

Melanie Schrage-Lang, Martina Hörnicke

**Intertextual Transitions in Contemporary Canadian Literature:
Atwood, MacDonald, van Herk**

Edited & introduced by Susanne Bach

Reflections

Literatures in English
outside Britain and the USA

Albert-Reiner Glaap (Ed.)

Band 23

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 **Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier**

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Trier : WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2013

(Reflections. Literatures in English
outside Britain and the USA ; Bd. 23)

ISBN 978-3-86821-457-4

Umschlagabbildung: © Alf Keller (<http://www.alf-keller.com/>)

Umschlaggestaltung: Brigitta Disseldorf

© WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2013

ISBN 978-3-86821-457-4

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WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier

Bergstraße 27, 54295 Trier

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Tel.: (0651) 41503 / 9943344, Fax: 41504

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Acknowledgements

Our joined gratitude is due to three gentlemen: our treasured colleague Albert-Reiner Glaap OBE, who did not hesitate a second to include this volume in his monograph series *Reflections – Literatures in English outside Britain and the USA* and who has been very supportive in every respect; Erwin Otto of the WVT who time and again proves to be the perfect publisher. And, after having provided us with a stunning title design for the last publication *Gewalt, Geschlecht, Fiktion* (WVT 2010), the artist Alf Keller (<http://www.alf-keller.com/>) was kind enough to spoil us again for choice concerning the title design.

To all three of you from the three of us: THANK YOU!

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SUSANNE BACH

Introduction: Intertextual Transitions

*Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered weak and weary,
o'er a plan to venge myself upon that cursed Thursday Next –
This Eyre affair, so surprising, gives my soul such loath despising,
Here I plot my temper rising, rising from my jail of text.
'Get me out!' I said, advising, 'Pluck me from this jail of text –
or I swear I'll wring your neck!'*

Victor shut the book with a snap. 'The last line doesn't rhyme well, does it?' [...]'I read "The Raven" only yesterday,' added Victor in a confused tone. 'It wasn't like this then!'

(Fforde 370f.)

We live, we read, and we write in a universe of texts. Whatever we say, think, and write has been said, thought and written before (very possibly including this sentence). Literature is a "chambre d'échos", according to Roland Barthes (78); a palimpsest, according to Gérard Genette; or a "play space" if one follows Juliet Campbell's line of argument (1). Similar to Paul Watzlawick's dictum that you cannot *not* communicate (cf. 49), a text cannot *not* be influenced by its predecessors: "...a literary text is unable to avoid reproducing, echoing and transforming the already written" (Campbell, 2). After Julia Kristeva's introduction and definition of the term 'intertextuality' – "an absorption and transformation of another" (37) – into the critical debate, we have been able to tackle the concept in an adequate manner; and numerous academic works and studies have differentiated it even further. Now the term is an established household currency amongst literary scholars.

Texts, and therefore hypotexts, too, do neither have a stable meaning nor a stable location in the literary universe; instead, appropriations, parodies, pastiches, quotations, and rewrites challenge and question their places in the canon (cf. Hutcheon). New forces de- and re-center older texts, political changes take their toll, or, as Salman Rushdie has it, "the Empire writes back" (8). Of course, here one needs to add that not only the Empire but also other formerly de-centered forces by now have had ample opportunity and occasion to write back, too. In short: notions of order, stability and meaning have become fluid, negotiable and have started to get diluted successively. Postcolonial literary criticism, gender studies and other influential cultural, social, intellectual and/or political movements incessantly cause the re-alignment of a given canon and acknowledge intertextuality as one of the driving forces in the production and reception of literary texts.

In Canada, male and female authors have been prolific first in imitating and then, very quickly, in appropriating and rewriting older texts. After a first phase of clinging

closely to the British literary heritage (cf. Klooß 169), (Anglo-)Canadian novels, plays and poems were able to achieve a distance to their roots to such an extent that they could – in a later phase – return to them and refocus their authority, hegemony and status. In the 20th century, Northrop Frye's poignant question "Where is here?" (222), Hugh MacLennan's disillusioned remark "Boy meets girl in Winnipeg and who cares?" (23), the depressing report of the Massey commission (cf. Klooß 184) and Margaret Atwood's devastating and provoking question "What's Canadian about Canadian literature, and why should we be bothered?" (*Survival* 11), helped to kick-start Canadian Literature away from European roots, and then, later, allowed it to return with new self-confidence and thus with the ability to de- and re-focus its origins in an exciting and continually fluctuating center-margin-choreography. Had MacLennan demanded that

[...] whether [the Canadian novelist] liked it or not, he must for a time be something of a geographer, a historian and a sociologist, to weave a certain amount of geography, history and sociology into his novels. Until he did so, his stories would be set in a vacuum (qtd. in Bach 81),

Atwood, in the following simile about this vacuum, implies that with a British map (i.e. with British literary and cultural history) a reader will not be able to navigate in a specific Canadian geography of the mind:

What a lost person needs is a map of the territory, with his own position marked on it so he can see where he is in relation to everything else. Literature is not only a mirror; it is also a map, a geography of the mind. Our literature is one such map, if we can learn to read it as *our* literature, as the product of who and where we have been. We need such a map desperately, we need to know about here, because here is where we live. For the members of a country or a culture, shared knowledge of their place, their here, is not a luxury but a necessity (*Survival* 18f).

Only fiction can make Canadians 'real', as Van Herk emphasizes:

Just as landscape and space map/make the writer, so does the writer impose her map of language on her place, but that neither map is accurate is to be expected, even desirable. Language is the ultimate arbiter; language, by naming a place, gives it life, existence [...] writing about a place makes it somewhere. Fiction makes us real ("Space" 64).

Margaret Atwood has been one of the major voices emerging from Canada, mapping and re-mapping the established canon by re-shaping, re-writing, and re-positioning older texts and concepts, be it tales from the Grimm brothers in *The Robber Bride* or penny romances in *Lady Oracle*. But she also ventured further back in history: in *The Penelopiad*, she tackles one of the oldest myths Western literature has to offer – the *Odyssey*. The same can be said for Aritha van Herk's novel *The Tent Peg*. Archetypal images and biblical characters, firmly grounded in the common cultural heritage of the Western world, are dissembled and put together again. Van Herk's confronting her heroine, the originally Old Testament character Jaël (turned into J.L.), with the 'virginal' and uninscribed Canadian North and having her and her male companions meet the image of the 'Great Mother' enables readers to re-focus the location, power and mean-

ing of older and non-Canadian hypotexts within the canon of literature and within the hierarchy of texts yet once again.

But revisions are, of course, not limited to novels. Canadian playwright Ann-Marie MacDonald in *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)* boldly tackles William Shakespeare on his very own territory: the stage. MacDonald sends Constance Ledbelly, a hapless and exploited Assistant Professor of Literature, into Shakespeare's *Othello* and *Romeo and Juliet*; a visit which causes numerous alterations within plot and character developments. In the wake of the young and bookish Ledbelly, literature and literary criticism enter Shakespeare's tragedies (which in themselves are – needless to say – highly intertextual). Constance's presence alters Shakespeare's fictional universe, and this in turn aptly illustrates the creative and imaginative appropriation of older texts, concepts, and ideas.

Melanie Schrage-Lang's analysis of MacDonald's internationally acclaimed play starts out with a very informed overview of the diversity of the critical terminology. The analytic parameters of gender and intertextuality, in a feminist and postcolonial context, as defined by Kristeva, but also – among others – Plato, Cervantes, T.S. Eliot, Bakhtin, Barthes, Genette, Bloom, Gilbert/Gubar, Showalter, Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin, and Spivak, are applied to the two main (Shakespearean) and the countless other pre- and intertexts. But Schrage-Lang does not blandly state that the play is highly intertextual. She takes *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)* one step further: in her reading, it becomes an *allegory* of intertextuality. And this argumentative turn enables Schrage-Lang to uncover layers of the play which a merely intertextual approach would have missed out on.

Martina Hörnicke, in *Gendering Myths – Margaret Atwood's The Penelopiad and Aritha van Herk's The Tent Peg* applies (gendered) myth criticism theories formulated by Frye, Frazer, Freud, Horkheimer/Adorno, Warner, Barthes, Butler, and French to two well-known Canadian texts, themselves firmly established in the 'Can Lit'-canon. Hörnicke connects analytical parameters of myth criticism to tendencies of de- and re-mythologization in *The Penelopiad* and *The Tent Peg*. Originally, myths could be used to stabilize repressive ideologies. Therefore, deconstruction would suggest itself as the postmodern method of choice, but Atwood rejects this temptation as too easy a solution. As Hörnicke is able to demonstrate, Margaret Atwood resists the temptation to answer one monolithic 'truth' with a counter-truth but instead offers a meta-mythical exposure of 'truth' as a heuristic necessity or, respectively, as a process which needs to be constantly (re)created and (re)interpreted.

However, myths not only serve 'truths', they are also projection screens of a lost world, of mankind's allegedly once-upon-a-time harmonious union with nature, free from any social claims, restraints or demands. In *The Tent Peg*, male geologists, explorers, scientists and their female cook, J.L., are confronted with nature's forces in the Canadian North, and their (traditional) ideas about gender and about feminized nature are challenged by – among others – the archetype of the Great Mother. Hörnicke analyzes

(inter)textual processes of subversion and containment, of de- and remythologization, and of de- and reconstruction in both works, without falling prey to the inherent lure of a simple analysis of straight dichotomies. Instead, she is able to illustrate and reveal what lies behind the tangled web of the text, its hypotext and its mythological / ideological background: a meta-mythology.

Without a doubt, both studies are able to uncover new and relevant aspects of the play and the novels in question. Written by junior scholars, they were too long for publication in a journal and too short for publication as separate monographs. Originally, *Intertextuality in Ann-Marie MacDonald's Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)* and *Gendering Myths – Margaret Atwood's The Penelopiad and Aritha van Herk's The Tent Peg* were research papers on the final exam level. Both were graded as 'outstanding'. The authors revised them for publication. The 'dialogue' of Hörnicke's and Schrage-Lang's studies is nothing but a felicitous union that offers new intra- and intertextual readings in some of the, by now, classical and canonical Canadian texts, probably shifting their respective location in the book universe by a few inches and opening up new connections to other texts.

Kassel, March 2013

Susanne Bach