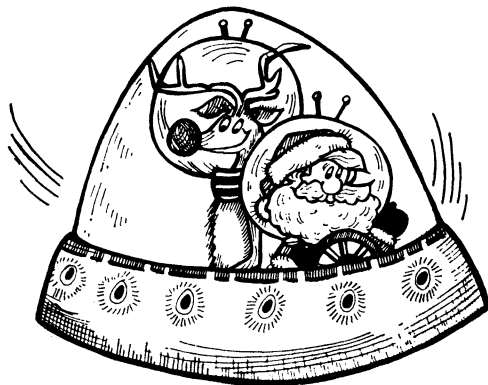


Alan Hardiman

The Future of Santa Claus

No Santa Claus! Thank God, he lives, and he lives forever. A thousand years from now, Virginia, nay, ten times ten thousand years from now, he will continue to make glad the heart of childhood.¹

A title such as "The Future of Santa Claus" may give rise to a number of images in readers' minds. There he is, all clad in his red suit, black boots and belt, zooming through the sky on Christmas Eve at twice the speed of sound. His plutonium-powered rocket-sleigh is automatically guided by a computer which contains in its memory banks the names and addresses of all the good children. This computer also prints the names of the children on tags attached to their gifts. Now, approaching his first target, Santa Claus flicks a switch and the rocket-sleigh gradually comes to a stand-still, engines humming as it gently hovers over the ground. A meter glows a dull green



and Santa's form begins to shimmer as he beams himself down, Star-Trek fashion, into the house of the good little girl or boy. A split second later he is up again and off to his next destination, electronically synthesized sleigh-bell sounds jingling in the crisp, cold night.

Before this flight of fancy gets out of hand, we should retrace our steps a little and see just where Santa is coming from. Santa Claus emerged in the context of Nineteenth Century Romanticism, a movement which saw a shift in emphasis away from classical literature and mythology toward popular mythology and "folk" literature. The story found a secure place in popular American mythology soon after the publication of Clement C. Moore's poem, *The Visit of St. Nicholas* (or as it is more commonly known, *'Twas the Night Before Christmas*), in New York in 1823. It was in these verses that the character, indebted to St. Nicholas of church legend in name only, first acquired the flying sleigh and reindeer. Forty years later, Thomas Nast began to illustrate the poem with his own conception of Moore's "St. Nick," creating the first drawings that clearly resembled the figure known to us today. Although he has grown from a "jolly old elf" to a full-sized person, the character created by Moore and Nast has remained virtually unchanged. The story has been embellished here and there (for



example, Rudolf the red-nosed reindeer has been added, along with assorted elves, and the front door increasingly replaces the chimney as a port of entry), but in essence it remains the same.

Although it is of some interest to investigate Santa's origins, a study of the myth to determine its meaning or function in our culture today may prove in the long run to be more helpful in assessing its future.

In its present form the story goes something like this: On Christmas Eve, Santa Claus leaves his home at the North Pole and flies through the sky in a sleigh pulled by reindeer, to the sound of sleigh-bells jingling. He comes with toys to reward the good children, whose names are written in his list. Santa is not only aware of each child's "moral standing," but he is also cognizant of its states of consciousness. He is all-knowing, all-seeing, omniscient:

He sees you when you're sleeping,
He knows if you're awake,
He knows if you've been bad or good,
So be good for goodness sake.

Santa enters the house of each good child, in one fashion or another, leaves the gifts and departs, usually having partaken of some sustenance in the form of hot chocolate and cookies.

This is the general shape of the myth. Most children learn about Santa Claus very early in their pre-school days. This makes the myth part of the general education they receive outside of the formal school curriculum. The myth belongs to the corpus of basic cultural learning, which includes language, and by which children, "the novices of society . . . are being indoctrinated by the bearers of tradition."² This raises the question: Is the myth anything more than a children's fairy-tale, or a commercial ploy to boost department-store sales during the Christmas season? Is there perhaps more to the story than meets the eye?

If Claude Lévi-Strauss is to be believed, myth is not just fairy-tale. It contains a message, "a message in code from the whole of a culture to its individual members."³ Now if there is a message contained in the Santa Claus myth, then the future of the myth is assured as long as that message has some validity for Western culture. Any new versions of the myth will be simply aspects of the same message. But Santa Claus is a fairly recent development; surely there is a myth of which the Santa Claus story itself is a "new version."

The Christian myth of the second coming of Christ has a narrative structure similar to that of the Santa Claus myth. This similarity is obvious when the stories are viewed together:

At the time of Christmas Eve Santa Claus leaves
the end of the world Jesus Christ

his abode at the North Pole and comes through the sky on
in Heaven

a sleigh with reindeer to the sound of sleigh-bells He
cloud angels a trumpet

comes with toys to reward the good children
Judgment faithful (good children of God)

A number of parallels can be drawn. In both cases a list of names figures in the act of rewarding: Santa's list and the Book of Life (Rev. 13 and 20). In both cases the keeper of the list is omniscient, even if he has to check the list twice to be sure. Both are eternal. It might also be noted that both reindeer and angels sport fixtures over their heads. The similarities are striking, but similarity is only one characteristic which marks the transformation of a myth into a different version. Inversion, or opposition, also plays a key role, and it is not lacking in the stories at hand. Santa Claus is an *old* man with a *white* beard who *never dies*. It is known that he comes once a year, every year. Christ, on the other hand, is a *young* man, usually depicted with a *dark* beard, who *has died*. It is not known when he will come ("no one knows" Mark 13:32), but when he does, it will be only once.

Food and drink figure in the ritualistic elements associated with the two myths. In some homes, hot chocolate and cookies are left for Santa when he comes in the night; the actual foodstuffs used may vary from one home to another. In the ritual of the church, there is wine to be drunk and bread to be eaten. Here it is the believers who eat the foodstuffs: the bread which is his body, the wine which is his blood. In doing this they proclaim Christ's death "until he comes" (1 Cor. 11:26). This, then, is another inversion which characterizes the transformation:

Santa Claus *eats and drinks* when he comes
 Christ *is eaten and is drunk* until he comes

While Christ's second coming is understood to be a once-and-for-

all affair, his first coming is celebrated annually. The story of Santa and his coming is, of course, tied to this celebration. Christ's first coming is marked by the twenty-fifth of December, Santa's coming by the twenty-fourth. So it is only after Santa has come, and gone, that Christ comes, in the context of the annual celebration. The result is one complete annual cycle, beginning on December 25th, marking Christ's first coming, and ending with the following December 24th, marking his second coming in its transformation as the story of Santa Claus. The cycle begins again the very next day. From the perspective of a single Christmas season, it can be seen that first and second advents are tied together, albeit in reverse order, and the message comes across that the story whose beginning is marked by Christmas Day does indeed have an ending, and that the two go together.

Both figures are involved with giving: Santa's *raison d'être* is to give; Christ came "to give his life" (Mk. 10:45), to "give himself" (1 Tim. 2:6). Both figures focus attention on immortality: Santa, who will live "ten times ten thousand years," comes annually with that reminder, while Christ, who is to come only once, promises the resurrection of the dead.

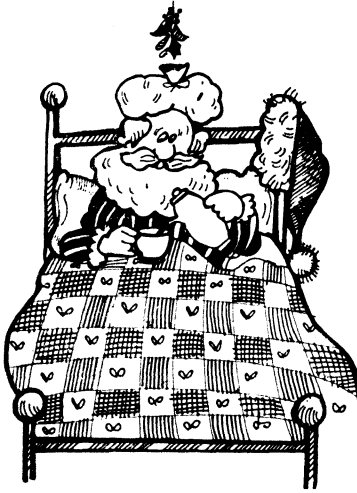
General information theory tells us that the communication of any message can be fraught with difficulty. To borrow an illustration from Edmund Leach, let person A represent the culture, and person B the members of the culture. Person A is trying somewhat vainly to communicate a message to person B, being hampered by "interference."

What will A do? If he is sensible he will not be satisfied with shouting his message just once, he will shout it several times, and give a different working to the message each time, supplementing his words with visual signals. At the receiving end B may very likely get the meaning of each of the individual messages slightly wrong, but when he puts them together the redundancies and the mutual consistencies and inconsistencies will make it quite clear what is really being said.⁴

The story of the second coming of Christ and that of Santa Claus are two separate statements of the same message. It is up to us, the members of the culture, to put them together in such a way as to comprehend "what is 'really' being said." Failing this, it is likely that the message will be "re-sent"⁵ in a different form again, although the underlying structure would probably be similar to the present stories.

This is perhaps the way that the future of Santa Claus is best seen. Santa can be dressed up in the technological jargon of popular futur-

ism, but he won't feel at home in it. He exists today, not as a relic preserved from the ancient past, but in a living myth which teaches something fundamental to our culture. Its message, obscured at present by the jingle and clang of cash registers and the clamor of big business, may indeed appear at some point in the future in a different guise, but I, for one, would hate to see old Santa go.



footnotes

1. Francis P. Church, "Editorial: Is There A Santa Claus?" *The New York Sun*, Sept. 21, 1897.
2. Edmund Leach, *Lévi-Strauss*, London: Fontana/Collins, 1974, p. 59.
3. Robert Scholes, *Structuralism in Literature: An Introduction*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974, p. 69.
4. Leach, *loc. cit.*
5. "Admittedly it is not very clear who is sending the message, but it is clear who is receiving it," *Ibid.*