

## From Manna to Money: The Narrative Structure of Yves Thériault's *Aaron*

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### Article abstract

Yves Thériault was a popular and prolific writer not known for his literary craftsmanship, yet his novel *Aaron* is a structural masterpiece. A close reading of the novel reveals how the structuring device of perfect symmetry identified by Renald Berube serves to illuminate its central themes: the confrontation between tradition and change in the modern world and the absence of a mediating force.

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# From Manna to Money: The Narrative Structure of Yves Thériault's *Aaron*

PAUL SOCKEN

**Y**VES THÉRIAULT (1915-1983) was a very popular and highly prolific writer not known for his literary craftsmanship. It would come as a surprise to some, therefore, that his novel, *Aaron* is a structural masterpiece. It is Renald Bérubé who points out the perfect symmetry of the novel in a single weighty sentence:

Si le dernier chapitre d'*Aaron*, roman admirablement structuré, organisé, écrit, répond bien au premier, il en va de même des autres, le vingtième où Moishe chasse Aaron de la Maison répondant au deuxième qui relate et résume les pérégrinations et les errances de la famille de Moishe depuis la Russie jusqu'à Montréal, le dix-neuvième où Moishe se décrit comme la mère, le père, le grand-père, le conseiller, le rabbin et le professeur d'Aaron faisant écho au troisième alors que nous assistons aux débuts de la vie familiale du grand-père et de son petit-fils; avec, au coeur de l'oeuvre, les chapitres dix, onze et douze, chapitres des discussions Aaron-Viedna surtout, qui font basculer la trajectoire d'Aaron et donnent au roman la direction qui est sienne. (*Dictionnaire* 1-2)

Bérubé's comment appears in a very brief overview of the writer for a dictionary entry and he does not explore the structure in any depth. Other critics have not addressed this issue. I would like to contribute to the discussion on Thériault through a detailed analysis of the narrative structure. In fact, a close reading of the novel will reveal how the structuring device identified by Bérubé serves to illuminate its central themes: the confrontation between tradition and change in the modern world and the absence of a mediating force.

The novel, first published in 1954, pits a grandfather, who insists on maintaining and transmitting an ancient religion unchanged, against his

grandson, Aaron, who is seduced by modern culture in the form of a young woman, Viedna.<sup>1</sup> Aaron eventually rejects the ways of his grandfather, Moishe.<sup>2</sup> The novel exposes inflexibility and lack of communication as the major sources of pain and tragedy between the protagonists.

In the Hebrew Bible, known also as the Old Testament and the Five Books of Moses, Moses is the Hebrew infant raised in Pharaoh's household in Egypt. As an adult, accompanied by his brother, Aaron, he becomes God's spokesman and, after the ten plagues, leads the Hebrew nation to freedom. Moses leads them to Mount Sinai, where he receives the law, the Ten Commandments from G-d, and then finally leads his people to Canaan, the Promised Land. He works in tandem with his beloved brother whose children become the High Priests of Israel. It is against the background of this paradigm that the novel is set. The break between Moishe and Aaron in the novel has profound resonances because of the historic and mythic overtones.

The first and last chapters of the novel embody two conflicting voices. In chapter one, the competing voices of the city outside the apartment and the grandfather's voice inside are juxtaposed in Aaron's mind. Outside, "la cohue des véhicules" is heard and "les trottoirs se mettaient à grouiller": "un son nouveau, masse tonitruante, hurlante: sorte de symphonie hystérique de rire gras, de cris d'enfants, de klaxons, de moteurs, de sirènes d'ambulances" (7). This detailed description of sounds invading the apartment presages the conclusion of the novel. The paradox of a "symphonie hystérique" shows both the appeal and the danger of this overwhelming force of modernity. Aaron listens to the sounds of the street and "le vieux qui psalmodiait doucement, demeuré malgré le siècle la voix impotente qui implorait Adoshem<sup>3</sup> dans le désert" (7). The narrator characterizes the grandfather's voice as "impotente" and for Moishe it is the strangeness of the outside world that is striking: "Par la fenêtre, les sons du cul-de-sac montaient, terrifiants pour Moishe, sauvages, déments ... cette nouvelle langue sonore du siècle" (8). Aaron is at the window, a spectator on this jungle-like scene. He is not completely integrated into his grandfather's alternative world either as he weighs the two: "Une plainte, songeait l'enfant sur le lit, semblable à la plainte de Moishe" (8). From the very beginning of the novel, the young Aaron is portrayed as caught between two conflicting realities, one very much the voice of this century ("cette nouvelle langue sonore du siècle") and one that attempts to transcend it and struggle against it ("malgré le siècle").

Very large tracts of this first chapter are given over to text of the Hebrew Bible quoted verbatim and at length, "les grandes vérités trans-

mises de génération en génération” in the words of the narrator (8), who also terms them “les textes admirables” (10). The passages cited deal with sanctifying the sabbath and laws of ethics and morality, a counterpoint to the world that will later attract Aaron. This Biblical voice, embodied in the grandfather, holds sway temporarily: “Cependant que par-dessus la voix de la ville, bourdonnement continu, dominait la voix de Moishe, sortie de l’ombre, sans appartenance, éternelle et immuable, l’aieul transmettant à l’enfant la science essentielle” (11). However, by the last chapter, chapter twenty-one, Aaron has left and Moishe calls out for him “d’une petite voix rauque, usée, une voix méconnaissable” (155). Aaron has left his place of employment and changed his name; the novel ends with the “rôle de la mort au fond de la gorge” (158) of Moishe. Aaron, transformed in name and assimilated in culture, has embraced the modern world while Moishe’s voice has been extinguished almost completely. In the words of Renald Bérubé, “des deux voix également en-vahissantes mais opposées du premier chapitre ‘la nouvelle langue sonore du siècle’ semble bien sortir victorieuse” (1). The juxtaposition of the first and the last chapters serves to dramatize the victory of the one voice over the other and to confirm the direction of the entire novel. An examination of the novel through this unusual pairing of chapters will point out supporting elements in the construction of the novelist’s vision.

In every one of the pair of chapters there are echoes of the other, which form a recognizable link. In the second and second-last chapters, two and twenty, it is the word “exodus” and the evocation of exile and wandering in both. The second chapter chronicles Moishe’s wanderings from one Russian city of oppression to another, then to San Francisco and finally to Montreal. Each of these places ends up signalling instability and disintegration and foreshadows the revolt that will destabilize Moishe’s world. Everywhere Moishe meets with discrimination (the landlords in San Francisco don’t like old-world Jews). His son, David, abandons certain traditions and eventually all other members of the family die, leaving only Moishe and Aaron, alone, isolated and vulnerable. The journey to this “Promised Land” is fraught with uncertainty and foreboding. In the twentieth chapter, Moishe is angered by Aaron’s frequenting the liberal synagogue and pursuing a career of which he does not approve. He banishes Aaron from his home. In a highly symbolic gesture, Moishe hands Aaron “les vieux sacs de faux cuir qui avaient autrefois servi à leurs exodes” (154). Now, it is Aaron’s turn to become the exile and the wanderer searching for his own “Promised Land.” It is an exquisitely painful irony that conveys the tragedy of the novel: the exodus embodied in Moishe for

a new home and a new beginning for the ancient faith is transmitted to Aaron, who will abandon the tradition to integrate fully into the new world. The juxtaposition of these chapters underlines the disintegration of the communal, ancient world of tradition and shared belief and values. The end is ironic, and perhaps even parodic, as Aaron is cast out as the wandering Jew and the idea of lost collective identity is reinforced.

It is the powerful image of Moishe's hand that links the third and third-last chapters. In the former, Aaron's rudeness to Moishe results in Moishe striking Aaron (*"sa longue main osseuse empoigna Aaron"* 28) and Aaron learns to fear his grandfather's anger. Physical power takes the form later in the chapter of anti-semitic threats and taunts by Aaron's schoolmates, and Aaron is described as having *"franchi une étape"* (33) as he discovers fear and his own marginal status. In both cases, he is alienated and powerless. In the nineteenth chapter, the powerful hand that struck Aaron is now feeble as Moishe clutches his cane *"surtout lorsqu'il devait escalader les trottoirs ou grimper les escaliers de son taudis"* (145). Times have changed, and the chain of events that link people cannot be taken for granted (*"rien ne ressemble à rien"* (146) says Malak the butcher). The family Aaron and Moishe once constituted has been sundered irrevocably.

The contrast in the choices open to Aaron is strikingly presented as the old and the new Law of the Father in chapters four and eighteen. The Old Law of the Father (*la Loi du Père*) is one of the faith and ritual of Moishe and, ultimately, symbolic of God and the original Moses who received the Law. Chapter four takes place during the holiday of Shavuot, the commemoration of the giving (and acceptance) of the Law on Mount Sinai, and describes Aaron's bar mitzvah day. On this day of transition from Aaron's boyhood to manhood, Moishe declares to Aaron: *"Sache que je ne te lègue pas une richesse mais un fardeau"* (43). All Aaron can feel is *"les atavismes honteux de fuite et de dissimulation"* and all he can hear is *"l'écho lointain d'ancêtres torturés, pourchassés, opprimés"* (41). This chapter demonstrates (on Shavuot and on his bar mitzvah, when he personally is to assume the tradition and commit himself to it) that the Law of the Father, in the form of his joyless and uncompromising grandfather, is a painful and unbearable legacy for Aaron. The mirror-image of this chapter is the eighteenth, in which Aaron enters the wholly opposing world of Viedna's home:

"Mais jamais il n'aurait cru un tel contraste possible et, dès son entrée, toute l'image du passé, celle de Moishe l'homme, de Moishe le porteur des mystiques, lui devint une sorte de souvenir nébuleux, une

seconde existence sans réalités et sans vie, un mauvais rêve qu'il aurait vécu mais duquel il s'éveillait pour se retrouver ici, enfin dans son élément" (139).

In a parody of the Bible, in which dreams are conveyers of divine truth, Aaron awakens from the bad dream of his former religious life to the new reality of material opulence ("Rien n'avait été la vie, auparavant" 140). The new way of life is explicitly opposed to the old religious order: "Y avait-il *une loi du Père* qui fût en termes égaux avec ces lois de confort, de beauté, de progrès?" (40, emphasis added). The exchange of one set of Laws for the other is complete and confirmed. The fourth and fourth-last chapters boldly present this unequivocal change. The eighteenth chapter outlines the condition, and the cost, of the new Law, from the divine law of Moishe/Moses to the secular law of Viedna's father<sup>4</sup>: "La seule condition de survie: n'être plus Juif" (143) declares Viedna. Compromise and accommodation are possibilities never offered Aaron. Moishe and Viedna represent polar opposites of rigidity and rejection, and Aaron is the victim of their extremism. This theme is not stated explicitly, but the positioning of the two chapters vividly portrays the extremes and the cruel choice to which Aaron is subjected. Aaron is portrayed as forced to choose between painful identity and unconditional assimilation.

Chapters five and seventeen deepen the theme of alienation and integration. In the fifth chapter, words such as "crainte," "malédiction," and "punition" (49) attach themselves to Aaron in his perception of his Jewish heritage whereas, in chapter seventeen, Aaron closely identifies himself with the environment that he associates with Viedna: "mon soleil... mon eau... mon nuage... Bonjour la montagne, ma soeur la montagne..." (134). In addition, Moishe's self-doubt in chapter five ("Où finirons-nous" 46) is overtaken by Aaron's self-confidence in chapter seventeen ("Aaron s'amusait, laissait courir son imagination" 134). In the fifth chapter, Moishe refers to Aaron as the "lingot formé au creuset patient" (50) but, in the seventeenth, that "lingot" has been transformed into the currency of the modern financial world, imitating those whom he met each day: "courtiers, spéculateurs en affaires de bourse, placiers en valeurs" (136). Everything about his affiliation with Judaism is foreboding and alienating in chapter five, and everything about commercial Montreal and his new life seems welcoming and harmonious.<sup>5</sup> This set of chapters, like the others, demonstrates the striking contrasts but also brings into focus the cost of Aaron's transformation: he, who had been the precious substance linking the past to the present, has become an imitation of those seeking their fortune beyond themselves.

In the highly polarized world of this novel, the sixth and the sixth-last chapters hold out momentarily the hope for some kind of synthesis. The sixth chapter captures the grandfather's questioning of himself and wondering whether he had ever really tried to communicate with his grandson: "Mais plus encore, lui, l'aieul, avait-il vraiment convaincu l'enfant des grandes joies du rite? Ne restait-il pas encore des heures de discussion à vivre entre les deux?" (53). That this understanding and insight are never developed or explored is one of the mysteries of the novel. The brief moments of openness, communication, and sensitivity quickly harden into rigidity and inflexibility without explanation. It may well be that Thériault's "univers romanesque" does not include accommodation because it is all too rare. Its absence, however, is almost palpably felt and constitutes an important theme. The need for accommodation becomes apparent when one examines the novel's organizing principle of oppositions. Chapter sixteen portrays Aaron as the one open to the possibility of accommodation. In a fit of revolt against his grandfather's values, he spends the night with a prostitute and feels "souillé" (128). He approaches Moishe "comme s'il eût cherché un terrain d'entente" (129) and offers to pay for a new modern suit for him. Moishe rejects the offer: "L'abîme se creusait toujours entre eux, s'élargissant constamment devenant un néant à jamais insondable" (131). That neither case of hope for compromise and synthesis is realized only points all the more to the lost opportunities and alienation. It is at this point that the narrator characterizes Aaron's gesture: "La tentative d'Aaron, faite sans art, sans tact, ne devait plus se répéter" (131). The unstated suggestion seems to be that a more sensitively phrased offer and a more receptive listener might have had a different outcome.

The link between chapters seven and fifteen is the mountain. In the seventh chapter, the grandeur of Mount Royal is described ("Symbole de la sauvage grandeur du Canada" 62) and the mountain appears as a mediating force between the city and nature. Moishe sends him to the mountain saying, ironically, that he will find peace there (63). By chapter fifteen, it is clear that the force of the mountain as Moishe had intended it has lost its hold on Aaron: "Dans la maison, rien ne ressemblait plus au passé tout imprégné de la Parole et des Actes des Anciens" as "les lois reçues sur la Montagne" (119) do not mean the same to Aaron as they do to Moishe. One, Mount Sinai, where the Law was given, is a mythical (even if real) religious and spiritual place; the other, Mount Royal, is associated with secular values (amusement, skiing) and, in the Quebec imagination, with worldly ambition (cf. *Bonheur d'occasion*). Both chap-

ters represent forms of initiation, chapter seven as the bar mitzvah ritual and chapter fifteen as Aaron storms out the door and ends up in the embrace of a prostitute. An examination of these two chapters also reveals more of the nature of the irresistible force meeting the immovable object: Aaron's dawning realization that Orthodoxy "niait l'individualité et les ambitions personnelles" (59, ch 7) as opposed to Moishe's firm belief in "l'immutabilité des préceptes" (121, ch 15). As positions become entrenched, the stage is set for an inevitable breakdown of relations.

Aaron's and Moishe's world views are dramatically contrasted in chapters eight and fourteen. In chapter eight, it is summer and Aaron's sense of empowerment dominates the chapter. Words such as "imagination" and "rêves" abound (65). Turning only fifteen years old, Aaron declares: "Je suis un conquérant" (66). Whereas his grandfather speaks of peace, Aaron sees in the newspapers only mention of war and suffering and Aaron claims he has a better understanding of the world (70). Aaron's attitude is characterized by the narrator twice as a "révolte" (71). Although there are moments of profound self-doubt for Aaron, including the chilling "Je ne veux pas commencer à vivre" (72) at the end of the chapter, they only serve to emphasize the depth of the revolt and the magnitude of the change he is undergoing. He is clearly on his way to fulfilling his ambitions. In chapter fourteen, it is winter and Viedna has bitterly disappointed Aaron by agreeing to see him and not appearing. However, the focus is on Moishe and his sense of crushing defeat. He interprets Aaron's seduction by Viedna and her materialistic world in the same category as the Hebrews' worshipping the pagan god Baal in biblical times (109). Memories of himself at age sixteen rise to the surface (112), and the contrast between that world and the new makes him feel "impuissant" and speechless ("il ne savait plus quels mots choisir" 113). It is at this point that Moishe realizes that it is not simply a battle between himself and his grandson but a war between two ways of life, a conflict that transcends them: "Car voici un pays — une Amérique de chrome et d'aluminium — voici un pays courant vers ses destinées, insouciant des rites, des religions, des croyances" (116). It is before this overwhelming reality that Moishe "sentit que la partie était irrémédiablement perdue" (118). The opposing chapters, then, contrast the summer of Aaron's empowerment and the winter of Moishe's defeat, the ascendancy of the young Aaron and the decline of the broken Moishe.

Two very short chapters put a fine point on the conflicting visions. Chapter nine takes place on a September afternoon that seems like June, but the changing leaves presage what is coming: "Et ces deux feuilles



démentaient juin et auguraient de l'automne proche qui chasserait de la ville toute la douceur" (73). To emphasize the fact that appearance must inevitably give way to reality, the narrator uses a strikingly symbolic image: "Puis ce serait, à plein ciel, la manne blanche de la neige que la fumée viendrait ensuite salir" (73). The snow as heavenly manna, the divine gift of sustenance to mankind, sullied by the city, is a powerful image of corrupted dreams and possibilities and a break with the link to the transcendent. This same theme is emphasized as chapter thirteen is filled with quotations from the Hebrew Bible and mention of Jewish holidays and rituals. All of this, in the form of Moishe's reminiscences, comes to an abrupt end as Moishe asks Aaron "Sommes-nous sur la terre pour jouir, pour y faire ce qui nous plaît?" (101) and then "A qui appartiens-tu?" (102). At first, Aaron has no response ("Aaron restait immobile, les yeux fixés ailleurs, ne cherchant pas à répondre" 102), but the chapter ends with Aaron's ominous declaration: "Je serai riche" (103). The inexorable movement of the novel from transcendence to self-gratification, from manna to money, is here confirmed yet again.

Chapters ten and twelve, the final set to be examined, contrast memory as punishment and memory as treasure. In chapter ten, Aaron and Viedna meet daily on the mountain, ironically for them "une oasis dans le Negev" (79), where Viedna reveals that she and her father plan to erase their past. For them, their Judaism represents an unbearable burden associated only with suffering, and their intention is to change their names, assume new identities, and pursue their plans for wealth and power (80). Aaron, on the other hand, is still tied to tradition and his "remembrance ancestrale" is a sign of the "transmissions judaïques, d'un âge à l'autre, survie malgré le siècle des traditions du Peuple Elu" (82). Aaron yearns for some form of blending of the two worlds as the sound of Viedna's voice affords him the illusion that the past and the present can cohabit the same space, "pour que périsse le temps, s'effacent les siècles et que renaisse le passé" (83). The illusion cannot be sustained as, in chapter twelve, Viedna insists categorically that "La punition de l'homme c'est de posséder le souvenir" (95). Aaron's protestations ("La foi, la tradition" 97) fall on deaf ears and are ultimately unconvincing even to himself: "Mais la voix d'Aaron était faible. Il ne savait plus résister" (97). In a symbolic act of reflecting Aaron's capitulation, "la montagne semblait dans un abîme noir et le ciel semblait s'éloigner" (96). The treasure that was memory will be abandoned by Viedna and, at the end of the novel, by Aaron as well. There is no mistaking the fact that the narrator sees this process as involving a loss as well as a gain.

Chapter eleven stands at the centre of the novel both structurally and thematically. It is the only time in the novel when the two protagonists truly talk to each other and communicate their intentions. The chapter is pivotal as it sums up the differences, crystallizes them, and prepares the way for Aaron's revolt. Each wants to reach out to the other: "L'un comme l'autre eût voulu trouver des mots, expliquer; démolir cette muraille de silence qui s'était érigée entre eux" (89). When Aaron does break the silence to say that he wants to work, Moishe reveals to Aaron that he expects him to work alongside him: "C'était la première fois que le vieillard exprimait aussi précisément ses projets pour l'avenir d'Aaron" (91). The words Moishe uses are positive to him as they represent Aaron as a great link in the chain of tradition, but those same words conjure up only enslavement to Aaron: "Tu auras ta voix, tes mots, ta science. Et ça te viendra de moi." They will work together, says Moishe, "Toi et moi et l'ombre de tous les autres" (91). Finally, the two understand each other and this forms the basis for Aaron's rejection as he realizes that he does not want to be in their shadow, that he wants his own voice and his own livelihood. Never is this fundamental and crucial issue a matter of sustained discussion, negotiation, or exploration between the two of them. The problem, then, appears as much one of a lack of real communication and creative imagination as one of rigidity and rebellion.

The organizing principle of the novel, then, serves to set off the novelistic vision of conflicting sets of values and attitudes. The chiasmic structure, whereby later chapters resonate with earlier ones, playing up differences and clashes, is a powerful vehicle for conveying the opposing world-views and the consequences that result from their conflict. Sacrifice and transcendence as opposed to self-indulgence and worldliness are brought to the fore. The contrasts thereby established provide a framework for the choice presented to Aaron between rigidity and rejection, and focus attention on Aaron as the victim of a highly polarized world that excludes accommodation and compromise. When Aaron does finally make his painful choice, this structure emphasizes the ascendancy of his adopted way of life over the enfeeblement of the traditional one he leaves behind. The inevitable result of a world of polarized choices is portrayed as a breakdown of relations between individuals and groups embracing different beliefs. The illusion that the two competing visions can coexist cannot endure as the forces pulling in opposite directions break any attempts at integration. The end of the novel dramatizes the fact that the exodus and wandering of the Jew has taken on a new dimension with profound ramifications in the new age: whereas, in the past, it was an estab-

lished faith seeking a new but uncertain home, the struggle has been transformed into a confused allegiance in a peaceful but alien environment. The new wandering Jew is an isolated individual disconnected from communal life and alienated from collective identity.

The novel underlines the inability of both parties to understand the dynamics of the historical period in which they find themselves, the pressures to which they are subjected, and the price of failure to find a way to integrate the old world and the new. I would argue that the lack of success of both extremes to yield balance and harmony constitutes an implicit plea for concession and reconciliation. The very structure of the novel emphasizes the impossibility of compromise when only polarities exist and makes a middle ground the only space absent and lacking. It is this lack that seems to emerge from the novel as the ultimate tragedy. Aaron's "disappearance" at the end of the novel and Moishe's impending death leave that terrain unexplored and begging for a pioneer able to seek it out.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Viedna is an anagram for Devina, which means "almost divine," but the name also contains all the letters of the word "vaine."

<sup>2</sup> Moishe is the Hebrew word for Moses, the leader of the Hebrews, who, in the Bible, receives the Law from God Himself and transmits it to the nation.

<sup>3</sup> Adoshem is the Hebrew word for God.

<sup>4</sup> It is emphasized repeatedly throughout the text that Viedna has adopted and is repeating her father's words.

<sup>5</sup> As opposed to the first chapter in which the city seemed menacing and overwhelming.

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