

Mapping out Gendered Journey-Hypostases in Some Recent (Anglophone) Canadian Short Stories

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Abstract

The paper aims at X-raying the interplay between the genre borders, the gender variables and the journey-types in some relatively recent short story texts from the English speaking Canadian space, within a cross-disciplinary framework; elements of cultural variables, of gendered discourse and of requirements of the genre poetics are getting pursued in their inter-relationship/s in a relatively modest corpus of texts, from a Romanian perspective.

Key words

Canadian culture, short story poetics, closure, gendered discourse, journey, hypostases, topos.

In the Canadian cultural space of the late 20th century, the journey topos has been variously experienced and figured out, with re-/configurations ranging from the traditionally mimetic hypostases, through the early modernist ones, to the subsequent post-/modernist versions. Most of these hypostases have been explored and decoded within a gender sensitive framework, grounded on the one hand in its apposite agenda, and on the other hand, in the genre poetics – the short story – with its requirements, out of which what stand out are closure/-e/-al in-/de-/creasing ratio and types, foreshadowing strategies (along with – if not even - in addition to – the cultural variable/s). Correspondingly, a mini corpus of relatively recent short story texts has been shaped out and x-rayed here in terms of salient features of the respective short story writer's gendered idiolect: Thomas King, Joy Kogawa, Rudy Wiebe, Bronwen Wallace, Alistair McLeod and Margaret Laurence – to be borne out (or not) by further research –. The hypostases of the journey topos as explored now are not meant to be compared and contrasted explicitly – although an implicit contrast is deliberate –.

With **Thomas King** – of Cherokee and Greek descent –, the journey topos is given ludically thematic and (macro-/micro-) structural representations in 'The One about Coyote Going West' (and 'A Coyote Columbus Story'), from the collection *One Good Story That One*, 1993, according to an idiolect that draws at once on an archetypal figure and on a playfully post modernist ingenuity, so as to

re-/configure Native voice/s. His (postcolonial) counter-identity in the short story practice is being engendered by the *Coyote* as trickster figure, as well as principle of poetics, the latter resulting not only in Bakhtinian carnivalesque, but also in the mock genealogical discourse of magic realism, by which the Western patterns get dislodged. *'The One about Coyote Going West'* begins:

'This one is about Coyote. She was going West. Visiting her relations. That's what she said. You got to watch that one. Tricky one. Full of bad business. No, no, no, no, that one says. I'm just visiting. Going to see Raven'[1].

Its closure sounds as following:

*'So, Coyote drinks my tea and that one leave. And I can't talk any more because I got to watch the sky. Got to watch out for falling things that land in piles. When that Coyote's wandering around looking to **fix** things, nobody in this world is safe' [2].*

So the narrator *'can't talk any more'* even if so far s/he has turned successively from *'grandmother'* to *'grandfather'* and back, or has employed abstract and concrete nouns in a blurring way, while his/her thoughts have *'bump[ed] around'* and *'run into each other'*, falling out of the Coyote's ears; the *'mistake'* the coyote has made becomes a character in a radically unstable physical universe. *Fix* and *safe* are key words; the *'safety'* – of the narrative communication with the reader – has come to get mockingly jeopardized by that confusing genealogy of the Coyote that keeps on wandering at large so as to settle *'things'* – of Mimesis/Realism – by letting them transcend it/ *'fall from the sky and land in piles'*; the suggestion is of an inherent equality of all forms of life within a fixation-resistant cyclic framework.

The en-framed story becomes a living body evolving *'organically'*, itself becoming a self-containing character [3]. The narrative journey has proved actuated by this Coyote principle, at work through the hybridization between mock genealogical discourse, oral story-telling and a sense of the spatio-temporal instability. The stories playfully journey across both cyclic mythical time and the linear historical one and back. Compositionally, different narrative discourses get juxtaposed according to a principle of dialogic fragmentation. Through the trickster as agent of transformation, Native oral traditions come to tellingly resonate with parodic, postmodernist compositional options, resulting in a re-/construction of the Native cultural authenticity by journeying back.

Whereas along his short story voyaging, Th. King's voice has proved to be distinctively male, **Joy Kogawa's** voice resounds in an unmistakably 'feminine' way. Her compulsive re-writings of *Obasan* turn out to be as many 'silent' voyages into the understated traumas of the Canadian Japanese [4]. In the short story 'Obasan', published twice 1978/1984, the family's silence about the forced evacuation incites Naomi to gather information herself from documents that have changed her life. The document-like discourse lays bare the inadequacies of 'historical truth', whereas the protagonist narrator's search is conducive to compassion. Kogawa's idiolect is characterized by an understated yet relatively highly metaphoric discourse about some hyphenated identities. There seems to surface a compulsion [5] of coping with distressing memories by an irresolute, if not even inconclusive, closure-type. This re-writing on victimization begins: '*She is sitting at the kitchen table when I come in. She is so deaf now that my knocking does not rouse her and when she sees me she is startled*' [6], and its closure is eloquent:

'At the edges of our flesh is a hint of a spiritual osmosis, an eagerness within matter, waiting to brighten our dormant neurons, to entrust our stagnant cells with movement and dance.//Obasan drinks her tea and makes a shallow scratching sound in her throat. She shuffles to the door and squats beside the boot tray. With a putty knife, she begins to scrape off the thick clay like mud that sticks to my boots' [7].

The juxtaposition between the modes – metaphorically transcendent and naturalistically minimalist – of writing in these last two min paragraphs of the closure engenders implicitly ('by *hint*') that *spiritual osmosis* able to *brighten/redeem the stagnant cells of our matter/flesh* into the *dance* of sharing memories and of journeying back into surviving. The family's silence about the forced evacuation of the Japanese has been given an objective correlative on the discourse level: gaps, 'silences', implication of lyrical suggestiveness. In rhetorically reshaping a narrative for an imagined new audience, Kogawa enacted a reconciliation of sorts. The 'pattern' that has emerged here is similar to that of all of her texts (for adults and for children) and has insightfully got outlined by critics: retelling as journeying into traumatic memories and back, through the '*gaps between speech and silence, between memory and forgetting*'. The understated voice/s of the traumatized hyphenated Japanese identities in 'Obasan' modulate/s lyrically and poignantly a message addressed to a sympathetic reader.

The voyage-hypostasis performed by **Rudy Wiebe** is resoundingly male in *'Where is the Voice Coming from ?'* from *The Angel of the Tar Sands*, 1982. His Mennonite experience is analogous to the First Nations' marginalization, this being one reason why he opts for retrieving a spiritual collectivity in this story about the hunt for a young Cree by the name of "Gitchie-Manitou Wayo", translated as "Almighty Voice". His voyaging to reconstruct the historical truth of the story itself is under scrutiny through an idiolect of flaunted self-reflexivity, stamped by 'post historical' irony, by which forgotten Indian/Cree voices get 'reclaimed', largely through the narrator's co-authoring the reader. As the rest of his fiction, this text is a combination of short fiction, personal narratives and memoirs. His conviction that history could get 'revived' in a rewarding, if not even 'redemptive', way actuates his narrative method: imagined details of daily life and individual perceptions get juxtaposed to documentary evidence, so as to weave out a labyrinthine opaque texture. The paradoxical quality of some of his texts is one familiar enough to some of his more or less post-modernist contemporaries[8]. The origins and nature of fiction get explored through the narrator's mock-failures in retelling, whereas his voice remains to be invented by each reader [9]. It begins:

'The problem is to make the story. One difficulty of this making may have been excellently stated by Teilhard de Chardin, "We are continually inclined to isolate ourselves from the things and events which surround us... as though we were spectators, not elements, in what goes on". Arnold Toynbee does venture, "For all that we know, reality is the undifferentiated unity of the mystical experience", but that need not here be considered. This story ended long ago; it is one of the finite acts, of orders, of elemental feelings and reactions, of obvious legal restrictions and requirements' [10].

Its closure sounds as such:

'The voice of "Gitchie-Maintou Wayo" – interpreted as 'Voice of the Great Spirit' – that is, the Almighty Voice'. His death chant no less incredible in its beauty than in its incomprehensible happiness. I say "wordless cry" because that is the way it sounds to me. I could be more accurate if I had a reliable interpreter who would make a reliable interpretation. For I do not, of course, understand the Cree myself' [11].

This story about reality as 'undifferentiated unity' of the mystical experience did end long ago – as anticipated at the beginning of this en-framed

journey-narrative –; yet it has gradually turned into the subjective perception of a ‘wordless cry’, for whose translation back into comprehension the narrator challenges the reader to get involved as co-author. The narrator’s avowed defeat can be interpreted in terms similar to Cora Ann Howells’ ‘*if language is a way of looking at the world, then the reality of the Indian world of Almighty Voice still eludes the narrator*’[12]; which is the very thing Wiebe has narratively performed by questioning the authorized record of Almighty Voice’s final stand against the Federal authorities on May 30, 1897. It is not beside the point to remark that culturally inherited modes of representing Native speech as basic mirrors of the ideological attitudes of the early settlers, priests and traders are still in use.

By contrast to the male hypostasis of the interrogating voice with Rudy Wiebe, **Bronwen Wallace**’s voyage seems conspicuously ‘domestic’, at least in ‘*An Easy Life*’, from the collection *People You’d Trust your Life to*, 1990. Her ‘easy-going’ idiolect is stamped by a colloquial manner articulating the voyage-hypostasis of recollecting, as attempt to shape out an elusive pattern for life, a pattern enabling one to restore its ‘lost intensity’. Distinctive about this voice is also the way in which she involves the reader in the narrative journey by drawing on a welter of recalled specific details. The beginning is telling in this respect:

‘Right now Marion is giving her kitchen its once a year major cleaning, right down to that little crack where the gunk builds up between the counter and the metal edge of the sink. She’s going at it with Comet and an old toothbrush, singing along to Talking Heads on her Walkman, having a great time. She smoked a joint with her coffee before she started this morning. It helps. She’s already done the fridge, the stove, and the oven, wiped down the walls. Just the counters and drawers to go, really. Then, the floor. Marion does a little dance over to the cupboard for the Lysol’ [13].

Its closure sounds as such:

‘Anger and tenderness. From nowhere, Marion feels the tears start. On the Walkman Patsy Cline is singing one of those songs that someone sings when they’ve been ditched, trying to cram a lifetime of pain into every note. And so Marion just stands there, on her patio, with a cup of coffee in her hand, crying like an idiot. Partly because of the song. Partly because it’s finally spring and she’s a little stoned. Because of her kids and her job. Because she’s like that, Marion, soft and open, in her easy life. But not only because’ [14].

The undertone of *'not only because'* coming to cancel the enumeration of partial motivations of the protagonist's mixed feelings goes beyond the thematically paradoxical juxtaposition/s – 'anger and tenderness', with their correlative discourses – lyrical and dramatically contrapuntal – as unfolding throughout –; it gestures towards a mysteriously feminine irresolution, motivated by her insight into gendered in-/securities.

With **Alistair MacLeod**, the voyage-hypostasis is emphatically male in *'As Birds Bring forth the Sun'* from *As Birds Bring forth the Sun*, 1986. Myth and legend are superimposed on historical facts in a narrative amounting to almost allegorical dimension/s by means of some multiple voyages of displacements and elisions performed throughout. It begins:

'Once there was a family with a Highland name who lived beside the sea. And the man had a dog of which he was very fond. She was large and grey, a sort of staghound from another time. And if she jumped up to lick his face, which she loved to do, her paws would jolt against his shoulders with such force that she would come close to knocking him down and he would be forced to take two or three backward steps before he could regain his balance. And he himself was not a small man, being slightly over six feet and perhaps one hundred and eighty pounds' [15].

Its closure is of the encapsulation and moral 'lesson'-type [16], and sounds as such:

'Bound here in our own peculiar mortality, we do not wish to see or see others see that which signifies life's demise. We do not want to hear the voice of our father, as did those other sons, calling down his own particular death upon him. We would shut our eyes and plug our ears, even as we know such actions to be of no avail. Open still and fearful to the grey hair rising on our necks if and when we hear the scrabble of the paws and the scratching at the door.' [17].

The metaphorical dog echoed here originated in the stray animal as depicted in the opening paragraphs with its displacements: 'a sort of staghound from another time' that was 'left, when a pup, at the family's gate ... and no one knew where she had come from'. Here there is a double displacement – the dog from another place and another time – that soon elides into the equally problematic matter of the dog's disappearance: how it reached the isolated island where it bore and raised its six pups which presently kill their master, and how it left that island

to enter still "another time" in which it becomes the 'spectre' that will appear to "succeeding generations" of the first victim's family as the sign of their impending death [18].

The same closure types have been foreshadowed by some other crucial displacements and elisions on the discourse-voyage level of this short story. All of his caring for her was recounted over and over and over again, – and nobody 'missed any of the ironies' –, and then re-enacted, in part [19]. Markers of uncertainty – "perhaps," "some say" – preface this archetypal voyaging beyond the third death and what is made of it; it is the consequence of the 'tale' having been already pieced together, which sets forth still another outstanding displacement and elision. The occasion of the story's retrospective recounting is the impending death of another father, which brings in the final displacement and elision [20]. "*Bound here in our own peculiar mortality*," the narrator half acknowledges in the last but one paragraph, "*We do not want to hear the voice of our father, as did those other sons, calling down his own particular death upon him*". But they too are themselves the sign they would not see, just as is the October rain in which the story begins with the saving of a dog, and ends, generations later, with the impending death of another father in this elegiacally archetypal male narrative.

Margaret Laurence voyages across spaces of figurative dis-/order as in the short story '*To Set Our House in Order*', from *A Bird in the House*, 1970. It seems that the ability to cope with 'mundane/contingent' disorder is for Laurence an index about contemplating transcendent – if not esoteric – hypostases of a divine 'reality'/order[21]. This short story begins:

'When the baby was almost ready to be born, something went wrong and my mother had to go into hospital two weeks before the expected time. I was wakened by the crying in the night, and then I heard my father's footsteps as he went downstairs to phone. I stood in the doorway of my room, shivering and listening, wanting to go to my mother but afraid to go lest there be some sight there more terrifying than I could bear' [22].

Vanessa's voyage ahead to (self-) discovery results in a finally baffled awareness as encapsulated through the closure-type of antithesis-completion:

'I thought of the accidents that might easily happen to a person – or, of course, might not happen, might happen to somebody else. I thought of the dead baby, my sister who might as easily have been I. Would she, then, have been lying here in my place, the sharp grass making its small tooth marks on her brown arms, the sun warming her to the heart ? I thought of

the leather bound volumes of Greek, and the six different kinds of iced cakes that used to be offered always in the MacLeod house, and the pictures of leopards and green seas. I thought of my brother, who had been born alive after all, and now had been given his life's name. I could not really comprehend these things, but I sensed their strangeness, their disarray. I felt that whatever God might love in this world it was certainly not order'. [23.]

The initial tension between the un-/predictable, the un-/expected as versions of dis-/order, as encoded at the beginning, lexically ('order' with its overtones, the purposefulness of the infinitive, to go wrong in 'something went wrong', 'before the expected time' 'wanting to go to mother but afraid to go lest there be some sight there more terrifying than I could bear'), and syntactically (by the sequencing of relatively short sentences with factual verbs) has been foreshadowed all along, to finally get reversed and completed on the symmetrical levels of discourse: lexically (by '*accidents might easily happen*' '*dead baby might as easily have been*', '*leather bound volumes of Greek*', '*pictures of leopards and green seas*', 'not really comprehend', sensed 'strangeness and disarray', the enumeration of tokens of missing order or the binary opposition/s – God, love vs this world, not order –), and syntactically (by the hypothetical past and present, and rhetorical questions).

The protagonist's growth in awareness is set against Grandmother McLeod's inability to grow. Vanessa's final perception of disorder, meant to be seen by readers as adequate – if not even teleologically grounded –, is largely corresponding to the reader's representation of 'what is going on' in the story, especially as Grandmother McLeod's love of literal/domestic order turns into an obsession, thus removing her from the subjective/emotional version/s of reality; thus, she is like the trapped sparrow which is the central symbol in the story.

By way of tentative conclusion, it might be worthwhile making few points. One refers to the degree to which the few short stories under discussion here seem to corroborate –with synthetic arguments about their genre poetics along gendered voyage-hypostases – Linda Hutcheon's view on '*the contradictory ambiguous "Canadianness"*' as being broadly a matter of '*double-talk/-ing*', as implicitly seems to result from both my selection of texts, my sequencing their order and my singling out few salient elements to illustrate a Romanian reading experience. The other point to be made refers to the gendered (Canadian) spaces in and about the matter, spaces which controversially seem to be ranked to the advantage of the

fruitfully feminine one (despite exclusively authoritarian voices to the contrary). Another point consists in my having to extend the demonstration along similar lines before coming to finally conclude on the gendered journey-hypostases in recent Canadian short story practice.

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1. Th King in Thieme John ed., *The Arnold Anthology of Postcolonial Literatures in English*, London, Arnold, 1996, p. 420.
2. Ibid p. 428.
3. At a certain point, the narrator even assures the coyote that 'This story is going to be okay. This story is doing just fine. This story knows where it is going.'; King, Th. Ibid.
4. 'I remember how careful my parents were/Not to bruise us with bitterness', Jo Kogawa, *'What Do I Remember of the Evacuation'*; Japanese Canadians were separated by the Canadian government from homes, possessions and interned for the duration of II WW; in 1941, after Pearl Harbour, the Canadian government began a movement to internment camps of Japanese people, many of them Canadian born citizens, for fear of subversive acts. Thus the Government abrogated the civil rights of tens of thousands of Canadian citizens, confiscating their possessions and property, interning them first into ghost towns in Central British Columbia and then moving them farther inland on farms in Southern Alberta. There were three Japanese generations: **Issei**, **Nisei**, or **Sansi**; the first generation of Japanese Canadians – those who emigrated from Japan – are the **Issei**; most of the Issei men came to Canada between 1877-1907, and most of the women came after 1900; the **Nisei** are the IInd generation of Japanese Canadians whose parents are **The Issei** - Joy Kogawa is of this generation -; the Nisei were born in Canada; the **Sansi** are the III-rd generation of Japanese Canadians, many of whom were born during the 1940s and 1950s; Miki, R.A., & Kobayashi, C., *Justice in our time: The Japanese Canadian Redress Settlement Reader's Guide*, 1991.
5. This short story subsequently grew into a novel with the same title (1981), and also serves as basis for *Naomi's Road*, a children's book that has been used as school text in Japan; all the three versions tell the story of Naomi Nakane, a child at the time of the evacuation.
6. Kogawa Joy, in Bennet D. and Brown R., eds, *A New Anthology of Canadian Literature in English*, Oxford and New York, OUP, 2002, p. 736.
7. Ibid. p. 741.
8. As resulting from the awareness that while events can get falsified by being retold and turned into stories, yet this might as well be one's only way of experiencing the past.
9. *'Presumably all the parts of the story are themselves available; a difficulty is that they are, as always, available only in bits and pieces. Though the acts themselves seem quite clear, some written reports of the acts contradict each other ... about facts that are simply told by this mouth to that ear, of course, even less can be expected'*.

10. Ibid id, p. 712.
11. Ibid. p. 718.
12. Howells, Cora Ann, 1983, 'If I Had a Reliable Interpreter Who Would Make a Reliable Interpretation, Language, Screams, and Silence in Rudy Wiebe's "*Where is the Voice Coming From*."', RANAM, XVI, 1983, 95-104, 102.
13. Br Wallace, '*An Easy Life*', in Bennet and Brown eds., Op cit, p. 947.
14. Ibid, id. p 953.
15. '*As Birds Bring forth the Sun*', in Bennet and Brown eds. Op cit. p. 757.
16. Cf John Gerlach, *Toward the End: Closure and Structure in the American Short Story*, Alabama, Univ of Alabama Press, 1985;
17. McLeod, A., in Bennet and Brown, eds, op cit. p 762.
18. The first death is itself the consequence of a virtual series of displacements. The dog left at the gate is... "still a small pup [was] run over by the steel wheel of a horse drawn cart". Pressed, broken boned, into the mud, it is lifted up by its new owner and nursed slowly back to health instead of being, "as the more practical members of his family", counselled, put out of its misery. Saved, it grows to immense size, too large to breed naturally, so the man, moved by "the longing of her unfulfilment" and used "to working with the breeding of animals", borrows the biggest male dog he can find and arranges, thanks to a hollow in a rock by the sea and his own assistance, a mating. Then, sometime after the dog has disappeared, he and two of his teenage sons, while fishing at sea, are driven by a storm to seek shelter behind a small island. The dog appears the man calls to it; he wades ashore to meet it; it rushes towards him and leaps, as it always did in the past, to put its paws against his shoulders and to lick his face; that leap which on solid land would stagger him backwards is here delivered on the "rolling gravel" of the seashore and knocks him down. "Six more huge gray dogs hurtling down towards the gravelled strand . . . and seeing him stretched prone beneath their mother ... fell upon him in a fury" and, though soon driven away by their mother, left him mangled and dying.
19. One of the sons who saw his father die, after a particularly vivid nightmare of the ... glas a' bhàis, commits suicide. The other is killed in a drunken fight, a fight "perhaps" precipitated "some say" when he too "saw the *cù mor glas a' bhàis* or uttered the name" to be "perhaps" misunderstood by a "large grey-haired man" with six similar friends waiting outside.
20. Another "large and gentle man" is dying, the great-great-grandson of the original victim. He too is attended by his sons who can do little more than take "turns holding the hands of the man who gave us life". His six sons partly recapitulate the two teenage boys who earlier attended their dying father as well as the ten other children not there. But grown and grey, they also evoke the six grey dogs following their mother or the "six other large, grey-haired men who beat [the second son] to death on the cobblestones".

21. Like Keats, she suggests that one must not strive irritably "after fact & reason", Letters of John Keats, "To George and Tom and Keats", but must be capable of living with doubts, mysteries and uncertain knowledge.
22. M. Laurence, 'To Set Our House in Order', in Bennet and Brown, eds, *op. cit.*, p. 584.
23. Margaret Laurence, *Ibidem*, id., p. 595.

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