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‘We’re destroyed if we mix. And we’re destroyed if we don’t’

Indigeneity in the Modern World System and the Politics of Tricksterese in Pauline Melville’s The Ventriloquist’s Tale

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"We're destroyed if we mix. And we're destroyed if we don't." Indigeneity in the Modern World System and the Politics of Tricksterese in Pauline Melville's *The Ventriloquist's Tale*

1. Introduction

In this essay, I will discuss Pauline Melville's Whitbread-Award-winning first novel *The Ventriloquist's Tale* (1997), set in the capital of Guyana, Georgetown, and the Guyanese savannahs, both in colonial and postcolonial times. Guyana's location on the South American main land (bordering on Brazil, Venezuela and Suriname) gives it a distinct status in the larger context of the British West Indies, as it still hosts a sizable Amerindian population while colonial conquest and diseases wiped out the Arawak, Taino and Carib populations on the Caribbean islands by as early as around the mid-eighteenth century. Pauline Melville, who was born in Guyana and is of part-Amerindian descent, is thus one of the very few Anglophone writers who authoritatively speak about the ambivalent position of Amerindian cultures in the modern world system from a South, rather than North American perspective. In the context of debates about the *Caribbean as Paradigm*, I hold Melville's voice to be of particular importance, as it problematises postmodern readings of the Caribbean which tend to exclusively focus on, in Paul Gilroy (1993) and James Clifford's (2001) terms, the *routes*, rather than the *roots*, of its various displaced populations, in readings which celebrate the Caribbean as anticipating a modern world system of 'nomadic' identities and 'liquid' regimes of belonging. Not only do such readings tend to sublate the unspeakable violence of Caribbean historical encounters all too easily, they also tend to bypass complex questions of indigeneity and indigenous entitlement.

My reading of Pauline Melville will accordingly attempt to reframe the question of the *Caribbean as Paradigm* by focussing on the precarious relation between local histories of Caribbean indigeneity and their confrontation with the modern world system. I will develop my argument in three movements, each a variation of the other, in the specific context of *The Ventriloquist's Tale*: the first addresses indigenous histories and global designs on the level of narrative content, the second turns to questions of narrative genre, while the third examines the politics of narrative discourse. In the first movement, I will

provide an overview of the story of Melville's novel and outline the cultural dilemma of modern Amerindian identity it unravels. In the second movement, I will place this dilemma within the controversies surrounding magical realism as the literary genre with which Melville's novel is associated. My central claim, here, is that the discourse on magical realism – a discourse which has been formative in including non-Western writing among the ranks of 'world literature' – in many ways reveals a structural parallel to the cultural dilemmas outlined in the novel. In the final movement, then, I will return to Pauline Melville's particular 'tricksterese' narrative setup in the prologue and epilogue to the novel which bridges not only different and ideologically seemingly incompatible designs of magical realist discourse, but also offers a way out of the underlying cultural dilemma of seemingly incompatible cultural traditions.

2. The Ventriloquist's Tale

The actual tale told by Melville's narrator interweaves two distinct temporal and spatial levels of narrative. One a first level, *The Ventriloquist's Tale* is set in the urban capital of Guyana, Georgetown, in the 1980s. It recounts the unlikely passionate encounter between a Jewish literary scholar from England, Rosa Mendelsohn, and Chofoye McKinnon, an Amerindian cattle farmer locked in a tedious marriage. Chofoye arrives in the capital to seek medical treatment for his aunt Wilfreda whose eyesight is dwindling. Rosa Mendelsohn's quest is originally an academic one, as she intends to re-trace the 1932 journey of British novelist Evelyn Waugh to Guyana, an episode which most prominently found its way into Waugh's short story "The Man Who Liked Dickens" and his canonical novel *A Handful of Dust* (1934). It should be noted, here, that the Amerindian villages of the Guyanese savannahs serve as little more than the backdrop to what is ultimately a vision of hell in Waugh's fiction, as a setting devoid of civilisation in which his British protagonist is trapped and doomed to read Dickens aloud to his (mixed-race Barbadian and Amerindian) host till the end of his days. Melville's novel thus leads its own little guerrilla campaign against the English literary canon via Dickens and Waugh: in her narrative, it turns out that Chofoye's Aunty Wilfreda actually met Waugh the writer and even cut his hair – yet she remembers anything but a witty and impressive man, but a man caught up in his own misery and cultural preconceptions, who bored the family to death by insisting to read Dickens aloud in a petty civilizing mission.

Such rewriting exercises are, however, a side issue in the novel, the larger concerns of which are unraveled in the interwoven relationship of the first level of the story set in Georgetown with a second level set in the Guyanese savannahs around the year 1919. The episodes related here eventually give us insight into Chofoye McKinnon's family history, and even suggest reasons for Aunty Wilfreda's progressing blindness. They are centered around Wilfreda's brother and sister Danny and Beatrice, and trace a passionate incestuous love affair between the two siblings. As the children of a Scottish freethinker who escaped the racial bigotry of Jamaica and took two Wapisiana Indian sisters as his wives in the Guyanese savannahs, Danny and Beatrice grow up in relative peace in a peculiar transcultural setup. This changes, however, with the arrival of Father Napier in the Amerindian village, a pederast Jesuit missionary with a fanatic ambition "to strike into the interior of the country […] to evangelize the most remote regions of the empire" (107). Danny and Beatrice escape into the southern interior to be able to live out their affair, yet Napier learns about their relationship, and hunts them down after a wild pursuit through the savannahs of several weeks. He draws Danny back into the folds of the church and facilitates his marriage to another woman, while Beatrice eventually emigrates to Canada after an unsuccessful attempt to poison Napier, and starts a new life with a white Canadian in perpetual cultural isolation. Danny and Beatrice's affair lives on, however, in their autistic son, Sonny, a beautiful shape-shifter (and future manifestation of the narrator) who was conceived by Danny and Beatrice during their flight, and not just at any moment, but significantly at the precise moment of a full eclipse of the sun (which indeed historically occurred in Guyana in 1919).

The convergence of solar eclipse and Danny and Beatrice's incestuous affair deeply anchors Melville's novel in Amerindian mythology, as Melville already indicates in the paratext by opening the novel with an epigraph by Claude Levi Strauss. In another context, Levi-Strauss notes about Amerindian cultures in *Structural Anthropology*:

> [There is a] myth – attested from one end of the New World to the other – of the incest of sun and moon. This myth assumes the masculine gender for the moon and the feminine for the sun, since it is most common procedure to explain the spots of the moon by the marks with which, in order to recognize him, a young girl soiled the face of her nocturnal and unknown lover. (1976, 216)

The myth serves as a powerful explanation for the creation and perpetual separation of sun and moon as the transformations of two transgressive lovers who must never touch again.

In Amerindian mythology, a solar eclipse is thus imbued with a foreboding of human catastrophes. The resonances of different versions of this myth lie at the very heart of the novel and are evoked in innumerable narrative parallels.

Still, *The Ventriloqist's Tale* rejects any sense of a simplistic anthropological recovery of Amerindian tradition – in fact, structural anthropology and its colonising attitudes are distinctly ironised in the novel through the figure of a Czech ethnographer who proposes theories such as "Eclipse – A Rational Analysis of Myth." Instead, all events and their (catastrophic) outcomes are interpreted differently by different characters: variably within a distinctly Amerindian cosmogonic framework, from the perspective of fanatic Catholicism, or from the perspective of Western enlightenment. Pauline Melville in this sense offers an astute investigation of the precarious relationship between what Mignolo (2000 and 2003) would term the global designs of (Western) modernity and its inferences with the various local histories which constitute Amerindian culture. The novel is, in many ways, an extended parable about the possibilities of Amerindian cultural survival in which the key characters, all of whom are in themselves already culturally hybrid, reflect certain cultural choices, ranging from the desire to ultimate become part of and blend in with Western modernity (as in the case of Chofoye) to the defensive cultural retreat from Western modernity as exemplified most radically by Danny and Beatrice's flight into the savannahs. On the story level, in fact, *The Ventriloquist's Tale* remains rather bleak about the possibilities of any productive middle ground. At one stage in the tale, Chofoye's cousin cries out: "You say we have to mix. What to do? We're destroyed if we mix. And we're destroyed if we don't" (55).

3. Magical Realist Designs

Let us pause here and take a brief excursion to the genre within which Melville's novel is most frequently placed – namely the genre of magical realism. My claim, here, is that the kind of cultural dilemma faced by Melville's Amerindian characters is mirrored, in a way, by the critical discourse about its generic frame. I will argue in the following that there is a division opening a continuum between two very different ideological designs of magical realist discourse: one closely tied to globalised postmodernist notions of a magical realist 'world literature', and the other a more radically localised and rooted version of magical realism, more closely tied to a pluralising concept of the 'literatures of the world'.

The latter version I would like to address as 'marvellous' realism, following Alejo Carpentier. In his essay "On the Marvellous Real in America," first published in 1949 as the foreword to *El reino de este mundo*, Carpentier famously argues that the discourse of the marvellous in the Americas differs sharply from European variants of the gothic, fantastic or surreal. Most importantly, for Carpentier, the 'marvellous' does not categorically differ from the 'real', but "arise[s] from un-expected alterations of reality […] or an amplification of the scale and categories of reality." The marvellous in this sense "presupposes faith" (1995, 86) – in other words, those engaged in genuine magical, or rather marvellous realist communication need to be locally grounded, they need to partake in the ritual and communal framework of, say, voodoo, and genuinely believe in their ontological value.

This notion of representing an ontological *real maravilloso* in magical realist writing manifestly differs from the concept of *realismo mágico* which began to gain currency in the 1950s in relation to Latin American fiction, and which is today most commonly associated with a global brand of magical realist world literature. Here, according to Zamora and Faris's inclusive definition, writing is much more generally distinguished by the fact that "the supernatural is [...] an ordinary matter, an everyday occurrence – admitted, accepted, and integrated into the rationality and materiality of realism" (1995, 3), Magic, in short, is primarily understood as a *discursive practice* rather than as an ontological given. At least in its Anglophone reception, this version of magical realism has, over the course of the 1980s and 90s, increasingly become associated with the postmodern project at large, as a genre that effectively subverts Western logocentrism. Maggie Anne Bowers thus remarks from a postcolonial perspective that magical realism "has become a popular narrative mode because it offers the writer […] a means to attack the definitions and assumptions which support [totalitarian] systems (e.g. colonialism) by attacking the stability of the definitions upon which these systems rely" (2004, 4).

The postcolonial *cum* postmodernist approach is certainly highly valid; what is rarely noted, however, is that its immense success with Western critics has displaced and more or less elided the difference between Carpentier's 'real maravilloso americano' and a global creed of magical realist world literature. A brief look at the two most widely read and canonised literary examples of magical realism in the Anglophone world may better illustrate the inherent problems of such an elision. Let us take a brief look at Salman Rushdie's seminal *Midnight's Children* (1981) first: Rushdie's novel clearly tends towards the left side of a continuum between notions of the magical and the marvellous. It surely

present readers with "irreducible elements" of magic (Faris 2004) – say, the outstanding telepathic powers of Saleem Sinai's majestic nose. At the same time, however, it is quite obvious that Rushdie does not expect readers to *really* believe in the magic he evokes, but that the penetration of the magical into the real world is part of a larger strategy of shedding *doubt* on 'official' narratives of the real. This *subversion* of the received stories we live by is mostly *cosmopolitan* in outlook, and it works by a largely *playful* undermining of conventional identity constructions, highlighting the instability of processes of signification in the encounter with other stories and their *alterity*. In Rushdie's fiction, the received symbols of the nation, or religion, for that matter, are constantly challenged by idiosyncratic subjective narratives which refuse to comply with official versions, and thus celebrate a Bhabhaian notion of cultural *hybridity*.

A good example for the other end of the spectrum is Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987). Like Rushdie, Morrison presents us with magic, especially Beloved's ghost – but in contrast to Rushdie, this magic is set pretty much as an ontological given. The characters in *Beloved*, at least, firmly *believe* in the existence of ghosts, and Morrison has repeatedly emphasised that the functioning of black American communities is firmly rooted in such belief. I also do not think that Morrison is really interested in subverting her white predecessors; rather, she is concerned with *affirming* a distinctly African American mythological and aesthetic tradition to support *communal* cohesion (cf. Eckstein 2006). Accordingly, magic is less ludically than *ritually* framed (as especially the exorcising scene in the end of the novel shows). *Beloved* is very much about the fashioning of a collective *identity* for the African American community, which envisages a culture that draws upon African as much as Euro-Christian elements, but merges them into a rather stable *sycretistic* whole.

magical	←	→	marvellous
doubt	←	→	belief
subversion	←	→	affirmation
cosmopolitan	←	→	communal
play	←	→	ritual
alterity	←	→	identity
hybridity	←	→	syncretism

Fig. 1: magical realist designs

The above table maps a continuum of ideological positions in magical realist discourse based on my readings of Rushdie and Morrison. It is important to stress again that these positions are by no means mutually exclusive, and that most magical realist texts probably fall somewhere in-between the magical and the marvellous. I would maintain, however, that the implicit ideologies of magical realist texts can vary extremely to the point that they may pursue almost diametrically opposed cultural politics. What is more, from the point of view of their actual reception, the interpretation of such ideologies may radically shift. Once taken out of their local and communal context and elevated to the global stage as world literature – as David Damrosch (2003) has for instance elaborated on – texts which Carpentier would label 'marvellous' confront a transformative critical and economic regime which privileges postmodernist variants of the magical in the fashion of, say, Rushdie, Grass or Allende. In other words, also on the level of genre, academic discourse and marketing regimes there is an unresolved tension between the centrifugal force of Western global designs and distinctly local histories which is not entirely dissimilar from the cultural dilemma which Pauline Melville outlines on the level of story.

4. The Politics of Tricksterese

How does Pauline Melville confront these tensions in *The Ventriloqust's Tale*? The places of this confrontation, I would like to propose, are the novel's prologue and epilogue, which in a self-reflexive first person voice introduce us to the novel's flamboyant narrator. Let us take a look at three representative passages from the opening pages:

> (1) Spite impels me that my biographer, the noted Brazilian Senhor Mario Andrade, got it wrong when he consigned me to the skies in such a slapdash and cavalier manner. I suppose he thought I would lie for ever amongst the stars, gossiping – as we South American Indians usually do in our hammocks at night – and spitting over the side to make the early morning dew of star spittle. Well, excuse me while I shit form a great height. [...] (1)

> (2) But first, I lay claim to the position of narrator in this novel. Yes, me. Rumbustious, irrepressible, adorable me. I have black hair, bronze skin and I would look wonderful in a cream suit with a silk handkerchief. Cigars? Yes. Dark glasses? Yes – except I do not wish to be mistaken for a gangster. [...] A fast-driving BMW when I am in London? A Porsche in New York? A Range Rover to drive or a helicopter when I am flying over the endless savannah and bush of my own region? Yes. Yes. Yes. [...] (1-2)

(3) Why am I not the hero, you may ask? Because these days you have forgotten how to make heroes.[...] Besides, you choose your heroes too carelessly, without considering their antecedents. As for my ancestry, it is impeccable. I will have you know that I am descended from a group of stones in Ecuador. [...] (2)

The first feat performed, here, is that Melville obviously appropriates her narrator from elsewhere, in a complex intertextual move. To the reader vaguely familiar with the South American literary tradition, the opening lines will make it quite clear that our "rumbustious, irrepressible and adorable" narrator is 'borrowed' from the novel which is usually credited with having entered Brazilian literature into the modern era. Our narrator, it is suggested, is no other than the eponymous hero of Mário de Andrade's 1928 *Macunaíma: A Hero without Character* (1984), a novel which is itself largely based on Amerindian stories and legends collected by the German anthropologist Theodor Koch-Grünberg in his travelogue *Vom Roroima zum Orinoco*, published between 1917-1923. Grünberg's accounts, in turn, are based his Amerindian informer Mayuluaípu, who shared with him the legends of Macunaíma and his brother Chico/Jigue among the Carib Pemon Indians. There is not enough space here to exhaustingly relate the fantastic adventures of Macunaíma in Andrade's novel – according to Andrade told by his hero to a parrot just before he decided to take up residence among the stars to join his former lover, the nature goddess Ci, and then told to the author by the parrot. Suffice it to say that Macunaíma's travels form the northern Brazilian savannahs to the major Brazilian cities and back again are full of marvelous as much as magical occurrences, and that Andrade's novel has retrospectively been appropriated as an early example of magical realist world literature.

The second move I wish to point out is that Melville transforms Macunaíma – who in Andrade's novel serves to promote a distinctly national project – from being a modernist symbol of the Brazilian nation, into a global citizen, whose travels now potentially include locations such as London and New York. Other than Andrade's *national* hero, Melville's narrator is a *transnational*, global shape-shifter with a gift for imitating every imaginable style and voice both Western and Guyanese: "To cut an endless story short, I have a genius for ventriloquism," the narrator argues. "I can do any voice: jaguar, London hoodlum, bell-bird, nineteenth-century novelist, ant-eater, epic poet, a chorus of howler monkeys, urban brutalist, a tapir. The list is infinite" (8). The narrator lays claim to an ability of mimicry that allows him to effortlessly shift between worlds –

between Western global designs and Amazonian local histories, appropriating such mimetic powers for an essentially transformative politics inherent in the art of storytelling.

Melville's narrator is, in this sense, a particular brand of literary trickster, a concept that is much more rooted in the context of North American Indian as well as African traditions than in the South Americas. It is a concept, though, which has already been applied to the Macunaíma of Andrade's conception, for instance by Lúcia Sa (2004, 17-26). Paul Radin, in his classical 1956 work on the Winnebago myth cycles, defines the archaic trickster as follows:

> Trickster is at one and the same time creator and destroyer, giver and negator, he who dupes others and who is always duped himself. [...] He possesses no values, moral or social, is at the mercy of his passions and appetites, yet through his actions all values come into being. (xxiii)

The literary trickster, as analyzed, for instance, by Lewis Hyde (1998), shares those archaic qualities, yet his powers are increasingly enlisted also for a transgressive and transcultural artistic creation. Most radically, American 'crossblood' novelist Gerald Vizenor has transformed the heritage of the trickster as a cultural agent in this sense by associating him with the linguistic turn when he writes: "the trickster is comic nature in a language game, not a real person or 'being' in the ontological sense" (1988, x).

It is in this context that I would like to place the third significant move performed by Melville, namely the evacuation, if you like, of the trickster from the level of story – as in Andrade's model – to the level of discourse. Melville's trickster is no longer part of the story world, but almost exclusively features in the role of extradiegetic narrator. What we have, therefore, is a rather obvious shift from trickster to what can be called, following Gerald Vizenor, trickster discourse, or "tricksterese" (1989). Melville's novel in this sense stages a meaningful division between the very material realities and ontological differences between Amerindian and Western modernities which she plays out on the story level, and a discursive practice, a creative epistemological attitude privileging transgression, plurality, multiple identities, shapeshifting or ventriloquism. In this way, the novel crucially resists easy appropriation into the postmodern fantasies inherent in designs of magical realist world literature, in which cultural and colonial differences are all too easily suffused in a playful, universalising constructivism. Instead, it upholds the validity of marvellous, ontologically grounded realities in the Americas as much as elsewhere. At

the same time, the strategic recourse to "tricksterese" is instrumental in the extradiegetic frame, as it counterbalances the disparaging outlook of the cultural dilemmas acted out on the story level, in which global designs and local histories continue to violently clash. This way, the frame proposes a creative model of personal as well as collective identity fashioning which points, perhaps, to the only way of (cultural) survival. In Pauline Melville's universe, ventriloquism is a strategy of (self)representation which takes the transformative power of language games and intertexual déferance seriously. It does not, however, as in Bhabha's conception of 'mimicry'(1994), displace intricate questions of ontology and indigenous entitlement. On the contrary, the insincerity of ventriloquist camouflage, Melville suggests, is perhaps the only mode of discourse which secures the survival of a *ritually grounded* performance of indigeneity in the modern world order, thriving underneath the infinite camouflages of ventriloquism, and enabling a plural mode of being which is both globally contingent *and* locally grounded, both magical *and* marvellous.

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