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Introduction: the Transatlantic Short Story

Héliane Ventura

- 1 In an early move to come to terms with the spatialization of literature, Northrop Frye proposed, in 1952, a theory of cultural containment destined to define literary production in Canada in contradistinction with that of the United States. The theory is well known and has been quoted repeatedly; it is still a part of Canada's perception of itself and still deserves to be cited *in extenso*, if only because of its historical value, especially in the context of transatlantic studies:

The United States is a symmetrical country: it presents a straight Atlantic coastline, and its culture was up to 1900 a culture of the Atlantic seaboard, with a north-south frontier that moved westward until it reached the Pacific. Canada has almost no Atlantic seaboard, and a ship coming here from Europe moves like a tiny Jonah entering an enormous whale into the Gulf of St Lawrence, where it is surrounded by five Canadian provinces, all out of sight, and then drifts up a vast waterway that reaches back past Edmonton. There would be nothing distinctive in Canadian culture at all if there were not some feeling for the immense searching distance, with the lines of communication extended to the absolute limit, which is a primary fact about Canada and has no real counterpart elsewhere. (Frye 97)

- 2 Frye goes on, underlining "the horizon-focused perspective," "the depth of the forest," the "feeling for strained distance" which, according to him, all characterize Canadian poetry, since these statements were originally destined for the annual survey of the year's work in poetry which he published between 1950 and 1960 in *The University of Toronto Quarterly*. Such exceptionalism which represents Canada as simultaneously self-contained and boundless found a resonant echo at a federal and provincial level at least until the 1990's; consider for instance the eloquent title given to an anthology of short stories from Western Canada published in 1993: *Boundless Alberta*, which simultaneously restricts production to a local level and enlarges it as far as the receding horizon.
- 3 There is no dispensing with the concept that poets or writers inhabit a specific environment which shapes their vision and leaves a deep imprint upon their creative

acts, but new epistemological paradigms that take into account different geographical factors or other factors than the geographical have also made their mark since Frye's pronouncement. In 1967, Michel Foucault introduced the possibility of "other spaces" than the homogeneous and traditionally inventoried ones, eventually extolling the boat as "the heterotopia par excellence," "the greatest reserve of the imagination." Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1980) have proposed a theory of smooth and striated space which distinguishes between an ordered and a more open mode of accommodation with space, and erases limits imposed by nation-states. Postcolonial criticism has equally challenged the clear-cut distinctions between apparently self-evident entities. Homi Bhabha, for instance, declares that the "imaginary of spatial distance" is "to live somehow beyond the border of our times," thus the "unhomed" and "extra-territorial" have somehow surrogated adherence to set locations and opened the way for the concept of "third space" or "interstitial passage between fixed identifications" (Bhabha 4). Arjun Appadurai emphasizes the circulation of people, of images, and of messages that new technologies have made possible, but also highlights "the radical disjunctures between different sorts of global flows and the uncertain landscapes created in and through these disjunctures" (Lechner and Boli 104). Zygmunt Bauman describes the passage from a stage of solid modernity to "the liquid present" in which forms and structures melt and dissolve before they have had time to establish themselves in any permanent way (Bauman 7). A number of critics continue to suggest that "the global ecumene" (Hannerz 217) and the concept of "transnation" (Ashcroft 72) override any vision of geographical or cultural containment in a global, multinational age, in which "small scale accretions of intimacy and interest" have been replaced by "a global cultural economy" (Appadurai cited by Lechner 95). Globalisation ushered in by new capitalistic modes of production has entailed diasporic modes of existence, and a new awareness of spatiality which is concurrent with an awareness of a longer temporality than the one resorted to in the Western world. This new temporality, theorized by Wai Chee Dimock around the concept of "Deep Time,"¹ accommodates other historical or geological periods from other locations of culture in the Southern or Eastern hemispheres.

- 4 The purpose of this issue entitled "The Transatlantic Short Story" is to argue that the short story calls for a reexamination of its location outside the confines of a fixed identification with the areas where it developed. The volume intends to showcase stories which straddle space and time just as they straddle genre and the affective or corporeal limits of memory. Sometimes contemplated through the binary opposition between the epic or the lyrical, the short story has been demonstrated to bear a great resemblance to the ballad, and to the narrative poem in general, and to approximate or amplify drama on account of its reliance on an oral tradition. Straddling the categories of genres, it similarly transports itself, its characters and its action to other countries or continents than the ones from which they originated in order to renegotiate its social, intellectual, and aesthetic affiliations. The flux of images and memories from which it draws not only overflows its national limits, but also overlaps the temporal frame of its initial inception, accommodating in the process resurgent epistemological confrontations which dissolve or challenge the divide between self and other.
- 5 The selection of stories presented in this volume is meant to emphasize the process of deterritorialization and emancipation from any identification with a fixed locale or definite geographical location, and it purports to carry out this task by extending the temporal, spatial and representational limits of the narrative as broadly as possible,

starting with canonical literary forefathers and moving all the way through foremothers to contemporary female voices as far away from the Atlantic seaboard as Alberta, India, or Australia.

- 6 The first article, by Aurélie Guillain, examines three early short stories by Henry James “A Passionate Pilgrim” (1871), “Daisy Miller: A Study” (1878), and “The Modern Warning” (1888) in which transatlantic travellers moving between Switzerland, Italy, England and America adopt a cosmopolitan perspective to try and decipher the enigma of otherness. Expressing their perplexity, they cast an acutely ironic look on the cultural aporias they are confronted with, but they withhold judgment, testifying to the adoption of a moral philosophy shaped by their civilized perspective. The next two articles, respectively by Philippe Birgy and Emmanuel Vernadakis, analyze stories which seem to be more firmly located on the American continent only, Mexico for D.H. Lawrence’s “The Woman Who Rode Away,” and New Orleans for Tennessee Williams’ “The Yellow Bird.” In point of fact, they articulate the archaic and highlight spatial and temporal journeys or fantasies to more primordial and original locations, be they respectively grottoes or the abyss of the sea, which represent either their paths of extenuation or liberation, and obliquely implicate the teller of the tale through the depiction of the characters’ own deterritorialization.
- 7 The second part of the volume concentrates on Canadian short stories, featuring three canonical writers from the English and French-speaking parts of the country, who have garnered some of the most prestigious literary prizes: the Nobel Prize for Alice Munro, a Governor General’s Award and the Molson Prize, among others, for Mavis Gallant and five Governor General’s Awards for Marie-Claire Blais, whose works have been translated into English by some of the finest contemporary translators, Sheila Fischman, Derek Coltman, David Loddell, and Nigel Spencer. The short story by Marie-Claire Blais examined by Julie LeBlanc, “The Torment,” was originally published in French in 1988, before it was reissued in French four years later, and finally published in English in 2000. Julie LeBlanc’s genetic analysis of this story highlights a sequential process which develops from the *Notebooks*, unpublished and written in French, to the novel *David Sterne*, translated into English, and finally to the English version of the short story itself, which brings Blais’s cycle of narratives on the Vietnam War to an end. It relies on the hypothesis that several types of deterritorialization are operative in the constitution of her cycle: a personal one (the Québécois writer moving to the United States), an intertextual one (the writer bringing her reading of Primo Levi and other European philosophers to bear on her reflection on war) and a diegetic one (some of the characters being draft-dodgers).
- 8 The short story by Mavis Gallant that Liliane Louvel examines, “Up North,” is equally nomadic and deterritorialized: it tells the story of a Limey bride crossing the Atlantic to join her husband in a hybrid, dream-like venture in between two worlds, the old and the new, Britain and Canada, reality and vision. My own essay finds that the story by Alice Munro entitled “Princess Ida” (1971) is explicitly indexed to Alfred Tennyson’s long poem “The Princess” (1847) and activates innumerable intertextual and intermedial references, in particular to Marcel Proust’s *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu* and to James Whistler, which create a process of literary and pictorial migration from one side of the Atlantic to the other.
- 9 As evidenced by the topic, the locations and the references to be found in the different stories, the present volume crosses wider borders than those delineated by the Atlantic Ocean: these wider borders are geographical but they are also physical and psychological

boundaries which implicate the body as represented in stories written by women. Linda Tym argues that in short stories by Janice Galloway, Lynsey May, and A. L. Kennedy, the characters' emotional engagement with family, friends, and acquaintances dissolves the boundaries between the self and the other. The fluidity of experience, depicted through corporeal and verbal secretions, in silence and speech, blood and limbs, disrupts perceived categories of age, gender, and social status and invites a reconsideration of the boundedness of memory and bodily experience.

- 10 To borrow from Peter Brooks' terminology, one could say that a double operation is performed at the same time: "a semantization of the body" and "a somatization of the text" (Brooks 25), a process which is not only present in the so-called "Scottish short stories" but also in the last two stories in the collection, respectively by Anita Desai and Gail Jones. Anita Desai's story "Winter Landscape," analyzed by Cécile Girardin, narrates the literal journey of two elderly sisters from India to Canada in order to visit their son and nephew on the occasion of his son's birth. The title makes reference to an emblematic snapshot which can be contemplated as a synecdoche of the women's visit, representing a transfiguration of the two sisters inscribed in a trans-national space. The snapshot catches them from the back, entirely covered by their white saris, and watching through the window of their son and nephew's apartment a winter landscape against which they almost dissolve. This paradoxical dissolution and invisibility ensures their integration because instead of standing out as belonging to a visible minority, the Indian widows dressed in white saris literally become part of their new environment, white figures against a white landscape. The snow-covered landscape becomes equated with the widows dressed in white, which points in the direction of a "natural" common denominator between the host country and the foreign women: the color white paradoxically homogenizes their differences.
- 11 The last critical essay in the volume, which "un-reads" a short story by Gail Jones, also revolves around a synecdoche which transforms death into revival. Its title, "The House of Breathing," refers to the name the young narrator gives to her bedroom, a room where she can safely fall asleep and live through the perils of the night. It is a story about the sinking of the Titanic hauntingly narrated by the granddaughter of a survivor who migrated to Australia. Aritha van Herk analyzes this story from a comparatively biographical perspective because her own parents embarked on a transatlantic passage a few decades later, and van Herk interweaves the dysphoric memories of the ill-fated voyage with the less traumatic remembrances of her parents' successful journey. Her analysis is a "ficto-critical" piece because it straddles the borders between fiction and essay, memoir and criticism.
- 12 In addition to critical analyses or ficto-critical analyses of short stories, the last part of this volume also includes a complete short story by van Herk entitled "At Land" which features the metaphoric engulfment of a female Jonah (called Jonna) who grew up on the grassy plains of Canada, and retraces her male namesake's journeys inside a metaphysical leviathan, which eventually carries her to the hinterland of the most landlocked Canadian province. As the story revises the biblical hypotext, it erases the boundaries between land and sea, male and female, self and other while synchronizing the local and the mythical in an ambiguous crossing or voyage across land.
- 13 Thus, the selection of short stories either analyzed or reproduced in this volume simultaneously features some of the most emblematic transatlantic passages, be they literal or metaphoric, arrested in their course or successfully completed. These stories

resolutely move further than the shores of the Atlantic Ocean, either because the practitioners of the genre are writing back from “down under” or because they establish relationships or comparisons that entail bringing together previously unconnected texts, images, or events. That is the challenge and the potential of the transcultural, trans-spatial and trans-temporal story.

- 14 To contribute to the development of transatlantic studies by suggesting the consideration of further aesthetic and intellectual migrations in the analysis of narratives is the ultimate aim of this volume which is dedicated to the memory of Professor Susan Manning. Professor Manning was instrumental in developing the transatlantic study of literature: she coordinated the Carnegie funded STAR (Scotland’s Transatlantic Relations) initiative and conducted research on Scottish Enlightenment and on Scottish-American literary relations, the subjects of her books *The Puritan-Provincial Vision* (CUP, 1990) and *Fragments of Union* (Palgrave, 2002). She inaugurated the series of transatlantic conferences which took place at the University of Toulouse 2 Le Mirail from 2010 to 2013 and which resulted in the present volume. This collection of essays on *The Transatlantic Short Story* represents the homage we pay to a scholar who, from a gentle and civilized perspective, opened for us new routes on the high seas.

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NOTES

1. The concept was not coined by Dimock in the twenty-first century; it dates back to the Enlightenment period with James Hutton introducing it and Charles Lyell developing it as a new paradigm destined to explain geological formations.

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Héliane Ventura is Professor of Contemporary Literature in English at the University of Toulouse 2 Le Mirail. Her research is mainly centered on the short story written by women in the contemporary English-speaking world, exploring the rewriting of the canon, the resurgence of images and the emergence of transatlantic literatures. She has recently devoted her research to Aboriginal writing and has written articles on Pauline Johnson, Eden Robinson and Tomson Highway. Since 2010, she has edited several volumes on *Hybridation Multiculturalisme et Postcolonialisme*, (P.U. Orléans), *Resurgence in Jane Urquhart's Oeuvre* (Peter Lang), *The Short Stories of Alice Munro (The Journal of the Short Story in English)*, and *Pratiques de la Transgression dans la littérature et les arts visuels* (Presses de l'Instant Même, Quebec).