

WEAVING, PATCHWORK AND BRICOLAGE: WOMEN'S CRAFTS / WOMEN'S TEXTS

In 1929 Virginia Woolf questioned whether traditional narrative genres, and more specifically the novel, could be adequate for women's creativity. She found the novelistic structures too rigid for women's poetic flow:

Who shall say that even now "the novel" ... this most pliable of all forms is rightly shaped for her use? No doubt we shall find her knocking that into shape for herself when she has the free use of her limbs; and providing some new vehicle, not necessarily in verse, for the poetry in her. (80).

Woolf articulated then the need for women to produce a new concept of narrative, with open structures which, as an alternative to the masculine canon, would be adapted to women's reality. Woolf's proposal that the book has somehow to be adapted to the body, and at a venture one would say that women's books should be shorter, more concentrated, than those of men, and framed so that they do not need long hours of steady and uninterrupted work. For interruptions there will always be" (81) gave place to a new concept of narrative which we currently nominate "body writing".

Sixty years later, the Canadian writer and critic Gail Scott recuperates Woolf's voice to attract attention on the new narrative forms used by Canadian women writers, based on the fragment or short text, which she defines as "shorter pieces surfacing like fragments in a poetic mosaic" (196).

One of these new fragmented genres is the short story cycle; a hybrid between the novel and the short story, it exists on the borderline between both forms, combining their normatives and thus subverting them. The challenge to canon from the three main cultural movements of the last two decades, that is, postmodernism, postcolonialism, and feminism, favoured the rise of this new literary genre among women writers, from Margaret Laurence's *A Bird in the House* (1970) and Alice Munro's *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971) to the more recent ones by multicultural writers as Makeda Silvera's *Remembering G.* (1991), or Rachna Mara's *Customs and Excise* (1991).

The first study on this genre appeared in 1971, *Representative Short Story Cycles of the Twentieth Century*, by Forrest L. Ingram. He defines the cycle as a set of stories linked to each other in such a way as to maintain a balance between the individuality of each of the stories and the necessities of the larger unit ... I will define a short story cycle as a book of short stories so linked to each other by their author that the reader's successive experience on vari-

ous levels of the pattern of the whole significantly modifies his experience of its component parts. (19)

The balance between the individuality of each independent story and its role as part of a larger narrative, which Ingram calls "the tension between the one and the many", is characteristic of Canadian society, as compared to the individualism promoted in their neighbour country, the USA. According to the writer and critic Robert Kroetsch,

In Canadian writing, and perhaps in Canadian life, there is an exceptional pressure placed on the individual and the self by the community or society. The self is not in any way Romantic or privileged. The small town remains the ruling paradigm. (51)

For feminist writers, the community is an empowering force that helps women to achieve an individual sense of self. As Nicole Brossard suggests,

it is clear that writing is in practice a subject which concerns above all the individual. But, as Jean Piaget so rightly says: "someone who has never considered plurality possible can never be conscious of his individuality." This means that, in order to be aware of oneself as an individual, that is as a unique being in the world, one must first of all recognize one's membership in a group or a community. (180)

The image of the short story cycle as a narrative community in which every of its components achieves its own independence while at the same time collaborating in the construction of a wider tale seems to be a suitable one in the context of Canadian women's narrative.

The distinctive characteristics of this genre are the recurrence of characters, settings, events, and / or symbols; interdependence between the stories in the cycle; sequential development of the events by a process of accumulation of details; re-construction of the narrative in each new story; and fragmentation of the chronological line. Susan Ash adds another one, the resistance to closure, characteristic of postmodern writing. She summarizes the characteristics of postcolonial cycles by women as follows:

The following strategies characterize these texts. Generally a recurring character / narrator tells her stories from some future perspective. The narrative time structure in these stories is usually vertical rather than horizontal ... Details tend to be related by association rather than chronology; time may move two steps forward and one back in order to incorporate new judgments. Thus, the same event is examined several times and from several angles. The puzzle which is experience may be rearranged to different designs, denying the possibility of closure. (45-46)

For Ingram and his followers the characteristics of the cycle contribute to create the sense of unity and coherence typical of modernist narrative. However, in the feminist postcolonial and postmodern context in which these authors write the concept of unity is precisely one of the concepts to subvert, as it is one of the basic concepts that sustain both patriarchy and imperialism. On the contrary, fragmentation, difference, fluidity, heterogeneity are the key words in

the analysis of the short story cycles by Canadian women writers. As Gerald Kennedy proposes, recurrence can be considered more as a disruptive element than a unifying one:

unity is a contestable and elusive criterion; works which we intuitively perceive as short story ensembles may rely as much upon fragmentation and discontinuity as upon unifying associations. Recurrent features may disclose differences as readily as similarities ... Yet this insistence on unity has produced a restrictive and conservative theory of form which has canonized certain collections while ignoring others. (11)

Both Linda Hutcheon and Susan Ash coincide to define this genre as “postmodern”. For Hutcheon,

Perhaps “postmodern” is the best way to describe the genre paradoxes in the works of ... Alice Munro (are they short-story collections? novels?). Certainly contemporary Canadian fiction is full of examples of a postmodern challenge to the boundaries of specifically “high art” genres. (4-5)

Ash thinks that the characteristics of the cycle reflect “the post-modern sense of disarray, multiplicity and fragmentation” (45).

The fragmentation of this form is specially useful to represent the unsteadiness of the self of the postmodern times, but also the feeling of isolation characteristic of this time, as Susan Garland Mann suggests:

Because cycles consist of discrete, self-sufficient stories, they are especially well suited to handle certain subjects, including the sense of isolation or fragmentation or indeterminacy that many twentieth-century characters experience. (Mann, 11)

These Canadian authors seem to be consciously using this form because of this; Edna Alford (author of *A Sleep Full of Dreams*) alludes to her reasons for writing in the cycle form in an interview:

I see *A Sleep Full of Dreams* as being a book about compartmentalization. It's there in the form. You will go into one room and then into another room and into another room. It was suggested at some points that I might want to write a novel out of the stories. But I was absolutely determined that it be presented in this form. The form to me was integral to this book. Not only are we into compartmentalization and specialization within society, within the language that is happening ... These days there are all sorts of strange, contradictory positions held by the same people, even within the same head, within the individual. (Twigg, 3-4)

The isolation to which contemporary life leads us is neutralized to some extent in the community. The division of the global narrative into fragments or compartments does not imply that these fragments are not tightly linked to each other, that those rooms to which Alford referred have no interior connecting doors. In fact it is the strong thematic and structural relationship between the stories that distinguishes a short story cycle from a miscellaneous antho-

logy or collection. The cycle does not represent individualism, but a community, and therefore it is a plural form. The cycle can be conceived as a tapestry formed by a framework of threads, a Text, in the Barthesian fashion:

The Text's plurality does not depend on the ambiguity of its contents, but rather on what could be called the *stereographic plurality* of the signifiers that weave it (etymologically the text is a cloth; *textus*, from which the text derives, means "woven"). (Barthes 76)

The image of the cycle as a tapestry or fabric has been used by both authors and critics, either as metanarrative self-referential comments in the stories or in interviews and essays. Isabel Huggan uses the metaphor of a quilt to describe the writing process for her cycle *The Elizabeth Stories*: "I didn't intend many of those stories; they happened by juxtaposing. I make up a patchwork quilt but I don't know what the pattern is going to be; I don't know what colors are going to go next" (Durix 54). The writer and critic P.K. Page uses the image of fabric to describe the structure of Ethel Wilson's *The Innocent Traveller*.

She carries us lightly, as though bearing no weight at all, through a myriad of interweaving mini-stories ... back and forth in time, back and forth again -weaving an intricate fabric into which, while the spell is upon us, we are woven too. (241)

Indo-Canadian writer Rachna Mara introduces in her cycle *Of Customs and Excise* recurrent images of women who are weaving or embroidering; the silk threads and the embroidery are the lace that interweaves two women, two separate worlds, that of Bridget, a British doctor, and Asha, her Hindu servant. The allusions to fabric are linking threads in the cycle, and can be read as metanarrative references to the very structure of the narrative, in which the lives of the characters interlace, and different motives appear repeatedly in three continents, across oceans and cultures: "Rather messier these, threads tangled, knotted, streaks of colour overlapping, crisscrossing from one patch to another" (Mara 80). This weaving is the metaphor not only of the construction of the short story cycle, but also of the construction of life itself. One of Mara's characters points out: "How you cut your cloth affects you not only in this life but the next one as well" (Mara 97).

This metaphor of the fabric for the short story cycle by women writers is very interesting, not only for its implications with Barthesian theory, but also for its close relationship to classic mythology and female creativity, traditionally confined to embroidery and weaving. The creation of patchwork quilts, tapestry embroidery, dress-making, spinning and knitting have always been female crafts which allowed women's creativity to flow freely. A creativity which could not be developed in other "higher" Arts, reserved for men. The weaving of a fabric represents in many mythologies the weaving of life; the three Moirai, also called the Three Fates, "were spinners of the lots of both mortals and immortals alike" (Smith 85); depending on their labour humans and gods would enjoy a better or a worse life.

Another recurrent image used to describe the cycle structure is that of the collage, puzzle or mosaic. Sandra Birdsell uses the term *puzzle* for her cycles (collected as *Agassiz Stories*), and Charlene Diehl-Jones describes them as "a mosaic of bits, of impressions, a mosaic of stories

admitting incompleteness, partiality, gaps, silences, even as it insinuates overarching patterns” (93). Hal Foster describes this way of writing as the bricolage technique, following Claude Lévi-Strauss’s ideas about the nature of myths (in *La Pensée sauvage*): the rule of bricolage is always to make do with whatever is available. Thus, as Foster argues, those who are relegated to the margins, those under the label “Other” because of their economic, social and / or cultural situation, can make use of the bricolage techniques to subvert the oppressive order, to expose that “western culture is hardly the integral ‘engineered’ whole that it seems to be but that it too is *bricolé*” (201). Foster applies the term to literature, comparing it to the classical concept of myth:

bricolage is a process of textual play, of loss and gain: whereas myth abstracts and pretends to the natural, *bricolage* cuts up, makes concrete, delights in the artificial — it knows no identity, stands for no pretense of presence or universal guise for relative truths. (201)

Diehl-Jones, following Foster, envisions the bricolage technique as a useful strategy for women writers, who always write from the margins and more so when they use a genre that exists at the margins of more reputed ones in order to challenge the myth of patriarchal power and of the master narratives which have silenced their voices. In literary bricolage, “textual gaps, then, become politically potent, positing another way of constructing the world and relations between people” (Diehl-Jones, 94).

Among the cycles’s characteristics, its resistance to closure is one of the most interesting features for contemporary critics, and it is more obvious in the Bildungsroman cycles, which show the development of a protagonist, as Gerald Lynch has pointed out:

such writers as Laurence and Munro explore the formation of fictional personality in this form that simultaneously subverts and sustains the impression of completion, of closure and totality, suggesting that psychic coherence is as much an illusion in fiction as it may be in fact. (93)

The open ending allows writers to take the same characters back into fiction and give different versions at different times in their lives, as Sandra Birdsell has suggested:

The structure of *Night Travellers* came out of a growing sense of frustration with what I perceived to be the restrictiveness of the short-story form. It seemed to me too compartmentalized and unrealistic to capture and contain a character ... You almost had to impose some kind of resolution on a character, just to end the story. When I came to the end of a story written that way, I’d find myself saying, “yes, but.” I kept seeing that same character later on in life. (135)

Munro and Laurence, however, seem to lead their characters towards a final epiphanic episode, just to get to a turning point where the ending takes us again to the beginning. Munro’s endings, with recurrent words such as “mystery, pretense, wish, doubt, invention,

lies, deceit, tricks, secrets, fraudulence, absurdity, treachery” (Irvine, 106), participate of the postmodern distrust towards the art that pretends to capture Reality.

Another of the postmodern characteristics of cycles is the breaking of chronology, which allows the author to give different versions of the same event. This re-writing may be done by the same narrator / protagonist who looks back from different stages in her life, as happens in the Bildungsroman cycles, or by using different characters, and thus different points of view, as in the “place” cycles. No version seems to be more reliable than the rest, denying the idea of Truth itself; these characters offer many alternative different versions, and the field of possibilities is never closed. As Ash suggests, “every apparent story contains alternate tellings, and the process of revision is endless” (47). This revision process is complex, since it doesn’t comprise only the usual revisions by the author during the writing process, but it is also a revision of the same event by the characters. This process engages also the reader, since every new story we read takes us back to previous stories already read. Our view of the events and characters changes with the new elements and perspectives. Moreover, the structure of the cycle itself is a re-vision of the already existent genres of the short story and the novel, of their limitations and ideological implications. The process of reading a cycle is thus a creative process, since the structure makes us take an active part in the construction of the story. When we read one of the stories by itself, we make an interpretation of the characters and events in that specific story. But when that story becomes one more thread in the tapestry of the cycle, our view of the characters and events changes, even to the point that a main character in a story may turn into a secondary character when considering the whole cycle. A reader may choose her own reading method both for the cycle and for each story; she may choose among the several interpreting strategies every time she takes up the text in her hands. She can read each story separately, or as pieces in a puzzle she can put together or take apart looking for linking elements among them or filling the gaps between the stories using her own imagination. This genre requires an active reader who participates finding the recurrent patterns and connections often hidden in the text. It implies a playing with the text, as Robert Luscher has pointed out: “In a short story sequence there is more room for subjective interpretation and active participation; the reader’s task thus becomes simultaneously more difficult and more rewarding” (158). The pleasure of reading short story cycles may then be rooted in the rebellious pleasure of transgression, of going beyond borders, in this case those of the literary genres, as Mann points out: “the case is not overstated if I say that readers enjoy reveling in the necessary restricted form of the short story and then discovering that they can, as they continue to read, transcend these boundaries” (19).

Finally, its multiplicity, both of versions and of points of view, or of possible readings, the recurrence of certain elements, the fragmentation in its form, the interdependence between the stories and the resistance to closure make of the cycle a postmodern genre. Nevertheless, at the hands of women writers in a postcolonial society the cycle fills with political content. The postmodern premise that denies identity is transformed in these cycles into a tentative as-

sertion of feminine Canadian identities, which will not then be coherent and steady, but, like the cycle, multiple, fluid, and permeable.

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