

# Paternal Authority in Wayne Johnston's *The Navigator of New York*

Fevronia Novac

Volume 23, numéro 2, fall 2008

URI : [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds23\\_2art03](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds23_2art03)

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

0823-1737 (imprimé)

1715-1430 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Novac, F. (2008). Paternal Authority in Wayne Johnston's *The Navigator of New York*. *Newfoundland Studies*, 23(2), 171–184.

# Paternal Authority in Wayne Johnston's *The Navigator of New York*

FEVRONIA NOVAC

IN *THE NAVIGATOR OF NEW YORK* (2002), Wayne Johnston warns his readers that his novel does not attempt to solve the controversy over who first reached the North Pole. This warning is not contained in an epigraph, but comes at the end of the novel:

This is a work of fiction. At times, it places real people in imaginary space and time. At others, imaginary people in real space and time. While it draws from the historical record, its purpose is not to answer historical questions or settle historical controversies (484).

While the purpose of Johnston's text was "not to answer historical questions," the lure of that possibility was most appealing. There is a play between historiography, fiction, and the writing of "contemporary" history in parallel with the writing of the novel itself. In its chiasmic structure, Johnston's note seems to urge the reader to re-think the novel she or he has just finished, and like many of his novels it encourages a reading in terms of the fluidity of boundaries between history and fiction. At a first glance, the title of the book, *The Navigator of New York*, could appear opportunistic. The protagonist comes from Newfoundland and goes into self-imposed exile in New York. Devlin, the narrator, writes: "There I was in Manhattan, and all I could think about was Newfoundland" (Johnston 52). Johnston might have been speaking for himself. "New York" in the title may serve to attract international readers and the protagonist of the novel is not "of" New York. But one learns, in the course of the story, that the narrator was conceived in New York and "navigated" in his

mother's womb back to Newfoundland. Furthermore, this is a novel of exploration and "New York is to explorers what Paris is to artists" (Johnston 10).

The relationship between father and son has been the object of Johnston's previous work. The importance of the father to the emergence of a psychologically sound child was a staple in the work of Freud and Lacan, and the father figures in his novels invite analysis along these lines. After analyzing the fictional protagonist's adventure towards adulthood from a Lacanian psychoanalytical perspective, I show how, through the role played by the mother, Johnston subverts Lacan's ideas of the formation of the self as a result of the symbolic authority of the father. The mother, even if physically absent from *The Navigator of New York*, plays a fundamental role in her son's search for a foundational narrative of self fulfilment.

In a study of historical fiction in Canada, Herb Wyile noted that historiography in Canadian novels has become increasingly speculative. He calls the postmodern and postcolonial attempts to re-write history and to deconstruct the myths of a nation in the works of a number of Canadian novelists, Johnston included, "speculative fiction." "Indeed, instead of exhibiting a retrospective certainty, contemporary historical novels are undeniably increasingly speculative" (Wyile xi-xii). Wyile examines Johnston's view of Canada and Newfoundland through the bitter destiny of a fictionalized Joe Smallwood. If *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams* offered a criticism of the allegory of the nation, *The Navigator of New York* departs from such concerns and sets the ground for an historical adventure which defines itself as uncertain from its very beginning — the race for the North Pole. Using historical figures in a work of fiction attracts a lot of attention and Johnston probably did not intend to avoid the controversy over who reached the pole first.<sup>1</sup> This controversy, although the author denies it, looms over the entire novel. A question such as "Who was first to discover the North Pole?" — irrelevant to the Inuit who came along to help out with the various expeditions — became crucial for two main newspapers in New York at the turn of the century. The *New York Herald* supported Dr. Frederick Cook's claim while the *New York Times* favoured Robert Peary's story. In *The Navigator of New York*, the question of who got there first raises questions of paternity and ownership. The idea of scientific paternity is related to the crucial importance of the discovery of the North Pole. On a personal level, two explorers (Stead and Cook) and a doctor (Devlin's uncle) struggle for recognition as paternal figures of the narrator. But Johnston seems to consider even this struggle irrelevant. For him, a paternal figure is merely a fiction. The author manages to alternate admirably the quest for adventure and recognition in the scientific world and the lessons learned in fatherhood. Dr. Cook learns how to be a father to Devlin, the naïve narrator who gladly accepts him as one. His authority is purely fictitious and, as reader, you believe it if you want to, since the novel makes it clear that no proof whatsoever is provided to Devlin. The discovery of the North Pole is the same; it is a fiction you also accept, as a reader, if you are willing to. It is in the juxtaposition of these two elements that *The Navigator of New York* finds its strength and its beauty as a Bil-

*dungsroman* of adventure which allows for reflection on the philosophical aspects of subject construction.

In an essay on *The Divine Ryans* (2004), Cynthia Sugars points out Johnston's preoccupation with the quest for origins in the exploration of paternal authority as a general characteristic of his novels. Sugars links the quest for the father with the symbolic pursuit of a historical, national past: "More plainly, the quest for the father represents a quest for patrimony that is in turn a quest for symbolic legitimation. Johnston's novels, one might argue, demonstrate a desire for paternal authority; these characters want to know where they fit in the communal and genetic inheritance" (152). Sugars also suggests that trauma is fundamental to Johnston's stories. The traumatic event as foundation for the intrigue of the narrative is used again in *The Navigator of New York*. The loss of the protagonist's mother triggers the adventures that would take him outside of Newfoundland, first to New York and then to the North Pole, and, I argue, allow him to construct his own identity.

Speculation in Canadian historical novels is often oriented towards consumerism. Wyle notes the "ambivalent fashion in which contemporary historical novels 'speculate' in history, on the one hand inscribing an uncertainty and skepticism about historiographical practice and commodity culture and on the other hand speculatively 'investing' in history as the raw material for the production of marketable fiction" (215). To attract readers, Johnston builds his novel on suspense and adventure, a technique which seems to be a characteristic of North American fiction. In a study of the *Bildungsroman* in Canadian fiction (*Unreal Country. Modernity in the Canadian Novel in English*), Glenn Willmott also referred to the commodifying nature of the modern Canadian novel, which he sees "as realist romance, with its 'empathic' and liberal, rather than elitist and revolutionary, within its bourgeois commercial and consumer culture" (51). This is also a trait of postmodern novels, such as those of Umberto Eco, where what seems like a traditional narrative can be interpreted on different levels of ambiguity. In spite of the ambiguity of its title, evoking the adventures of a Newfoundlander in New York, *The Navigator of New York* is a captivating *Bildungsroman*. It is a narrative in which the historical puzzle is matched by the protagonist's search for a father.

This novel is a self quest in which the boy from Newfoundland attracted to New York by the letters of the famous explorer Dr. Cook, who claims to be his biological father, discovers his "true" family story or, rather, manages to construct for himself a coherent narrative of his origins. He also meets his future wife in New York and, by joining Cook on his expeditions to Alaska and to the North Pole, discovers horrifying events in the history of his parents. A romantic story Cook reveals about his encounter with Devlin's mother stays with the young man since it is so well told. Cook, the usurper, had killed Devlin's father and now claims to be the "real" father, his mother's lover from New York. Whereas as a young boy he heard controversial bits of stories about his own family history, Devlin quickly embraces Cook's version of his family story. He accepts that his stepfather murdered his

mother who had tried to protect him as a little boy. In fact, Devlin's mother had met Cook in New York while engaged to Stead, fell in love with him, and had a baby. Although she was ready, upon her return to Newfoundland, to go back to New York and live with Cook, who knew about the baby, the explorer did not answer her letter and abandoned her and the child. She had to marry her fiancé, Stead, whom she told she was carrying a baby from a different man. Stead also abandoned her to join an expedition in Labrador as a doctor. Cook later told Devlin that Stead came back to Newfoundland in disguise, intending to confront his wife and to learn who the father of her son was. He threatened to kill the boy and threw his wife off a cliff. Devlin grew up thinking his mother's death was a suicide. He lived with his aunt and his uncle until he received a bizarre letter inviting him to join Cook in New York. From the first paragraph, the book feeds on adventure, like a Hollywood movie.

Although fatherhood has been a constant theme in Johnston's fiction, the author now departs from his earlier treatment of paternity or, rather, from the consequences of trauma caused by the father's authority. Johnston's novel depicts Cook as an orchestrator of deceit. Blinded by Cook's charisma, Devlin never revolts against the tragic events triggered by the explorer's egoistic behavior, but remains the naïve narrator who believes every word of Cook's and, even when he knows for sure that the two of them never reached the North Pole (a fact he also learns from Cook, although he was present at the expedition), he persists in supporting Cook and tries to console him for his failure. A very common occurrence in polar expeditions, failure came to be documented in numerous records. Johnston explains:

As my father [Stead] had yet to command an expedition, none of these records was attributed to him. Rarely, the records were some "first" or "farthest." But most of them were records of endurance, feats made necessary by catastrophes, blunders, mishaps. Declaring a record was usually a way of putting the best face on failure. "First to winter north of latitude..." was a euphemism for "Polar party stranded for months after ship trapped in ice off Greenland" (Johnston 6).

Just as the discovery of the North Pole involves a great deal of hazard and luck (considering the floating nature of the final target), successful paternity builds on luck in the novel. Cook does not make an effort to become a good father, but, through his attractive narratives, succeeds.

Both maternity and paternity are challenged in Johnston's novel. Devlin has two mothers, one can say, since, after his biological mother's death, his aunt cares for him. He also has more than one father: Stead, his uncle, and the "fascinating" Dr. Cook:

My father had always been a stranger to me, in life, in death. And, now, it seemed, in life again. Now this stranger had a different name and was still alive. Both my fathers were doctors turned explorers. There was little to distinguish one from the other except that one had written me a letter (Johnston 52).

It is the series of letters Cook sends Devlin that establishes his symbolic fatherhood. As for his mother, Devlin needs to go to New York, Alaska, and the Arctic Circle to find out that she had not abandoned him, but had died trying to save his life. He learns that she lived a wonderful love story in New York with his “real” father, Cook, who provides him with a life of adventures only backers (the rich who sponsored arctic expeditions) could offer their sons. Devlin likes and quickly adopts the version of the family history Cook told, since the latter takes him away from the dull life in Newfoundland, where he might have ended up “ambitionless, untravelled and uneducated,” as the protagonist of *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams* feared. A life of adventure opens to the “untravelled” Newfoundlander who will follow Cook in his historical expeditions. Devlin also learns that Cook killed Stead on one of their expeditions. We note that only after this murder does Cook write to Devlin and ask him to join him on his polar expeditions.

Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalysis provides us with a useful analysis of the paternal figure as a fundamental symbolical function for the development of a person’s adult life. By coining the term “the Name-of-the-Father,” Lacan defines the father as figure of the law and of symbolic authority:

*Il n’est pas pareil de dire qu’une personne doit être là pour soutenir l’authenticité de la parole, et de dire qu’il y a quelque chose qui autorise le texte de la loi. En effet, ce qui autorise le texte de la loi se suffit d’être lui-même au niveau du signifiant. C’est ce que j’appelle le Nom-du-Père, c’est-à-dire le père symbolique. C’est un terme qui subsiste au niveau du signifiant, qui dans l’Autre, en tant qu’il est le siège de la loi, représente l’Autre. C’est le signifiant qui donne support à la loi, qui promulgue la loi (Lacan, Séminaire V, 146).*

For Lacan, the father is only recognized as such symbolically, as the representative of the law. In Johnston’s novel, Devlin’s mother chooses Stead as the boy’s father despite knowing he is not the biological father. So Devlin’s situation literally symbolizes the hidden significance of the meaning of the father, as outlined by Lacan. Stead is later replaced by Cook as symbol of authority and promulgator of the law. Cook provides the new story of Devlin’s origin as Johnston splits the persona of the father in two figures: Stead, the murderer of the mother, banning the child’s access to her and Cook, the murderer of the father, who takes the place of the symbolic figure of the father through a textual play of thrilling stories. Lacan explains the process of sense-making by the murder of the father. The law finds its foundation in the figure of the dead, mythical father:

*C'est précisément ce qu'exprime ce mythe nécessaire à la pensée de Freud qu'est le mythe de l'Œdipe. Regardez-y de plus près. S'il est nécessaire qu'il procure lui-même l'origine de la loi sous cette forme mythique, s'il y a quelque chose qui fait que la loi est fondée dans le père, il faut qu'il y ait le meurtre du père. Les deux choses sont étroitement liées — le père en tant qu'il promulgue la loi est le père mort, c'est-à-dire le symbole du père. Le père mort, c'est le Nom-du-Père, qui est là construit sur le contenu. (Lacan, Séminaire V, 146).*

Stead's death, in Johnston's novel, could be the symbolic death of the father as figure of authority. Stead is replaced by Cook, the murderer, who, besides the authority he constructs for himself as the father of the boy, enjoys a scientific authority. Cook builds his own narrative out of the murder of the "other" father who might not have been the biological parent but was the symbolic father since he obstructed the boy's access to his mother.

The historical facts challenge the narrative, even if Johnston warns us that his book is not aimed at "settling historical controversies" (Johnston 484). Johnston is agile in constructing a novel that maintains the suspense by negotiating between his fictional story and the historical fictions with which his readers could be familiar. His response to the historical controversy is postcolonial: the Pole has not been reached and it does not matter. He sides with the Inuit, suggesting that the claims of the New York newspapers are irrelevant. Paradoxically, the irrelevance of the question becomes the core of the novel — its generating mechanism. Readers, enticed by their knowledge of the controversy surrounding the historical Peary and Cook, are eager to participate in any puzzle Johnston presents about the famous race to the North Pole. As for Devlin, the protagonist, he shares with the Inuit the lack of revolt when faced with adventurers like Cook who take them along their cruel expeditions. The Inuit do not feel oppressed; they help out, with good heart, even though these voyages make no sense to them. Johnston creates another parallel, post-colonial account, a counter-narrative to the exploration story of white men, not fully explored in this book. (He might surprise us with a new novel that expands on the numerous possibilities of such a story, as he did by writing the *Custodian of Paradise*, a book grown from a story hinted at in *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams*).

The narrator's position on the discovery of the North Pole is a *faux problème*, just like stories of paternal authority. For Lacan, the good father is the one who cares for and who does not oppress the son, but disappears to help his son fulfil his own desires [see the examination of castration (Lacan, IV, 217) and the discussion of the dialectic of desire and need in Lacan, V, 464 "*Les circuits du désir*" (457-472)]. His definition of castration is tied to the discussion of enjoyment. In Lacan's terms, Devlin's father does not castrate his son in the sense that he allows him to fulfil his own desires:

*L'action symbolique de la castration choisit son signe, qui est emprunté au domaine imaginaire. Quelque chose dans l'image de l'autre est choisi pour porter le marque d'un manque, qui est ce manque même par où le vivant, parce qu'il est humain, c'est-à-dire en rapport avec le langage, s'aperçoit comme exclu de l'omnitude des désirs...* (Lacan, V, 464).

In *The Navigator of New York*, Johnston challenges paternal authority on two levels: Devlin's father is not his father, and the paternalistic claims of both Dr. Cook and Lieutenant Peary to have reached the Pole are a hoax. The appearance of power produced by paternity underlies the novel. The complete naïveté Devlin projects finds its explanation in the opportunity Cook provides for him. The explorer offers his young apprentice the appearance of legitimation by telling him he is his father (even if he asks him to keep that a secret). Cook also provides Devlin with an alluring love story, of which he is the product, and therefore a coherent account of his origins. By taking Devlin along his expeditions and employing him as his apprentice, Cook, Devlin's pathetic father, the great explorer, and discoverer of the North Pole, helps the young man construct a sound self and grow up to write the perfect *Bildungsroman*. Lacan links subject formation with the acquisition of language. In Devlin's case, it is accomplished through narratives in the form of letters sent to him by Cook, an intriguing father figure. For, as Derrida would put it in *Monolingualism of the Other*, the return to one's self is always constructed through an imagined narrative:

Whatever the story of a return to oneself or to one's home [chez-soi], into the "hut" ["case"] of one's home (chez is the casa), no matter what an odyssey or bildungsroman it might be, in whatever manner one invents the story of a construction of the self, the autos, or the ipse, it is always imagined that the one who writes should know how to say I (Derrida 28).

Moreover, Derrida notes that "autobiographical anamnesis presupposes identification. And precisely not identity" (Derrida 28). Identity is indeed another one of those false questions in Johnston's novel, proving Derrida's assertion that "an identity is never given, received, or attained; only the interminable and indefinitely fantasmatic process of identification endures" (Derrida 28). In fashioning Devlin's character, Johnston provides his readers with the dramatization of the process of identification at work in the construction of identity.

In the end, Cook, who abandoned Devlin's mother, killed his step father, and put Devlin's life in danger by dragging him to the Arctic Circle, turns out to be a good father in Lacanian terms. By assuming his symbolic role and the Name-of-the-Father (Lacan, V, 180) and by not completely interdicting the mother (Lacan, V, 173, 187) Cook left enough space for his son to construct a non-psychotic self.



Following Freud, Lacan explains the child's frustration as a result of the role of the father to hinder the access to the mother's affection:

*D'autre part, qu'est-ce qu'il interdit, le père ? C'est le point d'où nous sommes partis — il interdit la mère. Comme objet, elle est à lui, elle n'est pas à l'enfant. C'est sur ce plan que s'établit, au moins à une étape, chez le garçon comme chez la fille, cette rivalité avec le père qui à elle seule engendre une agression. Le père frustre bel et bien l'enfant de la mère (Lacan, V, 173).*

Again, Lacan defines the symbolic role of the father as an imaginary barrier to the child's needs and desires:

Voilà un autre étage, celui de la frustration. Ici, le père intervient comme ayant-droit et non pas comme personnage réel. Même s'il n'est pas là, même s'il appelle la mère au téléphone, par exemple, le résultat est le même. C'est ici le père en tant que symbolique qui intervient dans une frustration, acte imaginaire concernant un objet bien réel, qui est la mère, en tant que l'enfant en a besoin ... (Lacan, V, 173).

The father, according to Lacan, bans the child's access to the mother. And his symbolic role lies in this scenario of frustration. In Johnston's novel, Devlin has two fathers but they are not similar father figures. If Lacan admits that, symbolically, the father removes the child from the mother whom the child needs, Devlin, in whose life the intervention of the father figure was extreme and abominating, to save himself from the trauma produced by his father's obstructions, constructs for himself a new father figure — one made up of narratives from letters. This new father acts in opposition to Lacan's symbolic father figure. Cook takes the mother back to Devlin in his accounts of his relationship with her. He brings Devlin's mother into the family equation by constantly evoking her (Lacan, V, 191). For Lacan, it is the role of the mother to bring the father in the Oedipal formula but, in Johnston's novel, it is Cook, the father, who plays all the symbolic functions of the family configuration (Lacan, V, 147).

Cook, the great explorer, appears pathetic in Johnston's narrative, for his magnificent adventure in search of the North Pole, which endangered his son, failed. He does not even assume this failure but moans about it and his son consoles him for it:

The number of people by whom we were surrounded — in the train, on that bridge between the two great boroughs of Brooklyn and Manhattan — seemed to be the measure of his loneliness. I felt an urge to link my arm in his and assure him, son to father, that even if he spent the rest of his days leading slaughter charters to the Arctic, everything would somehow be all right (Johnston 368).

Citing Fredric Jameson, Wylie makes the argument that postmodern historical thinking "has become commodified" (254): Contemporary culture is "irredeem-

ably historicist, in the bad sense of an omnipresent and indiscriminate appetite for dead styles and fashions.” Thus, “a certain caricature of historical thinking persists” (Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 286-7, cited by Wyile 254). This observation applies to Johnston’s novel where what could have been depicted as a major historical figure is a mere caricature. Cook looks pathetic in many ways; he lies about the discovery of the North Pole and makes up a marketable story about it.

In the space left open by the fictitious character of the relationship between father and son Devlin finds the liberty to construct a coherent satisfying story of origins for himself and to grow into an accomplished man. Devlin submits completely to the authority of his “father,” the perfectly naïve Dr. Cook, since this authority, constructed on the basis of a suspicious solidarity of secret agreements, is in no way threatening. Moreover, Devlin possesses the most important secret of all, a demystified truth — the hoax of the discovery of the North Pole.

*Appearance* is an important concept for our reading, since the novel is an account of questionable events. It appears that Cook and his son reached the North Pole and that Cook is Devlin’s father. Apart from Cook’s account in letters he writes to his “son,” which he asks Devlin to destroy after having read them, we have no material proof of that claim. Johnston puts these symbolic appearances in the context of the expeditions to the Arctic Circle, where the mirage of the cold transforms everything, makes one feverish and prone to imagination. The historic events could therefore have been metamorphosed by the power of the cold in the Arctic zone. Devlin in his total “credulity toward metanarratives” is no Hamlet — no justice figure; he takes for granted Cook’s story and he is the “living proof” that Cook has reached the North Pole. Furthermore, he was not angry at Cook for putting his life in danger by dragging him through such a deceitful adventure but continued to support him in his most miserable moments.

It is in the space left open by the unthreatening secrets with which he is confronted that Devlin can find his coherent story of belonging. That is why the adventure ends happily for him. He married and returned to Newfoundland to visit his dear aunt. Devlin lives with two wonderful secrets: the greatest explorer of his times is his own father, who secretly recognizes his son by inviting him to work for him and live in his mansion; and that the two of them never reached the North Pole. Cook pushes Devlin to walk to what he claims is the North Pole, and announces that Devlin is the one to reach it first, but they know that this is not the case. By parodying what should be a solemn historical moment, Johnston questions the grandiose meaning of the episode — thus demystifying it. On a more intimate level, Cook never reveals the secret that Devlin is his son. Johnston bases history on belief; the absence of documents or evidence is the sleight of hand that makes his historical novel so intriguing. His readers of history are free to believe the accounts or not, with no authoritative constraints. His is a different kind of rhetoric: the enticement of a thrilling action story, in which the first white male to have reached the North Pole is a Newfoundlander.

While for Lacan paternity functions by maintaining the appearance of power, in the case of Devlin and his father, the power is never exercised in an overwhelming manner since the paternity remains a secret shared only by the two actors concerned. Discussing the paternal metaphor in Seminar V, Lacan recapitulates that the importance of the father does not reside in his biological function, but in his symbolic role:

*Le père, pour nous, il est, il est réel. Mais n'oublions pas qu'il n'est réel pour nous qu'en tant que les intentions lui confèrent, je ne dirai même pas son rôle et sa fonction du père — c'est n'est pas une question sociologique —, mais son nom du père. Que le père, par exemple, soit le véritable agent de la procréation, n'est en aucun cas une vérité d'expérience. Au temps où les analystes discutaient encore de choses sérieuses, il est arrivé que l'on fasse remarquer que, dans telle tribu primitive, la procréation était attribuée à je ne sais quoi, une fontaine, une pierre, ou la rencontre d'un esprit dans des lieux écartés (Lacan, V, 180).*

Lacan cites ancient sources to attribute procreation to “a fountain, a stone or the encounter of a ghost in far away places,” implying that it does not matter whether Cook is the biological father or not. Cook provides fantasies that underline the construction of Devlin’s self. Therefore, Cook, the father figure, is no barrier for Devlin, who experiences no *Angst* in the relationship with his real but almost fictional father, since this fatherhood is constructed secretly, textually, through the letters which Devlin has to hand copy and then destroy. There is no trace to prove the claim that Cook is Devlin’s father and it is exactly this freedom in the construction of the paternal authority that allows Devlin to grow into a psychologically sane adult. Learning about the fraud that was his most exciting and most enduring expedition to the North Pole, Devlin does not develop a neurotic behavior but goes on with his “normal” psychological development he fashions in the interstices between the well kept secrets of the relationship with his “real” fictional father who generously lets him be the first to step on the North Pole (knowing well it is not the Pole). The discovery of the hoax of their historical adventure has no repercussions for Devlin’s psyche because the entire story that legitimated the relationship with Cook appears to be fictional. Devlin is the gullible narrator and it is his capacity for this constant suspension of disbelief that helps him come out a winner, on the personal level, from his arctic experience. In *The Navigator of New York*, Johnston sets up the literal meaning of Lacan’s pun between “*les non dupes errants*” and “*les noms du père*,” to signal that there is no escape from the tyranny of authority and those who fight to get away only manage to become psychotic (see Lacan, *Le Séminaire, Livre XXI: Les nondupes errent*, 1973-1974). The sane subject, our perfectly duped narrator, accepts without questioning the authority of his symbolic father figure.

Since Devlin is completely subordinated to his new father figure, he does not appear oppressed. Cook offers him an idealized account of the history of his imagi-

nary family and a coherent narrative of his identity becoming his symbolic father, but not in Lacan's terms, since this new father figure does not establish or enforce the constraints of the symbolic Law (we have seen that this role was played by Stead who completed the suppression of the mother before the arrival of Cook on the scene):

*à l'intérieur du système signifiant, le Nom-du-Père a la fonction de signifier l'ensemble du système signifiant, de l'autoriser à exister, d'en faire la loi ... (Lacan, V, 240).*

Cook allows Devlin space outside the dogmatic law of the symbolic role of the father in Lacan's psychoanalysis. This is how I understand Johnston's departure from Lacan's account of the role of paternal authority. The novel seems to go against the Freudian and Lacanian ideas of the formation of the self by maternal repression, since the figure of the mother represents the generator of the novel. The mother's sacrifice to save her son is at the core of the novel and her *hybris* (resulting from the affair with Cook) triggers her tragic destiny. At the same time, it provides her son the unique historic opportunity to join the polar expedition. Freud might have been right to say that the positive development of the self depends on the successful maternal repression (see his discussion of the Oedipal complex) in that, in Johnston's novel, Devlin's mother dies when he is a child. But Johnston challenges this view of the maternal figure, who is present throughout the novel. Devlin's New York lives off this presence and the love story between Devlin's mother and Cook. It is no surprise that Devlin, who is under the spell of Cook's account of his love for his mother, consummated in New York, falls in love with the daughter of his mother's friend/cousin in the same city. In Devlin's case, it is not the separation from his mother, but her rediscovery, in a romantic fiction provided by his newly discovered father, that completes his entry into adult life. Cook, pathetic on all fronts, is, in the final analysis, a good father. Johnston's historical revision gives us an entertaining rewriting of a famous arctic story whereby Cook fails as an explorer but succeeds, against all odds, as a father by allowing Devlin to achieve autonomy.

For Lacan, the mother's role is to preserve the illusion of paternal authority as symbolic source of law and of signification:

*Ce qui est essentiel, c'est que la mère fonde le père comme médiateur de ce qui est au-delà de sa loi à elle et de son caprice, à savoir, purement et simplement, la loi comme telle. Il s'agit donc du père en tant que Nom-du-Père, étroitement lié à l'énonciation de la loi, comme tout le développement de la doctrine freudienne nous l'annonce et le promet. Et c'est en cela qu'il est accepté ou qu'il n'est pas accepté par l'enfant comme celui qui prive ou ne prive pas la mère de l'objet de son désir (Lacan, V, 191).*

To compensate for paternal absence, Cook takes on all the necessary roles in the Oedipal equation, including the role Lacan assigns to the mother. Lacan explains the source of psychosis in the inability of the father to assume his symbolic role:

*C'est cela, le Nom-du-Père, et comme vous le voyez, c'est, à l'intérieur de l'Autre, un signifiant essentiel, autour de quoi j'ai essayé de vous centrer ce qui se passe dans la psychose. À savoir que le sujet doit suppléer au manque de ce signifiant qu'est le Nom-du-Père. Tout ce que j'ai appelé la réaction en chaîne, ou la débandade, qui se produit dans la psychose, s'ordonne là autour (Lacan, V, 147).*

Cook has an authority he does not need to prove. It comes from his position of an explorer and his relationship to Devlin is that of explorer and apprentice. Since Cook succeeds in assuming the Name-of-the-Father through the stories he narrates in his secret letters, his son Devlin matures into a psychologically sane adult. In Johnston's novel, Cook assumes his paternal role despite many problematic aspects of his persona. Devlin therefore is well taken care of from a psychological point of view and cannot become psychotic since he does not miss a father figure. He is confronted with a surplus of authority figures, three people play the role of the father in his life, one more symbolic than the others, and therefore is not overwhelmingly oppressed (see the discussion of the lack of paternal authority in "*La forclusion du père*," Lacan, V, 143-160).

Devlin's road to his father is not a straight line (see Lacan's discussion of the father's role as a category of the Signifier), but a convoluted adventure.<sup>2</sup> Just as the discovery of the North Pole, Devlin's encounter with his father constitutes an elaborate exploration at the end of which the reader, who witnessed it, still grapples with this hidden, elusive, and non satisfactory paternity. But Devlin appears happily to accept Cook's authority and quickly to adopt him as a father for the fascinating opportunity this presents, but there is no calculation in Devlin's enterprise. His journey is one of coming to grips with the loss of his parents, and he welcomes Cook, his fictitious and at the same time real father. His voyage to New York and then to the Arctic is also one of mourning his mother, at the end of which he understands that she did not leave him by committing suicide. If the novel is a race for the North Pole as well as for paternity, whereby three father figures contend for authority over Devlin, the mother/mothers play the most important role(s). Devlin's mother dies to defend her son, and his aunt replaces her as caregiver and confidant. The cousin Devlin's mother has in New York appears momentarily in the young man's life and her daughter becomes his loving wife. Each of these mother figures surround Devlin with warm hearts and without jealousy of one another. If men are ready to commit murder to take one another's place, there is no competition among the women in his life.

It is uncommon to meet women in exploration literature, but Johnston makes room for them, both in the fictitious tissue of his novel and in the historical intertext. A photograph of Josephine Peary inspired the author to place it in the narrative as the icon of “a guest of the Greenland expedition” (38). Here is the surrealistic paragraph describing her appearance:

There was a photograph of Jo Peary by which I was especially transfixed: Jo standing on the barren rocks of Greenland, dressed as though for a Sunday walk in a belted silk dress and matching waistcoat, and shielding herself from the sun with a large parasol. Her glance was downcast on an Eskimo family, over all of whom, even the parents, she towered like an adult over children. The Eskimos in their furs and skins, and Jo Peary wearing what might have been one of my mother’s dresses, so incongruous she might not really have been in the photograph but merely standing in front of one so large that all signs of civilization lay outside the frame (38).

Here Jo Peary emerges as an empowered woman, nostalgic silhouette who reminds the narrator of his mother. Johnston’s is therefore an unusual exploration novel peopled by significant women whose roles leave a trace in the narrative. There is also another level, extradiegetic, where women play an important role. Johnston acknowledges women (and quite a few) who had a significant role in the production of his book. Like the postcolonial narrative hinted at in the exploration story, the women’s chronicle is yet to be told.

Although physically absent from his life, Devlin’s mother remains the central figure of his coming to age. Cook’s letters become the unfolding process of this precious clarification. The figure of the mother was present at every step of Devlin’s adventure. Derrida defined maternity as watchful, always awake: “*elle veille, la Veilleuse — increvable.*”<sup>3</sup> He also wondered whether “writing without matricide was still possible.” Hardly, for Johnston in any case.

## References:

- Johnston, Wayne. *The Navigator of New York*. Doubleday, 2002.  
———. *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams*. Knopf Canada, 1998.  
———. *The Divine Ryans*. Toronto: McClelland, 1990.  
Derrida, Jacques. *Monolingualism of the Other or The Prosthesis of Origin*. Translated by Patrick Mensah. Stanford University Press, 1998.  
———. “La Veilleuse,” Belfort 2001, éditions Circé, pp. 30; Jacques Trilling, James Joyce ou l’écriture matricide. Précédé de Jacques Derrida, “La Veilleuse,” Belfort : Éditions Circé, 2001.  
Lacan, Jacques. *Le Séminaire, Livre IV: La relation d’objet et les structures Freudiennes*. Paris: Seuil, 1994.  
———. *Le Séminaire, Livre V: Les formations de l’inconscient*. Paris; Seuil, 1998.

———. *Le Séminaire, Livre XXI : Les non-dupes errent, 1973-1974*.

———. Séminaire oral du 14 Mai 1974, unpublished; <http://perso.wanadoo.fr/espace.freud/topos/psych/psysem/nondup/nondup13.htm>

Sugars, Cynthia. "Notes on a Mystic Hockey Puck: Death, Paternity, and National Identity in Wayne Johnston's *The Divine Ryans*." *Essays on Canadian Writing*, 82 (Spring 2004); 151 (22).

Willmott, Glenn. *Unreal Country. Modernity in the Canadian Novel in English*. McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002.

Wyile, Herb. *Speculative Fictions. Contemporary Canadian Novelists and the Writing of History*. McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>See his previous novel about Joseph Smallwood, *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams*.

<sup>2</sup>Lacan states, in *Seminar III*, that the role of the father is unthinkable without the category of the signifier. (*Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan. Lacan. Livre III, Les Psychoses, 1955-1956*. Texte établi par Jacques-Alain Miller. Éditions du Seuil, 1981, 329). To render his statement more graphical, Lacan makes a comparison with material signs of a map or of a road:

*Prenez une carte des grandes voies de communication, et voyez comment c'est tracée du sud au nord la route qui traverse le pays pour lier un bassin à l'autre, une plaine à une autre plaine, franchir une chaîne, passer sur des ponts, s'organiser. Vous vous apercevez que ce cette carte exprime le mieux, dans le rapport de l'homme à la terre, le rôle du signifiant (328).*

All physical deviation is explained, for Lacan, by a sign of some sort:

*Pour pousser un petit peu plus loin ma métaphore, je vous dirai — comment font-ils, ceux qu'on appelle les usagers de la route, quand il n'y a pas la grand-route, et qu'il s'agit de passer par de petites routes pour aller d'un point à un autre? Ils suivent les écriteaux mis au bord de la route. C'est-à-dire que, là où le signifiant ne fonctionne pas, ça se met à parler tout seul au bord de la grande route. Là où il n'y a pas la route, des mots écrits apparaissent sur des écriteaux. C'est peut-être cela, la fonction des hallucinations auditives verbales de nos hallucinations — ce sont les écriteaux au bord de leur petit chemin (330).*

<sup>3</sup>Jacques Derrida, "La Veilleuse," Belfort 2001, éditions Circé, 30; Jacques Trilling, James Joyce ou l'écriture matricide. Précédé de Jacques Derrida, "La Veilleuse," Belfort: Éditions Circé, 2001.