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(PRE)ISPITIVANJE TEORIJSKIH PRISTUPA U LINGVISTICI

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THE POST- IN CONTEMPORARY FICTION: TIME TRAVEL, FUTURES, MYSTERIES, VORTICISM, THE BODY, AGEISM, TRAUMA

PRELAMANJA KROZ PRIZMU TEORIJE

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THE POST- IN CONTEMPORARY CANADIAN SHORT FICTION[1]

Abstract: The paper will attempt to provide arguments for post-postmodernism as a trend emerging from postmodernism, and for the claim that post-contemporary poetics potentially stands not as a diverging trend within a broader poetics, but rather a terminological peculiarity that refers to post-postmodernism. The paper will also provide a number of illustrations from a selection of contemporary Canadian short fiction published between 2006 to 2016 to exemplify how postmodernism is manifested in contemporary literature. In his introduction to *Onto the Postcontemporary*, Christopher Brooks, the editor, notices that postmodern art "is always too busy, tracing its own heritage, assimilating the past into its own image, and reformulating how it can remain relevant" (2013: x), whereas there is a significant divergence from such an ideology and practice today. The objective of the paper is to identify the common thread in a selection of contemporary Canadian short stories, and place it in the context of postmodern or post-postmodern poetics. The main question that the paper aims to answer is whether there is such a thing as post-postmodern literature, and if so, what it tells us, at least based on the example of ten contemporary Canadian short stories, about the present moment. The decision to present a greater number of short stories by various contemporary Canadian authors was strongly inspired by the impression that it is the emerging Canadian writers' voices, overlapping and converging on similar topics, that offer the best insight into how it is that we have changed and entered this post-postmodern condition.

Introduction

In a general sense, what postmodernism stands for is a position in which the awareness of social, political, cultural or individual defeat is overwhelming enough to apparently be acknowledged but not solved. Its emphasis on indeterminacy, the inability to reach an epistemological center, forces both the author (or storyteller) and the reader to move inwards. What it seems to uncover and uphold is not only epistemological uncertainty, but a defeatist position towards it. Defeatist because epistemological insecurity destroys the sense of ontological unity as well. This de-centeredness is not simply a revolt against a repressive society, neo-liberalism or the capitalist system, but an apologetic recognition of the complexity of the human condition in the twentieth, and the twenty-first century – the failure of its social, political and ideological tenets, a deep understanding of a system error in our operating systems, and the inadequacy of any regression to former models. It is precisely why postmodernist poetics, individualistic yet reaching into our collective conscious, moves between two poles: pessimistic and almost fatalist despondent at one, and contented and isolated at the other end. Its focus

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is neither on social, political or ideological problems, nor the encoded, almost biological glitches that lead to them, but rather on their individual experiences and manifestations. However, critics and theorists have recently noticed a shift, arguably slight, that moves the direction of literary works into what is generally termed as post-postmodern, or post-contemporary poetics. As if in itself postmodernism has not infused literary Theory with enough perplexity, the *post-* poetics is regarded as a complement to postmodernism and its antipode at the same time, a natural progression triggered by globalization and the fading bounds between cultures and cultural spaces, but also a regression to something more similar to its predecessor – modernism. The paper will attempt to provide arguments for post-postmodernism as a trend emerging from postmodernism, and for the claim that post-contemporary poetics potentially stands not as a diverging trend within a broader poetics, but rather a terminological peculiarity that refers to post-postmodernism. The paper will also provide a number of illustrations from a selection of contemporary Canadian short fiction published between 2006 to 2016.

The Weight of Postmodernity

If understood as the theoretical, ideological, political, social and cultural framework or preset under which cultural artifacts are produced during a period, poetics can be a resource and tool in understanding the conflict between the collective and the individual. In the preface to her study *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (2004), Linda Hutcheon defines postmodernism as "a problematizing force in our culture today: it raises questions about (or renders problematic) the commonsensical and the "natural" (xi). The points of divergence between what we consider the main features of the poetics of modernism and postmodernism can be paralleled to those between postmodernism and post-postmodernism. What could be the distinguishing line between what is called modern and postmodern may not be the devices used to 'problematize' but rather the lack of romantic visionary sensibility of art in general. However, from the perspective of political and economic changes in the late twentieth century, postmodern as an adjective could certainly be applied to art that examines the *new* human situation, and therefore art that deals with the post-modern kind of disillusionment, or bafflement in a globalized society. Similarly to Hutcheon, but more cautiously, M. H. Abrams characterizes postmodernism as involving:

> […] not only a continuation, sometimes carried to an extreme, of the counter-traditional experiments of modernism, but also diverse attempts to break away from modernist forms which had, inevitably, become in their turn conventional, as well as to overthrow the elitism of modernist "high art" by recourse to the models of "mass culture" in film, television, newspaper cartoons, and popular music (1999: 168).

Not unlike certain modern attempts, postmodernism too manifests itself as a revolt against the discourse norm itself – the narrative discourse is disrupted, de-centered, indeterminate and thrives on juxtaposing contradictions almost in the manner of metaphysical poets' flippant amusement with conflicting metaphors. Such poetics, if it could indeed be labeled as such, enables plasticity that transfers to different media of transmission – the mass and new media that emerge in the post-industrial, neo-colonizing and globalizing society – and renders narratives, in the case of literature, a playground in which layers of culture are peeled inside-out. What Linda Hutcheon calls a "flexible conceptual structure" in her Preface (2004), the postmodern poetics, operates both from the historical and ideological perspective in the sense that it challenges the cultural core

concepts. By extension, the political context of the work can be analyzed only with the view of detecting the disparities with the self-reflective qualities of the postmodern in fiction. Furthermore, Jean-Francois Lyotard, in his essay *The Postmodern Condition* (Lyotard 2004: 332), explains this noticeable absence of any master narratives that direct or totalize the cultural artifacts produced as the "crisis of narratives" (*Ibid.*) – a crisis that stems from the transformations present in culture which are both in conflict with science and the search for truth. Lyotard further explains what he calls the "postmodern condition" as deriving from an epistemological crisis stating that postmodern knowledge "refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable" (Lyotard 2004: 333). By extension, the contradictions that arise with postmodern narratives focus precisely on fundamentally challenging the historical and political dimensions present in culture, and therefore the grand narratives that refer to the ideology of the post-industrial, and even the neo-liberal society. In Hutcheon's words, it is "the presence of the past" (2004: 4) that is the most important postmodern concept, and with it, the critical examinations of its tenet values. The interpretation of postmodern narratives not only involves the identification of work-authentic or author-specific systems that arrange or structure meaning in spite of the seemingly intentional contradictions on which it – postmodern poetics – thrives, but also active involvement in the process of sense and meaning making. In that respect, it is perhaps here that postmodernism exposes its most visible opposition to modernism – an absence of consensus on what the ultimate solution to the problems befalling an individual is. Postmodernism, in Hutcheon's words, problematizes culture in the sense that it questions its norms to the extent of rendering them nonsensical or futile. Moreover, with the focus on questioning, and its process, as if it were the main objective of produced narratives, Hutcheon comments on the essence of postmodernism:

> […] it is the process of negotiating the postmodern contradictions that is brought to the fore, not any satisfactorily completed and closed product that results from their resolution. (2004: xi)

Additionally, what postmodernism attempts is not to deny the effect of globalization and mass culture, or refute and discourage it, but to challenge it by allowing for diversity to oppose the imposition of a homogenous normative or identity. Reaching a public consensus on the basis of assuming unproblematically that things are such and such, is questioned in postmodernism by the instrumentalization of differences and oppositions within the narrative discourse and illustrating the absurdity or senselessness of such a presupposition. What is usually considered a negative disposition in postmodern literature is its tendency to disambiguate the purportedly humanist solutions – any solution to any problem as merely an attempt to create an illusion of coherence. This also supports Lyotard's argument that in post-industrial society life is understood as a game, and that the discourse by which the search for truth and knowledge is legitimized is a scientific and a fragmented one – infused with skepticism and locally determined (Lyotard 2004: 332-333) By extension, literary genres also become plastic concepts as formal limitations would also be another elitist-modernist claim to be challenged.

The Post- Poetics

In his introduction to *Onto the Postcontemporary*, Christopher Brooks, the editor, notices that postmodern art "is always too busy, tracing its own heritage, assimilating

the past into its own image, and reformulating how it can remain relevant" (2013: x), whereas there is a significant divergence from such an ideology and practice today. This lack of "future, change, opportunity, and optimism" (Brooks 2013: x) that emanates from postmodern ideology is according to Brooks in conflict with the emerging "movement that embraces ongoing and sudden change; it assumes the need and the justification for a forward-moving global society in all areas of human endeavor" (*Ibid*.) and implies an optimism of sorts – a desire, at the very least, for a different humanist vision. In postcontemporary poetics Brooks sees a shift from the postmodern indeterminacy and reluctance to resort to a decisive interpretation to a postcontemporary empowerment that encourages a critical and personal engagement. However, what Brooks interprets as optimism and a step from the postmodern heaviness may simply be another form of defeatism in terms of social and political action, which is by no means unexpected in the world of "fake news". If anything, the optimism Brooks sees in the acceptance of the world as it is – rapidly changing, mostly technologically – and adapting to its shifting values seems to be simply the human survival instinct, intellectualized to adapt to whatever the environment dictates. To use Brooks's term, the postcontemporary still focuses on the individual, the process or both narrative production and narrative reception, and most importantly, it focuses on individual "victories" in a world that is perceived as threatening. It is precisely in the tension of what we have come to call postcontemporary literature that postmodernism is rediscovered as a chronic condition. All the attempts to diverge from its core-deep brutality, the epistemological chaos and ontological uncertainty stand as a reflection of our cultural anxiety. Therefore, the concept of the postcontemporary seems to be our own forced projection based on the need for a new outlook, perspective and position towards (or even against) our culture.

The Post-postmodern

On this view, the short story as a genre, both in terms of its structure and inner mechanics, seems to be the most suitable prose genre for the transmission the postmodern design. To all appearances, it is the length of the short story that seems to agree with the postmodern refusal to reach a resolution or a comprehensible, unambiguous denouement. In his study *Genre* (2005), John Frow defines genre as "a universal dimension of textuality" (2) that is necessarily related both to other genres and other texts, and in fact generic structures. The central argument of Frow's study is that genres perform functions or serve as devices for relating specific kinds of effects that need not necessarily be unchanging or inflexible (*Ibid*.). Avoiding restricting definitions by which genres should be understood as highly formulaic, Frow's definition presupposes intertextuality or genre-interrelatedness as crucial to the effect that a particular text produces. That is, a text, in order to produce an effect of reality, truth, plausibility, etc. remains reliant on the convergence and confluence of different genre-particular elements within a single text. In that sense, genre is pragmatic, but it is not specifically a feature of a text nor is it imputed on the text by the readers; genre owes its existence to the social convention, and therefore, it is also defined by the reader's or interlocutor's expectations – internal cues, the setting, etc. Basically, genre could be defined as a specific manner in which "symbolic material," rhetorically charged, can be structured. Furthermore, in *Storytelling and the Sciences of the Mind*, David Herman defines genre as a set of protocols formulaic for the

process of storyworld making. That is, the creation and transformation of a storyworld does not depend on the genre per se, but rather, it is the "consequences and effects" that the author strives for that are achieved via genre-specific protocols (2013: 105). Following Frow's line of thought presented here, that a narrative can never be interpreted or even observed isolated from other narratives and the discourse in which it comes to exist, David Herman's comment on at least two co-extensive dimensions of a narrative pertaining to genre seems to complement and further explain the dialogism overtly present in the selected short fiction discussed in this paper:

> The interplay among the dimensions at issue – the specific pattern of responses created by the way an interpreter frames answers to those sort of questions when engaging with a narrative – accounts for the structure as well as the functions and overall impact of the storyworld issue. Thus, whereas the questions just listed concern what kind of world is being evoked by the act of telling, those questions connect up, in turn, with further questions about how a given narrative is situated in its broader discourse environment – questions concerning why or with what purposes the act of telling is being performed at all. (2013: 106)

Defining narrowly the short story genre as a specific narrative structure with distinctive formal features and formulaic functions would be reductionist at the very least. In accordance with both Frow's view of genre as pragmatic, and Herman's as specific-function-oriented, bearing in mind the powerful dimension of genre being a social convention inviting particular expectations, the short story could be said to produce a singular effect at its climax – the purpose of which may vary significantly: an epiphany or recognition that is the effect of the inner-workings, or in postmodern (and post-postmodern) instances, the ultimate inability to reach a denouement, resolution or conclusion.

In the following section, a selection of contemporary Canadian short stories from 2006-2016 will be succinctly examined to illustrate the shift from postmodern to what can be termed the post-postmodern. In fact, the premise is that what we call post-postmodern poetics is indeed a separate direction in postmodern poetics characterized by typically postmodern instruments such as parody and irony, decentered narratives and the presupposition of epistemological uncertainty that can be seen in the structure of the narrative discourse as well as thought; but at the same time characterized by the introduction of novel themes which are examined through a multitude of voices fully aware of the futility of social engagement, the difficulty of making choices or the impossibility of choosing at the same time. The characters featuring these short stories are all too real as voices who the reader can both identify with and condemn – identify with because their conflicts are contemporary and genuine, and condemn because they either remain passive in the face of these conflicts, or decide to limit their action so as not to disturb the social order they are rising against in the first place. However, to 'condemn' may be too strong an expression since our society's notion of activism may well include Twitter and other social networks as a legitimate space for action. Postmodernity essentially implies that the very act of producing a cultural artefact, the act of storytelling included, is *action*, but post-postmodernism admits its own shortcomings by not even considering radical action. What prevails is self-preservation and survival, and not

only physical, but psychological, mental. This is to suggest that Christopher Brooks's argument that postcontemporary literature is in fact a "movement that embraces ongoing and sudden change" (2013: x) is a valid one. However, the optimism that Brooks sees in the works produced in the last two decades or so seems to be, perhaps, a personal projection. We live in a post-postmodern global society that is in a constant struggle to defend itself against its own inner workings, much like the human body under the effects of autoimmune disease. Literature, however, need not provide optimism, but it does now as it has so far, provide a diagnosis for our condition, and these are some of our stories.

The decision to present a greater number of short stories by various contemporary Canadian authors was strongly inspired by the impression that it is the emerging Canadian writers' voices, overlapping and converging on similar topics, that offer the best insight into how it is that we have changed and entered this post-postmodern condition. Some of the authors of the selected short stories in this paper are well established authors, and some only dabble in short fiction while taking a break from their novelist aspirations, but all of their attempts at relating sometimes unusual, and sometimes dully mundane narratives unquestionably stand as pieces of a greater cultural puzzle.

The Stories

Published in 2006, Lee Henderson's "Conjugation" is a story about a man who finds himself back in grade four – a witty and unusual first-person narrative about a man who cannot seem to move forward before he ventures back into what is, perhaps, some unfinished business of his much younger self. What is genuinely peculiar about the narrative is that the reader may only presuppose that the protagonist-narrator is in fact a teacher, and that this is why he finds himself driving to school and being in the classroom, if not even attending the classes. Of course, the incongruities in the very scripts the reader may use to understand the story produce the humorous effect, but they also deeply undermine the narrative. The protagonist cannot find the "student parking at Whispering Pines Elementary School" (Henderson 2006: 2) and is yet being "tapped on [his] shoulder" by Melinda, "a pretty little religious girl" (Henderson 2006: 3) who gives him a note as if he were a fellow pupil.

> I always hated children, even when I was one. (Henderson 2006: 2)

Henderson's entire narrative works against itself, or negates its own assertions, to the very end where the protagonist, instead of choosing to pursue the crush he has on his colleague, a teacher in grade four who shows signs of affection towards him, decides to join the children in a game they were playing and "get the damn flag" (Henderson 2006: 24). The man-child, or child-man, as Henderson seems to be insinuating, is unable to transition to adulthood.

Martin West's "Cretacea," also published in 2006 in *Journey Prize Stories*, is another unpredictable narrative about a Red Deer Valley fiction critic shooting up abandoned television sets, as well as street lamps in a nearby town and "three car windows. A Dodge, a Ford, and a Toyota four-by-four, I think" (West 2006: 45) and smashing a few window displays using a garden gnome in an incident triggered by him finding an injured animal at the side of the road and mercy killing it. This unusual character, interested mostly in his old, arthritis-ridden dog, dinosaurs, paleontology, archeology and digging up discarded items in the desert, invites a routine check by the local police office, and in

particular, "an Amazon blonde female constable" (West 2006: 48) who seems to find him attractive and makes no attempt at hiding it. The protagonist too finds Mary Holocene "attractive or interesting" (West 2006: 54) but he immediately produces her profile, a narrative of why she ended up in his small town – an entertaining story about a woman who is trying to hide a secret. The narrative, of course, is a projection even if it were true, and so might be the desire to isolate himself and keep a secret of his own, especially when in the presence of the mentioned Amazon constable, the dog manages to dig out the rifle the protagonist has tried to hide.

> Rummaging down there in the Badlands, I found many remnants of the past: a roll of duct tape, mosquito repellant, high-school yearbooks, a tube of lip gloss without a cap, a leather satchel with a soiled magazine inside, a safety pin, and a black wristwatch with one strap missing. Not that it's a junkyard, but rather a cemetery. There was a green datebook and a tie clip, the tip of a fishing rod and a bookmark sticking out of the mud, and an old dog collar, too. Under a chunk of fossilized oyster I found a rusted shell cartridge, probably an old military issue and, at that moment, the phone started going off again.
> A rusted spade with a box handle was resting against an abandoned roll of cattle wire beside me. In a moment, the spade was in my hand and I opened a great trench in the soft mud of the August creek. I dropped the ringing phone into the hole and covered the hole up with dirt… (West 2006: 72)

Digging up fossils and discarded objects seems to be of the same value to the protagonist, or at least a matter as interesting. But metaphorically speaking, his isolated existence and the desire to dig up whatever the past has buried, stand in disagreement. This unquestionably clever and amusing character infuses his observations with sardonic humor that is neither judgmental nor compassionate – he merely observes and remains at the fringes, eventually burying his virtually unused cell phone as the Amazon constable is calling.

In the same volume of *The Journey Prize Stories* (2006), Craig Boyko's "The Baby" stands to illustrate the supreme example of the postmodern narrative playground, but with a twist. Boyko explores fatherhood through the perspective of the future "dadums", the narrator-protagonist, and demystifies all the reasons why someone would enjoy having children. He subverts all the cultural and traditional stereotypes and discourses related to parenthood and imbues the narrative with an almost moving sincerity of a man who is truly content with his life and desires no change. The protagonist's wife, Delia, however, is presented as the hormonally-ready female, explaining her desire for a baby as:

> It's a thing – I mean a little person – into which – into *whom* – we can pour all our unused love […] All the latent love that needs an object small and cute. All the potential love that we have rotting away inside us, all that derelict love whose expiry date draws rapidly nigh. (Boyko 2006: 74)

Cleverly parodying not only Delia's seemingly sudden decision to find the use for her potential love or redirect it to another "thing", for the narrator does emphasize having enough "things" already, Boyko's narrator-protagonist also parodies one's possible expectations of what the child should be like, or what this "little person" should in fact do when it enters the stage. What is poignant in Boyko's story, aside from the uniquely crafty humor, is the ending in which the protagonist, already a father, telling his child a bed-time story, reveals that parenthood is not blissful. All the humor woven into the mechanics of the story facilitates the reception of the ultimate message which is:

> I hesitated. "The moral? Why, the moral is look before you leap. Or perhaps it's don't bite off more than you can chew. Or maybe it's don't shit where you eat. Or perchance it's think before you speak. Or mayhap it's don't do something just because everyone else is doing it. Or peradventure it's pay no attention to honey-tongued demagogues for they act only and always in their own interest. All right? Okay? Now good night." The baby yawned. "Nigh-nigh daddums."
> … My heart melted. (Boyko 2006: 81)

Contrary to what might have been expected, Boyko's story does in fact provide a pseudo-ending, and not an ambiguous one, but rather a complex message. The male protagonist is certainly aware of the fact that the decision to have a baby, or the event in which it simply arrived without any prior notice according to him, need not have been made at all. Boyko's protagonists accepts his fall, but remains aware of his previous life and the severity of his responsibility as a parent. What is post-postmodern in "The Baby" is not only the negotiation of how the concept of parenthood should be defined, but also the idea that a new discourse might be proposed – one in which the bundle does not necessarily bring joy, and one in which a life outside parenthood might be seen as fulfilling.

Similarly, Clea Young offers the female perspective on parenthood – motherhood as a loss, in "Split" (2006) where a young married woman observes her estranged best-friend immersed in motherhood, and searches for reasons to justify her utter indifference at babies, motherhood and the ordeal that it seems to bring. Convinced that she is biologically faulty, Tova, the protagonist, puts the blame on her inverted nipple – a small deformity she uses to justify something that seems culturally unacceptable. The reasoning behind her split-nipple seems to be that since she is culturally obligated to bear children as a biological woman, a biological, physical defect would be a fair excuse not to. "Split" is a powerful story about a woman who is prepared to one day become a mother simply because society considers it crucial for womanhood, and because of her husband's paternal instinct.

> She looks for the "cuteness" she thinks she should see, the pitter-patter her own heart should feel when he releases an impromptu smile. She feels slightly reassured that her own mother never cared much for other people's children. It wasn't until she had Tova that she understood all the fuss. (Young 2006: 208)

Much like Boyko's male protagonist, Tova understands what role she plays in the microsystem of her marriage, and the macro system of society – from still being friends with her estranged friend even though the change terrifies her, to marrying and the expectation to one day endure pregnancy and child-rearing. But understanding the role does not enable either of them to resist or reject the imposed expectations. The optimism Brooks sees in postcontemporary poetics, basically in contemporary fiction, can be closely compared to the optimism of a cancer patient being told that there may be cure for AIDS. Post-postmodern poetics, in fact, challenge core concepts, only to remain within the well-established boundaries of the cultural and political mainstream discourse.

Nancy Jo Cullen's "Hashtag Maggie Vandermeer" (2014) is a narrative about aging but also ageism. The protagonist, Maggie, obsessed with her body and image, begins to notice changes she cannot control, "Maggie faced herself in the dining room mirror (hung just so to make her apartment look larger than it was) and lifted her arms above her shoulders; so far she was staving off scrotarms. Her face was another matter…" (Cullen 2014: 35). This former PR with twenty-three years of experience can easily run

a 10k, but cannot go to the second stage of job interviews because she is perceived as an aging woman, and "a mom" who could not possibly comprehend Facebook or social networking in general.

> "My mom doesn't get Facebook at all," Jasmine said. "You know, she posts weird things on my wall. Unnecessary things. That touchy, feely stuff with sunsets and oceans."
> Maggie gave Jasmine an understanding nod. (Cullen 2014: 36)

Far from being a perfect parent, Maggie is guilt ridden about her "Former Drinker" past, but she is also haunted by a feeling of disconnection from her daughter, Lacey – also known as Pushyboots on Twitter. Stuck in a jobless vacuum, Maggie attempts to attract both the attention of her potential employers by dropping her daughter's name, but also her somewhat alienated daughter's attention. The narrative oscillates between a general sense of injustice towards Maggie, a competent and qualified professional who is constantly being turned down because of her age; but also her misplaced and somewhat infantile desires. This former alcoholic enjoys both a release in the form of smoking marijuana, and text-spamming her daughter, guilt-trapping her, in moments of loneliness and despair: "And just in case Lacey would worry she was crazy, Maggie typed her final, final message on her phone's small screen: It's all good. She hit send" (Cullen 2014: 47). In the context of Leslie's "The Person You Want to See," neither Maggie Vandermeer nor Laura can orient themselves and find their space, so they turn to the virtual space only to be left to communicate into a void.

Tyler Keevil's "Sealskin" (2014) resonates with a very vast body of literature dealing with separation and dissociation from one's own kind. Alex, the protagonist, and an adult victim of bullying, finds it utterly tedious and stomach-turning to turn up for work. Not being a union worker, he becomes the favorite prey of Rick, a senior worker at the platform. Both Alex's inability to exert authority and his good-heartedness lead him into a situation in which the only connection he establishes at work – one with a seal who frequents the area – becomes another weakness his tormentor manages to exploit. Keevil's protagonist, deeply devastated by the incident in which his tormentor kills the seal Alex has been feeding, and after being severely beaten by Rick and his thugs, skins the dead creature, puts on its skin and speeds off on a boat he steals. Bizarre and almost absurd, the story reverberates with an acute sense of being the other, of not belonging and of lacking basic connections with human kind.

> All the lockers had names and union numbers on the except one, which was his. He kicked off his shoes and took off his clothes and stuffed these articles into the locker. He's left his coveralls sprawled on the floor like a deflated person. […] Alex picked them up and stepped into the legs one foot at a time and slipped into the sleeves one arm at a time before zipping the front up from his crotch to his chin. Doing this always made him think of those sea creatures that could change from people to seals and back again; each morning he on this grey skin and became somebody else, somebody owned, and after work he peeled it off and became himself again, or at least somebody closer to himself. (Keevil 2014: 92-93)

The protagonist not only feels "owned" but is literally marked as different, and his own perception of himself pushes him away from deeper human, but also other contact. Ironically, in his sealskin, he is again perceived as "an imposter" (Keevil 2014: 123) by another seal, "feeling aloof and alone and untouchable" (Keevil 2014: 123).

Andrew MacDonald's "The Perfect Man for My Husband" (2015) is an amazingly humorous story of a woman trying to cope with her husband's impending death, as well as the realization that their marriage might have been a friendship, and that her husband is not attracted to her or women at all. What could have been a heart-wrenching account of a cancer-patient's final days, or a marriage gone awry, turns into a parody that subverts the cultural and social normative pertaining to marriage and sexuality. The heart-warming sequence of the protagonist finding out that her husband is gay, making clumsy attempts at coping with the painful and confusing narrative the couple share, attempting to transform herself into someone more masculine by growing hair on her body and, finally, trying to find her husband a man, give all too touching an account of a relationship that transcends ego, as well as what is conventionally taken for marriage, or gender and sexuality.

> "You can't force someone to want to have sex with me."
> "Pardon me for thinking that the rest of the world would find you as pretty as I find you."
> "It's not that." He let go of me and looked into his hands. "I shouldn't have said what I said to you. It wasn't fair." (MacDonald 2015: 68)

Deirdre Dore's "The Wise Baby" (2015) deals with a theme that can be related to "The Perfect Man for My Husband" as much as it resonates with a similar sense of loss, disappointment at discovering a stranger in one's romantic partner, and the fact that the theme of homosexuality features in the 2015 volume of *The Journey Prize Stories* twice, even though in "The Wise Baby" it turns out that Darryl, the protagonist's boyfriend at one time, only uses it as an excuse to end the relationship. Much like in "The Perfect Man for My Husband," the emphasis on the process of coming to terms with pain and disappointment leaves a strong impression on the reader for there is no certainty of resolution.

> *Everyone is the other, and no one is himself… And only that which is unmeaning can be absurd*. (Dore 2015: 208)

Vivian's boyfriend of four years suddenly reveals to her that "his art was the most important thing in his life," and that "he might be gay" (Dore 2015: 206). The discovery, however, is quickly debunked as a mere excuse for their breakup. The protagonist's perspective, one of a "philosophy student-slash-server" (Dore 2015: 206) is enriched by quotes from Heidegger's *Being and Time*, and the process of her loss thrown into an even greater chaos by a couple next door – two unstable individuals with a child, entangled in an odd, dysfunctional or even juvenile relationship that ends in the baby's father running away.

> She started kissing Caro's wounded face and his eyes closed in feigned sleep or bliss, and when she lifted her head away from him and turned to me, her lips were bright and vivid with his blood, as if she had smeared them with lipstick, as if she were going somewhere. (Dore 2015: 221)

What is shocking, however, is the very end of the story – the moment Vivian is left with the baby, the unpinning of the baby's arms so the boy could play, and the very idea that the baby is wounded either through Caro's father's doing, or even the protagonist's, Vivian's doing.

> Bodies open and close on the machines that fill the weight room. A man drags steel from his chest – front push, cheeks taut, and the winged twin paths of his arms in full

> extension. His chest under the surgical light. Mechanical bird, his slow flight. Then, release. Arms in, he folds back in, weights clink into a neat stack. […] Inside, bodies struggle in the tinted air. (Leslie 2016: 8)

Alex Leslie's "The Person You Want to See" (2016), is a story of an odd inward journey of Laura after a painful breakup with her girlfriend. The oddness of the introspection of the main character is not in the nature of the relationship though it is a lesbian relationship, but rather the path the protagonist chooses to deal with the pain of loss, which stands emblematic of some of the cultural stereotypes referring to lesbians being masculine, butch or socially inadequate. However, the path also brings into question the nature of human relationships, the workings of the social and familial circles in the twenty-first century and points to a significant reliance on social networks. The protagonist's desire to reconnect with her former partner takes her into the gym where she unintentionally discovers that working on her body, noticing "a shift in texture" (Leslie 2016: 10), but also to Facebook. What is ultimately deeply disturbing about the personal growth she believes she is experiencing is its virtual and somewhat self-pitying nature. Instead of connecting to other people, Laura reconnects to Facebook and begins a one-sided conversation with her former girlfriend:

> Then eventually, the Rumi and Hafiz quotes on letting go, the Facebook mourner giving public signs of personal growth. The appropriate I-am-moving-on updates always earned many heart icons (Laura hated these); any persisting bitter or wounded posts were quietly ignored, or condemned by receiving supportive comments only from the mourner's parents. (Leslie 2016: 15)

The problematizing instrument in "The Person You Want to See" is not simply the underlying irony, but the idea, or sense, that there is a lack of awareness of the fact that the loneliness and inability to connect with oneself and others seems to be rooted in the normative lifestyle in which connection is established in the virtual space initially. The virtual space and the gym tend respectively to psychological and physical needs, but neither is adequate. The former offers a relationship with no satisfactory feedback, whereas the latter bursts Laura's blood vessels and transforms her into the negative cultural stereotype. Additionally, the idea that a leap towards masculinity would relieve the pain stands as another subversive idea in the story, even though it is not particularly or directly elaborated on. The narrator does not seem to mock the idea that the journey inwards needs to start from the physical, but Laura's self-pitying perspective of her journey is self-deprecating enough to suggest there may be awareness of the cul-de-sac situation she weight-lifts herself into.

J. R. McConvey's "Home Range" is another story from *The Journey Prize Stories* 2016 volume. At first glance realistic, the narrative flow reaches a rather dubious and even anomalous turn. Kyle, the protagonist, a pier-warehouse worker, finds "a tiny and thin" (McConvey 2016: 35) girl supposedly inside a container who appears to be around the same age as his daughter, six, "wearing a white blouse smudged with grease and oil, ad a navy skirt that barely covers her scraped knees" (McConvey 2016: 35). This girl, perceived by Kyle as "a curious bird, dead still" (McConvey 2016: 35) provides this single father both the respite from the overwhelming pressure of raising a child all by himself, but also mutates into his deepest fear. In fact, the story on the whole is enigmatic on at least two levels: initially, Kyle suspects the girl is a human-trafficking victim, and he takes her home in fear for her life, only to release her, as if 'into the wild,' when the fear of a local criminal who might be involved with the girl's present situation takes the best of him. On another level, what Kyle sees as a girl turns into something

quite exotic – a creature with a "bushy striped tail hanging unmistakably from the base of her spine, protruding just above the hem of her track pants" (McConvey 2016: 51). The discrepancy between the dynamic and smooth narrative and the final twist in the plot – for it certainly does not offer any relief in its final throws – brings into question the protagonist's, and the perceiving subject's state of mind, and leaves the reader with two chilling images: the girl who supposedly transforms into a bushy-tailed half-human half animal is left to her own means, "to dissolve into the evening mist before his eyes" (McConvey 2016: 50) – a reflection of the protagonist's despair at the idea of leaving a child in the forest; and the image of a man, haunted by the cracking voice of his dying wife, "the flick of the cargo girl's tail" (McConvey 2016: 51) and "whatever other echoes haven't fled him yet" (McConvey 2016: 51). What the reader cannot help but wonder is whether this man's actions with the cargo girl have anything to do with his own daughter, and the pressures that he feels knowing that "the music will never work that way again" (McConvey 2016: 51).

Conclusion

Postcontemporary poetics, at least according to Brooks, is marked by the optimistic thread permeating contemporary literature – an acceptance of the socio-political changes, and an affirmation of life – an awareness unburdened by the legacy of the past. However, the previously discussed idea of postcontemporary poetics remains reductive. What separates postmodernity and its possible contemporary diverging trends, is supposed to be an overall tone, a reclaimed desire or necessity for social action, the enthusiasm of rediscovery of new modalities of existence, but somehow modalities within the well-established norms and narratives. If postmodernity would salute the act of narrative creation – an act of defiance in itself, an act against the mainstream discourse and the subversion of the norm, an act that questions the legacy of the past and incorporates in into the present – post-postmodernity recognizes its deficiency in terms of the inability to transform reality into a novel, life-changing or merely life-affirming vision. Therefore, what is termed as post-postmodern falls short of the goal consciously, recognizing clearly a postmodern defeat with a contemporary conformist twist. In the selected contemporary Canadian short stories, randomly chosen to simply identify a common thread or link in the overall tone, the emphasis was placed on the processes taking place inside the minds and bodies of protagonists and characters dealing with others, society, culture or politics invading their lives, as if by force.

In Henderson's "Conjugation," the protagonist's surreal and ambiguous narrative is one of regression and ultimately a failure to recognize and clearly define one's own needs. The past in "Conjugation" is not only revisited, but rather forcefully relived. West's "Cretacea" allows us a glimpse into a world closed to the outside, bounded consciously and purposefully so as not to allow for any external meddling into the protagonist's routine and aloof serenity – a life lived in the present, but a life dedicated to rummaging aimlessly through someone else's past. In Boyko's "The Baby," the protagonist, "daddums," refuses to delude himself about the realities of parenthood. In fact, through parody, Boyko deflates the pomp of the mainstream narrative of parenthood as blissful and warns the reader about the realities of such an endeavor. Young's "Split" avoids parody but remains realistic in how the discourse on parenthood, and particularly motherhood, diverges from the realistic fears and insecurities both women and men may have. Both in "The Baby" and "Split" there is an evident postmodern streak – a defiance

against the notion of a grand narrative, of the narrative of parenthood and motherhood, but what is clearly post-postmodern about them is the implied idea that regardless of the protagonists' individual desires and fears, they would do what is expected of them. In Cullen's "Hashtag Maggie Vandermeer" the protagonist, Maggie, is frozen in the moment not only by her own doing, inhibitions, frustrations and demons, but by society and its expectations – a society that rapidly dispenses of those who cannot be perceived as culturally attractive – young, vibrant and connected on social networks, where life 'happens'. In Keevil's "Sealskin" there is no human or other connection for Alex – he perceives himself and is perceived as an imposter regardless of the "skin" he puts on. The uprootedness of the protagonist underscores the impact of capitalism and reification of both human and animal lives. MacDonald's "The Perfect Man for My Husband" subverts the discourse on marriage and love, and stands as potentially one of few stories that resonate with what Brooks sees as a shift towards a new outlook on life and society, although it is still not a space for social action. The narrative of Dore's "The Wise Baby," a parody sprinkled over with philosophical quotes, relates a story of mental breakdowns and brings into question the concept of adulthood, of responsibility, but also parenthood and love. In Leslie's "The Person You Want to See," a woman struggles both with the pain of her relationship falling apart, her own body changing shape, and social networks as means of communication and socialization. The protagonist, Laura, seems to exist merely in the space between the present and the past, and physical transformation and the creation of a new image in the virtual space, begins to give shape to her future. McConvey's "Home Range" is an ambiguous story about a man who supposedly saves a girl from human-traffickers only to 'release her into the wild' again. Or rather, a story of a man faced with a difficult choice that resonates with the postmodern condition - one of helplessness in the face of manifold choices and life-defining decisions.

To conclude, the selection of contemporary Canadian short fiction presented in the paper, illustrates a certain leap towards a new trend within postmodernism. Whether this trend can be called postcontemporary or simply post-postmodern is a matter of terminological distinctions and somewhat enthusiastic definitions. The noticeable focus on the individual, the subjective experience of social and political phenomena, the overall disconnect and the certain eccentricity present in the selected short stories suggest that contemporary fiction still operates in the bounds of postmodernism – using its instruments, devices, and problematizing what is taken to be the mainstream discourse in the twentieth and twenty-first century. However, what is also noticeable is the absence of that historical sense and the tendency to problematize the past in the context of the present. This might be the most problematic of the aspects of the discussed postmodern trend. Namely, if post-postmodern literature behaves as a fully functional, rational and observing amnesiac, how can it be socially or politically relevant? It would, perhaps, be safest to suggest that post-postmodern literature, contemporary literature, shows a lack of interest in the political, and focuses on the individual experience as it is, in culture as it is, criticizing it ever so subtly as if it were a nuisance. Even though post-postmodern literature shows signs of saturation with typically postmodern concerns, the delicately rebellious streaks and an emergence of novel topics, novel social, cultural and economic themes, render it relevant, valid and promising.

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Sanja Ignjatović

POETIKA SAVREMENE KANADSKE PRIPOVETKE

Rezime

Kako postoji tendencija da se pojedini aspekti poetike savremene književnosti kategorizuju kao post-savremeni (post-contemporary), u ovom radu se predstavljaju argumenti u korist teze da oni zapravo pripadaju post-postmoderni, pravcu koji proizilazi iz postmoderne, a da su sve dalje klasifikacije zapravo terminološki varijeteti koji se odnose na isti koncept. Ilustracije iz savremenih kanadskih pripovetki

objavljenih u periodu od 2006. do 2016. godine imaju za cilj da pokažu na koji se to način postmoderna manifestuje u savremenoj kanadskoj književnosti. Glavni cilj rada je da se identifikuje ono što je zajedničko savremenoj kanadskoj pripovetci, kao i da se ona postavi u kontekst postmoderne ili post-postmoderne poetike. Glavno pitanje koje rad postavlja jeste da li zaista postoji post-postmoderna književnost, i ako je tako, šta nam ta poetika govori o trenutku u kome živimo. Izbor pripovetki predstavljenih u ovom radu inspirisan je utiskom da upravo glasovi novih kanadskih pisaca, pisaca koji se bave sličnim temama, nude najbolji uvid u to kakve su to promene u društvu dovele do onoga što se naziva post-postmodernim stanjem.

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