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NATIVE CANADIAN LITERATURE

Don Sparling

Recent years have witnessed an explosion of writing by Native Canadians, both in quality and in quantity. This has led to a growing interest in this writing among both non-Natives in Canada and foreigners abroad; in fact, Native writing, like the Native cause in general, has become almost fashionable. A major problem arises, however, when this writing becomes the subject of literary studies: many of its conventions are simply so distant from those of ordinary Western literature that readers are often unable to come to terms with it. Reactions range from bafflement to frustration to simple rejection. For this reason, it is worthwhile trying to analyse precisely which aspects of these works it is that create the most difficulties for the non-Native reader. These seem to me to be three: the formal and verbal conventions of the works, the context of the works, and the function of the works. All three of these are of course necessarily interconnected, but for the sake of clarity it is best to discuss them separately.¹

First, the formal and verbal aspects. Native literature arises out of an oral tradition, a tradition that is still very much alive and well among Canadian Natives. As the Native writer Daniel David Moses points out:

A lot of Native people have been working with words without publishing. It's not this horrible painful need that so many white writers have when they spend a couple of years working on something and can't get it published. If the material is working orally within the community, that's enough.²

But when it is published, 'oral literature' is the result. Here, however, we are immediately up against a problem. For the term 'oral literature' is misleading, privileging as it does the second member of the term – i. e. its written aspect. The implication is that 'oral literature' is somehow a less valid form or variety of 'real', 'unadorned' literature. So it is better to use the term 'orature', familiar from post-colonial literary theory, as being more appropriate to the kinds of

¹ It should be stressed that most of the points discussed in this article apply to Native writing in general. However, certain features, particularly those relating to the use of language, are more pronounced in Canada than elsewhere. The reasons for this will become clear in the course of the article.

² Preface to *An Anthology of Canadian Native Literature in English*, Daniel David Moses and Terry Goldie, edd. (Toronto: OUP, 1992), pp. XVIII–XIX.

texts written by Canadian Natives. Virtually all the works of Native Canadian literature should be approached in the first instance as 'orature'.

Unfortunately, however, most late twentieth century Westerners are not attuned to the world of orature, which is fundamentally different from the world of literature, in precise measure as the speaker/listener relationship differs fundamentally from the writer/reader relationship. Marshall McLuhan, of course, has analysed many of these differences.³ One of the most important is the dynamism of the spoken word, directed to a specific audience and provoking it to react, as opposed to the relative reticence of the written word with its general and unspecified target. Though the 'what' of orature – the 'content' – may in many cases be fairly comprehensible, its 'how' is less tied up with what we traditionally consider the most important stylistic devices – figures of speech such as metaphor and simile, symbols, and so on – than with more purely rhetorical devices, which we are less accustomed, or totally unaccustomed, to dealing with. For today the educated person not only listens very seldom to anything that might be considered 'literature'; he has also been 'hushed up' and is no longer even accustomed to speaking aloud as he reads, and so has double difficulty in appreciating these effects in stories.

So for most readers, the oral power of literature is very much a thing of the past. Over a century ago, Gerard Manley Hopkins, wishing for his own works 'loud, leisurely, poetical recitation',⁴ complained that poetry had largely ceased to be what he claimed living art should be, made for performance. Yet this is the condition, direct or indirect, under which much Native writing is still created nowadays. This is particularly clear in the case of Harry Robinson, a British Columbian Native born in 1900: his stories abound in constant explication, much intentional repetition, dramatic pauses, frequent addresses to the listener. His editor, Wendy Wickwire, has tried to suggest some of the quality of his original performance by employing a distinctive layout in her book. Here is a passage from Robinson's tale about a boy who received power from two birds.

So the boy was travelling from here to there.
 And when he come to the ridge,
 the edge of the ridge, like,
 and he could hear someone was singing a song,
 but he couldn't tell where.
 He could just hear.
 Sound like to the bottom of the ridge,
 or in the air someplace, maybe on the tree.
 There was some big trees on the bottom, like.
 Anyway, he thought maybe he better go here
 and right to the edge of that ridge.⁵

This gives some idea of Robinson's units of speech, the cumulative effect of various passages. But what is missing is any indication of such features as

³ See especially *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964).

⁴ See John Pick, ed., *A Gerard Manley Hopkins Reader* (New York and London: OUP, 1953), p. XXII.

⁵ Harry Robinson, *Write It on Your Heart*, Wendy Wickwire, ed. (Vancouver: Talon Books, 1989), p. 201.

pitch, loudness, pace of delivery – features that reflect the nature of orature as essentially a performance art. Yet for most people, scholars included, the idea that the delivery is an intrinsic part of the very nature of a work like this is unacceptable. But this must be admitted. In fact historically, it was one of the reasons why in many Native tribes there existed a straightforward form of copyright: individuals, or in some cases families, 'owned' certain tales, and were the only ones permitted to express them. And these tales – i. e. the right to tell them – could be traded or sold or inherited.

Another important distinction between the written and the spoken word can be seen in the way in which the visual stress of writing fosters a heightened sense of privacy, whereas the oral bias of speech strengthens both the sense of community and the way in which the individual is linked to a world that is loaded with personal significance. This is reflected at a deep verbal level in much Native writing. A good example is Ron Geyshick, an Ojibway.

I know living inside me are two moose and two deer, a few butterflies, and the Lord is in my heart. That albino deer is very strong – she's number one, the leader. She lives in my right shoulder, and the regular deer is in my left shoulder. That's why the deer is number one. I have two moose around my hips, just below the bone – a regular one, and a blue one.

The Creator is in my heart and I have four butterflies in each ear, from the size of a moth up to the largest. I don't know where those big ones come from. I guess they live somewhere way up in the top of the sky. These butterflies are from all over the world. One's from as far away as South America, a big blue one.

[Geyshick then describes how he got the butterflies by walking into a cloud of them, and they crawled into his ears, and stayed there.]

Now all my messages come from them, just like a radio. When something is happening, I hear their wings fluttering inside my ears, sometimes two or three times in one night. When I hear this sound, I send my regular moose or the albino deer to find out what is going on.⁶

Now it is difficult to know what to make of this, other than to just shake one's head, or exclaim something like 'Weird!' The problem here is related to the way the language itself is being used. In *The Great Code*, Northrop Frye, adapting an idea from Vico, speaks of the sequence in which language develops, from the metaphoric to the metonymic to the descriptive.⁷ Simply put, Frye suggests that in the descriptive phase, words are used to refer to something outside the structure of words; in the metonymic phase, the criterion of truth is in the integrity of the verbal structure rather than its relation to something outside; and in the metaphoric phase, everything is potentially identifiable with everything else. In the metaphoric phase, subject and object are linked by a common power or energy; no true verbal abstractions exist. This is the language of immanence, rather than of transcendence or description – and it is at the heart not only of Geyshick's works, but to varying degrees of much Canadian Native writing. As the Cree writer Lee Maracle puts it: 'The concept of thinking that Europeans [i. e. non-Natives] have [is] ... objectification of thought. For us, thinking is a complete and total process.'⁸

A third crucial aspect of orature – and of the metaphorical phase of the use of

⁶ Ron Geyshick, *Te Blue Win Truth* (Toronto: Summerhill Press, 1989), pp. 13-14.

⁷ Northrop Frye, *The Great Code* (Toronto: Academic Press, 1982), particularly pp. 6-25.

⁸ In Hartmut Lutz, ed. *Contemporary Challenges Conversations with Canadian Native Authors* (Saskatoon: Fifth House, 1991), p. 173.

language – is its discontinuity. 'Cause' is not efficient and sequential, and things do not move and happen in 'rational' space or time. There is a great deal of jumping about; action is fragmented; narrators move in and out of their stories; causes are not explained; past, present and future are at times fused. Moreover, to quote Frye, 'Statements are not to be argued about, but must be accepted and pondered, their power absorbed by a disciple or reader.'⁹ This is a particularly difficult aspect of Native writing to grasp, for it goes against the general Western sense of an ending, of a 'point' to which the story is leading. Much Native writing leaves its 'point' hidden. The contrast with our formal conventions has been pointed out by Lee Maracle. Since the reader/listener is as much a part of the story as the writer/narrator, she says, he or she must share in creating the conclusion too. It is not up to the story teller to explain, just to present the dilemma tersely; no 'instruction' is given in how to interpret the story, very few hints. And Maracle wickedly adds that one of the reasons Natives are so frustrated when forced to attend non-Native schools is that the stories they are supposed to read there are so obvious, their 'messages' sticking out like sore thumbs, that nothing is left to the imagination and the Native children are simply bored.¹⁰

These are just some of the main ways in which Native writings differ in formal and verbal ways from what we are used to. Let us move on now to what I have termed the contextual difficulties that often stand in the way of comprehension of Native work. By 'contextual' I am thinking of the general cultural context in which Native work is written. Two things in particular are important here: traditional Native legends, figures, cultural attitudes, and so on, and – again – language, but here in its semantic aspect.

First, such aspects as legends and traditional figures. In fact, in *contemporary* writing, Native legends as such are not very important. Various writers do create modern versions of old Native tales, but these are not, in my opinion, very interesting. Far more fundamental is the extensive use made of the central figure in traditional Native mythologies, the Trickster figure, who goes by various names in different Native traditions – Coyote, Nanabush, and so on. Creator of Indians, meddler in the world, the Trickster is an embodiment of the Native concept of spirituality, which is not concerned with our either/or approach to reality, our obsession with the question of good and evil, but seeks instead a harmony that *contains* contradictions – both within the individual, and between the individual and his social and natural environment. The Trickster is both admirable and foolish, clever and gullible, subtle and thick-headed, a figure with good intentions that all too often just fail to work out, a character to be admired, laughed at and laughed with simultaneously. One is never sure what he is going to do next, whether what he does is to be perceived by the audience or the characters of the story as good or bad. Some of the qualities of the Trickster figure are discussed by one of Canada's leading contemporary playwrights, the Cree Native Thomson Highway:

⁹ Frye, p. 8.

¹⁰ Lee Maracle, *Sojourner's Truth and Other Stories* (Vancouver: Press Gang Publishers, 1990), pp. 11-12.

The central figure in our mythology is a clown, a Trickster, who stands at the centre of our dream life, as opposed to the European context where the central figure is an agonized individual. European mythology says we are here to suffer; our mythology says we're here to have a good time. The language that grew out of that mythology is hilarious. When you talk Cree, you laugh, constantly.

And secondly, it's very visceral. You talk quite openly about the functions of the body, which in English are taboo. The Trickster was a very sensual character – making love, eating – all those bodily functions, he celebrated them, he lived for them. The Trickster's most frequent conversational partner was his anus. In English the immediate impulse is to censor that, but in Cree it makes perfect sense.

The third distinction is that there is no gender given to words. By that system of thought the mythological Trickster is neither exclusively male nor exclusively female; or is both simultaneously. In the European languages you must always deal with the male-female-neuter hierarchy. God is male, irretrievably. Suppose Jesus Christ had been a woman? What an outrageous notion. But the Cree figure was never made flesh. He is strictly a figure of the imagination.¹¹

Given the centrality and complexity of such a figure, it is not surprising that Native writers use the Trickster – either explicitly, or in disguise – in an astonishing variety of ways. Thomas King has used it to create subtle put-downs of non-Natives 'interested' in Native tales, has employed it as a device to parody the Bible, has written a whole novel in which the incidents are reminiscent of Trickster stories.¹² Jeannette Armstrong has employed it for ecological ends;¹³ Beth Brant has put it to witty use in celebrating lesbianism.¹⁴ The possibilities are infinite, but no matter what the handling, the moral and ethical stance of the original mythology lies like a shadow behind the work, often making it difficult for someone unfamiliar with the concept of the Trickster to grasp. And this difficulty is increased by attitudes of mind that stem from basic qualities of Native languages.

It must be realized that a great many Canadian Native writers today are at home in a Native mother tongue. For many, English is something acquired at second hand, or later: Thomson Highway, for example, spoke nothing but Cree till the age of six, and only became fluent in English in his mid-teens; to this day, he dreams in Cree.¹⁵ Even for those whose mother tongue is in fact English, the weight of the lost Native tongue is still very evident. And one of the features of these languages is what might be termed their relativity, their judgemental hesitancy. For example, the Ojibwan writer Basil H. Johnson has pointed out that, in his mother tongue, the term for 'he or she is telling the truth, is correct, is right' (*w'daeb-awae*) is more than an affirmation of a speaker's veracity. Etymologically it also suggests that he is casting his words and voice as far as his perception and vocabulary will enable him or her – in other words, it is simultaneously a denial that there is such a thing as an absolute truth; it is saying that the best a speaker can achieve, and a listener expect, is a great

¹¹ Nancy Wigston, 'Nanabush in the City', *Books in Canada*, March 1989, pp. 8-9.

¹² In such stories as 'The One About Coyote Going West' (first published in *All My Relations*, Thomas King, ed. [Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1990], pp. 95-106) and 'One Good Story, That One' (in *The Journey Prize Anthology* [Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1989], pp. 110-116). The novel referred to here is *Medicine River* (Toronto: Penguin Viking, 1989).

¹³ In 'This Is a Story' (in *All My Relations*, pp. 129-135).

¹⁴ In 'Coyote Learns a New Trick' (in *An Anthology of Canadian Native Literature in English*, pp. 148-150).

¹⁵ Wigston, p. 7.

degree, the most honest degree, if you will, of accuracy. Similarly, the word for 'to know' (*w'kikaendaun*) signifies not some ultimate knowledge, but that the thing known corresponds to what the speaker has already heard, seen, experienced, touched, and so on.¹⁶ This careful qualification, this intellectual and moral modesty, is at the heart of the famous Indian reserve in speech – the patient striving to say no more than what one knows about, to give full weight to every statement. The result for an inexperienced reader or listener, however, is often a sense that the text is thin, empty, boring – or even, in the words of a student after reading the delicately crafted childhood reminiscences of the Ojibwa writer Ruby Slipperjack, 'The stupidest piece of childish writing I've ever read!'

Finally, a few words about what I have termed the 'function' of Native writing. I have already stated that Native writers do not generally make the 'point' of their stories obvious. In fact texts remain very open. As Lee Maracle says:

Most of our stories don't have orthodox 'conclusions': that is left to the listeners, who we trust will draw useful lessons from the story – not necessarily the lessons we wish them to draw... The listeners are drawn into the dilemma and are expected at some point in their lives to actively work themselves out of it.¹⁷

But though Lee Maracle stresses that the lesson is up to the listener, she also suggests that there must be *some* lesson. In other words, there is a belief that the works do not exist in some aesthetic limbo, but serve a purpose in people's lives and in the life of the community.

This is a complex topic, but it is enough here to suggest that one of the chief functions of contemporary Native writing – and by that I mean its function for the audience the writing is primarily directed at, the Natives themselves – is that of healing. Again, this is something the ordinary non-Native will often find hard to relate to. But exposure to a large body of Native work, and reading in the history of the treatment of Natives, will make much of the emotional background to these works clear. I should point out here that Canadians tend to be very proud of the way they handled their Native 'problem' as opposed to the way the Americans handled theirs. No Indian wars, no lawless massacres, just the orderly establishment of reserves, and the intrepid and incorruptible presence of the renowned Mounted Police to ensure fair play and instil respect. There is much in this picture that is accurate and laudable, but one must also look at what it leaves out: how Native customs were outlawed and those who continued to celebrate them prosecuted, how reserves were whittled down over the years and promises remained unfulfilled, how Native children were taken from their parents and sent away to boarding schools, and so on and so on. Seen from this perspective, the reasons for the frightful Native suicide rates, Native drunkenness, and Native apathy become only too clear. And it is with this community in mind, with the aim not of berating it, or excusing it, but of examining it in order to heal it and return to it a sense of self respect, that many of Canada's Native writers are producing their works today.

If the barriers to a full understanding and appreciation of Native literature are so daunting, is there any point in the non-Native reading it at all? I think so,

¹⁶ Basil H. Johnson, 'Is That All There Is? Tribal Literature', in *An Anthology of Canadian Native Literature in English*, p. 108.

¹⁷ Lee Maracle, *Sojourner's Truth*, p. 12.

and would suggest here, in addition to the general virtue of trying to understand a culture and mentality that is different from one's own, two additional reasons for becoming familiar with Native literature. First, the 'message' of much Native writing is something that we can all benefit from: the way in which it makes us conscious of the limits of our life, limits necessarily created by our spiritual bond with the physical world, is something that is surely of inestimable value at the end of the twentieth century. And second, the seeming simplicity, even primitiveness, of much Native writing is quite illusory; in many of its basic features, the best Native writing - orature in the full sense of the word - is very close to, and as complex as, the latest post-modernist fictions.

