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N. Scott Momaday: a postmodern rebel *with* a cause?

Anne Garrait-Bourrier

- 1 Imagination is Momaday's "divine blindness": the invisibility of words transmitted orally and conveyed by the communal work of memory and imagination. These words are so deeply rooted in the origins of mankind; they are so sacred that they inspire awe in the artist whose task is to protect them. They generate a paradoxical feeling of admiration — because they are immemorial — and fear — because they must be decoded to play their role and could remain out of intellectual reach if they were not. In the same essay, Momaday mentions Alastair Reid who identified in Borges's work the presence of this "*sagrada horror*" (sacred awe) towards words, towards what cannot be mastered by the artist because it belongs to the divine. Momaday shares the same viewpoint and insists on the perplexing character of ancestral oral tradition, this archaic "minor" language running at the deepest level of tribal narratives written in English. This embedded language is the imaginary reconstruction of a "non-reality" — as remembrance is just an image of what was real once — and as such, it is clearly postmodern. Apparently absurd, interior and fleeting when undecoded, oral tradition offers another vision of the world or the vision of another world. *The Way to Rainy Mountain* is Momaday's most postmodern creation as it is mainly built on oral tradition, but it is also a magnificent demonstration of how Native American literatures can actually bypass the postmodern *substratum* when the gaps and fragments of memory are bridged by imagination.

A Minorized Postmodern Writing?

- 2 In the introduction to the book *Narrative Chance, Postmodern Discourse on Native American Indian Literatures*, Gerald Vizenor, insisting on the comic dimension of tribal narratives, conceptualizes the relationship between these narratives and postmodernism:
- Native American Indian literatures are tribal discourse, more discourse. The oral and written narratives are language games, comic discourse rather than mere responses to colonialist demands or social theories. (10)

- 3 This brings a new light to Momaday's words in his essay "A Divine Blindness":
- Tradition is especially and above all the seat of the imagination and the imagination is a kind of divine blindness in which we see not with our eyes but with our minds and souls, in which we dream the world and our being in it. (98, my emphasis)
- 4 This quotation reactivates the part played by the imagination of the story-teller when he re-writes the common memory of tradition (*we dream the world and our being in it*), a tradition which cannot be read (*divine blindness*) without being deciphered first.
- 5 In *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, Momaday conceives textual strategies allowing the emergence of meaning beyond the visible gaps of the text. He is not the first Native American writer to use such strategies of encoding but he probably is one of the first to clearly draw his literary technicality from postmodernism and deconstructionism.

Textual Strategies and Encoding

- 6 *The Way to Rainy Mountain* is an Indian narrative. Not only does it deal essentially with the personal memories of a narrator who presents himself as distinctively Indian, but it also follows the fragmented construction of a three-dimensional folktale. It is a brilliant example of Momaday's skill at re-building oral tradition through snatches of both historical and personal memory. The study of this book will enable us to uncover the functioning of strategies which, when applied to fiction, lead the reader to the world of "magical realism".

The Way to Rainy Mountain: Ethnic Writing

- 7 Some American and European critics, probably a little over-pragmatic, have criticized Momaday for his repetition and his tendency to quote himself from one book to the next, using the same poems and the same mythological examples. This is undeniable, but cannot be used as a means of blaming him for gratuitous self-plagiarism or convenience. There is much more to it, for *The Way to Rainy Mountain* stands for the Indian quest for fusion and union, a quest for the origin of "Indian-ness", which is its very essence. Working from and on memory implies a great deal of repetition and of reinvention through repetition. There is no other way to try to stabilize a mainly oral tradition than to repeatedly reformulate it so as to force it to momentarily freeze until a reader can recapture it mentally, and then unloosen it through his own interpretation of it. *The Way to Rainy Mountain* sheds light on this process of fusion through repetition. Momaday says: "I have written several books, but to me they are all parts of the same story. And I like to repeat myself, if you will, from book to book, in the way that Faulkner did - in an even more obvious way perhaps." (Scubnell 107) To that extent, Momaday's writing perfectly adheres to Deleuze's vision of writing as "a question of becoming":

[...] always incomplete, always in the midst of being formed, and go[ing] beyond the matter of any livable or lived experience. It is a process, that is, a passage of Life that traverses both the livable and the lived. Writing is inseparable from becoming. (Deleuze, 1)

- 8 *The Way to Rainy Mountain* was published in 1969 and is the best illustration of Momaday's style and art, being a patchwork of mythical influences and reminiscences, blending into a discourse of the quest for identity. It is 87 pages long, and 11 of them

are pictorial representations created by his father. Thus the book can be classified somewhere in between the short story or novella and the children's picture book. Yet such a categorization is both inaccurate and incomplete, suggesting a mere surface-level understanding of the style, or styles, chosen by Momaday for his text. The genre is, in fact, totally undetermined, not responding to any pre-established conventions. When one examines the internal structure of the narration, one sees that it can be decomposed into a succession of embedded mini-texts which stimulate the interest of the reader. Momaday involves his audience, who are constantly discovering a three-fold narrative based on three narrative voices and on the interplay of three genres.

Triple Manipulation

- 9 The internal decomposition of the book into sub-texts, each composed of around 15 lines, and arranged as short tales, can be said to serve the purpose of a unification of composition. Momaday constructs his work upon the foundations of oral tradition, one which, by definition, is meant to be eternally transmitted; this tradition permeates the text and breathes life into it. Such constructions can be found in all of his creations and yet Momaday does not hesitate to delve into Kiowa history highlighting those events which may be said to illustrate the decline of the Indian nation - his heritage. He exploits the realistic elements of tradition, thus allowing a link to be established between past and present. This threefold approach defines Momaday's objectives in a very palpable way and confirms the need for the reader to adopt a new method of literary appreciation. In the first text of "memoirs", Momaday separates the three aspects of his quest (legend, history and intimacy) and it becomes the reader's task to bind them together and to discover the complexity of Indian identity. This is the overt and covert intention of the creator. Such is the reading contract implicitly passed between author and reader. Kimberly Blaeser explains: "He [Momaday] also acts out the reader/creator role as he responds to Kiowa myth and family history, he reads the past with his imagination, thus providing an example of the life-giving power of the reader's response." (Vizenor, 39)
- 10 In order to carry out this ambitious project, Momaday could not use only one literary genre thereby running the risk of being monotonous and static; he could not limit himself to talking about his own life, as unadulterated autobiography cannot convey any communal traditional experience. Nor could he deal exclusively with the history of the Indian people, because his aim is to suggest a degree of interplay between the contemporary nature of his writing and the timelessness of tradition. He has had to combine several genres in order to convey, in as authentic a way as possible, the diversity of his literary ambition. The variety of his writing styles is one illustration of this blending of genres: the relatively long prologue and epilogue bear witness to a more explanatory and historical style whereas the extremely short mini-tales embedded in the text are proof of intuition, insight and spontaneous memories, in other words, of the oral tradition of myth.
- 11 Common to us all is the perception of the number three as the symbolic sign of reunification, yet for Momaday, it is more particularly the symbol of an intrinsic division between the three modes of testimony he chooses to adopt in his book: "whole memory, this experience of the mind which is legendary as well as historical, personal as well as cultural" (Momaday 1969, 4). Explaining his project in *Indian Voices*, Momaday

once again insists that the three voices he uses in combination are: “the mythical, the historical, and the immediate” (59) that is to say, one voice for each genre used. Despite their remaining integrated within the mini-tales mentioned above, one does, in fact, skip from one voice to another, and each is represented in the text by a specific typographical set: the mystical voice starting each section is in bold characters, the subsequent historical voice is in italics, and the immediate, which intervenes at the end of the section as a sort of commentary, is in bold italics. On every page of the book, these three voices take the visible shape of three tales which follow each other in a revealing manner; sometimes, one of the tales is reduced to only two lines when Momaday wants to privilege one of the other two voices. The word “commentary” is actually used by Momaday himself in *Indian Voices* when he explains that the three voices are interlinked. As he indicates, the first is to convey a part of the Kiowa myth and the other two intervene as a means of commenting upon the myth either in an objective “documentary” way or more subjectively, as a “personal reminiscence”. As regards the former, detached observations, Momaday has been known to frequently refer to the ethnologist, James Mooney. If we persevere in our attempt to give a specific definition or category to the genre or genres used by Momaday in his book, we can say that the mythical and historical voices are manifested in tales whereas the third voice, which is more contemporary and analytical, is to be found in short sketches. This division into such norms can be found in nineteenth century utilitarian America exemplified by Melville and James Fennimore Cooper, both possibly having influenced Momaday who was especially partial to reading Melville’s texts.

- 12 The visible differences between the three voices as seen on the page as from the first chapter of the first part entitled “The Setting On”, distracts the reader rather than providing him with landmarks. He could, for example, be tempted to reconstruct a text logically according to the typographical modifications he encounters chapter after chapter. Why not consider that the text written in italics in chapter II, is a continuation of the preceding text in italics? No reading indication or advice is given by Momaday and the threefold division goes on and on so that one is obliged to adopt the reading contract decided on by Momaday, that is, a subtle deciphering game aimed at the unification of the Trinity-like Three into One.
- 13 Let us go back to the origin of the book, which is the narration of a journey, in order to better understand its final form. Momaday, respecting his own choices and the revelations he experienced in 1963, wants his reader to relive, through the medium of his text, the migration of the Kiowa from the state of Montana to the Great Plains in the state of Oklahoma. He starts his spiritual and intellectual journey from Yellowstone River with a poem entitled “Headwaters” and which is the preface to the text as a whole. Then, he draws his work to a close with another poem “Rainy Mountain Cemetery”, conveying the disillusioned vision of the end of the journey. The two poems, both very brief and both of which are re-published in subsequent books, seem to embody a historical *continuum* from the beginning of Indian migration to the decline of these nations, announced in the prologue by the falling of stars: “The falling stars seemed to image the sudden and violent disintegration of an old order.” These two poems also illustrate the blending of styles, as previously intimated, and function successfully owing to the harmonious diversity of genres creating their own idiosyncratic identity, going from short-stories to tales, via the apparition of poems and sketches.

- 14 Embedded in this poetic framework is to be found an explanatory prologue in the form of a short story, followed by a relatively short introduction then, finally, a lyrical epilogue combining myth, history and the personal angle of the writer on his very own "Paradise Lost". These two texts - prologue and epilogue - independent from the rest of the book are presented in a conventional narrative form - the short story. Each features between four and seven pages and adheres to a classic narrative chronology which is internally coherent despite the intra-textual omnipresence of Myth. The rest of the text is composed of 24 sections divided into three distinct parts - and we can find here another proof of Momaday's obsession with tripartite patterns - each headed by a title marking a step in the migration: "The Setting Out" - that is the beginning - boasts the first eleven sections, "The Going On" - that is the continuation - the next seven sections, and "The Closing In" - or ending - the last six sections. The body of the text is postscripted, at the bottom of each page, using the words of the main title - "The Way To Rainy Mountain" - following each other in reckless abandon, reading: "TORAINYMOUNTAINTHEWAYTORAINYMOUNTAINTHE". The visual effect of this unpunctuated *continuum* is that of an unceasing return or of the absence of ending, that of order born from chaos, and vice-versa - a sort of reincarnation, a literary representation of relentless eternity and infinity. We could say that there is no conclusion to the immemorial journey of the reader as the literary space of the book allows repetitions and continuity. More than a "Closing In" at the end of the book - as the third title suggests - the reader perceives the text as a perfect narrative circle. This impression of circularity is further reinforced by the inscription in the text of the visual tripartite pattern previously encountered: each of the 24 sections is sub-divided into three typographically different voices which constantly echo one another, even if the link between them is apparently missing or incoherent. There is a threesome within a threesome, a circle within a circle, and the narrative is built upon this very notion of perpetual renewal. This is further confirmed by the fact that although the titles of the three parts appear to announce a chronological order - a beginning, a continuation and an ending - each of the three parts can be read independently, indeed as a text separate from the book as a whole.
- 15 The central part - "The Going On" - is not a sequel to the initial section, but an autonomous piece based on paragraphs of historical import or events which took place over different periods of time: in section XII, the dates quoted are 1872 and 1873; in section XV, Momaday evokes Catlin's visit to the Kiowa in 1834, giving us a kind of flashback; in section XVIII, he mentions the 1843 Sun Dance, immediately followed by the winter of 1851. Momaday is not obsessed with chronological accuracy; the *continuum* suggested previously by the poems acting as frameworks to the text is here annihilated or replaced by another kind of continuous narrative structure according to which the book forms a literary entity composed of different parts, each well-defined and independent in itself.
- 16 This may be the second message to be decoded from the de-structured title (lacking in order) at the bottom of each page: if the reader sees these words, leaf after leaf, more than 70 times in a row, like some sort of ritualistic chant during which the same words are repeated *ad nauseam* so that they lose their meaning, he will finally feel that words find an order again, some sort of new arrangement. The reader can wait for the reassuring return of this *ordo ab chaos* and we may suspect that he will choose to read the book according to the chronological indications given by the subtitles; or alternatively, he can follow his fantasy and imagination and choose his own conception

of order with no logical guidance at all. Momaday actually manages to destroy any possible dependence on the reader's part on logical, temporal or spatial rules: by contrast, he provides the tools necessary for him to navigate freely through the text.

- 17 This freedom is further accentuated by the game Momaday plays in including his father's paintings in the text at very strategic moments: the birth of the fish horse myth, the death of the buffalo etc. He thereby contributes in a graphic fashion toward the enriching of the reader's imagination. Myth is thus represented by drawing, which acquires the value of an inscription in textual terms and a visual aid to imagination. More than a voice, oral tradition thus has a "body", and thus is converted into a reality.
- 18 Through these complex narrative forms, Momaday seeks the creation of unity, of post-division fusion. Intentionally, and with continuity in mind, he has included extracts from previous publications. For example, the prologue and some mythical paragraphs already appeared in *The Journey of Tai Me* (1967) and the introduction was also published in 67 in the newspaper *Reporter*. The same introduction is again to be found in *House Made of Dawn* (1968). In Momaday's works, all that seems to be dissipated and separated is actually linked and reunified by words; the journey described in *The Way to Rainy Mountain* is at the same time that of an Indian nation and that of a creator, his own artistic road to maturity. It is also the journey of a reader who is actively looking for meaning with the benevolent guidance of the writer.

AN UNCONVENTIONAL TEXT FOR A REBELLIOUS READER

- 19 We can thus perceive that the reader is called upon to play a key role. Here, we are not dealing with a conventional autobiography written by a lone actor, but with the re-birth of myth through the medium of the text in the co-writing of a collective biography. From the very beginning of the book the reader understands what is at stake: the return to unity and order from division and chaos, even beyond the chaos of the mixture and interdependence of literary genres. He has to participate in the interweaving of meanings and must progress from allusion to Truth. From this text in metamorphosis, the reader has to discover a fixed and static line of coherence to become the listener to Momaday's storytelling. He will then become the receiver and decipherer of an immemorial oral tradition which has been put into words, and pass it on. With reference to "open texts", Umberto Eco says: "Blank space surrounding a word, typographical adjustments, and spatial composition in the page setting of the poetic text - all contribute to create a halo of indefiniteness and to make the text pregnant with infinite suggestive possibilities. This search for suggestiveness is a deliberate move to 'open' the work to the free response of the addressee. An artistic work which 'suggests' is one which can be performed with the full emotional and imaginative resources of the interpreter." (53) This quotation may also refer to Momaday's text and we could even say that a postmodernist approach is adopted by him in that the fragmentations and gaps in narration as created by the vocal trio do not lead to the annihilation of meaning. Quite the opposite, in fact; such gaps are symbolic bridges and the reader has to understand the semantic reconstructions lying behind the fragmentation. For Momaday, the "open text" is a postmodern technique of writing which enhances communication and tradition, in no way destroying the communicative value of words. In his task of analysis, the reader must first accept guidance in the form of logical surface-level links between the three voices. In some sections, he simply has to read aloud the three voices together so as to comprehend

that one isolated element creates the link in each short tale by repetition. Thus the three texts form one story: in section II, the verbal construction “coming out” is repeated in each text and creates a fusion; in section II, the reference to the game creates the link and in section III, dogs are the main theme in the three tales. It is the same with section VII in which reflections and fractioning of the image have the same function: from the mythical birth of the Kiowa twins to the vision of Momaday’s grand-father as a defeated centaur once the horse has been banished from the Kiowa culture (historical part), to the splitting of the image of Momaday himself in the Washita River, a frog jumping in the river and so “splitting the image apart”. From these divisions, unity emerges albeit paradoxically.

- 20 But one cannot be satisfied with such obvious links and with such a superficial vision of unification. After reading the text more thoroughly, the reader detects other links. Absolute fusion goes through periods of confusion, when the reader can no longer distinguish the three narrative times despite the relevant typography. In section XXIII, the passage defined by Momaday as “mythical” (the first one) actually features his own grand-mother, Aho, and thus blends with reality in a puzzling way. Similarly, in section XXIV, Aho also is used to illustrate the historical relevance: “Aho’s high moccasins are made of the softest, cream-coloured skins,” whereas at the same time, the mythical part is pervaded by the figure of Momaday’s grand-father, Mammedaty: “East of my grandmother’s house, south of the pecan grove, there is buried a woman in a beautiful dress. Mammedaty used to know where she is buried, but now no one knows.” (Momaday 1967, 83)
- 21 Section XXIV is a good example of the phenomenon of fusion/confusion which actually shows the passage from history to legend and from legend to reality. In this section oral tradition circulates and transcends boundaries: history certainly loses some of its veracity as it penetrates the imagination of men and becomes the personal myth of a writer whose references are incarnated by the members of his very own family. The vocal trio may be said to create a new genre — mythologized autobiography — which typifies Momaday’s style. The writer reads his own people’s myths, makes them his own and re-reads them in his own way through his writing. “I think I know how much he loved that animal” and a little further on in the text. “I think I know what was going on his mind”. (Momaday 1969, 71)
- 22 The gnostic journey taking place in the text is an initiation materialized in three different narrative times and in a multiplicity of genres. We can consider this intra-textual literary journey as a diving into the writer’s own imagination, a rekindling of his intimate culture. The text is like an *axis mundi* along which Momaday slides from the periphery of knowledge - what he knows about the Kiowa - to the center of perception and intuition - what he feels about his identity. The reader, albeit manipulated, is above all charmed by this Indian magic and he accompanies the writer on this vertical descent. And we can bet that, just like Alice in Wonderland falling down the well without hurting herself, he will learn a lot about himself and about the others in this downward epiphany.

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ABSTRACTS

Tous les textes de N. Scott Momaday insistent sur le caractère déroutant de la tradition orale ancestrale, cette langue "mineure" archaïque qui traverse en profondeur les récits tribaux écrits en langue anglaise. Ce langage souterrain est la reconstruction imaginaire d'une "non réalité" - au sens où le souvenir n'est qu'une image de ce qui fut un temps réel - et en cela, il est clairement postmoderne. Apparemment absurde, intérieure et fuyante lorsqu'elle demeure non déchiffrée, la tradition orale offre une autre vision de ce monde là, la vision d'une autre monde. *The Way to Rainy Mountain* est l'ouvrage de Momaday le plus postmoderne du fait même qu'il se construit sur la tradition orale, mais c'est également une magistrale démonstration de la manière dont les littératures amérindiennes parviennent en fait à dépasser le substrat postmoderne lorsque béances et fragments de la mémoire sont comblés par l'imagination

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