

Byrna Barclay's  
"Out-Wandering  
Women" in  
*The Livelong  
Quartet*:  
New Directions  
in Canadian  
Ethnic Fiction

Beverly Rasporich  
University of Calgary

ABSTRACT

Drawing upon her Swedish cultural traditions, Byrna Barclay, in her trilogy of novels, *The Livelong Quartet: Summer of the Hungry Pup, The Last Echo, Winter of the White Wolf*, rewrites the epic and the Scandinavian saga tradition as female-centred immigrant odyssey. Her heroines are outwandering skalds of female genealogy and tribe who become indigenous to the Canadian Prairies through aboriginal inspiration. As ethnic and female fiction, the trilogy is expressive of postmodern culture. It is also an ethnofictive reflection of the new Canadian pluralistic nationalism.

RÉSUMÉ

Selon sa tradition culturelle suédoise, Byrna Barclay, dans sa trilogie de romans *The Livelong Quartet: Summer of the Hungry Pup, The Last Echo, Winter of the White Wolf*, réécrit l'épopée et la tradition de la saga scandinave comme une odyssée centrée sur des femmes immigrantes. Ses héroïnes sont des historiographes errantes de la généalogie et tribu féminines, qui deviennent indigènes aux Prairies canadiennes grâce à l'inspiration des autochtones. En tant que fiction ethnique écrite par une femme, cette trilogie est une expression de la culture postmoderne et une réflexion sur le nouveau pluralisme culturel canadien.

THE CURRENT CLASSIFICATION OF "ETHNIC literature" in Canadian letters is undoubtedly transitory,<sup>1</sup> and clearly tied to the historical evolution of our nation and our concept of national culture. Canada's history, although not its myth, is one of quiet conquest: a continuous story of ever-increasing tribes-in-exodus sparring over the rights to primacy in a vast frontier originally inhabited

by Native peoples who were the first to suffer defeat. In the aftermath of the British conquest of the French, the Anglo-Celtic majority in English Canada gradually created and canonized their own fictions — often of exile and immigrant experience — with marginal status accorded, if accorded at all, to literature written about ethnic minorities by members of ethnic groups. After the second world war,

however, when the exclusive immigration patterns of the interwar period which excluded the “lesser breeds” and “lower orders” were altered in favour of “selective restriction,”<sup>2</sup> a new freer concept of Canada began to evolve which favoured the eventual inclusion of ethnic literature into the literary canon.

To some extent, this development was foreshadowed in the scholarly work of Watson Kirkconnell, a humanist and a Christian who, prior to World War II, perceived the forces of racism at work abroad and at home, and postulated an ideal concept of a federated Canada that was built not on Anglo-Saxon superiority, but on a blending of the cultures of all immigrants. In *Twilight of Liberty* (1941), he explains:

I do not wish to belittle or deny the value of a national culture and a national tradition in giving a warm core of spiritual significance to our Canadian community. I hope for the fullest possible development of such a national culture, blending and cherishing here all the rich legacies of European gifts that are found in the land....<sup>3</sup>

Canada and its national culture would be a model for a peaceful international “world order” based on “co-operation and justice” (82). Believing in the universal interests and truths of literature, Kirkconnell acknowledged the literary as well as the socio-cultural value of the considerable body of writing created by those authors belonging to some two and a half million Canadians of European origin. As a linguist, Kirkconnell contributed to the recognition of what is the most pristine example of what one might define as ethnic literature — that written in languages other than English. His work included *Canadian Overtures: An Anthology of Canadian Poetry Written Originally in Icelandic, Swedish, Hungarian,*

*Italian, German and Ukrainian* (1935), as well as numerous translations and evaluations.

The White Paper of 1966 and the ensuing regulations of 1967 which opened the immigration doors wider than ever before to all peoples, regardless of race, colour, religion, national origin or sex, saw the politicians recreating the founding myth of the country as a multicultural country, with the original settler cultures — the Anglo-Celtic and the French — still, paradoxically, having authority. The literary canon has, of late, subsequently absorbed this national dream, with more attention paid to the category/categorization of ethnic literature and with a considerable number of writers of politically exiled sensibilities, or of particular immigrant or ethnic ancestral and cultural sensibilities, acknowledged as major Canadian storytellers. Joy Kogawa, for example, has had official cultural recognition for *Obasan*, a story of Japanese dispossession in Canada, and, in 1984, Josef Skvorvecky, a Czech refugee, won the Governor-General’s Award for *The Engineer of Human Souls*. Interestingly, it may be that this shift to recognizing ethnic storytelling has placed Canadian writing in the mainstream intellectual movement of postmodern thought and unity in the western world. As Linda Hutcheon explains, one of the major thrusts of the postmodern writer is to query the so-called “universal” truths of the liberal-humanist tradition, and to write from a marginal or ex-centric position with regard to the dominant culture. In a postmodern context, in fact, the emphasis in literary valuing on “the different and the diverse, in opposition to the uniform and the unified” is an attitude that accords well with what is now a dominant Canadian self-image.<sup>4</sup>

Postmodern culture in Canada, which espouses new models based on “contingency, multiplicity, fragmentation, discontinuity,” is

also largely expressed, as Hutcheon points out, "in new forms that embody ethnicity and the female" (18-19). In response to feminism and immigration patterns, these new forms, which are expressions from the borders of cultural power, are beginning to reshape our canonized literature. One writer who is a part of post-modern female and ethnic fiction-making is Byrna Barclay. Her *Livelong Quartet*, a series, to date, of three novels (*Summer of the Hungry Pup* [1981], *The Last Echo* [1985] and *Winter of the White Wolf* [1988]), is an extraordinary epic exploration of female generation and tribe played out as immigrant myth on the Prairies, and as an ethnofictive reflection of the new Canadian pluralistic nationalism.

Female authors must perforce reject or alter established literary forms because of their male-centredness. Thus in the hands of Alice Munro, the *Kunstlerroman*, a novelistic form which shows the development of the artist (traditionally male) from childhood to maturity, evolves as female genre in *Lives of Girls and Women*; and Aritha Van Herk creates a contemporary feminist picaresque in her picaresque parody, *No Fixed Address*. Similarly, Byrna Barclay, drawing upon her Swedish ancestry, re-visions, in *The Livelong Quartet*, a variant of the epic and Norse sagas as female-centred immigrant odyssey. Rejecting patrilinear fictional chronology in her *Quartet*, Barclay begins her first novel, *Summer of the Hungry Pup*, at the fictional centre of her story cycle. Her narrative focuses on the story of an aboriginal Old Woman, a Cree medicine woman, whose tale of exodus/exile across the forty-ninth parallel and return to the Canadian Prairies in Saskatchewan is that of the Cree people after the North West Rebellion of 1885. This life story is filtered through the responses of a contemporary woman, Annika, of third generation Swedish ancestry on the Prairies, who is the spiritual Granddaughter of Old Woman. Annika also relates Old Woman's

blood-sister relationship to her own Swedish grandmother and original immigrant, Johanna of Hannas. In the next novel, *The Last Echo*, Barclay begins at the beginning, with the story of the grandmother as it was in Sweden before emigration. Finally, in the third novel, *Winter of the White Wolf*, postmodern complexity allows for multiple texts: the story of Annika, an artist figure in contemporary dissettlement in Livelong, Saskatchewan; her grandmother Johanna's tale of early settlement there; autobiographical points of view of subsequent family members, and the return odyssey of Annika to Sweden — both as questing metafictional artist and the ethnic dispossessed. This trilogy has no closure; it only has the wanderings of heroines who circulate bravely in the epic tradition, longing for home and, in the case of the contemporary Annika, searching for artistic inspiration in a vision quest that also resists finalities: "Begin again, as late in the story as possible.... We resist change and finalities. Even a story-song does not want its last verse...."<sup>5</sup>

The nature of the epic in its original oral poetic form, broadly speaking, is that of the heroic story incorporating myth, legend, folk tale and history. *The Livelong Quartet*, which is largely prose narrative, has the richness of these elements as well as the celebration of tribe and heroic character that is characteristically epic. Richard Dorson points out that "heroic epics and sagas have enthralled audiences with their tribal and nationalistic appeal as the listeners identify with a hero of their blood, cast in their mold...."<sup>6</sup> In Barclay's contemporary epic, however, there is a re-vision of the masculine ethos of the genre; tribe is not patrilinear but authoritatively matricircular. Annika, who is both contemporary artist and ancient skaldic bard, is poetizing the deeds not of male heroes but of a genealogy of championing women, with her grandmother as the whole and centre. In *Win-*

ter of the *White Wolf*, Annika envisions: "On her quilt and etched into the central beam, four women danced now, weaving in and out of each other, separate and yet tied up together until they became, in the grey light, Johanna of Hannas" (8).

The ancient heroic epic was also as much a cultural as a literary phenomenon: "Epic poems grew out of appropriate cultural conditions, the so-called Heroic Age bridging nomadic and sedentary stages of civilization, a preliterate era when bards celebrated the deeds of great warriors."<sup>7</sup> This phase of transition between nomadic and sedentary culture is approximated by Barclay and presented as immigrant dilemma of some distress to her out-wandering Swedish women, who shift their allegiances between old country and new. This is particularly marked in the emigre Johanna of Hannas:

She [Johanna] cannot know: a half century of building on the wrong plan in the new land, of tending to one man and his children and loving his brother will cut deep and leave an empty place in her like the hollow left by an unearthed cave-stone. She will be an out-wandering woman, running thither and yon, forth and back from homeland to new land, back and forth from the new world to the old. (*Wolf* 29)

At the same time, the nomadic way is preferable for the heroic woman as quester who is entrapped by the masculine conceptualization of home/land and by a wrong-headed notion of land/holding on the Prairies. Barclay suggests that such a conceptualization is, indeed, contrary to an aboriginal and successful nomadic existence. As Annika explains, "It is not unusual for an Indian to move from place to place...."<sup>8</sup>

In *Summer of the Hungry Pup*, the aboriginal Old Woman is, in effect, mentoring wom-

an and inspirational nomadic female muse. Her story runs parallel to Johanna's and is told in an oral-literate way in the first person, with Old Woman herself as poetic bard, situated in a folk frame of orality as she recounts her life story to Annika. In both Old Woman's and Johanna's life histories, men initiate love and war and exodus. Women wait and follow. Johanna's emigration is occasioned by her romantic love for Arvid, the Northlander who marries another and whom Johanna unsuspectingly follows to Saskatchewan, only to conveniently marry his brother Bjorn as a means of surviving on the Prairies, as well as to discover their mistaken idea that "Where Arvid is, there is home" (*Wolf* 136). Similarly, Old Woman, the first wife of Horse-Dance-Leader, is led through periods of famine and extreme physical hardships in flight across the forty-ninth parallel by the remaining Indian leaders, Lucky Man, Little Poplar and Little Bear, after the Cree surrender at Battleford. She is later captured with her tribe and driven back to Saskatchewan by the American army and the redcoats.

What Old Woman encompasses is the understanding of the Real People, the Prairie People, of "man's" relationship to the land. She is the one who frees Johanna of Hannas from her fear of open prairie spaces and from the restrictions of not knowing "how to live well" (*Pup* 155) on it. She is the one who takes Johanna, makes her "lie down, face down, on the earth" (155) and helps her "overcome her fear of wide open spaces, of unending land and eternal sky by showing her the unity of all things and the protective circle drawn by the four directions" (204). The white man is the one who builds "on the wrong plan" on the Prairies with his squared off visions, with "dots for towns, triangles for farmhouses, and rectangles for grain elevators" and "squared off farmer's fields" (50). White imagination is what draws the "dividing line" of artificial national borders, in the failure to

understand that "Earth is Only Mother and She is the same on That Side of dividing-line as She is on This Side" (50). Keeping the Indians *in line*, the white man is the one who fails to comprehend the circular unity of creation and ensures his own dispossession on the Prairies.

In this geometrification of country, Barclay is also true to a Canadian literary vision. As Gaile McGregor explains in *The Wacousta Syndrome*:

[one of the] Canadian's tools for arranging his conceptual world — in this case for exploring the posture of the self with relation to its field of action — is the graphic analogy. In particular, loaded references to lines and circles abound throughout the corpus, dragging in their wake a complicated vision of alternate and possibly antithetic philosophies of life.<sup>9</sup>

In *The Temptations of Big Bear* by Rudy Wiebe — an author with whom Barclay studied — as in Barclay's fiction, white men are line-oriented and the "natives" are "identified with the circle of the seasons, the all-embracing curve of earth and sky" (McGregor 350). In Barclay's work, however, the circle-line analogy is also a battle plan for the female as adventuring "hero" and creatrix. When the medicine woman is about to have her first baby, she burrows into the ashes: "My toes press against stones circling fireplace. My body curves into earth. I will make a grey nest to have my child in" (*Pup* 49). She is, however, rudely uprooted by her mother, Too-Much-Woman, Bear Woman, who, a larger-than-life epic character, will herself later rush into the male battleground and disrupt battle conventions and the seriousness of war. Bear Woman pushes her daughter into a vertical position, insisting that she "Walk! Walk Far!" behind the wagons in exodus to Montana. In the process, the daughter becomes a striking

heroic vertical figure and creative life force in a circular landscape divided artificially by the white man's forty-ninth parallel:

Now I understand why my mother make me walk behind wagon. I walk through darkness of night, through all my pain, and I know there will be light of new day and new child on other side of it. I walk. Soul of a person must walk through wind on night of coming into life. I walk my child .... I do not know what circle of prairie holds for him on other side of dividing-line. (*Pup* 52-53)

For the Swedish-ethnic women, Johanna and Annika, the concept of settlement in a new home/land boxes them in as much as it does the Natives who are put on "left-over-land" (reserves). They, too, become "looked-after-persons" in a patriarchal system of ownership where there is little communication between the sexes, with men obsessively driven to work and possess the land, and women locked into homesteads as homemakers. In this system, farm women, peasant immigrants, "are workhorses and breeding mares" (*Wolf* 45). For the contemporary third generation ethnic woman, the young Annika who contemplates marriage to a young Arvid, the grandson of her grandmother's lost lover, romantic love — Johanna's lost possibility — also is no answer. With the young Arvid, "a quiet life in the country" will "chain her [Annika] to the stove and diaper pail" (*Wolf* 46).

As Tamara Palmer has pointed out, a central theme in the history of agrarian settler fiction on the Prairies has been a "preoccupation with work" in a hostile landscape:

There are no traces of the generosity born of paradisiacal abundance in the elemental landscape that is portrayed in novels about ethnic experience on the Prairies: nothing that would create a languorous sense of well-being in those who dwell there.

Rather, the landscape engenders a profound insecurity, and the price it exacts for lessening this insecurity is endless toil to eke sustenance from its stern expanses.<sup>10</sup>

As Johanna the emigrant reckons as she leaves Sweden, "Canada, I said, I am for that place, knowing that learning how to live well anywhere has to be got by task" (*Wolf* 3). Writing in retrospect, from the perspective of the third generation, however, Barclay moves the mythology of Prairie immigrant fiction in a new direction. Rejecting the faith of the Swedish grandparents, and the mythology of an earlier fiction that hard work brings its ultimate rewards (Palmer 70) and that home/land is desirable and possible, Barclay substitutes an allegiance to ethnic and female tribe, not squared off place, as a pattern for living with authority, independence and creative power.

One of the functions of Old Woman is that of female artistic and spiritual muse. Hers is a shamanic tutorship of Annika. Following the tradition of much earlier white female Canadian writers (Barbara Godard explains how Frances Brooke has her character Arabella admire "the beauty of movement of the squaw")<sup>11</sup> Barclay discovers, in the image and example of the Native woman, a means to empowerment and creative freedom. By having Old Woman adopt Annika as Granddaughter in the Native way and initiate her into tribal wisdom, Barclay acknowledges the Native idea that the nature of storytelling is communal, and that the art of fiction-making itself is a sacred trust which is transmitted through a female shamanic society. The lessons of Old Woman are clear: consideration of tribe, the Real People, is foremost for the female leader and artist. When her first child dies, she acknowledges the obligation of female-creator to the tribe: "My first born belonged to People before she was my child... I am only visiting here" (*Pup* 181). With milk from her breasts,

she feeds the children of other mothers and, in the situation of polygamous marriage, she assists and leads the female community of her husband's other wives. Most important, hers is the capacity to dream and receive visions that provide new customs and a spirituality for tribal women. In her first vision, Man-of-all-Songs comes to her saddened because the old customs are dying but empowering her with the creative capacity to begin anew.

My granddaughter / You are protected / I will show you how to make new / Dance.  
I will show you where to find medicine. /  
I will show you how to make feast. /  
Where you go, you are protected. / I will  
give you power of words. But / I do not  
give you song of your own. I give you /  
Song-of-women. You must sing it for them  
and teach / them new words. Song is for  
women and for children / of children. /  
Where you go, you are protected. (*Pup* 61)

As an initiate into this world of female tribe, Annika discovers home in the Native philosophy of the unity of all things as well as in her own skaldic power to recreate ancestral history in order to *originate* her Swedish grandmother's story, whose very naming — *Johanna* of Hannas — is a linguistic echo of unified being.

What Old Woman said was true: Johanna was part of me, and now apart. Also, I then felt the calm that only comes with the feeling of knowing that all things are joined inside and outside, of finding a reflection of my inner world in the outside world: miyopayiwin, the unity of all things under sky.

I had come home. (*Pup* 225)

Annika also joins the ranks of "other heroines in Canadian novels" who "in their search for empowerment, in quest of spiritual insight and creative expression ... enthusiastically follow the example of native women and discover a

new intersubjective relationship with nature and the cosmos as well as a greater originality in their art" (Godard 88).

Old Woman, then, in *Summer of the Hungry Pup*, clarifies the aesthetic need for Barclay and her alter ego, Annika, to centre on gender and ethnic-tribal affiliations. With an epic sensibility derived from the oral, folkloristic forms of Scandinavian ancestors — from the likes of the Poetic Edda, the Rig-Veda hymns, the Icelandic Sagas<sup>12</sup> — Barclay goes on to champion the female adventuring of Swedish tribe. The saga of Johanna of Hannas in the New World, alluded to in episodes in *Summer of the Hungry Pup*, is more fully developed in *Winter of the White Wolf*. A heroic epic of perilous adventure and womanly daring is recounted in Johanna's isolated emigration, her steerage voyage across the ocean, and her lonely trek across the Prairies by oxen. Heading west, on an old trail without markers or farmsteads:

She lifts her head: a crossing. Which way? North to Bjorn's quartersection, *eja* Arvid can forget about that, she's not a bride for stealing or trading. She hasn't lost command of herself... She's Johanna, daughter of a soap-boiling woman and she will never forget it. (154)

However, unlike the shamanistic heroine Old Woman, who is the magic centre of her own story cycle, Johanna is a more realistic epic heroine who, without the benefit of tribe, which she alone must engender on the Prairies, is superior, above all, for her fortitude and endurance. When she begins to lose heart on the Prairies, and her own centrality ("She is held at the center of the turning century but is pushed towards its ending. She is lost, undone, castaway by her own out-wandering" [*Wolf* 108]), she stumbles, in the style of the epic-odyssey, upon the wizard-like Hembrow, an Englishman situated in vagabond comfort on

the vast prairie, whose dance for her and whose song, *Beautiful dreamer waken to me*, enchants her into forbearance, under the mythic symbol of female life, the moon:

The moon turns, it slides away from the earth. On the rim of that golden globe, a young woman dances, twirling and spinning, the skirts of her festival dance swishing and whirling. Yellow ribbons twine down her bronzed hair. She dances dances, dances off the edge of the moon and falls falls, falls towards the earth. (*Wolf* 110)

Johanna of Hannas and Old Woman both, like their author-artist, are faced with the dilemma of reoriginating culture and tribal custom which are about to vanish in the Canadian context. Annika inherits the wisdom of her grandmothers; her mission as an artist becomes this very recreation, a mission which Barclay builds into *Summer of the Hungry Pup* as subtext and *Winter of the White Wolf* as metafictional inquiry. In the former, when Old Woman dies, Annika is visited with a Native vision of creation and, in the latter, she returns to Sweden, the homeland of her ancestors in quest of family and Swedish legend, folklore and myth, becoming, in the process, an epic and ethnic Canadian skaldic heroine. Hers is a fictional skald saga, a mimic of that ancient Icelandic genre which paid tribute to the poet-hero.<sup>13</sup> The female artist figure who emerges here is one of Viking ambition. In the last lines of *Summer of the Hungry Pup*, she is invested through Man-of-all-Songs with the poetic knowledge of "the words to all the songs" (303) and in *Winter of the White Wolf*, in Sweden, she is the out-wandering poetess who will be the wordsmith, medium, artistic interpreter and mythmaker of trans-continental tribal history in her reverse exodus to the land of her forbearers. In fragmented self-talk, Annika the artist considers the nature of her art, and her quest for artistic and tribal wholeness:

Livelong was my childhood home... Landscape become wordscape. There is no wordescape. In Hannas and in Molltrop I found two halves of the original home-place; and through the movement from south to north I brought them together.... All the myths are now true. Re-vision will be swift and easy... There are ways of bringing metaphor to metaphor, of imposing illusion upon reality upon dream, of superimposing landscape upon landscape and words of one language upon another. It all joins now... (*Wolf* 211)

In *The Livelong Quartet*, the very title of which suggests a bardic lay, Annika's — and Barclay's — aesthetic manifesto is one of epochal magnitude and broad circular sweep as she weaves her fictions backward and forward in time and around places and continents. If the first instrument is Old Woman, the second is Johanna who, in *The Last Echo*, is brought back to her own tribal roots and the beginnings of the family saga and genealogical lineage that develops as one feature of the author's tribute to Swedish ethnicity in these novels. At the heart of *The Last Echo* is family myth. Barclay explains:

Rather than focus on recorded myths, I turned to snatches of story told to me by my grandmother and mother. For example, I was told that my great-grandfather, a carpenter, fell from the church steeple. He also wore a rag tied around his thumb. That became the basis of the character Per Lundahl. The rest I imagined. I never knew my great-grandmother, nothing was ever said about her, but my grandmother made her own soap and candles, and the soap-boiling woman came from my memory of that lost art.... My focus was family myth, which I believe to be a universal characteristic of all Europeans who settled in Canada.<sup>14</sup>

The family myth of Per Lundahl becomes in *The Last Echo* the folkloristic tale of "The

Woodcarver's Fall," in which the elfish paterfamilias, who is dominated by his round, strong and combustible soap-boiling wife, falls from the church steeple, only to revive as he is being prepared for burial. After his wife has shaved his skull for the bone fragments from a dead man that, according to Swedish folk remedy, she needs to cure her daughter's epilepsy, he awakens "Berserk" (34) to a scene of comic ribaldry which is a tongue-in-cheek parody of male epic exploit. (In Norse mythology, a berserker was a fierce warrior who fought in battle with frenzied violence and fury.) The "family fiction" of *The Last Echo*, told within the larger framework of an immigrant female genealogical saga in the *Quartet*, is a richly sensuous tableau of larger-than-life peasant character, psychology, custom and superstition, with all of its old-world folk magic. This is a legendary world of Midsummer's Eve custom, of forest trolls, of pickled herring and oyster soup, rye krisp, potatoes boiled with their jackets on, "kottbullar, vitabord and kram pudding" (27), a world where skaldic poems are still sung:

Arvid told ... that the shield was the ship of the vegetation demon who comes on land in the spring and leaves in the fall. In the north, he said, shields were covered with leather, painted not carved. Not for war, the giving of the shield obliged the recipient to pay with a poem, the Ninth Spell of Odin, and he sang of *night hags sporting...* (122)

Here, too, the artistic magic of *renaming* primitive tribe is conveyed, as it is in *Summer of the Hungry Pup*, through Barclay's use of a poetic diction and a kind of imagery that is a salient characteristic of Old Norse poetry.<sup>15</sup> Kennings, or "naming" symbols, are compounded metaphorical expressions, such as those used by the author here: "Guest-giving house," "soap-boiling woman," "stay-sail," "heart-grief," "giftbag," "proudflesh," "priest-



yard," "windflag." Typically, as in the heroic lays of the Poetic Edda, Kennings add descriptive colour and to ambience of poetic grandeur.

Clearly, in *The Last Echo*, Barclay succeeds in imaginatively recovering and reviewing both ethnic familial ancestry and ethnic tribe. In the *Quartet* and, most explicitly, in *The Last Echo*, the metaphor which links the two (i.e., family and tribe) is that of the family tree which branches into the mythological Scandinavian World Tree. In the new world, Bjorn will build a home for Johanna, beginning with a carefully chosen log that will be the "guardian tree of their new home" (194), an act that echoes the larger Scandinavian myth. Johanna speculates on Bjorn's choice:

Of all the trees you might have chosen? Why that one? ... Arvid would say because the gods live in its uppermost branches, the earth is its middle, and the underworld its root. The Eagle lives at its top, the serpent curls around its base, and the trickster squirrel running up and down the trunk carries insulting messages from one to the other. He would go on to tell her that Ask and Embla, the first man and woman, were created by gods from trees on the seashore, the man from ashen spar, the woman from a piece of elm. (*Wolf* 194)

Family myth is also woven with the larger Nordic myth of the World Tree (the great tree that holds up the universe and is a symbol of life) in the mythic meeting of Arvid, Johanna's lost lover, with the Olding, the mysterious and ancient nomadic Laplander, who provides him with a prehistoric forest horse, a symbolic source of cultural knowledge: "Only the forest horse knows about the serpent coiled around the roots of the great tree, about the eagle's watch in its upper-most branches, about the chattering squirrel carrying insulting messages

from one to the other" (78). When Arvid leaves his family and leaves his horse to venture into the new world, he loses the mythology of his Scandian world which has been carefully preserved, even between Nordic tribes, to go and build on the wrong plan on the Prairies. As the Olding explains to Arvid, "I got her [the horse] from a Norwegian who got her from a Finn who got her from an Ice-lander who got her from a Gotlander" (93) and "never sell or trade her" for "If you do, your life will be altered for the worse" (94).

A dominant theme in *The Livelong Quartet* is that of the loss of original culture, as symbolized by Arvid's abandonment of the prehistoric forest horse in *The Last Echo*. Yet Barclay manages to re-invent the horse in the new world by reconstructing the history and pre-history of Swedish settlement in Saskatchewan and, as a Swedish Canadian female skald, by mythologizing blood-sisters in two continents. Her invention of tribe and tribal history is inspired by Native character, an inspiration that is constant in the literature of Western Canada, where the Native is designed by both male and female non-Native writers such as Margaret Laurence, Rudy Wiebe, Robert Kroetsch and Andy Suknaski as a totemic first ancestor in a prairie landscape. On one level, the appeal of the iconic Indian is to the tribe and to the nomadic condition, and an affirmation of the immigrant's first motivation is to leave the home/land behind and to become the out-wandering adventurer of the epic myth. At the same time, as Terry Goldie points out, the indigene in Canada is the very "symbol of national essence"<sup>16</sup> and, as such, symbolizes for these writers the paradoxical desire for a national culture, one which combines the old world ethnic tribe with that of the aboriginal. As ethnic writers in Western Canada have melded a variety of ethnic and religious heritages with aboriginal ancestry — for example, Suknaski, the Ukrainian Catholic; Wiebe, the

German Mennonite; Laurence, the Scottish Presbyterian; and Barclay, the Swedish Lutheran — they may appear to be at the margins of the contemporary national vision in Canada that currently espouses multiculturalism and female place yet, in practice, asserts English, French, male dominance. However, they can also be seen to be at the centre. In postmodern culture, which argues for speaking authoritatively from the borders, marginality may soon be fully equated with national identity — certainly on the “home” front and perhaps even internationally. Linda Hutcheon speculates: “Since the periphery or the margin might also describe Canada’s perceived position in international terms, perhaps the postmodern ex-centrix is very much a part of the identity of the nation.”<sup>17</sup>

Although Byrna Barclay in *The Livelong Quartet* is a part of the larger tradition of ethnic fiction writing in the West, she is also quite clearly establishing a new direction. In choosing to create tribal allegiance by rejecting the idea of a land-based national culture in

favour of a philosophical and metaphysical concept of “unity of all things,” she is, in part, exercising a womanly prerogative. The concept of home/land is one that has restricted the female, that has made her the passive agent in the marriage *plot* and that has disallowed her from being the skald or heroic protagonist. The history of women-in-exile has also always been occasioned by male rule, forcing the female to carry her home within: *miyopayiwini*. As the exiled Latin American writer Marjorie Agosin suggests, “I carry a country within myself. Like all women, I carry my home in my hair and carry love in my body full of spirits and pilgrimages.”<sup>18</sup> Thus, in *The Livelong Quartet*, Barclay and her heroines reverse the male order of Ulysses-unbound. They are out-wandering women whereby she and her heroine Annika are giving poetic voice to the tribal exploits and history of women, singing the Songs-of-women in epic style. By so doing, they begin to move themselves as artists and as women from the margins to the circular centre.

## NOTES

1. For a definition of ethnic literature, see Tamara J. Palmer and Beverly J. Rasporich, "Ethnic Literature," *The New Canadian Encyclopedia*, vol. 1 (Edmonton: Hurtig Publishers, 1985). Categories of ethnic literature include "emigre writing both in the nonofficial languages and in translation; literature by writers who perceive themselves as belonging to an ethnic minority and write from this perspective (usually in English or French); and works that deal with immigrant or ethnic experience but are not necessarily written by a member of the group portrayed." The point is made in this article that "the relationship between ethnic literature and mainstream writing is very much in flux" and "the latter is increasingly defined in the light of Canada's ethnic diversity."
2. In the interwar period, for example, the Chinese were completely excluded by the Chinese Immigration Act of 1923. Eastern and Southern Europeans were restricted. Xenophobia swept Canada and the United States. See Department of the Secretary of State, *The Canadian Family Tree* (Toronto: Corpus, 1979), 5-6.
3. Watson Kirkconnell, *Twilight of Liberty* (London: Oxford UP, 1941) 82.
4. Linda Hutcheon, *The Canadian Postmodern* (Toronto: Oxford UP, 1988) 19.
5. Byrna Barclay, *Winter of the White Wolf* (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1988) 151.
6. Richard Dorson, introduction, *Heroic Epic and Saga*, by Felix J. Oinas, (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1978) 1.
7. Oinas 2.
8. Byrna Barclay, *Summer of the Hungry Pup* (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1981) 31.
9. Gaile McGregor, *The Wacousta Syndrome* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1985) 349.
10. Tamara Palmer, "Ethnic Response to the Canadian Prairies, 1900-1950: A Literary Perspective on Perceptions of the Physical and Social Environment," *Prairie Forum* (Spring 1987): 56.
11. Barbara Godard, "Voicing Difference: The Literary Production of Native Women," *A/Mazing/Space*, ed. Shirley Neuman and Smaro Kamboureli (Edmonton: Longspoon/NeWest, 1986) 88.
12. Byrna Barclay, *The Last Echo* (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1985) 95.
13. Oinas 149.
14. Byrna Barclay, letter to the author, 9 July 1986.
15. See Peter Hallberg, "Elements of Imaginary in the Edda," *Edda: A Collection of Essays*, ed. Robert J. Glendinning and Haraldur Bessason (Winnipeg: U of Manitoba P, 1985) 59-74.
16. Terry Goldie, *Fear and Temptation: The Image of the Indigene in Canadian, Australian, and New Zealand Literatures* (Kingston: McGill-Queen's UP, 1989) 216.
17. Hutcheon 3.
18. Marjorie Agosin, *Women of Smoke* (Stratford, ON: Williams-Wallace Publishers, 1989) 26.

## REFERENCES

- Agosin, Marjorie. *Women of Smoke*. Stratford, ON: Williams-Wallace, 1989.
- Barclay, Byrna. *The Last Echo*. Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1985.
- Barclay, Byrna. Letter to the author. 9 July 1986.
- Barclay, Byrna. *Summer of the Hungry Pup*. Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1981.
- Barclay, Byrna. *Winter of the White Wolf*. Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1988.
- Department of the Secretary of State. *The Canadian Family Tree*. Toronto: Corpus, 1979.
- Glendinning, Robert J., and Haraldur Bessason, eds. *Edda: A Collection of Essays*. Winnipeg: U of Manitoba P, 1985.
- Goldie, Terry. *Fear and Temptation*. Kingston: McGill-Queen's UP, 1989.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *The Canadian Postmodern*. Toronto: Oxford UP, 1988.
- Kirkconnell, Watson. *Twilight of Liberty*. London: Oxford UP, 1941.
- McGregor, Gaile. *The Wacousta Syndrome*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1985.
- Neuman, Shirley, and Smaro Kamboureli, eds. *A/Mazing/Space*. Edmonton: Longspoon/NeWest, 1986.
- New Canadian Encyclopedia*. Edmonton: Hurtig, 1985.
- Oinas, Felix J., ed. *Heroic Epic and Saga*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1978.
- Palmer, Tamara. "Ethnic Response to the Canadian Prairies, 1900-1950." *Prairie Forum* (Spring 1987): 49-73.