

WOLFGANG HOCHBRUCK

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RUDY WIEBE'S RECONSTRUCTION(S) OF THE INDIAN VOICE.

Wolfgang HOCHBRUCK
Universität FREIBURG

"Canadian literature", according to Robert Kroetsch, "evolved directly from the Victorian to the Postmodern."¹ This implies that the period of modernism was somehow omitted; it also implies that as every stage in literary history has to define itself as separate from its predecessor, Canadian literature of the current (if one accepts the label) postmodern period is dealing with a Victorian rather than modernist heritage. The three stories by Rudy Wiebe that are the subject of this paper in a way appear to prove Kroetsch's point.

"Games for Queen Victoria", "Along the Red Deer and the South Saskatchewan" and "Where is the Voice Coming From"² were all printed first in the 1970s. All three approach the same intercultural problem, the translation and representation of the aboriginal languages of Canada.³ This representation of a host of different languages not only through the lexical and grammatical apparatus of another language – in this case English – but also through the eyes and minds of non-Natives has always been (and continues to be) dependent on linguistic possibility and on the ideological attitude of the respective authors. The question as to whether some Native languages and narrative modes can be translated at all without destroying essential aspects of meaning continues to be debated among linguists. At the same time, modern authors make use of culturally inherited modes of representing Native speech that are basically mirrors of the ideological attitudes of the early settlers, priests and traders. For example: in an article on *The Temptations of Big Bear* Sherrill E. Grace, using the distinctions made by Jakobson, Todorov, and Kristeva,⁴ concludes that the language of the Indians "is predominantly that of vertically referential, metaphorical narrative."⁵ May it suffice to say at this point that the very idea that Native narrative is overflowing with metaphor is a concept that has been around at least since the *Jesuit Relations*. The languages described there were Iroquoian and the metaphoric style of Iroquoian political oratory must to them – that is, the Indians – have sounded at least as dull as the oratory of contemporary political leaders occasionally does to us. Beauty, obviously, lies in the eyes and ears of the beholder.

The last decades have seen a few changes in the treatment of 'the Indian' and Native languages in Canadian literature. Several anthologies of writings by and about Canadian Indians in the 1970s introduced a new tone.⁵ Since then, the number of Native authors and the quality of their publications has been ever increasing. Rudy Wiebe's influence in this

process should not be underestimated. Three of his attempts to render Native speech in an English text will be discussed in the following.

1. RE/MAKE

Due to his personal history, Wiebe seems particularly fit to write about oral cultures and languages. Coming from a Low-German speaking Mennonite background, he grew up in a predominantly oral environment which shaped his perception to the extent that Métis writer Maria Campbell in her review of *The Temptations of Big Bear* praised Wiebe for his rendition of Big Bear's speeches, claiming that in fact Big Bear's spirit must have taken over and written these parts of the novel for Wiebe.⁷

Usually the sources of Wiebe's use of orality in his texts are more of an earthly making. Documents, photographs, museum items and previous attempts to record the same story are all used to generate a new piece of art. Of the three stories, "Along the Red Deer and the South Saskatchewan" is the one that makes the most visible use of the Indian voice. Wiebe dedicated it to the memory of the original teller of the story, a Blackfoot elder by the name of Little Bear, and to the American-born white man who took it down in writing and gave a first translated rendition of the tale, Sergeant-Major F.W. Spicer of the Northwest Mounted Police.⁸ As W.J. Keith has rightfully pointed out, Spicer, even though he appears to have been an unusually perceptive police officer, "must inevitably have been influenced by the Victorian conventions and presuppositions that surrounded him."⁹ Wiebe therefore reshaped Spicer's account in order to avoid the policeman's "tendency towards melodramatic and sentimental cliché"¹⁰ and to reconstruct a version which Keith suggests is closer to the original text. This, however, may be questioned. True, the tale starts with the traditional formula "This is long ago" but this is one of the things Wiebe added.¹¹ The language of the tale becomes more effective, images more striking, action more enlivened. Repeated addresses to the listener/reader add a certain oral quality to the text, even though Wiebe deletes the occasionally agrammatical and inverted syntax of Spicer's version: The passage

With maddened desperate voice each cries to all. One glance enough! With mighty roar a thousand horsemen onward rush. Tell us, that death is by us.¹²

becomes in Wiebe's version

Each desperate voice cries to each, back! for the open jaws of horses swirl up towards us through the snow of their running with spears and knives and war-cries of our enemies bristling above them, shout to your brother that death is running us, back.¹³

And this exactly is where the questionmark comes in. The non-grammatical syntax and inverted word orders in Spicer's version of the tale seem to indicate that Little Bear told the story in English. Wiebe's story makes the tale appear as told to a listener, but suggests at the same time that it was told in the original Blackfoot rather than in English. Names and token words in 'Indian' language have been a common device to indicate that the language of a text is supposed to be 'Indian' ever since the late seventeenth century.¹⁴ Fortunately, Wiebe does not repeat the stereotyped form of imagery so widely believed to be genuinely Indian since Cooper made it lastingly popular in his 'Leatherstocking'-novels. Instead, he uses his own imagery and the run-on style he developed to mastery in *The Temptations of Big Bear*.¹⁵ This technique Wiebe himself described as "to...heighten the English language to the certain point where you get the rhetorical power of Cree",¹⁶ or, in this case, Blackfoot. To achieve this without good knowledge of the languages in question means to have to rely on translations. Usually this means written texts: written by somebody else, somewhere else and at some other time, so that there is no control as to whether this written account presents a truthful image of Cree, Blackfoot, or whatever language. In the end, the non-linguist is caught in a vicious circle, having to believe what other authors proclaim to be the true story, the true form, the *mots justes*. They in turn may have obtained their knowledge in just the same way, so one author keeps copying from the next in line – this is how stereotypes come into existence. The Blackfoot alone are left out, silent.

For example, the phrase "death is running us" in the above quotation, Keith believes to be typical for Wiebe's attempt to approximate the original Little-Bear-tale. He calls it "the verb in its traditional indian sense as in 'running buffalo'."¹⁷ Neither Wiebe nor Keith nor I myself know enough Blackfoot to be able to tell whether a phrase analogous to "to run buffalo" would be exactly the verbphrase commonly used. However, the term "buffalo runner" to denote a horse of outstanding capabilities, the verbphrase "to run buffalo" signifying to hunt, and even the de-contextualized connotation implying to hunt anything, including women, as one would buffalo, are all in *Big Bear*.¹⁸ The Indian language of Big Bear, however, is Cree, not Blackfoot. It may therefore be justified to conclude that even though Wiebe reshaped Spicer's 19th-century-version of the Blackfoot tale, the result is not of necessity a reconstruction of the original – even though this was the author's main objective. – but Wiebe's 20th-century-version of the Victorian model. Whatever Little Bear said is forever lost to translation and edition. Spicer's second remove of the original became Wiebe's third. But even though the attempted reconstruction of the Indian voice is not entirely convincing "Along the Red Deer and the South Saskatchewan" is a thrilling tale and certainly good reading.

Of course Rudy Wiebe realized the kind of *cul-de-sac* he was in. The reconstruction of the Indian voice ethnographer-style is therefore only one of several approaches Wiebe experimented and played with.

II. REFLECTION

The attempt to reconstruct the historical truth of a story itself is under scrutiny in "Where is the Voice Coming From?", about the hunt for a young Cree by the name of "Gitchee-Manitou Wayo",¹⁹ translated (not entirely correctly, but this is not Wiebe's fault) as "Almighty Voice". The police hunt the young delinquent, the author, in turn, hunts the story and each in turn arrive at a stand-off where the hunted object is obviously there but invisible, untouchable to the very end. A post-modernist fictional narrative in that it self-reflectively explores "the origins and nature of fiction," as John Thicme has it,²⁰ "Where is the Voice Coming From?" is also a treatise on the word or, rather, the voice of the Cree protagonist. This voice is important for the creation of history with a capital S: "I doubt the official given history... there is another side to the story and maybe that's the more interesting side. Maybe even truer?"²¹ But what if the so-called *other side* also represents an established canon of romantic half-truths performed by ever so noble savages? To solve this dilemma Wiebe "creates a narrator who struggles to tell the story but for most of the story fails."²² Maps, reports, and documents, historical items like Almighty Voice's gun, bullets, and even a piece of his skull are all there to be seen, touched, and copied, but indeed: where is the voice coming from? Still, it has to be invented because, as the narrator flatly states,

Presumably all the parts of the story are themselves available. A difficulty is that they are, as always, available only in bits and pieces. Though the acts themselves seem quite clear, some written reports of the acts contradict each other... About facts that are simply told by this mouth to that ear, of course, even less can be expected.²³

At this point Sheherezade comes in leading by her hand the invented Indian who is alternately loved and hated throughout literary history and who is quoted as having said, yelled or sung:

We have fought well
You have died like braves
I have worked hard and am hungry
Give me food²⁴

This – like Wiebe's adaptation of Little Bear's story – is a remake of an earlier version of the same tale in which the author Buffalo Child Long Lance has Almighty Voice call out to the police:

«We have had a good fight to-day. I have worked hard and I am hungry. You have plenty of food; send me some, and tomorrow we'll finish the fight.» When this message was interpreted to the Mounted Police they were struck with surprise. But it was the Indian's code, fair fight, fair game, no bad feeling in the heart.²⁵

This is the noble savage at large. And if this is where the voice came from, it came not exactly from a reliable narrator, for Sylvester Long (a.k.a. Buffalo Child Long Lance) as we know now was largely an invented Indian himself.²⁶

The main difference between "Where is the Voice Coming From" and the usual pattern is that this time the reader gets to see the storyteller, the fragments and parts of the story, and is made a participant onlooker in the postmodernist storytelling process: deconstruction turns around in Wiebe's admittedly invented version of history. In the end, all attempts to locate the voice of the Indian with the strangely fitting name fall short of the aim:

I say "wordless cry" because that is the way it sounds to me. I could be more accurate if I had a reliable interpreter who would make a reliable interpretation. For I do not, of course, understand the Cree myself.²⁷

The narrator admits defeat. To quote Coral Ann Howells, "if language is a way of looking at the world, then the reality of the Indian world of *Almighty Voice* still eludes the narrator."²⁸ Which is the very thing Wiebe was trying to show.

III. RERUN

With the third story under scrutiny here, "Games for Queen Victoria", W.J. Keith did not seem to be happy. Wiebe's source in this case were the published journals of a British officer. William Butler, as a special agent, had preceded Colonel Wolseley's expedition to the Red River in 1870, and had made notes on Riel, the Metis, and the local Ojibwe Indians. Among other things Keith remarks that "Here less than anywhere else in his historical fiction is Wiebe concerned with establishing a 'voice' or a new angle of narration."²⁹ This is probably true, even if it were only for the fact that Wiebe simply did not have to establish a new voice. In a typically post-modern twist, he could rely on quotations which turn into real satire on their way from the old context to the new.

When Butler asks about the reliability of the Indians, he receives the answer, "Henry Prince, the chief, will tell you he is the most faithful child of the Great Mother."³⁰ The ensuing account of an Indian speech follows the conventional stereotype so closely it could serve as a model for the whole corpus of "Indian speeches" as distorted by colonial discourse.

And so he did, at incredible length, striking his hand upon his very broad and hairless chest. Throughout the oration I felt that the interpreter, [...] was certainly out of measure with the chief's large voice, the savage pomp and ceremony, the deep half-circle of brawny warriors with their outmoded flintlocks firing in salute, their rolling "ho, ho's" of agreement as Prince spoke of watching the lake for the great chief coming with many warriors to give presents to the red children of the Great mother.³¹

Butler adds a few obligatory lines about the "poor noble red man" but this romantic stance is given up lightly when a warning by the Ojibwe medicine man is brushed off as "the mutterings and peg gymnastics" of a "thimble-rigger".³² Butler clearly and typically enough does not deem Indian culture worth noticing beyond the assumed impressiveness of its rhetoric; assumed because as usual he does not understand a word of the Ojibwe language. If Wiebe's story were a nineteenth-century text, this sort of romantic paternalism would have to be taken serious. As it is, Wiebe's irony is running through the monologue of Lieutenant Butler as a constant countercurrent of additional meaning behind the words, mimicking its own implications. The nameless narrator of "Where is the Voice Coming From?" was searching for an *Indian Voice* that eluded his grasp. This time the tale is told by an idiot: Lieutenant Butler is an echo from the Victorian past, his appearance in a 1970s text serves but to mirror the conceit and self-indulgence of the colonial discourse. He is also faintly reminiscent of Conrad's figures, a Kurtz rather than Marlow: Butler's daydream about "some maverick British officers to teach his [Riel's] superb hunters basic cavalry strategy", his vision of Riel as "a veritable New World Ghengis Khan", his disappointment over Riel's lack of "emperor's spirit",³³ all this sounds dangerously close to Kurtz's jungle imperium. Only that Butler is spared Kurtz's revealing vision of "The horror!". Instead, the story ends with a musing afterthought: "Ah yes. Yes."³⁴

Three stories, three voices of the Indian, three approaches which I have called *Remake*, *Reflection*, and *Rerun*. Three forms of representation that serve the purpose of conveying to the reader a sense of difference between White and Indian languages and storytelling. Each of the three approaches mirrors certain preconceptions that the author worked from. Some of these preconceptions have been around for generations. The Indian still 'speaks' from the paper as an image for a language the author does not speak himself. That this holds true is yet another link between the Victorian and the postmodern in Canadian literature. Of course there is a strong modernist element in Canadian literature. Kroetsch's statement, however, provocative as it was, was true as far as the representation of the Indian voice is concerned. Wiebe's stories also serve the point to make obvious that there never was a modern realistic form to the 'Indian voice': it always was an invention, handed down and quoted by one generation of writers after the other.

The evolution of Canadian short fiction from the Victorian to post-modern has not come about as a linear sequence of steps. Literary modes interact, and since they draw upon each other it is sometimes difficult to say which is one and which is the other. Neither does Wiebe's search for the Indian voice in his short stories show a linear development. It oscillates between updated remake and postmodernist fragment-tale, between the convention and its deconstruction, between the sentimental and the sort of savage humor that is so typically Canadian. To admit his subjectivity and to lay open the process of invention in "Where is the Voice Coming From?" not only gave us one of the strongest passages of Wiebe's short fiction to date, it also was a major step for Canadian writing about the Indian voice.

NOTES

- 1 Quoted from Frank DAVEY, "Genre Subversion and the Canadian Short Story". *RANAM*, XX (1987), pp. 7-15, p.7.
- 2 WIEBE, Rudy. "Games for Queen Victoria", "Along the Red Deer and the South Saskatchewan", "Where is the Voice Coming From?", in: *The Angel of the Tar Sands*. Toronto: NCL, 1982.
- 3 Cf. GADPAILLE, Michelle. *The Canadian Short Story*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988, p. 111: "Obsessed with gaining perspective [...], Wiebe uses his short, meditative narratives to capture a vanished voice in history - that of the Plains Indians."
- 4 GRACE, Sherril E. "Structuring Violence: 'The Ethic of Linguistics' in *The Temptations of Big Bear*". *CL*, 104 (1985), pp. 7-22.
- 5 BOWN, Deborah. "Squaring the Circle. The Problem of Translation in *The Temptations of Big Bear*". *CL*, 117 (1988), pp. 62-70, p. 63.
- 6 GOODERHAM, Kent (ed.). *I Am an Indian*. Toronto: Dent, 1969. William & Christine Mowat (eds.): *Native Peoples in Canadian Literature*. Toronto: Macmillan, 1975.
- 7 MANDEL, Eli & WIEBE, Rudy. "Where the Voice Comes From", in W.J. Keith (ed.): *A Voice in the Land. Essays by and About Rudy Wiebe*. Edmonton: NeWest, 1981, pp. 150-155, p. 151.
- 8 KEITH, W.J. "From Document to Art: Wiebe's Historical Short Stories and their Sources". *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 4 (1979), pp. 106-119, p. 116.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 116.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 116.
- 11 *The Angel of the Tar Sands*, p. 31. Note that some of the tales collected and edited by George Bird Grinnell: *Blackfoot Lodge Tales* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1962), also start with formulae like "A long time ago..." (pp. 13, 29, 132 a.o.).
- 12 HAWKES, John. *The Story of Saskatchewan and its People*. Chicago/Regina: Clarke, 1924, vol. 1, p. 116.
- 13 *Angel*, p. 34.
- 14 Cf. Author: *Die Darstellung und ideologische Funktion indäianischer Mundlichkeit in der amerikanischen Literatur*. Phil. Diss., Freiburg, 1989, p. 76.
- 15 WIEBE, Rudy. *The Temptations of Big Bear*. Toronto: NCL, 1973.
- 16 Author: "Oral Wiebe". *Zeitschrift der Gesellschaft für Kanadastudien*, 7: 1/2 (1987), pp. 251-254, p. 251.
- 17 KEITH. "From Document to Art", p. 117.
- 18 Wiebe: *The Temptations of Big Bear*, pp. 82, 125, 311.
- 19 *Angel*, p. 86.

- 20 THIEME, John. "Sherezade as Historian: Rudy Wiebe's 'Where is the Voice Coming From?'" *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 17 (1982), pp. 172-181, p. 179
- 21 NEUMAN, Shirley. "Unearthing Language: An Interview with Rudy Wiebe and Robert Kroetsch", in W.J. Keith (ed.): *A Voice in the Land*, p. 230
- 22 DAVIDSON, Arnold F. "The Provenance of Story in Rudy Wiebe's 'Where is the Voice Coming From?'" *Studies in Short Fiction*, 22 (1985), pp. 189-193, p. 190
- 23 *Angel*, p. 78
- 24 *Ibid.*, p. 86
- 25 GOODFRIAM, *op. cit.*, p. 95. Condensed and adapted from Chief Buffalo Child Long Lance *Long Lance*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1928
- 26 SMITH, Donald B. *Buffalo Child Long Lance: The True Story of an Impostor*. Toronto: 1982. Long was a racial mix of Black, White, and Catawba Indian who managed to pass himself off as Plains Indian after he had been adopted by Bloods. Large parts of his "life story" are purely fictional.
- 27 *Angel*, p. 87
- 28 HOWLIS, Coral Ann. "'If I Had a Reliable Interpreter Who Would Make a Reliable Interpretation': Language, Screams, and Silence in Rudy Wiebe's 'Where is the Voice Coming From?'" *RANAM*, XVI (1983), pp. 95-104, p. 102
- 29 KEITH. "From Document to Art", p. 108
- 30 *Angel*, p. 53
- 31 *Ibid.*, p. 53f.
- 32 *Ibid.*, p. 55.
- 33 *Ibid.*, p. 59.
- 34 *Ibid.*, p. 60