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Jean-Marie Goussier

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THE PRESENCE OF THE INDIAN IN MODERN CANADIAN DRAMA: THE INDIAN AS SYMBOL IN GEORGE RYGA'S "THE ECSTASY OF RITA JOE"

All the papers dealing with Canadian drama unanimously acclaim George Ryga's *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* as a milestone in the history of Canadian theater. Its significance in Canadian literature and culture surpasses that expected from a good and successful play: Ryga lays great emphasis on the "Canadianness" of his work. Peter Hay goes even further, stating that "There are very few Canadians and certainly no English-Canadian writer who has fought as persistently, passionately and uncompromisingly for a national culture and literature and against the colonial bunts that continue to stunt it as George Ryga"¹. Interestingly Ryga, the son of Ukrainian immigrants who began to learn English only at school, uses Indian roots in his endeavor to define Canadian culture and realizes how important the theater is in this process: "theater... often resembles guerilla warfare in defence of one's culture... It is important to again and again recommit our talents and energies to rediscovery and activation of popular local and national mythology"².

The Indian motives can be used in this context in a double way: it is the Indians whose past is the richest in Canada; they have their legends and their close connection with tribal traditions and with nature offer a good opportunity for using them as symbols. The other aspect is revealed by Peter Hay: "the sense of kinship artists feel for the native peoples comes from being treated with the same admixture of paternalism and ostracism by the colonial mentality that is still the dominant cultural force in Canada"³. Margaret

¹ Hay, Peter. "George Ryga: Beginnings of a Biography", *Canadian Theatre Review*, Summer, 1979, 37.

² Ryga, George. "The Artist in Resistance", *Canadian Theatre Review*, Winter, 1982, 90.

³ Hay, Peter. "George Ryga: Beginnings of a Biography", *Canadian Theatre Review*, Summer, 1979, 37.

Atwood also draws attention to this phenomenon, writing that "Indian as tormentor and Indian as sufferer both permit the author the same kind of identification – identification with a victim, whether white or red..."⁴ In her interpretation this idea means that some Canadian writers try "to find in Indian legends mythological material which would function for Canadian writers much as the Greek myths and the Bible long functioned for Europeans"⁵.

Striving for a characteristically Canadian drama, Ryga follows the traditions of Canadian literature and at the same time introduces a new approach: both of these directions involve the use of Indian themes and figures in his plays. Indians have been present in Canadian literary works ever since writing began in that country: exhaustive studies discuss this phenomenon and analyze how the white writer handles Indian characters. Elizabeth Waterston in her *Survey: A Short History of Canadian Literature* gives a brief description of the history of the white writer's approach to the Indians: the first settlers spoke about their ways "with a mixture of dread and scorn"⁶. Later, as the Indians were defeated "the dread disappeared. In its place emerged a sentimental romantic picture of the 'Noble Savage'..." The smaller the menace presented by the native people, the greater the tendency to idealize their ancient ways. Canadian literature ultimately presents the image of the Indian as losing the land to the benefit of more sophisticated peoples, but as keeping his own cultural dignity and grace.

These myths of the native peoples perhaps masked the facts: degradation, exploitation, expropriation in the nineteenth century; prejudice and rejection in the twentieth century"⁷. "English-Canadian writers have played most insistently on the theme of the sacrificial victim, the beautiful loser"⁸.

Margaret Atwood in *Survival* makes a sharp distinction between the American and Canadian ways of portraying Indians. In the literature of the United States there are examples of the "idealization of the Indian as a Noble Savage", while the "other tradition is that of the Indian as inferior... or as evil..."⁹. The approach of Canadian writers to Indians is also a dual one: they are shown as victors or victims. "Canadian Indians as Victors... torture and

⁴ Atwood, Margaret. *Survival. Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (Toronto: Anansi, 1972), 102.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 103.

⁶ Waterston, Elizabeth. *Survey: A Short History of Canadian Literature* (Toronto: Methuen, 1973), 19.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 19-20.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁹ Atwood, Margaret. *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, 91.

kill whites, with whom the author identifies. And the point about Indians as Victims is not that they are good or superior, but that they are persecuted"¹⁰. The reasons for these different approaches, in Atwood's opinion, are "the different patterns of image and symbol that the two countries have made from their encounter with the first inhabitants of this continent"¹¹.

Historical moments of the conflicts between Indians and the whites have always been a popular theme from *Wacousta* to Sharon Pollock's *Walsh*. Ryga's innovation lies in the fact that the Indians in his plays are merely average representatives of their race, not famous heroes or villains – and this enables him to use the Indian as a symbol. Rita Joe and the other characters in *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* are the best-known examples.

For Canadian theater and drama, 1967 meant a "historically significant year in which the Vancouver Playhouse commissioned George Ryga to write what became *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*"¹². This play "brought a native shame to national attention"¹³, showing what limited opportunities are available to Indians if they want to join white society. Rita Joe is a young Indian woman who leaves the reservation with the intention of living and working in the big town, but there her welcome is anything but friendly. She can hardly find a job, she is very lonely and at times even hungry, and she goes on to commit crimes which the laws of the white society condemn. The play itself shows her on trial: the Magistrate's questions, however, evoke her memories and this enables us to reconstruct her life story. In her childhood she lived on a reservation; her memories of those years are pleasant: picking berries with her younger sister Bileen, her father the chief refusing the Englishman Sandy Collins' offer to "buy" Rita for \$ 1000 after the death of Collins' small daughter. Rita's problems begin when she moves out of the reservation: at school she forgets what she is supposed to do and cannot remember quotations; terms like "noun" and "melting pot" are too abstract for her. Later, in the big town, she gets lost, feels very isolated and scared and often violates the rules and laws of the white society. All through her life she has happy experiences only with Indians because the representatives of the white society (the Teacher, the Priest, the Magistrate and the Social Worker) are unable to understand her even if their intention is to help her.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 92.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 92.

¹² Wallace, Robert and Cynthia Zimmerman. *The Work: Conversations with English-Canadian Playwrights* (Toronto: The Coach House Press, 1982), 12.

¹³ Whittaker, Herbert. "Preface", *The Penguin Book of Modern Canadian Drama. Volume One*, ed. Richard Plant (Markham: Penguin Canada Ltd., 1985), 8.

In *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*, the “Indian characters are drawn with... gentleness and insight, although they are never sentimentalized. The whites however, receive less attention.”¹⁴ The emphasis is obviously on the Indian characters; most of them appear with names [Rita Joe, Jaimie Paul, Eileen Joe, David Joe], while among the whites only the social worker, Mr. Homer has a name – all the rest are presented according to their professions. With the help of this solution Ryga points out what forces the individual – in this case the young Indian woman – has to face at various stages of her life.

All these confrontations end up with the Indian as the loser: another point where Ryga agrees with the Canadian tradition of literature.¹⁵ The Indians provide a ready source of symbols for white writers. This is what also happens in *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*: Rita, the protagonist, is the embodiment of a martyr who has to face every kind of humiliation – racial, cultural, sexual – and even her most sacred experience [i.e. sheer ecstasy] is mocked by the whites. Her lover, Jaimie, is the victim of technology, while Rita herself is raped and murdered by the whites of the big town. Their tragic end is unavoidable because neither is ready to accept the laws of the white society operating in the big town and at the same time have no wish to return to the reservation either. The cause of their death is their love of freedom; but they are never in a position to realize their dreams. Ryga describes this with the help of a beautiful image:

Singer:

“Oh, the singing bird
Has found its wings
And it’s soaring !” (p. 125)

Rita and Jaimie hope for a good life in the big town – they want to live like the whites do, but they are being discriminated against in every field of life: their search for a job is mostly hopeless, they are thrown out of the bar, they are not welcome at Eaton’s and they are arrested on false pretenses.

Ryga can offer no solution for Rita and Jaimie – they cannot find the way out of the trap. In spite of her father’s begging, Rita refuses to go back to the reservation, saying: “I never wanted to cut cordwood for a

¹⁴ Ripley, John. “Drama and Theatre”, *Literary History of Canada. Canadian Literature in English*, ed. Carl F. Klinck (Toronto and Buffalo: The University of Toronto Press, 1976, second edition), volume III, 225.

¹⁵ “... Canadians are a nation of losers”. Frye, Northrop. “Conclusion”, *Literary History of Canada. Canadian Literature in English*, ed. Carl F. Klinck (Toronto and Buffalo: The University of Toronto Press, 1976, second edition), volume III, 324.

living" (p. 48). The Priest sees clearly what this means: "You could lose the reserve and have nowhere to go!" (p. 103), but he is also unable to change Rita's mind. The fact that several young Indians stay in the town means the end of their people: they cannot start a new life there, partly because the Indians themselves are incapable of re-adjusting themselves to the rules and laws of town life. The Magistrate puts it as follows: "...You Indians seem to be incapable of taking action to help yourselves... Your days and hours are numbered" (p. 118).

It is only David Joe, Rita's father, the wise old Indian chief, who has any hope as regards the future. But at the same time he is aware that the Indians themselves have to change if they want to survive. "If we only fish an' hunt an' cut pulpwood ... pick strawberries in the bush... for a hundred years more, we are dead." (p. 105) David Joe is fully conscious of his own responsibility: for him the most important thing is for his people to have security. He is ready even to give up his own position "To someone' who's been to school... Maybe university... who knows more" (p. 104); "I know nothing... Nothing at all. Only the old stories" (p. 71). He knows that the problem is not an easy one to solve, yet he trusts that the Indians are not doomed to death. The poetic expression of his hope is the dragonfly-story: "I once seen a dragonfly breakin' its shell to get its wings... Hesitant at first... then stronger... an' then the wings beatin' like that made the dragonfly's body quiver until the shell on its back falls off... An' the dragonfly ... flew up...up... up... into the white sun... to the green sky ... to the sun... faster an' faster... Higher... Higher!" (p. 114).

But David Joe is immediately contradicted by Jaimie Paul, the representative of the young Indians who also feel responsibility for the future of their people. He interrupts the Father's beautiful story and asks him: "Where you gonna be when they start bustin' our heads open an' throwing us into jails right across the god-damned country?... We're gonna have to fight to win... there's no other way!... Stop kiddin' yourself!" (p. 114). If David Joe is the old Indian, full of patience, whose wisdom and stability his people need, Jaimie is the other extreme: the whites see only the hot-headed trouble-maker in him, although David Joe considers Jaimie a good boy. David Joe and Jaimie Paul share the common idea of both wanting the betterment of Indian life, but they differ concerning the methods – the generation gap provides an explanation for this. Jaimie has ideas:

Jaimie: "No more handouts, David Joe ... we can pick an' can the berries ourselves.

Father: We need money to start a co-operative like that.

Jaimie: Then some other way!" (p. 68),

But he lacks the experience and practice. Besides, Jaimie is isolated and uneducated, a quality which prevents him from becoming a leader even if he is a rebellious character. He is only capable of sporadic rebellious actions, like over-turning the table at the Indian welfare office.

While among the male Indians Jaimie and David Joe are counter-parts, among the females the alternative to Rita's dilemma is the solution offered by her sister, Eileen. The two girls have always loved each other. Rita is able to reassure Eileen when she becomes scared in a storm. Eileen also tries to leave the reservation and to live in the big town, but like Rita, she is not welcomed there, and even if she works very well, no orders come in. Eileen gives up in the end and returns to the reservation.

Indians are losers as Rita's uncle told her when he was dying: "Long ago the white man come with Bibles to talk to my people, who had the land. They talk for hundred years... then we had all the Bibles, an' the white man had our land..." (p. 84). Now they have to contend with serious losses in their numbers – many young people die (like Rita and Jaimie: victims of an alien world), while others leave their communities for good. Throughout the play there is a constant fear that the Indians could even lose the reservation and their language. But above all, the most serious danger is that the Indians might lose their identity. The Magistrate's advice to Rita is the following: "You should fix your hair... perhaps even change your name. And try to tame that accent that sounds like you have a mouthful of sawdust..." (p. 52). With her people a lot of things would be easier for Rita, as the Priest puts it, "Life is simpler, You can be yourself. That's important to remember" (p. 32). Eileen finds it possible to accept this solution, but those who want to live like the whites and still retain their Indian selves become trapped in a real schizophrenic state.

Jaimie: "Teach me who I really am! You've taken that away! Give me back the real me so I can live like a man!" (p. 111)

The Magistrate, as the representative of white society, can only offer the institutions as a way to solve the problems of the Indians. In the course of the questioning process he claims that the Indians are responsible for their hardships.

Magistrate: "This is not the reservation, Rita Joe. This is another place, another time... Don't blame the police Rita Joe! The obstacles to your life are here... *He touches his forefinger to his temples...* in your thoughts... possibly even in your culture..." (p. 51)

Mr. Homer, the social worker, explains that "Sure, we do a lot of things for our Indians here in the city at the centre... Bring' em in from the cold an' give them food..." (p. 33). They also provide medical treatment and clothes, but no jobs and no independence.

Apart from the free x-ray examinations, another side of white civilization is also present in the play: the Indians very often get drunk and lose control of their actions. Technical development also ruins the Indians, for which Jaimie's death- he is run over by a train – is a metaphor. Thus the white civilization destroys the Indians not only because of its less human, sometimes heartless and bureaucratic nature, but also because it is physically stronger.

"All Indians same – nobody ... I got nothing ... nothing ... no wallet, no money, no name. I got no past... no future... I never been anybody."¹⁶ These are the words said by Indian, the protagonist, at the end of George Ryga's first play, *Indian*. Yet the playwright does not accept this statement and sets out on a quest which he later summarizes as follows: "foremost... is a re-examination of our history and lore for discovery of that distinctive mythology which reflects in our habits and ways a popularly agreed-on interpretation of who we are and how we got that way."¹⁷

The tasks and the significance of arts and artists in this process are great. Not only the Indian problem is at stake. "Canadians as a people... the moment we come up against other cultures we feel embarrassed. ... I think at this particular time of history, the cultural work that has to go on is to really develop a confidence in people. It is also important that the artists themselves, the reflectors of all this, feel that they are good, that what they have to say is important. And the way they say it is also important."¹⁸

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¹⁶ Ryga, George. *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe and Other Plays* (Toronto: General Publishing Company Ltd., 1982), 32.

¹⁷ Ryga, George. "The Need for a Mythology", *Canadian Theatre Review*, Fall 1977, 5.

¹⁸ Garr, Allen. "Footlights on the Foothills", *Weekend Magazine*, November 13, 1976. 10. The quotations are from the following edition: Ryga, George. *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* (Vancouver, Los Angeles: Talonbooks, 1970).