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Theories about ethnicity in literature

Katalin Kürtösi⁶⁸

"We must break out of the ghetto, [...] and immerse ourselves in our *difference*"

P. Verdicchio, 55.

As early as in 1935, Watson Kirkconnel suggested that together with works by the English and French communities, those by other ethnic groups be considered as components of Canadian literature (Pivato 1991, 27). In our days the balance has changed significantly: ethnic writing makes up a significant portion of literature in Canada, be the language English or French, it has become part of the canon and many works belonging to this group have received prestigious literary awards both in Canada and on the international scene.

Official multiculturalism has, without any doubt, played a decisive role in the flourishing of writing by authors who do not belong to the two founding nations (which implies that, oddly enough, first nations writers are very often mentioned together with writers with immigrant background), although 'ethnic' texts were already written in the interwar period and John Marlyn's *Under the Ribs of Death*, considered by several critics (e.g. Rasporich, 37) a 'prophetic' novel, was published as early as 1957. Still, when speaking about ethnic writing in Canada, we generally mean works written during the past 25–30 years – theory and criticism lagging about half a decade behind.

One of the pioneering volumes about the ethnicity problematics was published by Jars Balan in 1982 as a selection of papers presented at a conference at the University of Alberta in the fall of 1979. The three main sections of the conference dealt with writers in 'exile', mainstream writers drawing on the ethnic experience (i.e. Jewish authors), and ethnic characters in Canadian fiction. Jars Balan in the "Introduction" mentions that they included "native Canadian literature under the ethnic designation and concluded that although native people were not really 'ethnics' in political terms [...] culturally they shared much with ethnic minorities." (xi) Among the guest authors we can find names like Maria Campbell, Pier Giorgio di Cicco, Joy Kogawa, Myrna Kostash, George Ryga, Rudy Wiebe, to name but a few – and let me remind you again, the date was 1979! Writer and critic Henry Kreisel, based on his own experiences, examined the relationship

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of language and identity, stating that "identity was not something forever fixed and static. It was rather like a tree. New branches, new leaves could grow. New roots could be put down, too, but the original roots need not be discarded." (8) In the year of the publication of the above volume, one of the participants of the discussion in Edmonton, Judy Young, published an article with an extensive bibliography about "Canadian Literature in the Non-Official Languages", in which she states that "Most writers who live in Canada but do not work in English or French are usually no longer part of their original cultural and linguistic heritage while, at the same time, they may not yet be part of Canadian literature either. Even when an 'immigrant' writer writes in one of the official languages, his or her themes, concerns and sensibilities usually relate to the former culture" (138). Like H. Kreisel, Judy Young, too, mentions the question of the problem of identity and writing in another language (139).

Ethnic writers generally try to set up a link in their work between the old and new countries and their cultures. For this purpose they use certain motifs, terms and words frequently: genealogy, generations, foreign place names and languages, changing places. "The declaration of genealogical membership is one of the simplest modes of structuring literature. [...] To evoke the origin is, thus, to originate discourse." (Loriggio, 61) This latter feature is similarly present in modernism and the antiquity (the Bible, Homer). J. Pivato, speaking of two milestone novels in Canadian literature, namely *Under the Ribs of Death* by John Marlyn and *The Italians* by Frank Paci, concludes that ethnic novels deal with three general topics:

1. The myth of the Promised Land;
2. The question of the new identity; and
3. The voices of the author." (Pivato 1994, 197)

Marlyn builds his novel on the idea of getting rich, a frequent immigrant dream of people going to the New World. Young Sandor Hunyadi, the protagonist of *Under the Ribs...* thinks that he can reach everything with money - first of all he wants to get out of the immigrant ghetto where everybody is poor, dirty and helpless. He wants to assimilate with the British, lies about his name then changes it to Alex Hunter. His attitude toward his community is showing signs of self-hatred, typical of new immigrants. In a *Bildungsroman* scheme, Marlyn's hero - after the disastrous impact of the Depression on his own life - comes to realize his mistake and acknowledge that life has values that money cannot buy. In an interview, the writer himself stated that in his novel, "the overriding element is not ethnic but humanistic. The basic conflict is the philosophical dichotomy between the father and the son, Sandor, between humanism and blatant, rampant commercialism." (Rasporich, 37.) The aspiring young man is too ready to mix his dream world with reality. Marlyn describes this process - to borrow John Roberts' phrasing - using 'symbolic irony' (42). "Although Marlyn utilizes irony to illuminate this world of shifting perspectives, he does so not to prove that reality is unknowable, but to warn against the pitfalls in the process of unmasking it. He uses sarcasm, parody and dramatic irony to evoke the illusions which leave Sandor confused, alienated,

and supporting a false identity in a corrupt Canadian culture.” (Roberts, 41) This irony helps the author describe “the instability, ambivalence and insecurity which accompany an individual’s attempt to bridge two cultures or ideologies.” (Roberts, 47) The base language is standard English, switching occasionally into German, using some words in Ukrainian to evoke the ethnic neighbourhood – and Marlyn also uses a transcription of ‘immigrant-English’ in dialogues of the young boy.

“Everywhere I go,” he cried, “people laugh when they hear me say our name. They say ‘how do you spell it?’ [...] If we changed our name I wouldn’t hafta fight no more, Pa. We’d be like other people, like everybody else. But we gotta change it soon before too many people find out.” (17)

The debate on ethnic writing continued in the 1980s: in 1985 the first edition of *Contrasts*, the collection of papers, edited by J. Pivato came out. Pivato stated that “Ethnic literature has traditionally been defined as writing in the unofficial languages of Canada.” (27), but also designates the tasks of criticism: “Future scholarship should look to ethnic writing as a way of taking Canadian writing into a truly international context of comparative study and exchange.” (29–30) In Pivato’s view, *Configurations* by E. Blodgett could serve as a model since it is “the first critical study, comparative or unilingual, that seriously considers the work of ethnic writers and their contribution to the majority literatures of Canada.” (18) It is mainly thanks to Italian-Canadian writers and critics that the language-model of ethnic – or as others (e.g. Caccia) would call it, minority – writing has been worked out. Based on linguist Henri Gobard’s tetralinguistic model, F. Caccia applies the terms of *vernacular, vehicular, referential and mythic languages* to Italian-Canadian writing: immigrant regional dialects are the vernacular language, English is the vehicular, and referential language while standard Italian corresponds to the mythic language. (156–157) In Québec, the situation is more complicated, because English as vehicular and referential language is replaced by French. (159)

Marco Micone’s *Gens du silence (Voiceless People)* is generally held to be the best known example of this complex situation – as J. Pivato says, “The creation of a trilingual world in Montreal – French, Italian and English – is not just an act of the imagination but a reflection of local reality.” (Pivato 2000, 11) At the turn of the Millennium, twenty years after the conception of Micone’s seminal play, Pivato systematizes its epistemological dualities setting up the theory of ‘five-fold translation’, namely: 1. Silence and voice, 2. Knowledge and form, 3. Language and *lingua*, 4. Culture and *cultura*, and finally 5. Discourse and discovery. Micone was the pioneer of putting immigrant characters on the stage whereby the previously ‘voiceless people’ could speak up about their lives and problems as immigrants in Québec society. “Micone translates immigrant questions into the Quebec discourse and thus undercuts notions about pure Quebec culture and a national Canadian literature.” (Pivato 2000, 13) In the dialogues, these characters reflect the linguistic schizophrenia of urban Montreal: the base language is standard French, with inserted passages in English and Italian. Most of the Italian immigrants came from rural regions of their country – in Canada they had to fit into an urban society, so

apart from dislocation, they also suffered from a culture shock. These experiences, of course, appear on the discourse level, resulting in a polyphonic play, where the immigrant experiences are translated onto the stage using the subversive strategies of marginalized people.

To return to definitions of ethnicity, let us continue with F. Loriggio's view, which points out that ethnicity cannot be defined formally:

"any style, any genre can be ethnic. Nor is content a more reliable discriminant: a work with an ethnic setting or ethnic characters or displaying ethnic themes is not necessarily ethnic. [...] an ethnic work is a work written by someone who, in a particular society, is perceived to be an ethnic.

At the heart of literary ethnicity are, then two processes, which may interlock but do not have to. In one respect, ethnicity is a perspective: it occurs when ethnics assume voice, speak about themselves, when there is vision from within, writing with inside knowledge. In a second manner, ethnicity presupposes an indirect act of reference [...] relies on the figure of the author, and, more specifically, his or her social identity, for mediation. When the work is intrinsically ethnic, contains ethnic material, the writer attests to its authenticity." (Loriggio 1987, 55)

By the mid-eighties it became obvious that ethnic writers use several languages within the same work: most of them chose one of the official languages of the country to reach wider readership and insert passages in the other official language as well as their own native tongue, sometimes dialect, in their texts. This strategy underlines the fact that in their case, language, culture and territory do not coincide. (Loriggio, 56) All this implies that critics have to use new tools to fully understand and correctly interpret these works - thematic criticism, for example, is not equipped for this.

The past 12 years can be termed as 'post-thematic' stage in ethnic criticism. Theoreticians and writers alike are active participants of conferences and volumes discussing the question and they try to phrase the main tasks of both groups. In P. Verdicchia's view, an ethnic writer "has the job of re-writing the text of his ancestors, writing new texts, re-writing the texts of Canadian literature, [...] writing texts in two, three, or more languages". (54) Ethnic texts have to change with time - "Modern ethnic texts diverge from their antecedents or their coeval analogues in that on the basic, common cultural, mythic material they bring to bear specific coordinates, which have to do with the family as an institution, with its relation to technology, to space, to minority group issues." (Loriggio 1990, 87)

The increased critical interest in ethnic literature finally arrived at a point when ethnic writing entered curricula and anthologies, so ultimately could make part of the canon debate, even if, as E. Padolsky remarks, "The list of established minority writers is relatively short, and [...] the criticism of canonized minority writers has treated them in relation to 'mainstream' categories". (376) Critical

interest, however, took a sharp change in the early 1990s, post-modern gained ground, raising "certain minority writers (such as Cohen, Ondaatje, and Gunnars) to critical centrality" (Padolsky, 378). The multilingual and inter (or trans)-cultural features of contemporary ethnic writing in Canada helped its international recognition, which manifests itself not only in prestigious literary prizes but also in a growing number of translations, very often into the language of the 'mother country' of the ethnic writer. As a special side-effect of this process, literature by authors from the First Nations also started to flourish in the last two decades of the twentieth century. As a result of this process, not only is the Canadian mosaic becoming more and more colourful, but it is changing into a kaleidoscope, as writer and critic Janice Kulyk Keefer aptly puts it.

These changes, which on the writers' side underline the dominant writing strategy in one of the official languages and short passages in the other official language and the mother tongue and on the critics side mean a stronger and stronger participation of academics with non-ethnic (or to be more exact, not exclusively ethnic) background, can be demonstrated by two important anthologies and two volumes of papers. The title of the first anthology - *Other Solitudes* - points at *Two Solitudes*, Hugh MacLennan's thesis novel of 1945 about the French-English relationship in mid-twentieth-century Canada. Linda Hutcheon and Marion Richmond included short stories or passages from novels by 18 'ethnic' writers, including, e.g. Mordechai Richler, followed by responses of a representative of First Nations (Tomson Highway) and of the 'two founding nations' (Jacques Godbout and Robertson Davies). This anthology contains interviews with all 18 writers after their works. The subtitle of the anthology published in 1990 says *Canadian Multicultural Fictions*, and Linda Hutcheon in the "Introduction" explains why she has chosen the term 'multicultural' instead of 'ethnic' (everybody is part of an ethnos). Six years later, Smaro Kamboureli edited another anthology of *Canadian Multicultural Literature*.

In the "Introduction" to *Writing ethnicity*, editor W. Siemerling speaks about an "ethnic revival or re-'ethnicization' in both Canada and the United States", and refers to Berry and Laponce who claimed "globalization of the economy as partially responsible for a desire for smaller communities as purveyors of meaning, and identify, as further factors that have contributed to the importance of ethnicity, the weakening of the nation-state" and migrations. (3.) Ethnic writing in Siemerling's understanding contains "work in languages other than French and English", but also those composed "in one of the official languages, but offering nonetheless specific qualities relevant in terms of ethnicity". (7.) For critic-novelist Janice Kulyk Keefer, literary ethnicity, i.e. "the imaginative exploration and inscription of ethnic experience [...] is the Janus-faced, split vision of writers engaged not only with the invention of ethnicity in a new world or *ad quem* context but also, and as importantly, with an engagement with the *a quo* old world or country of origin, ancestral or immediate." (Kulyk Keefer, 1996, 85) Lucie Lequin, on the other

hand, points out that "Marginalisées et minoritaires, les écrivaines migrantes sont souvent inaudible ou trop audibles, invisibles ou trop visibles." (130)

In the most recent volume of our analysis, Tamara Palmer Seiler puts the problematic of ethnicity in Canadian literature in the context of post-colonialism, pointing out that the two different ways of looking at Canada, embodied in the emphasis on a unified national culture versus the emphasis on multivocality, are not ultimately incompatible. A post-colonial, multicultural aesthetic can allow an appreciation of both as discourses that, in complex interaction, express Canadian experience on the margins of several empires - an experience that continues to be shaped not just by difference, but by various kinds of difference, as well as by complex hybridity that is never static. (62.) A very typically Canadian answer to the questions.

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