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## “Emotional Importance of Walls.” An Agoraphobic Look on Canadian Wilderness in Steff Penney’s “The Tenderness of Wolves”

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**“EMOTIONAL IMPORTANCE OF WALLS.”<sup>1</sup>**  
**AN AGORAPHOBIC LOOK ON CANADIAN**  
**WILDERNESS**  
**IN STEFF PENNEY’S *THE TENDERNESS OF WOLVES***

**Résumé :** La notion de «mentalité de garnison» de Northrop Frye est un point de départ pour l’analyse de l’espace canadien sous le prisme de l’agoraphobie. Contrairement au «royaume paisible», que Frye associe à un projet non réalisé, la «mentalité de garnison» est bien enracinée dans un lieu et liée à des notions telles que «espace» et «nature sauvage». Le personnage principal du roman de Stef Penney, Madame Ross, fait un voyage vers le Nord, paysage vide qu’elle redoute, et enrichit sa narration d’une perspective extrêmement agoraphobe. Bien que l’énigme d’un meurtre constitue le principal centre d’intérêt du roman, l’objectif de cet article est d’explorer les rapports entre les concepts tels que «mentalité de garnison» et «agoraphobie» et de manière plus générale de réfléchir sur l’intérêt des théories de l’agoraphobie dans la lecture du paysage canadien.

My interests in distant and difficult landscapes probably did come out of my not being able to travel very much. (Steff Penney)

The sense of probing into the distance, of fixing the eyes on the skyline, is something that Canadian sensibility has inherited from the *voyageurs*. (Northrop Frye)

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<sup>1</sup> Joyce Davidson, *Phobic Geographies. The Phenomenology and Spatiality of Identity*. p. 23.

In his conclusion to Carl F. Klinck's *Literary History of Canada* (1965), which "is still often called the most important single essay about Canadian literature" (Kokotailo 5), Northrop Frye famously ascertains that Canadian literary tradition is typified by "a quest for a peaceable kingdom." The "peaceable kingdom," a concept inspired by Edward Hicks's paintings<sup>2</sup> and inscribed by Frye within Canadian pastoral tradition, "[does] not exist as [a place]" (Frye) but rather is "an emblem of Canadian cultural aspiration" (Kokotailo 3). As "this which is most essentially Canadian in [Canadian] literature" (William Kilbourn qtd. in Kokotailo 7), the notion has been widely made use of in debates on the country's national identity, in ways which exceed what Frye had in mind. Namely, as Philip Kokotailo explains, it has become "an accepted part of Canadian cultural currency" (3), and an "unattributed metaphor" (8) which has drifted away from its "fathers" (i.e., Hicks and Frye). Most importantly, to such theorists as William Kilbourn, the author of 1970 *Canada: A Guide to the Peaceable Kingdom*, the notion seems to no longer represent a myth but rather to have become a fact; in Kokotailo's phrasing: "Frye's quest is over. Canada has *become* the peaceable kingdom" (7; emphasis added).

Paul Rutherford's "Made in America" is less optimistic about the actuality of the peaceable kingdom. The author connects the concept of Canada as a society "devoted to the hallowed goals of peace, order, and good government, a haven of sanity and tolerance in a disturbed world, a country that is less aggressive and more humane than its American neighbor" to another recurrent image of the nation: one of "Canada as Nature" (278). Although this notion evokes the image of vast and empty landscapes rather than Hicks's lions and oxen, it is related to the peaceable kingdom in that it can "accommodate the metaphor of the mosaic or the slogan 'unity in diversity' (or Joe Clark's 'community of communities') in which Canada becomes a home for many different peoples and cultures" (279). Both concepts are then complimentary in the sense that they carry a form of romantic idealization and lofty aspiration towards some golden future within them. Moreover, both separate Canada from the USA in presenting it as other-American (279). The third image the author recognizes is, however, markedly different and bleak: here, "Canada appears as a victim, a vassal state, a perpetual colony (...)" (279). A starting point for Margaret Atwood's study of Canadian literature *Survival*, the gloomy vision of Canadians as victims is also present in Frye's conception of "garrison

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<sup>2</sup> Edward Hicks (1780-1849) was a Quaker minister who became famous as the author of a series of "The Peaceable Kingdom" paintings, inspired by a passage from the Book of Isaiah which describes animals gathering together in peace. "He painted nearly one hundred versions of The Peaceable Kingdom, his own vision of peace in a flawed world, little knowing that his art would become a touchstone for a young country hungry for its own legends" (Ford 168).

mentality.”<sup>3</sup> Unlike the “peaceable kingdom” which Frye associates with unfulfilled longing for harmony with nature, “garrison mentality” is rooted in the dreary reality of the 19<sup>th</sup> century colonization of the unwelcoming land. Although the images it evokes do not befit the idyll of the peaceable kingdom, the notions have jointly transmuted into apparent keywords to understanding Canada.

In Frye’s terms, “garrison mentality” develops in “small and isolated communities surrounded with a physical or psychological frontier (...) confronted with a huge, unthinking, menacing, and formidable physical setting”. Whereas Americans “marched confidently forward, intent on converting their wilderness into a New Jerusalem, according to Frye, Canadians were appalled by the brooding forests and enormous spaces around their settlements” (Hessing ix). What underlies Frye’s hypothesis is the belief that Canadian scenery is mind-boggling and thus has to have a profound and – usually – traumatic impact on an individual forced to redefine himself or herself in the “vast flatness of landscape” (McMullen 124). This impact and/or trauma, in turn, find their reflection in Canadian letters.<sup>4</sup> “Families in Canadian fiction,” to quote Margaret Atwood’s *Survival*, “huddle together like sheep in a storm or chickens in a coop: miserable and crowded, but unwilling to leave because the alternative is seen as cold empty space” (qtd. in Loiselle 16). Seeking refuge from nature in a garrison, they “must live by the law and not by love” (D. G. Jones qtd. in McMullen 123). The concept of “garrison mentality,” therefore, emerges as an obstacle on the nation’s way towards the “peaceable kingdom” and problematizes an individual’s position within and against the Canadian landscape.

Notions such as the peaceable kingdom, garrison mentality, Canada as nature, or Canada as a victim, have been incorporated within the discourse of Canadian national identity as popularized by thematic critics of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The discourse has promoted some of the most potent symbols and stereotypes of the nation and its inhabitants, created in the process of individualization and othering. In an attempt to set Canada apart from the USA, for instance, William Kilbourn mentions “a certain Canadian tendency to the amorphous permissive feminine principle of openness and toleration and acceptance” (Kilbourn qtd. in Gilbert). Such gendering of space, evocative in

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<sup>3</sup> This is another concept discussed by Frye in his “Conclusion to a Literary History of Canada”.

<sup>4</sup> Such conviction has permeated some of the most potent twentieth-century examinations of Canadian literature, including Henry Kreisel’s “The Prairie: A State of Mind” (1968), Marcia Kline’s *Beyond the Land Itself: Nature in Canada and the United States* (1970), Margaret Atwood’s *Survival* (1972), John Moss’s *Patterns of Isolation in English-Canadian Fiction* (1974), or Robert Thacker’s *The Great Prairie Fact and Literary Imagination* (1989).

this case of the conception of the peaceable kingdom, aims to satisfy Canadian longing for a graspable identity. In a similar vein, in his 1961 essays *The Canadian Identity*, W.L. Morton argues that

Canadian life (...) is marked by a northern quality, the strong seasonal rhythms (...) the wilderness venture (...) the return from the lonely savagery of the wilderness to the peace of the home (...) the puritanical restraint which masks the psychological tensions set up by the contrast of wilderness roughness and home discipline. The line which marks off the frontier from the farmstead, the wilderness from the baseland, the hinterland from the metropolis, runs through every Canadian psyche (qtd. in Mackey 45).

Morton also genders Canadian space, as “the lonely savagery of the wilderness” is inevitably a masculine enterprise, whereas “home” is a feminine domain. More importantly, he views both women and men in Canada as devoted to setting up firm boundaries which organize their lives, with their imagination “trapped by its colonial heritage” (Litvack 121).

Given this situation, which [emphasizes] the “victim position” and [engenders] survival strategies, it is understandable that [in the past] Canadian communities not only encouraged shared human values and a great respect for law and order in the quest for social cohesion and protection of a fragile way of life, but also refused to engage with concepts of cultural difference, place and displacement (Litvack 121).

The notions of oneness or sameness, unity and stability, however, have given way to the ones of plurality, disunity, fragmentation, irony, and transgression, which have shaped more recent theories of Canadianness. While the focus of the past was on delineating and protecting the boundaries of the nation, the interest of later critics (Hutcheon, Kamboureli, Kroetsch) has been on crossing, deconstructing and re-visioning these boundaries. In present-day Canada, garrison mentality appears to be a relic of the past; “its imperial earthworks crumble” (McCombs 149). One of the main assumptions of this paper is that transgressiveness, ingrained in the modern conceptions of Canadianness, also shapes agoraphobic perception of space.

In my analysis I attempt to examine agoraphobia in terms of its being a “spatially mediated anxiety” (Davidson 9). Spatial metaphors have been used for years in order to theorize Canadianness; the same metaphors “are well suited to capture the phenomenology of the particular form of panic that occurs when the most fundamental sense of existence and connection is at stake” (Marilyn Silverman qtd. in Davidson 217). Following David Trotter, I believe that one can look at agoraphobia as an “aesthetic resource” and an “unconscious estrangement technique” (Trotter 1). “In putting it to use,”

Trotter asserts, writers “have been able to say and show things they could not otherwise have said and shown” (1). Agoraphobic perception of Canadian landscape further enhances this landscape’s threatening limitlessness. Agoraphobia – this “dispossession of the capacity to comprehend and adapt to a particular environment” (Trotter 2) – forces one to establish boundaries, in which sense it brings to mind Frye’s concept of the garrison mentality. At the same time, however, agoraphobic fear always already transgresses borderlines and thus points to their ultimate fluidity.

Consequently, this paper ponders on how the introduction of an agoraphobic character into the story set in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Canadian landscape shapes, and also serves to subvert, depictions of this landscape. Even though theories of agoraphobia have been most often inscribed within the fields of psychiatry and psychology, it is not my intention to therapeutize either the author or the narrator of the novel. Yet, I believe that my discussion of agoraphobia as “a (peculiar) way of perceiving and relating to the world” (Trotter 2) may complement numerous theoretical attempts to *diagnose* the relationship between Canadians and their (cultural) space (which include ponderings on their garrison mentality, identity crisis, the clinging impulse, or the Wacousta syndrome<sup>5</sup>).

To make my deliberations more systematic, I base them on a reading of a novel written by an *agoraphobic* author (which is not necessarily relevant) and narrated by an agoraphobic character (which is). Steff Penney’s *The Tenderness of Wolves* is the 2006 Costa Book of the Year, which is set in 19<sup>th</sup> century Canada.<sup>6</sup> The novel is, first and foremost, a murder mystery with a considerable number of subplots most of which are narrated in the third person. The only first-person narrator – and the central figure of the narrative – is a Mrs. Ross who embarks on a journey into the wilderness to look for her lost adopted son, Francis, a prime suspect in the murder case. The story is set in a variety of locations, including the settlement of Dove River in the Northern Territory, the town of Caulfield, a religious village of Himmelvanger, as well as Hudson Bay Company’s outposts, Hannover House

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<sup>5</sup> Gaile McGregor identifies the Wacousta syndrome as “an ailment, sickness, incapacity, debility that she claims to see pervading the Canadian psyche onwards from at least 1832, when Major John Richardson first published *Wacousta*.” 12.03.1013 <<http://canadianpoetry.org/volumes/vol18/maclaren.html>>

<sup>6</sup> Although I use the novel to talk about the conception of Canadianness, *The Tenderness of Wolves* is a part of Canadian literature only in the sense that the events described take place in Canada, as Penney is, in fact, a Scottish writer. Because of her disorder, the author had not been to Canada and did all her research at the British Library in London which she lived close to. Sheltered by the library walls, Penney visualized Canadian wilderness to be unending, frightful and intimidating: an imaginary space which epitomizes what an agoraphobic fears most and within which disquieting events take place.

and Fort Edgar. It is then a contemporary novel that looks back to the time when Hicks created his paintings, and that seemingly reflects Frye's vision of the Canadian space as productive of garrison mentality: the protagonists walk from one fort to another through the wilderness of the Northern territory, and the two domains (civilization and wilderness) stand in stark contrast.

Settlements, towns, and forts are bastions of civilization, raised to protect their inhabitants against the badland. As Alastair Campbell and Kirk Cameron assert, "most of Canada is northern" but Nunavut, Yukon, and the Northwest Territories "represent only about three percent of Canada's population" (143). In result, "for most Canadians the north remains an unknown quantity" (Hamelin qtd. in Campbell 144), which is the antithesis to anything familiar and safe. In *The Tenderness of Wolves*, too, representations of Canadian landscape appear to be built on the opposition between culture and nature. Stepping into the forest marks Mrs. Ross's transgression into the space which has been construed as masculine and has served as a testing ground for manliness: "The rougher the tougher the landscape, the more heroic are men who seek to discover its secrets, tame it, and wrestle the wealth from it" (Hessing xii). Women, on the other hand, fall prey to this *malevolent* landscape: the settlement of Dove River and the town of Caulfield have grown on the myth of three teenage girls getting lost in the forest, and – in the case of two of them – never returning.

The vast, hostile spaces are contrasted with the confined structure of the town of Caulfield which constitutes a civilized world in which women – like Mrs. Ross – may have little to say, but which offers them protection from the wilderness in the form of law and its male enforcers. Mrs. Ross is a perceptive observer of the hierarchies which organize this world and, although they do not make her happy, restrictions do grant her some sense of stability. Before she makes the decision to follow her son into the wild, there is a touch of sleepy compliance in her narration. She passively accepts her subordinate position both in the community and in her own household, and her explanations regarding the choices she has made in her life are as passionless as her marriage is.

However, Mrs. Ross's role in the story, in fact, is to transgress borderlines: she commits a crime (frees a prisoner), ventures into the masculine domain of wilderness, manages to survive unlike some of the male protagonists, and is guilty of adultery. She is, as Andrew Knox, Dove River's elder statesman confesses, "a provoking woman" with "a sardonic gaze [which] never [softens]," who "is not popular in the town" (Penney 17). Mrs. Ross is the Other, the ab-normal, endowed with a unique outlook on Canadian space.<sup>7</sup> Regardless of the 19<sup>th</sup> century setting, then, the novel offers a perspective

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<sup>7</sup> However, there are hints at other feminine transgressions in the story. Eve Seton, one of the girls lost in the wilderness, turns up as Elizabeth Bird living with the Native people and shows no interest in returning to "civilization."

which is postmodern rather than modern through the character of its main protagonist.

In Penney’s words, the figure of Mrs. Ross “came very specifically from thinking about how someone with agoraphobic panic attacks would have been dealt with or would have coped in the Victorian, pre-Valium era” (qtd. in Moss). The protagonist is a former patient of a public mental asylum and a former laudanum addict. As a girl, she “was seized with paralyzing fears that rendered [her] incapable of movement, even of speech. [She] felt that the earth was sliding away from under [her], and that [she] could not trust the ground beneath [her] feet” (Penney89). The diagnosis she received before her first hospitalization which, in all probability, took place in the 1840s, was very generic; according to the doctors she was “troubled with ... difficulties” (89). The story of her venture into the wilderness in 1867 takes place right before the onset of “phobia’s *belle époque*” (Trotter 29), during which theorists speculated a connection between fear and modernity. In the last three decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the question of whether “being phobic [is] a way to be modern” (Trotter 3) was a pressing subject of scientific deliberations. 19<sup>th</sup> century theorists deliberated on whether or not these were the unique characteristics of modern architecture that triggered agoraphobia, and tended to inscribe the disorder within the transforming cityscape. In Penney’s novel, there are no grand cities; the historical context, however, does matter in the story, if only for the reason that it offers an insight into 19<sup>th</sup> century methods of treating neurotic patients.

The term “agoraphobia” was coined by German psychiatrist Karl Otto Westphal in 1871, in order to designate “the impossibility of walking through certain streets or squares, or the possibility of doing so only with resultant dread of anxiety” (qtd. in Davidson 10). Although it is usually translated as “irrational fear of *open* spaces,” the word “agoraphobia” comes from the ancient Greek term “agora” which may refer “both to an assembly of people and to the place of assembly (...)” (Carter 16; emphasis added). Therefore, a more correct translation would be “the fear of *public* or *social* spaces,” which, according to 19<sup>th</sup> century theorists, surfaced in response to “the escalating dangers of modern life” (Trotter 4; emphasis added). The studies linking the disorder to the transformations specific to the Victorian culture, however, have long proved inefficient; in fact, agoraphobia is believed to be “the most common of phobias [of the 21<sup>st</sup> century]. Over 50 percent of the individuals who report phobic distress are diagnosed as agoraphobic” (McHugh qtd. in Carter 29), and about 89% of those diagnosed are women (Clum and Knowles qtd. in Davidson 12). “It’s not agoraphobia [then] that is dying out,” as Paul Carter has it, “but the utility of the discourses applied to it” (29).

In recognition of the disorder’s complexities, present-day theorists of agoraphobia, such as Paul Carter, David Trotter, or Joyce Davidson, describe



it as the most borderline, or equivocal, kind of phobia, whose symptoms may develop in spaces as diverse as an elevator, a bridge, a bus, a plane, a street, a shopping center, or Canadian Northern Territory. It is also, almost ubiquitously, linked to the problem of gender and gender roles because limitations that agoraphobia creates correspond to cultural limitations imposed on femininity. As Susan Bordo suggests, an agoraphobic woman is an exaggerated response to the model of a perfect housewife, devoting her life entirely to the private sphere (170). Rules of femininity rooted in 19<sup>th</sup> century Western culture dictate that a woman should know her place; any excursions into the realm of the public have to be authorized. A feminine woman's mobility in the social sphere is inhibited – in order to walk in her feminine shoes she needs a navigator and a protector. An agoraphobe is similarly homebound, and often needs a “safe person” – one who could come to her rescue if need be – to accompany her outside of home. The majority of agoraphobes, whose symptoms allow them to go out, learn to perform normality in a way analogous to a woman learning how to perform gender. Like actors on stage, they feel visible, watched, and evaluated. The control that an agoraphobia sufferer imposes on herself is to prevent her from “losing it,” going crazy in public, making a spectacle out of herself. A panic attack which an agoraphobe dreads, this epitomy of transgression, is an ultimate experience of unbelonging, ungroundedness, and unboundedness, often compared to dying, or at least no longer being (yourself).

Although the best-known analyses of agoraphobia do not mention Canadian wilderness, they do stress the fact that agoraphobics fear walking through specific parts of a city – such as large squares or wide, crowded streets – precisely because they perceive them as unbounded. For instance, “[o]ne of Westphal's patients, a priest, experienced an overwhelming anxiety whenever he had to leave the protection of the vaulted ceiling of his church, but was able to walk in the open beneath an umbrella” (Trotter 32). The lack of boundaries, however, is also inscribed within the very experience of panic during which the environment “invades the self.” Panic, in Joyce Davidson's words, “is experienced as an unbearable attack on one's sense of self in space, constituting an unmitigated existential threat” (3), through which an agoraphobe falls into “the limbo of not belonging” (McDowell 2).

Even though Penney juxtaposes snowy landscapes with places representing culture and civilization, images of wilderness are cultural constructs, too. “Land,” in W. H. New's words, “has to be seen as a verbal trope in Canadian writing, not simply as a neutral referent” (5). It follows that Canadian wilderness can be interpreted as a peculiar type of social space from which – similarly to other public spaces – women should be absented. In Penney's novel then, “to confront patriarchy (...) is to confront not just [an] ordering and regulating principle [of the town], but a vast emptiness, a lack of

boundaries, or boundedness” (Trotter 35). In a way reminiscent of Margaret Atwood’s Susanna Moodie, for example, Mrs. Ross compares coming to Canada to being devoured by the vast, empty space around her: “The land swallowed us up and was hungry for more” (Penney 9). Similarly, upon entering a broad plain, Mrs. Ross experiences the blank landscape as menacing:

We are standing on the edge of a white sea on which waves of snow march to the horizon to north, east and west. I haven’t seen such distances since standing on the shores of Georgian Bay, and it makes me dizzy. Behind us, the forest; ahead, another country: one I have never seen before, glittering, white and huge under the sun. (...) I feel the mounting panic I felt when first confronted with the virgin forest of Dove River: this is too big, too empty for humans, and if we venture out onto that plain, we will be as vulnerable as ants on a dinner plate. There is truly, here, nowhere to hide. (...) I feel a sudden kinship with those animals who burrow into the snow in winter, to live underground, in tunnels” (Penney 191).

The image of the dinner plate suggests that Mrs. Ross re-experiences both her original fear of being ingested by Canadian landscape and distress evoked by her visibility. Agoraphobia is not only the fear of panicking because one is far away from any safe haven, but also anxiety about *being seen* panicking. The public space that agoraphobics dread is not simply “outside of home,” but is shared with others who seem better inscribed within it and as such are also perceived as antagonistic. “The problem with space isn’t just space; it is the fact that there are other people in it – other people who are creating it, determining it, composing it (...) is it surprising then, that space could seem a bit hostile?” (Kathleen Kirby qtd. in Davidson 21).

The fear of boundedness of Canadian landscape that Mrs. Ross experiences is accompanied with the anxiety caused by this landscape’s empty “sameness.” It is what Mrs. Ross has “always hated about the forest”:

There are so few varieties of trees, especially now, when the snow makes them all cloaked, somber shapes and the forest a dim, twilit place. In our early days in Dove River I used to have a nightmare: I am in the middle of the forest, and turning round to look back the way I came, I find that every direction looks exactly alike. I panic, disoriented. I know that I am lost, that I will never get out (Penney 180).

The horror of sameness is also emphasized in the story of Line of Himmelvanger, a minor character who secretly leaves the religious village to be with the man she loves and loses her way in the forest. Introducing Line into the story, as one reviewer has it, is “a means of embodying real terror – the terror of being lost and alone in a wilderness” (Guilfoile). When the landscape around her looks indistinguishable, when there are no visible points

of reference she could hold on to, there is nowhere for Line to go. The agoraphobic sense of immobility, however, “is [here] produced not by the lack of directions, but by an excess of them (Carter 17).

What Line’s and Mrs. Ross’s stories illustrate is that “what is most feared [by agoraphobics] is ‘the *absence* or *loss* of an attachment figure, or some other secure base,’ which the phobic person would normally ‘*move towards*’” (John Bowlby qtd. in Trotter 2; emphasis added). For Mrs. Ross specifically, wintry landscapes (as the realm of nature) rouse not only agoraphobic fears but also sexual attraction for William Parker, a half-breed with a face reminiscent of “faces in engravings of the Indian wars” (Penney 93), who is her guide into the wilderness. In absence of other touchstones, it is Parker who becomes Mrs. Ross’s movable signpost and hence she becomes bound to him. In psychological terms, the man is now Mrs. Parker’s “safe person” upon whom – in this case quite literally – her life depends. The ground she walks on, on the other hand, does not support her, and seems slippery and unreliable. Trying to move along a street is, for an agoraphobic, akin to walking along the edge of an abyss (Davidson 217). Agoraphobic bodies, in the state of confusion and vertigo, become self-less, volatile and drawn toward the void. “I feel that urge,” says Mrs. Ross in a description of a panic attack, “as the walker on the cliff is impelled to go even closer to the edge – to walk out onto the ice, from white to grey, to see how strong it is. To walk as fast as I can, and then a little further” (Penney 430). Correspondingly, Paul Carter construes the disorder as “a boundary crisis” (31).

Recognizing the importance of the cultural process of modeling femininity through limitations to the process of deciphering agoraphobia, Davidson brings to focus boundaries which are specifically feminine:

Given the centrality of boundaries to the phenomenology of agoraphobia, and the fact that the corrosive aspects of social space seem to impact more severely on women than on men, I want to question whether we might usefully frame our inquiry in terms of the *engendering* of subjects’ boundaries. Are, we might ask, women’s boundaries different, perhaps *less protective* than those of men? (Davidson 29; emphasis added)

Her question, in turn, relates to feminist interpretations of the female body, which has often been demeaned into fluidity and grotesqueness. Western “cultural narratives which determine (...) the contours of corporeality” (Jerome 2) have focused on its “porous” nature in an attempt at shaming this body, simultaneously requiring that it be timelessly beautiful and “closed.” Boundaries, in Paula Ruth Gilbert and Lorna M. Irvine’s terms, are perhaps particularly important to Canadians who “may well have a particular paranoia about [them] (...) and be invested in keeping their own boundaries intact”

precisely for the reason that “Canadian” is an uncertain identity. A “hesitation at a boundary” (Carter 31) appears to be inherent in both, Canadianness and agoraphobia.

In Susan Bordo’s feminist interpretation of the disorder, agoraphobia can be read as either a symptom of protest or one of retreat. On the one hand then, it symbolizes disconnection with the hostile public space and a refusal to be subjected by it, on the other, it marks one’s fall into debilitating femininity. In the case of Mrs. Ross, for example, the conquering of agoraphobic fear is possible only through clinging to Parker and transferring her longing for a safe home onto the man. Her dependence on Parker is emphasized by the last two sentences of the novel: “And then Parker turns back to the dogs and the sled, and keeps walking, and so do I. For what else can any of us do?” (Penney 450). Even though, therefore, it would be naïve to read the story as an account of Mrs. Ross’s deliverance, it can be read as one of transition and transgression.

Contrary then to the concept of “garrison mentality,” which stresses the need to raise and reinforce clear lines of demarcation between the civilized “in” and uncivilized “out,” agoraphobia “seems to express an anxiety about one’s ability to regulate and control the dialectic between permanence and impermanence, permeability and imperviousness (Davidson 220) and creates “tensions to enliven the body’s own borderlands” (Jerome 2). An agoraphobic positions herself/himself on a threshold between the inside and the outside, within a location which “can (...) function (...) as the *space* or *place* or *site* of challenge to the accustomed borders of power” (New 5-6). What an agoraphobic look on Canadian wilderness brings to light is that land can be interpreted “both as an icon of stability and as a medium of change. Fixity vies recurrently with fluidity, position with positionality, the place of social residence with the condition of being there (New 5-6). As a form of “resistance against the ideology of the straight line” (Carter 39), agoraphobic perception of space appears to be a transgressive alternative to the often categorical, 19<sup>th</sup> century depictions of Canadian landscape. As such, it also subverts colonizing representations of wilderness as what – like a woman – needs to be subdued and possessed, and problematizes one’s emotional reliance on walls, which has, as Frye suggested, kept Canadians garrisoned.

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