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Trickster Orthodoxy?: Deceptive Appearances in Louise Erdrich's *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*

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The ambiguous figure of the trickster calls for forked beginnings: there are at least two ways of envisaging him, as expressed in Paul Radin's classical definition:

> In what must be regarded as its earliest and most archaic form, as found among the North American Indians, Trickster is at one and the same time creator and destroyer, giver and negator, he who dupes others and who is always duped himself. He wills nothing consciously . . . He knows neither good nor evil yet he is responsible for both. He possesses no values, moral or social, is at the mercy of his passions and appetites, yet through his actions values come into being. (x)

The values the trickster brings about are usually found inadvertently: chance, not intention, is the main agency (Ellis 2). Moreover, the lessons the stories tell are taught by "negative example" (Danker 522). In a way, this "enemy of boundaries" can be envisaged stereoscopically as the utmost non-conformist and as the (unwitting) upholder of conformity, thereby questioning the very pertinence of the opposition.

The trickster often lives at the crossroads. This study will similarly stand at the meeting point of two lines of inquiry, an "internal," literary approach of *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* (2001), and an "external," more theoretical approach. Since the plot of the book revolves around the suitability of the beatification of Sister Leopolda (a.k.a. Pauline Puyat) one of the recurring characters in Erdrich's reservation cycle, the whole novel is intimately concerned with questions of orthodoxy. Conformity with Church doctrine is essential to the attribution of sainthood, especially so in the context of a Native American reservation, in which Catholicism is confronted with tribal religions. The universe of Erdrich's other novels, especially *Tracks* (1988), is here seen from the point of view of Father Damien, the Catholic priest, who is revealed to be an impostor and a woman in disguise, a fit white counterpart to his friend, the Native American trickster-character Nanapush. The text is placed under the auspices of hybridity, as every "pure" notion is—often comically—subverted: "racial" purity, gender roles and identities, and, of course,

religious dogma. Father Damien is so to speak converted to Native spirituality, rather than bringing pagan souls to Christ. But of course, the polarity according to which Christianity and Western values stand for orthodoxy, and Native spirituality for non-conformity, does not hold: saints often deviate from standard practices to renew the Faith, just as tribal traditionalism can be seen as another form of orthodoxy. Strikingly enough, the same word can be used to define a person's accession to sainthood and the exaltation of certain texts to pre-eminent aesthetic, social and institutional status as part of the literary "canon." This will lead us to ponder the significance of rewriting strategies in *Little No Horse*, as part of a subversive, or orthodox, "trickster esthetic."

Tricky Theories

The trickster and his rhetoric have become mainstays of contemporary minority literature and ethnic postmodern criticism in the United States, running the risk of creating a paradoxical orthodoxy of the unorthodox. The two most seminal of these "trickster theories" were exposed at the end of the 1980s in African American critic Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s *Signifying Monkey* (1988) and in Ojibwe writer Gerald Vizenor's *Narrative Chance* (1989). Both authors insist on the disruptive nature of the trickster, a character in narrative who confronts and subverts the dominant culture. Expanding on its function within the frame of traditional cultures, which is to "add disorder to order so as to constitute a totality, to make possible, within the boundaries of what is allowed, the experience of what is not allowed" (Kerenyi, 185), the trickster can, in a multicultural context, undermine the hegemonic pretensions of Euro-American culture and make room for alternative worldviews. These operations take place in and through narrative; they are primarily rhetorical, and make us aware of the discursive nature of reality, in an act of ideological demystification. Gates therefore associates to his African American trickster, the Signifying Monkey, the linguistic practice of "Signifyin(g)," "the black trope of tropes, the figure for black rhetorical figures" (*Monkey* 51). It is a form of "repetition and difference" (63), or creative parody, a masking device that uses the dominant language and semantic expectations for trickery or indirect in-group communication. Vizenor calls this double-voiced language, "trickster discourse": "The trickster is a chance, a comic holotrope in a postmodern language game that uncovers the distinctions and ironies between narrative voices; a semiotic sign for 'social antagonism' and 'aesthetic activism' in postmodern criticism and the avant-garde, but not 'presence' or ideal cultural completion in narratives" (192). Both authors insist on the roots of their aesthetics in oral cultures, and on the act of mediation between orality and literacy, together with a strong communal dimension: "the tribal trickster is a liberator and healer in a narrative, a comic sign, communal signification and a discourse with imagination" (Vizenor 187).

These twin aspects of mainstream subversion and communal empowerment

are confirmed by Gates's use of Signifyin(g) as the master trope of the African American literary tradition (121-124). In a discussion that is reminiscent of T. S. Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919), he argues that formal revision and intertextual relations place new texts within a black canon they simultaneously help reshape. The normative dimension of any canon leads us back to the notion of conformity, one that is here predicated upon the supposedly heterodox figure of the trickster (Adell 137; Feith 76). Gates also sometimes loses sight of one of the trickster's main characteristics, his humor. We are confronted here with one of the potential problems posed by a trickster orthodoxy: using this figure as an emblem of ethnic fiction, in a strategic alliance with the postmodernism that has become Academia's new doxa, we may run the risk of conceptual overstretch. It may be accurate to state that "theories of the postmodern and theories of the trickster coincide and mutually illuminate each other; perhaps trickster's biggest contribution to the postmodern is the notion that identity can be multiplicitous and that the deconstruction of a falsely unitary language need not lead to incoherence" (Smith 16-17), and to associate the trickster with the challenge liminality and borderline states pose to orderly systems of thought. Yet it may be exaggerated to assimilate all liminality and heterodoxy with tricksterism, as if it was a new Shibboleth.

This case of "trickster overstretch" results from the fundamental ambiguity of that figure's status, its closeness to, and overlapping with, the culture hero and the shaman. "Perpetual wanderers, tricksters can escape virtually any situation, and they possess a boundless ability to survive. It is these last two qualities that make the trickster not simply a figure to laugh at but also a hero. Even while transgressing all boundaries, trickster always confirms a human and cultural will to survive" (Smith 7-8). Once more, all heroes, shamans and wills to survive need not be trickster-like, even though the reverse might be true. It then becomes all too easy to enroll the trickster on the side of whatever "political correctness," one that would contrast ethnic (and/or female) dialogism with Anglo monologism:

> These writers [Erdrich, Kingston, and Morrison] seek to upset hierarchies not just because they have an inherent philosophical "feminine" dislike for binary oppositions, but because they pursue specific, racially and ethnically grounded sociopolitical purposes. It is the trickster's political exploitation of carnival that makes the figure so attractive to these writers. (Smith 13)

In pleading for a "trickster aesthetic," which challenges an ethnocentric as well as phallocentric tradition," Jeanne Rosier Smith (11), in an otherwise rich and useful book, resorts to a form of heavy-duty political jargon which seems to me the very contrary of the trickster's comic-ironic ethos. Community-building and the rhetoric of empowerment seem to take precedence over the structure of doubt and

carnivalesque strategies that are described. In order to sort out this strange turn-style of conformity and heterodoxy, the most expedient solution is to turn to the textual evidence of *Little No Horse*, and bring to light the encrypted "trickster signatures."

The Parable of the Wolves

Little No Horse is organically interwoven with the other reservation novels that came before it: *Love Medicine* (1984, expanded 1993), *Tracks* (1988), *The Bingo Palace* (1994); and the later sequel *Four Souls* (2004). The polyphonic structure of each of these works is expanded through interconnection into a full-blown story-cycle by installments, which encompasses approximately one century of the history of the Little No Horse community—it is actually the first time this local habitation is given a name:

> Erdrich's novels are another attempt to approximate storytelling sessions through the use of multiple narrators, different versions of stories, and community anecdotes . . . thus situating the text within a particular set of assumptions: that stories are communal assets; that stories never have one version; that different versions of a story are the attempts by community members to amend, revise, or refute another person's version of an event; and that one story is only the beginning of many other stories. (Jacobs 44-45)

This emphasis on community and polyphony need not be specifically connected with trickster discourse, but the fact that *Little No Horse* is largely structured like an inquiry (Father Jude gathers testimonies for Sister Leopolda's beatification process) and revisits from a different point of view episodes already narrated in *Love Medicine* and *Tracks*, endows the later work with the Signifyin(g) dimension of critical revision. The main characters are Fleur, Nanapush, Pauline, Lulu and Father Damien, the same configuration as in *Tracks*; the priest, formerly a minor protagonist, now comes center stage, since his diaries and recollections constitute most of the text. A similar preoccupation with history further unites the two novels. *Tracks* was a bivocal contest between Nanapush and Pauline, who both told Lulu, Fleur's daughter, conflicting versions of the story of her mother and the tribe. "Through his stories, Nanapush counteracts the Indian boarding school's attempt at cultural erasure and recreates a family and tribal history for Lulu" (Smith 80). In a way, history is to be read backwards, from present needs to the reconstruction of, and inquiry into, the past. What is at stake is the transmission of memory and identity, the survival of culture and community. The same problematic presides over *Little No Horse*, in which the to-and-fro movement between past and present is polarized by the beatification process, which serves the present-day interests of the church in its relations with Native Americans. The past is then interrogated and filtered so that an "official version" can be produced, which is both narrative (hagiography), and

history. This is exactly what the structure of the novel, with its weaving of conflicting stories, does not allow us to do. The struggle about narrative and history is a struggle about the nature of reality.

One telling example of this perspectivist hermeneutics takes the form of a detective story, another inquiry into the past, another form of writing. When Father Damien discovers the "rosary killing" of Napoleon Morrissey (*LNH* 161-163), the man who had presumably raped Pauline, he progressively pieces the unfolding of events together from a set of clues, or "tracks." This treatment of the episode from a deductive point of view Signifies upon the more "magic realist" account in *Tracks*, in Pauline's own voice, in which she states that she believed she had killed the demon of the lake, Misshepesshu (*T* 201-203). Yet Pauline's delirium and religious exaltation are not only her own: the wounds and tetanus attack consecutive to the murder with a rusted rosary are taken by the nuns for stigmata and a "visionary trance" (*LNH* 328). A stereoscopic reading of these passages from the two novels is like a "mise en abîme" of the instabiliy of signs, especially in the matter of historical reconstruction: subjectivity and self-interest make interpretations unreliable. As the quest for absolute meaning is always baffled, any orthodoxy is bound to be, at least partially, a lie.

The confrontation between the Church and its Other in the novel also takes on specific tricksterly aspects. Soon after arriving at the reservation, the young priest Father Damien saves Fleur's and Nanapush's lives during an epidemic. As soon as he recovers enough to talk, the old man starts a story about his namesake, the trickster, "Nanabozho Converts the Wolves"[1]: in order to sell their pelts to the French fur traders, the trickster pretends to have "taken the Jesus road" and sets about administering them a parody of the Eucharist, poisoned lumps of fat that are supposed to bring them eternal life.

> That's the way Nanabozho gave religious instruction to the wolves. After he saved their souls, he skinned them all and the foxes, too, and as he walked to the French traders carrying their skins, he laughed and laughed. Truly, he said, I have converted them—to money.
>
> That's all. Mi'sago'i! (*LNH* 85)

This story within the story is truly a masterpiece of "trickster discourse," imbued with all the communicational dynamics of an oral culture. It is dark comedy, an amoral animal tale in which Nanabozho takes advantage of other creatures' gullibility for his own selfish ends. His linguistic mastery of both literal meaning and figuration corresponds to the rhetoric of Signifyin(g): after all, his equivocations are both true and false. Poisoning the wolves, he lies, since they do not reach eternal

[1] The Ojibwe trickster has many names: Nanabozho, Naanabozho (Vizenor's favorite spelling), Nanapush.

life. Yet, Catholicism itself promises the latter not for the body in this world but for the soul in the hereafter. The trickster has perfectly understood the tricky logic of the missionaries: who is to say that his fake ritual has not in fact saved the wolves' souls, or conversely, that the Christian faith really delivers on its promises? Is not its asceticism really a life-denying force?

The satirical charge already shows that tribal humor can represent resistance to the new dominant outlook of the whites. But in oral cultures, storytelling is always entwined in a complex contextual web, and is often an indirect comment on some situation or member of the audience. The situation at hand is that of a deadly disease, brought about by the "epidemiological unification" of the world following contact between Indians and whites since the discovery of America. More pointedly, the present epidemic of consumptive fever had been brought by the priests in their robes (*LNH* 81), justifying Nanabozho's equation of conversion with death. He furthermore associates this religious enterprise with the progress of private enterprise: the other white characters, the French traders, are the remote cause of the skinning of the wolves. Greed—in its capitalistic form, associated in early colonial history to the fur trade—is something trickster readily assimilates. Its disruptive effects are felt in the reservation both in the loss of land resulting from the Dawes Severalty Act of 1887, which imposed private property (Jacobs 81, *LNH* 72), and in the threat to native culture and spirituality arising from the two-pronged offensive of money and Christianity. Trickster's gloating pun: "I have converted you—to money" can after all have two meanings, alluding to the deadly aspect of conversion, but also to the fact that money may become a new religion that will divide the tribe. Both Catholicism and capitalism will vie for the Indians' souls, in collusion rather than opposition. One passing remark: this story also shows the adaptability of Indian culture, since it can refashion its myths to include and comment on historical events; this emphasis on flexibility and renewal is one of the essential functions of trickster narratives (Smith 14).

A further twist is to be found in this "parable of the wolves." Beyond the historical allegory, there is an indirect address to the interlocutor, as well as a challenge to his / her wits. Thus equating conversion with a form of perversion, Nanapush's story becomes agonistic, a language game that is also a power play. On the one hand, it teaches by counter-example: Nanapush distanciates himself from his namesake, implicitly refusing both Christianity and a self-interest that could be harmful to the community. So he tells the priest, to his face. As a narrator, he impersonates Nanabozho's spirit of mischief. Moreover, since storytelling is by nature a dialogic activity, the addressee's response is equally important. Father Damien does not remain witless, and answers in kind, "that he thought the story was extremely clever but that, if he read the meaning right, the Anishinaabeg were not as stupid as wolves

nor did Father Damien need to skin them in order to pay his debts" (*LNH* 85). This amounts to a declaration of intentions on the part of the new priest, whose desire is not to earn souls whatever the cost, but to respect Ojibwe culture.

The Playboy against the Western World

In a sense, this little parable establishes early in the novel a poetics—and ethics—of encounter, within the broader context of the meeting of two civilizations. Trickster discourse is first presented as antagonistic to Western, and more specifically Catholic orthodoxy, but from Agnes's first retort, this assertion has to be nuanced, and exchange, or relation, take precedence. Confrontation is of course one, and often the first, figure of encounter, as confirmed by the numerous examples of competitive games in Erdrich's novels. They are all variations on one crucial episode of Nanabozho's story cycle, his confrontation with the Evil Gambler. The latter, a curious being, "almost round in shape," invites him to toss "figures of the four ages of man in a dish game. The gambler wins three tosses, as the figures remain standing" (Barry 13). The trickster whistles at the last moment in the game, disconcerting his opponent and thereby winning the survival of the tribe. A similar configuration can be found in Erdrich's novels, for example in Fleur and Lulu's skill at cards, culminating in *Tracks* when Fleur, according to Pauline, takes the Spirit Road and gambles for the life of her child (*T* 160-162). Smith argues that the overall structure of the novel, a storytelling contest between Nanapush and Pauline, reproduces this pattern: "The competing realities evident in Nanapush's and Pauline's narratives recasts an ancient battle over the spirit of the tribe" (Smith 98). After all, Pauline, who denies her Indian ancestry and whole-heartedly embraces Christianity, is the most ardent and rigid missionary, caring for the dying in order to baptize their defenceless bodies (*LNH* 122); she might even carry the disease from one home to the next. Once again, the opposition between the two seems to take the standard, rather manichean form of "trickster vs. the Catholic Church."

Little No Horse features several of these power games. Sister Leopolda's final confession is such an occasion: the would-be saint prevents Father Damien from disclosing her killing of Napoleon Morrissey, because she has guessed the priest's assumed identity. One fraud hides another. Father Jude defines this as "[s]ome secret endgame in which both triumphs have been thwarted, a checkmate, a stalemate, and the result was the cover-up of a man's ugly death" (*LNH* 329). The metaphor of the chess game evolves into the objective correlative of Agnes's and Nanapush's relationships. He also sees through the charade, and, in characteristic trickster fashion, uses this revelation to win a game of chess against the priest, by ruining her concentration—and taking her bishop (*LHN* 232).

> "I'm losing," Agnes muttered. "You tricked me, old man."

> "Me!" said Nanapush. "You've been tricking everybody! Still, that is what your spirits instructed you to do, so you must do it. Your spirits must be powerful to require such a sacrifice."
>
> "Yes," said Agnes, "my spirits are very strong, very demanding, very annoying."
>
> Nanapush nodded in sympathy.
>
> "Check," the old man said. (*LHN* 232)

Here the meeting is not a contest between rigid orthodoxy and tricksterism, not a "stalemate" as before, but the process of recognition between two respectful "check mates." After all, Nanapush does not only break Agnes's defences, across the board and in real life; he also tells her that her predicament is not unique, and is accepted by Native American societies, under the name of *Wishkob* (*LNH* 231). Two conclusions can be drawn from this little episode: the rigid opposition between the Church and the trickster has to be relativized, since it also can become deadwood orthodoxy (we may even have to reconsider our former analysis of Pauline); the world is not antagonistically divided but spotted, "checkered" in black and white; yet a society that recognizes the centrality of the trickster and the importance of contradiction can be more tolerant and has an advantage over "either / or" systems of thought. In the world of the novel, the trickster's dialogical imagination may retain the upper hand over Western monotheistic, monological mindframes. "Check."

Agnes Dei, Agnes Diaboli

The character who best embodies this fluidity and mutability is Agnes DeWitt / Sister Cecilia / Father Damien. She stands in structural opposition to Pauline, the apparent "straight" Christian of the story. Yet, Sister Leopolda also fulfils some of the functions of the trickster: she serves as intermediary and translator between two peoples and two worldviews; she mixes the religious symbols of her two cultures, as when she drags buffalo skulls, Sun Dance fashion, from her habit (*LNH* 110); she is a knot of contradictions—"*métis*, Indian to some slight degree . . . Not one thing or the other. Contradictory," says Father Damien (*LNH* 145; 147). And she cannot help being a fraud, a murderer masquerading as a saint. A tragic, involuntary trickster, she teaches by counter-example: she is a living invitation to embrace life, the body, and the complexity of existence. Actually, Lepolda and Cecilia are both polar opposites and mirror figures.

Agnes's name changes reflect the different personalities she dons and doffs according to the circumstances, in true trickster fashion. Moreover, traditional tricksters are often androgynous, or can change sex at will. According to Orban and Velie (28), Erdrich's work echoes postmodern preoccupations about the constructedness of gender

and identity, but she was also inspired in this by Shakespeare, and his disguised, cross-dressing characters; actually, this most canonical of authors' preoccupation with the topsy-turvy world of the carnival makes him a mediator between heterodox Western social and literary practices and the Native American trickster's world. Thanks to her constantly redefined, performative identity, Agnes is as much a baroque jester as a white Nanabozho. In Father Damien's case, (the) habit makes the man: she drafts a list of gestures and attitudes that will allow her to maintain the illusion: "Some Rules to Assist in My Transformation" (*LNH* 74). More than a disguise, which leaves intact the opposition between inside and outside, accident and essence, the cassock holds two—or more—competing, confusing identities: a sometimes painfully split self, who sometimes finds a sense of unity in praying (*LNH* 109; Orban and Velie 29).

In a sense, Damien's character is a mix of Pauline and Nanapush: with the first s/he shares mysticism, a sense of division and guilt; with the other, humor, adaptability and the possibility of mediating between opposites to find wholeness. She is really a trickster because of the fusion she operates of the sacred and the mundane: she is a manifestation of Vizenor's "comic holotrope . . . the *whole figuration* that ties the unconscious to social experience" (188), and also to "the revelation of plenitude" (Hyde 292). This spiritual force makes her a fit counterpart to Nanapush, whose religion and worldview she actually gets to share, in a form of reverse conversion that turns Catholic orthodoxy on its head. It may be worth noticing that Agnes's trickster spirituality, her openness to other forms of religious thought—which allow her to mix the Christian trinity with the Four Directions of the *Midewiwin* (*LNH* 182), or to finally go to her death on the island of Matchimanito Lake alive with spirits, just as Fleur had done at the end of *The Bingo Palace* (*LNH* 345-350; *BP* 271-274)—stems from the most fundamental conflict in her femininity, that between the flesh and the spirit. Sister Cecilia, whose religious name reminds of the patron saint of music and musicians, was after all exiled from her convent because her orgasmic playing of Chopin was disturbingly contagious to the minds of her sisters: "Chopin's spirit had become her lover. His flats caressed her. His whole notes sank through her body like clear pebbles. His atmospheric trills were the flicker of a tongue. His pauses before the downward sweep of notes nearly drove her insane" (*LNH* 15). This romantic demon lover unites the sensuality of music with a form of spiritism that prepares Agnes for an acceptance of the Indian belief in ghosts and *manitos*, the very same ones she will be united with in death. A beautiful, ironic image of the Christian "dissociation of sensibility" is to be found in the description of the convent walls, built out of bricks donated by the Fleisch Company Brickworks, an inscription that was etched on the bricks: "the young nun knew, as she gazed at the mute order of the convent's wall, that she lived within the secret repetition of that one word" (*LNH* 13). The omnipresence of that writing on the wall alludes to the paradox of monastic life, which makes *Fleisch* (flesh) more central a concern for being repressed, and symbolizes, in a parodic mode, the doctrine of the Incarnation.

Yet, if the Word was made Flesh, why deny the flesh? The demonic presence in the music brought to the fore this contradiction, thereby subverting, trickster-wise, this erroneous dichotomy.

A similar chord is struck much later, when the false Father Damien Modeste falls in love with his aide Father Gregory Wekkle. On the night when they finally make love, Gregory accidentally tumbles the wall of books that divided their private spaces; then they touch and allow their desire to follow its course. The structural antinomies that are contained in written language impede the spontaneous flow of life; wholeness is acquired, in trickster fashion, by a comic tearing of the word walls. Priestly sex is seen as the same time as a carnivalesque debunking of Church laws—the law of the Fathers—and as a sacrament uniting the bodily with the spiritual.

Agnes's trickster nature preexists her encounter with the Ojibwe and Nanapush; the tensions in her womanhood—between body and soul, Church orthodoxy and the sacredness of the world, Otherness in her self—have predisposed her to accept and understand Otherness abroad. There is no doubt a feminist argument here, yet the point seems to reach beyond feminism. So does the fact that Agnes is a German-American trickster. Tricksterism is not the exclusive province of any one group of people; it eludes essentialism to point at a wider human condition. As beings bred in language and its structural opposites, raised in social systems that enforce conformities, we are all fleshpots of contradictions, and need the trickster's mediating deconstructions of polarities. This is why the trickster is a fit emblem for a thought of hybridity, a *pensée métisse*: Nanapush and Father Damien are not genetically mixed, but their genesis as human beings proceeds from constant exposure and openness to the Other.

Agnes, like Nanapush and, to a certain extent, Leopolda, is a thief and impostor, an equivocator and a joker, but she is also a figure of the artist. Not only does she stage her own transformation, as an actor would; not only does she in a way orchestrate her life as if the world was a stage: her Mass is an art (*LNH* 224); she is a writer and translator (*LNH* 257), as her many "reports" to the Pope indicate; and she is an inspired pianist. "When it came right down to it, she acted as an artist" (*LNH* 222). We have already come across the spiritualist dimension of her love for Chopin; once in the reservation, a symmetrical episode shows her in contact with the powers of the earth. The vibrations of the new church piano attract hundreds of snakes whose ancient nest is situated under the rock on which the church was built. Agnes then becomes a snake charmer (*LNH* 219-220). This episode, one of the putative "miracles" at *Little No Horse*, stands at a cross-cultural crossroads. Should it be interpreted as a victory over the Devil of Genesis, or as a proof of shamanic powers? Whatever the case, it is a landmark in the priest's acceptation into the tribe, and a mediation between the two opposed worldviews. Just like the new statue of the Virgin ordered by the church, infused with the love reveries of an unknown sculptor, which verges on an unorthodox leniency towards the flesh: "The snake that writhed

beneath the Virgin's feet not only was too realistic, but did not look at all crushed by her weight" (*LNH* 227). Manichean opposition has given way to complementarity.

Such episodes, in spite of their mixed emotional and humorous tone, can be considered as examples of trickster discourse, not only because they embody a logic of accidents, encounters and *métissage*, but also because they are transgressive and parodic. This recoding of the two cardinal Catholic figures of the Virgin and the Snake amounts to a Signifyin(g) subversion of orthodoxy in the light of another cultural environment. Even though the mild humor of the scene is far from the low comedy often associated with the trickster, it belongs to a wider process in the novel, and still represents the replacement of a serious, even tragic vision of cultural conflation, as seen in Sister Leopolda's case, with a more comic, metamorphic vision of life. The difference in the portrayal of the main Catholic characters between *Tracks* and *Little No Horse* may correspond to a historical evolution of the church, the recent insistence on the "inculturation" of Christianity if it wants to survive among Native Americans (Rigal-Cellard 209). The future of the Church therefore depends on the abandonment of rigid orthodoxy and a flirtation with non-conformism. Yet Erdrich seems to go one step further, by finding under the doctrinal elaborations of Christianity a basic human paganism. As Agnes tells the black dog who comes to visit her: "so at this late age I'm going to convert, stupid dog, and become at long last the pagan that I always was at heart before I was Cecilia, when I was just Agnes, until I was seduced and diverted by the music of Chopin" (*LNH* 310).

The Metaplayer and the Trickster Author

The trickster characters in *Little No Horse* create their lives in a liminal environment born of the encounter between several cultures, through self-fashioning and storytelling. They also often seem to be "emplotted" by stories beyond their control. This can demonstrate the power of narrative and fiction in the definition of selfhood and identity, yet it can also show the dispossession of self by pre-existing plots. Of course, the fact that all characters are "paper beings," and tricksters are "comic signs in tribal narratives" (Vizenor 10), leads us to address the question of a trickster narrator, and possibly, author.

Father Damien's final destination, the island on Matchimanito Lake, echoes Fleur's last voyage. Yet, even though s/he sees her friends' ghosts, and dies a trickster's death, laughing "in joy at the foolishness of all design" (*LNH* 349), the final meaning of the scene remains open:

> Underneath her and before her, a wide plain of utter emptiness opened; trusting, yearning, she put her arms out into that emptiness. She reached as far as she could, farther than she was capable, held her hands out until at last a bigger, work-toughened hand grasped hold of hers.

With a yank, she was pulled across. (*LNH* 349-350)

This enigmatic hand can be that of her friend Nanapush, or of Nanabozho the trickster spirit, originator of most arts and technologies, but it could just the same be Jesus's, who was after all a carpenter. Not to mention the fact that Native American tricksters were often identified either with the Devil (by missionaries) or Christ, by Indians (Orban and Velie 31). So there seems to be a master plot, an ordering pattern beyond all the chance occurrences of destiny, but it remains mysterious, as to both intent and meaning. As Agnes herself tells her audience of snakes: "If I am loved . . . it is by a merciless and exacting love against which I have no defense. If I am loved, then I am being pitilessly manipulated by a force I cannot withstand, either, and so it is all the same. I must do what I must do. Go in peace" (*LNH* 227). Once again, this plot-driving entity can be assigned to Divine Providence, in the Christian sense, to the Devil, as the Faustian black dog who impersonates him argues (*LNH* 309), or to a trickster god. By upholding several orthodoxies and conformities, the narrative finally upholds none, ending on a last equivocation, the possible confusion of the Christian and trickster God. This refusal to close meaning takes us from the diegetic and thematic level to the narrative level, where the trickster "metaplayer" (Smith 16) plays his game. Trickster characters are artists, made in the image of the metanarrator, who juggles with the many intradiegetic narrators and stories that make up the novel—and fills the place of the *deus ex machina.*

The "parable of the moose" is a case in point. Nanapush wants to kill a moose, but unwittingly reproduces his namesake Nanabozho's pride and overconfidence, which lead to the same catastrophic conclusions as in the traditional story. "He decided to tempt fate by tempting the story" (*LNH* 286). Nanapush had hunted a moose that was crossing the lake and secured it with a rope, waiting till the animal had brought him back ashore to shoot it. But the moose surprised him, and dragged the canoe at a breakneck pace through the woods. The grotesqueness of the situation was compounded by the fact that the boat's fishing lines tangled around Nanapush and the hooks pierced the flesh of his buttocks. After he was saved, his death was brought about by the bean diet Margaret yoked him to, by way of reprisal for the loss of the moose's meat. Nanapush farted himself to death, only to resurrect on the third day in order to love his woman good and die again in a state, if not of grace, at least of happiness (*LNH* 283-295). Nanapush's passion can also remind the reader of Christ's Passion, in a lighter key: the dragging and fishhooks may represent the carrying of the Cross and the crucifixion, whereas the resurrection of the flesh in the form of a raised phallus seems a pun on the word "passion." At least it points to a textual truth: tricksters never die in stories; each telling, each reading brings them back to life. The trickster is a textual effect, a trope, but this spirit of misrule is healing, life-giving and eternal.

This episode is framed by a series of interrelated narratives: the original

Nanabozho story, which is mentioned but not reported, the Christian narrative it may or may not intentionally parody, and the Nanapush story that reproduces the other two. What remains unclear is the status of this third narrator: do we have a communal voice, the voice of rumor; is it a traditional storyteller's voice; Father Damien's memories, mental, oral or written; or Erdrich's storytelling/story-writing voice? It is the same entity that is responsible for the editing and ordering of the different stories and voices in the novel, what could be called the true "metanarrative voice"? In fact, the attitude toward narrative voice in *Little No Horse* marks a startling departure from Erdrich's other reservation novels. *Little No Horse* is characterized by a strong focus on written reports: they actually give the novel its title. Written texts are numerous: letters to the Pope, excerpts from Father Damien's journal, property deeds, newspaper clippings, Father Jude's own report drafts, etc. These acquire the status of sources, or historical documents. The body of the text is much more fragmented and disseminated than in the other novels: to the heterogeneity of voice and medium corresponds a division into parts, chapters and sub-chapters. The result is a kaleidoscopic collage of heterogeneous documents whose aim is to make the reader active in the construction and interpretation of the text, an aesthetic of hybridity at work, as well as a jester's motley habit. The text therefore ironically questions—Signifies on—its own production, by showing the many pitfalls of a translation from the oral to the written mode—as well as from the Ojibwe language to English. It may also be a comment on Erdrich's earlier books, which followed the structure of story cycles in an attempt to create a literary equivalent to storytelling situations. Rather than a criticism, this distanciation only enriches the attempt, by putting forward the irreducible opacities that situations of hybridity never do away with.[2]

A tricksterly turn of the screw is provided by the tragi-comic fact that in a "fax from the Beyond," a belated answer to Damien's previously ignored reports and letters to the Pope, the Vatican tells that most of these papers have been lost, and the rest possibly stolen by a women named Louise Erdrich, who has published confession secrets (*LNH* 354; 358). Like Agnes, her fellow-writer, Erdrich could well be a thief and an impostor. Here we finally come face to face with our trickster author, or rather a simulacrum of the author, playing with the supposedly mutually exclusive categories of fact and fiction, using imaginary, unanswered letters to "prove" the veracity of her literary work, a work which reveals the fictionality of most categories, like gender, identity, "race," etc.

[2] Let us not forget Father Jude's tape recorder. As a means to preserve orality while inscribing it on a lasting support, it represents a compromise between the two realms. Yet we only have access to transcripts, which does solve the problem only partially and superficially. But it hints at the "secondary orality" (Ong 11), which pervades our society, and may provide the backdrop to the contemporary rehabilitation of "primary orality," to which Erdrich takes an active part (Krupat 55).

In the light of the preceding analyses, we might venture to confirm our intuition that *Little No Horse* is Erdrich's most radical, and perhaps first full-blown trickster novel. All of Erdrich's works feature some trickster characters. They are sometimes central, like Nanapush in *Tracks*, or Lipsha Morrissey in *The Bingo Palace*. Trickster themes, like mediation, subversion, or the carnivalesque, as well as an emphasis on individual and communal survival, are present. Multiple narration allows for Signifyin(g) practices, perspectivism and relativism, and there are many humorous passages, such as Pauline's water temptation in *Tracks*, or the labour lost on the love medicine made of frozen hearts by amateur shaman Lipsha, which kills its addressee (*LM* 249-250). Yet my impression is that the overall ethos of these stories, pervaded with trickster allusions and episodes as they may be, is more oriented toward the articulation of a communal identity at a time of cultural crisis, than to the subversion of that identity. This is especially visible in *Tracks*, a text whose most salient feature, compared to the rest of the series, is the prominence of magic realism and the figure of the shaman—in spite of the unreliable narrators, Jesus-crazed Pauline and Nanapush the trickster.

Whereas Fleur is obviously a liminal, transgressive character, her ethos, contrary to what Smith asserts (85-86), does not seem to be that of a trickster; her character is not associated with humor or comedy, but on the contrary with tribal loyalty, piety toward her departed ancestors, and a form of cultural conservatism. Our own opinion is closer to Connie Jacobs, who sees in Fleur a shaman, "the old-time sanctioned medicine person who seeks power from her animal manitos and who, in turn, is granted the gifts of healing . . . She is the female mythic element continuing to assert itself in the lives of her people who are assimilating into Anglo lifestyles and religion at the expense of traditional beliefs . . ." (165-166). Nanapush in this novel is as often a shaman as a trickster, emphasizing the community-building aspect of the trickster as culture hero. The magic realism is therefore more upheld than subverted, and partly smacks of that "pathetic anthropology" William Boelhower often finds in ethnic fiction: the affirmation of a collective ethos based on "legend, dream and memory" in the face of growing acculturation into the mainstream (94-95).

In *Tracks*, the literary use of the complementary figures of the trickster and the shaman seem to point to a form of ethnic thematic and formal orthodoxy, a conformism in differing from the mainstream. Even though this should not be taken as a negative criticism of the artistic achievement of the novel, it appears to me as an imperfect manifestation of trickster discourse, one that could run the risk of upholding the cultural nationalist orthodoxy comdemned by fellow Ojibwe writer Gerald Vizenor.

Hence the importance of the textual revisions *Little No Horse* brings to bear on the former images of Nanapush and father Damien. In a way, this story of the failed canonization of a devious Catholic saint also enables Erdrich to Signify on her own

literary canon and its implicit ideology. While still subverting the dominant Euro-American worldview and ultimately upholding the Native vision—all the Catholic "miracles" are debunked, whereas the surpernatural claims of Indian spirituality are mainly upheld—the more recent novel leans toward a more comic, less essentialist view, in which the complexities of cultural encounter remain in spin, unsettled, in a non-manichean way. The multi-layered tricksterism of the novel—at the levels of characterization, themes, genres and discursive modes, narration and meta-narration, all united by the litmus test of trickster discourse, the spirit of comedy and parody—allows it to be classified in the same category as Gerald Vizenor's or Tom King's works, as all-out trickster novels. This new outlook might correspond to an evolution on the part of the author, but also on the part of American society. Multiculturalism has become more widely accepted, at least officially, and the general onslaught on essentialist thinking made by postmodernist critics, even though it has become somewhat of an orthodoxy too, has made for an awareness of the possibilities of trickster discourse and aesthetic. It has to be noted, nevertheless, that the next novel of the cycle, *Four Souls*, once more centers on Fleur and on the figures of the shaman and healer, and is much more traditional in form. Since Erdrich expressed dissatisfaction with her achievement in *Little No Horse*, there is a possibility that she was temporarily "possessed" by the trickster spirit beyond her usual ken.

The ambivalent nature of the relations between the figure of the trickster and orthodoxies—subverting and upholding values; helping cultures survive through constant change—has led us to associate trickster discourse with a "poetic of encounter" and confrontation with the Other, internal or external. Yet, considering the uses of the ethnic trickster and his/her rhetoric, they run the risk of becoming the mouthpieces of a new orthodoxy if they are enlisted in the "politically correct" camp, subverting only mainstream, Euro-American representations. Only a dose of self-criticism directed at both Self and Other can allow him/her to remain the infusion of disorder that is needed to keep any system, literary or social, from becoming too rigid and oppressive. Erdrich's constant revisions of her trickster narratives seem to point to the everlasting vitality of this figure, not as a given story, but as the embodiment of a process, the faculty of poesis, of making stories. This is perhaps why Father Jude's proposal to replace Sister Leopolda's beatification by Father Damien's is bound to failure. Tricksters cannot be canonized, or they would cease to be tricksters.

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