
Gerald Vizenor. *Native Provenance: The Betrayal of Cultural Creativity*. University of Nebraska Press, 2019. 199 pp. ISBN: 9781496216717.

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In his 1995 essay "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again," David Foster Wallace notes how his imagination has long been haunted by the scene in *Moby-Dick* "where the cabin boy Pip falls overboard and is driven mad by the empty immensity of what he finds himself floating in" (Wallace 262). Wallace adds that when he teaches another famous story of a shipwreck, Stephen Crane's "The Open Boat," he hopes to evoke in his students what he has "always felt" himself, a "marrow-level dread of the oceanic [, ...] the intuition of the sea as primordial *nada*, bottomless, depths inhabited by cackling tooth-studded things rising toward you at the rate a feather falls" (*ibid*). Curiously, this *nada* is conceived as at once a void or pure absence, and also as potentially populous, full of horrible "things" (*ibid*). Either way, Wallace's fear – often echoed in his representation of terrestrial milieus – is that a nonhuman environment is fundamentally hostile and intractable to sense-making, a perpetual threat to the vulnerable human pipsqueak.

One of the virtues of Gerald Vizenor's *Native Provenance: The Betrayal of Cultural Creativity* (2019) is its compelling reminders of a counter tradition. The collection's dozen essays reaffirm the author's faith in the possibilities of "a spirited and visionary sense of natural motion" (37) that, though often "betrayed" by both wilful and adventitious misconceptions, has always been a crucial element of (though it is certainly not exclusive to) "native creation stories, visionary dream songs, and literature" (37). Making his own assessment of *Moby-Dick* in "Native Transmotion: Totemic Motion and Traces of Survivance,"¹ Vizenor dwells on the novel's evocation of a nonhuman environment that ultimately "provides a sublime transcendence of sorrow, separation, cultural closure, and victimry" (47). By these lights, Melville's white whale swims free of any narrow human-focused allegory, becoming "a spectacular portrayal of literary transmotion, a spirited and mysterious image of natural motion in the ocean, in the book, and in the imagination of the reader" (48). If, for Vizenor, there is a *nada* here in Melville's work, it is affirmative and generative (evoking the word's classical Latin root *nāta*, "born") – a liberating unfixity amidst identities that allows for endless creative flux.² Wallace, I suggest, stands at the rather dismal endpoint of a Euro-American literary tradition that once held a partially kindred sense of natural liberty, but now, for the most part, has lost confidence in the nonhuman environment as a vivifying

tutor. Vizenor's essays point to the dynamic vitality of an alternative sensibility still thriving in contemporary Indigenous art: "Natives are forever in natural motion with ironic creation stories, and the new literary artists are answerable to the traces of transmotion, that mighty cosmototemic curve of the unnamable in cultural survivance stories" (51).

Extending a dialectical consideration of Wallace and Vizenor – who, intriguingly, share dominant thematic interests in the status of irony, the contours of a "decentered" selfhood, and the potential means of personal and collective healing – seems helpful in illuminating what is, at least for this reader, most profound in the latter's work. How these authors imagine the conditions of a therapeutic social order, oriented toward Euro- and Native America respectively, seems particularly revealing. Wallace's representations of Alcoholics Anonymous meetings in *Infinite Jest* (1995), or (more bizarrely) the bureaucracy of the Internal Revenue Service in *The Pale King* (2011), posit such organisations as frail but potentially salvific bulwarks against an all-encompassing void – means of surviving, that is, the *nada* that drove Pip mad. Within such places, an atomic self is largely left on its own to connect with whatever traces of a merely personal divinity it can discover. Vizenor's own fictional works, as well as the essays published in this collection, proffer a divergent vision suggestive of what I call *eunomia* ("good law/pasture"), a blending of the human and natural/divine orders in which the self is understood as capable of communing with a vibrant nexus of interrelated being. In Vizenor's estimation, Melville's Ishmael ultimately reflects a version of such eunomic autonomy, for he is said to have "created a sense of presence and situations of transmotion with tropes, diction, character expressions, irony, and comparative scenes" (51). Such a character can, that is, hear and endorse the divine in the nonhuman world around him – and the relationship is reciprocal. A modern castaway with, as Vizenor notes, "an ironic biblical name" (46), Ishmael is understood to express, in his eunomic sensibility, an unironic faith in that name's literal Hebrew meaning: "God listens."

For Vizenor, positive, liberatory, reciprocal relationships with the natural/divine ought to, and might still, inform and reform political institutions. Hence, in "Survivance and Liberty: Turns and Stays of Native Sovereignty,"³ the new Constitution of the White Earth Nation is conceived as having honored "totemic associations with nature" (33), for the "moral imagination, heartfelt ideas of native liberty, natural motion and change, ethos of governance, and the sentiments of survivance and sovereignty were embraced in [its] egalitarian articles" (35). The expression of such possibilities has, Vizenor emphasizes, often been obscured or "betrayed," but we may find it even in historical documents such as federal treaties, which, under attentive study, reveal an insistent

“native presence, the oral and scriptural stories of transmotion, and traces of inherent native rights, or an ancestral visionary sovereignty” (88). Wallace, like many of his Euro-American contemporaries, positions himself as skeptically treading water above a sunken tradition, alone together with other shipwrecked souls. Vizenor suggests that, no matter its past and ongoing betrayals, a longstanding communal enterprise, binding the human and nonhuman, still floats.

Vision is one of the guiding metaphors in these essays, and Vizenor is, as ever, interested in surveying “natural motion” with a sinuous alternation of retrospection and prospection. The contemporary artists he celebrates are temporally distant but imaginatively proximate heirs to an archaic tradition: “Native and indigenous cosmototemic artists created the first memorable scenes of presence, natural totemic motion, and survivance on the slant of stone and in the great shadows of monumental caves more than thirty thousand years ago on every continent” (43). The betrayal of that legacy includes, for Vizenor, the authors of “commercial literary victimry” (40), as well as theorists such as Michael Dorris, who have “resisted the concept of a singular native literary aesthetics” (126), and David Treuer (Leech Lake Ojibwe), who “rarely observes in his commentaries the marvelous visionary traces of native transmotion and aesthetics” (127). Legitimate engagement with Native provenance and providence, Vizenor affirms, can be found in the eunomic sensibilities of contemporary visual artists, “who have created scenes of transmotion with conceptual contours, temper of colors, and original abstract forms, patterns, and customs” (102), and contemporary Native novelists, who have “created the totem tease and consciousness of animals in dialogue and descriptive narratives and overturned the monotheistic separation of humans and animals” (127). What is always anxiously ironized in Wallace’s thought – a belief in the soundness and ongoing viability of a tradition’s key conceptual legacies – survives, as survivance, in Vizenor’s.

In fact, the vital expression of “natural motion” by Native American authors can, for Vizenor, be traced and honored in a de facto canon. Impishly but no doubt sincerely, he offers the following genealogy which suggests the historical constancy of some of his own central conceptual framings: “Samson Occom, Joseph Brant, William Apess, George Copway, Black Elk, Charles Eastman, Chief Joseph, Sitting Bull, Luther Standing Bear, White Cloud, William Warren, and many other native diplomats, published authors, and restive storiers worried about the course of racial separatism and might have written that it was the cause of native rights, visionary sovereignty, continental liberty, and peace that made them resistance authors” (79-80). All such authorship deploys a form of the purposeful ironic play discoverable in “an

Anishinaabe dream song," offering "a gratifying tease of nature and a creative totemic sense of presence" (38). This irony – again unlike Wallace's, which typically underscores a sense of isolation and is often most dynamic in exploring versions of paralysis – is resolutely communal and productive, suggestive of a vigorous belief in the possibilities of totemic pacts (Algonquian totem: "dwelling together"). Vizenor's cosmopolitan interests, and his eclectic intellectual borrowings from non-Indigenous sources, are sometimes invoked as evidence of his marginal status among Native American authors. As his own oeuvre and self-estimation suggest, however, he models T.S. Eliot's point in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," that significant novelty finally only springs from a faithful engagement with, and transformation of, a living heritage.

University of Toronto

Notes

¹ As Vizenor notes: "[This essay] was expanded from a conference lecture at Kings College, London, in May 2014. An earlier version of the essay, "The Unmissable: Transmotion in Native American Stories and Literature," was published as the inaugural essay in *Transmotion* [...] and included more examples of visionary motion in native literature and in *Moby-Dick* by Herman Melville" (Vizenor 181-82).

² *Nāta* can itself be traced back to the Proto-Indo-European root **gene-* ("give birth, beget"), whose "derivatives [refer] to procreation and familial and tribal groups" ("**gene-*" etymonline.com). One might find here, too, a correspondence with one of those derivatives, Hinduism's *nada*: "Inchoate or elemental sound considered as the source of all sounds and as a source of creation, and thus as present within every created being" (*OED* "nada" n.2).

³ This work "was published as an essay in a shorter version in a special issue of *Revue Française d'Études Américaines*, 'Les nations de l'intérieur: The Nations Within,' Paris, France, 2015" (181).

Works Cited

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