

Cross-Cultural Impersonations: Pauline Melville's "Shape-shifter"

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S*hape-shifter*, Pauline Melville's first book, a collection of stories, is remarkable not only for its assurance but also its range of modes and matter.¹ It could be read as critical realism, magical realism, fantasy, comedy, satire, allegory, and tales of the supernatural. It has stories about white, black, working-class and middle-class people—politicians, psychopaths, and dress-designers—from Guyana, Jamaica, St. Vincent, England, and Scotland. And there is much more. The two epigraphs emphasize the protean. The first (attributed to "Unknown poet") says: "The shape-shifter can conjure up as many different figures and manifestations as the sea has waves." The second also introduces reference to Guyana (Melville's father's homeland, where she has lived): "It is a firm article of faith that the shaman or medicine-man of the Indians of Guiana, to whom nothing is impossible, can effect transformation of himself or others."²

"I specialize in impersonations," says the narrator in one of the stories (114). *Shape-shifter*, whatever else it signifies, also describes the author³ who — on the evidence — seems to know about Guyana, its material situation, its history and folklore, its politics; about classical mythology; about the lives of blacks and working-class whites in Britain, law-abiding and criminal; about synchronicity and the occult, archetypes of the unconscious, mathematical speculation, and philosophy. *Shape-shifter* also signifies the ambivalent Anancy figure who may be god or trickster. "The gifts of the genuine shaman overlap in places with the psychological wizardry of the charlatan" (97). The shape-shifter may be Shakespeare McNab dressed up as La Diabliesse (12-13), or Mr. Evans the obeah man (34-37), or Georgetown which is

beautiful at night but in the morning smiles "with rotting teeth" (18), or England where "Nothing was what it seemed" (46); it may be the god Tuxedo perceives as white then black then white again, who "has been up most of the night laying traps for him, sometimes in the shape of things, mostly in the shape of people" (54); the protagonist of "A Quarrelsome Man," who is a dedicated father (61-73); the "lovely woman" (79), who is really something else; the Scottish drunk metamorphosed into Orpheus (95-98); the manipulative shaman ("The Truth is in the Clothes"); the cabaret artist, who confronts her shadow ("You Left the Door Open"), "The Girl with the Celestial Limb," whose "leg no longer consisted of flesh and blood" (139); or the woman in "Eat Labba and Drink Creek Water," who examines the transformation—the shape-shifting—of Guyana, Britain, and herself.⁴

"'Eat labba and drink creek water and you will always return', so the saying goes" ("Eat Labba" 148). The main narrator in the final story returns to Guyana. Sometimes resented for her "ice-cream face" (156), she is not as white as she looks. One of her aunts protests: "Just because you've got white skin and blue eyes you think you haven't got coloured blood in you. But you have. Just like me" (162). The story is vivid about racial prejudice, at its most devastating perhaps when non-whites internalize the dominant white perceptions.

Some time afterwards, in England, I am playing with my doll Lucy in a garden full of browns and greys. Lucy's face is cracked like crazy paving because I left her out in the rain but I love her because her hair is the colour of golden syrup. The cockney boy who lives next door has climbed into the pear tree on his side of the fence and is intoning in a sneery voice:

"Your fahver looks like a monkey.
Your fahver looks like a monkey."

I go inside and tell my mother: "Mum, Keith says Daddy looks like a monkey. And I think so too." (157-58)

But there is more here than the realistic presentation of racial prejudice and confusion of identity. With echoes of Wilson Harris and Jean Rhys,⁵ early passages introduce a mythic element, which runs throughout:

Once I dreamed I returned by walking in the manner of a high-wire artist, arms outstretched, across a frail spider's thread suspended sixty feet above the Atlantic attached to Big Ben at one end and St George's Cathedral, Demerara, at the other. It took me twenty-two days to do it and during the whole of that time only the moon shone.

Another time, my dream blew me clean across the ocean like tumbleweed. That took only three days and the sun and the moon shone alternatively as per usual.

We do return and leave and return again, criss-crossing the Atlantic, but whichever side of the Atlantic we are on, the dream is always on the other side. (148-49)

The story is told in sections, many of them short. The effect is cinematic, as we cut from one section into the next. In this instance, we cut to the childhood of the main narrator:

I am splashing in the waters of the lake at Suddie. The waters are a strange reddish colour, the colour of Pepsi-Cola and the lake is fenced in with reeds. The sky is a grey-blue lid with clouds in it—far too big for the lake. Opposite me on the far side, an Amerindian woman sits motionless in the back of a canoe wedged in the reeds. She is clutching a paddle.

They say that the spirit of a pale boy is trapped beneath the waters of one of the creeks nearby. You can see him looking up when sunlight penetrates the overhanging branches and green butterfly leaves, caught between the reflections of tree roots that stretch like fins from the banks into the water. (149)

Dream, moon, the (Anancy) spider's thread, the Amerindian presence, the legend of the boy whom nature now expresses—we are drawn into the dialogue with the past. The Amerindians, original possessors of the place, are also a moral presence. When the colonials are devising a strategy to deceive the British authorities about the racial origins of Frank, they are watched by the portrait of an Amerindian "with blank disdainful eyes" (154).

The various dead are part of the ebb and flow of time, part of the natural world. "The body of an Amerindian is falling through the mists, a brown leaf curling and twisting downwards until it reaches the earth with a thud like fruit" (150). The pale boy, Wat, is a European who centuries ago was part of an enterprise that pursued a dream.

They are lost, Wat, his father and the ragged remnants of the crew. They are padd[ing] the small craft which the Arawaks have named

“the eight-legged sea-spider,” and they are lost in a labyrinth of rivers, a confluence of streams that branch into rapids and then into more billowing waters all crossing the other, ebbing and flowing. (158)

Wat dies and is buried. But in torrential rains, “Wat’s body, loosened from its grave, begins a quest of its own through the network of creeks and streams and rivers” (160).

The story carefully balances the European dream of Eldorado (and, at another time, of the tourist paradise) with the colonial dream of the civilized metropole. (“It is impossible to *be* a real man until you have been to London” [153]). That London is a dream is underscored by a passage of description which parodies European travellers’ tales of the sixteenth century:

In some of these great towers are hollow statues of gold which seem giants and all manner of gold artefacts, even gold that seems like wooden logs to burn. Here dwell men who deal in markets of coffee and sugar and vast numbers of other like commodities. They have eyes on their shoulders, mouths in the middle of their breasts, a long train of hair grows backwards between their shoulders. They sit on finely-made leather cushions and there are also men like porters to carry food to them on magnificent plates of gold and silver.

In uppermost rooms of these towers, which are as we would call palaces, sit stockbrokers, their bodies anointed with white powdered gold blown through hollow canes until they are shining all over. Above their heads hang the skulls of dead company directors, all hung and decked with feathers. Here they sit drinking, hundreds of them together, for as many as six or seven days at a time. (154-55)

Misunderstanding and befuddlement are among the themes of Melville’s collection. In “I Do Not Take Messages from Dead People,” the broadcaster (who seems, through an Anancy story, to have criticized Comrade Vice-President in code) extricates himself by stage-managing a supernatural intervention. Comrade Vice-President, unlike his secretary, will take messages from the dead. In “A Disguised Land”—England—a black Jamaican learns that “[e]verything was camouflaged” (46). Her disaster is prefigured by a recurrent dream:

She dreamed she was in England and that she had been sentenced to death. She appeared to be free, standing on the pavement outside a court somewhere in a country town. Small knots of white people stood chatting like parents after a school function. They were always extremely kind to her. In one of the dreams a man drew up beside her in his car. He put his head out of the window and said helpfully:

"Hop in and I'll give you a lift to the gallows. It's not far out of my way." (41)

Appearances again deceive in "About that Two Pounds, Mrs Parrish." Snobbish Lily, having lent money to the impressive Mrs Parrish, is dying to get it back, but is anxious to conceal her distress. In "Tuxedo," a small-time black hustler wonders: "If god isn't white, how come black people have such a hard time?" (55). But whether his God is black or white depends on the shifts in Tuxedo's circumstances. "Tuxedo talks to God in the same way he talks to the police, in his London accent, saving the Jamaican for his mates" (59). Later he discovers that "he can talk to God Jamaica-style like one black man to another" (59).

Church bells—Lutheran and Anglican—sound in the opening paragraph of "The Conversion of Millicent Vernon": "For a while these two bells limped along together, out of step, and then the high sweet chimes of the Catholic church rang out, intermingling with them and confusing the difference between all three" (27). The story is concerned with "confusing the difference" among beliefs, among individuals, among categories. Millie, having turned to the obeah man for help, returns home to find good news, and she is certain now that obeah works. But her mother too, devoutly Roman Catholic, has had good news, and gives the Good Lord thanks. Which does the story endorse? Obeah? Catholicism? Both? Or neither? Although the narrative is filtered mainly through the consciousness of Millie, it keeps alternative readings available.

"The Iron and the Radio Have Gone" examines Molly Summers, an English Quaker "who trod a lifelong tightrope between trying to do good and trying not to feel pleased with herself for having done so" (16). Arriving at night in Guyana, she is taken with the beauty of Georgetown. But things are different the following morning. "She was living in an open sewer" (18). There is more filth, distress, and degradation than she had bargained for. She can understand hostility to whites—"Not surprising, she thought, given the history of the place"—and is proud of "[h]er own magnanimity and understanding" (21). But herself a shape-shifter, like Georgetown, she eventually uncovers her own sewer: her previously unacknowledged prejudice.

Though the main line of the story is conventionally realistic, there are passages that recall Wilson Harris.⁶ For instance, the story suggests that an alternative world imperfectly understood may actually be in control—the realm of the King of Rags, a scarecrow figure with supernatural powers.

Something was approaching down the street. Molly blinked. At first sight it looked like a walking tree. She looked again. It was a man, thin and black, dressed entirely in shreds and tatters of cloth that had turned as black as his skin with age, sweat and heat. His hair grew knotted and wild. He walked with obsessive regularity of stride, stiff-legged as if his legs were branches hung with fluttering scraps of material. Barefoot, he progressed with astonishing speed, eyes fixed straight ahead.

“Who is this, Maxine?”

Maxine looked up indifferently from her broom and glanced down the street:

“The King of Rags.” She chewed on a matchstick.

“What does he do?” asked Molly.

“Me na know. ‘E jus’ walk.”

Maxine was still sulking over Donella’s accusations that she had left the door unlocked. She swept on methodically, then added with a grin: “Maybe he’s walking for summady.”

“How do you mean?” Molly wondered if she meant she was going on an errand.

“Maybe he tryin’ to walk summady to death.” She squinted at Molly in the sunlight. “We can do that here, yuh know.” (18-19)

Myth is an important element again in “McGregor’s Journey.” Giving up his job on a building site, McGregor goes on a drunken odyssey. In their attachment to conventional propriety, people around him seem already to have died. His consciousness altered, he feels himself increasingly at odds with the living dead. He descends into the underground. “Overhead, the mammoth city, with its millions of citizens in their neon-lit offices, went about its business. And not a solitary soul was aware that far beneath the ground underfoot, McGregor was voyaging” (95). After a sleep—“For all he knew, he had slept three days and three nights” (96)—McGregor comes to life again. He passes a bristling dog—a Cerberus figure—and sees “a wondrous sight” (96), a black woman in her forties dancing vigorously. She too has been drinking. Affectionately, she invites him to dance.

McGregor approached bashfully:

"Och. I canna dance," he said.

"Everybody can dance," she insisted and continued to shimmy round the hall. Suddenly, McGregor joined her, leaping into the air and executing a wild, jerky Highland fling accompanied by a joyous, warlike scream. The woman shook with laughter.

"You're beautiful," said McGregor.

"Yuh lie," she screeched with laughter again and stopped to catch her breath. "It still snowing up there?" she asked. (96-97)

Under the influence of drink, the two establish, for a moment, warm community. But other realities threaten. When McGregor is about to kiss her as invited—he calls her "the first real bit of humanity" he has met that day, "the first person with a wee bit of optimism" (97)—he is inhibited by racial awareness. The guard whose advice he solicits approves the hesitation. The blacks in the station—"these youts"—might think: "Here is another white man who think he own a black woman like all through history." So McGregor must go ahead up the stairs and let the woman follow him, then they could go for a drink somewhere. "You jus' go on up de stairs like I said. Don' even look back. Let she jus' pick up she bags and follow you" (97). The injunction "Don' even look back" suggests the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, which Melville here appropriates.

McGregor did as he was asked. But he was hurt. Some poison had entered him. What the guard had said about history and white men went round in his head. He held onto the rail and the escalator carried him smoothly upwards. Half way up, he turned to check that she was following. Her eyes, blank with disappointment, were fixed on him and she was walking slowly backward away from him through the arched hallway, carrier-bags disappearing as if she were being drawn back into the dark tunnel. Trying to get back down he slipped, cursed, stumbled, and clung onto the rail. The escalator bore him steadily up towards the curtain of snow that hung in the station entrance. Something was happening to him that he did not recognise. A hot substance, like lava, crawled slowly down his cheeks. (98)

But though McGregor rejects categorization as an exploiter—"I want you to know that I never owned a fucking slave in my life. Never" (98)—the poison did not enter him just when the guard referred to history; McGregor was already sensing history when,

with the station full of black people, he "felt a little unsure of himself." Like Molly Summers in "The Iron and the Radio Have Gone," he is not as free of racial consciousness as he believes. And yet, albeit in his drunken optimism, he has known an interracial moment of community, when he and his black Eurydice danced in the underworld, celebrating life and warmth, in defiance of the many living dead. "Everybody can dance" (99).

Some of the stories seem especially concerned with rewards and dangers of the imagination. In "A Quarrelsome Man" (61-73), the Pistol-Man and Vera begin to know each other and are grateful to have met. Vera has given his spirits a lift; and she is impressed by the man's dedication to Avalon, his deaf-mute son. Pistol-Man, who says he found the name "in a book of myths," thinks Avalon is Greek, but the narrator offers a corrective gloss. "Avalon. Avalon. Where wounded heroes go to rest. Where King Arthur went to heal his wounds" (66). Pistol-Man, who has found himself healed in caring for his son, says he wants people to make progress, he wants his son to be somebody, to "be his own person" (71).

"... That's why I've let the grass grow like that." Vera looked to see where he was pointing. Outside, the grass had run wild, nearly waist-high, in the small garden. "The neighbours keep telling me I must cut it, but it's more interesting for him like that. There's lots of things he can discover in that grass: butterflies and worms, snails and caterpillars and insects with long legs, lots of things. He can hide in it and imagine things. It's more of an adventure for him like that." (71-72)

Pistol-Man is, like his son, in touch with other worlds, with levels below the conscious, where there are "lots of things he can discover," where he can "imagine things." It is "more of an adventure for him like that" (72). It also matters, perhaps, that Avalon's hearing-aid is Africa-shaped. That other world is symbolically connected with Africa, a potential source of richness to Pistol-Man, who is racially mixed.

"The Girl with the Celestial Limb," "The Truth is in the Clothes", and "You Left the Door Open" are allegories of the creative life. At the more immediate level, they dramatize communication with paranormal or supernatural elements—with

strange mathematical wizards from outer space, a black African sorceress, and a white English psychopath of a previous century.

When Jane Cole of "The Girl with the Celestial Limb," a child with a precocious talent in mathematics, "caught a glimpse of the meaning of infinity" (135), she resolutely turned away, "took a conscious decision to pursue dullness and mediocrity in all things" (136). But mathematics and infinity will not let her be. To some people "there is nothing real except mathematics" (139). The story builds on this premise, playing with mathematical ideas. Afreet, the mechanic, can set up a condition where Jane will either collapse into a black hole or revert to her former self with her former leg. "It's a quantum superimposition of two states—alive and dead. You will be both alive and dead at the same time" (145). It is a condition which would, she is told, "be rather like a dream. You frequently find such duality in dreams and it is not at all unpleasant" (146). "The Girl with the Celestial Limb" is playful science fiction, a mathematical fantasy, an allegory about creative challenge.

In "The Truth is in the Clothes," we are invited to consider the nature of Maisie's powers. Is she, as they said in America, a witch? Images on some of the clothes she creates reinforce the notion of supernatural activity: black batwing shapes on her hat; and on the gown she has made for the narrator "scarabs, the sacred beetle of ancient Egypt" (107). There are several strange occurrences, as in magical realism. The scarabs seem to shift (though that may have been an optical illusion). Then, travelling through a gate in time, the narrator has ominous experiences. She is in an evangelical church hall, and the sermon texts are from Exodus (referring to a gown like the one that Maisie wore) and Ecclesiastes (which Maisie has been echoing): "A time to kill and a time to heal . . ." (110). Also, space contracts unaccountably. "I couldn't believe that I had lived in my ground floor London flat for five years without ever realizing that Jamaica was just on the other side of my back wall" (111). In the last of various references to classical myth, we are pointed towards Medea (who had killed the bride of Jason with a poisoned robe), and we make the link with Maisie, "who makes clothes that can kill or heal people" (101). Then, finally, the story begins to get written. "The type-

writer wrote of its own accord . . . ” (112). This is in the end, whatever else it may be, another story about the life of the imagination, of “subordinated psyche” mirrored by dream paradox.⁷

“You Left the Door Open” seems, on the surface, a sensational ghost story. The narrator, threatened by a psychopath, survives by cunning. The door is both an opening in the psyche and a gateway in time. The attacker appears to be a criminal from the nineteenth century. He is also, specifically, the narrator’s own creation—in a sense, the narrator herself. “One night, alone at home, I found myself in the bathroom looking in the cabinet mirror” (115). “I found myself” is clearly ambiguous: she finds herself looking at the mirror and she discovers or encounters herself when she looks in the mirror. “That evening, Charlie regarded me confidently from the full-length mirror in my bedroom” (115). Charlie is the narrator’s Jungian shadow. Having involved us in “a drama of consciousness” (Harris, *Tradition* 48), the narrator summarizes various possibilities implicit in the story:

Over the next few days my imagination ran wild over the grid of facts, along the boundaries of reason and unreason that are stalked by the ancient figure of fear. Could it have been part of myself that escaped and attacked me? Had the spirit of a nineteenth century murderer and cabaret artist entered a contemporary small-time burglar? Did we all overlap? (133)

Here, “all,” of course, means *all of us*, not only the alternatives just listed.

Pauline Melville challenges conventional assumptions about identity, time, and space. Though she is adept at satire—as in “I Do Not Take Messages from Dead People,” “The Iron and the Radio Have Gone,” and “A Disguised Land”—her stories are not content to reinforce the settled illusions of realism; they communicate much by indirection, by symbolic hints; they traffic in intuition; they travel dream and myth. As Wilson Harris has put it: “The paradox of cultural heterogeneity, or cross-cultural capacity, lies in the evolutionary thrust it restores to orders of the imagination, the ceaseless dialogue it inserts between hardened conventions and eclipsed or half-eclipsed otherness, within an

intuitive self that moves endlessly into flexible patterns, arcs or bridges of community" (*Womb* xviii).

NOTES

- 1 *Shape-shifter* was adjudged Best First Book submitted for the Commonwealth Writers Prize, 1991. "This brilliantly handled collection is a work of varied and accomplished story-telling. The range of characters, setting, mood, and experience is rich and captivating" (Judges' Report, 23).
- 2 Attributed to Walter Roth's *Enquiry into the Animism and Folklore of the Guiana Indians*. The quotation is entirely plausible, but checking this source I have not found it yet.
- 3 In an aside, Melville says so herself in her *ICA-Guardian* conversation with Phillips.
- 4 In Busby's *Daughters of Africa*, Melville makes it clear that "Eat Labba and Drink Creek Water" is largely autobiographical.
- 5 Compare, for example, the following passages:
 "Is it true," she said, "that England is like a dream? Because one of my friends who married an Englishman wrote and told me so. She said this place London is like a cold dark dream sometimes. I want to wake up."
 "Well," I answered annoyed, "that is precisely how your beautiful island seems to me, quite unreal and like a dream." (Rhys 80)
 We had in our midst a new member sitting crumpled looking, like a curious ball, old and wrinkled. Her long black hair—with the faintest glimmer of silver-grey—hung in two plaits down to her waist. She sat still as a bowing statue, the stillness and surrender of the American Indian of Guiana in reflective pose. (Harris, *Palace* 71)
- 6 "I don't think it shows much, but Wilson Harris has influenced me a lot" (Melville, "Conversation").
- 7 "Imaginative sensibility is uniquely equipped by forces of dream and paradox to mirror the inimitable activity of subordinated psyche . . ." (Harris, *Womb* xvii).

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