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“A brave new schizophrenic world” – Canada in Michael O’Brien’s “Plague Journal”

TransCanadiana 6, 301-316

2013

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**“A BRAVE NEW SCHIZOPHRENIC WORLD” –
CANADA IN MICHAEL O’BRIEN’S *PLAGUE JOURNAL***

Résumé : Dans la dystopie controversée de Michael D. O’Brien *Plague Journal*, publiée en 1999, le Canada apparaît comme une antithèse du « royaume paisible » où au lieu de sa célèbre tolérance on voit une sorte de totalitarisme que causent le libéralisme et le relativisme postmoderne. Le roman se présente sous la forme d’un journal tenu par Nathaniel Delaney. Le narrateur, faisant souvent recours au courant de conscience, décrit le monde qui l’entoure, analyse des changements inquiétants qui s’y produisent et évalue sa propre vie. Il est persuadé que la civilisation occidentale, qui a rejeté les valeurs chrétiennes, se dirige vers une catastrophe. Le titre du livre est une référence au *Journal de l’année de la peste*, le texte du XVIII^e siècle dans lequel Daniel Defoe relatait l’épidémie ravageant Londres au XVII^e siècle.

Selon Delaney, une maladie similaire, qu’il appelle peste sociopolitique, ronge les esprits des Canadiens contemporains. Le narrateur, en tant qu’un critique du gouvernement et du relativisme, qui est selon lui proche du totalitarisme, et en tant qu’un catholique, un homme homosexuel dans les veines duquel coule du sang de Premières Nations du Canada, se sent comme quelqu’un qui fait partie d’une minorité opprimée, ce qui paraît comme une anomalie dans la littérature canadienne qui décrit souvent des conditions symétriquement opposées. Le héros décrit le processus de son exclusion progressive de la vie sociale et publique à cause de son rejet du politiquement correct et de la dénonciation du Canada comme un pays ressemblant à la société orwellienne où l’apparente paix est au fond une guerre idéologique, la liberté devient une nouvelle forme de totalitarisme et la prétendue science captive la société et la fait endormir dans l’ignorance. Soupçonneux, se trouvant au bord de la folie, Delaney devient l’ennemi public. On l’accuse, selon lui à tort, d’inceste et de meurtre, et on le désigne coupable, comme chez Orwell, de crimes de pensée. Nathaniel trouve refuge dans la forêt canadienne, au sein de la nature du pays à laquelle ses ancêtres étaient liés depuis des siècles. Soutenu par les Thu, une famille pieuse d’immigrés vietnamiens et aidé par son grand-père Thaddeus Delaney, il retrouve la paix intérieure et libère son esprit de la haine qui le détruisait. Quand, à la fin, il est arrêté par les autorités canadiennes à ses trousses, et ensuite disparaît mystérieusement de sa cellule, sa vie est écrite dans les pages de son journal qui doit servir aux autres générations à reconstruire le monde d’avant l’apocalypse.

Here is eternity as we dream it – perfect.
 Another dimension. Here the ship of state
 has sprung no leaks, the captain doesn't lie.
 The days are perfect and each perfect minute
 extends itself forever at my wish.
 Unending sunlight falls upon the steep
 slope of the hillside where the children play.
 And I am beautiful.

P.K. Page "Inebriate"

Michael O'Brien is a controversial Canadian Roman Catholic novelist, an essayist, a painter and an ardent, though extremely controversial, lecturer on faith and culture. The writer is best known for his series of apocalyptic novels entitled *Children of the Last Days*.¹ In his painting and fiction O'Brien claims to contribute to the restoration of Christian culture and warns against various forms of nonviolent totalitarianism in Canada and in the western world. O'Brien sees the contemporary world as a battlefield on which the forces of good and evil clash and in which Christians are discriminated against. In his fiction and art he frequently uses the biblical metaphors of the plague and Apocalypse to illustrate this conflict. He preaches that since modern plague-ridden western states reject Christian absolutes, which O'Brien perceives to be indispensable pillars of the western civilization, the collapse of the western world is inevitable. The present times are, therefore, for O'Brien, "the final hour (...) These past two thousand years *are* the last days. (...) We are *in* the final battle, we are *in* the apocalypse, we are *in* the book of Revelation" (O'Brien, "Are we living"). In his art O'Brien reveals the signs of the apocalypse and discloses the disconcerting truth lurking from beneath the surface of the apparently peaceful and harmonious reality. According to O'Brien, like the dwellers of the biblical Sodom and Gomorrah, Canadians and other Westerners enjoy their lives unaware of the approaching disaster: "That generation which is least awake, least able to recognize what is happening, perhaps even a most comfortable and confident generation, will be the one in which the spirit of Antichrist will manifest itself fully" (O'Brien, "Are we living"). O'Brien's art, therefore, serves as a warning, an alarm clock which is supposed to wake up the numbed and satisfied Canadians, and all

¹ O'Brien was inspired by *The Holy Scripture* and its apocalyptic visions while choosing the title of the series, as he explains in one of his interviews: "In his first letter, the apostle John says, simply, without the theological nuances that we have grown so accustomed to in recent years, "Little children, it is the final hour," and in another English translation, "Children, it is the last days." (1 John 2:18) (O'Brien, "Are we living")."

Westerners, before their world comes to an end. In the present article I am going to concentrate on Michael O’Brian’s *Plague Journal* and his deconstruction of Canada as a pastoral ideal, but also a work which in an original and a contentious way continues the Canadian tradition identified by Frye as a quest for a peaceable kingdom (Frye 240-250).

The Apocalypse as a religious term and a popular myth has been interwoven into numerous works of world and Canadian literature. The 20th century, due to technological developments, the historic traumas and the ecological threats, has been particularly obsessed with the concept (Bennett, Goldman). The essential elements of the apocalyptic narrative are an annihilation of the old order and a revelation of the ultimate truth. (Goldman 5) The biblical Apocalypse, however, has three stages (Bennett 813-814). The first is awaiting the second coming of Christ and doom. This moment focuses on the faithful who wait for the ascent into heaven and search for the signs of God in the present which will predict the time of Apocalypse. The second consists of Armageddon, the battle between good and evil, the climax of the Apocalypse as a stage in a series of events at the second coming of Christ. Finally, the third phase includes the collapse of the old order into a New World, which will result in a millennial kingdom and the disclosure of ultimate reality and meaning. According to Bennett, the first one characterizes religious sects because they see the Apocalypse as the matter of their lives and their present. They inspect reality for signs of the Doomsday and await impatiently the end of the world. The second phase has been frequently present in popular media and has propelled the film industry with their visions of the end of the world. The third of these three moments, as the critic insists, in which revelation, “the possibility of perfected vision” (Bennett 814), is essential, has been a primary focus of several Canadian writers in the second half of the 20th century. Such writers, who refer to both biblical and non-biblical apocalyptic narratives, reveal secrets and, as such, become apocalyptic in the original sense of the word.

In his seminal “Conclusion to a *Literary History of Canada*” Frye identifies Canada’s tendency to read its conquest of the American continent in biblical terms (224). Therefore, Goldman (3-4) believes that apocalyptic narratives have been popular among Canadian writers not only since the second half of the previous millennium but that Canadian literature has been pervaded by the apocalyptic paradigm since the very beginning. The very discovery of today’s Canada for the first explorers and settlers had an apocalyptic dimension when their Old World was being replaced by the New Order. This transformation of worlds, Goldman believes, has never been successful so that Canada has appeared in literature often as a dystopia, rather than the Promised Land or a new paradise. Therefore, Canadian writers have frequently revised the traditional apocalyptic narrative. The Canadian perspective has often favoured the viewpoint of those refused the access to the

new Eden and condemned to perish. Numerous Canadian writers have been particularly engaged in challenging such key features of the Apocalypse as the purgation of the non-elect and the violent destruction of the earthly world before a new, divine one is created (Goldman 6).

O'Brien's *Plague Journal*, an apocalyptic narrative and a dystopia with numerous classical intertexts, is definitely not a typical example of the Canadian apocalyptic fiction which has been characterized above.² Firstly, the narrative adopts the vision of the elect rather than the non-elect so popular in several Canadian apocalyptic narratives, even though O'Brien's central character is sacrificed in the time of transformation and vanishes before a new, better order is established. Secondly, the novel focuses on the first stage of the Apocalypse; that is awaiting the second coming of Christ and investigating the reality for divine clues. However, the narrative also includes elements of the second phase, Armageddon, since *Plague Journal* envisions Canada as a battleground between good and evil. The novel adopts the approach defined by Goldman (15-16) as apocalyptic eschatology. This type of eschatology believes that the world is past redemption so that God will annihilate it and create a completely new one.³ The apocalyptic belief, unlike the prophetic one, is a secret reserved only for the elect chosen by God. What is more, unlike several other Canadian apocalyptic narratives or dystopias, instead of criticizing the conservatism of the power apparatus, like in the case of, for example, *Not Wanted on the Voyage* (1984) by Timothy Findley or *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) by Margaret Atwood, *Plague Journal* implies that Canadian liberalism, political correctness and postmodern relativism are threats to the freedom of some Canadian citizens and reasons of moral decay. As in the case of other anti-utopias, the pre-apocalyptic Canada in *Plague Journal* is camouflaged as utopian so only the elect are able to reveal the truth about the reality and envision the necessary change. Mourning the loss of the hegemony of Christianity in Canada and the West and commenting on the failure of reasonable accommodation of Canadian religious diversity (Beaman,

² *Plague Journal* is situated within a wide range of world apocalyptic and dystopian literature. Through its title it, of course, refers to Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722), but also to Albert Camus's *The Plague* (1947). Additionally, O'Brien's intertexts include such classical dystopias as Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) or George Orwell's *1984* (1949). Among other intertexts there are also Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) and John Ronald Reuel Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (1954).

³ The other approach is prophetic eschatology – it envisions God accomplishing divine plans within the here and now, in the context of human history and with the use of human agents.

Reasonable Accommodation),⁴ O'Brien calls for a necessary return to the original power technique deriving from Christian institutions which Foucault calls the pastoral power (783). Such power would be salvation oriented and would possess the ability to direct the conscience of its citizens. Advocating such a change, the author contests Canadian management of its cultural diversity and religious plurality.

Canadian dystopian reality, “a landscape of secret nightmare” (O'Brien, *Plague Journal* 151), is described in terms of a plague which, similarly to the 1665 London epidemic described in Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722), has struck contemporary Canada and the West. The novel's central character Nathaniel Delaney becomes a contemporary Daniel Defoe, who records the progress of the multidimensional disease in modern Canada. Delaney depicts the current plague as an apparently invisible spiritual malady which affects moral standards of Canadian society. As a journalist and an editor of a local magazine *The Sweetcreek Echo*, he reveals moral degeneration, profanity and the effects of non-violent Canadian totalitarianism as he preaches to the world about a decline of the civilization. On the pages of his periodical and his diary he displays his disregard for political correctness and exposes the country's Orwellian realities – apparent peace as an ideological war, freedom as a new form of totalitarianism, and knowledge as numbing ignorance. The controversial revelations lead to Delaney's gradual othering and exclusion from the society. Accused of incest as well as a murder, and guilty of a thought crime, Delaney escapes into the Canadian wilderness, where he regains internal peace. When he is finally caught by the Canadian authorities Delaney disappears from a prison but leaves behind his version of the truth on his diary pages.

Plague Journal written in the form of a diary records Delaney's five-day long flight and pursuit but it also provides the reader with an access to the protagonist's inner life and his past. Consequently, the diarist follows the most immediate developments which lead to his notorious status as the enemy of the people and the gradual collapse of the world when the superficially friendly state changes into an oppressor. The journal contains, too, Delaney's reflections on his inner life and the state of the external world, non-chronological memories, quotations from his most controversial editorials and discussions with his friends. The novel gains a metafictional aspect as Delaney comments on the very process of writing his diary, which he calls his final, unpublished editorial. Writing the journal has several therapeutic functions. In the very act of putting his thoughts on diary pages and retreating to the world of his imagination O'Brien's character searches for peculiar refuge and freedom. Moreover,

⁴ Beyer notices that Christianity is still, to a certain extent, traditionally, the norm in Canada and therefore culturally Canada is a Christian country.

analyzing his memory and wording his views provide Delaney with an illusion that he transcends the chaos he is surrounded by. Besides, writing his diary serves also as an examination of his conscience, and is a peculiar “biopsy of the soul” (O’Brien, *Plague Journal* 33) which, finally, leads to his spiritual cleansing and gaining internal peace. Besides, Delaney treats the text as a tool for the future restoration of his self and the world. His journal of a “sociopolitical plague recorded for posterity in 3-D stream of consciousness” (O’Brien, *Plague Journal* 90) will, as its author hopes, contribute to a potential revision of the reality after the apocalypse: “If the Conditioners succeed in wiping out every authentic account of history (in the Orwellian sense) then they’ll be able to recreate the world in their own stunted image. I must leave a trace. If thousand fugitives leave enough fragments, there may come a time in the future when the world will be reconstructed” (O’Brien, *Plague Journal* 103). While he is in his prison cell aware of the approaching doom, the protagonist hurries to contain the crumbling reality on the diary pages for prospective future audience: “In such limited time, how can I summarize a life, two lives, three, or the decline and fall of an age? I write with tiny lettering, covering each page both sides, filling every margin. I write for several hours. But what to do with it. (...) By whatever method comes to hand, I’ll leave these fragments for the remnant” (O’Brien, *Plague Journal* 268-269).

Imprisoned but spiritually liberated Delaney resorts to leaving the diary in his cell for Corporal Frank McConnell from the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, hoping that he has inserted enough doubts into the policeman’s mind about the ambiguous reality to make him preserve his writings:

That constable is only a foot soldier in an army of nice young guys who don’t really grasp what’s happened. He could just chuck the manuscript into the wastebasket. Or even keep it as a souvenir to hand on to his kids, a curio from a vanished era. Some day it might even find a home in a museum of thought-crime. (...) Okay, (...) I’ll risk it on you – my literary heritage, my last testament. These are the lyrics that Daedalus sings as he plummets, locked in the embrace of love. Falling, falling, fearless in my fear, I have learned that we rise only on the wings of grace. I am a free man. I am awake. I know at last what I am for. (...) O discouraged writer. For in spite of everything there are people out there. Something in them can still hear a word that shatters lies (O’Brien, *Plague Journal* 269).

McConnell finds the diary under Delaney’s mattress. He deciphers the journalist’s chaotic writing, provides opening and closing letters to potential future readers and sometimes comments on Delaney’s divagations. Years later, when he is already retired, McConnell presents the journal to Delaney’s family out of his certainty that the writer’s conspiracy theories have been proving true: “Things have a way of just disappearing lately. Things and people” (O’Brien, *Plague Journal* 271).

Apart from being an apocalyptic narrative in a form of a peculiar spiritual autobiography, *Plague Journal* shares also many features with classical western dystopias (Gottlieb 2001). Thus, like in a traditional dystopia, the central conflict in O’Brien’s novel is between an individual and a totalitarian state which legalizes injustice. Nathaniel Delaney rebels against the policy of his state and confronts an oppressive Canadian regime. The journalist leads a rather peaceful life in the village of Sweeftcreek with his two children Zoe and Bam until his controversial editorials published in a small centrist magazine become perceived as a threat to the existing order. The conflict between Delaney and the Canadian state starts when the protagonist unveils the schizophrenic nature of the Canadian reality hidden under the utopian cover. The journalist believes to be on an important mission as one of the chosen few, who is able to identify the signs of the approaching catastrophe:

When events become more and more extreme, the temptation grows to bury ourselves in escapist dreams or in the distraction of comfort. The critical faculty is lulled to sleep. To stay awake and watch demands energy and the willingness to persist in a chronic tension. It’s so much easier to be “positive”, to trust in what our leaders tell us. (...) You have nothing to lose but your illusions! (O’Brien, *Plague Journal* 161-162).

As a prophet of the apocalypse his task, however, is extremely challenging. Canadian totalitarianism is hardly perceptible since it has a spiritual dimension: “[O]ur tyrant doesn’t look like a tyrant. (...) [T]his war is now almost wholly within. Few shots will be fired, and only upon those who dare to say that we are in a war zone, who dare to say that we are the enemy” (O’Brien, *Plague Journal* 162). Delaney tries to convince his readers and fellow citizens that he notices disturbing signs of hypocrisy. He is irritated by constant supervision of citizens by the state and opposes the killing of the innocent which by the “mesmerized by utopian dreams” (O’Brien, *Plague Journal* 162) majority come unnoticed:

[D]ear “masses” (...) Why is it so difficult to believe that the worst is happening? You who believe in progress? Look at the marvellous whisper jets in our skies. But they are flown by a police force that isn’t accountable to you and me. You believe in the elimination of poverty. Look at the efficient way the computers are planning a world economy, how they will number us, and we shall be made content, lacking nothing. Look at the ways they are eliminating the poor themselves by burning them to death with saline and cutting them to pieces in the womb. (...) A very strange age, is it not? (O’Brien, *Plague Journal* 161).

In Delaney’s view Canada and the Western world have become versions of Huxley’s and Orwell’s dystopian societies described in *Brave New World*

Revisited and *1984*, respectively.⁵ The journalist claims that his country is being constructed by the powerful mass media, which serve the purpose of the government. Thus, although democracy and freedom may be the subject of almost every broadcast and editorial in Canada, Delaney believes that the underlying substance is benign totalitarianism. The journalist criticizes the oppressiveness of the Canadian government and comments on the decline of morality in the West. He sees the evident peace which other Canadian citizens around him enjoy as a disguised form of an ideological battle. The Janus-faced reality offers an anesthetizing surface of a steady development but in fact covers up evil. Canadian totalitarianism as a spiritual condition is characterized by a gradual decrease of civil rights and constant changes in the legal system which strengthen the power of the state. Additionally, the Canadian tyranny has been enslaving its citizens with the use of the educational system. Due to corrupt education Canadians are not able to exercise critical and analytical faculties. Besides, they are indoctrinated by the mass media and are devoid of a sense of human identity. Therefore, Delaney thinks he lives in “a brave new schizophrenic world” (O’Brien, *Plague Journal* 130) and a “brave new culture” (O’Brien, *Plague Journal* 93), which favour unawareness and instil pleasant numbness:

I hate (...) the moderates who make us all suffer by their claim, measured assurance that all is well, (...), all shall be exceedingly well. I can’t forgive what is being done to us, the strangling of everything that is beautiful and true and good. The strangest of their lies is that, as the world dies, they say they are giving us an enhanced life. I find this an especially cruel form of deception. I hate them most of all for drugging everyone. Most people have been lulled into total apathy by the narcotic (O’Brien, *Plague Journal* 221-222).

Delaney observes that at present the western man listens “without hearing, look[s] without seeing. (...) The modern North American simply has no time, inclination, or apparatus to read correctly the face of reality. (...) Thinking himself to be free, he is in reality the most tragic victim of the spirit of global totalitarianism” (O’Brien, *Plague Journal* 95). The root of contemporary evil and the reason for the approaching apocalypse, as Delaney claims, is the rejection of Christian values. In this apparently liberal western society Delaney, a heterosexual male and a Catholic, becomes a member of an oppressed minority: “[T]here is no room left in the world. It’s an increasingly narrow place. They either bend us out of our true shape or force us to make fantastic leaps as we attempt to escape.” (O’Brien, *Plague Journal* 101)

⁵ Michael O’Brien uses his protagonist Nathaniel Delaney as his alter ego and a vehicle for presenting his own views on the state of the world and the discrimination of Christians. These views are repeatedly interwoven in his fiction, essays and interviews which are presented on his website entitled studyObrien <http://www.studiobrien.com/>.

O'Brien's Canada depicted through the eyes of his protagonist Nathaniel Delaney is an Orwellian world ruled by such new gods as psychology and sociology, in which only certain truths are accepted and created, while others are avoided in the name of political correctness. This is a world without moral absolutes which only Christian faith provides. Nathaniel Delaney's views are definitely not politically correct since he looks at the world through the prism of his faith. Therefore, in the eyes of the regime he commits an Orwellian-like thought crime, which makes him an unwanted entity. He calls abortion and euthanasia murder and believes that the Canadian society treats these procedures as legally accepted ways of eliminating its unwanted members. Such practices are reminiscent of biblical Herod's massacre of innocents. The present hypocritical civilization is, as the protagonist believes, the civilization of death, and its ruler is biblical Herod, whom Delaney addresses in one of the diary entries:

Herod, how did you do this to us, you old egomaniac? (...) In the old days you were a tyrant who looked like a tyrant, and history remembers you as such. But for us there will be no accurate history. Our tyrants will be remembered as the saviors of mankind. Here you are again, two thousand years later. This time you have a public relations consultant; you have a pleasant bureaucratic manner and a business suit and a new; improved image. But you are just as furious with life as you were then. (...) *Life is death!* Your servants say. *Death is life! Darkness is light!* They say. *Light is darkness.* (...) You seduced an entire age (O'Brien, *Plague Journal* 197-198).

In one of his most controversial editorials Delaney compares the situation of Canada to the condition of the pre-war Germany during its descent into totalitarianism. According to Delaney, Canada, just like Germany then, has been crumbling and is on the edge of the apocalypse because Christian God is dead. Liberalism has become a religion, a new version of dogmatic orthodoxy. In the 1930s, spiritually divided, indifferent to the papal warnings about National Socialist, artistically decadent and secularized Germany was awaiting a lay messiah. Hitler fulfilled that role offering a promise of happy Germany. Delaney believes that contemporary western nations resemble Nazi Germany as they are troubled by the same anxieties and confuse good with evil:

[A]t root is a gnawing angst, a common flagged despair. A man in despair becomes capable of any outrage. He can make evil personages in the position of power if they promise a secular redemption. If God is in fact dead then it is permissible and even logical to do so. If there is no absolute good or evil, then why should we not employ evil men and evil means to bring about a perceived good-meaning, of course, any social good of which the collective mind is convinced. (...) Add to these similarities the almost limitless powers of the modern media and there emerges the potential for a complete deformation of man's sense of reality (O'Brien, *Plague Journal* 129).

O'Brien's protagonist points out that pre-war Germany's collective mind was extremely swiftly and extensively convinced of the above. In some of his most controversial editorials he preaches also that Holocaust could take place in Canada, that the Canadian government has already built civilian internment camps, which resemble Nazi concentration camps, in case of civil unrest and that the next step in taking control over the citizens will be imprinting everyone with a personal code in the form of a miniature chip injected under the skin.

Furthermore, Delaney notices that Canadian society has also been manipulated by social engineers who have instilled desired values in its members through the system of education, the literature and the media. The Canadian educational system has taken over the responsibility of the parents and has been enforcing the state's perspective on the masses. Social engineers architect the citizens' lives. Therefore, children have been indoctrinated at school against value judgment and enlightened on the roles of the sexes or sexual orientation, other religions and races before they are old enough to be able to form their own opinions about these matters and without consideration for their parents' perspective. While in the past the family was an autonomous unit, now it is being invaded by counsellors, therapists, social workers, psychologists and facilitators of different kinds so that it is the state which in reality brings up children: "Until recently it was the parents who let the government educate them for six hours a day, on loan, on trust. Now they think we have to justify our parenting to them, and they loan the kids back to us, no trust". (O'Brien, *Plague Journal* 117) Striving to free his children from the moral relativism instilled into them by the state Nathaniel recovers the old fairytales which deal with archetypal forms of good and evil. The disappearance of the traditional fairy tales with their Judeo-Christian symbols is for Delaney another systematic step in the destruction of the society. Written by social engineers contemporary books are preoccupied with the occult and destroy the traditional perceptions of good and evil seriously damaging the young minds: "[T]here are fundamental symbols in the human mind and heart; to tamper with them is dangerous. We can't arbitrarily rearrange them like so much furniture in the living room of the psyche. They are a language about the nature of good and evil; (...) they are points of contact with these realities." (O'Brien, *Plague Journal* 82-83)⁶ Delaney

⁶ The journalist, just like O'Brien, protests against 'taming' dragons, which are, for him, a fundamental form of evil:

The natural imagery knows (...) [a dragon is] a metaphor of malice and deceit, of evil knowledge, and of power without conscience. Call it a mental construct, call it a snake or a serpent, a theology or an ideology – call it whatever you like, but I'd rather it not prowl around these hills that I call home. Most of all I don't want it infesting my children's minds. I don't want it befriending them, either, or swallowing their fears

suggests that a return to traditional children’s literature is to be a remedy for postmodern relativism which blurs the distinction between two archetypal opposites. Blaming television for anesthetizing the mind and encouraging consumerism, art for promoting absurdity, violence, and death, through the act of reading classical literature he salvages his son and daughter from moral chaos and decadence.

However, spreading such contentious views on morality as well as the state of Canada and portraying its ever growing control over the minds of Canadian citizens in *The Echo* is treated by the authorities as an act of social terrorism. Nathaniel Delaney becomes, therefore, a public enemy. The journalist is first hunted for a thought crime and then accused of committing other offences. His elimination from the public world begins when his speech is excluded at the last minute without any explanation from the National Press Convention in Toronto. Later he is unable to have any mainline journals accept his articles, the number of his subscribers decreases, his income becomes microscopic, he is fined 5000\$ for ‘hate literature’ and he is monitored by the government. *The Sweeftcreek Echo* office is broken into and destroyed, and his computer as well as data bases are stolen. The devastation, as he believes, is a part of a selective and thorough destruction. His private life disintegrates, too. He battles insomnia, suffers from bouts of depression and is abandoned by his wife. Finally, he experiences a nervous breakdown. Delaney’s children are also harassed at school because of their father’s controversial views. With time hate mail and disturbing calls become a staple ingredient of his life. This is, as Delaney insists, the revenge of the state: “Why were they so upset? Because I wrote some nasty criticism about their wonderful world? Hey, journalism is democratic, isn’t it? (...) [W]ho or what am I threatening?” (O’Brien, *Plague Journal* 47) Finally, the protagonist is warned that he and his children are going to be annihilated by the regime. Therefore, when he learns that the children will be taken away by the Ministry of Social Development and Child Welfare as he is declared a sociopath and accused of paedophilia, in an act of desperation Delaney kidnaps his daughter Zoe and son Bam from school. All over the media he is depicted as mentally ill, possibly armed and dangerous. A warrant for his arrest is issued on charges of sexual assault against his and possibly other children: “I am hunted by my own nation. I have become an enemy of the people. Where do I go? Who can be

and perhaps in the process taking possession of their very selves. (...) Dragons cannot be tamed and it is fatal to enter into dialogue with them. The old stories taught our children this. By contrast, the new stories were definitely in favor of the civil rights of dragons and encouraged perceptions that were in fact a form of ancient newspeak (O’Brien, *Plague Journal* 84-85).

O’Brien discusses this matter also in his non-fictional book *A Landscape with Dragons: The Battle for Your Child’s Mind* (1998).

trusted? Where is there a soul who isn't infected with the atmospheric lie?" (O'Brien, *Plague Journal* 100).

The romanticized Canadian wilderness becomes a refuge for Delaney before he is caught by the authorities and disappears from a local prison. The journey into the wilderness is also Delaney's passage into his past and his conscience. It is far away from the civilization where he, a half-native and a descendant of the valley's first settlers, finds a literary and a metaphorical sanctuary, first with the Thu family and then with his grandfather and an old European priest. The Thus with whom Delaney stays shortly during his flight from the authorities are Oriental Christians, Vietnamese immigrants, refugees with a troublesome past. They observe Catholic rituals and their peculiar home is permeated by "the spirit of love" (O'Brien, *Plague Journal* 143). In Delaney's world of decayed morals and totalitarian liberalism the Thu family, who live in a boat reminiscent of Noah's ark, become the last of the just, the chosen ones who salvage the Christian values when the world is flooded with evil. However, among the Vietnamese-Canadians Delaney also feels othered.⁷ He perceives himself as a lazy Western Christian, a hypocrite, and a mediocre Catholic. This is the beginning of his conversion which culminates in his grandfather's cabin when father Andrei hears his confession. As Nathaniel reconsiders his life so far he realizes his multifaceted guilt. He understands that his anger, responsible for his editorials and now for his being pursued, has been accompanied by pride and hatred. His self-centeredness has made him one of the masses he despises. He has become his own god and has destroyed his family life due to cherishing his resentments. Going to confession changes him profoundly: "I accept full responsibility for my acts, my anger, my hatred, my failures to love. (...) I am at peace. There is no guilt, and there are no guilt feelings. No fear, no anger. Just clarity" (O'Brien, *Plague Journal* 239). He realizes that maybe his life is the cost of a new, better order, that he has become a sacrificial lamb in the times of Armageddon. However, it is a different 'lamb' which perishes before Delaney is arrested by the Canadian authorities. The protagonist, having involved the boy in his conflict with the state, contributes to the death of Anthony Thu, the Vietnamese immigrants' son. The young man is wounded during a police attack from a helicopter and finally bleeds to death as Delaney is trying to save him. Delaney asks his only friend, a physician Woolley, for help but is betrayed by him and consequently imprisoned. The protagonist forgives his enemies and accepts his fate. He

⁷ The Vietnamese immigrants are one of the few references to the multicultural character of the Canadian society in the novel. What is interesting, for Delaney these immigrants are the paragon of Christianity for Canadians and other Westerners. With respect to their spirituality these newcomers are superior to the demoralized majority and even to Delaney himself.

leaves his account of the Canadian plague for future generations before he is taken away for interrogation and mysteriously disappears.

Merging together the genres of an apocalyptic narrative, a dystopia, a diary and a political thriller, Michael O'Brien's *Plague Journal* offers an unusual and extremely controversial insight into Canada which defies Northrop Frye's image of the country as the peaceable kingdom. The writer presents the state as a totalitarian regime which eliminates inconvenient individuals who dare to bare and criticize its policies. The novel's main protagonist, a journalist Nathaniel Delaney, perceives himself as a member of the elect who reveals the truth about the approaching apocalypse to the unaware masses. In a world rejecting Christian values he claims to be witnessing Armageddon as the forces of good and evil clash underneath the apparently harmonious Canadian reality. In his often repetitive criticism of Canadian non-violent totalitarianism as a spiritual condition, dangerous liberalism and postmodern relativism, Delaney glorifies the past and preaches about a new order which will soon substitute the decadent and dysfunctional present. With its strict adherence to biblical and Christian laws this will probably be a world resembling the fundamentalist regime depicted in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* or the despotism portrayed in Timothy Findley's *Not Wanted on the Voyage*, or Findley's other novels. O'Brien's vision of Canada as a dystopia resonant with numerous intertexts almost completely ignores the unique character of the Canadian state with its multidimensional religious and ethnic diversifications. Michael O'Brien as a Catholic fundamentalist believes that his religious views and his values are the correct ones. Therefore, although he criticizes Canadian apparent totalitarianism, he himself promotes another authoritarian vision of a perfect world. O'Brien's ideal world will be an oppressive one for Canada's, and the West's, mainly religious but also cultural Others, as well as for those who are of a different sexual orientation. His paradise, then, would be the Other's hell.

Moreover, O'Brien disregards the fact that the modern state has developed as a sophisticated structure which integrates individuals in such a pattern that it aims at the interests of totality (Foucault 783-784). In this way the state exercises both an individualizing and a totalizing form of authority. In Canada, a country of immigrants, which has been multicultural and multireligious from its very beginnings, individualizing and totalizing procedures are determined by the policy of multiculturalism adopted by the federal government in 1971. Though Canada's cultural diversity had been frequently suppressed for the sake of imagining national unity, traditionally regarded as a prerequisite for any country (Anderson, Banting Kymlicka 52, Coleman, Edwards 110-111), since the second half of the twentieth century Canada has been constructed as a multicultural mosaic the strength of which has been its very cultural as well as religious multiplicity. Canadian multiculturalism has not been regarded as flawless and has been accused of

introducing sedative politics and demarginalising difference (Kamboureli 82, 101), deliberately cherishing otherness, encouraging resistance to assimilation as well as dividing rather than uniting Canadian society (Bannerji, Bissoondath). On the other hand, the policy has been also regarded as a sign of Canadian progressiveness in comparison to other monocultural or multicultural countries and seen as, among others, means of obliterating divisions, a condition of successive language acquisition and an effective way of combating ghettoization as well as providing a link between Canadian national identity and solidarity with immigrants (Coleman 7, Banting Kymlicka 52-60). Furthermore, the policy is believed to have been managing Canada's religious plurality quite successfully (Beyer 19, 23-24). As Banting and Kymlicka notice (63), it is the question of religious diversity within Canada's multiculturalism which still needs to be more thoroughly explored and researched.⁸ Michael O'Brien's *Plague Journal*, a peculiar elegy on the former hegemony of Christianity and a lament on the present liberalism and relativism, seems to be a literary voice in such a debate on the place of religion in the modern state and its role in Canadian multicultural society. Therefore, despite the novel's obvious flaws, the point of view presented by Michael O'Brien can be regarded as significant. Delaney, as constructed by O'Brien, is a lonely, heterosexual male Catholic who feels oppressed by postmodern liberalism and relativism, a citizen of a secular state who prophesies the apocalypse and creates his version of an ideal world. The presentation of such a character and his perspective allows *Plague Journal* to mount a highly distinctive critique of Canadian culture which challenges any simplistic conception of the nation as the peaceable kingdom.

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⁸ A book exploring the issue which Banting and Kymlicka fail to refer to in their article is entitled *Religion and the Social Order: Religion and Diversity in Canada* edited by Lori Beaman and Peter Beyer. Another collection of articles considering the problem in Canada and other countries is the recent *Reasonable Accommodation: Managing Religious Diversity* edited by Lori Beaman.

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