Loops of Memory and Territorial Expansion in Myrna Kostash’s Work

The paper intends to give a rear-view of Myrna Kostash’s work in order to discover a design of the “writer’s progress” and the motivations under the evident patterns of return that suggest periodical revisions of the past as well as her writing about it, in a process of maturing and responding to new challenges. These turns and returns induced by memory – whether personal or collective – appear as linked also to changes in the location of the experiences and cover successively larger and larger territories in space and time.

Myrna Kostash defined herself in an interview as a “Ukrainian Canadian non-fiction prairie new leftist feminist Canadian nationalist” (Fee, 123). It is a complex formula showing that Kostash’s Canadian identity contains and embraces her belonging simultaneously to the ethnic and regional community she was born into and also to a wider nation. Her writing career was willy-nilly shaped initially by her “blood relations”, her family and ethnic group with the history of their becoming “Canadian”, based upon remembrances and recollections of the “old country”. This made her later on wish to explore not only the history of the nation to which her family had belonged before immigrating but also the larger context of their “Slavic” origin connected to a region of Europe. Her Canadian “nationalism” is shaped by her country of birth and it is only natural for her to be concerned with its present and future. But her personality is marked also by her conscious choices in the fields of politics, ideology and the way she expresses herself as a professional writer. All these objective and subjective determinations must have shaped the pattern of her writing.

Born in 1944, in Edmonton, Alberta, into a family of Ukrainian origin, Myrna Kostash had chosen to study Slavic languages and literatures at the universities of Alberta and Toronto. While her studies were in English, her family environment maintained her connection with the ethnic community of her ancestors. After graduation she spent two years in Europe with odd jobs and then returned to Toronto in 1971. She worked for four years as a
free lance magazine writer appearing mainly in *Saturday Night*, *Maclean’s* and *Chatelaine*. In the meantime she was teaching in the experimental women’s studies program at the University of Toronto, apparently perfectly integrated into the Anglophone Canadian society. But in 1975 she decided to return to Alberta, the region where she was born, a return also in time in order to explore her roots and the ethnic group to which her family belonged.

*All of Baba’s Children*, Kostash’s first book, could be viewed as a monograph of the Ukrainian community of the Prairies in Canada in the first half of the twentieth century. It includes both oral and written history and covers a wide range of aspects of the community’s life viewed from different perspectives. First published in 1977, it was strategically reprinted in 1980 and 1987, as if to recommend the author’s new books to her former readers but also as if to enhance the impact and to enlarge the circle of penetration of her writings. In his foreword to the third edition, George Melnyk recommends it as a “classic” and praises its vibrant, radical and revisionist perspective on multiculturalism:

> It turns its back to the old clichés; it dares to question and to criticize. For the contemporary generation of Canadians, it, more than any other book, has revealed the true nature of ethnicity, which has often been hidden under the veneer of assimilation. ‘All of Baba’s Children’ has become a manifesto that is yet to be surpassed (Kostash 1987, vii).

Melnyk classifies the book as “social literature” and its author as a “product” of the protesting generation of the sixties, culturally influenced by the “struggle for equality and pride of the women’s movement and oppressed minorities, who […] were rediscovering their lost past in strong, confident tones” (Kostash 1987, vii). Melnyk, himself of Ukrainian origin, welcomes Kostash’s return to the ‘homeland’ as a rootless intellectual’s attempt to overcome alienation and identification with a history and peoples other than her own (Kostash 1987, viii). *All of Baba’s Children* received immediate national attention because Kostash’s views were provocative and because she investigated the darker corners of Canadian identity. It became a widely commented bestseller as it put an end to the myth of “the happy ethnic”. Melnyk compares the impact of the book on Western Canadian non-fiction to Maria Campbell’s autobiographical *Halfbreed*, John Marlyn’s *Under the Ribs of Death*, and in poetry to Andrew Suknaski’s *Wood Mountain Poems*, showing “how fruitful a reciprocity can exist between place and the self” (Kostash 1987, x-xi).
In her introduction to the 1987 edition, Myrna Kostash writes in retrospect that in 1977 she knew only the technical part of her enterprise. She had considered it simply a “professional”, “journalistic” exercise: a “writer’s view of Ukrainian-Canadian history” (Kostash 1987, xiii). Only the contradictory reception of the book enabled her to see her own achievement from the outside. On the one hand, writes Kostash, there was the “fan mail” from people with unAnglo last names from small towns, expressing their gratitude for her “‘courage’ to write bluntly of the unhappiness and failure of the ‘ethnics’ as well as of their achievements” (Kostash 1987, xiii). On the other hand, she was attacked as “pinko” and “slanderer” because she had written sympathetically of the Ukrainian-Canadians in the Communist Party and dared to write that Ukrainians had been “drunks and criminals, anti-Semites and wife-batterers”. Non-Ukrainian readers accused her of “bitchiness” and for “maligning Anglo-Saxons” (Kostash 1987, xiv). Above all these reactions, Kostash had to acknowledge the pulling-force of the community – the Galicians of the prairie countryside – which was reclaiming her: “Liking these people or even getting along with them wasn’t the point: I had been born into them and my identity had been sealed” (Kostash 1987, xix). But she was not content just to acknowledge the blood relation. She believed that identity is also conscious and articulate and self-assigned: “There is the ethnicity one inherits and the ethnicity one acquires”, she wrote, and set out to acquire this “inherited ethnicity” (Kostash 1987, xiv).

*All of Baba’s Children* is not a linear, chronological narrative. As the titles of the different chapters suggest, it focuses on topics connected to work, family life, education, religion, culture, but also on politics, racial discrimination, the situation of the Ukrainian minority in the period of the two World Wars, nationalism and assimilation, ending with a chapter entitled “Mythologies”. There are hundreds of “voices” telling their different stories, quotations from newspapers and histories, interviews, showing the differences between the first and the later immigrants, between those who lived on the early homesteads and those who left for the city, summing up the losses and the gains in becoming Canadian and still preserving the former identity. According to these “voices”, becoming Canadian had been a painful and complicated process during which sometimes the formerly discriminated became themselves racists and discriminators. Kostash tries to keep a fair balance between the opinions concerning the Ukrainians’ wish to integrate into the new country and their opposition (supported by priests, teachers and intellectual activists) to a forced denationalisation. She also includes the discussions revived during the debates surrounding multiculturalism: “it
was argued that loyalty and identification with Canada wasn’t necessarily the same thing as allegiance to the British way of life” (Kostash 1987, 85). Kostash shows how and why, during this process of assimilation, the Ukrainians did not surrender unconditionally their “exiled identity” to the new one, and continued to identify with the Ukrainian nation and the Ukrainian culture (363). The moments of “retreat” to the other side of the hyphen happened exactly when the dominant culture manifested its lack of trust in the loyalty of the minority. In the final chapter of her book Kostash points at the “compromise” of the older generation, represented by the “hyphenated identity” which for the outsider “may seem like a neutralised and attenuated substitute for a real name” (Kostash 1987, 394). She sees the “ethnic compromise” as a “survival technique” and ethnicity as “a culture of ambiguity, emphasising now one, now the other identity on either side of the hyphen, depending on the prevailing political winds” (395).

Myrna Kostash realises that the next generation emerged with different perspectives: “Canadian identity was their birthright, Ukrainian loyalty a learned response” (Kostash 1987, 394). Still, the Canadian-born generation whose educational background should have facilitated their social and political integration so as to reach the top of the vertical mosaic were discontent: “the melted-down ethnic has only got as far as the tradesman’s entrance to the clubhouse” and considered that “another strategy had to be employed” (Kostash 1987, 397). While the “quiet revolution” in Quebec was challenging the exclusive status of the Anglophile culture and sustained that “language retention and cultural survival were inseparable”, during the seventies, the “third world” or “third force” of the non-Anglo-Saxon, non-Quebecois, population was also claiming recognition, rejecting biculturalism in favour of multiculturalism. It was because, by the end of the sixties, “no single ethnic group, not even the Anglo-Saxons, represented a clear majority of the Canadian population” (Kostash 1987, 398). In her straight and provocative tone, Kostash challenges mythologised versions of history and idealised visions of multiculturalism based upon ambiguous keywords such as: national unity, identity, richness, energy, which hardly reflect individual reality. The fact that she needs so many diverse points of view and so many contradictory opinions shows that she has not reached the end of the discussion yet. New concepts have to be clarified and new questions arise. According to Kostash, there is a difference between acculturation and assimilation into the Canadian mainstream as it is “also a decision of the elite, which, according to the image it holds of the ethnics, will or will not allow us access to their structures” (Kostash 1987, 420). The book ends with the sceptical statement:
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A tourist I came, a tourist I leave. Like thousands and thousands of Ukrainian-Canadians of my generation and beyond, I only travel these ethnic sideroads when I need to find a breathing space awhile, away from the fumes of the cosmopolitan metropolis and all its works. But the metropolis is what I return to when it’s time to go home (Kostash 1987, 430).

Myrna Kostash’s second book bears a significant title: *Long Way from Home* (1980) that underlines the importance of her departure from her place of birth. It deals with the story of the sixties generation in Canada as written by “one of them”. After almost twenty years, the writer was looking back at the events which have marked her for the rest of her life: the “Flower Power” in the United States and the students’ movements in Western Europe, imposing a Counterculture. She remembers the rhetoric of the New Left, the Vietnam War and the draft dodgers, the Quiet Revolution of Quebec, but also the terrorist actions of the FLQ as well as the War Measures Act issued by the Canadian government and its consequences. It becomes clear to herself that these events, and especially the Quiet Revolution, acted as triggers for her to pursue the project which resulted in her first book. Canadianness is seen only as “citizenship” and Kostash sums up “from within” the consequences of the Revolution which aimed at decentralising and particularising the twin impulses of regionalism and ethnicity.

While speaking and reading to wide and various audiences, Kostash began to really ask herself questions like: What is ethnicity? How is it related to being a western Canadian? Is it a source of strength or is it debilitating in the modern world? How can I be an ethnic and a feminist in the same time? How does my ethnicity affect my writing? (Kostash 1987, xv). In the process of answering these questions and clarifying for herself the problem of identity, her next book, *No Kidding: Inside the World of Teenage Girls* (1987), dedicated to her sister Janice, seems only an intermezzo. Based on the exploration of a subculture which was not anymore that of the sixties, the writer tries to deal with the generation gap and understand the younger ones. In the meantime, the reactions to her first book and her trips to Europe before writing *No Kidding* make her return to the exploration of ethnic identity and revise her own ideas.

In Edmonton she became friends with a number of Ukrainian-Canadians of her generation: teachers, researchers, lawyers and writers and journalists who had stayed within the Ukrainian community as activists “protesting
both the undemocratic arrangements of Canadian society as a whole and the ethnic organisations and institutions” (Kostash 1987, xv). Though Kostash was willing “to engage in the construction of neo-Galician prairie identity” she was not prepared to acknowledge her relationship with the Ukrainian nation as a whole, including the motherland, the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. In the summer of 1984 she travelled to Ukraine, visited her Baba’s village and acquired a new experience which was to modify again her vision of identity, so that she would end the 1987 “Introduction” to the third edition of her first book by confessing that she was learning to speak Ukrainian and that she decided to never live in Toronto again (Kostash 1987, xvi). When she was writing this, Myrna Kostash was already preparing another “story”, this time exploring a wider space between cultures and her Bloodlines (1993) is actually intended to represent identities.

At first sight Kostash’s Bloodlines could be classified as a travelogue, resembling other accounts about journeys in Eastern and Central Europe and coming closest to the Polish American Eva Hoffman’s Exit into History published in the same year. While Hoffman records her fresh impressions from the region right after the fall of communism and during her return after just a year, Kostash’s book refers to her visits before 1989, showing again that she needs time to digest her impressions and look back upon her experiences. The “Introduction” outlines the background and genesis of the book. The writing had actually started in the spring of 1982, with the first travels into Central and Eastern Europe. Kostash warns her readers that the book is about memory and the territories that exist in the imagination of a Canadian writer and in that of her interlocutors, but also about the space between them. Thus, what she explores though seemingly belongs to the world of imagination is actually a space for communication. Chronology does not act as an organising principle, but it is not futile to look at the dates of the writer’s journeys for they reveal a restless come-and-go between the two continents which have shaped her identity.

At the start of her successive journeys, Myrna Kostash had a plan in her mind. It was to interview writers of her generation, “bred by the events of the 1960s, who were writing from within the opposition in their respective societies”. She was interested in “how they [the writers from the Soviet block countries] coped, as creative people, with the political demands of their situation” (Kostash 1993, 1). There are similar meetings in Eva Hoffman’s Exit into History. But Hoffman was concerned mainly with the remains of the Jewish communities in the Central and Eastern Europe and
therefore she included also Hungary and Romania in her itinerary. But being an American citizen, she preferred to go to Bulgaria instead of Yugoslavia. Kostash considered that her project was also about ethnicity and so she limited herself to the Slavic countries. For Kostash – a New Left socialist whose information about the Soviet Union and the Soviet bloc countries came mainly from books and casual encounters – the third point on her agenda was to confront herself with “actually existing socialism” and see how it affected her own political beliefs. The experience itself proved to be more complicated and upsetting than she had planned and imagined. She simply lost control and became manipulated by the events and the people she met. These took her “further and further afield” in her inquiries, making her realise that the political, ethnic and generation solidarity she had thought to feel with the people in Europe was illusory or at least ambiguous. She records the pathetic questions arisen in her mind during the experience, questions which her book had to answer:

How does the “old country” live in the citizen of the new? How may I understand these people and their extraordinary history – my blood relations, as it were, from whom I was separated by the accident of being born in Canada? How do they imagine the place I came from? Can I trust what I see of theirs? What is the source of my feelings – feelings I didn’t even know I had – about their history, their landscape, their languages, their sites of collective memory? What is their claim on me? Mine on them? In other words, what has this part of the world got to do with me (Kostash 1993, 2).

The book makes the readers share the writer’s experience and also urges them to understand why their own countries have had each a different history, a different perception of “the other”. The obsession with the map – actually included in the book – and the perception of space as “territory” changing ownership has to be connected to Myrna Kostash’s Canadianness endowing her with a special sensitivity to de- and re-territorialisations. When she conducts her research in Eastern Europe as a writer emotionally guided by the European side of her identity, there are always Ukrainians among her interlocutors. This makes her pursue the still unsolved problem of minorities, even if the socialist “internationalism” had prided to have solved it for ever in the former Soviet block countries.

The book is organized in sections devoted to the countries she visits: Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Poland and Ukraine. Each section is preceded
by a short summary of the historical events around the Second World War and is broken down into separate thematic divisions under whose headings Place Names and dates fix the source of the experience. The writer is guided by the flux of her own memory, trying to deepen the experience. In the chapter on Yugoslavia the past is more alive and the present is threatening. Genocide becomes the dominant theme and the title question “Are we still in Europe?” has an ironic ring. History goes back to the battles with the Turk. The speech of a French ambassador is quoted because he praised the Serbs who had saved European civilisation for once and for all (Kostash 1993, 82). In 1988 in Belgrade, the talk is inevitably of Kosovo and the stories Myrna is told about genocide remind her “of the cheap propaganda that nations at war have always unleashed against the enemy”, which for her interlocutor has quite another meaning. When she looks around, her eyes are caught by the picturesque mixture of different cultures but she is aware of racism and discrimination. The Montenegrins who in 1912 fought together with their “brethren”, Serbs, Bulgarians and Greeks, to drive out the Turks from the Balkans, now are called “cockroaches” by their neighbours, though they “with fire and sword reinscribed themselves in Europe” (Kostash 1993, 84). In Skopje, Macedonia, Myrna’s host is a refined man, a university professor who can quote from Joyce’s *Finnegan’s Wake* but who tells about the Albanians that “they breed like vermin” and complains that “violence is endemic with them”. The visit to the historical sites makes the author conclude that the route from Dubrovnik and Ohrid to Constantinople speaks about polymorphism and polyphony: Macedonians, Greeks, Albanians, Turks, living together on the Silk Route. Nevertheless, there is always: “[t]he never-ending debate: what kind of people are we?” and though the territory bordering on Serbia and Bosnia marks the farthest extent of western Christianity into the Balkans, it is called the “Bloody Frontier” (Kostash 1993, 85). In Ohrid, Macedonia, the talk goes around the Cyrillic alphabet and the thousandth anniversary of Christianity. For Myrna Kostash this is a moment of ardent recollection of having learned the letters of this alphabet at the Saturday School in the basement of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of St. John in Edmonton.

As expected, the places and themes connected to Poland – like in Eve Hoffman’s *Exit into History* – are around Gdansk and Solidarity, the Polish underground and the collaborators with the regime, the memory of the Holocaust and Sopot. But unlike Eve Hoffman, whose Polish origin makes her see mostly the positive side of the Polish people, Kostash cannot help but remember Poland’s rule over her neighbours: “The lost territories: an
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On the Polish side nostalgia, fear and regret. On the Ukrainian side, resentment, bitterness and vengefulness” (Kostash 1993, 159). The summary on Ukraine starts with the 1939 incorporation of the lands of western Ukraine into the Ukrainian S. S. R. The two parts of this section are about the liquidation of the Greek Catholic Church, the Ukrainian Insurgent Army in western Ukraine, about the ideological campaign against “bourgeois nationalism”, the thaw under Khruschev, the massive anti-intellectual pogrom, and of intellectuals protesting Russification during the seventies. Recollections recall other recollections: Taras Sevchenko, the national poet, the terrible famine with millions of dead, the Cossacks of Zaporozhia, the serfdom to Polish pans (i.e. masters) and Kostash’s visits and meetings with the members of her own family.

On the whole, Myrna Kostash’s Bloodlines, alike her other books, is not only a quest for the writer’s identity. Referring to important historical issues in Eastern and Central Europe before the Fall, there is also a warm appeal to reason and understanding so that history should not repeat itself. The feminine and feminist message is that the rhetoric of politics should go together with the rhetoric of love rather than that of domination and hate. The same message is conveyed by her stories in The Doomed Bridegroom, a personal “tour” in search of perfect love. The exploration of the Slavic countries and their histories in Europe made Kostash include her own ethnic community in a much wider context.

The Next Canada. In Search of Our Future Nation (Kostash 2000a), marks a return to her home country and its problems, but this time having in view its future. The most evident reason would be the approach of the Millennium. The sub-chapter “Ethnicities” included in Beyond Identity Politics opens with a comment on “Hyphenations” in the new historical context. The author intends to answer the question whether “it is still the case in the so called global village, that that hyphen is a kind of hinge between two equally compelling identities” (Kostash 2000a, 151). This time the writer’s interlocutors are, besides the Ukrainians, the representatives of most of the ethnic communities in Canada. Her knowledge of their opinions and perception of identity was due to her function as chair of the Writers’ Union. In 1993-1994 she found herself “lucklessly having to mediate several competing interests around multiculturalism and Canadian literature”, especially connected to the conference “Writing Thru Race” which the Union’s Racial Minority Writers’ Committee had proposed to host (Kostash 2000a, 160). Through the conversations and interviews recorded or just
summarized in the chapter, Kostash shows that other communities than her own had similar perceptions of their status and identity but also that certain views have been shaped by the media (Kostash 2000a, 154) and sometimes there can be an under-representation of a community or another (156). One of Myrna’s interlocutors observes how the immigrants’ grandchildren have acquired a new territorial patriotism. Among her interviewees there are also those of Asian and African origin and it is only natural for Kostash to include in her survey the representatives of the First Nation people, tackling a wide range of subjects, from land claims to “going native”. She shows how First Nation Artists are taking up the new tools of technology in order to incorporate their power “into the living skins” of Canadian culture, the regenerated Aboriginal culture trying to “radiate” outwards and influence.

Kostash realises how important “theory” has become in the creation of the new identity based on the concept of “inclusiveness” coming from Aboriginal philosophy.

Besides writing her long books and amidst other activities such as teaching creative-writing courses in different universities, spending time in writers’ retreats and monasteries, Myrna Kostash reports on various topics and sends circular letters to share with her friends the fresh impressions of her new journeys of discovery. These letters represent an important part of her writing. Such a series of letters sent from Australia during the time of the former Olympic games made me think of Myrna Kostash as a post-colonial writer, a label that I do not remember she had used to define herself, though the themes of her work very well match Ashcroft’s characterization: “beyond their historical and cultural differences, place and displacement, and pervasive concern for myths of identity and authenticity are considered a feature common to all post-colonial literatures in English (sic!)” (Ashcroft et al., 9).

Myrna Kostash’s latest quest in search of her hyphenated self seems to have sprung from her Baba’s religion. She has set out on a new project following the footsteps of St. Dimitri in a “pilgrim’s progress” in the Balkans, perhaps in order to find the metaphysical dimension of her identity, rising above the differences that lose any significance when facing the unknown time and territory of afterlife.
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