Mothering Alter-Narratives: Jack Hodgins’s The Drover’s Wife

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DOI: 10.4000/books.pufr.5056
Publisher: Presses universitaires François-Rabelais
Place of publication: Presses universitaires François-Rabelais
Year of publication: 2008
Published on OpenEdition Books: 1 June 2017
Serie: GRAAT
Electronic ISBN: 9782869064850

http://books.openedition.org

Electronic reference

This text was automatically generated on 10 May 2019. It is the result of an OCR (optical character recognition) scanning.
In a book length essay entitled “Antigones: The Energy of Reiteration” George Steiner has set for himself the task of mapping the proliferation of the rewritings of a myth of Antiquity, that of Antigone’s fight with Creon, a myth he considers to encapsulate the fundamental conflicts in the life of human beings. In contemporary times, a female figure from a peripheral, exilic, geopolitical context, has similarly given rise to the proliferation of a series, or the multiplication of the same, a woman from down under who has risen to the status of national icon or “Australian Mona Lisa,” who is called the Drover’s Wife.

“The Drover’s Wife” is an Australian icon or modern myth which owes its fame to the Sister Arts, the verbal and the visual, since it can be envisaged simultaneously as a pictorial artefact, a painting by Russell Drysdale dating from 1945 and a verbal representation which predated the painting and also gave rise to a number of subsequent literary avatars. Louisa Lawson’s story “The Australian Bushwoman” published in The English Woman’s Review in 1889 might possibly be considered the “ur” story, the matrix from which all other variations are descended although it was her son’s story, Henry Lawson’s “The Drover’s Wife,” published three years later in 1892, which brought fame to this realist vignette about the hardships and isolation endured by women living on the utmost fringe of civilisation. Murray Bail’s story, published in 1975, frank Moorhouse’s in 1980, Anne Gambling’s “The Drover’s De Facto,” published in 1986, Broderick Damien’s “The Drover’s Wife Dog” published in 1991, Chris Eipper’s “The Wife’s Drover” published in 1996 are some of the successive variations on this enigmatic figure.

In 1992 and 2004, this national emblem of courage and fortitude in the face of the hardships in the outback was subjected to an unexpected turn of event; she was revisited by extra-national writers, like Phyllis Webb and Jack Hodgins, both Canadian writers from British Columbia who, like their Australian predecessors, write from a position of liminal space and create what has been called commonwealth literature,” or “emergent new literatures in English.” By transcontextualising the Australian national icon and taking up the challenge of the sequel, Hodgins and Webb adumbrate the process of globalization.
and dissemiNation (Bhabha) of culture which constitutes the stakes of postcolonial criticism today. They also raise the question of the proliferation of a single topic: what is the purpose of a sequence? What is the meaning of the repetition of a motif or, to use Lacan’s revelatory pun, what is the meaning of l’iter-rature, the meaning of repeating and erasing? More specifically, these Canadian examples raise questions which are linked with transcultural writing and the dissemination of literature outside national boundaries into the territory of the other. They emblemize the process of the reproduction of stories, a process which I would like to envisage in the light of Emmanuel Lévinas’s concept of fecundity. Lévinas asked the question; “How can the self become other? There is only one way to do so: through paternity. Paternity is the relationship with a stranger who at the same time as he is other, is the self: the relationship of the self with the self, which is nevertheless other.”

Although Levinas has taken pains to firmly root this concept in its biological dimension and to distinguish it from its metaphoric use concerning the creation of works of art, I would like to suggest that the re-produced work of art, as opposed to the single artefact, that is to say the sequence, might also be envisaged as a (m)othering of alterna (rra) tives which enables us to interrogate fiction and its duplicates or “the relationship of the self with the self which is nevertheless other.”

This paper will concentrate specifically on Jack Hodgins’s story, published in 2004 in a collection entitled Damage Done by the Storm. Because of the markedly double inscription which characterizes the drover’s wife resurgence in another country, I propose to study this verbal and visual icon crossing generic and geopolitical boundaries all the way from Australia to Canada as an instance of “the supplementary space of doubling” that Homi Bhabha depicts as emblematic of the discourse of emergent cultural identities. Hodgins takes up a character from a referential painting which is to be found in an Australian museum and he makes her step out from her painterly containment onto the written page where she is allowed to walk the earth or rather circumnavigate the Pacific Ocean to land in British Columbia, on Vancouver Island. This passage from the canvas to the page is first a transit from one narrative level to another and is necessarily transgressive: Gérard Genette has called this process a “narrative metalepsis” as early as 1972. As Genette underlines:

All these games manifest through the intensity of their effects the importance of the limit which they aim at crossing against all likelihood and which is precisely the narration (or the representation) itself; a moving but sacred frontier between two worlds: the world which is narrated and the world in which one narrates. Hence the disquiet so justly designated by Borges: “such inventions suggest that if characters front a fiction can be readers or spectators, we, the readers or spectators of their fictions can be fictitious characters.”

These games are metaphysical enquiries which perform an ontological displacement or dislocation with multiple rhyzomatic ramifications. Hodgins’s game is a case in point because, instead of a simple metalepsis, it encompasses an extended one; not only does his drover’s wife step out of Drysdale’s canvas, she also steps out of the proliferating other stories written about her to re-territorialize in his own fiction in which, lo and behold, she splits again into a new visual artefact. At the beginning of the story, Hodgins alludes to Drysdale’s painting as represented in Murray Bail’s story and even provides us with an ekphrastic description of it, but in the middle of the story, right in the core of the narration, he introduces a newspaper photograph, which is the exact, symmetrically inverted, duplication of Drysdale’s painting:
A journalist from the Vancouver Sun visited them long enough to take a photo for the Saturday second-front page. Hazel in her rain-gear stood mountainous amongst the stumps and seedlings, filling half the space, while Cyrus laboured to secure the tent pegs in the background. In the distance, sheep were chewing their way up a neighbouring canyon crowded with their tasty leaves of rapidly growing young alder.

In this photographic avatar, the flat barren landscape of Australia is replaced with a British Columbia canyon covered with new growths. To the clutch of dead, scraggly trees of the outback is substituted rapidly growing young alders with tasty leaves devoured by flocks of sheep. From a painting about drought emblamatising isolation in a wasteland, we have moved to a photograph of a pastoral community in a lush canyon. This is not simply a move from deprivation to abundance or from painting to photography.

This is a passage to another country which involves the passage to another medium. As Marshall McLuhan pointed out: “the medium is the message and it involves the literal and metaphoric processes of photographic revelation which invert the values of the painting. The Australian painting is metaphorically immersed in the Pacific Ocean to emerge on the coasts of British Columbia as a literal newspaper photograph which is paradoxically realized by being converted into a text. This conversion from painting to photograph to text can be regarded as a discursive development based on the principle of the full inversion of the first posited meaning, which is also a definition for irony.

Consider the ironies of the representation of the other drover’s wife. In the original painting she was standing in the forefront, on the flat lands, with a suitcase in her hand, dressed in a shabby black dress and a soft hat. In the revealed photograph, the suitcase has vanished and Hazel stands mountainous in her rain-gear. There seems to be a transmutation which is geomorphic: the migrant woman has relinquished the signs of migrancy (the suitcase) and she has solidified and stabilized to the extent that she looks like a mountain. The lush canyons in the background also participate in a symmetrically inverted transmutation: the flat desert land of the outback has given rise to mountains and fertile valleys which are called “neighbouring canyons” and seem to offer the “mountainous” woman their complementary companionship.

In the reversal of the original isotopies, homophony and paronomasia also obtain: the growing young “alder” points in the direction of a temporal reversion, of a possible anamnesis meant to repossess and redeem the past; and we cannot help hearing “reindeer” under “rain gear.” In B.C., the Aussie has naturalized into a true West Coaster, there is an identification of the woman and the elements from nature. There is a naturalization of the woman which is also, paradoxically enough, an artialisation. At the same time as Hazel looks like a rocky mountain, and an indigenous animal from the West Coast rain forest, she inscribes herself in the tradition of Ovidian metamorphoses and pastoral literature which originated with the Greek *Idylls* by Theocritus. In a profoundly ironic (i.e. inverted) manner, it is as if Hazel, to canadianize herself, had to return to the imagined tranquillity of a revisited North American Arcadia. The picture which is conjured up is one of rustic innocence predicated on simplicity and virtuous frugality, except that some elements clearly jar. What is described here is not the loves and sorrows of young musical shepherds and shepherdesses living in the idleness of Virgil’s *Elegories*. Hazel and Cyrus are senior citizens with a checkered career, whose companionship, as captured in the photograph, is but a respite in a long series of physical fights and verbal attacks which predated and prolong the instant during which the picture is taken.
The story justifies its existence by documenting the photograph, by expanding it, retrospectively and prospectively. The story acts as a supplementary adjunct to the image, as a space of doubling which performs this supplementary role synchronically and diachronically, on the collaborative mode as well as the agonistic mode: text and image vie with each other for recognition, compete for supremacy, a supremacy which seems to have been ironically denied to both of them ever since the sequence came into existence. The picture will never make it to the front page. And the story, after all, is a second comer, which developed after the painting by Drysdale turned the woman into an icon. However, the stories by Lawson and by his mother predated Drysdale's painting which made her famous: so in the quarrel over who occupies first rank, who looms larger, it is impossible to assign the right to a superior status to either the picture or the text.

What is being thematized here is the dynamic conflict between the arts, the rivalry between the sister arts, Vinci's paragone and it is thematized, not only through the competition between the present photograph and the past texts, but also through the physical and verbal combats the other drover's wife engages in throughout the Canadian story. What the painting and the photograph do not tell, the short story aims at showing. In symmetric opposition with the resignation conveyed by the painting and the peace and quiet exemplified by the photograph, the story highlights, from the opening line to the clinching one, the drover's wife's fighting spirit: “For years she was known as Hard-hearted Hazel in the logging camps up and down the coast of British Columbia. She was also known as Hazel Haulback, Highball Hazel, and the Terror of the Woods. Government inspectors trembled at the thought of visiting her outfit.” The proliferating names of the new drover's wife make us grasp the formidable dimension of a woman who is no longer known as anybody's wife but as a lumber baron in the province of BC. The story documents Hazel's rise to success, her emancipation from the subjection of being a drover's wife down under to coming into her own in Canada.

It also implicitly encodes a number of virtual stories about her, which are not developed, but suggested with the mentioning of each new nickname. Each nickname functions as a latent supplementary adjunct, a space of doubling which the short story cannot afford to realize but nevertheless embeds as a token of the character's fecundity. Hazel's fecundity is not represented as biological, it is represented as narratological: she becomes the subject of countless narratives which perpetuate her indomitable energy at the same time as they exemplify the psycho-dynamics of storytelling. To paraphrase Todorov, Hazel turns into a femme-récit.

Through the conjoined use of photograph and text, Hodgins's tale participates in the process of the reproduction of the icon, a process which is not only dependent on a geographical and representational crossing of boundaries. It is also grounded on an heteronormative gender-crossing which subverts the traditional ideals of the feminine and the masculine and fosters the cross-fertilisation of the icon. From a traditional attitude of feminine disempowerment and resignation, Hazel has moved to a masculine, robust and conquering position which operates according to the principle of the full inversion of her original status: Hodgins has performed a reversal which hinges on the photograph to develop Hazel's life in Canada as a passage from subaltern to dominant, from silenced reification to vocal claims of responsibility. But the photograph which mediates her alteration is a middle brow art, it is on the second front page of a local newspaper, and it only displays the owner of the third largest private timber company in
the remote province of B. C.. Hazel’s rise from subaltern to dominant must be qualified accordingly.

14 The use of a photographic paradigm also enables Hodgins to undercut Hazel’s transfiguration through a number of supplementary ironic reversals, of heterogeneous disruptions, climaxing with the depiction of her quasi farcical final discomfiture. After bringing about the deforestation of that part of British Columbia which she ruthlessly exploited, Hazel eventually devises an unfortunate scheme to prevent further environmental damage. She imports sheep to eat weeds and to allow new evergreens to replace the trees she helped chopping down. This environmentally friendly method advantageously replaces weed killers but unfortunately sheep indiscriminately eat weeds and evergreens, a detail that Hazel and Cyrus had overlooked, when they embarked on their joint venture. The contest in blame upon which their cooperation terminates blurs the borders between the private and the public, the topic and the timeless, the personal and the political.

15 What is at stake under the fable of the sheep devouring the weeds and evergreens is the process of indiscriminate exploitation of the colonies by the colonizers, a process which is rendered all the more ironic as it is performed by Hazel, the Aussie, who unleashes the emblematic animal on the Canadian West Coast. The victimized Australian drover’s wife has reversed her fate into that of a victimizer, attempting to transform the rain forest into a desert, ruining the habitat of the reindeer and providing a solution against the growth of weeds which further desertifies the environment. By calling the Australian sheep to the rescue of the Canadian rain forest and by making them devour the emergent forest they are supposed to preserve, Hazel, the resigned colonized female from down under, casts the figure of the impenitent colonizer outcolonized by the meek and ignorant sheep.

16 This most ironic reversal in the ethical positioning of the female character in the Canadian version of the tale also reverses the status of the narration. From a postcolonial story about migration, Hodgins’s tale turns into a post-burlesque avatar of the colonial novel which derides the violence of deprivation, the blind disrespect of difference, and the misunderstanding of local culture generally encountered in dominant discourses of the nation. In this postcolonial delegitimizing of the hero, the new drover’s wife does not escape scot-free. In addition to being constructed as a female conquerer who reverses the myth of the disempowered female, Hodgins’s Hazel also ironically reverses the masculine myth of the frontier hero to turn into a Canadian Calamity Hazel.

17 It might be necessary to use Homi Bhabha’s concept of discursive transparency to account more precisely for this ambiguously constructed picture of the drover’s wife on the Canadian West coast:

[....] discursive transparency is best read in the photographic sense of the term in which a transparency is also always a negative, processed into visibility through the technologies of reversal, enlargement, lightning, editing, projection, not a source but a re-source of light. Such a bringing to light is a question of the provision of visibility as a capacity, a strategy, an agency.7

18 In the image of Hazel which is constructed through her rise and fall, there is a discursive transparency that results from the inversion of her former Australian resignation into her present Canadian mixed empowerment. This empowerment is a display of hybridity, of its peculiar replication, which is at the same time mimicry and mockery. Hazel Bailey in Canada is twice the product of colonial specularity, she is doubly doubly inscribed and
the Canadian context does not provide a mirror where she or we can better apprehend her: it produces “the split screen of the self and its doubling.” (Bhabha 114) In this split screen, what is reflected is Hazel’s self-multiplying ambivalence: it is not Antigone’s final defeat and live entombment, it is not the Australian icon’s resignation in the face of hardships, it is a hybrid and androgynous empowerment, a power of creation and a power of destruction matching the proliferating ambivalence of the narration which designates and disavows her rise to success.

19 In the last analysis, I would like to indulge a final eurocentric vagary: to adumbrate the ambivalence of the drover’s wife’s power of destruction and creation, Hodgins might have resorted to an implicit, unarticulated metaphorical equation and to what, after Franco Casamaggiore, I understand to be a cultural joke predicated on coded language and more specifically on the polysemy of the process upon which her move to Canada is constructed. By making the drover’s wife emigrate to British Columbia, Hodgins endorses the principle of transmigration, an ambiguous concept which can be contemplated under two distinct headings. The first meaning is related to “passing through on the way to another country” but a second meaning is linked to “passing into a different body or undergoing metempsychosis.” (OED) Metempsychosis is defined as “the supposed transmigration of the soul of a human being or animal at death into a new body of the same or a different species” (OED) It is a doctrine among some followers of eastern teachings which Hodgins seems to have implicitly encoded into his construction of the drover’s wife’s passage to Canada. He represents the mountainous Hazel in a place called Goat Leg and he finishes his short story on a close up on Hazel’s legs:

Those who see in that young Hazel the symbol of a female victim would I imagine be heartened to learn that she succeeded in altering her destiny once she arrived on these shores. Look to the legs. She was never meant to be toppled."

20 Hodgins’s version of the drover’s wife is meant as a mock-epic transfiguration of the older woman as a goddess who, far from “standing on her last leg,” has reached another “leg” in her journey that is to say another stage in an ongoing cycle. This Canadian leg has inverted the Australian legacy of victimization and it has also inverted the negative associations that are generally attendant upon the cycle. Hazel’s rebirth in British Columbia, her transmigration is not to be linked with “samsara.” In most Indian philosophical traditions, Samsara is regarded negatively as a fallen condition which is to be escaped. Hybridising mythologies, Hodgins transforms the negative passing through states, through legs, into a permanent achievement; Hazel’s transmigration to Canada has led to a successful incarnation, which is nonetheless as self-derisive as it is invigorating.

21 Hodgins has made us move from the negative cycle of birth death and rebirth to a self-reflexive short story cycle which does not simply tell us the story of the drover’s wife in Canada but also announces and asserts the enduring power of story telling, its resurgence into other nations and other cultures, through different avatars. Hodgins’s story is not simply based on the metalepsis which ensures Hazel’s passage from the visual to the textual, it is also predicated on a photographic paradigm which highlights the principle of reversibility as a redemptive and self-multiplying othering.

22 It may be summarized as being founded on this last antimetabole: Hodgins does not simply speak about the story of another life, he speaks about the life of other stories. He provides us with an enduring scenario of self-production, that is to say he tells us about the reproduction of stories and the reproduction of the self through stories. Mixing myths to found a story, he posits the terms of a transcultural aesthetics based on the
continuation of a cycle that crosses national boundaries, outgrows the conflict between the arts and proposes redemption through the arts.

The story is framed through a narrator who advertises his status as a reliable character. He has created a job for himself by imagining a service to the community which he has called Rent-a-Rellie. In this very witty self-advertisement, we easily recognize a linguistic displacement of Rent-a-tellie. This final paronomasia might be considered to encapsulate Hodgins's art of narration: to write stories is to convert telling into seeing and to make it reliable. Making us see the drover's wife through “the split screen of the self and its doubling,” Hodgins asserts with the energy of reiteration that the other can be engendered through fiction, not merely as an alter ego, but as a process of “trans-shifting” into something rich and strange, a pluralistic, heterogeneous, mode of existing based on the fecundity of reversing and recycling.

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ABSTRACTS

This paper examines the alterations undergone by an Australian icon who is made to transmigrate to Canada. From a traditional attitude of feminine disempowerment and resignation, the drover’s wife has moved to a masculine, robust and conquering position which operates according to the principle of the full inversion of her original status: Jack Hodgins has performed a reversal which hinges on a photograph to develop Hazel Bailey’s life in Canada as a passage from subaltern to dominant, from silenced reification to loud claims of responsibility. But the photograph which mediates her alteration is a middle-brow art, it is on the second front page of a local newspaper, and it only displays the owner of the third largest private timber
company in the remote province of B.C. The drover’s wife’s achievement must be qualified accordingly and envisaged as an example of the fecundity and ambivalence of story telling in the postcolonial age. It might also be considered as a (m)othering of alternare(tives destined to interrogate fiction and its duplicates or “the relationship of the self with the self which is nevertheless other.”

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