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Dog Eat Dog, Word Eat Word:
Postmodern Negation in Sheila Watson's “And The four Animals”
(1950-1980)

Georgiana M.M. Colvile

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future in time past.
If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable.
(T. S. Eliot, 1935)

"I was sitting down to eat, and a devil in the form
of a black dog walked in through the window (...) It
wasn't ordinary. No, the dog spoke to me".
(Louise Erdrich, 2001)

Although she represents a literary landmark in her native Canada, Sheila Watson remains
little known beyond its borders. She not only transposed onto her own territory the
innovations of great Moderns like Joyce, Woolf, Faulkner, Pound, Eliot, Bernanos etc. but
with a single short novel, The Double Hook, laid the foundations for Canadian
Postmodernism. Canada's Postmodern author-critics such as Robert Kroetsch, George
Bowering and Stephen Scobie still claim her as their mother. The Scottish born Scobie
even maintains that "her writing is more important, and her influence more pervasive
than those of Margaret Atwood". He was born in 1943, Atwood in 1939 and Watson in
1909, yet Scobie insists that "both as a writer and as a critic, it is the Sheila Watson
generation that I belong to". Watson (1909-1998) is known for her reserve and
minimalism, hence Scobie's humorous remark in a biographical note:

The major fact about Sheila Watson's biography is that she does not have one; or,
rather, that she would regard it as irrelevant."
Ironically, biographical elements often colour Watson's fiction. Sheila Doherty was raised an Irish Catholic in New Westminster, B. C. and spent her first 11 years on the grounds of the Provincial Mental Hospital, where her father was Superintendent. After obtaining her MA (1933) at UBC, she taught primary or secondary school in small rural western towns, notably the aptly named Dog Creek in 1934, while reading Joyce, Faulkner, Eliot etc. In 1941 she married the writer Wilfrid Watson, moved with him to Toronto and completed a PhD on Wyndham Lewis with Marshall McLuhan in 1965. She taught at the University of Alberta from 1961 to 1975 and co-founded *The White Pelican: A Quarterly Review of the Arts* in 1971. In 1980, the Watsons returned to British Columbia and settled on Vancouver Island. Sheila's writing bears the double marks of biblical and Greek mythology and of arid western landscapes and the proximity of madness. Hélène Ventura's comment on her short story "Antigone" (1959): "It is a displacement of the tragic into the lunatic" could refer to all her fiction. Watson also combines fragmented, open-ended (post) modern structures with traditional Amerindian as well as classical myths.

The totality of Watson's "œuvre" was published between 1954 and 1992. Its superb quality and craft contrast with its small quantity: two short novels, five short stories and a dozen concise critical essays. Moreover, the order of publication of her work now seems as subversive as T. S. Eliot's notion of time in *The Four Quartets*. Her first novel, *Deep Hollow Creek*, written in the 1930s, probably at Dog Creek, came out last, in 1992. Her last short story to appear, "And the Four Animals" (1980), was written in the early 50s (Scobie: 276) and Scobie intimates that this uncanny fifth story "stands as an introduction, or a prologue, to the greater achievement of *The Double Hook*" (ibid.: 287). Watson waited several years for the latter's publication in 1959. The other short stories appeared in a more logical order, "Brother Oedipus", "The Black Farm" and "Antigone" in the 1950s and "The Rumble Seat" in 1974. Those four texts and the critical essays from the 60s and 70s were gathered in a 1974 issue of *Open Letter* devoted to Watson.

"And the Four Animals" at first appears disconcertingly hermetic. Critics have tended to avoid it, with the exception of Scobie. The connection Scobie establishes between this story and the seminal novel *The Double Hook* proves more than plausible. Both texts open onto the naked western landscape Dog Creek. *The Double Hook* begins: "In the folds of the hills/under Coyote's eye/lived", followed by a poetic, anaphoric list of dramatis personae. AFA begins: "The Foothills slept..." and the second paragraph reads:

> Around the curve of the hill, or out of the hill itself, came three black dogs. The watching eye could not record with precision anything but the fact of their presence...

Coyote the Amerindian Dog-god is mentioned further on. Unlike the novel, AFA uses no poetic typographical make-up or interpolated verse but a powerful and consistent use of repetition creates a poetic rhythm: the word "dog (s)" occurs twenty times in less than three pages, "eye (s)" sixteen times, "hill (s)" twelve times; there are five nominal references to a silent human presence ("man", "master", "watcher" etc...), three to "god (s)" and three to Coyote. Both texts read as fairly abstract, particularly the short story, which has the makings of a fable.

Diegetically, AFA is stripped down to a bare minimum: the initially empty landscape becomes sparsely populated by three black dogs, to be followed by a fourth and a watcher, later identified as a man. The dogs are described as "aliens in this spot or exiles returned as if they had never been" and contrasted with Coyote, having been domesticated into degeneracy, like La Fontaine's dog in "Le Loup et le chien" (The Wolf...
and the Dog). Watson's dogs "were of Coyote's house (...). They, too, were gods, but civil gods made tractable and useless by custom" (AFA). When the man intervenes, he uses their starvation and helplessness in the wilds to reduce them to abjection to the point of extinction. He makes them devour themselves and each other "until one tooth remained and this he hid in his own belly" (AFA). And then there were none. The text swallows itself up.

7 In the one talk Watson gave about The Double Hook, she recalls buying a real double hook in a fishing tackle shop by the Seine in Paris, so she could prove the object's existence to a skeptical critic, and how, to her delight, its photograph became the book's cover:

It gave me enormous pleasure when I saw the book in this cover, because it seemed like a co-creation. (ibid.)

8 The symbolism of the double hook goes much deeper, for its doubleness structures all of Watson's writing. According to Scobie:

The characteristic duality of her thinking, the pattern of the double hook, may be seen in the various juxtapositions of convent schooling and avant-garde literature, of the need for order and the need for disorder, of the local and the cosmopolitan, of conservative tradition and endless youthful intellectual inquiry. (Scobie 262)

9 It is not a question of Saussure's binaries but of something more difficult to formulate, a negation process in the Freudian sense, closely related to irony, when "the speaker himself means to convey the opposite meaning of what he says". Linda Hutcheon, who attributes special importance to irony as a Canadian literary trait, also pinpoints a doubleness close to Watson's:

While Canadian culture is not alone in deploying the creative tension between differences that I am calling postmodern irony, it does seem to be particularly fertile ground for the cultivating of doubleness.

10 In AFA, it all boils down to language... or not, as Gertrude Stein would say, which makes deconstructing the text a challenge and a pleasure. The first question could be "why dogs?" One answer is that English is probably the only language to anagrammatize the words "god" and "dog" and thus bring together the highest (though hypothetical) form of life with one of the lowest: a doggone god on a par with a goddamn dog. Interestingly, canine symbolism and dog deities (including wolf, fox, jackal and coyote figures) remain fairly consistent in most world mythologies. According to Guy H. Cooper, the Ameridian Coyote, the probable focalizer of The Double Hook and possibly of AFA, represents:

... both good and evil, humans and gods, and of course animals. He is unpredictable and ambivalent, a characteristic of all these beings. At the same time, however, by testing and pushing the limits of behavior, he demonstrates and reinforces concepts of harmony and order...

11 In Native American and Canadian lore, Coyote is connected with creation myths, as well as being a trickster, a loner, a predator and, like his counterparts the Egyptian Anubis, the Greek Cerberus, the Mayan Xolotl, the Scandinavian Garm, the Chinese Tien K'uan, etc., he is associated with death and the passage into the underworld (Cooper: 189). In DH, Watson's Coyote is a talking animal, with the gift of the gab and a touch of the poet, like any self-respecting Irish fox. In AFA, Coyote is referred to as:

... the primitive one, the god-baiter and troublemaker, the thirster after power, the vainglorious (who) might have walked since the dawn of creation...,

12 but no one talks in that story, neither Coyote, nor the dogs, nor "the man", and its pre-linguistic scene seems to negate language. And yet, as Scobie has discovered:
The title comes from the Revelation of Saint John the Divine: "Then I heard all the living things in creation—everything that lives in the air, and on the ground, and in the sea, crying, 'To the One who is sitting on the throne and to the Lamb, be all praise, honour, glory and power, for ever and ever'. And the four animals said, 'Amen', (v. 13-14, my emphasis)"

Scobie then refers the reader to the preceding description of the four beasts:

In the centre, grouped around the throne itself, were four animals with many eyes, in front and behind. The first animal was like a lion, the second like a bull, the third animal had a human face, and the fourth was like a flying eagle. Each of the four animals had six wings and had eyes all the way round as well as inside; and day and night they never stopped singing. (iv. 6-8)

So the original Four Animals, unlike Watson's dogs, talked and sang. AFA creates a strange double hook effect of alpha versus omega and genesis versus Revelation or Apocalypse. The opening statement of the Gospel according to St. John: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God" (I: 1) has turned into "In the beginning was the Eye", in both AFA and DH, but in the latter both humans and animals, including a talking parrot, have gained access to the Word and to music. This confirms Scobie's theory of AFA as an introduction to DH and Barbara Godard's statement that "Watson moves beyond language into music", emulating the biblical movement from Adam naming the silent animals in Genesis to the Four Animals talking and singing in Revelation.

Critics have often looked for the woman in Watson's writing. George Bowering identifies the author of The Double Hook with a female Coyote:

The reader (...) does not so much desire to know what Coyote is but rather what she says. (My emphasis).

To me, "ça parle", in the Lacanian sense, sometimes through Coyote's mouth, through the other characters or an external narrator in DH and on a different level in AFA. Bowering as reader, was answering a provocative boutade on the part of Watson, "trickster", as he calls her. She had said, re-DH: "I don't know now, if I re-wrote it, whether I would use the Coyote figure". That tongue-in-cheek hypothesis would have meant negating the novel.

Barbara Godard does detect feminist elements in her analysis of language in DH. Using Gertrude Stein and Nicole Brassard as critical lenses, she highlights postmodern fragmentation and semi-abstraction, writing of the body and a "feminist myth of androgyny" (151). She also reads the novel as reflecting the "modernist crisis of language", its disruption, its transgression of "the ordinary lexical meanings of words" and self-denial as it moves into other dimensions, such as music, silence and light, a theory later pursued by Margaret Turner, who stresses the spiritual dimension of the text:

The Double Hook is an activity of language reflexively moving in on its own energies, moving out from them along channels of liturgy and ritual, floating inside a medium, a surround, of silence.

The book opens with the murder of an old woman, whose ghost goes on fishing in silence and ends with a birth and a final song from Coyote, after purification by fire and water, announcing a return to Christian or other rituals.

In DH, Watson was transcribing the desperation of destitute rural communities and displaced native peoples in the 30s. Like Eliot in The Waste Land (1922) or Bernanos in Monsieur Ouïne (1933-46), she writes about their fall from grace and spiritual void; she said in her talk:
... There was something I wanted to say: about how people are driven, how if they have no art, how if they have no tradition, how if they have no ritual, they are driven in one of two ways, either towards violence or towards insensibility.

She also establishes her characters' physical osmosis with the land they inhabit: "I was concerned with figures in a ground, from which they could not be separated" (Ibid.)

The dogs in AFA, once a product of their environment, have been driven and disconnected by degeneracy, as we have seen. Gender never appears to be an issue, but the very absence of any female component constitutes one and reinforces the sterility of the fawning, anthropophagic male dogs, under the eyes of a man and a masculine deity. A different writing of the body pervades Watson's animal-fable. The primeval opening landscape is described in organic, anthropomorphic or zoomorphic terms: "The foothills slept. Over their yellow limbs the blue sky crouched" and the hills appear to have given birth to the dogs: "Around the curve of the hill, or out of the hill itself, came three black dogs". A métonymic organ, "the eye", propels the text forward:

The watcher could not have said whether they [the dogs] had come or whether the eye had focused them into being.

The story progresses in terms of the dogs' bodies, movements, fragmentation and devoration. The fourth dog's appearance emulates Eve's creation from Adam's rib: "And the fourth which he had whistled up from his own depths". These timeless animals are anachronistically defined as Labrador retrievers, bearing the name of another desolate region on Canada's North-Eastern shore.

"Beasts aren't much different from men..." (DH: 76), says a character in DH. In AFA, the man plays a bestial part in the dogs' cannibalistic ritual, which he orchestrates by biting off and feeding them first their tails, then their legs, followed by their eyes and jaws, down to the last tooth. Before disintegrating, the dogs fawn, bow, slaver and "grew plump" on the very organs they have lost. How to decrypt the meaning of this absurd story? Just as "the man stood rolling the amber eyes in his hands", the reader will play with certain clichés and sayings: "dog eat dog", "eye for eye and tooth for tooth", "tooth and nail", "a dog's life" etc... and dogged as (s) he may be, will probably decide to let sleeping (or dead) dogs lie.

So let us try another angle. Rimbaud's 1873 text "L'Alchimie du verbe" defines poetic language as "verbal alchemy" and refers back to his 1871 sonnet "Voyelles", which inscribes an alchemical synaesthesia. The first three vowels "A noir, Ε Blanc, I rouge", could represent the three pre-gold stages of the "grand œuvre": black, white and red. The fourth, "U vert"'s shape and color evoke the alchemists' secret emerald or green crystal vase containing the blood of a green lion (meaning gold), the Grail holding Christ's blood and other ancient symbols. Yellow or gold, being a component of green and inside the U vase or still, is not directly mentioned and O, the open letter, closes the series; the blue of "O bleu" is redefined as purple and belonging to the Greek alphabet: "O l'Ômêga, rayon violet de ses yeux". In "L'Alchimie du verbe", Rimbaud inscribes the blue of the sky into the alchemical code, by turning it black, before shifting to gold and to nature's green:

Enfin, ô bonheur, ô raison, j'écartai du ciel l'azur, qui est du noir, et je vécus, étincelle d'or de la lumière nature.

Watson, who knew French literature, writes a similar set of alchemical colors into AFA. The black dogs appear against the yellow hills and blue sky, the green of nature remains "fugitive", white appears with the dawn and the final tooth, while the dogs have "tongues dripping red" and "amber eyes". The ultimate entropic cannibalism starts with the dogs.
eating their own tails, like the cosmic serpent Ouroboros, biting its own tail in a circular
configuration, symbolizing a closed cycle, life/death dialectics, the merging of opposite
principles, the emergence of change, the transcending of animality etc. The alchemists
also used the symbol of a dog being devoured by a wolf for the antimony or purification
of the gold, signifying on a higher plane that a saint or wise man, as both wolf and dog,
purifies himself by self-devoration, in order to attain the final stage of his spiritual quest.

The alchemical metaphor reestablishes the chronology of Watson's literary "œuvre": the
preliminary novel *Deep Hollow Creek* and the four stories with a Greek mythology hypo-
text connote the early stages of her quest and AFA purification before the final gold of
her masterpiece *The Double Hook*. Once that book was published, she wrote only critical
texts.

To conclude, I'll turn to an essay by Louis Marin, "L'animalfable" which, for the reader-
critic of Sheila Watson, constitutes a jubilatory recognition, as in Lacan's "Mirror Stage"
interpreted by Jane Gallop as both anticipatory and retroactive, i.e. future-perfect.
Marin uses two episodes from La Fontaine's 1668 *Life of Aesop*, the VIth century bestially
deformed and mute Greek slave, who was metamorphosed into the eloquent author of
animal-fables and the French poet's main inspiration. First we learn how Aesop the slave
proves his innocence when accused of stealing and devouring his master's figs. Without
uttering a word, he uses body-language, making himself vomit and inducing his guilty
accusers to retch up the stolen fruit. As Marin puts it and as we may read AFA:

... ce récit est une séquence de gestes, récit silencieux, muet d'avant le langage. Le
narrateur n'y est point une voix, mais un corps, un animalfable. L'animal de la fable
est un corps dévorant-dévoré mais qui parle aussi, en sus. Ici, l'homme fabulateur
est une bête, un corps (dévorant-dévoré) qui ne parle pas encore, un corps à qui
advent, au titre de la morale de l'histoire, le langage, des gestes auxquels est
donnée une histoire, en conclusion, en supplément. (ibid: 51)

In the second part, Aesop shows kindness to and helps some lost strangers, who pray to
Jupiter to reward him. Consequently, Aesop awakes from a deep sleep able to speak, and
Marin concludes: "La bête est parlante. Les fables sont racontées" (ibid.: 60)/The beast
can speak. The fables can be told. A similar slippage occurs from the silent, visual
narrative of AFA to the voices of people, animals and Coyote in DH. The novel ends with
the birth of a story as well as of a baby. According to Scobie:

"And the Four Animals"... represents a first sketch for the landscape of *The Double
Hook*, the major difference being that it is farther back in mythological time, it is
not yet peopled-except by the dogs, by Coyote and by the observing eye (280).

One could also consider the story as the novel's negative, a reel of film with no
soundtrack. The rotation of a reel connotes revolution, the completion of a cycle, and
future-perfect regeneration, after negation and disintegration:

The single tooth which the man takes and hides in his belly is surely reminiscent of
many teeth or bones, in mythological stories, which spring back into life (Scobie 286).
NOTES

13. Both these quotes are from Scobie, op. cit., 281-282.
18. Sheila Watson, "What I’m Going to Do", p. 183
21. See, for all references to alchemy, Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrandt, Dictionnaire des symboles, Paris, Laffont/Jupiter, 1982, articles on alchemy and on each color.
23. Ibid., p. 245, re-dog symbology.
ABSTRACTS

In this very short story, the “Mother of the Canadian Postmodern”, author of the seminal novel The Double Hook (1959), provides a masterful example of anthropophagic writing, in the wake of psychoanalysis and beyond minimalism. “And the Four Animals” is her last text, she had reached her own “degré zéro de l’écriture”. In my paper, I will attempt to deconstruct the meanings and mechanisms of this fascinating piece.

AUTHOR

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