

Maximum Morality of Art: Thomas King's *Medicine River*

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In this paper I want to trace Thomas King's hermeneutical endeavors to give his novel *Medicine River* the function stories originally had: the repetition of Creation. Because revealing relations is its ordering principle, I consider it deeply religious. Apart from drawing on a group of contemporary Native American philosophers, such as Thomas Norton-Smith, Gregg Sarris, Donald Fixico, I will also rely on some essays in eschatological metaphysics, primarily Emanuel Levinas's and Nikolai Berdjaev's.

The novel's main concern is the half-blood Will's return home, his (metaphorically speaking) long journey from the loneliness in a city to the Blackfoot reservation, which develops in relation with his immediate and larger family, especially through memories about his mother who has recently died and, most poignantly, his fantasies about his white father whom Will does not remember:

“My father is a television producer.” [Will imagines.]

“My father is an investment consultant.”

“My father is a physicist.”

“My father is a computer designer.” (King 80)

As the tribe gradually accepts Will, the progress of his endeavors is marked by not over-ornamented, yet illuminative, sketches of life around the reservation that not only discourage, but utterly fail to comprehend the meaning of dramatic climaxes and spectacular resolutions. As such they gradually and gently reveal a life that is simple but rich because it ritualistically imagines every little event as an empowering ceremony. For such an affirmative imagination, life is constant expansion and growth. Therefore, if at the beginning of the novel Will lacks ground upon which to build identity, these grounds are endless at the end of the novel. Besides, the depicted events, which are often recognized as important formative moments, such as receiving counsel from elders, listening to the tribal stories, sharing the feasts, taking part in various ceremonies (name giving and gifting), remembering (with others) those who have passed, etc., highlight the importance of the responsible attendance to one's relations and beget the value of ceremonies, which are transformative in an ontological sense, making Will one of the kin, a Blackfoot.

Developing as Will's creation story, *Medicine River* adopts the concept of relations as its methodological tool both for its structural and its semantic organization.

Although it unfolds as a first-person narrative, Will's narration is constantly intertwined by the voices of the others, coming from the past as well as from his immediate surrounding, such as his father's letters, his mother's stories, as well as the reservation stories he attends in the present. As the polyphony augments the implication of Will's own story, the importance of situating oneself among the other voices becomes clear, and so does the unavoidable plurality of the foundational voice, demanding a new diegetic approach on the reader's side. This is so especially because the maneuver of past and present narratives gives Will's retrospection a particularly vibrant dimension, because the relations he invented (such as that with his father) have an equally important empirical existence as those we take for granted as real.

However, such an expansive hermeneutical space (in which Creation is constantly happening) opens in an unusual manner, with a sudden suggestion of disconnection, loneliness, and isolation coming as an extract from an old letter written by Will's father to Will's mother, the wife he abandoned, and the woman who lost her tribal status by marrying a white man:

*Dear Rose,
I'll bet you never thought you'd hear from me again. I've thought about calling or writing, but you know how it is. How are you and the boys? Bet they're getting big. Bet you're probably mad at me, and I don't blame you. I'm going to be in Calgary for a rodeo. Thought I might drop in and see you...*
(King 1, italics original)

The impulse of division that stands behind this narrative, as well as its conditional phrasing and insistence on personal opinions and chances ("*I've thought*," "*I bet*," "*I might*"), point to extreme insecurity of this voice. Its uprootedness, which disables Will from imagining him, together with the distance assumed in the written narrative, are juxtaposed by the assertiveness and concentrating impulse of the native salute "Hey-uh," uttered by the tribal constant Harlen Bigbear, who obtains the letters for Will and who explicitly believes that "being related is more important than some small difference in opinion" (King 68). Appearing with the strong imprint of landscape in the background, Harlen suggests the importance of community and landscape in situating oneself and building up one's identity, reminding Will: "You see over there... Ninastiko – Chief Mountain. That's how we know where we are. When we can see the mountain, we know we're home" (King 93).

Harlen knows that there is no innocent observation of the world without consequences (as Norton-Smith argues in *The Dance of Person and Place*, 2010), and that Will's visualization and understanding of the connections must not be propositional, i.e., possession of facts, but procedural, ritual (cf. Fixico 1-2). Seeing Ninastiko, therefore, equals imaging himself as a significant creative force in a creative, animate, dynamic, purposeful, unfixed, and unfinished world (cf. Norton-Smith). For the one who looks responsively, the mountain, therefore, is not semantically static existence, it does not have a status of an object, but it appears with what we may define adapting Foucault's formula for authority, an expansively potent person-function. As Norton-

Smith argues, being human is not a condition for personhood in not only Native American, but any other epistemology and ontology – but persona is an amalgam of moral and metaphysical concepts in a network of social relationships, and so it can also be a mountain, especially because it calls into existence the people living under it and their personal territories, which are contexts of a rich exchange of stories (cf. Sarris 40).

In eschatological metaphysics persona is not understood as a natural category either, but as a creative act, which eternally “resides beyond my intentional horizon” and thus becomes an eschatological aura of “possibility” (Kearney). As such it belongs to me, because it confirms me in the immediate presence (in reality), yet, at the same time, it ultimately appears to me in its alterity (cf. Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*). I can know it only as unknowable (in an epistemological sense), I can speak of it as of something inexpressible (in a linguistic sense), and I can think it as unthinkable, i.e., as nothing, in an ontological sense. Yet, this nothingness is not a sphere of absence, but the sphere of the yet unknown (the “Divine Nothing” in the negative theology of Dionysius the Aeropagite), a possibility of being – rather than actuality, a *fait accompli* (Kearney). However, the promise remains powerless until and unless I respond to it – but when I respond to it, I risk the “I,” the being I know I am. For this reason, in his *Essay in Eschatological Ontology*, Nikolai Berdjajev argues that instead of appropriating facts, knowing is being aware (therefore a process) of the meaning that is forever born and reborn in being. Truth, therefore, resides in a never-ending process of enfolding and unfolding. The relation it is capable of producing lies, if it is imaginable at all in temporal terms, in the future, and thus stays forever out of grasp (cf. Zizioulas).

It is in this sense that I particularly admire the moment of taking the family photo, as an image strongly metonymical of this conception and the one that the whole novel is gradually heading towards. Namely, when Will becomes recognized as a tribal photographer and tries to take a photo of a family (irony to Edward S. Curtis is discarded), the family including “all one’s relations,” is huge, so that its body is constantly moving and changing, like a big amoebic organism, while at the same time it remains the same:

The first shots were easy. I set the timer, ran across the sand and sat down next to Floyd’s granny. But with a large group like that you can’t take chances. Someone may have closed their eyes just as the picture was taken. Or one of the kids could have turned their back. Or someone might have gotten lost behind someone else [...] Then, too, the group refused to stay in place ... the kids wandered off among their parents and relatives and friends, and the adults floated back and forth, no one holding their positions. I had to keep moving the camera as the group swayed from one side to the other. Only the grandparents remained in place as the ocean of relations flowed around them. (King 215)

That camera gives frame but to one instant of life is of partial interest of ours now. Quite otherwise, this camera so finely goes beyond the poststructuralists’ skepticism regarding the objectivity of representation and recognizes the referential interconnection of all the

phenomena, at the same time lacking what Nietzsche called the violence of historicizing and is creatively turned to contemporaneity. And if we would be able to see the juxtaposition of all the photos Will made, I am sure we would be told a good story – because it would be epistemologically realistic to the manifested phenomena (*depicta*), but it (as a series of analog photographs) would be also ontologically realistic, presenting, perhaps not adequate reflections, but simply casual, not regular or permanent, interactions of people in time, as well as with the very photo paper, which is also reducible to ruin. They are comparable with the numerous footprints imprinting their shape in the sand but only for an instant and impossible to hold on to. The mere information about the people does not matter as much as do these unpremeditated, chanced effects in the collage of Will's becoming.

Numerous passing traces are inserted in the novel in the form of photographs and other prints, such as fragments of his father's letters, old photos that are fading, remembered drawings of his brother, etc. These visual moments are intimately connected with and supremely veracious of Will's feelings. By only implying them, they speak more of the emotional ruptures, transitoriness, and deceptiveness of Will's feelings than words would be able to do, exactly because elaborate narratives are always made by intentional subjects. It is in this way that the novel, which is also a manipulation, becomes an honest and courageous treatment of its own fragility, which presupposes its limitedness in depicting reality that is continuously becoming (developing, changing). Because of this the novel necessitates comparison with our help of other means of human exchange, exactly with an attempt to either transcend itself or confirm its own ontological status, or both. By doing this, the novel, at first, denies its own authority, becoming a mosaic of fragments, but then, as it reconstructs (encodes and decodes) irregular possibilities, it reveals the risk a verbal medium always has, and starts existing as a dynamic, unfixed life itself. By doing this, *Medicine River* also underlines the malaise of the inherited linear conception of existence, displaying, consciously or not, important oversights in some aspects of contemporary philosophy (examples from Terry Eagleton, Eco, Baudrillard, but also Emanuel Levinas and Nikolai Berdyaev), which slip into the same (linear) mistake of imagining an ontological cul-de-sac. Therefore, *Medicine River* offers an opportunity to revisit Baudrillard's conclusions in "Symbolical Exchange and Death," in which he suggests that simulation has replaced reality, which, therefore, becomes "a schizophrenic vertigo of signs." Just the opposite, art, exactly, is everywhere, since there is no reality besides the one we are capable of producing. Therefore, Baudrillard's embittered resolution that "artifice lies at the heart of reality," and that art is dead, since not only is "its critical transcendence dead, but reality itself, entirely impregnated by an aesthetic that holds onto its very structurality, has become inseparable from its own image" (Baudrillard 500), entrusts the seer with an impregnated responsibility.

Both, the mimetic nature of stories, as they repeat Creation, and the empirical foundation of stories, as existential frames within which we imagine ourselves, demand that stories grow, modify (life), and, consequently, carry a risk of forgetting and exclusion. Therefore, Harlen believes that "it is difficult to tell half of a story" (King 41), and when he gives Will his father's letters, he must make sure that Will understands the

responsibility, both of Harlen's investment in Will's quest and the element of risk they are carrying together:

Will, you remember Wilma Whiteman? [...] she passed away last week [...] Wilma used to look after Granny Pete all those years. You know, everybody used to leave their stuff at Granny's house, whenever they went somewhere. Reserve storage. Should have seen the folks come by when Granny died. Those who were still around picked their stuff up, and Wilma took and stored the things that were left over [...] Lots of memories. Louie Frank's wife went over to help Wilma's family. One of her girls found them, in a cardboard box. Edith gave them to Bertha over at the centre, and Bertha gave them to Big John, and Big John gave them to me. (King 3)

Harlen's insisting that "people are fragile" (King 31) and that "the truth's like a green-broke horse [...] you never know which way it's going to jump or who it's going to kick" (King 176-177) is grounded in a method of verification that is inclusive of all the non-objective and personal experience because not even the most ephemeral point in life can be excluded from formulating the understanding (Cf. Norton-Smith). The episode with January Pretty Weasel is illustrative of this. Although it is obvious that January killed her husband, because he constantly abused her and the kids, and that she wrote the long suicidal note in which the dead speaks gently of his family, the community agrees to believe that it was a suicide and that Jake has written the letter himself:

It was funny in a way. Jake's suicide, I mean. For a month or so after the funeral, everybody mostly worried about him, as if he were alive. We all had Jake stories, and even January was anxious to tell about the time Jake had taken the kids shopping or made a special dinner or brought her home an unexpected and thoughtful present. I wasn't sure how, but she seemed to have forgotten the beatings and the pain, and in the end, all of us began talking about the letter as if Jake had written it.

"Jake really had a way with words."

"You can see he cared for his family."

"Hard for a man to say those things."

You could see that January wanted it that way, and when you thought about it long enough, I guess it wasn't such a bad thing. After a while we all forgot about the Jake January found lying on the bed, his head against the wall, the shotgun pressed under his chin, one hand on the trigger, the other holding a pen, trying to think of something to say. (King 48-49)

The thought of those observing January's situation, therefore, is obviously tremulously cautious of entailing any other kind of verification but the one which is tied to practical concerns close at hand (since law is just another fabrication). Similarly, Will's mother told Will numerous contradictory stories about his father. But Will learns that as long as he rationalizes experience, he will suffer the lack of the truth that matters to him – because it must lie in all the contradictory simultaneous possibilities, acceptance of which brings joy (cf. Sarris 40).

The character of the tribal elder, Lionel James, sprouts from such an understanding. There are a lot of stories about Lionel, but the one that matters to Harlen, in his mission of bringing Will back to the community, is that Lionel is the best storyteller in the reservation. When Lionel wonders why people in Japan and Germany clap their hands when he finishes his storytelling, “[l]ike they never heard that story before” (King 167), he does not just emphasize the difference between the aesthetic expectation one may have of a work of art as a perfected form, on one hand, and ceremonial endeavors of a ritual performance as a revolving form, on the other, but he also underlines the chaos of the disconnected existences in a linear reified world, etc.

But when Lionel tells the story about Will’s father, it again betrays Euro-American expectations of what an important foundational story should be like. To a good storyteller, though, who can listen (cf. Benjamin 19), because his stories are always at the edge of existence (cf. Momaday 165), every little instance of life is precious, because it invokes Creation. If properly told, as Louis Owens suggests, every story is a creation story (Owens 96) and it generates a new existence for Will’s father, as well as Will’s deep emotional intervention, thus turning into a healing ceremony for Will. The storytelling event develops as follows:

“When I was in Norway, I told the story about the time your father and mother went to one of those chicken restaurants after a rodeo. Your mother was pregnant, and I guess the smell of all that fat and grease made her sick because she threw up.”

“Threw up. At the restaurant?” [Will intervenes surprised.]

“That’s right. She was sitting near the window, and she couldn’t get out. It was real messy.”

“My mother did that?”

“So your father, quick as he can, said in a real loud voice, ‘Hey, what’s in this chicken anyway?’” [to which Harlen exclaims]

“Sounds just like your father, don’t it, Will?” (King 172-173)

Harlen’s suggestion is not ironical. On the contrary, it is a celebration of acceptance, which is the most courageous act for a human being to undertake, greater than compassion, because Will’s father is given an existence no one can call back any more. Decentering the imposed meanings and conventional expectations, Harlen’s suggestion redefines the margins of human experience in a non-hierarchical universe, in which a deliberate act of exclusion is the only sin. And when it enables Will to imagine his existence starting from any point of the rich net of his relations, the novel achieves the maximum morality a work of art can claim (more so for the reason that it never displays this ambition, but grows out quietly as if from life itself).

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