

THE GULAG, THE CRYPT AND THE GALLOWS: SITES OF UKRAINIAN-CANADIAN DESIRE

*But how about desire?...which equally can turn the nape of your neck or the back of your hand into a sexual explosion. Eileen Phillips, *The Left and the Erotic**

Which comes first, the revolution or the orgasm? Myrna Kostash

I. The Doomed Bridegroom

In 304, the Doomed Bridegroom is bleeding to death on the hard red earth of the Roman baths, his breast ripped open by a centurion's spear. He is Great Martyr and Miracle Worker St Demetrius of Thessalonica. In 1885, the Doomed Bridegroom, his face masked by a black veil, slumps in the noose of the gallows at Fort Battleford, North-West Territory. This one is Plains Cree war chief Wandering Spirit, and his neck has snapped precisely where his soul now flutters, trapped. In 1985, the Doomed Bridegroom is dying in isolator cell number three in the fifth year of a sentence to penal servitude. This one is Vasyl Stus, Ukrainian poet, in the Gulag.

Stus "completed" his sentence in the grave dug into the tundra-floor of the campsite, the place marked by a small wooden stake and the number nine; when he was disinterred by his son four years later, his shroud fell away in tatters, and we catch a glimpse in the wavering video image of the torque of a blackened, leathery wrist. Wandering Spirit's body was tipped into a wooden coffin, locally-crafted, and buried in a shallow trench with his fellow convicted rebels, well beyond the walls of the fort, like so many heretics outside the cemetery gate. St Demetrius's grave is unknown.

The "doomed bridegroom" is a marginal man, ethnically, politically, historically and spiritually, exiled to the margins of the dominant narratives of Western Christian, Enlightenment and Imperial cultures. At the same time, he is specific, located in dramas of courage, despair and failures in countries or territories wracked by a complex of cultural and political history, men of a certain "otherness" whose birthplace, language and alphabet, folksong, ancestral memory, and visions are themselves triggers of my erotic imagination.

The Doomed Bridegroom is also a prisoner of my text. I make him up; or, rather, I insert myself imaginatively into the historical record in order to participate in his drama.

What is that drama? A young man, dedicated to resistance against agents of violence and empire, is crushed by them, and then condemned to death. His vitality and passion are still so fresh and muscular in him, leaping through his blood, that he cries out in disbelief at his own extinction. But this Ukrainian-Canadian woman stands as witness, and the story rewinds, and

goes on, this time with her in attendance. In this way she absents herself from the scenes of her white girl's humiliation in the Euro-Canadian middle class.

I stand in Stus's living room, with his wife and friends, increasingly besotted with jealousy. In my hands, a plate of bread, sausage and radishes, while everyone else gets drunk and kisses each other in sheer admiration. Even as I create the scenes in which to place myself as admirer, archivist and chief mourner, I confess guilt of the crime of all erotomanes: lust for the singer not the song. I can imagine scenes from the life, as in this living room. Stus's language, his poems, however, are of the densest obscurity. I am not admitted there, and so I insinuate myself instead into the cramped living room, its walls fore-shortened by bookshelves, I jump onto the Turkish carpet with the dancers, then, gripping the neck of a vodka bottle, I shove myself into the corner of the divan, hip-to-hip with the poet whose head I pull back with a fistful of his hair, and tip a small stream of the liquor into his open mouth.

Like this he looks like my first lover, in the photograph I keep of him in the kitchen of his flat. He is in profile, planed cheek bones and tousled chestnut locks, meditatively considering a large open canister of ground coffee. We would roll together on the slab of foam mattress in the bedroom, crumpling under our flailing limbs the typed sheets of paper meant for the alternative Marxist-Leninist broadsheet, a pedagogical adventure among the masses. My lover was an American Jew, a draft-resisting man from the Bronx, a Communist with a grandfather in a deli, the wooden barrel of dill pickles at the back, and my lover would eventually abandon me, and the bedroom, and the kitchen sink, for a penitential turn in prison in California. He wasn't for marrying. He was doomed to live out the drama of class warfare in Amerika, in which he laid his body down.

In fact, he did marry, after serving his sentence. But this is the coda, not the tale. Last seen, he was "bald and very wide."

It was not I who saw him thus: my last view of him was in the prison yard in 1977, his tough, browned body in a regulation short-sleeved brown polyester shirt, the chain-link fence the backdrop to our little picnic under the watchtower. I had shopped so carefully: organic strawberries, cream cheese, peppercorn crackers, papaya juice. I moved and gestured with extremest delicacy, so that this moment should not collapse from its reverie in which I submitted ecstatically to my fate as the bride of a man in jail. I would marry him, I swore, restored to my virginity at the portal of carnal knowledge, repeating ritually the first act of my body's sacrifice to the doomed bridegroom.

(It did not occur to me until a couple of decades later that there could have been something problematic in the coupling of a Jew and a Ukrainian who otherwise understood themselves to be stateless children of the Revolution. It did not occur to me that we had prehistories that trailed behind us, true genealogies of incrimination.)

I stand in St Demetrius's cell. A little light seeps through the chinks of the bricks, so he can see the rats, the crawling things, but I can see the radiance shimmering around his head.

Martyred during a savage persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire, his only representation among us now is of an iconic, virginal, celestial beauty sheathed in light, disembodied within his cloak. Elusive in the martyrologies, he is nevertheless protean in the narratives: rhetor in the forum of a Late Roman city, aristocratic, charismatic and pious; folkloric patron of the souls of the dead; to the Bulgarians, miraculous redeemer of the oppressed nation; to the Greeks, warrior saint on the battlements while my Slavic ancestors slithered off the scaling ladders at the walls to their deaths. In fact we can be sure of none of it, so I make him a Christian slave in a Greek household, still young, beautiful and condemned to be among the untimely dead. Yet the day of his Passion is also his birthday, his first day of his new life. He dies under torture, his body is flung outside the city gates among the weeds, and his grave is unknown. If he had a script, it has not come down to us. There is the singer; imagine his song.

Wandering Spirit, Cree buffalo hunter and warrior, a charismatic figure at the peak of his power, rode the great plains in an increasingly desperate search for the means to succor his starving, homeless people. He had a vision, a vision of his own homeland restored once all of the Whites were gone, turned over, released, to their armies and their government, and taken somewhere far, far away, back where they came from. He had his visions, he prayed, he danced and drummed, but still the land lay a wasteland for his people. Nothing, not even a war chief's power, his gun, his coups, his Blackfoot scalps, could feed his people. Nor could he lift their suffering, expelled from their home without sustenance or spirit. Instead, he and his wild young men, the young warriors, killed nine unarmed white men at Frog Lake, now in Alberta. He lies pressed under the weight of a great stone. His gaping mouth is speechless. The past is now inscrutable to him: blinded by earth, he cannot see ahead. But I can.

Wandering Spirit left no text of his own.

II. Questions Arising

These three Doomed Bridegrooms have been central figures in three of my books: Stus in *The Doomed Bridegroom: A Memoir* (1997), St Demetrius in *Prodigal Daughter: A Journey to Byzantium* (2010), and Wandering Spirit in *The Frog Lake Reader* (2009) and also in the 2010

playscript, "The Gallows Is Also a Tree." They were all men ill-fitted to their times, the dissident figure confronted by the implacable machinery of the state. But of them Wandering Spirit is uniquely denied a posthumous victory: Stus was disinterred and reburied by an independent Ukraine, St Demetrius is venerated by a triumphant Christianity. Wandering Spirit's only alternative narrative is that of his people, themselves marginalized and silenced.

I didn't find a project among the modern Ukrainians until I engaged with the narratives of the dissidents of the 1960s and 1970s.

Through Stus, I imaginatively attached myself to the dramatic narrative of Ukrainian resistance to Soviet power in the politically and ideologically frozen decades of the 1960s and 1970s in Ukraine. Given my own work on the history of my Canadian generation in the 1960s, it was inevitable that, when I finally embraced the roots of Ukrainian-Canadian identity in Mother Ukraine, I traced them through a man of the *Shestydesiatnyky* - until then, Che Guevara had carried me off, away from the Ukrainian-Canadians - all other masculine "types" being unsexed. In St Demetrius, in my attachment to the form of a tragically-young martyr to the cause of the early Christian *eikoumene*, I re-entered a community I had abandoned as an adolescent, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Canada. But my attachment is delicate, mediated by the Liturgies of the Church. Even so, it is he whom I have chosen, not Prophet Elijah, say, or Martyr Procop. As for Wandering Spirit, the utter hopelessness of his struggle, the ultimate futility of it, drew me to him, and not, say, to Big Bear, so old and pacific, or to Poundmaker, the strategist who "logically" surrendered. Poundmaker did not hang.

I have made the circuit from Two Hills in western Canada (in my book *All of Baba's Children*), to the Ukrainian SSR and Eastern Europe, to Thessalonica in Byzantium, and back again to the "ancestral" Canadian prairie lands (Frog Lake is physically not so far from Two Hills). This time, however, compared to my study of a kind of *sui generis* Ukrainian-Canadianness in *All of Baba's Children*, I account for the immediate pre-history of that identity in the history of Aboriginal anguish- Wandering Spirit was hanged in 1885 - on the very land that my grandparents would claim by homestead title, in 1900. Note the proximity of these two dates: it is not an uncomplicated account. Baba and Dido had their way with the land while the Cree lay broken on the reserves.

The Saskatchewan poet, Andy Suknaski, once wrote a poem after visiting me at my log shack on 160 acres of land near Two Hills, Alberta, which I called Tulova. The poem is "Tulova/1979," in the collection *In the Name of Narid*: "tulova, that final peace with spirit and earth/she naming it after that *selo* her parents left in *ukraina*/she buying it with hardearned writer's money/remembering the sacrifice it took/to turn horizon and forest into something/of remembered steppes."

There are several things “wrong” with this picture: my parents were Canadian-born, my grandparents did not come from the steppes, and the only “remembered sacrifice” evoked is that of the settlers at their back-breaking labour where “horizon and forest” are unpopulated. Suknaski does not spend time here in nursing guilt toward the peoples made to vanish from the scene in order to accommodate Galician farmers: the Cree on reserves, although he is remarkably compassionate toward men such as Sitting Bull and Crowfoot in his classic collection, *Wood Mountain Poems*. Guilt, perhaps, is not the point: what the settlers have wrought is irreversible, and in any case their ghosts demand to be honoured at the family shrine; no, the point, Suknaski seems to be saying, is mindfulness about the ghosts that were already walking this land, with the names for places and heroes, before we ploughed it up: “I stand here listening for the possible/ancestral voices/as the wind passes rustling/the rosebushes and taller grasses/by the creek/and I try to imagine who passed here so long ago/possibly becoming this dust/I breathe,” a symbolic Eucharist, consuming the fallen gods gone to dust in the *chernozom* of the prairie.

Or, in the case of the Doomed Bridegroom who is Wandering Spirit: desire in the place of guilt.

The Doomed Bridegroom is also a metaphor for engagement with history and the historical matrices of my identity. My relationships, my love affairs, with these Doomed Bridegrooms, is a way of projecting myself into the irrecoverable past and to give myself a pre-history and a history. (“Depersonalization of history is one way to forget it.” Susan Crean) But “history”, I seem to be suggesting, is elsewhere. Or, perhaps, my powerful identification with the violence and complexity of the particular times and places of my Bridegrooms is an acknowledgement that the roots of very brief residency of the Ukrainian-Canadian in the New World are too shallow for tragic or epochal history, the only kind that art draws itself to. That these roots lie in the “chernozom” of Ukraine’s old suffering, of Orthodox Christianity’s bloody beginnings, in the humiliation of the Cree that prepared the way for our settlement.

None of these eroticized heroes is a Ukrainian-Canadian, which suggests that my ethno-literary psychodramas occur in a deeper layer of consciousness, chronologically and thematically. In mining these deeper layers, I have unearthed archetypal “lost loves” in the Ukrainian political and moral drama of the twentieth century, in the devastation of the primordial Cree on the contested lands of the great plains a century earlier, and in the medieval mission of Byzantium - the matrix of all Ukrainian identities - among the Slavs. But the archetypes need not be, are not, Ukrainian at all: political and moral dissidents can also be Poles, Jews, Greeks; Byzantines can also be Bulgarians, Serbs, Macedonians; the hero indigenous to the prairie can only be Aboriginal.

There is an unregenerate heterosexuality at play in the relationship of narrator and lover. I write from the feminism that has analyzed and theorized the *material* politics of sex and gender, and built a case for the liberation of women from biological necessity, and against the essentialist notion that the act of coitus, and not society or history or economics, is the source of women's subordination. My young self was a desiring self who admired and lusted after revolutionary men (as they were then constructed): "earthy men, men of action...who exert power, occasionally demonstrate self-knowledge, and display proud, peacock-like loveliness," as Miriam Edelson described labour union activists.¹ What I remember is being always, almost without a break, in love with such men. Like Edelson, I "need not intellectualize this." Think of the bodily perfection of the leonine-headed Che on posters in left-wing bedrooms around the world. Think of the fully-realized, superb corporeality of Wandering Spirit's warrior body, Stus's shrinking slave labourer body, St Demetrius's dematerializing icon body.

Yet the tales of the Doomed Bridegroom tell the story of my celibacy, a kind of perpetual virginity. His is a free spirit, beyond the reach of the claims of intimacy. I can't have him but he can't have me either. In fact, I am aroused by his unavailability, elusive and transient couplings snatched from the agenda of his higher calling. He is no "use" to me as a free man dominating his situation, such as in marriage. As I wrote in my Preface to *The Doomed Bridegroom*: His lovers are thus spared that detumescence in the 'calm of coupledness' that British feminist Elizabeth Wilson predicts, in *The Left and the Erotic*, is the conclusion of more sensible love-affairs." Admittedly, there may be a certain sadism at play here, eroticism associated with the suffering and death of a beautiful man, but no more so than in the apparently salutary Christian meditation on the arrows of martyrizing desire piercing the flesh of St Sebastian just above the loin cloth: "Like the Virgin, his point is that he is pierced but pure."² I leave him as I found him.

III. The Genre

¹ Edelson, Miriam. "Letting Go of the Union Label: The Feminization of a Macho Myth," *This Magazine* (October/November 1991).

² Charles Darwent, "Arrows of desire: How did St Sebastian become an enduring, homo-erotic icon?" *The Independent* (Feb 10, 2008) <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/features/arrows-of-desire-how-did-st-sebastian-become-an-enduring-homoerotic-icon-779388.html> Accessed March 20 2011.

And so I have been drawn over and over again, in sympathies of desire, to heroic figures in the extremity of resistance and sacrifice, and an obsession to narrate, in what I have called “auto-fictions”, a personal history of arousal by historically-transgressive men. The genre popularly known as creative nonfiction has suited me well, the literary equivalent of false memory syndrome.

I also note the repeated theme of textual inaccessibility – Stus’s impenetrable language and perished poems, St Demetrius’s biographical ambiguity, Wandering Spirit’s illiteracy – granting me the possibility of creating substitute texts.

In some cases, as narrator, I was compelled to refashion the men’s stories in order to make them compatible with my obsession; this refashioning or “making things up” was nevertheless commensurate with the techniques of creative nonfiction.

