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CULTURAL IDENTITY IN ANGLOPHONE ETHNIC LITERATURE

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Abstract: *This article is based on the concept of multiculturalism and focuses on ethnic writing in Canadian English. It examines both an earlier text by Frederick Philip Grove in order to probe the beginnings of literary ethnicity in Canada and two more recent novels by Margaret Laurence and Kristjanna Gunnars which give an insight into the various strategies employed in retrieving an ethnic tradition and articulating an ethnic consciousness.*

For many years literary writers and critics in Canada have made various attempts at defining the Canadian-ness of Canadian literature. The search for an all-encompassing notion of Canadian writing, which initially found its expression in such formulae as: “survival as a unifying symbol” or “Canadian garrison mentality”, has been replaced by a multicultural concept. The Canadian cultural and ethnic mosaic finds its literary expression in a polyphony of voices.

Ever since on announced multiculturalism as an official policy, multiculturalism has become an acknowledged fact in many walks of Canadian life. It has served to defuse the Anglo-and Francophone dualism, though with little luck; it has been used to assign to the country a distinct national image different from the American ideology of the melting –pot; and with the slogan “unity with diversity” it has intended to stop the centrifugal forces at work in Canadian society, and to bring about a greater national cohesiveness.

Introduction

Multiculturalism has not yet sent shock waves through Canadian culture, it has, however, created more than a few wrinkles on the formerly smooth face of dame English –Canadian culture, as the increased output in ethnic literature over the last three decades has put a large question mark behind the former nationalist search for, and canonization of, a Canadian literary mainstream. Needless to say that the policy of multiculturalism has not yet met with approval everywhere and that it has also sparked some controversy. But regardless of what it has or has not achieved, it has most certainly put the Canadian ethnic mosaic – another frequently abused political concept – into a public focus which it has never had before.

While other academic disciplines have witnessed an explosion of publications in ethnic studies, literary criticism in Anglophone Canada has been lagging behind,

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exceptions permitted. It seems that anglophone scholars have found it difficult to accommodate the ethnic factor in their aesthetic approaches, and the impetus for a revision of long cherished critical practices has come from the regional fringes –and here chiefly from the Canadian West with perhaps the most intense historical exposure to ethnic experience- and from critics with affiliations to an ethnic community.

Ethnic literary voices are so diverse and abundant that this paper will have to be selective. I will therefore deal neither with works translated into English from Canada's so-called unofficial languages nor with native Canadian literature which would be a topic in its own right. Instead I will focus on ethnic writing in English and examine the following three novels more closely: Frederick Philip Grove's "A Search for America", Margaret Laurence's "The Diviners" and Kristjana Gunnars' "The Prowler". I have chosen these works for several reasons:

Their authors come from different ethnic backgrounds, German, Scottish, Japanese and Icelandic-Canadian, representing an interesting cross-section of Canada's ethnic mix. By including Laurence as an anglophone writer I am following Enoch Padolsky's recent attempt at replacing the concept of a Canadian mainstream works from the perspective of British-Canadian ethnogenesis.

The selected novels are all cast in form of autobiography which for many minority writers is obviously a very attractive genre. As such the works are all concerned with the artistic presentation of memory which is dealt with in aesthetically different ways thus representing examples of the evolution of Canadian fiction from realism to modernism and postmodernism.

The novels also employ a number of common motifs which, although they are not exclusive to ethnic works, are apparently highly suitable to the literary articulation of ethnic concerns.

The term 'ethnicity' is, of course, highly ambiguous and hotly debated. Linda Hutcheon in her preface to the recent anthology 'Other Solitudes: Canadian Multicultural Fictions' (1990) avoids the term 'ethnic' as an ideologically charged term denoting hierarchy and power, suggesting perhaps aesthetic inferiority, and unduly generalizing and smoothing over differences within a single ethnic group. I would nevertheless like to retain the term 'ethnicity' for the sake of convenience with the full awareness that the artistic transmutation of central themes such as cultural loss, alienation, problems of adjustment may come under many shapes. In addition, it is risky to define literary ethnicity by theme alone, although ethnic works often display a predilection for certain subjects. The novels which I am going to discuss are all characterized by an obsession with the problem of identity which is, however not the sole property of ethnic works, but at the heart of modern literature in general. In order not to fall into the trap of an all too easy definition by theme I have chosen novels which in various degrees focus not simply on the content of an individual's cultural consciousness but on the process of shaping, retrieving, and even inventing an ethnic identity. The respective attempts of the four novelists under inspection bear quite fascinating results.

Grove's "multiculturalism"

It would seem that Frederick Philip Grove's work is out of place here. When Grove published his novels, the term 'multiculturalism' had not yet been coined, not to mention the recent appearance of multiculturalism as a political ideal.

Most critics would therefore side with Walter Pache's verdict that "it seems dangerous and misleading...to assess his work in terms of 'ethnic literature'" (Pache 1986:17). A contrary position is taken by novelist-critic Robert Kroetsch who calls Grove "perhaps the most complex and instructive ethnic writer yet to appear on the Canadian literary scene" (Kroetsch 1985:65). Both Pache and Kroetsch tackle the problem from different angles. Pache argues from the perspective of literary tradition, whereas Kroetsch tries to back his statement by probing structural patterns in Grove's novels. Pache bases his view on Grove's literary roots in fin-de siècle Europa and on his curious biography which forced him to hide his real ethnic origin. Born as Felix Paul Greve in Germany, Grove who had manoeuvred himself into difficulties faked suicide and reappeared first in America, then in Canada, where under an assumed name he became one of the important modernizers of Canadian fiction. Pache links Grove's creation of a new identity to his early infatuation with Oscar Wilde's belief in art as reality and reality as an aesthetic exercise and he interprets Grove's lifelong obsession to become the great Canadian novelist as the author's most "radical experiment...to subordinate the real world to his own artistic concept" (Pache 1990:153).

By contrast, Kroetsch singles out narrative patterns as markers of Grove's ethnic stance. Ethnic experience is reflected within regularly recurring binary patterns such as success - failure, inferiority - superiority, integration - resistance, fact - fiction, forgetting - remembering, death - rebirth, silence - speech and so forth. Although I would argue that Kroetsch's model is valid for the articulation of the immigrant experience in general, motifs such as death and rebirth or silence and speech obviously lend themselves particularly easily to exploring ethnic concerns.

I believe that the gap between Pache's and Kroetsch's differing views can be bridged, if we take a look at "A Search for America". In his preface Grove had maintained to have written an autobiographical narrative dealing with his years in the United States, at the same time he emphasized the importance of the writer's imagination. To anyone familiar with theories of the autobiography this is not a radical statement, as the autobiographer apart from tapping his or her memory usually has to resort to as imaginative reconstruction of the past. For Phil Branden, the novel's protagonist and Grove's alias, memory seems to be only of secondary importance. Although we catch him a few times musing on the unreliable and highly fragmentary nature of the process of remembering, memory does not become a burden, because he is preoccupied primarily with the inventions of his past self. Part of Branden's self is tied to his gradual discovery of the ethnic fact as part of the 'conditio' Americana. At the beginning of the novel Branden explicitly dismisses "the ethnological difficulties between Frenchman and Anglo-Saxon, Indian and Whiteface, Negro and Caucasian" as irrelevant. Yet he is soon to learn that ethnic realities are of greater import than European notions of class. Subsequently, in the course of the action his awareness of ethnicity is growing. When disillusioned he turns his back on urban America, ethnicity slowly moves into the centre. He comes repeatedly in touch with

characters whose ethnic descent is mentioned: the German with his striking accent, the Russian factory worker who does not speak English, and finally the Russian hobo Ivan who speaks English fluently and who initiates Branden into a world teeming with ethnicity, the American wheat belt with its ethnically heterogeneous harvest crews. The mention of the language competence of these characters is revealing, as it can be linked to a symbolic reading of Branden's development. Grove uses an ethnic grammar, he makes Branden in Kroetsch's sense die out of one language into another. This is a surprising twist, as Branden on arrival in North America already speaks English. In retrospect, however, he subjects his experiences to an ethnic fiction interpreting them as loss of language and as movement from speech to silence. From the outset his frequent claim to linguistic competence contrasts to the fact that he is at a loss to understand certain Americanisms and that he falls prey to quite a few misunderstandings.

Subsequently he is silenced when he seeks refuge in nature and, symbolically speaking, has to learn a new language. In one of the key scenes he rescues a man from drowning spending with him two days in silent companionship. A climax is reached when he falls ill and loses consciousness, that is when he undergoes a symbolic death. Brought back to life he regains his speech and his first recorded conversation revolves around the plight of the foreign immigrant who without knowledge of the language becomes a victim. In a symbolic way Branden creates an ethnic fiction for himself, on which he grafts another identity. For he also places his past in a world of literary allusion and reference, which assign to his experiences a moral framework retrieved from Carlyle, Thoreau, John Burroughs and others. The almost allegorical structure of the novel with the hero embracing values such as self-denial, altruism, voluntary poverty etc. casts doubt on Grove's claim to have written a thinly disguised autobiographical work and marks Branden's comments on the workings of memory as plausibility strategies.

The problem with Grove is that he speaks for no ethnic group in particular, but tries to act as a pan-ethnic spokesman. In two lectures which may be read as direct comments on his novel he expresses ideas which partially foreshadow the report of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism on the contribution of the other ethnic groups. Although Grove is not very specific about this contribution, he postulates the failure of the melting-pot ideal, and preaches ethnic pride. Grove's view is highly idealistic as he maintains that Canadians are in need of the newcomers 'spiritual heritage' which comprises their 'rich culture' and moral superiority (Padolsky 1987: 32-50), thus recalling Branden's two fictional identities of which help to bridge the gap between Pache's and Kroetsch's views.

Lawrence's Sophisticated Narrative Pattern

The Canadian West was a hotbed of ethnic literature, and Grove was not the only voice, but the ethnic qualities of these voices went unrecognized or were sacrificed to the screening of Canadian literature for nationally distinct symbols. It was only in the 1970s that the search for such symbols came under attack for ideological and aesthetic reasons. The knife was whetted first by Margaret Laurence who made the experience of other ethnic groups the subjects of her fiction.

Laurence in 'The Diviners' employed a sophisticated narrative pattern for her main topic: the process of acquiring a cultural identity and the aesthetic appropriation of another culture. Several motifs already known from *Grove* reappear in 'The Diviners', though within an altered context: the figure of an orphan, the fictional invention of one's ethnic identity, a concern with language and speech, and the role of memory.

At the centre of the novel is Morag Gunn who, orphaned at the age of six, is adopted into the family of Christie Logan, the town scavenger of Manawaka, a small prairie community. She succeeds in leaving Manawaka for the university where she soon marries a professor of English. The relationship breaks up. Morag, who has started a writing career, gives birth to a girl whom she has conceived from her Métis lover Jules Tonnerre. She becomes a successful writer who in search of her Scottish roots undertakes a trip to Scotland only to find out that her real home is Canada. She finally settles on an old farm in rural Ontario. Her daughter Pique who is of mixed descent becomes the inheritor of two cultural traditions, that of the Scots and the Métis.

This summary may make the novel appear trivial, but what rescues it from lapsing into banality, is its aesthetic complexity. The novel is told from the perspective of the middle-aged Morag who is engaged on an autobiographical quest and into whose present the past keeps intruding in the form of photos and memorybank movies. Much has already been said on these memory devices. Apart from establishing a referential frame for Morag's life, they serve to illustrate the shortcomings of the process of remembering. In contrast to *Grove* who simply smoothed over the inconsistent nature of memory by creating an allegorical vision of the autobiographical self, Laurence openly exposes the selective and arbitrary character of remembering. The series of snapshots showing Morag in various stages of her childhood evokes some unease in the self-reflective narrator who is conscious of reading "invented memories" into them. (Laurence 1974:9). The flashback sequences of the memorybank movies retrieve a better remembered past which is, however, presented as a string of past events selected and ordered by Morag. Altogether the memory devices remind the reader of the artist's need for an inventive imagination and of the thin line between fact and fiction.

Morag's autobiographical quest is also an ethnic quest, and it is useful here to introduce Jan and Aleida Assmann's model of collective memory. Both distinguish between a cultural and oral collective memory. While the oral memory recalls memorable events and stories of a more private kind which are retained in the consciousness of a group for not more than three generations, the cultural memory preserves, interprets, and passes on a group's cultural identity, which is guarded by cultural specialists, storytellers who keep it alive during occasions and in visible objects of publicly acknowledged communal importance. Assmann's model is a little too exclusive, because the realms of both kinds of the collective memory frequently overlap (Raible 1988) and because the model is based on the notion of an intact community. "The Diviners" shows the small town riven by class and ethnic difference where the cultural memory of the descendants of the Scottish settlers has condemned that of the Métis almost to oblivion. Morag is at a double disadvantage. As a lower class member she is an outsider in her own ethnic group and as an orphaned child she is placed in a cultural void.

From an aesthetic point of view this is, however, also an advantage which permits Laurence to focus on the complex process of acquiring a cultural identity. The orphaned Morag exists in a state of cultural muteness which forces her to develop a voice of her own, first as a child with a desperate desire for cultural belonging, later as an artist struggling with the literary articulation of that experience.

Christie Logan and Jules Tonnerre are the exponents of a cultural memory whose ethnic strands finally merge in Morag and her daughter's cultural consciousness. What Christie and Jules as storytellers do is basically the same. Their stories are each about their respective group. Though grounded in fact, that is the history of the Scottish evictions or the defeat of the Métis, the stories are enlarged, gaps in historical facts are bridged imaginatively, and history is even invented. The line between fact and fiction is blurred and the past remade in tale and song is fictionalized. As a result Morag's autobiographical quest reveals a cultural memory in the making, where the handling of a tradition, its enlargement, growth and revision are chiefly dependent on the needs of the present. Truth enshrined in the cultural memory is never identical with factual truth, but is the result of shifting, selecting, and using scraps from the nuisance grounds of history. Christie, quite aptly presented in the role of a garbage collector, and Jules, the ballad singer, become interpreters of Canadian history whose contrasting versions spell out the need for revisions and disclose the questionable claim to a definite historical truth. Earlier in the novel, before another memorybank movie begins to unfold in her mind, Morag articulates this in her notebook:

...everyone is constantly changing their own past, recalling it, revising it. What really happened? A meaningless question. But one I keep trying to answer, knowing there is no answer. (Laurence 1978:60)

Reading the novel on the basis of this statement, the collective memories of both ethnic groups are equally true and untrue. What counts is not their factual value, but what they mean to members of each group. In this sense, Morag's decision to keep both traditions alive implies the recognition of the equal validity of both cultural memories. In the end Morag, becomes the guardian of Jules' tradition. As an artist she will do what Jules as a folk-singer wanted to do, when he tried to make the songs about his family public, but failed on account of his unresponsive white audiences. In the act of writing Morag will wrest his stories from the threat of oblivion and rescue them from the realm of orality into the printed page thus sealing her acknowledgement of Métis culture. As a specialist of the word Morag has become a modern day successor of the old storytellers as the sacred guardians of the cultural memory. The preservation of Jules' tradition within the confines of a white art form carries the hope that the Métis' past will eventually be adopted into the cultural memory of the dominant group.

A Completely Different Book

“The Prowler” by Kristjana Gunnars, the last text under examination, is a completely different book. The book cover, though not an integral part of the novel, suggests an ethnic work by showing Icelandic scenery emanating from a person’s (Gunnars’) forehead upon which a text in Icelandic is superimposed. On opening the book the reader, however, gets a surprise. The novel has no pages, but is arranged in 167 numbered paragraphs which do not follow a chronological story line. It is furthermore preceded by a quote from Marguerite Duras’ novel “L’amant” (1984) which serves as an introduction to what we have to expect: “The story of my life doesn’t exist... There is never any center to it.” Like “The Diviners”, “The Prowler” has a narrator who has to come to terms with her past, but in contrast to Laurence Gunnars deliberately undermines the claim of an autobiography to present in retrospect a truthful picture of one’s life and to submit it to one central perspective in order to convey the impression of a consistent identity. Although we can gather quite a few details from the unnamed narrator’s life including clues that Gunnars is writing about herself, the novel is built on a paradox: the narrator’s desire to write her autobiography and the simultaneous acknowledgement of the defeat of that intention. What emerges is not an autobiography, but a text focussing on the process of writing one. The novel is a mixture of the narrator’s memories and reflections on the nature of that venture. The burden of memory consists not only in the predominance of recollections of negative past experiences, of sickness, hunger, hard work, loneliness etc. set against the uneasy political background of World War and Cold War events. The burden also consists in the narrator’s awareness of the unreliable and incoherent character of her memories which are released by way of association, force themselves into her mind regardless of chronology and order, and reveal gaping blanks. Silence in “The Prowler” is identical with memory gaps, and unlike Morag in “The Diviners”, Gunnar’s narrator is unwilling to resort to an imagined past. Conscious on the fact that any attempt at stringing together the snippets of memory into a coherent whole would imply a distorted or at best restricted approach to her life, she remains suspicious of any autobiographical reconstruction as text. As “all stories are pretense” and the telling of one’s life would be a self – deception (Szabados & Givner 1989:82), the narrator rejects the traditional autobiographer’s stance of omniscience. She also resists the power of autobiographical prescriptions with their culturally acquired generic and aesthetic conventions which would assign centrality, order, and closure where there are only chaos, disorder, and multiple meanings.

On the basis of these convictions the narrator starts her story with reflections on the limitations of story-telling, and continually interrupts her memories with statements to that end. Thus she constantly reminds her readers of the text as artefact and she reinforces her argument by breaking down the distinction between memories as stories and her aesthetic reflections by transforming events from her past into metaphors of the aesthetic process. As a result the title of the novel relates not only to an event remembered from her childhood, but it also serves as a metaphor for the relation between writer and reader. The narrator as prowler is always in search of a story within the confines of a text. A writer is always looking for threads and connections, for a beginning, middle and ending. The finished text working within a context of pre-given assumptions in, as the narrator

tells us, prowling in the reader's domain, since it tries to forcefeed the reader with a preconceived interpretation. Prowling therefore becomes a metaphor of violence in the same way as the Cold War which is translated from political background into a powerful image of the act of writing.

All this could mean that the novel is a slightly disguised treatise on the fashionable art of deconstruction and that ethnicity is of no concern at all. This would ignore, however, the open character of the text and the narrator's plea to the reader to become an active participant, which is something I am planning to do. The structure of "The Prowler" as a string of fragmented memories embedded in a net of self-reflexive epigrams may attest to be narrator's sense of alienation. Coming from a mixed Icelandic – Danish family background she suffers from insecurity and is intensely conscious of threats to her identity. Joan Givner in a review of the novel mentioned "this double descent" which "consigns her to a perpetual no-man's land" (Szabados & Givner 1989: 86). In response to this the narrator takes recourse to inventing fancy identities for herself which would make her less vulnerable in situations where she is stigmatized and ghettoised (in Iceland she is nicknamed a "dog-day girl, a monarchist, a Dane" and in Denmark "a white Inuit, a shark-eater," no.16). Her strategy of imagining herself as a Russian and even to pass off a person of Russia extraction (no 133) recalls Eli Mandel's image of the rotating whirligig which characterizes the assumption of an imagined identity as both an act of liberation and entrapment (Mandel 1977: 93). The narrator's troubled identity finally finds parallels in the political context and on the level of literary allusion. Her sense of insecurity is repeated in Iceland's history of consecutive colonial experiences as a Danish possession, a British military base during the war, and an American nuclear base in the Cold War period. On the level of literary reference the narrator places herself in the company of a few illustrious personalities who like James Joyce are either used as a source of aesthetic premises or who like Danish writer Isak Diensen, Jewish novelist Bernard Malamud, and Icelander Halldór Lexness are mentioned only for apparently trivial reasons. Although in the latter cases the importance of the writers for the narrator's autobiographical quest is played down, the reader senses that is more than we are told. We feel that these allusive strands all merge in the tacit creation of an atmosphere recalling exile (Joyce), rebellion the crossing of national and linguistic borders (Dinesen), and displacement and suffering (Malamud). These strands also relate to the personal situation of the narrator.

A reading of *The Prowler* as ethnic text could also be supported by the ending. The final paragraph tells of the narrator's parents who return from Denmark where they were stranded together with other Icelanders during the war. This homecoming could lend itself to the re-affirmation of a collective identity, yet in the preceding section (no.166) the narrator refuses explicitly to draw a nationalist parallel suggested by the memory of the ninth-century Norse settlement of Iceland. The happy ending, describing an event before the narrator's birth, is deceptive and out of place in a novel whose snatches of recorded memories tell a different story and whose fragmentary nature bears witness of the narrator's alienated self (Szabados & Givner: 87).

5. Conclusion

The novels I have examined make not only fascinating reading for their various aesthetic choices, but also for illustration of multiple aspects of ethnic concerns expressed in apparently similar motifs and images. Grove and Laurence discover the multicultural face of North America, Grove by replacing the European notice of class with the perspective of ethnicity, Laurence through the acknowledgment of the tradition of a minority as part of the Canadian experience. In contrast, Kogawa is pre-occupied chiefly with an intercultural subject, the restoration of a disrupted ethnic community towards a new sense of self-assertion, whereas the only certainty in Gunnar's novel seems to be the ultimate futility of the desire for belonging.

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