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"The fiction that makes us real": Playful Accreditation in David Arnason's "The Sunfish"

Héliane Ventura

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The title to this essay is borrowed from Robert Kroetsch's discussion of Canadian fiction (Kroetsch 63).

- 1 At the beginning of the sixties, speaking about the differences between Canada and the United States, Northrop Frye suggested this often quoted simile: "The United States is a symmetrical country: it presents a straight Atlantic coastline and its culture was up to about 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." (Frye 97) Relying on the motif of death and resurrection, and the metaphor of disempowerment and re-empowerment, David Arnason's short story "The Sunfish" published in 1982 seems to invite us to this apparently specific Canadian voyage of initiation through the Gulf of St Lawrence, up this vast waterway, in the wake of an immigrants' boat that leads a beautiful young heroine from Iceland to the shore of Lake Winnipeg, under the guidance of a marvellous talking fish. His story is a regional break-away from the foundational narrative which taps the plots of myths, fairy-tale, and romance while re-envisioning the contents apparently to provide the Icelandic community around Gimli with its myth of origins. But this tongue-in-cheek "invention of tradition" is a *collage*, and a *bricolage*, the function of which is not to provide an essentialist definition of the Icelando-Canadian *ab ovo* but rather to challenge and dissolve it, through a multi-layered discourse which self-consciously borrows and annexates and recycles the

material from what Edward Said has called "nationalism's heroic narratives" only to demonstrate the impossibility of a tale of origins. The experience of the New Republic of Iceland is mediated in a tale through the recuperation of other tales, and it participates, if playfully, in the foundational aesthetics but it simultaneously points in the direction of a questioning of accreditation: it is rather the experience of a tale pondering the enabling codes of fiction, even perhaps a tale purposefully coming up against what is inaccessible to fiction.

- 2 Consider the story: One morning, in 1878, on Lake Winnipeg, a fisherman called Gusti Oddson hauls a sunfish into his boat to hear it talk to him. And what does the sunfish tell the fisherman? He announces the end of the world while reluctantly accepting to grant the man his only wish: to see his dead wife return to life. Indeed, in compliance with the promise made, one month after the fisherman's encounter with the talking fish, there arrives in his community, after a miraculous voyage, a beautiful young woman from Iceland who bears a great likeness to his deceased wife and claims kinship to her. During her first winter in Canada, she stays in Gusti's house until springtime when she is chosen to be the protector of the god in the waggon and required to select the man she wants to marry. Several endings are then proposed. In one ending, Freya does marry Gusti and has thirteen children, in another she marries a younger man and Gusti has thirteen children with an older woman. In still another, Freya lives and has 13 children with both men. She is also said to move away to Sakatchewan with a marvellous stranger. Eventually, in the last ending proposed, she first marries Gusti, then is rejected by him on account of her bad temper. She finally marries the younger man while Gusti marries the older woman. They each have thirteen children and Gusti feeds the sunfish who predicted doomsday to his own children. In all cases the present inhabitants of the fishermen's villages around Lake Winnipeg are all descended from these children.
- 3 A talking fish endowed with the possibility of granting a fisherman's wishes. A miraculous journey with a silver fish which keeps the boat from foundering on the rocks on the coast of Scotland, a silver fish which appears to the captain in a dream to prevent the boat from crashing into another one coming up the St Lawrence. A school of silver fishes which bump into the boat to help it float free after it has run aground in the Red River delta. All these elements constitute easily recognizable fairy-tale motifs. We are made to enter the world of magic, a world in which wondrous impossibilities are presented as normal occurrences. It is characterized by its far-away, exotic quality, clearly separated from our everyday experience. For instance the narrator resorts to the Icelandic language to name the endless supply of food which is consumed during the great rejoicings of the spring festival: "ponnukokur", "Hangikjot", "rullupylsa", "lifrapylsa" and "slatur", "vinaterta", "kleinur", "astarbolur" (Arnason 72). The use of the vernacular creates the conditions for otherness by defamiliarizing what is familiar and performs a re-enchantment of the ordinary.
- 4 Arnason's use of fairy-tale motifs is not limited to plot, or diction, it is extended to characterisation which is marked by a lack of psychological complexity in its delineation. Take Freya, for example: she is the heroine with blond hair that hangs down to her waist and "eyes so blue that no one in New Iceland called anything blue without explaining that it was not as blue as Freya's eyes." (Arnason 68) By setting the standard for blueness or embodying the essence of blueness, she is marked out as the archetypal heroine of wondrous beauty. Yet her psychological traiking is far more

limited. She is presented as a compulsive cleaner, whose interest in dust is not metaphysical but fastidious: she sweeps the cleanest floor in new Iceland. She is also endowed with the worst of tempers and she is not likely to change. Gusti is the only one who is presented as undergoing a metamorphosis. At the beginning of the story, before Freya's arrival, he is called Gusti foulfart because of the foul smell which emanates from him. At the end of the story he is called Gusti Carpenter because he stopped drinking and chewing tobacco, he shaved off his beard, clipped his nails and turned into an exemplary suitor. Nevertheless such metamorphosis is no evidence of the character being well-rounded. Both Gusti and Freya remain essentially flat and monolithic as befits their status as fairy tale characters. Of these fairy tale types, Todorov has said they exemplified the absence of psychology in character construction: "We are neither confronted with another psychology nor with anti-psychology: we are faced with a-psychologism" (Todorov 36. My translation)

- 5 Lastly, the distinguishing mark of the fairy-tale can be said to lie in its happy ending. The young heroine marries the Prince, they have many children and live happily ever after. If Arnason abides by the rule of the happy ending, he nevertheless alters the familiar script in a radical way. The very inscription of several endings is at cross-purposes with such a mode as the marvellous. In marvellous tales, the narrative "voice is positioned with absolute confidence and certainty towards events. It has complete knowledge of completed events, its version of history is not questioned and the tale seems to deny the process of its own telling-it is merely reproducing established 'true versions' of what happened." (Jackson 33). By juxtaposing clashing versions of Gusti and Freya's life stories, Arnason destabilizes the authority of the marvellous tale in such a way that it leads us to reconsider the nature of the story. All the more so as the contents of the multiple endings are in no way acceptable by fairy-tale or even romance standards. A blue-eyed heroine getting 13 children with two men is thoroughly extraneous to the mode. The erotics embedded in this tale subvert the construction of social coherence which should be based, as Doris Sommer argues for the foundational fiction of Latin America, on "desire in young, chaste heroes for equally young and chaste heroines in order to establish conjugal and productive unions which represent national unification." (Sommer 82) The multiple endings which create rival versions of the story together with the multiple fathers which make a generative claim of uncertain origin dissolve the harmonious and enchanting aspect of the fairy-tale to usher in another more disquieting dimension.
- 6 Let us think of Roger Caillois' celebrated distinction between the unicorn and the narwhal. According to his theory, the former embodies the charming and decorative aspect of the marvellous, the latter by contrast emblematises cosmic dissymmetry and the enigma of the fundamental forces afloat in the universe as investigated in fantastic literature. (*Le Monde*, 24 décembre 1976, p.11. My translation) With its reliance on multiplicity, heterogeneity, hybridity, destabilizing authorial control and creating anxieties of fatherhood simultaneously at the level of utterance and enunciation, Arnason's story draws away from the marvellous to approach the fantastic. It creates a particularly unsettling polyphony which plays off a laconic fisherman speaking in the voice of the nineteenth century against a fish announcing doomsday in the cartoon voice of the twentieth century. To reinforce the uncanny effect, the prophecies uttered by the sunfish simultaneously evoke the themes of the zealots and the diction of the streetwise heroes from late twentieth century popular culture. The result is a double accent, a double style which falls in the category of the open dialogical structure,

conflictual and hybridized as theorized by Bakhtine: "What is hybridization? It is a mixture of two social languages within the limits of a single utterance, an encounter, within the arena of an utterance, between two different linguistic consciousness, separated from one another by an epoch, by social differentiation or by some other factor" (Bakhtine quoted by Young, 20)

- 7 In typically postmodern fashion, the story suggests the marvellous only to dissolve it through the superimposition of conflicting codes and similarly it proposes an explanation for the origin of a community only to destabilize and reinforce it through the multiplication of endings. To provide an explanation as to origins is one of the functions generally ascribed to myths. And in the same way we recognize fairy-tale motifs, we can trace a number of mythemes in Arnason's story, one of those being the founding of a nation in a new country after a long sea-voyage. Let us only think of Pious Aeneas leaving the burning city of Troy with his father Anchises on his shoulders to sail across the Mediterranean and up the Tiber estuary to found the city of Lavinium from which the city of Rome was born. With Freya's journey from Iceland to Lake Winnipeg, Arnason's story offers a parodic reiteration of the *nostos* set in the northern silver seas, with a Norse goddess replacing the Trojan hero.
- 8 Another major mytheme inscribed in the story is the resurrection from the dead. Gusti's first wife died of a smallpox epidemics and she is allowed to be reborn under the guise of a young relative called Freya. The name she is given further points in the direction of mythopoeia. In Norse mythology, Freya is the goddess of love and beauty but she is also in charge of half of those who are slain in battle, so that she is often regarded as the goddess of love and death. By naming the reborn wife Freya, Arnason taps the resources of Northern mythology in a simultaneously facetious and literal manner, for indeed Freya is allowed to return from the dead through the power of love. Moreover, by giving his Icelandic character a name so directly taken from mythology, Arnason also encourages us to link his short story to the saga literature of Iceland. He creates a genealogy of mythic origins for the Icelando-Canadians of lake Winnipeg. He prods us into equating the story of the beginnings of New Iceland to the heroic achievements related in the Elder Edda.
- 9 We can even go as far as saying that he does not only invite comparison with the Elder Edda but also with the Younger Edda. Indeed the Younger Edda does contain prehistoric mythological material but it mainly consists in a technical treatise on how to write poetry and it is regarded as an *ars poetica*. Arnason's story strikes us as foregrounding its own fictionality in such a way that it leads us to ponder the enabling codes and processes of fiction. Just consider the first two sentences of the text: "Dawn was just spreading its red glow across Lake Winnipeg when Gusti Oddson reached for the buoy to pull in the first of his seven nets. And what was he thinking, that second cousin once removed of my great grandmother, on a June morning in 1878?" (Arnason 61) These two sentences give evidence of clashing codes. The first one posits an omniscient narrator with an impersonal voice and a minimum emotional involvement in the tale while the second one inscribes an involved subject, who ironically brags about his family connection with the protagonist, and shows no ability to know the past with any certainty.
- 10 If the simultaneous inscription of self-defeating codes marks the story off as postmodern, it more specifically investigates the nature of the reconstruction of past events. From the very first paragraph of the story, the narrator alludes to the existence

of scattered diaries which he took pains to collect and to recompose. He even includes whole entries into the story: "Thursday, January 11. More snow, the weather very cold. Freya is cleaning again. Worked all day repairing Helgi's roof. I may no more chew tobacco." (Arnason 69) He incorporates pieces of evidence supposedly taken from a verifiable past to ensure the accreditation of his reconstruction; he attempts to keep up the pretence that he is producing a representation of the past unmediated by his own subjectivity, a representation of events "as they actually happened". Yet at the same time as he takes pains to establish the truth value of his narration, he undermines its authority through an intense self-consciousness about the way this is done. For instance he interrupts the supposedly trustworthy reconstruction of the past to speak in his own voice: "Here you must bear with me, because the diaries end, and so I have had to reconstruct what actually happened." (Arnason 74) The claim to the actuality of what happened and the mediation through which it is reconstructed are simultaneously foregrounded. Not only does he intrude into the text with his own commentaries on the action but he also supplies multiple points of view on the same event so as to problematize the understanding of the past.

- 11 The ending of the story is a case in point. Instead of offering one authoritative version, the narrator supplies all the variants he has been able to collect. By doing so, he seems to remove the story from the domain of biography and to root it into that of legend, while at the same time he reinforces the authenticity of the biography through an array of possible truths. This tongue-in-cheek show of investigative equity has far-reaching consequences. As suggested by Homi Bhabha, we can regard the multiple endings as being simultaneously "acts of affiliation and establishment as they are moments of disavowal, displacement, exclusion, and cultural contestation." (Bhabha 5) What Arnason suggests here is the instability of knowledge and the effacement of frontiers or the crossing of thresholds of meaning which establish "a chiasmatic figure of cultural difference" (Bhabha 4) , one in which personal history, the history of a people and the history of a nation, gain accreditation by reversing back and forth into legends and fairy-tales as well as myths. By juxtaposing traditional fairy-tale motifs, time-honoured mythemes and fake real life diaries, Arnason does not simply collapse the difference between the historian and the teller of fictitious or mendacious stories, he does not simply create a historiographic metafiction which confronts history and fiction only to erase their differences. "The Sunfish" self-consciously creates a myth of origins for the Canadians of Icelandic descent and claims empirical validation for the story it narrates by offering it to the readers for them to ratify according to the principle that if history is fiction, so fiction is history because, as Robert Kroetsch puts it, it is "fiction that makes us real." (Kroetsch 63)
- 12 The creation of a "chiasmatic figure" which enables history and fiction to reverse into each other is accompanied by a similar effacement of boundaries between beginnings and endings. If "The Sunfish" as a story is a fable about the beginnings of the Icelandic settlement in Canada, the sunfish as a participant in the story is a messenger of ill-tidings. He has come to talk to Gusti about the end of the World, what is called in Norse Mythology "Ragnarok". Yet the sunfish does not use either a prophetic tone or an inflamed rhetoric to foretell the last combat: "It's over, the fish told him. Done. Finished. Kaput. They're closing down the whole show, moving on to bigger and better things. Cutting their losses." (Arnason 65) The language of the sunfish belongs in the satirical pastiche as if better to suggest the contemporaneity of the prophecy. Dissolution is in the offing, not only the dissolution of the world but also the

dissolution of the word, for the story is drawing to the end with the sunfish being eaten by Gusti's children. The death of the eponymous hero is what brings the tale to its end, or rather it is what prevents any further reconstruction of the past. Derrida calls this thwarted attempt at reconstruction "le mal d'archive", the impossibility of carrying the archival process to completion: "to keep interminably looking for the archive where it slips away" (Derrida 142. My translation)

- 13 According to the principle of reflexivity which dominate "narcissistic narratives", not only is the Sunfish as a participant in the story swallowed by the characters' children, the readers have also consumed the tale entitled "The Sunfish". They have swallowed it, which points in the direction of the accreditation of a literary hoax. The consumption of the tale can be regarded as an act of acquiescence: the readers have partaken in the wafer. Each new reading will be a new celebration and with each new celebration, "The Sunfish" will be made alive again and, along with it, the foundational myth of the Icelandic community around Lake Winnipeg in Canada. But to consume the fish is also to eliminate it. Whether, like Christ, it will be resurrected or whether, like Jonah, it will resurface again is an act of faith which is entirely dependent on the reading subject and his capacity to convince others of the validity of the claims made by fiction.

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ABSTRACTS

Cet article entend démontrer que la nouvelle de David Arnason intitulée "The Sunfish" est une variante régionale du récit fondateur de la nation et qu'elle suit les grandes lignes des mythes, des contes de fées et des histoires d'amour mais en modifie le contenu dans le but apparent de fournir à la population islandaise de la région de Gimli son mythe d'origine. Mais cette facétieuse "invention de la tradition" est de l'ordre du collage et du bricolage et n'est pas destinée à remonter à l'essence de l'identité islando-canadienne. Elle se situe plutôt du côté d'un défi ludique qui, à travers un discours aux ramifications multiples, dissout cette conception identitaire pour finalement démontrer l'impossibilité d'une histoire qui remonte aux origines.

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