

Babeş-Bolyai University  
The Faculty of Letters  
Doctoral School of Linguistic and Literary Studies

## **DOCTORAL THESIS**

**Displacement and the Postmodern Fantastic in the Canadian Novel  
(1963-1993)**

*ABSTRACT*

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## Abstract

The twentieth century can indubitably be considered one of the most prolific and thematically diverse ages in the history of English-Canadian literature. More specifically, in the second part of the twentieth century more than ever, an unprecedented number of novels were published that led to the blooming of the literary scene. In this period, new voices emerged from marginalized groups, such as Native American or Black writers, which significantly diversified the literary landscape. The fiction written and published in this period reflects the writerly preoccupation with the rapidly changing environment and society. These novels were influenced by technological advancements, globalization, and the fears and anxieties that wars, pandemics, and the threat of nuclear weapons instilled in the collective consciousness. At the same time, an increasing tendency to diverge from the realist conventions that defined earlier texts was noticeable in Canadian novels written in English.

My scholarly interest in Canadian fiction was fuelled by the great variety of literary texts that proliferated in the twentieth century, as well as by a personal desire to gain a deeper understanding of how the novel evolved in an era primarily defined by change and experimentation. Additionally, postmodernism in Canadian fiction, not to mention the fantastic tradition, received less critical attention than the texts published in other Anglophone spaces even though their literary value is comparable to the masterpieces of postmodernism from other countries. Until recently, there was no comprehensive treatise on the Canadian fantastic, a fact suggesting that academics neglected and marginalized such a significant part of literature.

One element that twentieth-century English-Canadian novels share is the prevalent use of fantastic topoi. The fantastic also becomes a tool for exploring concerns related to a wide range of topics, ranging from gender issues to ontological anxieties. On the other hand, the fantastic also has a metafictional function related to the desire to find alternative ways of fiction writing, an obsession that haunted the Canadian spirit as a consequence of the colonial past. Brian McHale's *Postmodernist Fiction* is a key study for understanding the radical changes that postmodernist novels underwent in terms of their treatment of the fantastic. McHale's conceptualization of the postmodern fantastic is crucial for revealing the complex dynamics that these novels embed as well as for exploring the new forms of the fantastic that twentieth-century fiction generates.

For genre theorists, the fantastic continues to be a problematic concept that dates as back as Plato and Aristotle. Tzvetan Todorov's *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (1973) is the first major contribution to the critical study of the fantastic. It inspired further and much needed research on the topic as the fantastic had been a marginal topic in academic research before Todorov's seminal theory on the fantastic was published. Other relevant scholars whose contributions to the study of the fantastic are notable include Rosemary Jackson, Lucie Armitt, Colin Manlove, Eric Rabkin, Kathryn Hume, Jack Zipes, Farah Mendleson, and Brian McHale.

A significant term for understanding the innovative nature of the postmodern fantastic is displacement. A notion used in several fields of study, such as postcolonialism or psychology, displacement can be interpreted as a metafictional instrument that allows writers to challenge conventional narrative modes and to project the ambiguities and complexities of their own ontological condition. Displacement is used in a variety of ways in postmodernist fiction, such as in the case of historical displacements. In fantastic literature, displacement is mostly linked to the ontological structure of the narrated world.

The fantastic tradition in English-Canadian fiction can be traced back to the nineteenth-century utopias and James de Mille's *A Strange Manuscript Found in a Copper Cylinder* (1888). Starting with these nineteenth-century narratives, fantastic elements gradually became more and more prominent in different literary texts. This deconstruction of the realist framework is emphasized by disruptive tropes. One masterpiece that foreshadows the postmodern *Weltanschauung* and the writerly interest in myths is Howard O'Hagan's *Tay John* (1939), a novel that tells the story of the mythical Kumklesem. Set in the Rocky Mountains, O'Hagan's text reflects how myth can be appropriated and used as a liberating tool that challenges traditional understandings of reality. It is also important to mention the contribution of women writers to the evolution of the fantastic in Canadian literature. Authors, such as Margaret Atwood, Marian Engel, or Jane Urquhart, are major representatives of experimental fiction. Many of these texts aim to tap into mythical content in order to create fictional reinventions of our world, or parody aspects of human history, or even the literary tradition.

Prompted by favourable sociocultural and economic factors, Canadian literature became more and more diverse in the second part of the twentieth century. Science fiction, fantasy, dystopia, and utopia are some of the major genres that proliferated in this period. At the same, in

Canada the fantastic postmodern novels point to a preference for ambiguity, playfulness, irony, and intertextuality, all of them hallmarks of the postmodernist *zeitgeist*. ~~As such,~~ Canadian literature is an organic part of a tradition that celebrates such strategies and techniques. A penchant for myths and an interest in the ontological potential of the landscape ~~that~~ has its origins in early Canadian texts that thematized the wilderness. These are some of the distinctive elements that set apart the fiction written in Canada from the rest of the world.

The richness and vitality of these postmodernist texts influenced the international reception of Canadian literature. The Romanian scholarship is particularly interested in exploring the vast horizons of English-Canadian literature in twentieth-century context, with books such as *Infinite Horizons: Canadian Fiction in English* (2004) by Monica Bottez or *The Postwar Canadian Novel between Tradition and Postmodernism* (2005), written by Margareta Petruț. Other books, such as Florin Irimia's *The Postmodern Canadian Novel: Perspectives on Four Major Writers* (2006) and Mihaela Mudure's bilingual *Lecturi Canadiene/Canadian readings* (2009) introduce the Romanian readership to important texts from Canadian literature, promoting this way in Eastern-Europe the narratives that had an impact on the evolution of Canadian literature.

The key texts that shaped the postmodern fantastic in the English-Canadian context reveal the many ramifications of the novel as well as the directions in which literature evolved in the late twentieth century. An author whose novel offers valuable insight into the intricacies of the postmodern fantastic is Gwendolyn MacEwen. Of particular interest is her novel *Julian the Magician* (1963), in which MacEwen sets out to construct a gnostic text that heavily relies on Kabbalah, hermeneutics, and esotericism in the construction of the plot and characters. Her mystic novel is the culmination of her personal and artistic search for a cosmic vision. MacEwen displaces biblical and mythical references to tell the story of Julian the Magician, an archetypal embodiment of Christ. At the same time, MacEwen's fiction shows how myth can be a structuring element even in a de-centred and desacralized environment to the extent of becoming an effective tool in the search for meaning.

Brian Moore's *The Great Victorian Collection* (1975) represents another textual illustration of the postmodern fantastic. Not as invested in myths and mysticism as MacEwen was, Moore rather taps into the realm of dreams to build his novel. Moore materializes and transposes the past in present-day California, effectively combining oneiric and fantastic

elements in a mundane setting. The ontological landscape is liminal cartography, always bordering on the extra-ordinary, yet firmly rooted in a real spatial milieu. Furthermore, Moore displaces historical imagination and estranges the American landscape into a topography that is characterized by liminality and ontological ambiguity, playfully referencing the frailty of reality. Moore also turns the idea of dreams into a metafictional tool that marks the departure from older conventions to a new type of fiction, highly experimental and deliberately transgressive.

Jack Hodgins, on the other hand, focuses on his native British Columbia as inspiration for his fiction. More specifically, Hodgins displaces Vancouver Island into *The Invention of the World* (1977), a text in which the landscape is mythologized and reconfigured to become the site for the unfolding lives of a group of eccentrics. Metaphorically, the island symbolizes marginality, which can be interpreted both spatially and metafictionally. Hodgins also plays with different understandings of truths and how history can be mediated and constructed by gossip and stories. This preference for subjective accounts of the past echoes the postmodern distrust in metanarratives of any sort. Exaggeration, hyperbole, intertextuality, myths, irony, and biblical references are some strategies which Hodgins turns to express his desire to construct a polyphonic and multi-layered story, while also incorporating several references to Canadian culture. The novel reveals various aspects of the island community and becomes a valuable source for better understanding the dynamics of said community.

*What the Crow Said*, published in 1978, is one of Robert Kroetsch's most significant contributions to Canadian postmodernism and a crowning achievement of Kroetsch's writerly career. The novel is also one of the most experimental and estranging narratives published in this period in Canada. Fantastic elements infiltrate into the fabric of the novel and logic is radically reversed to the extent of becoming excessive and ridiculous. To complicate matters further, Kroetsch deliberately displaces elements from other fictional and mythical works only to turn them around in an attempt to create an open novel that is constructed by readerly interpretation as much as it is by the author. *What the Crow Said* also reflects a prevalence of mythical elements, but for Kroetsch those references are no longer appropriated in a search for meaning, but they appear as a source of parody. The carnivalesque, the farcical, and the burlesque are all estranging strategies in the novel. The Canadian landscape appears to be the spatial representation of ontological liminality. It is governed by absurd laws that seem outlandish to readers.

Lastly, Timothy Findley's *Headhunter* (1993) forays into the lives of social outcasts and schizophrenics, chronicling the darker aspects of human condition in a prose that abounds in intertextual references and ironic displacements. The inherently Gothic setting of the novel accentuates the fascination with death and violence, two elements that are the hallmarks of Findley's fiction. Literary texts are the main source for displacement in the novel, as *Headhunter* literally transports characters from other fictional works into the plot.

In all of these texts, the postmodern fantastic takes a different form, reflecting the complexity and the creativity of the Canadian mind. Displacement is a strategy that authors resort to in the act of writing because it allows for experimenting. Moreover, displacement is instrumental for canvassing a pluralized or hybrid ontology that is reflective of the fragmented and decentred *zeitgeist* that postmodernists embrace. The above-mentioned texts are all part of a larger tradition, and they offer valuable insight into the evolution of the English-Canadian novel, as well as into the postmodern fantastic within the Canadian space.

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