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Frederick Philip Grove's Immigrantship and the Theory of Wonder

Abstract

*In his book *Marvelous Possessions* (1991), Stephen Greenblatt contends that "the central recurring feature in the early discourse of the New World" is "wonder". By his definition wonder is a conscious recognition of difference, and a reaction towards reality that appears beyond immediate understanding, and thus beyond ready-made conceptualization. One of the problems faced during the encounters with the Americas is thus a problem of language; the new space gradually develops an adequate language to refer to itself and to the new experience.*

*Frederick Philip Grove's novel *A Search for America* (1927), usually read as a thinly veiled autobiography of an early immigrant experience, is one such attempt at the verbal conquest of the New World. This paper discusses Grove's contribution to Canadian "national literature" in view of its possible pertinence to Greenblatt's concept of wonder, the conscious recognition of which might be an indispensable step in the process of constructing the variety of private as well as public identities within the New World's reality.*

Résumé

*Dans son livre *Marvelous Possessions* (1991), Stephen Greenblatt soutient que « c'est le « merveilleux » qui est au centre de la caractéristique du discours du Nouveau Monde. » Selon sa définition, le merveilleux est une reconnaissance consciente de la différence, une réaction envers une réalité qui se situe en dehors de la compréhension immédiate et ainsi en dehors de la conceptualisation toute faite. Aussi, l'un des problèmes auxquels on se heurte dans la rencontre des Amériques est celui du langage, avec le nouvel espace qui se crée un langage approprié pour s'auto-référencer et pour exprimer l'expérience nouvelle.*

*Le roman de Frederick Philip Grove *A Search for America* (1927), interprété avant tout comme une autobiographie à peine voilée d'une expérience immigrante, est une des tentatives de conquérir le Nouveau Monde par les mots. Cet article examine la contribution de Grove à la « littérature nationale » canadienne, en vue de la pertinence possible du concept du merveilleux de Greenblatt, dont la reconnaissance consciente pourrait représenter une démarche indispensable dans le processus de la construction d'une variété d'identités privées et publiques au sein de la réalité du Nouveau Monde.*

The view of America – in the sense of the whole of the continent – from the European geographic and spiritual position has traditionally inspired pressing ontological questions. Besides the obvious practical, more or less manageable problems with crossing the ocean and invading the new space, the historical processes of recognizing America and gradually populating it have meant extremely complicated, by no means automatically successful social, cultural and psychological rites of passage. The problem has not merely been one of understanding or adaptation; rather, the adaptation of those who wished to stay in the new country had to be transformed into a conscious reconstruction of the individual as well as of the social self. Such a process obtains its most direct representation in language, this being a fundamental means of both intra- and inter-cultural communication. In concrete examples of language use, and later in theoretical discourse as well, different stages of this “linguistic mis/appropriation” can be recognized. Margaret Turner says:

Settling and writing the New World means coming to terms with its ontological status and constructing its discourse. There is a pause or stillpoint in the migration from the fixed and placed culture of Europe to the new setting, ... a moment which is disconnected from the Old World and as yet unconnected to the new. That stillpoint between cultures is charged with questions of structure and meaning, and finds a reflection in literature, in language, in human being itself. Absence and silence accompany the migrant suspension between cultures, and underlie the writing of this continent. (Turner, 185)

In his socio-linguistic study of the mental discovery of the New World, Stephen Greenblatt contends that “a central recurring feature in the early discourse of the New World” is “cracking apart of contextual understanding in an elusive and ambiguous experience of wonder” (Greenblatt, 19). He continues to claim that “the frequency and intensity of the appeal to wonder in the wake of the great geographical discoveries of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries helped ... to provoke its conceptualization” (Greenblatt, 19).

Such conceptualization as effected by the principle of wonder had, Greenblatt admits, naturally been underway before the initiation of the conquest of the New World, and was studied by philosophers such as Descartes and Spinoza, in whose view:

Wonder depends upon a suspension or failure of categories and is a kind of paralysis, a stilling of the normal associative restlessness of the mind. In wonder “the mind comes to a stand, because the particular concept in question has no connection with other concepts”. The object that arouses wonder is so new that for a moment at least it is alone, unsystematized, an utterly detached object of rapt attention. (Spinoza qtd. in Greenblatt, 20)

It was Descartes who recognized the connection between the element of wonder and what he referred to as a “first encounter”. Greenblatt then extends the idea into the contention that the experience of wonder is

an almost inevitable component of the discourse of discovery, for by definition wonder is an instinctive recognition of difference, the sign of a heightened attention ... in the face of the new. The expression of wonder stands for all that cannot be understood, that can scarcely be believed. It calls attention to the problem of credibility and at the same time insists upon the undeniability, the exigency of the experience. (Greenblatt, 20)

Greenblatt goes on to apply the “wonder principle” to the study of the discourse of discovery, and describes it as a temporary linguistic incapacity in which the newly encountered reality does not correspond with the pre-existent language. The result is silence in time, and in it the verbal foundations of another reality, and of another fiction, are laid.

The inevitability and inherent complications of this history of verbal reconstruction of the European self in the American space do not imply that the outcoming language accounts of it represent genuine, somewhat unassuming, “clean” uses of language, in the sense of being “realistic” or “true to life”. One of the “marvels” of language reconstructed in this manner is that it proves effectively applicable in literature, which means the use of language referring not only to “what is” or “what was” but likewise to “what might be” or “what might have been”. Literary history abounds in examples of writing in which credibility of presumption cannot – and is not intended to – be testified by the measures of historical truth.

In Canadian literature, one such example is represented by the career of Frederick Philip Grove (1879-1948), a self-appointed (and self-inflicted) late explorer and “searcher for America”, who was, apparently, very painfully aware of the reality of wonder, and whose writing of it, nonetheless, would not stand the test of truth in the legal sense. His texts are usually interpreted as intermediaries between the genre of confessional autobiography – thinly veiled behind multiple assumed identities – and something of an intriguing, provocative literary fake. The story of Grove’s writing strongly resembles the story of his “real” life; of the actual course of which, though, one can never be sure. What we do know, however, is that he was born as Felix Paul Greve in Radomno, Prussia, and was raised in Hamburg, attended universities in Bonn and Munich; he never finished his studies, spent a *Wanderjahr* in Italy and, leading a bohemian life, threw himself deeper and deeper in debt and other trouble. His education seems to have been eclectic but still of admirable scope, and during his European years he must already have become aware of the fundamental power of language for both ontological and practical purposes. *The Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature* writes:

Greve worked feverishly to pay off his debts translating, from English to German, Wilde, Pater, Dowson, Browning, Wells, Meredith, and Swift; and Gide, Murger, Flaubert, Balzac, and

Le Sage from the French. His translations from Cervantes, supposedly from the Spanish, apparently used English models, as did his major project, a translation of the *Thousand and One Nights*, which remained popular in Germany for half a century. (Toye, ed., 190)

Grove also started writing on his own, and published poems, at least one play, pamphlets, articles, reviews as well as two novels in German; but even such prolificacy did not relieve him from debt. In 1909 he faked suicide and fled for America under the assumed name of Fred Grove; there he tried farming, worked as occasional labourer and later settled as a teacher in Manitoba. He continued writing and eventually achieved recognition for his autobiographic and naturalistic novels relating the immigrants' experience in North America. His characters were described as "men whose failures may be predetermined but who nevertheless are driven to try to understand. Projecting himself in them, Grove transcended his own failures" (Toye, ed., 2001, 191-192).

The indicated outline of Grove's life story seems to suggest that the author must have realized very early the importance of language for constructing and re-constructing one's identity, whether real or fictional, and also the vagueness of the dividing line between the realism, or "truthfulness" and fictionality of rendering facts. In the fourth edition of *A Search for America*, one of his attempts at the genre of semi-autobiography, subtitled "The Odyssey of an Immigrant", Grove included a preface in which he wrote:

Imaginary literature is not primarily concerned with facts; it is concerned with truth. It sees facts only within the web of life, coloured and made vital by what preceded it, coloured and made significant by what followed... By writing the book, in the long past, I was freeing myself of the mental and emotional burden implied in the fact that I had once lived it and had left it behind. But the present pervaded the past in every fibre. (Grove, 1927, xvii-xviii)

In commenting on the function of the words quoted above as "paving the road" for the text towards the reader, Axel Knönagel wrote that

with this preface he may have attempted to downplay difference between the novel and *In Search of Myself*, which he was about to compose. The statement is certainly influenced by Grove's attempt to develop a coherent and believable biography that would support the image he had created for himself. (Knönagel, 27n.)

What kind of rhetorical image Grove created for himself in his work is easier to see than to understand why he actually cared for having such an image in the first place. Why he wanted his own self to be interpreted as belonging to a genuine, incurably honest, and gentle individual of ex-European cultural make that has voluntarily gone through multiple hardship and eventually successfully re-made his existence in America, might have

had a variety of reasons into which we do not see, since not even the author's "fictional" words do represent them. They remain in silence, creating thus a "rift in time", and opening space for speculations and, possibly, wonder.

Such questions are, however, probably less important than the indisputable fact that Phil Branden, the narrator of *A Search for America*, and his author "both undergo identical archetypal experiences of immersion in and complete withdrawal from human society, and that both arrive at identical conclusions, most importantly, the conviction that interaction with other people is a necessary element of a satisfying human life" (Knönagel, 28). The difficulty of this process for Grove and the potential perils of it are pointed out in similar terms in Margaret Turner's discussion of the author's use of language and its silence:

He determinedly and repeatedly writes himself and what he conceives to be his place into existence: the alternative is silence and another absence. Grove *lives* the New World's problem of language... The statement of self, when both place and self are radically in question, remains tentative: "myself" and "America," the subjects of Grove's searches, are not fixed. (Turner, 1987, 189)

Phil Branden's "linguistic odyssey" in *A Search for America* starts some time before the physical act of emigration, and with a conscious realization of the language equipment that he has accumulated and that has determined his existence in Europe. On the first page of his story he characterizes himself at that stage, at the age of twenty-four, as follows: "I had been trained to speak the English of fashionable governesses. I had acquired – by dint of much study of English literature – a rather extensive reading and arguing vocabulary which however showed – and, by the way, to this day shows – its parentage by a peculiar stiff-necked lack of condescension to everyday slang" (Grove, 1991, 11). And he does not waste much time in proving himself to be telling the truth by inserting literary, "cultivating" allusions into his speech, such as "I drank from Timon's cup" (Grove, 1991, 17) or "my state of mind was Byronic" (Grove, 1991, 19).

In his speculations about emigrating and thus placing himself into another language reality, the young Phil Branden appears interestingly inconsistent. At first, his education and language equipment seem to provide him with a direction: "Not for a moment did it occur to me to go anywhere except into an Anglo-Saxon country" (Grove, 1991, 19). But very soon the direction is lost due to the narrator's insecurity about his present position – the entire change of which arrives unexpectedly, and sends the narrator's idea about himself into collapse – and consequently about the future: "I intended ... to ask for the next boat which I stood any chance of catching, either at Liverpool or at Southampton, no matter where she might be bound" (Grove, 1991, 20). Even at the point of reaching the Canadian coast, the insecurity and language inconsistency remain: on page 20: "I thought I had a very definite aim..." (Grove, 1991, 20), and immediately on page 21: "I had no definite plans" (Grove, 1991, 21). Thus the first step of Phil's geographical

and expressive odyssey must be the recognition of his present position in time, space and values, and the consequent taking leave from it: "In spite of my very distinct determination not to form a little island of Europe in the American environment I needed only to let myself go, and I was a hot-house plant, used to artificial atmospheres. Rude draughts of the fresh air of a newer world were required to awaken me fully" (Grove, 1991, 27). Only after this pivotal recognition of one's self can the conceptual recognition of the new space gradually begin as well:

I had stepped from what I could not help regarding as a well-ordered, comfortable environment into what had upon me the effect of an utter chaos. For the moment all human contact was non-existent. I felt that not only had I to learn a great many things, the social connections of a world entirely different from the world I knew, for instance; but I also had laboriously to tear down or at least to submerge what I had built up before – my tastes, inclinations, interests. My every-day conversation had so far been about books, pictures, scientific research. Not a word had I heard or spoken about these things since I had set foot on the liner which took me across the Atlantic. In Europe, no matter with whom or about what I might have been speaking, my intercourse with other people had been characterized by that exceeding considerateness which we call culture. Here everybody, even the few that were friendly, seemed bent upon doing what in my former world had seemed to be the unpardonable social sin, and which is described by the slang phrase "rubbing it in" (Grove, 1991, 52)

The hints at "chaos" and "non-existence of human contact" indicate that Phil's adaptation is not to be a straightforward process. His "search for America" is not only a horizontal but a vertical one as well, and, on the way, there is always the danger of illusion: Phil has to go down the social scale to its very bottom, and concurrently discard most of the indicators of his identity; also, the adaptation to and acceptance of American values does not take place where or when he chooses or feels ready. He describes one such momentary illusion as follows:

I could not help comparing myself with the young man who, two months ago, has arrived at the pier of Montreal. "All things flow." I was the same and not the same. I had gone through what, for me, was a tremendous experience; it had changed my attitude towards life. Outwardly I felt very safe, very sure of myself. If any one had accosted me and asked whether I was a newcomer to the country, I should not have answered so openly ... Without telling a lie, I might have prevaricated, avoiding the stranger's eye. To a certain extent the quiet, self-possessed bearing of this young man was not altogether histrionic. I was an experienced traveller: for the first time in my life I had money in my pocket which was really mine. (Grove, 1991, 120)

Because of the illusion, inconsistency about the fundamental terms of self-referencing returns as well: on page 129: "I felt very American on this morning in the metropolis of the western world" (Grove, 1991, 129), whereas on page 158: "When I emerged into the avenue, a miracle had happened. I was in Europe again; I was a European" (Grove, 1991, 158).

Phil's temporary failures might possibly be attributed to the fact that he has not yet undergone the stage of wonder: that his search for America, despite his goodwill, has not yet reached far and deep enough. Eventually, he comes to the realization of it, and does justice to the truth of the need for wonder:

I felt again as those first explorers must have felt when they began to realize that behind this fringe of coast which the discoverers had found there lay a vast continent, a world unknown. Somehow I felt as if my task were harder than theirs. They merely needed to set out, at the risk of their lives, it is true, to arrive at the physical facts; and they found glory and reward. The unknown world which I had to explore was a spiritual world; it had to be inferred from abstract facts; worst of all, in order to arrive at something which might be of value to me in terms of happiness or despair, it had to be condemned or approved of. (Grove, 1991, 173)

Eventually, Phil exposes himself to wonder – he realizes that the "search for America" cannot restrict itself merely to a geographical one; in this context it is hardly surprising that one of Grove's subsequent texts, which represents somewhat of a sequel to *A Search for America*, is titled *In Search of Myself*. Grove's literary, and Phil's "real", searches are pertinent to Greenblatt's interpretation of wonder in the sense that the crucial stage in both of them, following the conscious admission of the sensation of wonder as such, is a complete discarding of language, silence, which is a sign of ultimate conceptual modesty. Phil abandons human society and immerses himself in the vastness of space and silence. Without offering much direct motivation for this narrative turn (and without, of course, having read Greenblatt or, for that matter, the early explorers' verbal accounts of discovery), Phil instinctively confesses:

The terrible need for communication, for imparting to others what I garnered in impressions, moods, thoughts was on the wane. My body had become adjusted to the conditions of the tramp and left my mind free to commune with itself. Things that I felt or thought began to crystallize into short statements, sometimes into brief lines of verse. I obtained a pencil and a little notebook and occasionally jotted observations down. But I did not date them; nor did I attach to them the names of localities. Nothing was further from my mind than to keep a journal or a record. What I wrote down fulfilled its purpose right then and there in affording me that satisfaction which we find in formulating elusive things... Today, when at last I am trying to write this record, even that little help in no longer

available; the notebook seems to have been lost. (Grove, 1991, 280)

Here, towards the conclusion of Phil's story, an objection might arise in the sense that the narrator eventually succeeds, comes to terms with himself and other people, "makes it" in America, and re-assumes his language – the easy evidence of which is the fact that he is using the language to narrate (or fabricate?) his story and shares the story with the reader. The question then arises whether such a conclusion is or is not in accordance with the principle of wonder. Is wonder not a recognition of failure rather than of success? The answer to this question is further complicated by the already suggested insecurity about how much truth Grove actually tells his reader.

Acknowledging the complexity of the issue of Grove's multiple writerly identities, Margaret Turner concludes:

The primary act of self-declaration must take place in language, even if it is as qualified as this statement near the end of his autobiography, which he has devoted to the construction and placement of his identity: "I have often doubted whether there is anything that I can legitimately call I." As Grove said himself: "My life was, or should have been, the life of the imagination." Oddly enough, it was: his life was the imaginative masterpiece he kept trying to write. (Turner, 192)

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