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CYCLICAL TIME AND LINEAR TIME IN THOMAS KING'S GREEN GRASS, RUNNING WATER

Keywords: *mythical/historical time, orality, centre-margin relationship, stereotypes, deconstruction, Judaeo/Christian and Amerindian archetypes, parody, postmodernist.*

Abstract: *Starting from Mircea Elide's and Paul Ricoeur's description of time, the paper sets out to analyse Thomas King's recuperation of mythical time, the heritage of his native Amerindian spirituality. In Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return (1954), Eliade shows that archaic and religious humanity perceives time as heterogenous, that is as divided between profane time (linear), and sacred time (cyclical and reactualizable), whereas modern non-religious humanity perceives time as a homogenous, linear, and unrepeatable medium. In his novel Green Grass, Running Water (1993) King deconstructs white stereotypes of Native culture on the one hand and also decentres the dominant culture by a play of literary archetypes in a parodic postmodernist way that recalls the trickster's techniques, on the other. The trickster holds a central figure in native mythology and its oral culture with its essentially story-telling literary tradition. The novel is made up of several interconnected stories, the end of one story being the beginning of another, which suggests the ongoing process of existence but also the cyclical intervention of Coyote, the trickster. Illustrating the Native vision of the world the stories occur on two levels of existence – the spiritual and the material - weaving a postmodernist text that combines comedy and fabulation, parody and realist discourse.*

In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha emphasizes that, for a colonized society to be recognized, it needs to shape its identity on difference rather than on its essence, on a discourse that undermines stereotypes attributed by the colonizing power. Therefore in order to assert its power, the colonized should fight against an already existing pattern and should build a counter identity which would represent it as a distinct society (Bhaba 165 – 170).

This is what Native Canadian writer Thomas King does in his novels, mostly by reviving the Amerindians' cultural heritage, particularly their spirituality and the tradition of oral story-telling. An outstanding achievement in this respect is his novel *Green Grass, Running Water* (1993) where by resorting to the Native mythical figure of the trickster and the specific cyclicity of mythical time, Tomas King uses magic realism to deconstruct white stereotypes of Native culture and also decentre the dominant culture by a play of literary archetypes in a parodic postmodernist way. The creation myth is at the core of the novel, introduced after "So", the marker of orality, as the first line of the novel, which will then recur, like a leitmotif: "In the beginning, there was nothing. Just the water" (King 1). But the mythical figure that appears next is not the One Spirit of the Amerindian Pantheon, who would more or less correspond to the Christian Creator, but the mythical figure of Coyote. In order to set off the contrast between the Christian and Native traditions King chooses this protean comic animal Trickster figure as the counterpart to the rigid stern God of the Old Testament who is the preserver of rigid boundaries and hierarchies..

The trickster is the archetypal "transformer" of himself and of other people. This power of transformation that Coffin, a European collector of Native legends, describes as "confusing to the civilized reader" makes this male/ female, human/ animal/ plant creature to be essentially associated with orality, a type of communication that resists fixation. The principle of transformation embodied by the Trickster in Native spirituality derives from its vision of the inherent equality of all forms of life.

As Gundula Wilke remarks in her article “Traditional Values and Modern Concerns: The “Committee to Re – Establish the Trickster,””¹ although he is known in oral cultures world-wide, the Trickster is of particular importance to most First Nations of North America, appearing in stories that have been handed down by word of mouth for hundreds of years. He appears under such guises as Coyote, Raven, Nanabush, Glooscap, Weesageechak, Old Man. He possesses no fixed form, has the ability to change his own size and shape and those of others. He can also change his gender or parts of his body and can be animal, or human. But he is made to have human attributes so that listeners/ readers can identify with him. Essentially a carnivalesque sort of character, a fool, the trickster often rather accidentally functions as beneficial culture hero and creator, transformer and teacher; contrariwise, his ill-considered actions just as often have negative results, turning him into a destroyer. Most trickster heroes incorporate all these aspects more or less equally. The trickster specifically deceives others, but he is also frequently tricked and ridiculed himself. There is no logic in his behaviour. He possesses no moral or social values and is at the mercy of his passions and appetites (King 141). All these features make him a particularly suitable figure to convey the absurdist and illogical outlook underlying postmodernist literary creations, since as a literary character he/ she can take any forms required for the story’s progression.

The Trickster or Principle of transformation provides the underlying connection between the Native oral traditions and King’s postmodernist text, reconstructing Native culture and deconstructing white culture archetypes and stereotypes about Aboriginal people. Coyote’s entrance follows precisely the trickster pattern. Coyote makes a mistake that is so big that it is presented as getting material shape. Then Coyote sets out to fix the mistakes only to make a worse mess. A third character enters the stage and the narrator attempts either to help Coyote or determine him to change his ways by telling him a story.

There occurs a most subtle, almost unnoticeable passage from the mythological past to the present, by a shift from the Past Tense through an iterative Present to the Present Continuous of the moment of speech: “In the beginning there was nothing (----) Coyote was there, but coyote was asleep. When that Coyote is asleep, anything can happen (---). So that coyote is dreaming and pretty soon, one of those dreams gets loose and runs around (King 1). This shifting may suggest the power of adaptation of the Native people’s stories and by extension of the Amerindians themselves in order to survive.

Ironically, King changes the Biblical creation into a typical aboriginal story: he changes Eve with the Amerindian mythological figure of First Woman and calls Adam Ahdamn, which doubtless diminishes his prestigious position as first man in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Moreover, in King’s story, God, in further trickster transformation, comes after the first man and woman. He arrives later and proceeds to attribute all the stuff to himself (a parodic gesture contrasting with the Native tradition of sharing), which makes First Woman describe him as a stingy person. She decides to pack her bags and leave, considering that there is “no point in having a grouchy GOD for a neighbor” (King 69). God is further satirized when he feels frustrated by First Woman’s decision to leave, as it deconstructs the Biblical story: “You can’t leave my garden [...]. You can’t leave because I’m kicking you out” (69). Moreover, the very end of the book which features dr. Joe Hovaugh looking on impotently on the waters breaking loose through the dam, an incident that Coyote has had some contribution in bringing about, may also suggest that the Amerindian mythological figure ultimately has the

¹ In 1986 a group of Native writers in the Toronto area founded The Committee To Re-Establish the Trickster” (CRET): founding members are Lenore Keeshig-Tobias, Tomson Highway and Daniel David Moses. Their political and cultural aim is to strengthen the position of First Nations people within the Canadian-mainstream society and to change the public perception of their people. Activities of CRET include publication of the *Magazine To Re-Establish the Trickster*, workshops, seminars, readings and performances – CRET serves as an example for the joint efforts of First Nations, writers in Canada; other strong groups also exist in British Columbia, Saskatchewan and elsewhere. We needn’t add that such activities, as well as all the affirmation of new voices of various ethnical backgrounds in the Canadian literary landscape of the last 30 years would be unthinkable without Multiculturalism as the official policy of Canadian government.

upper hand in his contest with the Judeo-Christian God, who is celebrated for his victory and control over the primordial waters (Eliade 63).

Round Coyote gravitate other figures from the Pantheon of Native American creation myths: First Woman, Thought Woman, Changing Woman and Old Woman make their appearance,² which is an ironic reversal of the patriarchal principles underlying the Biblical genesis and Old Testament stories. These mythical Native figures intersect and interact with Christian Old Testament and New Testament ones in episodic parodies (for instance Noah in his ark, the Annunciation, Christ walking on the waters) so as to inscribe the Native mythology into the dominant culture and empower the formerly marginalized culture.

Coyote appears as the eager interlocutor of an unnamed first person narrator who keeps telling him stories about Old Coyote and the *illo tempore* figures I have mentioned. Thus the reader is introduced into mythical time, which is cyclical repetition by ritual. As regards the mythical tales, the book ends arbitrarily: the reader knows that the storytelling will be cyclically going on and on as dr. Joe Hovaugh has remarked on the cyclical character of the natural disasters brought about by the periodical escape of the four Indians. The book concludes with the words of the beginning and the announcement of another story [”this is how it happened” (King 431)], which is left to the reader to imagine.

This outer frame story that the “I” narrator tells Coyote embeds the stories the narrator learns from four American Indians who have escaped from a mental institution in Florida. These characters gradually acquire semi-mythical features. They are preternaturally old: we are told by dr. Joe Hovaugh that they were already old when they arrived at the hospital in 1891 (King 96), whereas Babo Jones, the Native janitor, affirms they are 400-500 years old; dr Hovaugh reads their clinical records of periodic escapes which he associates with catastrophic events; in addition, their escape seems rather uncanny, a real mystery, as the director of the hospital repeatedly underlines (48, 76); the escapees’ identity also shifts, Babo Jones stating that they were four old women (53). This gender shifting reminds us of the Trickster’s shape-changing abilities and makes the reader suspect that they are avatars of First Woman, Changing Woman, Thought Woman and Old Woman.

Although Babo identifies them as Mr Red, Mr White, Mr Black and Mr Blue (King 51) the four old Indians who keep trying to escape from the mental institution ironically assume the names of Western literary archetypes famously paired with an Aboriginal character – the Lone Ranger, Hawkeye, Robinson Crusoe and Ishmael – their authors Fran Striker, Cooper, Melville and Defoe being thus inscribed into King’s novel so as to suggest that they are part of contemporary Native literary production.

But at a certain moment First Woman assumes the identity of The Lone Ranger – paired with Tonto; Changing Woman takes on the identity of Ishmael – paired with Queequeg; Thought Woman merges with Robinson Crusoe – paired with Friday; Old Woman becomes Hawkeye – paired with Chingachgook, a trickster juxtaposition that parodies by gender and race reversal and thus humorously undermines the white Western tradition.

In James Fennimore Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans*, the national hero is Nathaniel Bumppo, nicknamed Hawkeye. His nickname comes from his having assimilated Native skills: “The eye of the hunter, or scout, whichever he might be, was small, quick, keen and restless, roving while he spoke, on every side of him, as if in quest of game, or distrusting the sudden approach of some lurking enemy” (Cooper 29). Yet, he valorizes

² As Blanca Chester has remarked, King connects Harry Robinson’s Okanagan Coyote with stories from the Blackfoot of Alberta and the traditions of Thought Woman (Pueblo), First Woman (Navajo), Old Woman (Blackfoot, Dunneza) and Changing Woman (Navajo) (Chester 46). This would point to the idea that he wants to construct a Pan-Indian spirituality and tradition. We may add that this idea may have been shaped by his being born in the U.S. (Sacramento, California, 1943), where he completed his studies and started his academics career (he has subsequently established himself in Canada, getting a Governor General’s award in 1992, and becoming a member of the Order of Canada in 2004).

these skills negatively in his Indian enemies, and his speech betrays his arrogant belief in his natural superiority as a white man: "I am not a prejudiced man, nor one who vaunts himself on his natural privileges, though the worst enemy I have on earth and he is an Iroquois, daren't deny that I am genuine white" (Cooper 31). The Iroquois he refers to is merciless, bloodthirsty Magua who stands for the treacherous and cruel savage.

The second type of North American Indian that appears in Cooper's book - Chingachook and his son Uncas - fall into the stereotype of the noble savage because they serve the white men. However, the analogy with animals underlies most of the Native people's descriptions: they move like snakes, monkeys or hares, they have the vigilant eyes of hawks, the speed of racehorses, claw-like hands. These animal attributes clearly place them in binary oppositions with the conquerors' civilization "justifying" their "civilizing" enterprise

In *Green Grass, Running Water*, Old Woman, mythological creator of the world in Native folklore, remains totally unimpressed by her first encounter with Hawkeye (Natty Bumppo is now called Nasty):

"Is that you Chingachook?" says a voice. Is that you, my Indian friend?

(...) And there is a short skinny, grey in a leather shirt with fringes standing behind one of the trees", dragging a really big rifle behind him" (King 392). King deconstructs the stereotype of the handsome, strong, imposing frontier man: his Hawkeye is described as a physically small, scared figure who promptly recites the stereotype traits of Natives and whites to First Woman in a typical racist discourse:

Indians can run fast. Indians can endure pain. Indians have quick reflexes. Indians don't talk much. Indians have good eyesight. Indians have agile bodies. These are all Indian gifts.

Whites are patient. Whites are spiritual. Whites are cognitive. Whites are sophisticated. Whites are sensitive. These are white gifts. (King 393)

King's Nasty is unable to communicate with Old Woman. He is too vain, individualistic and self-sufficient to enjoy establishing a real dialogue. An inversion of roles with a parody effect follows: when Hawkeye wants to shoot Old Woman, it is he who is shot from behind with perfect craftsmanship by a mysterious hunter. Thinking that it is Old Woman who has shot him, he wishes to save face before he drops dead, by assigning Old Woman an important sounding male name – Daniel Boone, Harry Truman, Arthur Watkins and finally Hawkeye. By renaming Old Woman, Nasty wants to make her appear as a powerful enemy, at whose hands he should be not ashamed to die. But his act could also be regarded as the typical colonizer's practice of renaming in order to assert ownership.

In the figure of the Lone Ranger King parodies Western movies stereotypes. In the film, the title hero is the only survivor of a posse of six Texas rangers tracking a gang of villains. He is nursed back to life by the Native Tonto, who then subsequently becomes his companion in his exploits in the West. Tonto is the stereotyped projection of the white man's wish to see the Amerindian as stupid, slow in his reactions and in his ability to express himself, yet devoted to the white man whose natural superiority he perceives and accepts. The role of this very popular Indian stereotype is to highlight and inculcate the idea that the white men were recognized as superior by the Native people who welcomed them and helped them to settle in.

Thomas King parodies the film by inverting the parts: First Woman takes on the identity of the Lone Ranger whereas the identity of Tonto is taken by Ahdamn, the parody of the Biblical first man. They are shown escaping the rangers who want to kill them, failing to see through their disguise. If the Lone Ranger can be anyone who wears a mask, then what he does and stands for is only the onlooker's psychological projection:

(t)he live rangers point their guns at First Woman and Ahdamn.

"Just a minute, says First Woman, and that one takes some black cloth out of her purse. She cuts some holes in that black cloth. She puts that black cloth around her head.

Look, look, all the live rangers says, and they point their fingers at the First Woman. It's the Lone Ranger. (71)

But finally, when First Woman is not quick enough to put on her black cloth mask, she and Tonto get arrested by soldiers and the charge is simply "being Indian"(72). It is the mythical figures' descent into historical time in a bodily form.

We may say therefore that the mythic or legendary material included in the novel is used “to interrogate the assumptions of Western, rational, linear narrative and to enclose it within an indigenous metatext, a body of textual forms that recuperate the pre-colonial culture, as Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffin and Helen Tiffin specify.” (Ashcroft: magic realism).

In *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return* (1954), Eliade shows that archaic and religious humanity perceives time as heterogeneous, that is, as divided between profane time (linear), and sacred time (cyclical and reactualizable through the ritual re-enactment of myth), whereas modern non-religious humanity perceives time as historical, homogenous and linear, an unrepeatable medium. King’s novel also introduces historical time associated with an apparently realist discourse.

The novel does not use only the discourses of myth and literary archetype that modulate into parody; in Hawkeye, Ishmael, the Lone Ranger and Robinson Crusoe’s storytelling cycles, the narrative keeps slipping into another thread where, apparently at the level of reality, Eli, Charlie, Alberta and Latisha inhabit linear, historical time, getting on with their lives in Blossom and the nearby reserve, in Alberta. The story of *Eli Stands Alone* is one of alienation and final return: a former successful professor in Toronto, he has eventually returned to live in the cabin his mother built in order to oppose a white company’s building of the Grand Baleen Dam. This dam that he lives in the vicinity of would prevent the river to flood every year which would eventually result into the death of the cottonwoods that provide the trees for the Natives’ traditional yearly Sun Dance. By his law suits Eli has been able to obstruct the builders for years. Eli’s nephew Lionel and his cousin Charlie Looking Bear are rivals to the hand of Alberta Frank, a professor in Calgary, who however wants a child but does not want a husband. Lionel’s sister Latisha, who owns a café, is a preserver of family and Native traditions.

The “real life” characters in *Green Grass, Running Water* frequently have to confront white stereotypes of the Indian. But Latisha is smart enough to use trickster weapons in order to use such stereotypes to her material profit. She runs a successful restaurant called “Dead Dog Café” where she pretends to sell real dog, thus ironically playing to the white people’s cultural expectations:

“Jesus! You’re kidding. It’s not really dog ? (...) looks like beef to me. (...) You were kidding, right ?”
“Black Labrador”, said Latisha (...) You get more meat off black Labs.” (131)

Latisha’s marriage experience to a white American is used to quote stereotypes about Americans and Canadians.

“Americans are independent”, George told her one day. “Canadians are dependent” (...)

“In sociological terms, The United States is an independent sovereign nation and Canada is a domestic dependent nation”.

“Americans are adventurous”, George declared. “Canadians are conservative. Look at the western expansion and the frontier experience.” (192)

The marriage ends abruptly when George buys an outfit reminiscent of John Wayne the archetypal Hollywood Western hero and in addition bashes her head against the wall until she falls unconscious (192). Thus King exposes white wife-beating and in the end the racist John Wayne is killed in a western that reverses roles.

These “real life” characters’ stories that develop in linear, historical time, are given in scenes episodically interwoven with one another and the other stories we have mentioned. Conversant with many literary traditions (King is a professor of Native literature and of comparative literature) the author tells stories that play with cyclic mythical time and with linear historical time that gets a touch of the fabulous, amalgamating Amerindian, Canadian, American and European cultures without establishing any hierarchies so as to collapse the imperial opposition centre/margin.

Made up of a multitude of interconnected stories, the action of the novel occurs on two levels of existence – the spiritual and the material correlated with the Native mythical cyclic conception of time and that of linear time held by modern Western man. But the two time dimensions intersect and the irreversibility of

historical time is abolished in a protean world where not only mythological figures from the Native tradition interact with figures from the Judeo-Christian tradition, but where “real people” like Eli, Lionel or Latisha meet famous Canadian writers such as Susanna Moodie or Pauline Johnson (156-8) and historical figures like Louis Riel, who all lived a century or more ago; it is a universe where historical time intersects fictive time when the “real life” characters encounter characters that are parody impersonations of “heroes” from famous American and English novels (Nathaniel Bumppo, Ahab, Ishmael, Robinson Crusoe); transcendent cyclical time also irradiates and intervenes in historical time not only as members of the “real” Native community meet the four semi-mythical old Indians that miraculously periodically escape the mental hospital in order “to fix the world.” This interference is particularly articulated at the end of the novel which on the one hand reiterates the archetype of the flood and that of the scapegoat on the other. An earthquake occurs (possibly induced by the four Indians and the dancing Coyote) that leads to the disintegration of the dam and the waters flood the adjacent ground and sweep away Eli and his shack. By Eli’s sacrifice, the nature that the Indian feels part of is saved, and this ensures the continuity of the Native spiritual traditions. It is an end that again rewrites the biblical incident: Jehovah, “master of the waters” (Eliade 63) used the flood to punish sinful humanity, whereas this time the flood is used by the Native deities in order to counteract inconsiderate white greed and consequently save the Native traditions. And Eli, the son who has returned to the community in order to prevent the destruction of its traditions, has acted as a willing scapegoat: we realize he has confidently anticipated the eventual victory of Nature, the Indians’ partner, when saying to Clifton Sifton, the builder of the dam: “You can’t hold water back forever”. (143)

The effect of juxtaposing the different narrative strands is that, as Blanca Chester remarks, the fragmented texts “contextualize, creating meaning in gaps that cannot be read linearly. Consequently, another voice “speaks” to the reader. Native reality consistently intrudes on the carefully constructed realities of Western tradition” (Chester 47).

King creates a dialogic text between oral Native creation story, biblical story, literary story and historical story, which all imply a different type of time. In the case of historical time, we may say that it assumes its “monumental” dimension (Ricoeur vol II 106) when associated with the authority-figure of dr. Joe Hovaugh, the director of the hospital from where the four Indians have escaped. The reader becomes an interactive participator in the creation of meaning of the text, which is characterized by open-endedness and dialogism. On the one hand the doctor is modelled on Northrop Frye, whose rigid and compartmented theory of literature is the very opposite of the Native tradition that King’s novel embodies. Dr. Hovaugh is uneasy with the Canadian landscape, missing his garden (an allusion to Frye’s book on the Canadian imagination entitled *The Bush Garden*) and he always looks for “occurrences and probabilities and directions and derivations” (389). The narrator records how Dr Hovaugh felt that “[t]hings in Canada seemed slightly wild, more out of hand, disorderly, even chaotic. There was an openness to the Sky and a wideness to the land that made him uncomfortable” (312).

The wild physical environment of nature is perceived from the civilized perspective, whereas the Indians are part of nature. Dr. Hovaugh also expresses the colonizer’s view which simply disregards the existence of the Indians, considering that when his ancestors came, all Canada was just “[e]mpty land” (95) although subsequently he mentions that they *bought* the land from the Indians (96).

Frye’s emphasis on the importance of archetypes and myths rather than history in his synchronic view of literature as expounded in his *Anatomy of Criticism* and *The Great Code* is paralleled by dr. Hovaugh’s reclusive retreat to his garden which, by association with Eden, suggests his refuge into timelessness and a world of his own making.

But, on the other hand, dr. Joe Hovaugh is not only Northrop Frye. As the pronunciation of his name suggests, he is also Jehovah, the supreme divine, mythical model for the Western white patriarchal authoritarian type of civilization and culture, brought over and imposed by the colonizers in Canada (the Bible = *The Great Code*, the title of another book by Northrop Frye). Dr. Hovaugh tends his Canadian garden of literary taxonomy to keep the wilderness out (*The Bush Garden*). The doctor is presented as charting his course towards Parliament

Hill using the “literal, allegorical, tropological and anagogic” (389), the literary modes that Frye discusses in his *Anatomy of Criticism*. The problem is that the Indians in his hospital keep going wild. And, as Blanca Chester subtly remarks “just as the four old Indians keep escaping the confines of western institutionalization, King’s text self-consciously defies categorization in Frye’s terms. Frye presents a scheme where the mythical mode operates out of the grammar of archetypes. The critic shows that in Frye’s structuralist universe, myth provides a model for literature, whereas collectivity, history and culture are a reality that lies outside the system of the literary discourse. In *Green Grass, Running Water*, the floating imagery becomes symbolic of an experience of history as continuously beginning and ending in ever going cycles. “The distinctions between myth and story, between myth and reality are collapsed in these cycles of narrative as Coyote dreams stories into reality” (Chester 50-1).

We may therefore conclude that in his novel *Green Grass, Running Water* Thomas King recuperates mythical time, the heritage of his native Amerindian spirituality. In this novel, the literary world and the real world are interconnected: the characters fall into other stories, other realities, they shift from one narrative form to another, from one medium to another. Alberta, Charlie and Lionel are watching the same movie Eli is reading. The four Indians from the mental hospital are in the TV film too (221). The four Indian mythological women fix the Western movie in favor of the Indians but they have to harmonize things again because the cavalry keeps returning and whites frequently tip the balance as dialogue keeps becoming monologue, the text suggests. Considering that both the structure and the texture of *Green Grass, Running Water* pay homage to the distinctive voice of a well known Okanagan story teller, Harry Robinson, Blanca Chester characterizes the realism of the novel as “a realism that theorizes the world through story telling” (Chester 53).

We could conclude that by periodically reversing the relation centre (white Western literary archetypes) and margin (Native stories), Thomas King reconstructs the Native story-telling tradition round the fluid figure of the trickster and cyclical time, which renders the novel at once postmodern and traditionally Native.

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