

# Trickster Ethics, Richler and King Fiddling

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**T**HE CONTEMPORARY TRICKSTER is the closest to a postmodern, post-colonial persona we have in literature. Representing both the play and the politics of current fiction, the trickster can permit a new narrative route to problems that range from legitimacy of voice to canonicity. I want here to construct the figurative relationship between reader and work that I call trickster ethics. The new emphasis on ethics in literature demonstrates a turn from theory to conduct and performance. I do not see this turn as a new moralism, however; pluralism has discredited prescriptiveness. Ethics now emphasizes a closer understanding of how to *describe* the ethos of the subject, as Wayne C. Booth, Charles Taylor, and Richard Rorty, among others, have shown. Under the influence of postmodernism and postcolonialism, our own subjectivity inscribes our critical positions as never before. The most valued critique becomes a congruently mixed metaphor of one's own subjectivity and the exclusionary status of the object studied. We have made ourselves metonymies of the politics and stylistics of the literature we admire—and, of course, anti-types of the literature we loathe.

Mordecai Richler's *Solomon Gursky Was Here* and Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water* are exemplary texts through which to dem-

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onstrate the trickster ethic. They will illustrate my development of the trickster persona (which I shall gender male; though as important, there are fewer female tricksters, and “it” denies the human element). Both Richler and King raise issues and questions relevant to our current and historical ethical relationship to alterity, and as minority writers—Richler Jewish, King mixed race but emphasizing his First Nation’s heritage—they do so from the position of the now privileged outsider. But they also upset that position in the way Naipaul does with his mimic men, writing parody rather than praise. It is that upset, that trickster play, that I believe defines the persona—the offspring?—of the cohabitation of postmodernism and postcolonialism. Dee Horne alluded to this cohabitation in King’s novel in her analysis of its “*creative hybridization*,” combining satire and postcolonial interaction between cultures (257); I continue her consideration in a cross-cultural context to describe a universal trickster. In my description, moreover, the phenomenon of return that Mircea Eliade elaborated encodes the helix of this character. If repetition is about inculcation, then we can say that this trickster ethic, this “pomoco” offspring (postmodernism + postcolonialism), is a didactic literature deeply concerned with alternative ways of showing us the recurring problems we encounter in the recognition and accommodation of alterity.

## I: Ethics in the Pomoco World

A survey of ethics in literature presents a troubled field. Historical and cultural difference prohibits general agreement as to what is a suitable ethics and how to constitute it. Postmodernism and postcolonialism both inspire and frustrate attempts to prescribe an ethics of salvation, yet the paradox of postmodernism and postcolonialism is that salvation is not found in its pursuit but rather in ignoring it: pursuit means following the path of prescription and then scapegoating when the path is inevitably discovered to lead to the lip of a volcano instead of the stairway to heaven. Postmodernism and postcolonialism are better understood, especially as they converge in critical discourse, through the practice of pluralism.

Accepting that, I can only define a trickster ethics through the highly determined selectivity of reading in a time when it is impossible to read everything. Reading the “right” texts is impossible, too: deconstruction and pluralism problematize them into maps for herd wanderings only, and even those herds steered away from the abattoir of fashion still range within the fences of dogma. Tricksters are mavericks, as are the most interesting scholars. If there are trickster scholars, they play with both “essential” and eccentric work, make from it unexpected and sometimes

undesired discoveries; the names are enough to reveal that: Foucault, McLuhan, Derrida, Said, even Bloom (either). It is with no great pretense nor offence, then, that I develop the pomoco trickster eccentrically.

Literary study is currently concerned with the possible replacement of itself with cultural studies. The concern is, however, simply a symptom of the larger ethical reorganization of the humanities that results from postmodernism and postcolonialism. Literature will not disappear as an object of study, but it is now over-privileged. If assessments of its new status vary, one can nonetheless suggest that cultural emblems such as the trickster will define the desire for a new reading. Charles Altieri laments how those blind to the lessons of deconstruction are too caught up with the hermetics of suspicion: “Superb at describing how political conditions impose themselves on writers, the new demystifiers prove much less able to show how literature provides means for responding creatively to those conditions” (4). Altieri proposes that “we postulate some active principle, independent of the reader, that guides selection of meaning from a range of semantic and cultural possibilities” (13). I understand Altieri’s “active principle” to mean what the trickster is and permits: a pluralist ethic that responds to semantic, cultural, and political conditions. His new demystifiers confuse the gap between moral and scientific discourse for which Edith Wyschogrod proposes that ethics open “a discursive and ontic space for becoming, specifically the becoming of moral change” (55). Like Altieri’s, her activist ethic must have a “*point d’appui*” (xx); for her, it is narratives of saintly lives, whose compassion reflects the Fanonian postcolonial regard for the wretched (xxiii). As I will show later, divinity is a trait of the trickster and allows us to read him as a pomoco saint.

William R. O’Neill shares the ethical angst of Altieri and Wyschogrod when he sees Kant’s heirs pervert “the majesty of duty” into “the problematic rules of moral discourse” (49). Rather than prate over the rules, they could accept Kant’s “Mephistophelean maxim” of an ironic materialism behind our moral actions (41) and distinguish, with Aristotle, “the *phronimos* [*phronesis* is ordered to the ‘end and highest good’] from the merely clever (*deinos*) agent, who is equally adept at pursuing “unscrupulous’ ends” (O’Neill 10; *Nicomachean Ethics*). Our conflict over positionality in ethics and theory reflects and results from the trickster charging between the *phronimos* and the *deinos*, which Freud calls ego psychology and which literature and politics call the endless struggle between duty and freedom, between community and individual.

Achieving the “highest good,” utilitarianism’s laudable aim, extinguishes the incendiary individual, just as the individual is freed of community tyranny with, say, the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights. As neither position is possible without the other, the trickster ethic is about the dilemmas of reconciliation staged between them. Those dilemmas cause the moral confusion that John Kekes identifies correctly, I think, as the misdirected movement from monism to relativism rather than to pluralism. Relativism errs in ignoring pluralism’s claim that “there are limits beyond which conceptions of the good life cannot reasonably go” (139). The trickster ethic is also about the problem of ignoring the desirable social and material conditions for the good life, about the problem of determining what is reasonable, and, most of all, about the problem of not only failing to agree but of failing to recognize that agreement is necessary at all. Christ and Marx unite here, and Elaine Scarry has shown that if one’s body is in pain, all other concerns are secondary—nothing supercedes this physicality. Take care of the body, and the mind will take care of itself.

I have linked postmodernism and postcolonialism to develop the trickster ethic, but the linkage is not itself new. The linkage of postmodernism and postcolonialism is not specifically made in Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin’s landmark *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures*, but the basis for the link is evident and well-drawn, based on the politics of language: “The crucial function of language as a medium of power demands that post-colonial writing define itself by seizing the language of the centre and re-placing it in a discourse fully adapted to the colonial place”; that can happen by “abrogation,” or the refusal of imperial categories, and by “appropriation,” or the adaptation of imperial categories to one’s own cultural experience (38). This invites postmodernist, idiomatic “english,” which both Richler and King employ, through their use in contestatory circumstances of untranslated Yiddish and Cherokee as well as colloquialisms. If, as Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin assert, “the imperial moment” is the “control of the means of communication” (78), then Richler demonstrates the postcolonial resistance to that in situations such as when Ephraim becomes a forger in London, audaciously subverting the authority and the law of language right at the imperial centre, and King demonstrates it when the four old Indians enter and change the John Wayne film, the product of another imperial centre. Lesser instances would be, in *Solomon Gursky*, Moses’s correction of the *OED* and, in *Green Grass*, Eli’s professorship at the University of Toronto, which, even if an act of mimicry,

is an implicit challenge to imperial custom as Eli maintains a sufficient, if latent, Indian identity that allows him to return to his reserve (King uses the American “reservation” in his novel’s American portions, with appropriate trickiness—see Lionel at Wounded Knee [58]).

The pomoco connection is also the context for a later collection edited by Tiffin and Ian Adam, in which the linkage promotes resistance to imposed ideals. The trickster becomes the agent of this resistance in my definition, the postcolonial aesthetic *maquis* who contests any further hegemony through his identification with the local, the locale. In that way the trickster becomes more than just the impulse to and manifestation of irony: he is the reification of localized, culture-specific irony. The combination of locale and irony creates the trickster’s pomoco identity and makes the trickster its emblem. Terry Goldie’s culture-specific work shows the potential to ironize the colonial imposition when the indigene assumes that “white technology represents mystical powers” (131). The trickster inverts the assumption and defeats that technology, as when, in Richler, Franklin goes missing in the Arctic and, in King, the dam breaks. Likewise, just as Goldie finds that in imperialist literatures the shaman restores the white soul at the cost of his own, the trickster ethic inverts that restoration, guarding the indigenous spirit when the shaman no longer can because he has been appropriated. The trickster cannot suffer such a fate because he is not so much a culture-specific being as a way of seeing. That allows Richler to use the raven as his trickster totem (it is common to Jews as well as to North American Natives) and avoid cultural appropriation, and allows King, who is part Greek and German, to use coyote, a local version of the global wild dog. Richler and King use these figures not just as Goldie’s white authors use the shaman, to restore themselves, but also to restore all who can accept the ethic. More than local and ironic emblem, then, the trickster is also the emblem of pluralistic anti-imperialism.

Having overcome cultural difference, the pomoco trickster also overcomes historical difference in resolving the problem of historical truth. The trickster is at his most soteriological here and supports Charles Altieri’s proposal that “we shift our attention from the relations between interpretative statements and their objects to the positions that works of art make available for reflecting on ourselves as interpreting subjects” (291–92). If pluralism offers multiple positions, Altieri’s valorization of subjectivity offers the benefit of working with personal history as a metonymy of pluralist, cultural history. The metonymy connects post-modernism and postcolonialism to resolve the problems with history

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that Diana Brydon defines with reference to Linda Hutcheon's work on postmodernism, problems that result when emphasizing ahistorical interpretation. Brydon writes:

As Hutcheon points out, “[h]istoriographic metafiction acknowledges the paradox of the *reality* of the past but its *textualized accessibility* to us today” (*Poetics of Postmodernism* 114). Without denying that things happened, post-modernism focuses on the problems raised by history's textualized accessibility: on the problems of representation, and on the impossibility of retrieving truth. Post-colonialism, in contrast, without denying history's textualizing accessibility, focusses on the reality of a past that has influenced the present. As a result of these different emphases, post-modern fiction takes liberties with what we know of the facts of the past much more freely than does post-colonial fiction. (201)

Richler and King unify Brydon's distinction and resolve Hutcheon's paradox: though recognizing that postmodernism and postcolonialism can refuse each other, trickster ethics also reconciles postmodernism's suspicion of history and postcolonialism's affirmation of it. History becomes a pluralist, ironic, and contingent construct that both invites and imitates novelistic play. Representation is not a problem, truth is retrieved, and postcolonial writing is liberated when the trickster informs the script. Determining our reading through him, we create the paradox of an ethical fixed point that slides between various agencies and points of view. The trickster ethic both doubles meaning with postmodern cleverness and requires the postcolonial highest good of accepting alterity.

## II: Trickster as Pomoco Emblem

The trickster embodied postmodern cleverness and postcolonial alterity long before those terms gained currency in theory. His historical continuity as clever otherness signifies an ethical accretion that parallels foundational discourses as it also inverts them. Reactive rather than initiatory, the trickster responds to the need to restore the highest good if codification debases that good. If his absence indicates the realization of the highest good, his continuous worldwide presence shows that the good has always been elusive. With the irony that he is always trying to erase himself to establish that good, he defines and embodies the ironic positivism of the pomoco soul. Remedial practices are always about the desire to eliminate the need for them.

Of the numerous writings on the trickster worldwide, Paul Radin's *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology* (1956) remains the standard reference. Working from the North American Indian Winnebago trickster and hare cycles, Radin generalizes cautiously— imagine his sense of peril did he not—and can globalize his definition. Following mid-20th-century myth criticism, he believes the trickster is a “*speculum mentis* wherein is depicted man’s struggle with himself and with a world into which he has been thrust without his volition and consent” (x). The trickster is a metaphor of the ethical conflict of our attempts to define and solve the problems of internal and external conflict (x). At odds with ourselves, we fashion an alteric quasi-human to displace and embody our desire and to permit its imaginative enactment, “a hero who is always wandering, who is always hungry, who is not guided by normal conceptions of good or evil, who is either playing tricks on people or having them played on him and who is highly sexed. Almost everywhere he has some divine traits” (155). The trickster symbolizes a past of vague distinction between the divine and the secular, representing neither humans nor gods. Belonging to another realm, he leaves us uncertain what to do with him (168). As this symbol, the trickster represents the aporia in binary definition, the gray area from Aristotelean categorization to Derrida’s abyss, from the divine versus non-divine to idealism versus pragmatism. He satirizes authority and morally questionable achievement: the Winnebago idealized the warrior, yet their trickster myth begins with a satire on the warbundle ritual (117). Trickster satire informs literature from Homer’s gods toying with their heroes to Pope’s mockery of the dunces, to Richler and King pulling the strings of characters too tangled to pull their own. As writers, they can both embody and present the trickster, can do it all in the ludic impulse that Radin perceives behind the mask that is often enough constructed for the very purpose of cautioning us not to construct and limit ourselves with such masks. Trickster “became and remained everything to every man—god, animal, human being, hero, buffoon, he who was before good and evil, denier, affirmer, destroyer and creator. If we laugh at him, he grins at us. What happens to him happens to us” (169). A cultural safety valve, the trickster is Socrates’ gadfly presence in Athenian pseudo-democracy; is Jesus’ rabbinate with gamblers, whores, and fishermen; is Luther’s spiked theses; and is Gorbachev’s perestroika. In the viciousness of late-communist China, the trickster is even the tanks of Tiannanmen and now even Bush’s Iraq. Reciprocation in kind appears to be the standard trickster performance, and the ironic benefit of those crushed bodies in the Square is not lost on the democracy movement.



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Pomoco trickster study echoes Radin's anthropology of satire even while it qualifies the mythopoeic, archetypal origin. William J. Hynes and William G. Doty reflect our time's identity and postcolonial emphases with their interest in the trickster's "cultural manifestations" (2). Challenging the Jungian view of the trickster as a primitive stage in the evolution of the cultural hero, they assert the enduring relevance of the trickster's plurality, plurivocality, and ambiguity; only he fulfills the Renaissance dictum "*serio ludere*—play seriously" (6). Hynes and Doty reject his definition through comparativist segregation, arguing instead for a "generic" trickster (2), with Hynes presenting a "heuristic guide" (33) of core characteristics: "(1) the fundamentally ambiguous and anomalous personality of the trickster. Tumbling from this are such other features as (2) deceiver-trick player, (3) shapeshifter, (4) situation-inventor, (5) messenger/imitator of the gods, and (6) sacred/lewd bricoleur" (34). While not every trickster has all these traits, all have some; ambiguous, the trickster also is at both poles simultaneously, the perfect Cartesian postmodern. Encompassing so much, the trickster, writes psychotherapist June Singer, regulates both our conscious and unconscious lives:

He symbolizes that aspect of our own nature which is always nearby, ready to bring us down when we get inflated, or to humanize us when we become pompous. He is the satirist par excellence, whose transcendent wit points out the flaws in our haughty ambitions, and makes us laugh though we feel like crying.... The major psychological function of the trickster figure is to make it possible for us to gain a sense of proportion about ourselves. (Doty 47)

That satirical sense of proportion is also foundational to a culture, as Laura Makarius observes: the trickster violates taboos to obtain "medicines or talismans necessary to satisfy [the group's] needs and desires. Thus he plays the role of founder of his society's ritual and ceremonial life" (73). Ironically, in assuming the founder's role, he also becomes the "expiatory being who will take upon himself the sins of humanity and set humans free, by virtue of the familiar process of redemption" (83). Representing first and last, the trickster sets the bounds of systems, then plays within them to test and if need be overturn them. Jesus is easily identified with Socrates in the role of rule-maker, rule-breaker, and redeemer, as are all revolutionaries, teachers and poets who upset a social order that through its self-neglect has given the trickster cause to play.

The trickster aesthetic of mimetic and performative signifier enhances his social role. Anne Doueiki, regretting that Western scholarship ignores



the breaks and contradictions in the free play of signifiers, believes that the trickster celebrates “the power of signification, the possibility to mean” (201). Possibility signifies uncertainty; if we seek absolutes, the joke is on us for rejecting the incomplete reality that trickster language intentionally constructs (200). The commentary on failed absolutes makes T. O. Beidelman want to abandon “trickster” as a global term (176): ethnocentric anthropology misdescribes the disorder and ambiguity of trickster stories as deviancy and subversion rather than as the central moral concern of those stories (189). Beidelman condemns critical approaches that marginalize ambiguity, contradiction, and conflict, whether across or within cultures; tricksterish change, dysfunction, and cognitive dissonance represent the essence of social life (191). If William J. Hynes’s “interpretative theses” on the trickster risk inviting the boundary-breaking that signifies the presence of the trickster, they also anticipate and then enact that breach in the concluding thesis of open-ended dissolution; the enactment steps beyond deconstructive denial to affirm what it knows it denies, which is the paradox at the heart of trickster performance: “1. *Trickster myths are deeply satisfying entertainment*” (202); “2. *Trickster myths are ritual vents for social frustrations*” (206); “3. *Tricksters reaffirm the belief system*” (207); “4. *Tricksters are psychic explorers and adventurers*” (208); “5. *Tricksters are agents of creativity who transcend the constrictions of monoculturality*” (211–12); “6. *Tricksterish metaplay dissolves the order of things in the depth of the openended metaplay of life*” (214). Hynes’s theses address interests in both postmodernism and postcolonialism, from Bakhtin’s carnival to Booth’s ethical criticism; from Guillory’s and Altieri’s canon critique to the irony of Hutcheon and Rorty; and from Said’s orientalism to the western defence of both Blooms. The paradox of the trickster seen in the third thesis, that of reaffirming the belief system—“Every time the trickster breaks a taboo or boundary, the same taboo or boundary is underlined for non-tricksters” (208)—makes Bakhtin *et al.* trickster guides for us. Once we have read them, we can no longer maintain old taboos and boundaries, yet we can see how those old ones still apply, even why they have to if we are to sustain any sense of having broken them only to have established new ones. The trickery is the process of breaking: new limits always appear. “Metasocial commentary’ or ‘hermeneutics in action” (Pelton; Doty and Hynes 21), trickster creation and destruction are both revolutionary and salvational (Street; Doty and Hynes 19), the desire within us for individual liberty and social security.

Mac Linscott Ricketts believes the trickster makes us self-sufficient humanists and permits us to mock authority (87–88), as does Mircea Eliade in his discussion of the evolution of the occidental God from archetypal to historical being. Contrasting Judaism to prior religions, Eliade finds it values historical events in themselves, and that God “is no longer an Oriental divinity, creator of archetypal gestures, but a personality who ceaselessly intervenes in history, who reveals his will through events (invasions, sieges, battles, and so on)” (104). As a metaphor of righteous action, God’s intervention differs from the trickster’s only in being direct and unironic. If irony characterizes our epoch, then the trickster is our god, a play that King makes when he bases his novel about history and its effects on the punning of God and dog (2) and places his trickish narrator divinely above all. If, as Eliade wrote, “yesterday’s profane and illusory existence gives place to a new, to a life that is real, enduring, and effective” (18), the trickster is our learning, our confusion and discovery during it, and the need to repeat and extend it if we are not to be fooled by limited subjectivity. Objectivity is just another name for the accumulation of the multiple and limitless subjectivities that the trickster provokes us to discover in marginalities that become central. The discovery purifies the ethos and regenerates life, and the deluge is its prime symbol (57). In both *Solomon Gursky Was Here* and *Green Grass, Running Water*, floods and the threat of them figure to ethically situate the action. The trickster’s activity with floods in both books makes him fundamental to the ethical transformation that the flood represents. But the historical position is insufficient: anticipating yet rejecting Richard Rorty’s contingency argument (22), Eliade believes that “Justification of a historical event by the simple fact that it is a historical event, in other words, by the simple fact that it ‘happened that way,’ will not go far toward freeing humanity from the terror that the event inspires” (150). The trickster reconciles Eliade’s binary—or breaks boundaries, to follow Hynes—in making historical progress acknowledge tradition and contingency work with foundationalism. The result is the revolutionary salvation that we now see in the side-effect of postcolonialism: the mediation of civic and ethnic nationalism that Michael Ignatieff studies. But Eliade sees a further danger:

as the terror of history grows worse, as existence becomes more and more precarious because of history, the positions of historicism will increasingly lose in prestige.... [I]t is not inadmissible to think of an epoch, and an epoch not too far distant, when humanity, to ensure its survival, will find itself reduced to desisting from any further “making” of history in

the sense in which it began to make it from the creation of the first empires, will confine itself to repeating prescribed archetypal gestures, and will strive to forget, as meaningless and dangerous, any spontaneous gesture which might entail “historical” consequences. (153–54)

Eliade, I believe, was right, and I believe he was describing our own time. With Francis Fukuyama and with the fall of the Berlin Wall and Iraq, we now avoid any further making of history by losing ourselves in the new archetypal gesture of democratic consumerism. Our prescription is that global access to consumer goods will prevent wars for that access. However, we are missing—and this is the trick—the war being waged on the environment to permit consumerism. A history is still being made, and it is the ecocriticism that Eliade did not, maybe could not, foresee: the archetypal gesture of consumerism will wipe us out unless we cooperate with nature. That very concern is elemental to the trickster activity in Richler’s and King’s novels as they satirize the ethic of acquisition and predict concomitant environmental disaster.

### III: Raven and Coyote Play

Mordecai Richler’s *Solomon Gursky Was Here* and Thomas King’s *Green Grass, Running Water* both propose a trickster ethic. Though very different novels in their narration and cultural settings, they share a concern for minority status and invert authority through trickster play. *Solomon Gursky*, Richler’s most ambitious work, is a roots saga modelled on the founders of Seagram’s Distillery, the Bronfmans. *Green Grass*, King’s second novel, is a story of contemporary Native life and concerned primarily with the return to cultural roots. While Richler’s novel ranges broadly in history and geography, and through four generations, King’s is set primarily in southwestern Alberta, with some time in Hollywood, and in the present and recent past. Both novels are comic and satiric, with a wide range of characters revolving around a few principles. In *Solomon Gursky*, an obsessive Moses Berger pursues information on the elusive Solomon Gursky, the trickster in the empire-building Gursky family. In *Green Grass*, Lionel Red Dog is turning 40 and having to face his failure and possibly unsettling renewal through the intervention of four old Indians intent on bringing out the coyote in him. The old ones have a habit of wandering off to revise history, always one step ahead of their caretaker Dr Joe Hovaugh, a pun on Jehovah that is only the beginning of the trickery in an extraordinarily crafted novel.

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Both Richler and King use trickster figures as integral characters. The usage differs in each, but the intent is the same: to reveal and determine the ethical status of the stories. In *Solomon Gursky*, Richler refers frequently to the raven, even citing mythology about it (191, 493, 499–501) as he also identifies the bird with the story’s main trickster human, Solomon himself. In *Green Grass*, King has Coyote appear frequently as an actual character, in a metafictional role with the self-announcing narrator. They usually appear apart from the main action—though Coyote sometimes enters it too—commenting on it and also introducing the supporting legends that King uses to establish historical, ontological, and etiological contexts. Both novels show the raven and coyote as actual animals as well, but most often their role is symbolic. Richler varies the representations more, from decals to Solomon Gursky himself, while King retains Coyote as the narrator’s side-kick and ironic pupil—ironic, as Coyote knows all already and thereby undermines the narrator’s authority to make us shift, with Eliade, from the naive, traditionalist, and false comfort we take in controlling stories to the historical understanding of indeterminacy we need. Both tricksters direct the stories into ethically troublesome waters, as the flood motifs throughout each reveal (e.g., *SG* 346–7, *GG* 414 [as dam break]) and just as Eliade describes as the climax of the cycle of return. The pluralism of both novels rewards the culturally strong, encourages good mixing, and punishes the greed, corruption, and blindness of technocrats and crazed consumers. What I will do here is present instances of the raven and coyote tricking their way through the novels to show how Richler and King return to mythology through postmodernism and postcolonialism to exemplify their ethical narratives. Their return is itself a trick of history, resurrecting myth criticism for current postcolonial cultural work.

In *Solomon Gursky Was Here*, the raven is evoked at the very beginning of the novel when the patriarch Ephraim Gursky sleds out of the Arctic winter in 1851, having survived the Franklin expedition by the tricksterish act of cannibalism. Ephraim calls the bird, but it does not appear, having been shot, and that shooting leads to the suicide of the gunman and, we can assume, the later backwardness of the area as revenge (4–6). Ephraim, as the novel’s minor key trickster, carries the nickname of *Tulugaq*, Inuit for raven (60), and at various other points he is associated with the bird to build on the trickster quality he already embodies with his London crime life (cf. 84, 192, 227, 346, 415, 438). Deciding Solomon is the most adept of his grandchildren, Ephraim steals him away to the north to initiate him. Though Ephraim says nothing about ravens on this trip, the first

time Solomon is associated with ravens is in a gesture exactly replicating Ephraim's call at the novel's opening (78, 4). Association of Solomon with the raven continues, through Latinate and other aliases such as "Mr Corbeau" (327), "Corvo" (394), "Dr Otto Raven" (517), and "Mr Cuervo" (541), and with his businesses "Corvus Trust" (299) and "Raven Consolidated" (411). The raven is the emblem on his escapist Gypsy Moth biplane (484) and for the freighters used to transport Jewish refugees to Israel (190). Solomon, alias Sir Hyman Kaplansky, tells Moses about the raven in a self-justificatory gesture; mocking, he says, "I see that you've been seduced by the deceitful raven" (191), a play on Moses's infatuation with Solomon as Moses studies an Inuit raven painting, and he tells a story of the raven's deceitfulness. Later, he tells Moses the legend of the raven among the Haida of the Pacific northwest: the raven has a "constant and notorious need to meddle and change things" (493). The postcolonial moment with the raven is a connection between the Jews and Native Indians through the raven (37, 45) in the Bible and in Native legend.

Why does Richler present Solomon as a trickster, and why has he used the raven? The raven's mix of deceit, cunning, and survival describes the stereotype of Jews, which, as is true of all stereotypes, needs inversion to show its determination. Solomon's grasping brother Bernard cheated him out of his share of the family wealth, and worse, plotted his murder, believing he has killed him as Solomon wisely never reappears. Richler tricks up the Cain and Abel story to show how an admirable vengeance might occur in the inversion. Solomon tries to positively influence almost every scandal and tragedy of the mid-twentieth century—from the attempt to rescue Jews from fascist Europe to the attempts on Hitler's life to Watergate to the Entebbe El Al hijacking, let alone his anonymous pestering of the economic control of his vicious brother's liquor empire and his play with the obsessive Moses. Together with the trickster role, Richler emphasizes the Eliadean idea of return through narrative history in which present events mirror and replicate past. A refrain of the novel concerns destination and evokes both the narrative return and the refuge of Solomon and Ephraim in tricksterness: asked where they are going or have gone, it is said, "North. Where north? Far" (4, 34, 148, 316, 484, 556). The most important return is in the identification of the raven with Solomon's grandson Isaac, who will continue his grandfather's pestering of the liquor empire in a takeover bid (92, 108, 526, 531, 535). The inescapable conclusion is that Richler sees the trickster myth as a device to work at the problem of contemporary morality, as a means to reveal the absurdity of selfishness to avoid the return to it. For literature, the use

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reconciles the conflicts within postcolonialism by offering the pluralism of a common humanity that accepts our difference, and even if Ephraim proselytizes Inuit to Judaism, it is his own peculiar version, with himself as Messiah—another trickster-as-God trick. And surrounding all this is the activity of Solomon’s son Henry, living a kosher life in the Arctic and building his ark as he monitors the arrival of the deluge of Eliade’s return.

Where Richler’s trickster raven occurs irregularly in the guises of the real and the emblematic bird and in Solomon Gursky, Thomas King’s coyote trickster always appears as Coyote and at framing, directive breaks in the narrative. *Green Grass, Running Water* has four major parts, each based on repeated motifs: a colour sacred to Cherokee; a sub-narrative controlled by each of the four old Indians; a female original of each of the old Indians; and a narrative from the Western canon, which is postcolonially inverted in the relationship between the central white character and the secondary indigenous character. Each part opens and closes with the narrator and Coyote, and they return each time to the same story to try to tell it right, even while the story changes. For the first two parts, the narrator and Coyote speak alone, with Old Coyote appearing as a hapless victim, a return motif to show the irony of trickery. By the third part, Coyote is entering the action of the main narrative as it revolves around the members of the Blackfoot community and the four old Indians, who are out to “fix up the world” (123): such a fixing needs him. Only the old Indians recognize Coyote when he appears, making them tricksters as well; to the remainder of the characters, he is a wild yellow dog (23, 265–66, 279, 289).

Coyote helps the four old Indians restore Lionel Red Dog’s and Charlie Looking Bear’s pride in their Blackfoot heritage. There is a climactic moment for each, and Coyote appears at each: at Charlie’s, Coyote and the four old Indians enter a John Wayne western and change the ending so that the Indians—and Charlie’s actor father—win (316–22); at Lionel’s, they conclude a longer process of assistance when he faces down the white racist George Morningstar at the Sun Dance (382–88). The deluge that concludes the story is the breach of the dam, on Blackfoot reserve land, that symbolizes white intrusion. The dam has not functioned fully because another Native, Eli Stand Alone, has refused to relocate his obstructive cabin, which predates the dam— another coyote play. Coyote himself refers to the dam and its lake as “a Coyote dam” and “a Coyote lake” (409), and it breaks when three floating cars symbolic of Columbus’s ships—white technology again—that Coyote has transported to the lake

ram the dam: white technology works against itself, an environmental trick we are seeing more and more. When the dam breaks, Eli is washed away to trickster heaven, as the four old Indians are with him, and Lionel decides to live in the cabin when it is rebuilt: he has returned. The four old Indians return to Dr Joe Hovaugh, a flustered but relieved Jehovah, and all is fairly right in the postcolonial world.

The above description of Coyote in King's novel reveals only a small part of his role in the story. King's metafictional narrator always appears with him, and King thereby incorporates the trickery of postmodernism in his Coyote's identity, just as Richler has Solomon's improbable trickery direct his narrative. In both novels, the central characters—Moses Berger and Lionel Red Dog—discover the trickery played on them and become better men for it: they are the prime recipients of the ethical lesson. The strength of the female characters is also significant: in *Solomon Gursky*, Diana Morgan reduces Solomon and Beatrice Wade reduces Moses in ways not entirely unsatisfactory to them; in *Green Grass*, Alberta and the four Women who correspond to the four old Indians trouble men enough to make them rethink their presumed dominance. Each writer, then, has a feminist subtext to his novel that reflects another aspect of the contemporary trickster: the play of sexual politics. Overall, their vision is determined by the injustice that minorities and the excluded experience. Though we might be tempted to call this a Christian ethic, the novels' non-Christian, even anti-Christian narrative asks us to go further. Christianity is persecutive in each novel; the treatment of Jews and Indians historically directs us to another explanation of the authors' ethical orientation. The explanation is found in postcolonial pluralism. The trickster represents and demonstrates the difficulty of achieving that norm—but not the impossibility.

One last question: why the trickster in these two powerful novels, now and in such different stories? The postcolonial period—the whole of the twentieth-century—seems one big trick of history, a tragic one that we still have to come to terms with fully. If human hubris is always implicated in fiction, this century knows no better representation of it than the trickster's play. We have messed up badly, but we are also, as the new millennium begins, learning far more than ever about issues ranging from the cruel treatment of outsiders and colonized people to the hazardous treatment of the environment. To see the trickster at the root of all this requires, at the same time, a ludic outlook, a Bakhtinian sensibility, the Augustan mockery of pride in total knowledge. If that seems beyond our

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potential or even undesirable for us as teachers, Michiel Horn's evocation of C. B. Macpherson's admonition can inspire us:

In 1970 C. B. Macpherson spoke of "a sick society" and its need for "diagnosis, at every level of its malfunctioning: ecological, physiological, economic, psychological, political, and above all (or below all), to use an old-fashioned word in little repute these days, moral." He claimed for the university the role of diagnostician, and compared it to the medieval court jester or fool, the one person in a prince's entourage who was supposed to be outspoken and to say things no courtier was allowed to say. (353)

To say what others are not allowed to—what better defines our professional urge and our refusal of censorship? What better defines, at the same time, how we accept our possibility of error? Trickster ethics is about recognizing humanity's apparently inevitable creation of absurdity for ourselves but also about the need to remedy it. How we remedy it is something else again. A pluralist island is about all we can stand on if we are to survive the deluge.

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