

Preface

Amongst the numerous typologies of the immigrant experience in Canada, the one that has received particular attention in the critical debate is that of living in a constant state of doubleness, of developing an identity in an alien culture while still feeling a tie with the country of one's origins. In "Ethnic Voice in Canadian Writing", Eli Mandel (1977b) points out how the process of articulating the essence of the immigrant experience is a way of giving shape to a cultural identity, "a strategy for cultural identification that I take to be the ethnic strategy, the *voice* I'm trying to identify" (pp. 57-68). In ethnic texts, this *voice* usually finds literary expression through a series of thematic, symbolic and structural oppositions, the binary system, which Mandel sees as one of the most important structural features of an *ethnic* text. In a binary system, whenever an author develops a specific motif he will do so by providing a parallel motif, which, either directly or indirectly, reflects on its double and gives unity to the text.

Robert Kroetsch (1985) has also outlined some of the most important features of ethnic literature, and in "The Grammar of Silence, Narrative Pattern in Ethnic Writing", he emphasizes its fundamental presence in Canada, a country made up of a great number of people whose origins are to be found in a multiplicity of ethnic contexts. Kroetsch locates the essence of the immigrant experience in the subtle conflict between feelings

of loyalty and nostalgia for the country of origin, for a past that becomes even more evanescent, and the wish for assimilation and success in the modern context of a new country. Kroetsch quotes Grove's *Settlers of the Marsh* (1925) as a classic example of ethnic writing in order to illustrate his ideas. Bearing in mind that Grove is the epitome of immigrant Canadian writers, since he did not exist, but was an invention based on a German named Greve, who faked suicide and came to Canada creating a new person for himself (Spettigue, 1969), the conclusion which Kroetsch reaches on Grove's literary production is of extreme relevance to immigrant writers of the first generation. Kroetsch pinpoints one of the central dilemmas of ethnic writing in Grove's text "There is an extreme tension between ideas of success and ideas of failure" (Spettigue, 1969: p. 66), which vary drastically for the members of the two generations.

One of the most important structuring components of Canadian texts dealing with the immigrant experience of different ethnic groups, which is highlighted in *Ethnic Pasts, Modern Presents*, is the production of meaning through a different series of binary oppositions. The temporal shift from past to present, as perceived by the four authors chosen for this study, Rudy Wiebe, Joy Kogawa, John Marlyn and Frank Paci, is a problematic and, at times, tragic one, when the passage from the older generation to the younger one implies the loss of a cultural heritage and the acquisition of new social codes, which do not always meet up to the demands of a newly formed identity. For Linda Hutcheon (1991), the pressure on immigrants to integrate is so great that they are almost conditioned into a total rupture with their past:

"For immigrants, the need to resist the dominant culture – however liberal or well-meaning – may be intensified because of the weight of cultural tradition, made heavier (not lighter) by distance and time, by memory, by a sense of exile or simple nostalgia. Therefore, the drive towards self-definition

within a new culture may well involve separation from this ethnic past, at least temporarily" (p. 66).

Each one of the authors analyzed in this volume is concerned with the shift from one generation to the other and focalizes on the problem from a different perspective. Rudy Wiebe, in his novel *The Blue Mountains of China* (1970) is primarily concerned with the religious ideals, which inspired the Mennonites to leave Russia and Germany in order to find a new spiritual Eden in the Canadian wilderness and the Paraguayan lands. The older generation of the Mennonites were to find, to their disappointment, that faith in the modern world crumbles and dies, particularly when progress and economic interests begin to dominate their lifestyles. The younger Mennonite generation in Paraguay were to turn their eyes away from their fathers' religious ideals and accuse them of having left the richer and more economically rewarding Canada for the poorer lands of Paraguay.

The Blue Mountains of China is narrated in the realist tradition and aspires to the novel form. It is a collection of different stories, some of which were published separately, put together in book form and given organic cohesion through the underlying motif of the *odyssey* of the Mennonites into the New World. Lynette Hunter (1991) has pointed to the potential weakness of such a narrative structure, which paradoxically, is a very common one in Canadian literature

"Short fiction, with its metaphoric and associative strategies, raises a unique set of problems when a writer chooses to juxtapose a series of such fictions and create a whole book. The wholeness of this set of fictions is difficult to maintain because the formal conventions of the novel can pull it into the linear and discursive, and can diffuse the intimacy of the individual subjective portrait" (p. 4).

Rudy Wiebe overcomes the difficulties of the whole book form through a very successful narrative expedient: he inserts into the text four different chapters narrated by Frieda. Her highly personal autobiographical experience covers a period of two generations, and, thus, of the complete history of the Mennonites in Canada, and helps to overcome the fragmentary nature of the text. Frieda's narrative opens *The Blue Mountains of China* and is taken up again in chapters three, six and ten. The book is thirteen chapters long so Frieda's narrative is present throughout most of the novel and gives it organic cohesion. Her vision of the Mennonite experience is thus historical and personal; it successfully blends the documentary and the anecdotal and is emblematic of Rudy Wiebe's technique and accomplishment in *The Blue Mountains of China*.

The second chapter of *Ethnic Pasts, Modern Presents* is instead dedicated to an analysis of Joy Kogawa's poignant first novel, *Obasan* (1981). Analogously to Rudy Wiebe, Joy Kogawa too is committed to writing a novel where historical facts and personal experiences are intermingled to create a powerful and moving account of a specific event in the history of Japanese immigrants to Canada. The narrator, a second generation Japanese, uses both personal memories of childhood – oral accounts given by her parents, relatives, and other people who experienced the traumatic events, and written documents – at times letters and, at other times, official documents of the Canadian Government – to build up a carefully woven text where fact and fiction are carefully intermingled so that one never predominates over the other. Like Rudy Wiebe, Joy Kogawa is very sensitive to the problem of how language builds up and keeps an ethnic identity alive, but differs from Wiebe, whose literary approach to language privileges the dissemination of Russian and German lexemes throughout *The Blue Mountains of China*, in order to gradually build up the memories and associations of an ethnic past. Joy Kogawa instead uses the opposition between the poetic language of emotions, associated with the anguish

of the Japanese, and the cold, official language of Government reports related to the Japanese, to structure her novel.

In the second part of *Ethnic Pasts, Modern Presents*, the attention shifts from how language is used to reveal the trace of an ethnic past and culture to its very disappearance as a consequence of the generation conflict and the acquisition of the culture of the new country by the younger generation. For Frank Paci "to be ethnic poses a problem of socio-economic dimensions that has by now attained global magnitude" (Blodgett, 1982: p. 86). The younger generation of Italian Canadian no longer wishes to associate with its ethnic inheritance, which very often proves to be an obstacle in the acquisition of economic success. The sons and daughters of first generation immigrants reject the Italian language and culture in favour of hockey, pop music, and English University education. They acquire the codes of the New World and gradually slip into a communication gap with their parents that is to take them further and further apart. It is only when the parents are very old or die that the younger generation begins to appreciate the sacrifices their parents had made for them and the love they had not been able to communicate. Some of them, like Marie, now try to come to a full understanding of their ancestral past and thus of themselves by visiting their country of origin.

In an analogous way, in John Marlyn's *Under the Ribs of Death* (1964), the contrast between an ethnic past, still closely tied to the values and customs of the old country, and the rejection of these values in order to find full cultural, social and economic assimilation in the New World, is expressed through the conflict between the protagonist and his father. Sandor believes that his fellow Hungarians maintain too strong a link with their origins and criticizes them for not making an effort to learn to speak English properly for he understands that language is one of the most important keys to success in the New World. Sandor abandons his family and friends in order to try and reach

economic success with Nagy, a nasty, selfish individual who runs an estate agency and, in the end, betrays Sandor's hopes of working there after his retirement. In the end, Sandor finds himself alone with his wife and child and he understands that the fundamental values of life, like love and friendship, cannot be forsaken in the interests of economic success. Sandor's bitter experience becomes a typology of the ethnic condition of second generation immigrants for it leads him to compromise with his initial rejection of all that his father stood for and helps him to acquire an awareness that is fundamental for the formation of a new identity in the New World.