

METANARRATIVES AND TEXTUAL IRONIES IN ROBERT KROETSCH'S *GONE INDIAN*

UDC 820(71).09-31

Tanja Cvetković

Faculty of Philosophy, Niš, YU

Abstract. *The narrative structure of Robert Kroetsch's novel Gone Indian is multi-layered and abounds in the use of mythological fragments with special reference to the myths and stories of the Canadian past and present. Robert Kroetsch's use of myth in his novels, as well as in the novel Gone Indian, is exposed to parody and irony for he believes that familiar myths and stories must be "deconstructed", "uninvented" and "unnamed" (all his favored terms) as fictions.*

The surface story of the novel *Gone Indian* is concerned with the issues of identity of the main hero Jeremy Sadness whose life story, recorded in fragments on the tape recorder, is manipulated and interpreted by another narrative voice in the novel, Jeremy's professor and supervisor, Mark Madham, who plays the role of a parodic reader-surrogate and writer-surrogate. What is of interest here is not the overt structure and content of the narrative, but the covert structures, hidden in "the space between" the text and the actual reader. Three of the most significant texts beneath the surface story of *Gone Indian* are: Frederick Jackson Turner's notion of the American frontier; the story of "Gray Owl", a type of an ironic trickster figure in the text; and Jack Shadbolt's mural at the Edmonton airport "Bush Pilot in the Northern Sky". While the story on the surface of the text continues the traditional effort of putting together a coherent narrative, the subtexts add a new reading to the surface story by constantly undermining it and diffusing its meaning. By constantly exploding the metanarrative of the surface text via various subtexts, this novel balances within "the space between" a description of Canada's perception of itself and its place in the world.

Much of Robert Kroetsch's writing is closely aligned with Foucauldian archeological practices and takes the form of uncovering, revealing a new layer of meaning under the surface story. Apart from layering, the archeological technique allows for the existence of fragments, the interrelationships of which expand the meaning of the main narrative by means of imaginative speculation.

The narrative structure of Robert Kroetsch's novel *Gone Indian* is multi-layered although the plot summary gives little indication of the complexities underlying the textual surface. The surface structure is borrowed from the epistolary novel in which the entire narrative is presented through a series of letters. The main hero, Jeremy Sadness, has recorded his life stories in fragments on the tape recorder because of his inability to put down his experience in words. He sends the tapes to his professor and supervisor Mark Madham who manipulates and interprets the fragments presenting Jeremy Sadness's life story to the readers. Mark Madham of Binghampton, New York, is responding to a letter from Jill Sunderman of Edmonton, Alberta, about the whereabouts of a graduate student Jeremy Sadness who has disappeared in the Canadian wilderness. We find out from the transcriptions of tapes and a series of letters that Madham sends Jill that Jeremy has gone to Edmonton for a job interview. At the airport he collects the wrong suitcase and in search of the right owner Roger Dorck, barrister and solicitor, he meets his secretary Jill Sunderman, her mother Bea, finds out about Jill's father, the late Robert Sunderman, takes part in the winter festival instead of Roger Dorck and disappears with Bea, leaving behind his tape recorder. It turns out that the people he has met in Alberta are in mysterious connection to Professor Madham from whose letters it can be inferred that Robert Sunderman has faked his death by drowning and has traveled to Binghampton, New York, where he resides as a university professor named R. Mark Madham and has been having an affair with Jeremy's wife Carol.

The whole story of the novel is concerned with the identity issue - replaced, mistaken, changed identities. The question of identity does not occur within the story of Jeremy Sadness told by Professor Madham the way he selects and interprets fragments of the various tape recordings but outside that story and within the space occupied first by two fictional characters Mark Madham and the text's fictional reader, Jill Sunderman, and then between the two narrators, Madham and Jeremy, and the actual readers of the novel. However, Kroetsch's archeological fragments scattered through the novel are accessible to the actual reader only through Madham. The novel refers to the double layer of the text: the one created by the fictive character of the text, in this case Mark Madham, who creates the fictional world, and the fictive hero, Jeremy Sadness, and the other constructed between the text and the actual reader who compares the text to what he/ she thinks of as "real". The issues of identity might be followed within this context, within "the space between" as described by Mary K. Kirtz in her essay "Inhabiting the Dangerous Middle of the Space Between: An Intramodernist Reading of Kroetsch's *Gone Indian*"¹, or "the dangerous middle" as Robert Kroetsch explains in his essay "Beyond Nationalism: A Prologue".² Talking of Canadian writing, he says that this writing takes place between the vastness of (closed) cosmologies and the fragments found in the (open) field of the archeological site. It is a literature of the dangerous middles. It is a literature that, compulsively seeking its own story (and to be prophetic after all: this will be the case a century from now) comes compulsively to a genealogy that refuses origin, to a genealogy that speaks instead, and anxiously, and with a generous reticence, the nightmare and the welcome dream of Babel.³

The epistolary, realist narrative structure of the novel is opposed to many underlying fragmented stories of the novel. In his essay "Disunity as Unity: A Canadian Strategy" Kroetsch explains that his concern is with narrative itself.

The shared story - what I prefer to call the assumed story - has traditionally been basic to nationhood. As a writer I'm interested in these assumed stories - what I call meta-narratives. It may be that the writing of particular narratives, within a culture, is dependent on these meta-narratives.⁴

In the same essay, Kroetsch defines a metanarrative as "a kind of archeological act that succeeds against the traditional narrative."⁵ In the postmodern world we trust a version of archeology over the traditional versions of history. Against the totalizing centre and the coherent narrative, a postmodern mind asserts the fragmented margin, the archeological sense that "every unearthing is problematic, tentative, subject to a story-making act that is itself subject to further change as the "dig" goes on."⁶ In *The Crow Journals*, Robert Kroetsch explains that "the text beneath the text, as in *Gone Indian*, is at the root of our Canadian writing."⁷ The use of metanarratives is a typical Canadian strategy and the phenomenon is reflected in *Gone Indian* by parodying and exploding the surface narrative.

The three underlying texts beneath the surface narrative structure of *Gone Indian*, according to Sherrill Grace,⁸ are: Frederick Jackson Turner's notion of the American frontier, the story of Grey Owl, and Jack Shadbolt's mural at the Edmonton airport "Bush Pilot in the Northern Sky". According to Kroetsch's belief that "the fiction makes us real"⁹ and that we do not have an identity until somebody tells our story because it is the act of storytelling that contributes to our or somebody else's identity, I associate the metanarratives of the main text with the two main narrative voices and the two main characters, Jeremy and Madham, and their identity problems. In my opinion, the various subtexts in the novel do not dissolve personality. On the contrary, they define it in an additional different way thus expanding it into the possibility of meanings, or, as it is said in the novel, "the diffusion of personality into a complex of possibilities rather than a concluded self".¹⁰ We also have in this statement the classic tension between regional and national identity in Canada: the vast spaces allow an endless expanse of personality. As far as the individual is concerned, there are no boundaries, no barriers. The nation, however, requires definition, confines itself within borders, must be a "concluded self" if it is to retain a distinct identity. Jeremy Sadness has been driving toward such an expanse of personality, while Madham personifies a conclusion of self.

Kroetsch's frontier idea in the novel is a parody of the American frontier as described in Frederick Jackson Turner's "The Significance of the Frontier in American History".¹¹ Turner describes the American western frontier and its shaping of the essential American as white, strong, male, self-reliant individual. Kroetsch's Canadian frontier is the frontier of the North and, according to Sherrill Grace, it is the basic semiotic system in the novel. Unlike the American West, the Canadian North is characterized by silence, something that looks like a failure. By explaining the difference between the American and the Canadian frontier, Kroetsch states in the same essay:

The North is not a typical American frontier, a natural world to be conquered and exploited. Rather, in spite of inroads, it remains a true wilderness, a continuing presence. ... And we don't have to go there literally in order to draw sustenance from it, any more than the American had to go literally to the west. It presses southward into the Canadian consciousness.¹²

As described by Kroetsch, the Canadian frontier is more part of one's consciousness than a physical frontier where one can prove himself. In *Gone Indian*, however, the Canadian North is not only a psychological but also a physical frontier.

It is the city of Edmonton, "the last city on the far last edge of our civilization"¹³, that Jeremy Sadness goes to to experience the change and transformation of identity. Kroetsch admits that "we have in Edmonton a technological center that bills itself as the Gateway to the North", and that he is "fascinated by characters who approach the city, resist it, leave it, enter it."¹⁴ It is exactly what has happened to Jeremy. He enters the city and leaves it for Notikeewin several times in the novel while he is searching for Roger Dorck. The moment he enters the city at the airport for the first time, he encounters the problem of exchanged identity with Roger Dorck symbolically represented in the novel by the exchange of suitcases. In search of his suitcase, Jeremy is forced to leave Edmonton, to go to another northern city, Notikeewin, and to encounter some aspects of the Canadian frontier through the Notikeewin winter festival. Unlike the American west, the Canadian North turns out to be silent, cold, empty, ambiguous. It is not the place of the strong, true and free. It's rather the place of barren wastes, mysterious disappearance, isolation and death. Robert Sunderman disappears mysteriously by faking his own death by drowning in the ice; Roger Dorck loses his own consciousness by a fatal leap with his snowmobile over the hummock of ice and snow and remains in coma throughout the novel. Jeremy Sadness himself is lost into the snowy night during the winter festival and the snowshoe race and is helped out by Daniel Beaver, an Indian. Moreover, the Canadian North in *Gone Indian* is dangerous, mysterious, primordial; it is mother and virgin which encompasses its male questors seeking to conquer, name and discover it for themselves. The North with its whiteness, vastness, snow and prairie blizzard, as described in the novel, is the place where its male questors seek to return. It is a kind of a metaphorical womb, a secure place, a kind of paradise which embraces man in his desperate attempt to find security, instead of which he finds death. Unlike the American West which is masculine and virile, the Canadian North is gendered female. It embraces and swallows man. Thus Jeremy's and his lover Bea's escape into the vastness of the northern Arctic prairie and their fatal fall from the bridge into the abyss and snow is the escape into nothingness: "And they rode away seeking NOTHING. They sought NOTHING. They would FLEE everything. THEY DID NOT KNOW WHERE THEY WERE GOING."¹⁵ The effect of the Canadian North on an individual as described in the novel confirms Robert Kroetsch's statement that "it remains a true wilderness, a continuing presence. We don't want to conquer it. Sometimes we want it to conquer us."¹⁶ In a similar way, Donna Bennet describes North as "the uncreated frontier. One frontier that will conquer you. The intersection of nothing. The void (filled with all possibilities)."¹⁷

The main sub-text of *Gone Indian* is the story of Grey Owl. Grey Owl is really Archibald Stansfeld Belaney, a stubborn Englishman who rejected his home in England in order to live among Indians in Canada. He arrived in Canada in 1906, made quickly for Northern Ontario where he trapped, murdered a man, was adopted by the Ojibway and got married several times. The Canadian Government financed two films about his life, his third wife Anahareo and their beaver, as Sherrill Grace points out.

The story of Grey Owl underlies in an ironic way the surface story of *Gone Indian*, although it has been hidden so well that its presence is almost indiscernible. At the beginning of the novel it is explained that Jeremy started his journey North not only to acquire an academic position but also to follow Grey Owl's model of life. Jeremy's journey north

is not his search for his own identity but his attempt to imitate somebody's life. Consequently, *Gone Indian* is criss-crossed by familiar words and phrases from the Grey Owl book: Grey Owl fringed buckskin; braids, moccasins, and snowshoes are Jeremy's. Grey Owl's and his wife's Anahareo's beaver with whom they jump from the train are Jeremy's Indian friends, the Beavers.

Jeremy is an ironic representation of his idol Grey Owl. Unlike Grey Owl who is self-styled, half-breed, amateur naturalist, Jeremy sets out on his journey as an insecure, confused, restrained man whose life and career appear to be a failure. To be Grey Owl and to go Indian for Jeremy means to go wild, to free himself of all restraints and limitations. Grey Owl has become proto-conservationist, lecturer and writer of books: *The Man of the Last Frontier*, *Pilgrims of the Wild* and *Tales of an Empty Cabin*, unlike Jeremy who has failed to complete his doctoral dissertation for a number of years. Frustrated and dissatisfied, he decided to go north in search for another model of life, to become somebody else, Grey Owl. While Jeremy feels compelled to play Indian, Madham could not accept freedom, vastness and timelessness of the Canadian wilderness and northern prairie: "I can only assure you I have been Indian enough. I prefer to forget the experience, and yet I do recollect the sense of being - how shall I say? - trapped in the blank indifference of space and timelessness."¹⁸

The third text beneath the text that is usually mentioned in connection with *Gone Indian* is Jack Shadbolt's mural for the Edmonton airport "Bush Pilot in the Northern Sky." Shadbolt's abstract expressionist mural represents chaotic parts held together by the great white disembodied wing which is painted against a black ground producing tension, ambiguity, and a sense of power and force. According to Jack Shadbolt, the mural celebrates the "conquest of the north" by technology and the skill of the bush pilot. Sherrill Grace suggests that in relation to *Gone Indian*, the mural represents the "leap into or against the dark incurious flume posited at the end of *Gone Indian*."¹⁹

Jeremy Sadness first notices the mural when he arrives at the airport disguised in "fringed buckskin jacket", "beaded moosehide moccasins" and carefully arranged "two braids", staring "at the Shadbolt painting of a labyrinthine airport ... a labyrinth ..."²⁰ His being disguised as an Indian and his going Indian represents the strategy of survival in the labyrinth of the North where you do not need "a thread, let alone a compass, but a disguise to get out alive - if you *want* to come out/south at all."²¹ Ironically enough, when Jeremy takes part in the snowshoe race, wearing the buckskin jacket, moccasins, and a borrowed pair of Athapaskan round-toed snowshoes, remembering the exact quotation from Grey Owl's book: "snowshoe lifts in front only, hanging by toe bridle,"²² he has been mistaken for an Indian and beaten to death by a group of people. During the race, Jeremy has been trapped by the North and its mysteries, his life has been endangered, conquered by the North. The visual subtext of the painting undermines the main narrative in a double way: the conquering of the North in the painting by a bush pilot is reversed into Jeremy's being conquered by the North for a moment. Nevertheless, he survives thanks to the help of his Indian friend. It is the image of an Indian which endangers his life and the actual Indian who saves his life.

In the novel what is genuine shatters the appearance, the surface story, the fiction that the writer creates. The various subtexts: the authentic notion of the North as the Canadian frontier, the genuine story of Grey Owl, as well as the mural at the airport, undermine Kroetsch's narrative only to be retold into new life. Robert Kroetsch turns various subtexts into new existence in his fiction by changing them, adapting them to a new

context, adding to them a new layer of meaning. For, after all, Kroetsch explains it is not the content of the story that matters but "the *act* of telling the story".²³

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META-PRIČE I TEKSTUALNE IRONIJE U *INDIJANCU* ROBERTA KROČA

Tanja Cvetković

Rad se bavi proučavanjem višeslojne narativne strukture romana Indijanac Roberta Kroča. Površinska priča romana nosi u sebi najmanje tri podteksta koji se odnose na Tarnerovo shvatanje pojma Američke granice, na priču o Sivoj Sovi i mural Džeka Šedbolta koji se nalazi na aerodromu u Edmontonu. Meta-priče, pomoću Kročovog arheološkog metoda, koji nesumnjivo vodi poreklo od Fukoovog shvatanja pojma arheologije, narušavaju autentičnost teksta romana, ali, uz pomoć čitačeve imaginacije, učestvuju u izgradnji jedinstvene interpretacije romana.