

# THE EPIC JOURNEYS OF THE MODERN CANADIAN PENELOPE

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Travelling ladies – as the title of Janice Kulyk Keefer’s short story collection (1990) echoes – are a growing presence in Canadian women’s writing. Here, indeed, the trope of the journey as a quest for selfhood and self-knowledge is increasingly dealt with on a number of diverse and co-existing dimensions. Horizontal and vertical journeys through space and time mingle with symbolic psychological voyages through the meanders of the unconscious and memory, and/or with meta-narrative and intertextual journeys through the text itself and through literature, art and culture. Journeys for female legitimacy and sexual authenticity are paired with metaphorical quests for authorial and creative mastery; coming-of-age journeys toward womanhood are found alongside mnemonic journeys into the past; and prototypical Canadian journeys into the wilderness are matched by return journeys to ethnic homelands.

Such an intermingling of interrelated quests suggests that Canada’s women writers are tackling a multiplicity of complex and plural identities, which defy clear-cut self/other categorizations. Like Ulysses’ talented spouse, these modern Penelopes<sup>1</sup>, therefore, undertake the epic challenge of unweaving conventional plots and weaving new scripts by which to re-inscribe otherness<sup>2</sup>. As they ‘light out’ toward a new female space of creation and imagination, they set forth to re-appropriate the classical quest motif and to, thereby, subvert tradi-

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<sup>1</sup> The use of Penelope as «a metaphor for the newly emergent woman writer» (*Literature and Feminism* 58) has been suggested by Pam Morris, who highlights how the talented weaver/unweaver of antiquity encompasses «the endless resourcefulness, productivity, cunning and daring of literary women» (83).

<sup>2</sup> In her essay ‘What Was Penelope Unweaving?’ Carol Heilbrun emphasizes how «In literature and out [...] women have lived by a script they did not write. [...] Theirs has been the marriage plot, the erotic plot, the courtship plot, but never, as for men, the quest plot» (108).

tional paradigms of representation, including fixed notions of heroic self-formation and narcissistic models of identity. Quite often, for instance, parodic intertextual strategies – as Linda Hutcheon has suggested in *The Canadian Postmodern* – are deployed to enact a cathartic journey through «the looking glass» (Gilbert and Gubar 16), which unmasks and revises the mythical construction of female identity as the angelic/demonic reflection in Narcissus' mirror<sup>3</sup>.

As I have argued elsewhere<sup>4</sup>, the recurring use of what Dana Heller has called «the feminization of quest-romance» (1990) enables Canada's women writers to prompt a series of revolutionary socio-cultural, political and literary transformations, which are having a crucial impact on the redefinition of Canadian identity. In particular, the emphasis placed on intersubjectivity, multiplicity, diversity and polyvalence offers a new model of identification, which admits difference and otherness as positive relational values and ultimately redeems Canadians from the stylized victim/victimizer positions described by Margaret Atwood in *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972). In literature, it has spurred the creation of a new character, which embodies a muted consciousness of the feminine and of female identity. Given the revolutionary portent of such a quest, I would here like to focus on the travelling female quester, and to trace the development of this new literary archetype, which I shall call 'the modern Canadian Penelope'.

The core of Penelope's journey is the search for an authentic self, which entails a courageous act of self-reinvention through a radical subversion of traditional misrepresentations of female identity. It thus comprises an epic movement from passive *heroine* – the somewhat ambivalent female archetype in the traditional quest-romance mythos<sup>5</sup> – to active *hero*. The hero that emerges from this culturally defiant act of journeying is, however, a new and unprecedented one. Although her quest is always a personal one, Penelope is never a 'solitary hero', who restores order to a chaos-ridden kingdom<sup>6</sup>. Instead, her quest for

<sup>3</sup> In *The Whirlpool* and *Changing Heaven* Jane Urquhart subverts, for instance, representations of women as angels or demons through an extended intertextual echoing of Romantic poets and of Tintoretto's paintings. Cfr. Saidero, Deborah, "Parodic...".

<sup>4</sup> Cfr. Saidero, Deborah, "Female Quest Patterns...".

<sup>5</sup> In their investigations of the archetypal mythos, Northrop Frye and Joseph Campbell highlight how although the woman «is clearly the kind of being who makes a quest possible» (Frye 193) and can symbolize «the totality of what can be known» (Campbell 116), her role is always subordinate to that of the male hero. While she may inspire heroes, she may not aspire to become herself a hero and thus «achieves no quest herself» (Frye 193).

<sup>6</sup> The mythical substrata of the quest cycle provided by ancient Hellenic and Celtic legends

identity and selfhood constantly intersects with that of other travellers, who become alternate selves. She thus embodies a collective identity, which defies hierarchical ordering and the oppositional reconciliation of a divided self.

If the modern Canadian Penelope lacks a mythos, how then does she forge herself as a new hero? Which patterns of identity does she develop? And which archetypal Canadian consciousness does she embody? For a long time, the representation of the female in mainstream Canadian literature complied with the mythological heroine archetype. As Atwood had pointed out in her critical survey *Survival*, there was an outstanding presence of old, sinister Hecate-Crone figures, against an almost complete absence of young, fertile Venuses. Although strong and tough, these vividly portrayed «ice women» (195) were sterile, cold and forbidding embodiments of the life-denying and malevolent forces of Nature. Thus, rather than embark on heroic journeys of any kind, they incarnated the stiffness of a petrified life approaching death. As archetypal metaphors of the Nature-as-Monster theme, they were heroines who upheld the vision of Canadians as victims.

The heroic travelling ladies that fill the pages of more recent Canadian texts encompass, on the other hand, the entire spectrum of the triple goddess<sup>7</sup>. Numerous are the young maidens, like the orphan Eileen O'Malley in Jane Urquhart's *Away*, the adolescent Mouse Bradford in Susan Swan's *The Wives of Bath*, the Piper daughters in Ann-Marie MacDonald's *Fall On Your Knees*, or the teenage Laura Martyn in Kulyk Keefer's *The Ladies' Lending Library*, who set out to discover their blooming sexuality. There are old Hecates, like eighty-two-year-old Ester O'Malley in *Away* or Saiko, the middle-aged virgin spinster in Kerri Sakamoto's *The Electrical Field*, who, rather than embody the sterile virginity of the former barren ice goddess, are wise preservers and transmitters of stories and knowledge. Both Ester and Saiko are, in fact, the self-sufficient scribes entrusted with the stories of their foremothers and of their silenced and oppressed people – the Irish and the Japanese. Above all, we come across an ever-growing body of sexually mature and fecund Venuses, who seek an authentic erotic libido: Arachne Manteia, the female picaro in Aritha van Herk's *No Fixed Address*, is, for instance, a mantis-like saleswoman of female lingerie who travels around the Canadian prairies in search of passionate adventures; the would-be critics Ann Frear in Urquhart's *Changing Heaven* and

and by the Arthurian Grail repositories with their connection to the dying god of pre-vegetarian fertility rites reveal that its basic pattern is 'to kill and to restore', to equate, in other words, the maintaining of universal order with the hero's final mastering of the feminine side of his nature.

<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of the triple goddess see Graves, *The White Goddess*.

Anna English in Keefer's *Rest Harrow* seek creative mastery through adulterous love affairs in the English countryside; and the lesbians Elizete and Verlia in Dionne Brand's *In Another Place, Not Here* move from the Caribbean to Toronto in search of genuine homosexual female desire.

This abundance of Venus-type female questers obviously spurs a re-visitation of the nature-as-woman archetype. If the Hecate-Ice Woman upheld visions of a malevolent and destructive nature, the life-giving and procreative qualities of the Venus-Earth Goddess store the promise of redeeming the stereotypical and imperialistic envisioning of Nature as a monstrous and terrible *femme fatale* to penetrate and exploit. Since the archetypal modern Canadian Penelope is ultimately a fully emancipated, desiring subject who refuses imposed sexual roles, the Nature-as-Earth Goddess association prompts a re-evaluation of the wilderness as an ungendered space of redemption and rebirth, void of socio-cultural restrictions and encodings. Nature is, thus, no longer envisioned as either just a barren land of rock and ice, or a lush and blissful garden; it becomes, instead, a powerful, regenerative and neutral presence, which embraces energy, motion, and cyclical transformation.

The co-presence of Diana, Venus and Hecate questers foreground a composite, multifaceted hero archetype, whose identity is not static but constantly in process. Each quester symbolizes a stage in the earth-life-cycle and is crucial to the process of regeneration and renewal. The envisioning of Penelope as a triple goddess sanctions her as both nature and muse, «a goddess» – as Graves tells us – «of cycles and seasons» and «the inspirer of poetry» (Graves 1961, qtd. Atwood *Survival*, 199). Not surprisingly, the Canadian female questing hero is often an artist or writer figure, whose journey for sexual authenticity is intertwined with that for creative and linguistic legitimacy. Central to both quests is the rediscovery of the female body, which provides the travelling quester with a primal female self against which to define herself. A metaphorical correlative for both the land and the text, the body contains, in fact, the lost self-image of the woman-as-mother-creatrix, who is at once the goddess within, the Mother-Earth of ancient sexual creation myths, and the literary foremother. Penelope's re-appropriation of the body and the maternal is often enacted as a descent process into the past, usually back to childhood memories of the lost or missing mother, as occurs for Ann Frear and Anna English, for the unnamed Atwoodian narrator in *Surfacing*, or for Kate Mason, the anthropologist/archaeologist in Genni Gunn's *Tracing Iris*. At times, the descent journey also leads back to literary mothers, like Emily Brontë, Virginia Woolf and Katherine Mansfield in *Changing Heaven* and in *Rest Harrow*, whose tangible fictional presence endows the questing female artist with a sense of creative and linguistic empowerment. Other times, the reconstruction of a matrilineal

heritage takes the form of a generational saga, like in *Away* and *Fall On Your Knees*, where the interconnected stories of three generations of women spur a sense of bonding and mutual identification. Here, in particular, there is a full conflation of the Hecate-Venus-Diana triad, since the mature storytellers Esther and Lily, the transgressing and passionate lovers/mothers Mary and Materia, and the young maidens Eileen, Kathleen, Mercedes and Frances, who grow up motherless in the Ontario backwoods, are all interlocking selves of the same, fragmentary being.

The plunge into memory, with the consequent surfacing of a buried self-image of femininity – that of the underworld goddess Persephone/Hecate – emphasizes circular patterns of experience and enables the questing traveller to re-emerge with a newly enlightened selfhood, which hinges on a sense of interconnection with other selves. The sinking/surfacing movement teaches her the fundamental importance retained by expressing and empowering a capacity for self-realization through identification with others, who are acknowledged as an integral part of the heroic development. Rather than a unitary hero, the modern Canadian Penelope, thus, shapes herself as a shifting, complex, fractured and polymorphous subject, whose identity is, of course, reflexive of the national consciousness.

When transposed from a personal to a collective level, Penelope's inward journey to retrieve and enlobe Persephone implies, in fact, a re-evaluation of the woman-as-memory archetype which spurs the retrieval of a national sense of historical identity. Against the conventional envisioning of Canada as a passive, silenced and colonized female, Penelope-as-Persephone prompts a redefinition of History, which hinges on the recovery of the multiple historical facts that are peculiar to its building as a nation. In its strive to unbury the processes of cultural erasure put into act through both colonial assimilation and immigration, this mnemonic descent involves re-appropriating the collective histories of the many ethnic groups that co-inhabit the country, and who are often caught in the dual bind of their displaced marginality, even within the multicultural mosaic.

Thus, as the embodiment of the Canadian multicultural consciousness, Penelope is often envisioned as an 'ethnic' traveller, who either embarks on return journeys to other homelands, like Eva Chown's Ukraine in Kulyk Keefer's *The Green Library* and Bianca's Italy in Caterina Edwards' *The Lion's Mouth*, or imaginatively reconstructs her familial ethnic affiliation to other peoples (i.e., the Irish in *Away*, the Japanese in *The Electrical Field*, the Lebanese in *Fall On Your Knees*, the Afro-Caribbean in *In Another Place, Not Here*, etc). Since these journeys – whether physical or mnemonic – foster both a confrontation with the old world and a re-appropriation of the new world as a space of

national belonging, Penelope emerges as a Janus-faced goddess who looks out in multiple directions, in order to retrace a genealogy of self, which resides in and is inscribed by a plurality of histories, none of which can be forgotten. Upon return from Ukraine, Eva Chown has, for instance, developed the multi-directional vision of the two-faced Janus and reached a new understanding of her ethnic identity as intimately interconnected with that of other ethnicities. Having established connections with a host of unknown Ukrainian ancestors and their shared histories of dispossession, she accepts, rather than neglects, her ethnicity as an important part of her self-definition and thereby overcomes the self-inflicted victimhood of the ethnic subject's hyphenated identity.

In terms of national consciousness, this Janus-faced travelling female quester becomes emblematic for the shift from a multicultural to a transcultural construction of identity, where a constellation of different intersubjective relationships transcends sexual, racial, ethnic, and national boundaries among people. By constructing her subjectivity as multiple and dialogic, she challenges the monomythical constructions of Canadianness as the separate tesserae of the mosaic and prompts the construction of Canada as a space which integrates otherness, instead of containing it within long-standing hierarchies. As Eva realizes walking through Toronto's ethnic strip at the end of her quest, it is necessary to re-imagine her Canadian homeland as a kaleidoscope of different but mutually-defining ethnic identities, which, like the millenary rock and crystal formations that stretch across the globe, are intimately similar in their diversity.

Recurrently used as «epic voices to define Canada» (Irvine 151) the travelling ladies that we encounter in recent Canadian literature dramatize and challenge the many cultural ambiguities of the Canadian identity. Their allegorical association with Canada subverts, for instance, the traditional image of the country as a conservative old maiden and welcomes – as Irvine writes – «its emergence from a closed and private colonized space to one of international importance» (165). As metaphors for the land, they re-draw spatial cartographies, so as to re-inscribe nature and Canada as presence rather than absence, as a place of redemption and regeneration rather than as an empty non-place. Moreover, their self-creation as interrelation prompts a redefinition of conventional iconographic models of Canadian identity as a multicultural mosaic of separate cultures and prompts the construction of a post-national and transcultural identity in which a plethora of identities co-exist as competing and contradictory modes of subjectivity.

A mercurial and fluid hero whose self-construction is always in the making, the modern Canadian Penelope is no longer the frozen Hecate described by Atwood, with Diana and Venus concealed, or rather entrapped, inside her dying body. Like Maud Grady, the undertaker's arachnid-like widow in

Urquhart's *The Whirlpool*, she has recovered her buried memory and mothering capabilities and has emerged as a beautiful, airborne butterfly. Her metamorphosis into a completely new and free being values the combined fertility and fecundity of the youthful Diana-Venus and the wisdom of maturity. As an archetype of the Canadian experience, she thus reverses typical patterns of victimhood and suggests alternative patterns of self-empowerment through cyclical regeneration and renewal.

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