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Telling the Transnational Self: Shifting Identities in the Voyages of Pierre- Esprit Radisson

Between his birth, most likely in Paris, in 1636, and his death, in London, in 1710, Pierre-Esprit Radisson led a vagabond life. His youth was spent in the colonies of New France and among the neighboring Native American communities. At roughly fifteen years of age he was taken captive by the Iroquois and adopted into a Mohawk family. After his return to New France, Radisson made good use of his knowledge of Native American customs, traveling west into Huronia with his brother-in-law and trading for furs. After a falling-out with the governor of New France, however, Radisson and his brother-in-law ended up in England, where Radisson made a manuscript record of their voyages. Radisson then played a key role in the founding of the Hudson's Bay Company, which, from 1670 onwards, established the English as an important force in the fur trade. Radisson, however, returned to the service of the French king, Louis XIV, briefly in the 1680s, in large part because of anti-French sentiment in the Company. And yet, Radisson's family ties in England made it difficult for him to find the kind of employment he had hoped for in France, and so he returned again to England, where he remained until his death. This essay examines his life and writings in the context of changing concepts of identity and authorship in the seventeenth century.

Pierre-Esprit Radisson is, simply put, a problem. He is a problem for historians because of his difficult prose and what Germaine Warkentin calls his "fascination for the present [tense, which] complicates their attempts to establish a chronology of [his] travels" ("Language" 311). He is a problem for scholars in general because his shifting national allegiances have, as both Warkentin and Martin Fournier have noted, led to his stigmatization as a traitor (Warkentin "Styles" 24, Fournier 101). And, finally, he is a

problem for literary critics since, while he is clearly a writer—with at least three distinct manuscript accounts of his voyages attributable to him—his status as an author is much less certain: none of his works were published in his lifetime, nor did he even attempt to have them published, and his manuscripts only circulated in small groups of royal and commercial patrons—indeed, a superficial assessment of his "voyages" might suggest that they are more "reports" than anything else.

What I will argue in this essay is that these three problems are vitally related to each other. What I want to show, in other words, is how the difficulties of Radisson's writings as writings can help us to understand, if not actually solve, the problem of his fluid national and authorial identities. First, however, I want to indicate the magnitude of the problem he presents by citing two brief passages from his writings: the first is from the beginning of the narrative of his captivity among the Mohawks in 1652, the second from the beginning of his so-called "Fifth Voyage," which took place in 1682.

Being persuaded in the morning by two of my comrades to go and recreate ourselves in fowling, I disposed myself to keep them company. Wherefore I clothed myself the lightest way I could possible, that I might be the nimbler and not stay behind, as much for the prey that I hoped for as for to escape the danger into which we have ventured ourselves of an enemy the cruelest that ever was on the face of the earth. (1)

In the first place, I think myself obliged to vindicate myself from the imputation of inconstancy for acting in this voyage against the

English interest, and in the year 1683 against the French interests, for which, if I could not give a very good account, I might justly lie under the sentence of capriciousness and inconstancy. ... I have no cause to believe that I in the least deserve to be taxed with lightness or inconstancy for the employments wherein I ... engaged, although they were against the interests of the [Hudson's Bay] Company, for it is sufficiently known that my brother and myself ... did all that was possible for persons of courage and honor to perform for the advantage and profit of the said Company [in the past]. (161)

That these two passages are very different is, I hope, clear: both have complicated syntax, but that of the first is garbled; further, the diction in the first passage also seems oddly elevated, unsuited to the simplicity of its subject. Meanwhile, the second passage comes across as more sophisticated and self-conscious, and yet it is not, strictly speaking, a narrative, but rather a polemic, since no actions are narrated in it. In a very basic way, these differences tell us much about Radisson's development in the roughly fifteen years (1670-1685) between the writing of these two texts: his increasing familiarity with how to address a courtly audience, his increasing sense of confidence in his abilities, and his increasing need to rely on polemic in defending himself against the suspicions of his various patrons.

These fifteen-odd years are not only important in terms of Radisson's career, however; indeed, as Roger Chartier has shown in his *Order of Books*, this was also a key period in the transformation of the concept of "authorship." One element of that transformation was a shift from patronage

as a source of support to a more commercial model of authorship, although the two were strongly imbricated, as the frontispieces of many books from this period demonstrate with their hierarchical ordering of patron, author, printer, and bookseller (Chartier 37, 41). Another element was the rise of printing itself, which led Richelet and Furetière, in their dictionaries of 1680 and 1690, to make a distinction between authors and writers, with the first category being restricted to those whose writings had been printed (Chartier 40)¹. Contemporary with these changes was an increasing emphasis on the individual creative powers of authors—a sense that was already implicated in the earlier use of author as a synonym for creator, but which took on different connotations as literature moved towards meaning something more like "creative writing" than writing broadly construed. One essential consequence of this emphasis on creativity was an increasingly perceptible gap between the person who wrote a book and the persona who narrated it, a gap or "plurality of self" which Michel Foucault identifies as the location of the "author-function" (112).

As is already clear, Radisson does not meet Richelet and Furetière's definition of an author, but we needn't rule him out for that reason alone. Indeed, as Warkentin has shown by placing Radisson alongside his contemporary, Pierre Boucher, printing alone does not necessarily make a writer an author either ("Styles" 27). Boucher's sole publication, the *Histoire véritable et naturelle* of Canada, appeared in 1664 and it, far more than Radisson's voyages, is a report. Indeed, the book was commissioned by Louis XIV's minister Colbert to bolster the case for the King's assumption of direct authority over the colonies. Furthermore, Boucher himself seems to have given little importance to the book, which is not even mentioned in his

manuscript memoirs (Warkentin "Styles" 27). Radisson, meanwhile, makes reference to his first manuscript narrative in his later ones, and, while those later manuscripts appear to have been produced with the specific aim of shoring up his support from King James II and other of his patrons, the purpose of the earliest manuscript is not as clear. Fournier has hypothesized that it was made for the Royal Academy in England (see Warkentin "Styles" 33), but, despite the valuable geographical and ethnographic information it provides, this hypothesis doesn't explain why these earlier narratives often omit important geographical details, such as the names of lakes and villages, and simultaneously provide us with such extensive accounts of Radisson's state of mind, which in and of itself would seem to be of little value to the Academy.

Absent any clear evidence about the context in which this first manuscript was produced, Warkentin's discovery that Radisson commissioned a copy of it in 1686 just before returning to England suggests that it, too, was composed with a political use in mind, or was at least capable of being accommodated to such a use ("Styles" 26, 33). Indeed, one of the major themes of both the first manuscript and the later pair is the problem of allegiance and identity, a problem central to its political reception. The difference, then, between the explicitly polemical approach to this problem in the later manuscript, and the more indirect approach in the earlier one takes on greater significance still in light of this similarity in their ultimate use.

While Radisson's later texts demonstrate a more diplomatic manner of talking about his allegiances, one which it seems was not available to him before, they too

fall short of accounting for the suspicious singularity of his experiences. After all, he had been in a vital way not only English and French but also Mohawk at different points in his life. And yet, the discourse of cosmopolitan sophistication that he would need to answer to this fact is not yet open to him, though it would be to later authors such as the Baron Louis de Lahontan who moved between French, Native American, English, and other European communities.² The notion of a *sensus communis* had yet to be articulated by Lord Shaftesbury, and any appeal to disinterest would have been compromised by the competing contemporary senses of that word—the object of disinterest being both something in which one has no interest and something which is contrary to one's interest—and outright contradicted by Radisson's bald appeals to personal, national, and corporate interest.³

Thus, when he attempts, in his *Fifth Voyage*, to place himself above the conflict between England and France over fur-trading rights in Hudson Bay by appealing to a sense of greater good (161), he fundamentally contradicts the Hobbesian political notions of his day: conflicts between states are not the realm of higher values, but of primitive impulses, whatever diplomacy's claims for efficacy. Furthermore, he pushes at the bounds of plausibility when he simultaneously asserts "a greater inclination for the interest of England" based on his marriage into an English family and criticizes Colbert for denying him employment on those very grounds (161-63). Seen in this light, the first manuscript becomes more plausible precisely because it presents matters in a more directly narrative fashion and does not attempt to explain away the contradictions that emerge from Radisson's experiences.

Radisson's shifting identity is, unsurprisingly, the source of many of these contradictions. In the course of his captivity narrative, Radisson moves from describing the Mohawks who capture him as "dogs, or rather devils" (3) to describing them as his brothers. In fact, the change is more radical still, since he does not simply see the Mohawks as his metaphorical kin, but is actually adopted into a Mohawk family, and takes the name of their murdered son, Ovinha (11)⁴. In the scene which leads to this adoption, the Mohawk woman who will become Radisson's mother asks him "whether [he] was Asserony, a French" and he answers that he is not French, but rather "Ganugaga, that is, of their nation" (11). This confident assertion, however, conflicts with Radisson's "troubled ... mind" which seems to stem from his having "lived five weeks without thinking from whence [he] came" (11), and which leads to the Mohawk woman's inquiry.

Radisson's mind is troubled yet again during a military excursion that he undertakes with his adoptive brother and several other young Mohawk men. While the group is hunting for beavers, they meet an Algonquin man who claims to be an ally. He later takes Radisson aside, however, and reveals his desire to return to New France. Radisson tells the Algonquian that he, too, wants to return, though he notes for his readers that he "did not intend it" (13). Radisson then asks the Algonquian whether he loves his own nation; when the man says that he does, Radisson replies that he too loves his own nation-although he does not specify what nation he means. Still, it is implied that he means the French nation, for, when the man reveals his plan to kill the Mohawk men and flee to New France, Radisson "[a]t last ... consent[s], considering [that] they were mortal enemies to [his] country, [and] that [they] had cut the throats of so many of [his] relations" (13). And yet,

at the moment when they are to carry out their plan, Radisson tells the reader that he "was loathsome to do them mischief that never did [him] any" (13), but then "for the above said reasons" he takes a hatchet and murders them anyway (13).

These reversals continue, but the scenes above amply illustrate the truth of Ernst Renan's observation that a nation is created as much by forgetting as it is by remembering ("What is a Nation?" 11, 19). In Radisson's narrative, however, remembering and forgetting are much more sudden and personal things than they are in Renan's conception. From moment to moment his sense of self shifts as different factors come to the fore in his thoughts, and the way in which these factors influence his decisions remains incompletely intelligible even to himself as he narrates these events more than fifteen years after they occurred. Yet, for all the reversals of Radisson's text, there is one constant that holds not only in these early narratives, but in the later ones as well. While Radisson's national allegiance is often in flux, the primary factor in determining that allegiance remains his understanding, at that given moment, of who his family is. Indeed, Radisson's closest bond in the course of his life was to his brother-in-law, Médard Chouart des Groseilliers—brother-in-law, of course, being a form of adopted family relation. Their bond was so close that one of the voyages which Radisson narrates in his first manuscript from a first person-and frequently first person plural-perspective, was, as demonstrated by other historical sources, undertaken by his brother-in-law without him (see Warkentin "Styles" 24).

Thus, where Fournier claims that "Radisson ... appears ... as a wholly 'modern' man, mobile and preoccupied with

his own self interest" (108), and Warkentin states, more obliquely, that Radisson "speak[s] to us from the centre of a set of verbal stratagems designed to maintain the place of [a rhetorical] 'I' within ... competing [interest] groups" ("Language" 312), I would argue that Radisson's persona is profoundly determined by his relations to other people. And so, while these critics might be inclined to say that, yes, Radisson is an author, at least in the archaic sense of authoring his own destiny, my answer remains, in short, maybe.

In short, maybe; at length, something closer to yes. While Radisson can obviously not be made to clear the bar erected by Richelet's definition of an "author," he does, in the narrative techniques of his earliest manuscript, produce something we can recognize as "literary" in our more restricted modern sense. There is the manipulation of narrated time, which greatly troubles historians; there is the conscious recognition on Radisson's part that he is generating symbolic meanings, which appears most explicitly in his accounts of the ritual gift-giving ceremonies he performs with the Hurons; and, finally, there is the plurality of self, which can be seen when his narrating self separates from his narrated self in order to give a reflective, external perspective, when "they" slides to "we" and back to "they" again in the account of his captivity with the Mohawks, and when the "he" of his brother-in-law becomes, by turns, a "we" and even an "I."

Ultimately, in tracing the complexities of Radisson's texts and their history, I feel compelled to conclude that he was an author in a transitional sense that fully conforms to neither the archaic nor the more modern senses of that word. He was, as Warkentin puts it, "a creator of meanings" ("Language" 316). His writings may not have

been able to produce a fully-articulated discourse of cosmopolitan identity—indeed, Radisson had to fall back on the concept of family as a means of holding his many selves together—and yet, in the course of his writings, he reworks that concept, stretching it to include, at least potentially, anyone and everyone. And thus, in his own, strange way, Radisson became an important precursor of those—unmistakably authors in our sense of the word, and yet in Radisson's sense as well—who made cosmopolitanism a positive principle with a name, rather than a nameless source of suspicion.

Notes

¹ The first (1694) edition of the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française*, however, makes no such distinction.

² For more on Lahontan see Charles Scruggs' essay "La Hontan: Precursor of the Enlightenment and the Myth of the Noble Savage" and Réal Ouellet's "Lahontan: Les Dernières Années de sa vie: Ses rapports avec Leibniz."

³ The entry for "disinterest" in the *OED* lists examples of this first meaning from the 1682 edition of Joseph Glanville's *Lux orientalis* and the 1699 edition of John Norris' *A Collection of Miscellanies* and an early example of the second meaning from James Webb's 1658 translation of the eighth part of La Calprenède's *Hymen's Praeludia* or *Cléopâtre*.

⁴ According to Radisson this name means, interestingly enough, "lead or stone" in Iroquois (11), and thus his adopted name is, looked at from a certain angle, the very name he already had; Radisson, however, does not comment at all on this. Elsewhere in his narrative Radisson seems more aware of the possibilities of name-play, especially when he names a rock after himself (123). For another example of such interlinguistic name-play in a colonial context see Frank Lestrignant's article "Ulysse, l'huitre et le sauvage: Giovanni Battista Gelli et Jean de Léry."

⁵ For a detailed discussion of these ceremonies, see Warkentin's "Discovering Radisson: A Renaissance Adventurer Between Two Worlds."

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