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“Their Head Full of Fragments”: Newfoundland Author Al Pittman’s *West Moon*, Monuments, Fragments, and Ruins

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ABSTRACT: This paper is written in a narrative style to enhance points made about different cultural stories. It compares Newfoundland author Al Pittman’s play, *West Moon*, with ancient monuments in Greece in order to underscore how important it is for different cultures to understand each other’s monuments and ruins. While there are no ancient ruins in Newfoundland comparable to those in Greece, the ruins spoken of in *West Moon* (the mostly deserted traditional outports, or fishing villages) carry an important similarity to ancient Greek monuments. They speak of traditions, a connection between past and present, and cultural ways, and they ultimately make one aware of the importance of a culture. The paper considers how some cultures have oral “ruins” as much as oral continuance, the latter based on the passing down of stories, and how both oral and written monuments are equally important. Inevitably, this paper turns briefly to a consideration of today’s refugee crises and posits that the recognizing of cultural continuance and remnants of monuments (carried with people through memory and narrative) might help break down the hopeless divides between “us” and “them.”

KEY-WORDS: monuments; Newfoundland, Canada; Greece; ancient ruins; contemporary ruins; cultural difference; cultural divisiveness; oral monuments; the Beothuk; refugees

I'm sitting in Rhodes overlooking the Aegean Sea thinking about Newfoundland author Al Pittman's play *West Moon*. When Pittman began writing this play, he would have been looking at the North Atlantic Ocean surrounding Newfoundland, a large island which, together with its mainland counterpart, Labrador, constitutes the easternmost province of Canada. When Pittman wrote the play's final draft, on sabbatical from where he taught in Newfoundland, he would have been only steps away from the Caribbean Sea in Tobago.

The ocean defines *West Moon*, though it is never seen. This play's only setting lies underground, in a cemetery in the community of St. Kevin's, a fictional outpost, or remote fishing village, modelled on many of the outpost communities that were once vibrant and strong in Newfoundland. Yet the ocean is there. It separates the island from the mainland of Canada, and it is the reason why languages, traditions, and cultural ways have been so strongly protected and maintained within the shelter of an island's world. The ruins and fragments that the ocean leaves behind on the landwash mirror the central concerns of this play—that the past and traditions can be washed away, perhaps within a generation or two.

As the voice of the prologue asserts, *West Moon* is set in “a wilderness of ruins” (6)—a recently resettled and vacant “isolated coastal community in Placentia Bay, Newfoundland” (Pittman, scene description). The cast of ten characters, all dead and lying in the community's graveyard, wake, as per usual, on All Souls' Night to talk with one another until they then fall to slumber's death for another year. What will haunt the characters this time is that there is not a soul left in their community to visit them, as St. Kevin's has been relocated to a larger centre. Though St. Kevin's is fictional, the history upon which it is modelled is not. Due to a governmental resettlement scheme in the 1950s and 1960s, the Newfoundland government, under the leadership of then premier Joseph Smallwood, responded to growing urbanization by centralizing services in larger communities and making it impossible for people to stay in their once small island homes. Their resettlement was sealed for good when the priests of God-fearing staunch Catholics were summoned to larger centres. This is the history and realization mourned by the characters in *West Moon*. Inevitably, the

depopulation of their islands means that only fragments—stories and songs, perhaps—will bear witness to their origins, though outside this play and in reality some houses were literally dragged across the water to new settings.

Some important contrasts come to mind here. The archeological museum on Rhodes, for example, boasts many artifacts, the oldest of which are burial finds from cemeteries that date as far back as the 9th–4th centuries BCE. However, as Pittman's accompanying note to *West Moon* indicates, the oldest vestiges of the graves in St. Kevin's are the twentieth-century clothes in which people were dressed "at the time of burial" (60). Among the Museum of Rhodes's most important exhibits is a vase dating back to 550–530 BCE.¹ Conversely, there is nothing ancient about the objects on *West Moon*'s stage: "The props [the characters] may use are the props at hand," the author's note also states. "The bushes, the gravel, the grass, the gravestones and so on. Nothing that isn't present naturally in the graveyard and within reach of the resurrected corpses can be placed within their reach" (60). Rhodes also possesses the marble head of Helios, sculpted as early as the second half of the 2nd century BCE, while the closest thing to a myth's hero or god in *West Moon* is Skipper William Sullivan, who was a legend in his community for once riding out "The August Gale" (23). What all of this means is that, still today, the Greek population of Rhodes can visualize, through a witnessing of ruins, a connection between past and present, the contemporary and the ancient.

This is not the case in Newfoundland. The settlement of its capital city, St. John's, disputably the oldest city in Canada, began in earnest only in the early seventeenth century.² Notably, within the understanding of an old world, such as Greece, the history of Newfoundland is a fairly recent thing, even if one considers the remnants of the lives of the Beothuk, the Indigenous peoples who inhabited Newfoundland before settlement. They were, according to most historians and contemporary thought, entirely obliterated in 1829 with the death of Shanawdithit, the last Beothuk, as she has been called. Reminders of the Beothuk do not posit a connection between past and present. The abrasiveness and divisiveness inherent in Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations and the effects of genocide strongly contrast the worlds established by settlers in Newfoundland, that of which Pittman writes.

¹ This pyxis is of the Fikellura type.

² Quebec City competes for this status, as French explorer Jacques Cartier arrived on its shores in 1535.

Pittman—a Newfoundlander with strong nationalist leanings, who went so far as to wear a black armband on March 31, or Confederation Day in Newfoundland, the date that marks the province’s entry into Canadian federation in 1949—presents us with a work obsessed with continuance and ruin. Like other Newfoundland nationalists, Pittman mourned the loss of the Dominion of Newfoundland, an estranged British colony whose near self-governance from 1855 until 1949 basically made it a country in its own right until, as Pittman put it in conversation with me, a corrupt premier won the confederation vote with names stolen off gravestones. Perhaps it is no wonder, then, that Pittman would proudly and fiercely focus on those things that mark Newfoundlanders as distinct from the rest of Canada.

First, it is the unique language of *West Moon* that the reader or viewer encounters, the characters’ speech written entirely in Newfoundland English, or what some might call a dialect. This language is the spoken language of Newfoundland, a mild creole, as it were, a mixture largely of Irish Gaelic, West Country English and, to a lesser extent, Scottish and Aboriginal words. It is so different from standard English that it has merited its own dictionary: the *Dictionary of Newfoundland English*.

Speaking of little Sheila, who drowned as a child under the ice, Ray, known for his singing and song, recalls to her the day she died: “The cove was full of slob and we was tryin’ to hook you up from the bottom . . . [W]hen I hauled you up and saw where the jigger was hooked, I passed out in the punt, and the line slipped out of me grip. (11) *Slob*, a “slushy mixture of water, ice and half-frozen snow,” *jigger*, “an unbaited hook,” and *punt*, a “flat-bottomed shallow boat” (*DNE*), speak not only of words relied upon in a mariners’ world or inherited by a special mixture of languages. The combination of unique nouns with a use of verbs and pronouns that differ from the rules of standard English—“we was tryin,” instead of we were tryin, and “me grip,” instead of my grip—underscores what Frantz Fanon would say is a unique way of understanding the world. Significantly born in Martinique where this island’s creole sits far from standard French on a continuum, Fanon recognized that “every dialect is a different way of thinking” (25).

The conversations that the characters have are, not surprisingly, reflective of the world that shaped them—in this case the sparsely populated, communally dependent, Catholic-obsessed, gossip-ridden, rough-sea realm. “What do a dead man miss most out of the life he had?” Jack Leonard questions (25).

If I had one day back at it, just one day give back to do what I pleased . . . I'd pick a day in July month, or maybe the first week of August. I'd be at the wheel of the Alice-Eileen. And she'd be under sail, all fresh paint and good canvas. And I'd be at the wheel of 'er with a nice sou-west breeze blowin' . . . And we'd be takin' her down past the Grey Gull in lee of the Ragged Islands. And the sun would be lovely on the water. And we'd be loaded down with fish. (25)

Guilt-ridden Rose Anne Hepditch, shaped by the fierce faith of the outports, recognizes that there is only part of a night left and advises that all the dead "might have enough time . . . to say the Rosary" (28). Inevitably, Ray, who would wish to see again the "[s]now clung to the eaves like upside-down waves" (26), sings "Cradle Hill," a song he was known for³. On the one hand, Ray croons, "do not weep my darling one / Oh no don't ever weep for me." On the other, he cautions a still-alive lover to "[r]emember what it all meant then," to remember the "birds," "fragrant flowers" and "evenings" the "two strolled up Cradle Hill" (29). In this portrait there is as much keening for lovers separated as there is for the many hills that might not be walked again.

West Moon's heavy romanticization of the times that immediately preceded resettlement not only reacts to this historical period but also stands as a document to chronicle a passing way of life and to record its values and properties. *West Moon* is a museum of sorts, an exhibit or exhibition that leaves a record.

In this sense, I am reminded of a poem, "Her Mark," written by Newfoundland author Michael Crummey and published in 1998 in his collection *Hard Light*. This is a found poem, really, which grew out of a moment in Crummey's research when he was collecting information about an older Newfoundland. Happening upon a legal deed, he discovered Ellen Rose, his great-grandmother whom he had never heard of, whose only trace was this document signing over her land to her daughter and marked by an "X," the signature of one illiterate.⁴ Adding to the actual language of the deed itself, the voice of "Ellen Rose of Western Bay in the Dominion of Newfoundland," speaks: "*I leave nothing else. Every word I have spoken the wind has taken, as it will take me. As it will take my grandchildren's children, their head full of fragments and my face not among*

³ Pat Byrne, a Newfoundland traditional singer, composed the score for "Cradle Hill," while Pittman wrote the lyrics.

⁴ I have heard Michael Crummey explain this at numerous readings, though I cannot recall the first instance he talked about the history behind this poem.

those. The day will come when we are not remembered, I have wasted no part of my life in trying to make it otherwise.” (53)

Crummey’s poetic additions to this deed reveal not only the importance, and futility, of remembering individual lives but also the fact that, at least in Newfoundland, the land itself and its monuments might not stand for that long as testimony to the lives and cultures who once inhabited the isle. Ellen Rose has disappeared in several generations, and there are no stone monuments, for example, to mark her or her generation’s being—only a piece of paper happened upon by happenstance.

While the Acropolis, the Parthenon, and the Medieval Town of Rhodes, to name a few examples, are monuments of the past here in Greece and remind one of the connections between those living today and those individuals who, though gone forever, still represent some grand whole, many literary works of Newfoundland, like *West Moon*, remind one that the most important and defining monuments of this province, or nation, as some Newfoundland nationalists would refer to the island, are the voices, songs, and stories of the people. Rex Brown, Programme Manager of the Newfoundland poetry festival The March Hare, a celebration of words and Newfoundland traditional music, author of *Voyage to Discovery: A History of Newfoundland and Labrador 1800–Present*⁵ and *Out from the Harbour: Outport Life Before Resettlement*, speaks in similar terms. Asked why the March Hare festival has focused on traditional Newfoundland music for nearly thirty years, he responds by saying that the traditional songs and stories of Newfoundland are a big part of what remains unique in today’s outports and Newfoundland generally (in conversation).

Perhaps this form of monument, the recalling of the outports’ ruins and their shadowy memories through story and song, seems more fleeting than the Acropolis overlooking Athens. But memory, like stone, can be resolute. In his work *If This is Your Land Where Are Your Stories? Finding Common Ground*, Canadian scholar J. E. Chamberlin frames his convictions with an anecdote about a conflict in British Columbia, the westernmost province of Canada:

It happened at a meeting between an Indian community in northwest British Columbia and some government officials. The officials claimed the land for the government. The natives were astonished by the claim. They couldn’t understand what these relative newcomers were talking about. Finally one of the elders put

⁵ This text was designed for adolescent students of Newfoundland.

what was bothering them in the form of a question. "If this is your land," he asked, "where are your stories?" (1)

Chamberlain's recollection registers significant considerations. If the Gitksan's [an Indigenous people of Canada] stories have been borne out of the land upon which they have resided for thousands of years—sacred stories, historical stories, stories for the purpose of entertainment and delight—who, indeed, holds true title to the land? Just as importantly, perhaps, these stories, born in their environment and speaking of it and its happenings—art being inextricable from landscape and culture—stand as monuments that might outlast the ruins spurred on by colonialism and capitalism, amongst other things.

The questions, then, are thus: Are visual and spoken fragments diametrically opposed? If it is words and songs, registered in either oral or written form, that compose the only monuments of a culture, and not, in Shelley's words, "the pedestal that stands in the desert," can cultures whose forms of memory differ recognize each others' monuments? Compared to stone, paper has much less longevity, of course; if a literary work survives upon a bookshelf for fifty years, it is a true anomaly, though I am tempted here to mention the Colossus of Rhodes, which stood for only fifty-six years. Just how long can Newfoundland's ruins and cultural monuments be maintained in provincial, national, and international memory? Are the narrative monuments of Newfoundland, sometimes sung, sometimes written down, capable of surviving like the Gitksan's stories?

Before coming to Greece, I spent three months in Serbia studying the gusle and the oral literature that accompanies this instrument. Years back, American scholars Milman Parry and his then student Albert Lord conducted extensive and groundbreaking research in this area, studying the epic traditions of Yugoslavian singers, in particular, Serbo-Croat singers. The culmination of this research was Lord's seminal work *The Singer of Tales* (1960), influenced by Parry's much earlier scholarship on Homeric verse. Parry and Lord produced a catalogue of characteristics that defined these Yugoslavian poems in order to understand how they had maintained themselves for so long. As Herbert Jordan explains in his introduction to his own translation of *The Iliad*, "[a]mong other conclusions, Parry and Lord found that the bards 'performed' their songs from memory, often having learned the material by listening to a senior artist. The same song was never sung twice exactly the same way, and, indeed, the bards improvised to a large extent, while remaining faithful to the

essential core of the song.”

Perhaps the most important question here is the following: if the bard sings her or his songs and repeats the past, maybe with adaptation to accord with the contemporary (the latter often a characteristic of oral literatures which secure their longevity by appealing to the present), who is there to listen? Tourists can visit visual monuments that pay homage to the past and keep a collective memory alive, but who visits the monument of song and story? And why is it important to do so?

Again, I’m sitting in Rhodes watching the Aegean, the water here as wet as it is on the shores of Newfoundland, but the monuments and ruins of both places as different from one another as extended summers and eternal winters. What I am recalling most, though, is an installation by Ai Weiwei, “Law of the Journey,” that I had the fortune of seeing at the Czech Republic’s National. A large rubber boat was suspended from the ceiling and rubber refugees lined the circumference of the boat inside, but one person was depicted as falling off into the imagined sea. Several lifesavers were strewn on the museum’s floor, reminding one of the importance of trying to preserve lives and, possibly, the impossibility of doing so. This is one of Ai’s depictions of refugee crises (Ai was also a refugee), and I wonder what monuments these people carry with them, what ruins haunt their nightmares, what fragments give them strength and hope. I’m wondering who will understand or see their monuments, ruins, and fragments.

In 2017, the ashes of Newfoundland artist Gerald Squires were scattered around one of his greatest artworks, a bronze statue called *The Spirit of the Beothuk*. This monument was unveiled in 2000 at the Beothuk Interpretation Centre near Boyd’s Cove, Notre Dame Bay, Newfoundland. The larger-than-life figure, placed at the end of a path in the middle of trees a brisk walk from the side of the road, signals both absence and presence. Entitled “the spirit,” this is what is imagined to remain of the Beothuk—something ethereal. This is the perspective of an ancestor of settlers and their myths, the Beothuk dead and gone, their spiritual presence still possibly existing, however.

The lessons I take away from Squires’s statue and from the places, people, and traditions I have compared within the context of a literary discipline are that it is important to be able to understand each others’ monuments and ruins, and that such an act might help quell the hopeless divides between “us” and “them,” as much as it might allow us to understand important cultural distinctiveness. However, as the narrator of

the late Canadian author Alistair MacLeod's short story "As Birds Bring Forth the Sun" recognizes, "It's hard not to know what you do know" (145).

How do we recognize monuments and the people for whom they speak when we are figuratively deaf and cannot hear the ruins in song and story or blind and cannot recognize what we see before us? It would limit our understanding of literature, for example, to look at mountains in the Monte Creek area of Kamloops, British Columbia and not recognize them as the three hills into which the Indigenous mythological figure transformer and his brothers turned.⁶ These fragments of an old Indigenous story, literally landscape, are not only the basis for an impressive land claim but also one of the keys to understanding different properties of stories. What a consideration of monuments and their different forms leads me to consider is the importance of understanding different ways of thinking and attempting to think in different ways.

I am not trying to romanticize all Newfoundland literature and to claim it as a monument that should be unqualifyingly praised. Its nationalism should make one nervous; the distinctions between those who were born in Newfoundland and those who choose to migrate there, called "come-from-aways," signals a distinction between a pure culture and those who are from outside. This echoes an eerie and too memorable divisiveness in Europe, with World War II still in living memory. As well, most of the literature of Newfoundland, until the last several decades, has built monuments to men and left women behind in their wake, serving them berry pies and pining for them to come back from the sea.

What is important, as the voice of the play's second prologue reflects, is that "[i]n all the measure of time's turning, it may not matter that the dead are dead as long as the living live and remember" (32). Just as oral literatures might have employed repetition as a method for mnemonic aid that inevitably served to keep cultural memory alive, as Parry and Lord have suggested, cultural repetition itself is monument, sometimes fragmented or left in ruins.

⁶ I have written about this phenomenon more fully in my monograph, *Before the Country: Native Renaissance, Canadian Mythology* (68–69) "The Shuswap, an old and anglicized word for the Secwepemc [First Nation], traditionally inhabited (and still largely do) a large area of south-central British Columbia known for its rivers (the north and south Thompson, the Fraser, and the Columbia) and mountains. In 'THLEE-sa Travels the Land,' the first story of [Bouchard and Kennedy's *Shuswap Stories*] and a story which belongs to the time period when only animal people, and not humans, inhabited the earth, Ike Willard relates how THLEE-sa and his brothers were entranced and 'hypnotized into a deep sleep' (5) while they watched a woman dance; subsequently, the woman 'transformed THLEE-sa and his brothers into rocks, which can still be seen today' (5)."

If we are able to recognize monuments worth considering, will we be able to read the signs of cultural importance attached to them and, thereby, learn from them? Will we be able to walk the long grass in former traditional outports and, through our exposure to the monuments of story and song, listen to what Newfoundland English tells us about a community's values, its heroes, and why we should stop and pause where the stories might lead us to former graves? If we can do this, can we one day learn to see potential monuments left behind by the Beothuk, for example, which our minds cannot yet comprehend because they are so clouded by what we already know? Will we accept and understand the monuments refugees might build in new lands to speak of the monuments they may never see again, to mark their passage across water, their surprising fortitude, the ways of thinking and languages they've carried with them? Will we be able to recognize that all oceans and seas, mountains and valleys, deserts and rivers bear their monuments that repeat a culture, much like epic literature repeats itself? Can literature and its monumental properties, like other disciplines, lead us to examine the monumental value of human life and dedicate ourselves to its healthy repetition?

S.McK.

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