

WATER IN ENGLISH CANADIAN LITERATURE: IMAGERY AND APPROPRIATIONS

Marcello POTOCCO

University of Primorska, Faculty of Humanities Koper, Titov trg 5, 6000 Koper, Slovenia

e-mail: marcello.potocco@guest.arnes.si

ABSTRACT

The author analyses some typical examples of water imagery in English Canadian literature, especially in the poetry of E. J. Pratt, A. Lampman, and Margaret Atwood, as well as in Atwood's novel Oryx and Crake. In the selected cases, water is used as a hostile and static element; particularly in the description of ice and snow, water is seen to lose its dynamic quality, thus being deprived of its original vitality and fertility. Though hostility may lend itself to interpretations derived from Northrop Frye's definition of the Canadian national myth, his definition must be taken with caution. As the example of Atwood's poetry shows, the hostility of water may also be interpreted as the hostility of the Other and/or the unconscious.

Key words: English Canadian poetry, water, Canadian cultural myth, language, imaginary, Northrop Frye

L'ACQUA NELLA LETTERATURA ANGLOCANADESE: IMMAGINARIO E APPROPRIAZIONE

SINTESI

Nell'articolo l'autore analizza alcuni esempi tipici di immagini mentali legate all'acqua evocate dal linguaggio poetico nella letteratura anglo-canadese, in particolare nella poesia di E. J. Pratt, A. Lampman, e Margaret Atwood, come pure nel romanzo della Atwood Oryx and Crake. Nei casi analizzati l'acqua è usata come elemento ostile e distruttivo, oppure come elemento statico; in particolare nella descrizione della neve e del ghiaccio l'acqua sembra perdere la sua natura dinamica, privandola della sua innata vitalità e fertilità. Una delle possibili chiavi di lettura dell'ostilità e dell'avversità dell'acqua potrebbe essere – non senza cautela – quella del mito nazionale canadese come definito da Northrop Frye. Come ci indica in particolare la poesia di Margaret Atwood, l'ostilità dell'acqua può significare anche l'ostilità dell'altro o/e dell'inconscio, il rapporto tra staticità e dinamicità invece va visto come relazione tra l'immaginario primordiale e le secondarie rappresentazioni simboliche.

Parole chiave: poesia anglo-canadese, acqua, mito culturale canadese, lingua, immaginario, Northrop Frye

INTRODUCTION: WATER AND IMAGERY

In this article, I will discuss the use of water imagery in English Canadian literature, in particular by analyzing some representative examples drawn from its corpus of poetry. Making use of the criticism of Northrop Frye and Margaret Atwood, I shall argue that in the selected cases water is used predominantly as a hostile element, which is, at least in part, due to the source images in the early English Canadian poetry.

In 1936, Edwin John Pratt published his *Silences*, a poem notable for its use of water imagery.¹ The poem begins with the following representation:

There is no silence upon the earth or under the earth
like the silence under the sea;

No cries announcing birth,
No sounds declaring death.

There is silence when the milt is laid on the spawn in
the weeds and fungus of the rock-clefts;

And silence in the growth and struggle for life.

The bonitoes pounce upon the mackerel,

And are themselves caught by the barracudas,

The sharks kill the barracudas

And the great molluscs rend the sharks,

And all noiselessly -

Though swift be the action and final the conflict,

The drama is silent.

{...} under the waves the blood is sluggish and has
the same temperature as that of the sea.

There is something pre-reptilian about a silent kill.

(Pratt, 1989, II, 3)

Although somewhat anachronistically, Pratt captures perfectly a particular imaginative quality, typical of a number of works of English Canadian literature. The poem – ending with a claim that a culture of perfect rage could grow only »where the inhabitants slay in silence and are as silently slain« – is abundant with images of water that can be defined as cold, aggressive, and antagonistic. The use of water imagery in Pratt's poetry is by no means rare. In examining the most notable instances of Pratt's sea imagery, Peter Buitenhuis as much as notes that »the sea is the central, if not the

dominant, image of his poetry« (Buitenhuis, 1977, 43),² while Patricia Jane Munro observes that the sea, as well as the ocean are most frequently used as a destructive force or a graveyard, although in some cases they also become a symbol of a creative and occasionally chaotic life force (Munro, 1970, 24). A similar observation, but from the chronological perspective, is made by Buitenhuis. According to him, Pratt's early poetry is filled with images of the sea as both destroyer and moral agent (Buitenhuis, 1977, 45), while in the latter poetry the ambiguity of the water element tends to disappear, especially in the war poems, such as *Dunkirk*, *Roosevelt and Antinoe*, and *Behind the Log*. However, the ambivalence is not done away with altogether. In *Behind the Log*, the sea may be a helpful power for the ally forces, but in the portrayal of the enemy, strongly antagonistic water imagery is used again. The Nazis are identified with »predatory fish«, and with »tiger sharks [...] finding habitats wherever there was open sea« – not killing for food, but killing »that food / should not be used as food« (Pratt, 1989, II, 151, v. 67–79).

Therefore, water is, at best, described in an ambivalent way, and the general impression given by Pratt's poetry, in particular his early poetry is that he uses images of water so as to emphasize its hostile and antagonistic nature. This is especially true of his long poems where the sea becomes »a high stage for Pratt's epic battles« (Buitenhuis, 1977, 47), and it is especially true of his poem, *The Titanic*. In *The Titanic*, the two previously handled themes are united: man's pride in the construction of a ship, and the theme of the iceberg. Especially through the latter, water and its frozen formations are loaded with negative connotations. The iceberg which causes the catastrophe is understood as an extension of water and its force – this identification of water with ice becomes clear no later than at the moment of collision, when the impact is so faint that it »seems like {the ship} hit a sea« (Pratt, 1989, I, 322, v. 540). Furthermore, the iceberg is denoted with a specific set of images from the very beginning of the poem, most notably as when it is referred to as a »paleolithic outline of a face,« or a »sloping spur that tapered to a claw« (Pratt, 1989, I, 305, v. 89, 91). It is the claw that later tears »the double skin« of the ship (Pratt, 1989, I, 305, v. 557–58), and in the closing lines of the poem it once again becomes a »grey shape with the *Paleolithic* face« (Pratt, 1989, I, 338, v. 1934).

1 The poem first published in *The Canadian Forum* was republished a year later in the collection *The Fable of the Goats and Other Poems* (Toronto, The Macmillan, 1937).

2 Buitenhuis is also one of the authors attributing this fact to the possible influence of the environment of Newfoundland in which Pratt spent his formative years, having »his youthful sensibility shaped by the sea« (Buitenhuis, 1977, 44). This thesis is also sustained by Sandra Djwa (e.g. Djwa, 1989, xii–xiv).

The paleolithic, that is to say the prehistoric nature of the iceberg is what unites *The Titanic* with *Silences* and its prehistoric creatures below the surface, but with regards to the iceberg, Pratt gives us another important clue. »I call it a paleolithic face,« he said in one of his interviews, »like a monster, a half-human and half, well, granite, ice, you see, remorseless and careless and indifferent« (Djwa, Pollock, 2009). Pratt's own denotations in the interview are very important, since they bring us to a specific understanding of nature itself. Nature, water and ice are, in Pratt's view, hostile to human action precisely because they are indifferent. The hostile nature thus becomes an all-encompassing existential threat, and man in his struggle with nature, regardless of his wish to control it, is rendered powerless.

WATER AND MYTH(S)

Nature as something menacing – a trope often found in English Canadian poetry – was first brought to our attention by Northrop Frye, and it is not surprising that Frye wanted to define its use in the Canadian imagery using Pratt's poetry. Margaret Atwood also used both Pratt's poetry and Frye's criticism as a starting point to define her version of what may be defined as a Canadian cultural myth.³ In her most famous essay *Survival* she describes the natural environment as that which constantly endangers Canadian literary characters, testing their endurance, and ultimately turning them into victims. Atwood's understanding of nature is in great part indebted to Frye's notion of the so called »garrison mentality.« In the *Conclusion to Literary History of Canada*, Frye observed that the earliest settlers in Canada culturally defined Canadian communities as »small and isolated communities surrounded with a physical or psychological 'frontier,' separated from one another and from their American and British cultural sources [...] yet confronted with a huge, unthinking, menacing, and formidable physical setting« (Frye, 1965, 830). Such communities, adds Frye, are bound to develop a conservative mentality of self-isolation that may provisionally be called a garrison mentality (Frye, 1965, 830).

Both Atwood and Frye agree that in such circumstances nature is confronted as »Nature-as-Enemy.« Frye's reference to frontier, however, evokes yet another notion which is crucial to our comprehension of what is supposed to be a standard Canadian response to nature. In 1893 Frederick Jackson Turner formulated the well known theory describing the so-called American western frontier as »the limit of control,« as »a temporary and arbitrary boundary« which may be transcen-

ded, redefined or eradicated (McGregor, 1993, 283). But while the western frontier in the USA may be comprehended as a limit to personal challenge, Gaile McGregor observes that the so-called Canadian »northern« frontier, on the contrary, »denotes the *limits of endurance*. It is [...] an ineradicable line between the 'self' and the 'other'.« And while the western frontier is a culturally defined interface, the northern frontier is an existential one (McGregor, 1993, 283; see also McGregor, 2003).

The northern frontier and the garrison mentality, while becoming two primary constituents of the Canadian cultural myth, can therefore be presumed to be an imaginative response to an uncontrollable environment. I say *presumed* because I am aware of the anti-essentialist attacks in the literary criticism aimed at Frygian definitions of the Canadian cultural myth. I have shown elsewhere that, contrary to the assertions of his detractors, Frye did not understand these two concepts as a fixed identity (Potocco, 2006). However, it is indicative that these concepts are present both in the literary works and in the criticism of at least three authors – Pratt, Frye and Atwood – that most significantly influenced the self-perceptions of standard Canadian imaginative responses throughout the 1960s, 70s and well into the 1980s. Primarily, Frye's conception was a broader one. »I have long been impressed in Canadian poetry by a tone of deep terror in regard to nature,« he observes in the *Conclusion*, but he adds: »[i]t is not a terror of the dangers or discomforts or even the mysteries of nature, but a terror of the soul at something that these things manifest« (Frye, 1965, 830). Clearly, a terror felt in Canadian poetry is – as Gaile McGregor also suggests – a terror of the unknown, confronted in the otherness of nature, water, the indigenous population, and, by extrapolation, one's own unconscious self, as, for example, in the poetry of Atwood. To define garrison mentality as a typical imaginative response therefore means to define it as a mentality that either domesticates or evades contact with what is outside, since it interprets the Other as an existential threat.

In the context of such imaginative response, water imagery is deployed in two different, but often inter-linked ways. Firstly, in Frye's view, the image of water is bound to the physical peculiarity with which the settlers in Canada were confronted. They entered the territory through the Gulf of St. Lawrence and the Saint Lawrence River. And while entering the USA is a matter of crossing the ocean, »to enter Canada is a matter of being silently swallowed by an alien continent« (Frye, 1965, 824). The alien continent induces the terror of being completely

3 Although both terms, cultural and national, are found in criticism of Canadian literature, due to the problematical usage of the term nation with reference to Canada, it seems preferable to speak of a cultural instead of a national myth.

surrounded by the unknown. Water functions as the only possible entrance, but also as an almost impossible exit. This is also why water is used as one of the hostile natural elements, described as part of a wild and uncontrollable »North« – the North being in quotation marks, because it denotes the hostility of the otherness itself – in its diverse, albeit predominantly natural forms (Deahl, Barker, 1983, 33–34). In describing Pratt's poems and, specifically, his *Titanic*, Atwood defines the relationship of man towards nature in terms of war and challenge: »The Titanic itself – as its name implies – is a giant created by man as a challenge to Nature« (Atwood, 1996, 58). Both the iceberg and the ocean are claws, a weapon of the nature-monster and by drowning the passengers, Pratt shows that man is victimized by the sea. It is again indicative to read Atwood's comment that in Canadian literature, drowning and freezing are the two favorite methods for dispatching victims: »drowning being preferred by poets – probably because it can be used as a metaphor for a descent into the unconscious« (Atwood, 1996, 55).

Atwood's use of water imagery in her own poetry shows that her comment might as well be taken as a description of her own poetics. But one is also tempted to read her comment as a description of a variety of Canadian poems, beginning with the so-called Confederation poets.³ No later than with their rise in the 1880s, the imagery presenting water as part of an isolating and inhospitable nature had become a common topos in Canadian literature, most significantly in the works of Archibald Lampman, a poet that has been, surprisingly, in great part neglected by both Atwood and Frye.

Lampman's poetry is often discussed as post-romantic (Ower, 1976; McLeod, 1984), but it presents us with an ambiguity, and some curious paradoxes governing the relation between the lyrical subject and nature – and the ambiguity is reflected in, and sometimes generated by water imagery. Richard Arnold reads Lampman's dichotomies against the grain of Lampman's reception of American transcendentalism. Lampman's wish to imitate the transcendentalist identification with nature and the world is undermined by the typical Canadian imaginative response to nature (Arnold, 1981, 33–56). Motifs and images used in Lampman's poems seemingly imply a total identification with natural elements, but in his poems one can speak – similarly as in Flaubert's narration – of the surface (dessus) and the

depth (dessous). While identification is implied at the surface level, images in the dessous, with their affective agency, reveal an opposite stance towards nature. One of the best examples to deploy water imagery is no doubt Lampman's *Morning on the Lièvres*. It begins with an image of a quiet, misty – and mystical – surroundings, as well as of the river:

Softly as a cloud we ago,
Sky above and sky below,
Down the river {...} And the river reaches borne
In a mirror, purple gray,
Sheer away To the misty line of light,
Where the forest and the stream
In the shadow meet and plight,
Like a dream.

(Lampman, 1888, 21, v. 10–25)⁴

Despite the dream-like description, the mirror image is, contrary to our expectations, described as »gray«, and further on in the text, the river is given an aggressive connotation. It is seen as a predator feeding on its prey. I quote Lampman: »the lazy river sucks / All the water as it bleeds / From a little curling creek.« There follows an image of the muskrats sneaking »in around the sunken wrecks / Of a tree« (Lampman, 1888, 21, v. 27–32). Again, the reader is presented with a complex description of the muskrats and there is a suggestion of death lurking in the image of »the sunken wrecks« that can be read literally, but also as a metaphor for the ruined and deserted ship. Taken together, all these images produce a strong ambivalence, culminating in the final image of the poem, that of a sudden apparition and just as sudden the disappearance of a few river ducks.

Lampman uses a similar strategy in his winter-poems, only instead of water, the menacing elements are ice and, predominantly, snow: and the images are more openly aggressive and violent, as if confrontation with the existential threat would be more difficult to conceal when it came to the element, more domestic to the surroundings of the »malevolent north«.⁵ Let us consider two examples. While the poem *Snow* bears much resemblance to a similar poem *In November* – in that both are structured as a juxtaposition of a dream and the description of cold, snow-laden, and inhospitable surroundings – in *Snow*, Lampman's dream-vision is, once

3 This has become a standard literary denomination of the group that includes C. G. D. Roberts, D. C. Scott, Archibald Lampman, B. Carman, G. R. Cameron, and I. V. Crawford, because they were born in the 1860s, in the decade when the first Canadian political entity was formed.

4 See Lampman (2009) for the text in the hypertext critical edition.

5 I have borrowed the term »malevolent north« from the title of one of Atwood's books of essays.

again and predictably, undermined by negative connotations of nature.⁶ Three snow-related semantic fields prevail in the poem's imagery: silence, haziness and blurring, and heaviness. The dominant field of silence is captured by images of snow falling »scarce audibly«, by the meadows lying »still without a sound«, by identifying wood, water, earth, and air with silence, and eventually, by »the sleeping noises« of the world. The blurring of boundaries is evoked in the fading forests, in the smoothing road, the blotted hills, and in the dim sky. And, finally, heaviness is suggested by the dense snow, weighing down on the roofs and tree-tops, and in the dwindling fences. All these images imply an isolated and rather unfriendly environment, although on the surface a faint effort to identify with it is still attempted. Such efforts to identify with the environment are, however, more difficult to trace in Lampman's later poetry. In the unpublished *Winter Solitude* there are no more attempts at any identification with nature. Snow condemns the world to be »deathly silent« – leaving the lyrical subject in the scenery »utterly alone« – while the snow itself is designated in the central image of the poem as follows: »And the hard snow ran in little ripples and peaks, / Like the fretted floor of a white and petrified sea« (Lampman, 2009a, v. 7–8).

Like the iceberg in Pratt's *The Titanic*, snow and ice can be understood as water in its frozen state, and it is clear that they are both shown as elements in which the original fluid state of water has become static, rigid, and determinate. One can detect an identical »petrification« in Pratt's previously quoted identification of iceberg with »granite.« Margaret Atwood noted that the iceberg in Pratt's *Titanic* »is not alive [...] it is a 'thing' with the blind, uncaring motions and attributes of a thing,« and as such it embodies the three elements of nature: ice, ocean and rock (Atwood, 1996, 59).

WATER, MYTH(S), AND IMAGERY

In the petrification of ice, water loses one of its essential characteristics, that of fluidity and vitality. In their *Dictionary of Symbols* Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant handily categorize the symbolic value of water into three interconnected categories: water as a source of life, water as a cathartic element, and water as a center of rebirth and/or renovation (Chevalier, 2006,

662). These all imply a dynamic quality. Mircea Eliade has also shown that the symbolism of water is associated with fecundity, in close connection to the symbolism of Woman and of the Moon, especially through images of shells (Eliade, 1991a, 125–28). The woman and the phases of the moon are also associated with Earth, as well as uterus (Eliade, 1996, 36), and it is not by chance that in Greek mythology the »rational« Gods of the Olympus supersede the older gods, both the subterranean and water ones (Vrečko, 1994, 56, 109). This cyclic function of water – present also in the semitic traditions (Eliade, 1959, 63) – is naturally loaded with a dynamism of birth and rebirth. A more complicated dynamism, however, is to be found in cosmogonic myths, in which water represents primordial and indistinct chaos, but it is usually through an external element that it receives its dynamic faculty. In many versions of Hindu mythology, water and fire – Agni – both take part in the act of creation (e.g. RV, X, 129, 12),⁷ while Agni is also said to be the embryo of waters (Eliade, 1996, 139; Veljačič, 1992, 32). In Genesis, the spirit of God is moving over the waters at the moment of creation (Gn 1,1–2); but, on the other hand, there is an ambiguity implied in the celebration of the Jewish New Year festival, as the celebrated Yahve's slaying of the monster Rahaab and his victory over the waters are obviously equivalent to the creation of the world (Eliade, 1959, 60). In a similar way, the image of water is ambiguous in the Sumerian *Enuma eliš*. Only after the sky god Nudimuda usurps the post of water from the god Apsu, does water become dynamic leaving Apsu, according to Eliade, to speak in a nostalgic language of »matter« yearning for its primordial immobility (Eliade, 1996, 54).

In the duality of dynamism and immobility, Canadian appropriations of water obviously reduce its imagery to the side of stability, and at the same time, to a negative, threatening side. Obviously, this is not a process that occurs only in regards to ice and snow, but also in regards to water itself. Let us, thus, finally attempt to analyze some of the water imagery in Margaret Atwood's poetry and fiction, since it has become clear that in her essays Atwood tries to define man's relation to nature, following the Frygian myth of the »malevolent north.«

6 See Lampman (1895, 40, 45) for the text of both poems; and Lampman (2009) for the text in the hypertext edition.

7 I am referring to the hymn Nasadija sukta, as translated in the Slovenian anthology of Vedic hymns. For some interesting representations of Agni and water see also Gangal, 1998.

This is how Atwood begins her novel *Oryx and Crake* (2003):

Snowman wakes before dawn. He lies unmoving, listening to the tide coming in, wave after wave sloshing over the various barricades, wish-wash, wish-wash, the rhythm of heartbeat. He would so like to believe he is still asleep.

On the eastern horizon there's a *greyish haze*, lit now with a *rosy, deadly glow*. Strange how that colour still seems tender. The *offshore towers stand out in dark silhouette against it*, rising improbably out of the *pink and pale blue* of the lagoon. The shrieks of the birds that nest out there and the distant ocean grinding against the *ersatz reefs of rusted car parts and jumbled bricks and assorted rubble* sound almost like holiday traffic.

Out of habit he looks at his watch – stainless-steel case, burnished aluminum band, still shiny although it no longer works. He wears it now as his only talisman. A blank face is what it shows him: *zero hour*. *It causes a jolt of terror to run through him, this absence of official time. Nobody, nowhere knows what time it is.*

(Atwood, 2003, 3; emphasis M. Potocco)

Snowman, the focalizer, is seemingly the only surviving member of the »old« human race. He is stranded in a tree on the shore of a new world that was created during a self-destructive genetic engineering project by his close friend Crake. Although – as we are told later – Crake's newly-bred race divinizes their now dead creator, rather than presenting us with a variant of a cosmogonic myth, the opening passage must be read as an allusion to a deluge myth. In fact, both myths may be understood in close connection with each other, as deluge myths connote a (re)birth of an exhausted or of sinful world, whereas the flood clearly enables new creation (Eliade, 1996, 50). Eliade demonstrates that the water imagery in the celebration of the Babylonian and the Jewish New Year shows a mixing of symbols of creation and of the deluge imagery (Eliade, 1959, 57–60). Furthermore, most ancient myths of deluge, according to him, disclose a cyclical lunar structure and origin (Eliade, 1991, 72), especially given that a new, regenerated humanity is born from the so-called lunar animal or from a mythic ancestor who generally takes on the aspects of a lunar animal (ibid.). Hence, water, along with its cathartic function, also takes on the symbolic aspects of a life-source.

In *Oryx and Crake*, mixing of deluge and cosmogonic imagery is clearly present, especially in the representation of chaos. In a typical cosmogonic story narrated by Snowman to the new race, Atwood describes water as dirty and indistinct chaos, out of which – in a cosmogonic act – the »Great Emptiness« would be created (Atwood, 2003, 102–104). The image is in line with the creation and deluge myths in which water is most commonly represented as primordial chaos, while overcoming of water is equivalent to overcoming of the monsters and water deities, such as Rahaab and Tiamat. However, in another typical passage in the novel, chaos is described as that which has remained after the apocalyptic deluge: »The trees surrounding the dome were lush and green, everything seemed pristine, but when they reached the RejoovenEsense Compound proper, the evidence of destruction and death lay all around. Overturned golf carts, sodden, illegible printouts, computers with their guts ripped out. Rubble, fluttering cloth, gnawed carrion. Broken toys. The vultures were still at their business. 'Please, oh Snowman, what is that?' ... 'It's part of the chaos,' said Snowman« (Atwood, 2003, 351–52). In this passage, chaos obviously isn't represented as a regenerative principle of (re)creation, but a consequence of devastation.

Atwood's novel, therefore, presents a modification of the deluge imagery, and this is made clear in the very opening passage of the novel. Firstly, the water scarcely gets a mention there; instead of the real flood we are presented only by the impression that Snowman is a survivor of the deluge. Secondly, the images of water and of the environment are predominantly discomfoting: the horizon has a »grayish haze,« with a »deadly« glow, the dark towers stand out in sharp contrast to the »pale« blue lagoon. The images conjure up an atmosphere of infertility, death and sterility. Infertility, in relation to the human race, is amplified by yet another modification. Eliade observes that in standard deluge myths the disappearance of humanity »is never total, for a new humanity is born from a pair of survivors« (Eliade, 1959, 87) – while Snowman is stranded alone and his potential mate Oryx was killed by Crake prior to his own death. Atwood thus changes the standard model, depriving it of the female principle. The survival obviously has to be questioned, since the post-deluge imagery is shorn of the symbolism of uterus and that of a woman associated with fecundity. In *Oryx and Crake*, both are present only *per negationem*, as a past presence.

This reduction of the model is significant in itself. In *Oryx and Crake*, the image of surviving the apocalypse is entirely a pessimistic one. Instead of gesturing towards a new life, the survival of the last human becomes a symbol of near-death,⁸ at least in regards to the »old«

8 At the end of the novel, with Snowman's injured foot, and with his running into three other humans, several scenarios are possible. It is not certain whether Snowman will die, or how many humans have survived, and whether they would eradicate the new race, etc.

human race. Snowman is an alienated survivor surrounded and passively victimized (see Ingersoll, 2004), if not actively threatened by the new race surrounding him. He is respected only as a prophet of a non-existing deity (Atwood, 2003, 104).

It is impossible to discuss here to what extent the use of deluge imagery with its attendant pessimism in *Oryx and Crake* is influenced by the use of genre, given that the novel has been suitably described as post-apocalyptic science fiction (e.g. Ingersoll, 2004).⁹ But it is clear that Atwood's use of deluge imagery is not coincidental. Her earlier work is full of water imagery, with water predominantly taking on the cathartic function, and there are at least some poems by Atwood that also draw on flood imagery. In *After the Flood, We*, the deluge is clearly observable, and the whole poem resembles the opening passage of *Oryx and Crake*, although with images that are in many ways more explicit, as in the following evocation of a desolate city:

*We must be the only ones
left, in the mist that has risen
everywhere as well
as in these woods*

*I walk across the bridge
towards the safety of high grounds {...}*

*gathering the sunken
bones of the drowned mothers
{...} while the white mist washes
around my legs like water;*

*fish must be swimming,
down in the forest beneath us {...}
and a mile away
the city, wide and silent,
is lying lost, far undersea.*

*You saunter beside me {...}
not even knowing
that there has been a flood {...}*

*not hearing the first stumbling
footsteps of the almost-born
coming (slowly) behind us
not seeing
the almost-human
brutal faces forming {...}
out of stone.*

(Atwood, 1966, 4–5, italics by M. Potocco)

Contrary to »dark silhouettes« in *Oryx and Crake*, the city here is explicitly submerged and its silence implies the devastating agency of water. Both images, however, depict the desolation and devastation of the world which must be read in close connection to the relation of both narrators to the Other, and to otherness, as we shall see. Likewise, the flood itself is more explicitly shown, since it is already suggested in the title. A standard surviving human pair is presented right at the beginning; however, the representation is all but univocal, since we can as well read the flood as a metaphorical one. The narrator's addressee isn't aware of water, while the narrator concentrates on the mists that wash around the legs *like* water, but, essentially, they are not water. The flood itself is represented in a predominantly static way. Compared to *Oryx and Crake*, a possibly chaotic destruction of everything old and exhausted is shown in an image that is more aggressive and hostile, since it shows the remains of human life (the bones of drowned mothers), and it openly alludes to death by drowning, while in *Oryx and Crake* the focalizer concentrates on the remains of never living objects – things. But the predominant impression is again that of sterility; once more the devastating agency of flood is implied, not by active chaos, but by observing the consequences of devastation: the bones, the stones, and the city.

In *Oryx and Crake*, silence is relative, compared to the once clamorous cities; devastation of the city is implied by its darkness, and the relative silence is filled only with sounds of nature, and later with sounds of a new race approaching. In the poem, on the other hand, out of the silence that dominates the submerged city and out of the woods arise the footsteps of something »almost-born« and »almost-human«. The representations in the novel and in the poem both denote something that is human, yet not totally human; they both denote something created or born, but not yet totally living; and finally, they both imply something that is Other than the narrator's Self – nature, the new race: the unknown.

Atwood commonly depicts the otherness of the unknown in a fashion, similar to the one used in the poem *After the Flood*, that is, as a thing in the process of changing form, as something »brutal« that has been, or is yet to become domesticated, while at the same time often evading domestication. While in *Oryx and Crake*, accommodation of the otherness is related to developing the ability of symbolic representation by the new race (in their ability with regards to myth-telling; see Atwood, 2003, 360–61), and while symbolic representation in the novel is not associated with water imagery, the connection between water imagery and symbolic representation is, in fact, very often hinted at in Atwood's work.

9 *Oryx and Crake* begins, as have countless SF novels and stories, observes Ingersoll, »by dropping readers into a vaguely familiar yet overwhelmingly hostile and alien world in which a viewpoint character is struggling to survive.«

In her poem *Notes from Various Pasts*, the lyrical narrator is found:

{c}apsized somewhere and stranded
here, in a bluegrey rocking-chair
{...} looking at
what has been caught in the net
this morning: messages
from a harsher level

(Atwood, 1968, 10–11)

The surface beneath the narrator is, again, compared to the sea, and again the image of water is a rather static one:

I rock on the bluegrey
day, while below me
the creatures of the most profound
ocean chasms are swimming
far under even the memory
of sun and tidal moon

(Atwood, 1968, 10–11)

It is hard not to be reminded here of Pratt's *Silences*. But even in Pratt's *Silences*, the image of the ocean creatures is not that of primordial chaos, but that of a Darwinian hierarchy in a struggle for survival. This is not surprising given that Pratt has often used Darwinian imagery (Djwa, 1975, 49–51; 1977, 62–63, 65 etc.); nevertheless, compared to the one in Atwood's poem, it is still a moderately dynamic image. Atwood uses imagery that implies chaos, but her focus is a focus on the surface, therefore, her lyrical narrator focuses on the land above the chaos – and the surface remains static and unmoving. In the final analysis, what overcomes chaos in Atwood's work – as Yahve had overcome the monster Raahab in the Jewish creation myths – is the ability of symbolic representation, the ability strongly associated with the faculty of reason.

In this respect, Atwood's novel *Surfacing* – with the aborted baby, and the water imagery as a symbol of protagonist's unconscious Other – is probably most instructive. But metaphors of water as the unconscious which denote a multiplicity of linguistic significations are equally pervasive in her early poems. In the poem *This is a Photograph of Me*, the following image is given of one's self:

At first it seems to be
a smeared
print: blurred lines and grey flecks
blended with the paper {...}

(The photograph was taken
the day after I drowned.

I am in the lake, in the center
of the picture, just under the surface.

It is difficult to say where
precisely, or to say
how large or small I am:
the effect of water
on light is a distortion

but if you look long enough,
eventually
you will be able to see me.)

(Atwood, 1966, 3)

The split of the lyrical subject into a narrating self and a perceived object suggests the estrangement of the narrator's self from the Other drowned in the lake. At the same time the Other is difficult to locate precisely because it is submerged, and, therefore, suppressed. Atwood's concentration onto the act of perception likewise suggests a divergence in the habituated view, and through it, the otherness of narrator's habituated self. And although the image has been understood as a metaphor of the Heraclitic absence of a fixed identity (Munro, 1970, 148) – in line with a common interpretation of Atwood's poetics (Marshall, 1978, 89–98, 154–161; Davey, 1974, 30–33) – water is again presented as a relatively static surface. Nothing in the narration suggests any movement beneath or on the surface. Rather, the narration should be read as a phenomenological description which emphasizes the boundary between the perceiving narrator and the perceived Other. The view of the perceiver is first halted by the blurred physicality of the photograph paper, and then – while *inside* the picture – by the surfacing water that creates a distortion of light, causing a second smudging. The eye of the perceiving self, therefore, stops at this double-layered surface, which, though truly acquiring some depth (Munro, 1970, 148), in the depth itself, remains motionless.

In *Notes From Various Pasts*, the situation is quite the opposite. The depths are shown as dynamic, while the surface is represented as ambiguously static, primarily through the image of a rocking-chair, provoking the lyrical narrator to question her own condition:

*Have I lost
an electric wisdom
in the thin marooning air?*

(Atwood, 1968, 10–11)

The surface is not static altogether, since the comparison of a rocking chair to the day suggests motion. However, the static nature of the day is emphasized by the condition of the narrator: stranded, sitting, memorizing only. Instead of motion, the rocking chair brings to mind oldness and inactivity. This is underscored by contrasting the surface to the ocean depths. The electric wisdom Atwood refers to is associated with the primordiality of fish, but this Pratt-reminding image gains a fairly different meaning. »Creatures in the ocean chasms« are also:

sheathed in an armoured skin
that is a language; camouflage
of cold lights
{...} words {that} lie washed ashore
on the margins, mangled
by the journey upwards to the bluegrey
surface

(Atwood, 1968, 10–11)

The poem ends by denoting them as:

these once-living
and phosphorescent meanings
fading in my hands

I try to but can't decipher.

(Atwood, 1968, 10–11)

Water imagery is thus intertwined with language imagery, and the multiplicity of water creatures becomes a multiplicity of linguistic significations. By using a Pratt-like image of fish, significations are shown in a constant struggle to overpower one another while at the same time, in the constant flux of emerging. Since language itself is a creation of symbolic ties, and a symbolic representation of the primordial, as well as unrestrained flux of images (see e.g. Castoriadis, 1997), the fish – the once phosphorescent meanings in Atwood's poem represent exactly this unrestrained flux of images, the imaginary itself. In a specific way, Atwood shows unconscious imaginary significations coming to the surface – but, in the process of transition becoming something that cannot be deciphered. This motion is of the utmost importance. The meanings in the process of reaching the surface have lost their living attributes – they fade in the hands; they have lost the original dynamics of their subconscious, sub-rational, and not-yet-symbolic life. Hence, both the narrator and the words become static (and domesticated) once reaching the surface. By getting lungs, the narrator loses her electric wisdom, and by lying ashore, the words lose their quality of being unlimited.

It is significant to note that where representations of water have moved from being static to being dynamic, they have also moved to direct suggestions of hostility in descriptions of the ocean creatures. In some instances they have also passed to imagery almost identical to Pratt's vision of the sea. An even clearer example may be found in *A Descent Through the Carpet* where the path of the lyrical narrator is presented inversely as a submersion into the water. The ocean depths are described in an ambiguous dynamic fashion, but as directly hostile:

{...} in the waste ocean
{...} only the cold jeweled symmetries
of the voracious eater
the voracious eaten

the dream creatures that glow
sulphurous in darkness or
flash like neurons
are blind, insatiable

(Atwood, 1966, 22)

This is a crucial point to emphasize. It shows that Atwood's images, despite their more robust ambiguity, still remain in line with what she was describing in the *Survival* as standard Canadian imagery. In her critical essays, Atwood has taken up Frye's suggestions on the question of the Canadian cultural myth, and directly or indirectly, also some of the imagery found in E.J. Pratt's poetry. In her novelistic and poetic works, Atwood is preoccupied with the same ideas. Her usage of static and/or hostile images of water, in a variety of contexts, especially in the context of linguistic and psychoanalytic imagery, is a case in point.

CONCLUSION

By interpreting water imagery I have attempted to demonstrate that in English Canadian Literature Atwood's work is not an exception in that many authors use images of water, combining them with the idea of static and hostile nature, and the idea of otherness. These ideas feature particularly in Pratt's and Lampman's poetry. While Pratt usually represents water and its inhabitants both as an openly destructive and as a dynamic force, the ostensive image of iceberg in *The Titanic* also shows the devastating agency of water when changed into its »petrified« form. In Lampman's poetry, on the other hand, the brutality of nature is less openly hinted at, and the dynamic quality of water is principally ignored, especially in the representations of water's frozen formations.

In Margaret Atwood's work both types of images are used in a most complex fashion. In *Oryx and Crake* the

deluge imagery is deprived of its link to regenerative principle of cosmogonic myths, and the infertility of the post-apocalyptic world is underscored with non-fluid images of the ocean. Despite the fact that Pratt-like dynamic and openly aggressive images of water creatures can be discerned in Atwood's earlier poetry, serving as a metaphor of the primordial flux of imaginary significations, Atwood's narrators are generally focused on the static surface where the linguistic meanings – following the process of transition – have lost their living attributes.

Though the nature of water as static and hostile may lend itself to interpretations derived from Frygian definitions of the Canadian cultural myth, these definitions must be taken with caution. In Canadian literary criticism of the last few decades, a »thematic« search of standard imagery and topoi has persistently

been devalued (e.g. Cameron, 1990), and a re-evaluation of the so-called thematic criticism has only become possible in recent years (Brown, 2005). I agree with the critique of thematic criticism in that cultural myths cannot be understood as a fixed identity, as well as that representations can never be reduced to only one myth or one signification. Nevertheless, the analysis of water imagery enables us to speak of »northernness« and of »otherness« as at least one of the standard topoi, observable in a significant part of major Canadian authors. Regardless of the problematic denotations of the Canadian cultural myth, the analysis undertaken here has shown that we may discern a clear line which enabled Frye to speak of similar imagery deployed by Pratt, and to some degree also by Lampman, Atwood and several other Canadian authors.

PODOBE VODE V ANGLEŠKI KANADSKI KNJIŽEVNOSTI

Marcello POTOCCO

Univerza na Primorskem, Fakulteta za humanistične študije Koper, Titov trg 5, 6000 Koper, Slovenija
e-mail: marcello.potocco@guest.arnes.si

POVZETEK

Članek ob primerih iz poezije Edwina Johna Pratta in Archibalda Lampmana ter ob prozi in poeziji Margaret Atwood obravnava rabo podobja, povezanega z vodo, v kanadski literaturi. V Prattovi poeziji naletimo na dvoumno uporabo vodnega podobja, toda zlasti v njegovi zgodnejši poeziji so podobe vode preteče in neprijazne, kar še posebej velja za eno izmed njegovih najznamenitejših pesnitev *The Titanic*. Zelo verjetno je, da sta se pri Prattovih upodobitvah vode in narave navdihovala tako Northrop Frye kot Margaret Atwood v svojih opredelitvah kanadskega nacionalnega oziroma kulturnega mita, vendar je njuno opredeljevanje standardnega kanadskega imaginarija potrebno obravnavati tudi v luči problematičnega odnosa literarnih junakov, pripovedovalcev ali lirskih govorcev do tujosti drugega. Tujost in ogroženost posameznika je mogoče zaznati zlasti v reprezentacijah narave, in sicer najkasneje v delih t. i. konfederacijskih pesnikov, še posebej značilno v poeziji Lampmana. Pod vplivom ameriških transcendentalistov njegove pesmi na površini skušajo doseči zlitje z naravo, toda analiza vodilnih semantičnih polj pokaže, da v odnosu do vode in še posebej v odnosu do snega prevladajo negativne konotacije. Podobno kot led v Prattovem Titaniku, lahko sneg tolmačimo kot vodo v drugem elementarnem stanju, kar potrjuje tudi dikcija samega Lampmana, ki sneg označi za »okamenelo morje«. Tovrstna okamenelost zaznamuje izgubo dinamike in pre-rojevalne moči vode, izguba dinamike pa je skupaj z njeno razdiralno, ogrožujočo močjo tipična značilnost kanadskega literarnega upodabljanja vode. Oboje je prisotno tudi v romanu Atwoodove *Oryx and Crake* (Zadnji človek), ki ga avtorica podlaga z mitom vesoljnega potopa, a ga tako na fabulativni ravni kot z uporabljenim podobjem reducira tako, da več ne nakazuje očiščenja in prerojevanja sveta, s tem pa je novi svet prikazan kot sovražen in statičen. Sterilne, sovražne in statične podobe vode so, nenazadnje, prisotne tudi v poeziji Atwoodove, vendar so v njej tesno povezane z vprašanji jezika, simbolne reprezentacije in imaginarnega.

Ključne besede: angleška kanadska poezija, voda, nacionalni mit, jezik, imaginarno, Northrop Frye

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Arnold, R. (1981):** 'The Clearer Self?': Lampman's Transcendental-Visionary Development. *Canadian Poetry*, 5, 1981, 8. London (On), 33–56.
- Atwood, M. (1966):** *The Circle Game*. Toronto, Contact Press.
- Atwood, M. (1968):** *The Animals in That Country*. Toronto, Oxford University Press.
- Atwood, M. (1970a):** *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*. Toronto, Oxford University Press.
- Atwood, M. (1970b):** *Procedures for Underground*. Toronto, Oxford University Press.
- Atwood, M. (1972):** *Surfacing*. Toronto, McClelland & Stewart.
- Atwood, M. (1995):** *Strange Things: The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature*. Toronto, Oxford University Press.
- Atwood, M. (1996):** *Survival*. Toronto, McClelland & Stewart.
- Atwood, M. (2003):** *Oryx and Crake*. Toronto, McClelland & Stewart.
- Brown, R. M. (2001):** The Practice and Theory of Canadian Thematic Criticism: A Reconsideration. *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 70, 2001, 2. Toronto, 653–689. <http://www.utpjournals.com/product/utqarticles/702brown.html> (10. 10. 2005).
- Buitenhuis, P. (1977):** E. J. Pratt: Poet of the Sea. In: Clever, G. (ed.): *The E. J. Pratt Symposium, reappraisals of Canadian writers*. Ottawa, Borealis Press, 43–53.
- Cameron, B. (1990):** Theory and Criticism, Trends in Canadian Literature. In: New, W. H. (ed.): *Literary History of Canada, Canadian Literature in English*, 2nd Edition, Vol. 4. Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 108–132.
- Castoriadis, C. (1997):** *The Imaginary Institution of Society*. Cambridge, Polity Press.
- Chevalier, J., Gheerbrant, A. (2006):** *Slovar simbolov: miti, sanje, liki, običaji, barve, števila*. Ljubljana, Mladinska knjiga.
- Clever, G. (ed.) (1977):** *The E. J. Pratt Symposium: reappraisals of Canadian writers*. Ottawa, Borealis Press.
- Davey, F. (1974):** *From There to Here. A Guide to English-Canadian Literature Since 1960*. Erin (On), Press Porcépic.
- Deahl, J., Barker, T. (1983):** *New Canada or True North*. *CV/II*, 7, 3. Winnipeg, 33–36.
- Djwa, S. (1975):** Canadian Poets and the Great Tradition. *Canadian Literature*, 65. Vancouver, 42–52.
- Djwa, S. (1977):** The 1920s, E. J. Pratt, Transitional Modern. In: Clever, G. (ed.): *The E. J. Pratt Symposium: reappraisals of Canadian writers*. Ottawa, Borealis Press, 55–68.
- Djwa, S. (1989):** Introduction. In: Djwa, S., Moyles, R. G. (eds.): *Pratt, E. J.: Complete poems 1*. Toronto, University of Toronto Press, xi–xix.
- Djwa, S., Pollock, Z. (2009):** The Titanic. In: *The Complete Poems and Letters of E. J. Pratt, A Hypertext Edition*. <http://www.trentu.ca/faculty/pratt/poems/annotations/136annotations.html> (21. 07. 2009).
- Eliade, M. (1959):** *Cosmos and history, the Myth of Eternal Return*. New York, Harper and Row.
- Eliade, M. (1991):** *Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbolism*. Princeton, Princeton University Press.
- Eliade, M. (1996):** Zgodovina religioznih verovanj in idej, 1. Ljubljana, DZS.
- Frye, N. (1965):** Conclusion. In: Klinck, K. F. (ed.): *Literary History of Canada*. Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 821–49.
- Gangal, V. V. (1998):** The RgVeda, Is It Mere Mythology? In: Jamkhedkar, A. P. (ed.): *Journal of the Anantacharya Indological Research Institute*, 1, 1998, 25–40. <http://ia331321.us.archive.org/3/items/journaloftheanan014919mbp/journaloftheanan014919mbp.pdf> (15. 12. 2009).
- Ingersoll, E. G. (2004):** Survival in Margaret Atwood's novel *Oryx and Crake*. *Extrapolation: A Journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy*, 45, 2004, 2, 162–175. http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_hb1421/is_2_45/ai_n29119525 (10. 07. 2009).
- Lampman, A. (1888):** *Among the Millet and Other Poems*. Ottawa, J. Durie & Son. In: *Early Canadiana Online*. <http://www.canadiana.org/ECO/ItemRecord/08300?id=45c5eda67d88e703> (25. 07. 2009).
- Lampman, A. (1895):** *Lyrics of Earth*. Boston, Copeland and Day. In: *Early Canadiana Online*. <http://www.canadiana.org/ECO/ItemRecord/08383?id=45c5eda67d88e703> (25. 07. 2009).
- Lampman, A. (1899):** *Alcyone*. Ottawa, J. Ogilvy. In: *Early Canadiana Online*. <http://www.canadiana.org/ECO/ItemRecord/09997?id=45c5eda67d88e703>. (25. 07. 2009)
- Lampman, A. (2009):** The Confederation Poets – CPP editions, Archibald Lampman. In: *Canadian Poetry Press*. <http://uwo.ca/english/canadianpoetry/confederation/Archibald%20Lampman/index.htm> (25. 07. 2009).
- Lampman, A. (2009a):** *Winter Solitude*. In: *Poem Hunter*. <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/winter-solitude-2> (25. 07. 2009).
- Marshall, T. (1978):** *Harsh and Lovely Land, the major Canadian poets and the making of a Canadian tradition*. Vancouver, University of British Columbia Press.
- McGregor, G. (1993):** The Frontier Antithesis. In: Rasporich, B. et al. (eds.): *A Passion for Identity, an introduction to Canadian studies*. Scarborough, Nelson Canada, 275–288.
- McGregor, G. (2003):** A Case Study in the Construction of Place, Boundary Management as Theme and Strategy

in Canadian Art and Life. In: *Invisible Culture*, An Electronic Journal for Visual Culture. [Http://www.rochester.edu/in_visible_culture/Issue_5/issue5title.html](http://www.rochester.edu/in_visible_culture/Issue_5/issue5title.html) (20. 07. 2009).

McLeod, L. (1984): Canadian Post-Romanticism, the Context of Late Nineteenth-Century Canadian Poetry. In: *Canadian Poetry*, 8, 1984, 14. [Http://www.canadian-poetry.ca/cpjrn/vol14/vol14index.htm](http://www.canadian-poetry.ca/cpjrn/vol14/vol14index.htm) (20. 07. 2009).

Munro, P. J. (1970): Seas, Evolution and Images of Continuing Creation in English-Canadian Poetry. Master thesis. Burnaby, s.n.

Ower, J. (1976): Portraits of the landscape as poet, Canadian nature as aesthetic symbol in three confederation writers. In: McMullen, L. (ed.): *Twentieth Century Essays on Canadian Literature*. Ottawa, The Tecumseh Press, 140–51.

Pacheiner Klander, V. (ed.) (2005): Ko pesem tkem, antologija vedskih pesmi. Ljubljana, Mladinska knjiga.

Potocco, M. (2006): Re-reading Northrop Frye: Images of Culture and the Canadian Context. *Acta neophilologica*, 39, 2006, 1/2. Ljubljana, 85–98.

Pratt, E. J. (1989): Complete poems, 1–2. Djwa, S., Moyles R. G. (eds.). Toronto, University of Toronto Press.

Sveto pismo (1996): Sveto pismo Stare in Nove zaveze, slovenski standardni prevod. Ljubljana, Svetopisemska družba Slovenije.

Veljačič, Č. (1992): Ločnice azijskih filozofij. Ljubljana, Cankarjeva založba.

Vrečko, J. (1994): Ep in tragedija. Maribor, Založba Obzorja.

Wilson, M. (1960): Klein's Drowned Poet, Canadian Variations on an Old Theme. *Canadian Literature*, 6. Vancouver, 5–17.