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A Postmodernist Version of Canadian Identity: Ray Smith's "Cape Breton is the Thought Control Centre of Canada"

Abstract

The paper discusses Ray Smith's "Cape Breton is the Thought Control Centre of Canada", a short story with a typically postmodernist fragmentary structure, apparently a random motley amalgamation. The perspective used will be that of narratology and of postcolonial studies, referring to the past tradition of British colonialism and the USA's neo-colonialist present practices, to identify postcolonial trauma and fear of a new type of colonization.

Résumé

Cette étude analyse "Cape Breton is the Thought Control Centre of Canada" ("Le Cap Breton est le centre de contrôle de la pensée du Canada") par Ray Smith, une nouvelle avec une structure fragmentaire typiquement postmoderniste, qui est en apparence un amalgame chamarré arbitraire. La perspective utilisée sera celle de la narratologie et des études postcoloniales, se référant à la tradition passée du colonialisme britannique et aux pratiques néo-colonialistes actuelles des EUA afin d'identifier le trauma et la crainte postcoloniales d'un nouveau type de colonisation.

The short story is a genre with a long-established, successful tradition in Canada. We may observe with Gerald Lynch and Angela Arnold Robbeson that "the enduring centrality of the short story in Canada's literary history" (Lynch and Robbeson, 4) is due perhaps to the fact that, as W.H. New argues, in historically marginal cultures such as Canada's and New Zealand's, writers have found this marginal form "accommodating of their situations and ambitions" (quoted in Lynch and Robbeson, 3). This makes it the ideal vehicle for introducing students to Canadian literature and culture. It is in this context that I will discuss Ray Smith's "Cape Breton is the Thought Control Centre of Canada" as an illustrative postmodernist version of the issue of Canadian identity, a topic that has challenged numerous writers.

This piece of short fiction is innovative, even iconoclastic, with regard to form and content (Gadpaille, 102-103), the story being made up of 32 short or exceptionally short fragments (up to one line) typographically marked by three asterisks (which I have numbered and shall refer to parenthetically as Fx). This extreme fragmentary form is a major postmodernist feature

(Hutcheon, 84). The author himself calls his form "compiled fiction" in one of the self-reflexive passages (Smith, 359) that form a significant metafictional stream throughout the text.

The reading is framed from the beginning by the long title, which may be a possible allusion to the Orwellian institution of the Thought Police in 1984. The title also rings a postmodernist self-ironic and ludic tone by making Cape Breton, the author's birthplace, the centre of this "project" of thought control, a notion that is belied by the very structure and content of the short story, and which would ironically reflect the postcolonial opposition centre/margin.

Then the subtitle "A Centennial Project" places the date of publication after 1967, the year when Canada celebrated the 100th anniversary of its birth date: July 1, 1867 (the year of publication was actually 1969). Thus the subtitle introduces "patriotism" (or love of Canada or love of Canadian life) as the possible subtextual signified underlying the seemingly disconnected fragments that follow. It is therefore a hint to the reader who is hard put to it to produce a meaning – that is, though the structure apparently defies unity it nevertheless acquires a possible unifying thread.

The form of this short story is its most challenging aspect, and foremost among its facets comes the complex use of the multiple narrative voices: some of the fragments are third person narratives with the external narrator's role sometimes cut down to merely transcribing dialogues; some of the fragments, particularly the self-reflexive ones, are written in the first person; and a good number of them use the much less frequent second person narrative.

The third person narrative fragments feature recurrent dialogues between a domestic couple who seem to reject life in Canada as they are debating, even if in an inconclusive way, the question of whether to leave the country (F1). In a typical postmodernist way the dialogue uses Free Direct Speech – that is, a transcription of dialogue without inverted commas and declarative verbs – so we do not know which of the partners utters the cues. The couple also produces discussions of erotic or sexual issues that could be subsumed under the general picture of life in Canada evoked by numerous fragments (F4, F9, F21, F28) where the protagonists are different personae. The most dramatic of these vignettes is F12, which features two men sitting on a park bench. After a brief commonplace dialogue one of them suddenly dies and the other, after treating himself to a draft of whisky, "blows his brains out" (Smith, 361). It is a scene that appears to foreground the precariousness or/and the senselessness of Canadian life.

F2 uses the second person pronoun "you", though the referent is indeterminate here: it could be one of the speakers of the first dialogue in F1 or it could be a more patriotic body as "you believe in Canada and are worried about American economic domination?" (357), or it could be the reader, clearly a Canadian reader. This "you" could even be the first person narrator, a dissimulate "I" speaking to himself, as in an interior monologue (Bal, 47, 48). Therefore F2 introduces the motif of a postcolonial trauma that results in the fear of American neo-colonization in the form economic and financial domination, a fear that had been expressed even as early as 1904 in Sara Jeannette Duncan's *The Imperialist*.

Also, in an as yet jocular tone, the story expresses a possible violent reaction to this threat: "blowing up the Peace Bridge" (357), the link between Canada and the United States at the east end of Lake Erie at the source of the Niagara River. In F3 the feeling escalates to fear of military occupation (and we should mention here that the territory of present Canada was twice invaded by American armies, once in 1775 and a second time in 1812). But as a look



at the deixis of F3 reveals to us that the “you” is a child, the light tone takes the edge off the anxiety couched in the binary opposition “we Canadians” against “them imperialist Yankees” (Smith, 357).

The motif of violence recurs also in F8, which is a sort of interior monologue where the context reveals “you” to be a member of a gang attacking a supply column in order to pilfer guns. The same sort of illegal activity is unfolding in F11 where “you” implies the whole gang that has just blown up a huge oil tank and in F23 where “you” is engaged in smuggling a man on the Canadian coast.

F18 bluntly and unequivocally puts forth the alternatives to a “you” that can be subsumed to a generic reader’s position: “Would you rather be smothered under a pillow of American greenbacks or cut open on a U.S. Marine’s bayonet?” (Smith: 365).

And in F19 and F26 the military occupation (the subject of a suggested “day dreaming” announced in F3) seems to be a reality: there is a curfew for civilians and the identity of “you” has deictically shifted to that of a member of a French resistance group engaged in the operation of helping a fellow fighter escape from the house where the CIA men are holding him prisoner. In F26 the “you” carrying on a resistance action is a woman that will cook “a very special soup” in memory of her husband, “shot down in front of his customs shed the day it all began” (Smith, 367).

The theme of neighbourly imperialism is resumed, running in a somber register throughout F5 and F17, on analogy with the situation of Poland, a country that was historically obliterated for 123 years through repeated partitions of its territory (1772, 1793, 1795) by greedy imperialist neighbours (Austria, Prussia and Russia). The centrality of the issue is foregrounded by the length of F17 which, with its 3 pages, is the longest of the collage. It dramatizes (without giving explicit dates) the situation of Poland’s second partition between Russia and Prussia (1793), using a scathing satirical presentation of the Prussian diplomat, “monocled Baron Otto von und zu something –dorf” (363) and of the Russian diplomat, the lean and foppish Prince Igor who is suspected of scandalous sexual practices (363).

Patriotism gets a simple definition in this fragment: “Poles love Poland” (365), a definition that has initially been questioned in F1 where the couple trifling love of their country leads them to contemplate relocation. The topic of patriotism spills into the self-reflexive stream too, as this attitude is institutionally encouraged by the Canada Council. Thus F22 comments on the figure of the Canadian artist as patriot. But the protagonist, a painter that benefits from a Canada Council grant, fails to find patriotism a viable source of inspiration and only pays lip-service to it by painting a Maple Leaf flag on a canvas that he hangs in his studio.

The sensitive issue of national identity is touched upon in F5 as based not only upon territory (land) but also upon a distinctive language, which the Canadians “want”, in the dual meaning of “wish” and “need, lack”. The issue of language of origin that the Canadians share with their republican “cousins” south of the border leads to introducing Britain as a possible target for the initial couple’s relocation in F14. It is a fragment that articulates postcolonial revulsion at the former imperial centre. The couple hates England on account of its “centuries of grime on everything” (Smith, 361), a metaphor that suggests the historical accumulation of imperial exploitation disguised under grandiloquent rhetoric.

Albert Memmi in *The Colonizer and the Colonized* explains that "to be a colonizer means to be a nonlegitimate privileged person... [and all actions are geared to] ...transforming his usurpation into legitimacy" (52). The way the colonizer does this is to extol his own merits to the skies and "harp on the usurped's demerits" (53). And colonial peoples end up internalizing the deprecating hetero-image of the Imperial Centre(s) based on the latter's self-assumed sense of superiority, thus developing self-deprecating auto-images. This process is alluded to when the narrator in "Cape Breton" describes the Polish Count's "self-deprecating sense of humour" (362), which is echoed by the allegorical meaning of F31. This fragment features a common-looking man incarcerated in an octagonal room, which symbolically embodies the ambiguous duality of the archetypal Canadian auto-image: he thinks himself remarkably beautiful and strokes his beautiful body with one hand, and, at other times or even simultaneously, he thinks himself surpassingly ugly and lashes his ugly body with a whip he holds in his other hand (369).

Another specifically Canadian dual condition is also mentioned, the English/French duality that Atwood has called "the Canadian schizophrenia". In F30 the reader may infer that one half of the couple is possibly French Canadian and that Canada stands in need of healing that divide, the conversing couple thus acquiring the symbolic meaning bestowed upon the marriage of Paul Tallard and Heather Methuen at the end of Hugh MacLennan's *Two Solitudes*.

As the short story draws to an end the fragments evidence greater thematic unity, and from the couple's last dialogue the reader learns that patriotism is not really absent from Canadians' psychological make-up:

Maybe we could just stay here.

I suppose.

I mean, I like Canada, really. It's not a bad place.

It is home.

Perhaps, though, we could go to Montreal for a change. (Smith, 369)

Moreover F29 dramatizes Canadian-American relations as a child's game between Joe Yank and Johnny Canuck. Joyfully aware of his physical strength, Joe bullies his cousin even to the extreme of demanding that the latter should lick his boot. The narrator's reaction to this order of complete subservience is to urge his addressee (again "you") to undertake an act of unexpected rebellion: "Of course, you can always kick him first" (Smith, 369), even if it is a futile act given the inequality of strength. The conclusion of the short story (F32) rings the same note, and the tone is not exactly light, though not totally grim either because of the use of the terrorist cliché: "For Centennial Year send President Johnson a gift: an American tourist's ear in a matchbox. Even better, don't bother with the postage" (Smith, 369).

Ray Smith's short story with its ramified structure is an outstanding achievement of what we could term with Michelle Gadpaille a "baroque" postmodernism (103). Its most remarkable feature is perhaps its intensity, which to our mind derives from the text's extensive use of second person narrative passages: in some the "you" can be construed as the addressee of apostrophe, as in lyrical poetry (Bal, 47) where the referent of "you" assumes various identities, continually shifting from a member of a domestic couple, to children playing, to mem-



bers of gangs engaged in illegal activities in various geographic locations (Toronto, Manitoba, Montreal are mentioned); at other times the "you" can be subsumed by the reader's position (Bal, 47). The text seems to convey a Canadian fear of annihilation of identity through Americanization; it vibrates with anxiety, but Smith's play with the narrative form and cliché both "underlines and undermines" (to extrapolate from Linda Hutcheon's remark on Atwood's use of parody in *The Handmaid's Tale*, Hutcheon, 8) the embedded tale of war. Therefore, the very form of the "you" as direct address is put under erasure by ironic and self-ironic hints that render this plurivocal text typical of the postmodernist context in which it was produced.

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