; a distant precursor of the writers of the Native American Renaissance; an amateur anthropologist gone wrong; a New Yorker short story specialist who made a mistake in attempting novels; or a novelist who wrote only one book, Laughing Boy, and then disappeared from the world of letters. The list could go on indefinitely, swinging from one contrary statement to the next. Only two decades have passed since La Farge's death, and yet his reputation seems to be that of a far remoter figure--a writer of the twenties and thirties who outlived his prime by a generation.

The following notes represent an attempt to assess La Farge's work for readers who have seen his efforts matched or surpassed by writers of Indian fiction who are Indians themselves. The notes are written with the understanding that La Farge, though his best work still stands up on its merits, will probably be regarded as chiefly as a predecessor of such contemporary novelists as James Welch, Leslie Silko, and N. Scott Momaday. There are worse roles to play

than that of forerunner to such distinguished writers, however, so the notes proceed under the assumption that a reader's interest in La Farge is a convenient starting point from which to express a broader interest in the field of Native American literature.

La Farge's Life

Born in 1901, Oliver La Farge was raised in New York City and Narragansett Bay, Rhode Island. Since his family was wealthy and distinguished--his grandfather John La Farge, to take one ancestral example, was a friend of Henry Adams--there was no question about what college he would attend. Majoring in anthropology, he graduated from Harvard in 1924. Shortly thereafter, Frans Blom invited him to become his assistant director of the first Tulane Expedition to Central America in 1925. He also accompanied Blom on the Third Expedition in 1927. His outstanding anthropological work, Santa Eulalia, is based on these early experiences.

As a writer of fiction, La Farge gathered material less often from Central America than from North America. Of his three visits to the Southwest in 1921, 1924, and 1926, the third was especially fruitful, and his first mature story about Navajos was published in January 1927 in The Dial. The story, entitled "North is Black," attracted the attention of an editor at Houghton Mifflin, who invited La Farge to submit the manuscript of Laughing Boy. Published in 1929, this novel received the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1930. From then on, La Farge's work always benefited from the mixed blessing of his

being known solely for that one stellar achievement.

Aside from his fiction, La Farge devoted a good part of his life to Indian causes, serving in several official capacities. In 1930, he joined a group that eventually came to be known as the Association on American Indian Affairs, a private organization hostile to the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Six years later, however, he was appointed by John Collier--a good man in an anomalous office--as a field representative for the Bureau itself. His ensuing familiarity with the horrifying details of the Federal Government's treatment of the Indians inspired him to publish The Enemy Gods in 1937. This book, though never as popular as Laughing Boy, is regarded by many politically informed readers as his most important novel.

Though La Farge continued to write and work with distinction on behalf of Indians until his death in 1963, it is primarily with the earlier part of his career that the following notes are concerned. The initial question that anyone reading La Farge's early Navajo writings may want to ask is: "Why did he do it? What was it that drew an upper-middle class, Anglo-French New Englander to the deserts and mountains of the Southwest?" D'Arcy McNickle may be closest to a proper evaluation of La Farge's seeming dislocation from his background when he expresses the opinion that La Farge's accomplishment in Laughing Boy is that of a clever interpreter, whose "artistry consisted in blending . . . essentially esoteric information in a narrative carried along by imagery drawn from the usages of polite society of the Eastern seaboard. . . . He brought outlandish subject

matter into the realm of acceptable experience."¹ In other words, to suggest that La Farge's mildly aristocratic background and his novels are at totally unrelated opposites of human experience is to lose the key to his success as a writer--his perception of the alien Navajos' similarity to ourselves. It is this that allows him to discuss Indian topics without ever cheapening his comments by seeing the Indians as merely picturesque. In fact, La Farge's most consistent method of presenting the Indians to white readers is by way of removing, or at least toning down, picturesque effects.

As an Indian novelist writing in the 1930s, McNickle was in an excellent position to understand that in 1929, when Laughing Boy appeared, Indians were perceived by all but trained observers, or other Indians, as lacking manners, morals, and mores--in short, as lacking humanity--rather than as possessing their own variants of these social properties. La Farge's keen eye for polite, humane behavior detected in the Navajos of the Southwest, not the wild, free, romantic rudeness of a pack of bronze-colored bipeds, but the excruciatingly correct behavior of a people equal to us in all but technology, and as civilized as we are in all but their lack of a written language. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that La Farge was instrumental in helping the Navajos to acquire new technology and, ultimately, to write in their own tongue.

La Farge as Interpreter

Oliver La Farge's central narrative problem--especially in Laughing Boy, which is

set in the year 1915--is that of making the alien sensibilities of Native Americans accessible to a non-Indian audience. Particularly when it comes to composing dialogue, he is forced to see himself as a translator of authentic Native American speech and thought. The problem is that, with linguistic structures of Asiatic origins, a Nadene language such as Navajo offers dismally few reference points for a Germanic language such as English to use when La Farge tries to render what Navajos are saying in their native tongue. The situation La Farge faces is roughly comparable to that faced by Ernest Hemingway when Hemingway tries to do justice to the language of Europeans. The difference is that Athabascan dialects are far more difficult to get right than are Spanish, French, or German. As Clyde Kluckhohn has observed, the problem is not that certain Navajo statements "cannot be made in English but that they are not made consistently."² It is not so much the meaning of the original that can get lost as it is the undiluted flavor of the meaning.

The hazards attached to a single Navajo word, hozhoni, serve to outline the broader obstacles that exist for all would-be interpreters of Indian thought processes. The most frequent translation of this Navajo noun is "beauty." But the word "beauty" can result in a mistaken impression. An innocent phrase, "he goes in beauty," has the potential to lead an uninstructed reader to the image of a stone-faced, but noble, savage solemnly stalking along the south rim of the Grand Canyon at sunset, grimly at peace with himself and piously at one with nature. But what alternatives does La Farge

have other than foresaking English and writing in Navajo?

Navajo verbs present staggering difficulties for an English speaker caught in the act of conjugation. So, depending on the exact form of the verb "to go" used in the phrase, "he goes in beauty," the meaning could be one of several. The phrase might be saying that "he," perhaps on his way out of a hogan, is behaving amiably, courteously, generously, or cooperatively. In the context of an extended family, for instance, it might imply that his action is conducive to harmony (hozoni) or stability (hozoni) within the group. In none of this is there the slightest hint of some facile poetic abstraction. Rather, it is precise, specific, and, above all, literal.

To attempt to convey in English the concreteness and density of implication found in the original would turn most novels about Indians into plot skeletons fleshed out by ethnographic pedantry. The resulting tale might be rewarding for a patient, scholarly audience, but for no one else. Thus, "he goes in beauty" has to be preferred to the conceivable alternative of "the accurately specified manner of his going [chosen from among 356,200 possible conjugations], aesthetically pleasing in its meticulous deference to one of his mother's brothers, connotes absolute freedom from moral negligence in the opinion of at least two of his male cross-cousins, thereby contributing to the establishment of productive social relations in the matrisib." It is safe to assume that Laughing Boy, had it contained this sort of language, would not have stolen the Pulitzer Prize away from A Farewell to Arms.

This protracted digression on hozoni, La Farge's favorite Navajo word, is mainly by way of asserting that, somewhere along the continuum that ranges from the fallacy of the noble savage to the pitfall of the social scientist's jargon, there is room for artful compromise, for fiction that is at once reasonably accurate and actually readable. Laughing Boy, I hope to show in the following notes, occupies that space.

Laughing Boy as Ethnography

As a non-Indian writer with a mostly non-Indian audience, Oliver La Farge faces the dilemma throughout Laughing Boy of having to impose the foreign concepts of white America on Indian lifeways while trying to leave those lifeways as intact, as free of distortion, as they can be in English. That he succeeds in his proclaimed attempt to be "as accurate as possible about ceremonies, rites and customs" is lent credence by D'Arcy McNickle's having singled him out as a groundbreaking author, especially noteworthy for his fearless introduction to American fiction of such Navajo specificities of customs as mother-in-law avoidance, mandated clan exogamy, and dietary taboos (Laughing Boy ix).³

La Farge is so assiduous in his observation of culturally conservative Indians, in fact, that one frequently finds the most compelling chapters to be those in which he devotes entire scenes to the usages of traditional, as opposed to marginal or assimilated, Navajo society. The third chapter, in which Laughing Boy solicits advice from his maternal uncle, Wounded Face, is a case in point. Laughing Boy, not content to see himself

and his future wife, Slim Girl, in isolation from family and clan, requires approval for his proposed course of marriage.

Perhaps the first thing to strike one about the conversation that Laughing Boy starts to have with Wounded Face is the incredibly long time it takes either one to get down to business. According to Navajo ideas about such matters, however, La Farge paces the talk perfectly. At the outset, the two men smoke for a while, quite a while, without saying anything. Their initial words are merely Laughing Boy's polite form of address, followed by his uncle's courteous response. Their roles are established, the social hierarchy reaffirmed. Only then may Laughing Boy announce, "I have been thinking about something" (Laughing Boy 33). More time passes.

The immediate explanation of what Laughing Boy's "something" is would be unseemly in the opinion of Navajos, whose dwellings are cramped spaces, and for whom there can never be too much decorum. Therefore: "They smoked on. A black-and-white kid slipped in the door, leaped up and poised itself on the cantle of a saddle. Outside was the rhythmic thump-thump-thump of a weaver pounding down the threads in her loom. A distant child laughed, someone was chopping wood --sounds of domesticity" (Laughing Boy 33). Wounded Face knows exactly what is on Laughing Boy's mind. He shows no surprise at his nephew's statement but, as is appropriate, evaluates this information from his culturally certified position of experience and authority. "You are old enough," he conjectures. "It is a good thing" (Laughing Boy 33). Laughing Boy mulls this over while he finishes his cigarette. Only

now, when the two of them have warmed to the topic properly by giving their words the value of rareness, can they engage in verbal battle. And battle they must, for Slim Girl, though Laughing Boy does not know it, is a whore.

La Farge is careful to move quickly over the seemingly slow-motion talk. The reader must be equally careful not to take the pauses that occur in the conversation as signs of the intellectual torpor of savages. That would be to misread the scene entirely. In fact, what many white people regard as a normally relaxed pace for the act of conversing strikes Indians from several tribes as extremely hurried and conducive to rushed, ill-considered replies. Restrictions and modifications of what is said, frequently taken for granted in white conversation, have no place in the discussion between Wounded Face and Laughing Boy. When they speak, it is with the gravity and awareness of someone under oath in a court of law.

Besides the pace at which Laughing Boy and his uncle move through their talk, the nature of Wounded Face's advice is one of La Farge's nicest accuracies. At no point does he say, "I forbid you, foolish nephew, to marry that prostitute." Rather, he leaves it up to Laughing Boy to infer how ill-advised such a marriage would be. It is a sign of respect among Navajos to refrain from issuing directives. Hence, Wounded Face's advice is oblique. But while avoiding any overt suggestion that Laughing Boy is unfit to make up his own mind, Wounded Face nonetheless manages to get his message across in no uncertain terms. The trouble with Slim Girl, he says, is that she is "a school girl. . . . She was taken away to that place, for six years"

(Laughing Boy 33). Laughing Boy, unaware of the implicit condemnation of Indian boarding schools, makes his uncle spell out the problem. "She is not one of the People anymore," Wounded Face explains, "she is American" (Laughing Boy 33). His statements, made in a tone of finality, sound narrow-minded. But the ramifications of his ostensibly simple words are complex. To say that Slim Girl is "not of the People" falls somewhere along the continuum of meaning that ranges from "she is no longer one of the folks" to "she is bereft of humanity as we conceive of it." For Wounded Face to add that Slim Girl "does bad things" is merely to make an ancillary comment, one that follows as a matter of course from the label "American" (Laughing Boy 34).

La Farge handles Laughing Boy's reaction to such unpleasant news with an equal degree of ethnological accuracy. Laughing Boy does not attempt to chop logic with his uncle. It does not occur to him to put the matter into abstract terms and to try to rationalize his uncle toward a modified view of Slim Girl. Wounded Face's pronouncement that "she is bad" is as concrete, clearly defined, and absolute as would be the statement that "she is five and a half feet tall and weighs a hundred and ten pounds." Laughing Boy is free to accept or reject his uncle's assertion, but he must do so without qualification. As soon as he decides to reject it, the cozy interior of the hogan in which they are seated becomes a place of unbearable spatial constriction. "Now you have said too much," Laughing Boy concludes. "Ugh! This place is too small for me!" (Laughing Boy 34). He rushes outside to find room to diffuse his anger, and

the vastness that is Arizona eventually calms him down.

In the twelfth chapter, where this temporarily terminated discussion is resumed, it is worth noting that La Farge pays even closer attention to the quiet indirectness with which Navajos convey what might otherwise be fighting words: "They talked, watching the end of their cigarettes, or with the right hand rubbing over the fingers of the left, as though to bring the words out, or touching each finger-tip in turn, with their eyes upon their hands, so that the even voices seemed utterly detached, the persons mere media for uttering thought formed at the back of nowhere" (Laughing Boy 113).

Slim Girl as Marginal Woman

The subject of Laughing Boy's and Wounded Face's intense discussions, Slim Girl, is a far more difficult character to understand than either of the two men can acknowledge from their monocultural perspective. La Farge's portrayal of her stands as one of the major achievements of Laughing Boy. The manner of her introduction to the reader shows La Farge's skill at embedding Native American specificities in an essentially Euro-American mode of narration. Instead of being described as a passive sex-object upon whom Laughing Boy can work his masculine magic, she is allowed to manifest her beauty primarily through her active, aggressive physicality. Though this vigor of hers may be seen most obviously in her dancing at the opening of the novel and in her love-making later on, there is a subtler scene, in the third chapter, that demonstrates the same defining trait.

At a spring located near an Anasazi ruin, Slim Girl comes to fill a water-basket, knowing that Laughing Boy is her audience in all that she does. She approaches the spring on "small feet . . . sure and light on the rocks as a goat's. She seemed to be hours descending. She was businesslike about filling the basket, but she turned utilitarian motions into part of a dance" (Laughing Boy 28). It must be emphasized that there is nothing eccentric in La Farge's compliment to Slim Girl--though heroines of modern novels are not usually as nimble as goats--or in his single-minded focus upon her neuromuscular aspect. Flora Bailey, in a monograph entitled "Navaho Motor Habits," observes that "one of the most striking differences first noted between Navaho movement and that of the white American is the smoothness and flowing quality of the action. Briefly, the Navaho gestures and moves with sustained, circular motions rather than with angular, staccato movements characteristic of white culture."⁴ Even within this cultural context of rounded movement, however, Slim Girl is a creature of singular grace, whose "slimness was deceptive; strength came forth from her" (Laughing Boy 29). Later, after she has visited Laughing Boy long enough to leave his mouth dry and the blood pounding in his ears, "her rising, her ascent of the rock, were all one quick motion" (Laughing Boy 29).

For La Farge to have defined Slim Girl's beauty not in static terms--those of exquisite facial features, for instance--but in kinetic terms of suppleness, of grace in utility, accomplished two things. Without any imposition of Caucasian standards of attractiveness, he has given her a strong physical presence that at least passes for sex appeal. But more impor-

tantly, he has made an opening for the reader to conceive of her as a character who does things rather than as one who is to be known in the harsh light of what she is: a whore at the disposal of whites, a casualty of misguided boarding schools for Indians, an "American." The facts of iniquity that attach themselves to her, facts that can never be countenanced by Laughing Boy's clan, remain secondary matters to the reader.

Not until a third of the way into the book, in the seventh chapter, does the reader catch sight of Slim Girl dressed in a way that would not have surprised Wounded Face. La Farge's portrait of her changes radically, if temporarily, at that point. She wears "the inevitable uniform of the school-trained Indian," in which everything is ill-fitting, out of date, and, in Slim Girl's case, immodest as well (Laughing Boy 59). Having dispensed with body-concealing layers of undergarments, she is left with the outer shell: "The slack, thin stuff indicated her breasts with curves and shadow; a breath of wind or a quick turn outlined the firm stomach, round thigh, and supple movement, very little, but enough" (Laughing Boy 59). It is worth noting that not until this moment of divesting herself of her Navajo garments, of her "barbaric velveteen and calico," has there been the slightest hint of any prurience in her manner or appearance (Laughing Boy 59). Now, however, she is fittingly attired to move along the bottom rung of white society, as represented by the unredeemed ugliness of the town of Los Palos, a place where "man and mud and boards created squalor" (Laughing Boy 55).

Ironically, the one man with whom Slim Girl has a steady financial arrangement in the white world is not that bad a fellow. Unlike the rapacious locals, the hypocritical missionaries, and the rude tourists who combine to form La Farge's group portrait of white Americans of the Southwest, Slim Girl's benefactor is an educated man. Though a minor character, he plays as vital a role as Laughing Boy does in his capacity as a vehicle for Slim Girl's expression of her marginality. After Slim Girl's marriage to Laughing Boy, the man finds himself in possession of letters such as the following, which he receives when he arrives at a rendezvous: "DEAR GEORGE My husband make me go too dance I will come day after tomorrow afternoon. pleas not mind. love LILLIAN" (Laughing Boy 133). The poor quality of Slim Girl's prose style is in keeping with her bad pronunciation of English. She has been cursed with just enough training to have lost her hold on her native culture.

George, for his part, misjudges Slim Girl completely. Convinced that she is married to a drunken Indian, he wants "to raise her to a position in which he could respect himself if he married her" (Laughing Boy 135). Though misguided, George is no villain. To him, Slim Girl is "Lillian," not "Lilly," as she is known by her more casual clients. (Either name ironically connotes whiteness.) He seems, actually, to be as much of a cuckold as Laughing Boy. His last name, "Hartshorn" (i.e. heart shorn, hart's horn), certainly reinforces his role as a betrayed man. Just as Laughing Boy wants Slim Girl to hear myths, George wants Lillian to read books. The fact that George is as domestically minded as Laughing Boy contributes to the pro-

longation of Slim Girl's double life. For her, he is easy to despise, but easy to control as well. And there is a resemblance between her use of alcohol as a hobble for Laughing Boy and her use of sex as the reins by which she draws George in from his protests at her unfaithfulness: "She kept him at tension, administering happiness and unhappiness carefully, accepted his increased gifts, and in her mind shortened the time of waiting" for the resumption of a purely Navajo life (Laughing Boy 135).

The key qualifier here is "in her mind." Slim Girl is living a lie, not evilly, but guiltily. Wishing to erase her background and begin anew, she pulls herself apart. Her businesslike "administering" of happiness to George takes place on a cultural battlefield. There is no more pretending in her hatred of what he represents "than there is in an arrow leaving a bow. . . . On him she had concentrated all her feelings towards Americans in general, everything that she had ever suffered. In him she was revenging herself upon them all. Her kisses were her weapons, her tenderness were blows struck in the full heat of battle" (Laughing Boy 134-5). George, regardless of how miserable he may be making himself with jealousy, is certainly getting his money's worth.

In an odd corollary to her vigorous anti-American movements in bed, Slim Girl brings her weaving up to top Navajo standards and remains steadfastly opposed to the portrayal of non-Navajo (i.e., conventionally representational) patterns and to the use of non-Navajo colors. This hardline policy, pursued in the face of lucrative offers to supply debased work to white tourists, also results in her insistence that

Laughing Boy not give in to similar offers and produce meaningless designs in his silverware. She promises that, when she and Laughing Boy live in the North Country someday, "she would use any power they acquired in combating Christianity, short hair, shoes, ready-made trousers, and the creeping in of American-derived words" (Laughing Boy 136).

As laudable as such purism might be, Slim Girl's reasons for being a purist are all wrong. She must realize that, to the North Country people, she would seem to be a kind of Pharisee, stridently going through the motions of a religion she did not have the knack for. In mistaking the observance, the outward show of things, for the belief, Slim Girl condemns herself to stay where she is--stranded, with half a heart, between the two wholehearted ways of life represented by her husband and her white lover.

The words that end the fifteenth chapter of Laughing Boy are weighted with intimations of tragedy: "Slim Girl's life with Laughing Boy 'was settled, serene, monotonous; there was no detail of it that one would wish to change'" (Laughing Boy 136). "No visible detail," the reader might respond. Serenity, monotony: if ever there were a signal of a calm before the storm, this is it. Slim Girl's beautifully woven pattern of deception approaches its end with each thump of her loom, each surreptitious visit to George, each fanatic defense of "native ways" (Laughing Boy 136). Her deceit is the one article she weaves that lacks a "spirit outlet."

Laughing Boy as Emergent Bicultural Man

In contrast to Slim Girl, who enters Laughing Boy as a wounded veteran of cultural conflict, Laughing Boy is a contentedly monocultural character when the novel opens. His progress through the book, though he never ceases to be essentially Navajo, is marked by ever-increasing exposure to the white world. Though he never becomes the bilingual, bicultural man that Myron Begay does in The Enemy Gods, he nonetheless displays the same adaptive energy, the same flexibility, that Myron possesses. But in 1915, the time has not yet arrived when Euro-American pressure on the People to assimilate will reach its peak.

At the novel's beginning, Laughing Boy is marked by nothing so much as his lack of exposure to the outside world. In the first chapter, for instance, there is a noteworthy exchange between Laughing Boy and a man named Slender Hair that introduces the theme of how strange, how initially incomprehensible, the encroaching civilization of the white man is. A wealthy Navajo named Tall Hunter drives past them in a brand-new buckboard. Slender Hair remarks that Tall Hunter's "brother is in jail for stealing cattle, they say" (Laughing Boy 12). Laughing Boy, in the first of many demonstrations of his understandable naivete, asks, "What is jail?" (Laughing Boy 12). As Slender Hair explains, "It is something the American Chief does to you. He puts you in a room of stone, like a Moqui house [i.e., a Hopi pueblo dwelling], only it is dark and you can't get out. People die there, they say. They haven't any room; they can't see anything, they say. I do not like to talk about it" (Laughing Boy 12).

Aside from the physical horror Laughing Boy feels at the alien notion of confinement, two aspects of Slender Hair's speech stand out. First of all, this is a book of explanations. La Farge occasionally intrudes, but more often the job of making a concept clear to someone who not only does not know the concept, but does not even have a frame of reference for knowing it, is the responsibility of one of the characters. In this scene, La Farge casually slips in the information that Slender Hair, unlike Laughing Boy, is a southern Navajo. As such, he has in all likelihood been exposed, perhaps by way of Flagstaff, to such cultural treasures as cowboy boots with heels, cowboy hats with brims, and cowboy jails with bars.

A second thing to notice about Slender Hair's explanation is his repetition of the phrase "they say" (*jini*). This represents an attempt by La Farge to convey the formulaic patterns of Navajo speech. What might be taken for awkwardness in English--and sheer repetition of any phrase is usually felt to be uncalled for--would not necessarily draw the same response in Navajo. "They say," as in the story-opening formula of "Long time ago they say" (i.e., "Once upon a time"), would strike the Navajo ear no more than "you know," if not overdone, would strike the English ear. La Farge, it should be pointed out, was never completely fluent in Navajo, though he did manage to pick up quite a bit of the language. His source for the Navajo phrasing that had the right ring to it came primarily from bilingual Navajos he had heard speaking English and making characteristic mistakes, or adding characteristic flourishes, as they looked for foreign equivalents of what they really intended to say. When held up against

transcriptions of actual Navajo locutions, La Farge's passages of dialogue show him to be gifted with a remarkably sensitive ear.

In highlighting Laughing Boy's innocence from the outset, La Farge paves the way for the greatest crisis his protagonist will face. Slim Girl, in an effort to keep her husband from getting too restive at their unnatural isolation from other Navajos, introduces him to alcohol, a greater scourge to Native Americans, in some ways, than smallpox or firearms. What makes La Farge's portrayal of Laughing Boy's incipient alcoholism carry so much weight is his understanding of how perniciously the alcohol can actually blend with a traditionalist's culture, rather than merely subvert it. This can be seen in the sixteenth chapter, where Laughing Boy, suffering from spiritual malaise, goes in search of a native healer. The one he finds is Yellow Singer, the novel's whiskey Indian, a pathetic character who drifts through La Farge's narrative in a state of bleary-eyed dissolution. Apprised of Laughing Boy's distress he does not immediately prescribe medicine, but offers a medical opinion: "I dreamed last night that when you were at Buckho Dotklis, you put those prayer cigarettes wrong. They fell down into the sand. Now they have put a spider's web into your brain" (*Laughing Boy* 140). Of course, this makes excellent sense to Laughing Boy, who suspected as much.

Handing over two bottles of "low-grade, frontier tanglefoot rye, dear at a dollar a bottle," Yellow Singer administers Laughing Boy to pray, after washing his hair, to the offended deities (*Laughing Boy* 141). Collecting a twenty-dollar fee for services rendered, he

carefully instructs Laughing Boy in the correct use of the alcohol: "When you have prayed, just start drinking it. By and by you will feel your mind becoming all right, your heart will be high. Then you will fall asleep. When you wake up, you will feel badly, but if you take some more, you will feel all right. One bottle should be enough. Put the other away until something tells you you need it" (Laughing Boy 141). Here, in these simple, straightforward instructions, issued by a practicing whiskey Indian to a probable initiate, is one of the cleverest compendiums of the complex problem of reservation alcoholism ever written.

The blending of the whiskey not with other beverages, as in one of Slim Girl's vile mixed drinks, but with yucca suds and prayers--that is, with traditional religious endeavors--is central to the process of how sober Navajo can convert from the Enemy Way or the Mountain Top Way to the Alcohol Way. For one of the People to find his entry into the Great American Search for a really good anodyne, it is vital that he first straddle the gap between his own culture and that of the aliens. Laughing Boy's private ceremony consists of an exercise in spiritual brinkmanship. "Tell no one about this," Yellow Singer warns him, "above all no woman. It is very holy and secret; if you speak of it, it will do you harm. It will make you jump into the fire" (Laughing Boy 141). In other words: "Do not tell Slim Girl. She would kill me if she ever found out." But also: "Here you will find in a matter of minutes the religious fervor that would take far longer to achieve by old-fashioned means--nine-day chants, four-day vision quests, and the like."

The effects of the liquor on Laughing Boy are such as to bring him closer than ever to the panicked realization that there is something wrong not with himself, but with Slim Girl. He pushes further in his drive toward enhanced perception with a few more swallows, however, which just leads to incoherence and then unconsciousness. The sun-baked hangover with which he awakes in the middle of the afternoon sends Laughing Boy back to the bottle at first, but a sudden awareness that this whole "ceremony" bears not the slightest resemblance to any known religious act combines with the memory of a recent bout of alcohol-poisoning and vomiting to make him reconsider what he is doing. He finds salvation in coffee, which burns his tongue, clears his head, and enables him to see alcohol as "just something like jimson-weed" (Laughing Boy 143). This is precisely the expression that Laughing Boy used a hundred pages earlier, in the fourth chapter, to describe the then as yet untasted beverage, whiskey, to his friend, Jestin Squaw's Son (Laughing Boy 40). La Farge's cleverly implanted repetition shows that, even if Laughing Boy has not learned anything, he has at least retreated from the abyss of drug addiction to the higher ground of a culture in which the worst intoxicant is only t'oghlepai, a home-brewed corn beer.

Laughing Boy's escape from alcohol presages his release from the amorous clutches of Slim Girl. Her accidental death from a gunshot wound produces in her widower the deepest grief imaginable. The passing from this world of her anguished, marginal soul pushes Laughing Boy back to his orthodox Navajoism. He manifests his return to religious fervor in a four-day mourning vigil for his wife

and, later, in a Mountain Top Way ceremony. The landscape in which his mourning takes place is one of beautiful desolation: "It was quite dark, and the snow still drifted down like waterlogged leaves falling through water" (Laughing Boy 180). The beauty remains but the desolation recedes when, his vigil completed, Laughing Boy encounters other Navajos at a Mountain Chant. His meeting with the celebrants provides the setting for one of the most moving touches in the whole novel. According to a rule of correct behavior by which the People govern themselves, it is vital not to bring one's personal woes into the joyous midst of religious observance. The words that pass between Laughing Boy and a woman who offers him some bread and mutton are among the most memorable in Laughing Boy: "Where do you come from, Grandfather?" the woman asks. "From Chiziai." "Where are you going?" "To this dance." "That is a good saddle-blanket; who made it?" "My wife, she weaves well." (Note Laughing Boy's use of the present tense.) "Is she here?" "No, she stayed behind" (Laughing Boy 190).

The self-restraint, the good breeding, the sheer normality that makes those last words that Laughing Boy decides to use is proof of the efficacy of his prayers, proof that he has expunged his grief. Those four simple words, in effect, earn him the right to enjoy the Mountain Chant. La Farge drifts through a few details of the ceremony--which functions as a bookend to the Enemy Way ceremony with which the novel got underway--but all that really matters in these closing stages of the Chant and of the book is Laughing Boy's response to what he sees: "At times the details of what he was watching became

blurred and he drowsed deliciously; but he was permeated with the general feeling of the prayer, and he looked upon it as he had when an uninitiated child" (Laughing Boy 191). It is precisely at this juncture of "past and present [coming] together," of Laughing Boy's re-entry into his former life, that the novel closes, its full-circle design complete (Laughing Boy 192).

Laughing Boy Concluded

These notes on Laughing Boy so far represent only a fraction of the topics that the novel offers for discussion. If space permitted, one could observe La Farge's use of the patterns and designs of Navajo weaving, silversmithing, and sand painting as convincing metaphors for the psychological states of his characters; one could observe his use of equine imagery and its contribution to the reader's understanding of the overwhelming importance of horses to pre-automotive Navajo society; one could observe his use of landscape, specifically in his character's attachment to or alienation from the harshness of the desert, and how it allows the reader to see beyond the picturesque of Navajo Country.

What these observations would show, if pursued, is that any attempt to evaluate La Farge's achievement in Laughing Boy must include an examination of the degree to which he has successfully blended the esoteric anthropological elements of his story with the exigencies of constructing a well-made novel. That he is successful may be seen most clearly, not in the above observations, but in the two most conspicuous ethnological facets of Laughing

Boy, namely, the recurrent nine-day chants and the recurrent figure of the "Slayer of Enemy Gods," a major Navajo deity. These not only fail to detract from the plot, but function as leitmotifs around which the episodes of the story are made to coalesce and reverberate in tune with each other. The danger of randomness, of interchangeable chapters--a considerable threat whenever a short story writer attempts a novel--is effectively removed.

The nine-day chants, in order of appearance, are the Enemy Way of the first through fourth chapters (or fifth if one considers that Laughing Boy and Slim Girl have not yet departed from the site of the festivities), the Night Way of the twelfth chapter (i.e., roughly the midpoint of the book), and the Mountain Top Way of the twenty-first chapter (the finale of the book coinciding with the finale of the ceremony). The various Ways are not merely picturesque backdrops. They are working definitions of Laughing Boy's religiosity, sociability, and character. And they are also commentaries on the fragmentation of Slim Girl's psyche. She may not dance at the Enemy Way's "squaw dance" after certain people find out that she is participating; she may attend--indeed, is compelled to attend--the Night Chant, but cannot enjoy it; and she is altogether absent (i.e., "she stayed behind") from the Mountain Chant. To be sure, the private story of Laughing Boy and Slim Girl could have been told in isolation, but with nothing like the vividness achieved by La Farge's act of throwing their tale into high relief against the broad background of the Navajo World.

The "Slayer of Enemy Gods" motif provides an even better example of how La Farge manages to use ethnology not as a crutch for lame narration, but as a primary source for original work. The figure of the Slayer, who is of central importance in the Navajo Creation Myth, appears in Laughing Boy no less than eight times. Laughing Boy is never equated with the Slayer exactly, but Slim Girl's insistent view of him as bearing a distinct resemblance to such an impressive mythological entity lends to Laughing Boy a depth and dignity that otherwise might not have been his.

In a sense, the novel begins on page 47, when Slim Girl thinks, as she sees Laughing Boy approach from a distance, "That is he . . . Slayer of Enemy Gods." She arbitrarily changes the lines of a well-known song--which is itself repeated several times, giving Laughing Boy a choric unity as well--from "In beauty it is finished" to "In beauty it is begun." The next appearance of the Slayer is on page 68. Laughing Boy, having foregone the traditional four days of waiting to make love after marriage, has a nightmare in which the Slayer figures prominently in Laughing Boy's justified fear that he has sundered himself from the People.

The particular episode in the career of the Slayer that La Farge most frequently adduces is the one in which he relents and does not kill the Hunger People. The Hunger People, it might be added, also appear over and over again in Laughing Boy, further contributing to the coherence of the plot. For instance, just as the Slayer does not kill the Hunger People, so Laughing Boy acceded to the paltry Blessing Way

ceremony conducted by Yellow Singer and his wife, who are identified as looking just like Hunger People on page 63.

On page 116, Slim Girl has delusions of triumphing over Laughing Boy's relatives and again interprets Laughing Boy's role in the scene in terms of the Slayer. On page 129, an overnight host to Laughing Boy and Slim Girl tells his children about the Slayer, repeating word for word a part of Laughing Boy's dream on page 68. On page 161, after Laughing Boy has shot Slim Girl with his bow and arrow, he prays for the courage to face his wife by singing a Slayer song. Then, on page 170, after the two of them have made up their differences, Slim Girl calls Laughing Boy the Slayer to his face and is rebuked for sacrilege. And then, on page 177, she repeats the words, but this time is not rebuked because these are her dying words. Finally, on page 187, Laughing Boy stops grieving at the end of his fourth night of mourning and chants one last prayer involving the Slayer--the Slayer of Enemy Gods, of phantasms, and of unhappiness.

La Farge's careful placement of all these references to the Slayer works splendidly as a device contributing to the structural coherence of a book that, carelessly read, could have seemed to be a loosely strung chain of intense days in the life of Native America. In fact, the overall unity of design provided by the recurrent imagery of the Slayer is so complete, so finished, as to bear comparison with F. Scott Fitzgerald's use of ghost imagery in The Great Gatsby or with Ernest Hemingway's use of intermittent rain in A Farewell to Arms. La Farge's use of the Slayer leitmotif works pre-

cisely because the reader can easily slide right past the images without noticing them at all. They are not overdone. They do not occur with obtrusive, metronomic regularity. Rather, they work to reinforce the reader's impressions of Laughing Boy by way of repeated ambush. The images do not mold his character, but they do amplify it considerably. And in a vast desert terrain that seems to swallow whole many of the book's lesser characters, amplification is exactly what Laughing Boy needs to become one of the genuinely enduring heroes of modern American fiction.

The Enemy Gods as Social Tract

Appearing in print in 1937, eight years after Laughing Boy, The Enemy Gods is not so much a sequel to the earlier novel as it is, in La Farge's own estimation, "a sort of anti-thesis."⁵ Indeed, the book is antithetical in more ways than La Farge intended. In Raw Material he wrote, with some exasperation, of The Enemy Gods' comparative lack of popularity: "the people who will throng to read about the social problems of any other section of the country despise the book because all writing about Indians is ipso facto escapist."⁶ This realization pained La Farge considerably, for in The Enemy Gods he was seeking to rectify precisely what he felt to be wrong with Laughing Boy, its remoteness from present-day concerns. Looking back in 1945 at his position as a novelist working in the decade of the Depression, he saw himself as having made a definitive break with the past when he decided to write The Enemy Gods: "I saw that in my writing I had run away steadily from the present-day realities

which occupied most of my thoughts in connection with Indians. For the first time I felt a desire to tackle those realities. I should write a counterpart to Laughing Boy, a real study of what his son would be up against today."

The Enemy Gods' most perceptive critic, D'Arcy McNickle, sees the book as being "at once a tract and a plea for cultural pluralism."⁸ With the possible exception of sermons, however, tracts and pleas are among the easiest forms of literature to ignore, so it might be observed that McNickle, without intending to, has exposed the underlying cause for the book's relative obscurity during the forties and fifties. Ironically, the book's recent resurgence in paperback can be traced in part to the same tract-like quality of several of its major passages, the political and cultural themes of which are simply too important to forget.

Though the Navajos have not remained static for the past half-century, many of La Farge's central messages, as conveyed in The Enemy Gods, have lost none of their relevance for large segments of the Navajo Nation. The balance to be struck by individual Navajos between total assimilation and total rejection of the Euro-American way of life is as difficult to attain as ever. La Farge's repeated attempts in The Enemy Gods to direct Navajos to some sort of workable compromise form the core around which the plot of the book has been loosely wound.

The definitive version of La Farge's frequently stated main point appears within a couple of pages of the end of the novel: "Just

following the old Navajo way won't save us," says Myron Begay, the book's bicultural protagonist, "and we can't walk in the white man's trail. We have to give up a lot of little ideas, that we have held because they were the best we knew. If we want to save ourselves, we have to learn to use the white man's knowledge, his weapons, his machine--and--still be Navajos" (The Enemy Gods 323). La Farge writes his plea for cultural pluralism with the twofold assumption that Navajo adaptation to mainstream life need not automatically connote assimilation, and that Navajo culture, during the period of adaptation, must provide room both for progressives and for traditionalists.

For proof of the continuing relevance of La Farge's fifty-year-old position on this matter, consider the following statement: "Most of the people here are very traditional. They don't trust modern ways. But I try to think both ways, in English and Navajo. I have to decide which way is better. Most of the time, I'm right on the edge between them."⁹ These words, which sound remarkably like an excerpt from The Enemy Gods, are in fact of recent utterance. They belong to Johnny Descheny, a Navajo from Rock Point, Arizona. Having defeated an incumbent in a 1982 election, he went on to serve as a member of the Navajo Tribal Council. The specific situations described in The Enemy Gods may appear to be dated, but the broader themes belong, as those of classic art always belong, to the realm of perennially current events.

The Enemy Gods' Portrait of the BIA

Of the many sub-themes included in The Enemy Gods--among them, the corruption of Protestant missionaries, the rapacity of local ranchers and politicians, and the shocking mistreatment of children in Indian boarding schools--one in particular deserves a few words of explanation. La Farge's portrait of the Bureau of Indian Affairs under the administration of John Collier is open to charges of idealization in a book that, everywhere else, is scrupulously accurate. La Farge's brief coverage of the Navajos' response to the New Deal's Indian Reorganization Act of 1934, and especially to the Federal herd reduction programs that were intended to control soil erosion on the Navajo Reservation, leaves him in the awkward position of appearing to be, not a documentary realist, but an apologist for his friend Collier. Actually, he is a little bit of both. In order to understand La Farge's basically honest approach to the Navajos' reluctant dealings with the Federal government in the thirties, one must first focus on his insider's view of the BIA's internal workings.

The sixth chapter of Part Two of The Enemy Gods introduces the reader to a minor character with whom La Farge has much in common, "Miss Pitman, Field Secretary of the Indian Welfare Association" (The Enemy Gods 96). Having witnessed for several years the exits and entrances of various Commissioners, she has developed a healthy skepticism about the whole Bureau--healthy to the extent that it has not degenerated into an automatic, unthinking cynicism. Through Miss Pitman, La Farge expresses what must certainly have been his own response to the

exigencies of working in simultaneous connection with American Indians and the U.S. Congress.

Seated for the moment in a leather armchair, the plushness of which is conducive to meditation, Miss Pitman finds that "above all the Indian Bureau oppressed her, the interminable hall that ran on and on and on, with the close succession of offices opening off each side, the hundreds of typewriters, the memoranda and routing slips, the vast bumbling compilation within which the desperate human needs of the people she knew so well could be lost like a handful of beans thrown into a steam-shovel" (The Enemy Gods 95). When Miss Pitman "was among the Indians, learning their specific visible needs," just as La Farge himself had learned them, "she was afflicted constantly by the knowledge of this web and the balancing complexity of Congress; when she came here, it seemed as if her head would split for trying to hold, reconcile, express the knowledge of individual Indians, places, tribes, human beings, and the machinery reaching up to this place and the Capitol, the pressures, confusions, aims, the whole complex world into whose government they were tied" (The Enemy Gods 95).

Anyone who has accused La Farge of simplistic thinking or romanticism regarding Indians and the Indian cause has not read this passage. The sensibility that it reveals is anguished but utterly immune to fashionable alienation. The tone of the passage, rather, is that of lucid outrage. Miss Pitman's engaged mind remains inexhaustibly active and impassioned despite the wearying, numbing complexity of working within the system. She could

easily have spoken out in coherent denunciation of the insensitive, unspeakably huge Federal bureaucracy, and perhaps on another day she might have. But against the frustration of trying to meet microscopically specific human needs, she consoles and fortifies herself with the knowledge that the present Commissioner of Indian Affairs is a "reform appointment" (The Enemy Gods 95).

Commissioner Trubee, based on John Collier, spends most of the sixth chapter discussing, in horrifying detail, the very problem the reader has been aware of since the opening chapter of the book, namely, that of the squalid state of Navajo education. Lest the reader be encouraged to think that the Navajos are singular in their needs, La Farge undercuts that notion with the aid of the trustworthy Miss Pitman. As she walks out of the Commissioner's office, Bureau stationery in hand, it occurs to her that this vital piece of paper she holds--the one that contains so many polysyllabic words determining the fate of so many anonymous children--"would have to pass over at least six desks for initialling before it reached the Commissioner again. She decided that if it was to go through before next winter, she'd have to carry it around from desk to desk herself. What a to-do over one small reform, and the great things untouched, land being stolen by the millions of acres, that Navajo boundary business in New Mexico, the Osage scandals, sickness, poverty and despair . . . Building a house out of pebbles, one by one, but after eight years, looking back, one could see the gains" (The Enemy Gods 99).

Just in case the reader's farsightedness is not as good as Miss Pitman's, she repeats that final thought. Nodding to Dr. Entwistle, the BIA's Director of Education, who has just informed her brightly that "our new food appropriation" has come through--thirty-six cents a day per child!--she thinks: "With this administration, perhaps one could really get something done" (The Enemy Gods 99). If La Farge did not agree with Miss Pitman, he would never have had reason to write The Enemy Gods. But he does agree with her. Indeed, some readers might insist that he is Miss Pitman.¹⁰ Whether he is or not, though, her hard-boiled sentiments and her thoroughly useful attitude accurately reflect La Farge's own opinions. Readers wondering what quality in La Farge induced D'Arcy McNickle to write a biography of him need look no further than to the resilient sanity of Miss Pitman.

But how sane are La Farge's views on herd reduction? These could present a problem for the historically minded reader. The Indian Service, under John Collier saw herd reduction as the only solution to the environmental catastrophe of overgrazing and consequent soil erosion. Unfortunately, the two great reduction campaigns carried out in 1933 and 1934 were underplanned, understaffed, and underfinanced. The resulting haste and clumsiness of the program were manifested in non-graduated reductions in which poor families were left with too few head of livestock to live on. According to Donald Parman, "Collier was only dimly aware of the Navajos' attachment to their sheep and goats. These early blunders served to handicap later attempts to prevent overgrazing by a

semigraduated reduction program which concentrated on horses and nonproductive livestock."11

La Farge gives the reader little sense of Collier's dim awareness, in the fourth chapter of Part Four of *The Enemy Gods*, when he devotes an entire scene to a discussion among Navajo tribal leaders about how they should respond to the problem of overgrazing by their sheep. Cottonwood Leader, the local headman, knows that Myron Begay is the school-educated nephew of Shooting Singer, the most respected Navajo character in the novel. The young man's opinion might be worth something. But Myron, at this stage of the book, is not yet the paragon of cultural pluralism that he is destined to become.

The discussion is straight-forward but moves at a Navajo pace, thereby generating an excess of enthusiasm in Myron, in whom the pressure builds as he must wait his turn to speak. It is the kind of meeting in which only a few men speak, most just sit and listen, "and finally out of reflection and long silences a common agreement would emerge" (*The Enemy Gods* 281). The two main points of view are that, according to religion, it is impossible that the sheep can do harm, but that, according to observation, it is readily apparent that the land is being seriously overgrazed. Myron, when at last his opinion is solicited, shows that he is not quite ready to assume his role as a Navajo.

La Farge characterizes Myron's unstable, volatile state by the simple device of having him stand up and talk. As natural as that gesture might be in a white context, it is a breach

of decorum here, a sign of pride where there should be only a self-effacing contribution of information to the group as a whole. Myron speaks with eloquence, but perhaps he is a shade too loud, a little too eager in his desire to prove himself, to help his fellow tribesmen, and to lash out at the whites. "It is a trap, I think," he says. "They give us a big council, a government, so that they can run it and yet make us take the blame for what happens, I think. By and by we shall have few sheep, we shall be poor, we shall be hungry. We'll be glad, then, to get jobs building even more fences, I think" (*The Enemy Gods* 283).

In short, Myron sees the government's herd reduction campaign as a ploy whereby the whites are going to grab Navajo land in Arizona the way they did in New Mexico. He foresees nothing better than a future of penury, of total dependence on handouts from the whites. "He sat down. The following silence was longer than any before, he didn't think he could stand it. He kept thinking of convincing things he might have said. A lanky middle-aged man began to speak, slowly and thoughtfully, without rising" (*The Enemy Gods* 283). It dawns on the reader that, yes, Myron was speaking a bit rapidly there, a bit abrasively, and was he really the only one to stand while speaking? Yes, he was.

Having expected a personal triumph, Myron is greeted instead with a calm, steady chipping away at his entire thesis. The lanky man and a couple of other speakers relate their experiences, which have not been with corrupt missionaries but with concerned agricultural advisors working for the Indian Bureau. The last of them ends his story, which is in praise

of modernization in a traditional cultural context, by glancing at Myron and saying, "I went to school, and I have travelled a little, but by and by I got over it" (The Enemy Gods 285). The meeting breaks up shortly thereafter.

The only problem with the scene is that, despite La Farge's characteristically impeccable handling of matters of Navajo decorum, Myron's views in fact represent those of most Navajos in the mid-thirties--especially in 1934 during the second reduction campaign. The views of La Farge's wise tribal leaders are highly atypical during this era. Clearly, this scene was written in earnest support of John Collier and expressed La Farge's ideals rather than his perception of reality. Twenty years later, however, writing in a non-fictional context, he admitted that the herd reduction program had "shattered the Navajo economy and changed the life of the tribe."¹² But he simultaneously bemoaned the soil erosion that continued unabated with the failure of the New Deal to leave a legacy of conservation. Readers of The Enemy Gods who have the opportunity to look at certain parts of the Navajo Reservation today will perhaps find La Farge's defense of BIA policy, in this one instance, to be forgivable.

The Short Stories

The fourteen Indian short stories of Oliver La Farge have received much less attention from readers than have his two Indian novels. This is regrettable. Although at times his stories read like rough ideas later smoothed for inclusion in his novels, more often they display his best talents, with the added

advantages of brevity and compression. Indeed, the best stories, such as "North Is Black," contain virtues found only in the strongest chapters of the novels. La Farge's subject matter is also broader in the stories. Whereas in the novels he confines himself for the most part to Navajos, in the stories he expands his range to include Apaches, Pueblos, Hopis, and--most peculiar of all tribes --anthropologists.

Most of the stories evince the same bias toward realism that characterizes the novels. However, when an experiment with the supernatural is attempted, as in the Hopi story "The Resting Place," it is conducted with greater control than in, say, the Prologue to The Enemy Gods. In general, the stories tend to confirm the impression created by the novels that La Farge's main strengths are small ones. Even if his broad themes sometimes strike the reader as editorial seeded through an otherwise sound narrative, his illustrative details seldom fail to ring true. It may be that the stories simply leave La Farge less room in which to proseletyze. This is not to say that he is essentially a story writer who errs in even attempting a novel, but it is to suggest that he is at least as good a storyteller as he is a novelist, and that his stature in American fiction, diminished somewhat by time, can only stand to gain from any attention his stories might receive.

One of the aspects of the stories that distinguished them from the novels is the jolt they sometimes give the reader concerning the sheer otherness of the Indians. The alien qualities of Navajos, Apaches, and Pueblos, as they appear in the novels, frequently seem to

have been played down, if only because the reader has time to get used to these foreign people. In the stories, on the other hand, the tribal properties of Native Americans never quite release any one Indian from the strictures of thinking or behaving in a markedly culture-specific way. Three of La Farge's best stories, ranging from his earliest to his latest work, illustrate this point especially well: "North Is Black," from All the Young Men (1935); "The Happy Indian Laughter," from A Pause in the Desert (1957); and "The Ancient Strength," from The Door in the Wall (1965).

"North Is Black"

More than any other story by La Farge, "North Is Black" exhibits a terse, linear mode of narration that will strike the reader as highly reminiscent of the excellent second section of the eighth chapter, of Laughing Boy, in which Laughing Boy tells Slim Girl of his fight with some renegade Kaibab Paiutes. "North Is Black" is written in an almost identically taut, spare, first-person narrative. In addition, one finds none of the false notes, none of the overly lush figures of speech, that occasionally detract from other parts of Laughing Boy. In "North Is Black," the Indian speaker, North Wanderer, tells, as Laughing Boy does in his own narrative, the story behind the acquisition of his name.

North Wanderer acquires his name by doing just that, wandering northward from Arizona to Colorado. His reason for making the journey is that he wishes to court and marry an American woman who befriended him during her stay in

Arizona. Her attractiveness is classically La Fargian: "She was not like most Americans, the way they act. They talk fast, and shout, and spit over the edge" of mesas they visit (All the Young Men 66). "She was quiet, and looked, and thought about it, like an Indian" (All the Young Men 66). After an arduous journey up into the Rockies, North Wanderer locates the woman. He also locates her friends, her relatives, and the man she plans to marry. During his stayover as their guest, he reveals that the woman's fiancé cheats at cards. Unfortunately, his method of exposure, a knife through the cheater's hand as he tries to palm an ace, is too violent and is performed in front of strangers, thereby humiliating the group to which the woman is attached. Understanding his mistake, North Wanderer sadly returns home alone.

"North Is Black" differs from the eighth chapter of Laughing Boy in that the speaker is bilingual, having been "taught American" as a boy on the Apaches' San Carlos Reservation, and thus tells his tale in English, not in Navajo (All the Young Men 63). Despite that difference, the two narratives are virtually indistinguishable in tone. It seems not to matter who does the translating, La Farge or one of his characters. The narratives share, for instance, the same short sentences, the same vividly literal observations. But what really sets them apart from the common run of Western literature is their narrators' blindly unthinking acceptance of what must seem to the reader to be wildly alien assumptions about how to look at life.

Nothing could be more reasonable for North Wanderer to suppose than that Hopi Indians were

put on earth to be relieved, without a trace of Navajo guilt, of their sheep. It is also in the nature of things, as he sees it, that a train, which he calls an "iron-fire-drives," is a miraculous thing indeed, but one would not actually want to ride in it (All the Young Men 66). The thought of killing certain white people, however, on the grounds that they are obnoxious tourists is worth considering. And it is apparent that, as a Navajo, one must disapprove of the barbarous customs of scalping, for that is an art practiced only by people of inferior breeding, such as Utes, various Plains Indians, and Americans. Every line of "North Is Black," in other words, is an education in how to look at the world in a fresh, unbiased--or, rather, rebiased--fashion. The best that Laughing Boy has to offer in the way of startlingly modern realism may thus be traced to the very story that gave rise to its publication.

"The Happy Indian Laughter"

Education of another sort than that offered by "North Is Black" defines the form of "The Happy Indian Laughter," which focuses on the irreconcilable differences that will always remain between whites and acculturated, but non-assimilated, Indians. This story has to do with the mutual attachment of an Apache man and white woman. The man, a veteran pilot of the Second World War, decorated for valor over Europe, is a fully bicultural character. His name is Ralph, he is fluently bilingual, and he is one of only four members of his tribe to have gone all the way through college. He has returned home to take up the tribal pursuit of being a successful stockman. The woman, who comes from Cleveland,

has considered accepting his proposal of marriage. The catch is that she will be expected to move out here to the "Gohlquain Apache Indian Reservation" if she becomes his wife (A Pause in the Desert 176). She will have to prove herself able to adapt to the strangeness of an utterly alien environment.

The woman, never named in the story, is one of La Farge's "good" white people--intelligently quiet, polite, receptive to the customs and attitudes of strangers. The Apache family she stays with on the reservation represent a continuum of adaptation to the white world. Ralph comes as close as any of La Farge's Native Americans do to manifesting the bicultural ideal toward which Myron Begay strove in The Enemy Gods. His father and mother are comfortably traditional. His uncle on his father's side has studied for two years at Colorado A & M and is "really a fine cattleman" (A Pause in the Desert 180). Of his two sisters, one has been in the Waves during the war and plans to follow in Ralph's footsteps by entering the University of New Mexico. The other sister is an updated version of all the Indians La Farge portrays as being unhappy with their Indianness. She reads movie magazines, has curled hair, and has donned white people's clothes of unsurpassed tawdriness. Her uneasiness stands in pointed contrast to the relaxed affability of the rest of Ralph's family.

The family's good manners turn into genuine friendliness once the white woman has made a good impression by not talking too loudly, the way "some kind of social worker did" who "came in talking her head off before anybody

had time to get used to her" (A Pause in the Desert 183). Indeed, up to the very end of the story, it seems that the white woman is actually going to be able to bridge the cultural gap between herself and Ralph. The barriers that stand in her way are removed one by one, either through the aid and explanations of Ralph or through her own La Fargian sensitivity to the lifeways of strangers. It looks as if nothing will stop her. The people's appearance, the sometime opaque expressions on their faces and in their eyes, the way they speak, "With a good many 'sh' and 'l' sounds, punctuated by harsh, throaty consonants," the way they complement modern health care with curing chants, the way they drink, from one communal lard pail, their cider-like corn beer, tulapai--all these things the woman accepts (A Pause in the Desert 177-9). To the very last page of the story it seems as if she will decide to remain with these friendly people so easily roused to laughter.

It is the laughter, however, the innocuous laughter, that puts an abrupt end to the white woman's acculturation. A friend of the family, Tomas Horses, tells an Apache tale of revenge upon a clever Pueblo trader. The Pueblo, whose well known trick it has been for years to get Apaches drunk in order to swindle them in trade, has the tables turned on him by being made drunk himself and then traded, at a bargain price, a dangerous horse that takes him off at a gallop into the night. Apaches in on the joke have strung wire across the route he is bound to take, and the wire catches him perfectly in the throat. He is still in the hospital at the time the story is being told.

Ralph translates the whole tale, pausing for bouts of uncontrollable gaiety from his family and friends, for the benefit of the white woman. To his dismay, though, she is appalled by the cheerful, unconcealed cruelty. The border between two cultures, which she so easily traversed at so many points of shared humanity, suddenly becomes a barrier of impenetrable thickness. Ralph reads the expression on the white woman's face and understands that she will be leaving "first thing in the morning" (A Pause in the Desert 192).

"The Happy Indian Laughter" does not constitute a statement of moral condemnation directed at people outside the Judeo-Christian system of ethics. Rather, it is an assertion of the sheer discreteness of cultures, of the inevitable hazards that await would-be cultural cosmopolitans. It is as pure a variation on the theme of cultural incompatibility as can be found in all of La Farge's work. The story highlights one of the ironies that La Farge delights in, namely, the tendency of certain cultures, such as that of the Apaches, to span the range of human possibilities from the subtlest to the crudest extremes. The reader, surprised again and again by the meticulous manners of the Apaches--or confirmed over and over again in the opinion that they are admirable people--is brought up short by the horrible, completely unsympathetic tale of revenge.

La Farge could hardly be accused of romanticism in this case, any more than Homer could be in the Iliad when he presents the lifeways of the Achaeans, whose sublimity on the one hand and whose coarseness on the other can make a reader feel as if New York City's South Bronx

and its Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts were located in the same neighborhood and frequented by the same crowd. The Apaches, La Farge seems to be saying, are not less sophisticated than white people are, but their culture is less compartmentalized than Euro-American civilization, hence the surprises, pleasant and unpleasant, that they consistently offer.

"The Ancient Strength"

That a Pueblo would figure as the victim of a story such as "The Happy Indian Laughter" should not, of course, be taken as a sign of Athabascan partisanship on La Farge's part.¹³ In fact, one of La Farge's finest pieces of short fiction, "The Ancient Strength"--along with a companion story, "The Little Stone Man"--is devoted to Pueblo Indians. Rather than name a known Pueblo community, which would be a risky proposition in view of the Pueblo Indians' adamant desire for privacy, La Farge takes the safer route of inventing a fictional group in a fictional village that merely happens to resemble, albeit very closely, an actual place.

The "San Leandro" of La Farge's story is based on the town of Santa Clara, located near the Rio Grande in northern New Mexico. The "Piro" language the San Leandros speak, a defunct subdivision of the Tanoan language family, is really the Tewa language. La Farge's theme in the story concerns the importance to the Pueblos of keeping their beliefs and certain ceremonies, such as the masked dances, to themselves and especially of keeping their close-knit world intact. The historical source for this jealously guarded privacy is the

Spanish occupation of Pueblo territory centuries ago.

It is the chief regret of an archaeologist named Hendricks, the first-person narrator of "The Ancient Strength," that the San Leandros with whom he is dealing should be so obsessed with keeping their world inviolate that they might not even let him dig in the town's stratified rubbish heap. Engaged in the land claims suit that requires physical evidence of their having occupied a given area prior to a given time, the Indians are enjoined by their attorneys to allow Hendricks to dig. If he finds fragments of floral black-on-white pottery in a stratum indicative of the Pueblos' long-standing habitation of the area in question, they will win their suit, which is worth a hundred thousand dollars.

The success of "The Ancient Strength" proceeds less from the mystery of whether or not the Pueblos will let the excavation take place than from the mode of narration. La Farge's creation of the young academic Hendricks, an assistant professor at the "University of Northern California," comes close to rivalling his creation of the Navajo narrator of "North Is Black." Hendricks tells his story with that mixture of straightforward American English and wild professorial jargon that academic readers will instantly recognize: "Ever since the days of the Anasazi cliff dwellers--nay, before that, back into the Basket Maker II period at least, two thousand years ago--the ancestors of the present Indians were in the habit of throwing their trash out of the settlements, preferably where there was a drop. (I know, the Basket Makers were longheaded and the Pueblos are

brachy, but let's not get into labile cephalic indexes, the dolicho remains at Pecos, and all that; it's too complicated)" (The Door in the Wall 109).

La Farge's ear, so often praised for its sensitivity to the nuances of Indian speech, is nowhere more keenly attuned to a "tribal" dialect than in Hendricks' narration. The contraction of brachycephalic to "brachy," and beyond that the very use of a scientific term instead of a layman's equivalent, is exactly what one would expect to hear from an enthusiastic archaeologist. Of course, what captures the tone to perfection is Hendricks' honest desire not to get bogged down in trivial technicalities that are "too complicated." Indeed, it is Hendricks' honesty, his lack of professional affectation, that emerges as his most salient characteristic. One sees this primarily in his nervous, earnest desire not to offend the sensitive people among whom he is working.

The most seemingly innocent conversation that Hendricks has with the Indians, if it has anything to do with their religious observances, always contains a note of trepidation on both sides. Overt questions, more often than not, meet with evasive answers. Seeing eagles tethered to rooftops, Hendricks asks the Indian he knows best: "You need them for the dance you people put on next month? Like at the end of that dance the Hopis have about then?" (The Door in the Wall 115). "Something like that," his friend answers. "You seen that Hopi dance?" (The Door in the Wall 115). This deflection of the question leads to further deflections, as the Indian pushes the conversation obliquely

away from dangerous ground. Hendricks, cautious and respectful throughout the exchange, understands. But how will he feel when the question of his being allowed to dig arises?

Hendricks is not an ethnographer but an archaeologist who has been called away from his current project in order to perform a special task on behalf of Indians. His attitude at the beginning of the story is that of a man whose attention is focussed toward the ground, not towards the people who walk on that ground. They are of interest only so far as they determine where one may or may not dig. Early on, Hendricks related the separate tale of his difficulties with a Hispanic rancher on whose private land he is digging. His irritation with the obstacles put in his way by this man is a reaction one might expect him to have when impeded by the Pueblos. But the note of exasperation on which one fears the story may end never materializes.

Hendricks' view departs from its purely professional focus to take in the aesthetic balance of San Leandro: "One of the much touted charms of adobe is how it takes sunlight and shadow, the sunlight absorbed and softened, the shadow luminous" (The Door in the Wall 117). This chiaroscuro marvel is not the only salient aspect of the village, though. Hendricks has just as sharp an eye when it comes to noticing the rubbish heap. Along with tin cans and shards of glass and pottery, he sees a "brass cartridge case, farther down the half buried remnant of an old shoe, and near my feet a phonograph record and a plastic hair brush without bristles" (The Door in the Wall 114). It is one of La Farge's more poignant ironies that such a

town-dump trash as this should be deemed too precious to disturb.

Hendricks grasps the irony. The beauty and the ugliness he witnesses, which ought to be discrete components of a culture in the Euro-American scheme of things, forms what the Pueblos perceive as a whole. The Indians, in other words, are not part-time ecologists. They are the ecology. And just as the beauty and the ugliness are incorporated into the total visual experience of San Leandro, so are its past and present, its surface trash and its buried artifacts, part of a whole fabric that may not be torn.

The overwhelming question of "what harm can it do" to dig a tiny trench is precisely what Hendricks does not ask at the end of the story. He startles himself with his acquiescence: "I guess my reaction had been building up in me, subconsciously, for some little time. I heard myself saying, 'I think you are exactly right. I think the important thing is for you to keep everything whole.' I rose, still surprised at what I had said, and knowing that I meant exactly that" (The Door in the Wall 131). Hendricks is one of La Farge's "good" anthropologists. He never lets his professional concerns obscure the humanity of the people he is involved with. This puts him in contrast to the Pueblo expert among his colleagues at UNC: "Sorenson might say I had muffed it, but if I had, by doing so I had uncovered a bit of simon-pure archeology that no ruin, no matter how complete, would ever yield up" (The Door in the Wall 131). By allowing his capacity for human response as much depth and breadth as his assiduousness in professional endeavors, Hendricks

experiences first-hand the unmediated Pueblo "wholeness"--of speech and song, of adobe and rubbish heap--that Sorenson, for all his accomplishments, can only conceive of as an abstraction.

Conclusion

Until such time as La Farge's Indian stories are collected in one volume and put back into print, his reputation as a writer will be based almost exclusively on his achievements as a novelist. As good as his novels are, this is an unfortunate situation, for the best of the stories have a quality of mature understatement that contrasts favorably with the occasional stridency of the novels. Whereas La Farge is tempted into editorial glosses on life-and-death issues confronting Indians in his novels, he is more often content in the stories to let the plot move swiftly and without interruption. The brevity of expression that the story-form forces on its practitioners has a healthy, disciplining effect on La Farge. And yet, for the time being at least, the stories continue to be seen as reinforcements of themes that have been definitively embodied in the novels.

While one does not want to argue that the stories are better than the novels, neither does one do La Farge a service by evaluating them as so many rejected scenes from longer works, fit only for publication in the deciduous pages of the Saturday Evening Post or the New Yorker. It is enough, perhaps, that one realizes the stories tend to exhibit the virtue of compression, the novels the virtue of sustained effort, and that both virtues taken together explain La

Farge's appeal to readers fortunate enough to be exposed to his work. Finally, though, the best measure of La Farge's currency comes of seeing how great are the debts of recent writers to the precedents established by his best efforts. A comparison of La Farge with the most distinguished of his successors, all of them contributors to the Native American Renaissance, shows that while he may not have had the last word in the field of Indian fiction, he had one of the first and most enduring voices, one that is still worth listening to, if only for its echoes.

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Notes

¹ D'Arcy McNickle, Indian Man (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1971), p. 55.

² Clyde Kluckhohn and Dorothea Leighton, The Navaho (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1946), p. 42.

³ McNickle, p. 55.

⁴ Flora L. Bailey, "Navaho Motor Habits," American Anthropologist 44 (1942), pp. 210-34. Quoted in Kluckhohn and Leighton, pp. 43-44.

⁵ Oliver La Farge, Raw Material (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1945), p. 189.

⁶ La Farge, p. 189.

⁷ La Farge, p. 208.

⁸ McNickle, pp. 103-4.

⁹ Quoted in Bruce Cory, "A New Generation of Navajos," New York Times Magazine, 18 November 1984, pp. 156-60.

¹⁰ See McNickle, p. 65: Collier's predecessor "Rhoads took the unusual step of inviting [La Farge] to share his desk, to review every bit of paper that came up for his signature, to listen in on every conversation with staff members."

¹¹ Donald L. Parman, The Navajos and the New Deal (New Haven, Ct.: Yale University Press, 1976), p. 293.

¹² Oliver La Farge, A Pictorial History of the American Indian (New York: Crown, 1956), p. 146.

¹³ See La Farge, Raw Material, p. 163: "What I've written may sound a little hard on the Pueblos; I do not wish to be, having a great liking for them, but as it was their opposite numbers I set out to describe, inevitably I played them for contrast, I could write the same account the other way round with the reverse effect."

Works by Oliver La Farge

All the Young Men. Boston: Houghton Mifflin,
1935.

The Door in the Wall. Boston: Houghton Mifflin,
1965.

The Enemy Gods. 1937; Albuquerque: University of
New Mexico Press, 1975.

Laughing Boy. 1929; New York: Signet, 1971.

A Pause in the Desert. Boston: Houghton
Mifflin, 1957.