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Reviews

The Trickster of Liberty: Tribal Heirs to a Wild Baronage. By Gerald Vizenor. Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1988. 159 pages. \$19.95 Cloth. \$8.95 Paper.

In *The Trickster of Liberty: Tribal Heirs to a Wild Baronage* Gerald Vizenor attempts to set the ancient oral tales and traditions of the trickster figure into up-to-the-minute fabulistic narrative form. The intent is admirable to be sure, and interesting if not totally successful in the working out.

Invidious comparisons notwithstanding, one need only remember the relatively recent comic successes of Ron Arias's triumph of Magic Realism, *The Road to Tamazunchale*, for example, to see how overly contrived the humor of *Trickster* really is and why it misfires. Both narratives as post contemporary adaptations of traditional myth and story telling techniques occurring in "minority" cultures lay claim to older allegorical motives of parable and fable which transcend ethnicity, culture, and race.

Moreover, *Tamazunchale* transcends its high-flying verbal contrivances and self-conscious narrative game playing, thereby allowing story and character to take on the universal appeal of simply a funny story well told—informing and teaching, lightly satirizing, while it entertains. *Trickster* reads more like verbal pyrotechnic exclusively for its own sake—puns and word play become their own self-reflexive end with claims to instruction, and ultimately, entertainment for the reader, victimized by the novelist's own indulgent word-way trickery, a trickery approaching a joke on the reader's reading.

Of course, fabulators do not necessarily have to serve up moral message with experimental medium, comic or otherwise. The old issue of whether or not, or to what degree literature *should* be moral and representational rears its oversized head in *Trickster*. Some readers will no doubt find Vizenor's playfulness as innovative novelist, as self-conscious stylist and laughing boy-writer,

much in keeping with the designs and attitudes of various tricksters in Native American myth now and outside of time.

This is far from Vizenor's first narrative exploration of the essences of Native American trickster story and story-telling as such. No one can question his allegiance to the new Native American novel (innovative novel most assuredly—though that term has lost much of its force), to Native Americanness generally, and his own Minnesota Chippewa tribe more particularly. If anything, this past allegiance and heritage, and his past choice of subject-matter as an artist establish an ethos which survives any failing of artistic product and author-anticipated laughter in the implied reader of *Trickster*.

Vizenor's attempt here is broadly and satirically comic. The problem. . . : the jokes, or more generally their narrative scaffolding and underpinning, just are not as funny as they were obviously intended to be by the author. As with most humor which is highlighted or enjoyed too obviously or indulgently, the humor here falls flat—or will do so for more sober readers who turn to this book looking for a recognizably greater semblance of traditional trickster stories of liberation or of trickster one-upmanship, or maybe even underdog triumph and guffaw.

In his "Epilogue" to the novel Vizenor comments on his function as novelist-trickster, saying that the novelist's job is to overturn the historical and the mimetic and that the trickster functions as "an usher in an existential language game." In *Trickster*, however, the usher becomes actor, becomes character upstaging other fabricated character personnae in their own performances.

The plan of the novel is geneological, familial, as is so often the case in Native American fiction and myth. In this pattern Vizenor plays off the family-tree structures of most modern Native American novels—trickster or otherwise—from the talents of McNickle to Erdrich, from Momaday to Silko and Welch. The progenitor is Luster Browne (or Lusterbow) and the family estate is that of the tribal baronage, Patronia, on Chippewa lands, northeast of Bad Medicine Lake in Minnesota or some other more imaginary land of lakes.

The tribal heirs to this "wild baronage" of the Baron of Patronia are, first, Novena Mae Ironmoccasin, Luster's wife, mate, and ersatz earth mother—complemented by two guardians of the gates, two mongrels, Chicken Lips and White Lies. Luster and Novena Mae begin a lineage (or continue one) of ten weird,

curiously named trickster children, the eldest of whom is Shadow Box Browne. He marries Wink Martin, sister of Mouse Proof. And so the geneology begins to burgeon and branch and in the process grow alternately comic and monotonous.

Mouse Proof's prowess as a trickster is to collect lost and autographed shoes. His lost shoe stories become famous far and wide. Sound funny? Mouse Proof Martin's sidekick, Griever de Hocus, has a less established lineage, being born with no name. His association with Mouse Proof, however, lends him the identity he needs. Wink Martin and Shadow Box beget eleven children of their own, and thus it is these grandchildren of Lusterbow and Novena Mae who provide the trickster identities and actions which the novel follows, in sequence for a time, and then in a maze of amazing crossings, start-ups and endings.

Among the grandchildren tricksters are China Browne, Tune Browne, then Tulip, Garlic, Ginseng, Eternal Flame, Father, Mother, Mime, and Slyboots. Funny? Too funny? The cuteness of each character's exaggerated "caricature" soon grows as tedious as the cataloging of the clan. Puns and double meanings abound as parallels develop with contemporary issues and assumptions, myth becomes stereotype and au courant cause. At least one chapter is devoted to the adventures and misadventures of each of the Baron's heirs and their own wild autobiographical applications of their trickster birthright.

China Browne is the first one in the family to receive a college degree. As a literature major she soon decides to become a magazine writer and travel the world. Trouble follows trouble. Tune Browne is known variously in sloganeering as Tune In, Tune Out, Call the Tune, A Different Tune, and so forth. He wears an enormous tricorn when he tells stories and boasts of living for a time in a museum with Ishi, the famous last survivor of the Yahi tribe. Tune establishes the New School for Socioacupuncture at the University of California, Berkeley (a witticism which is presumably intended to stir up some inter-institutional rivalry out West). Tulip Browne is both a trickster and a private detective, obsessed with nature and animals but with no liking for men. Garlic Browne, as one might guess, has an enormous appetite for garlic which forces him to specialize in the subject at college and study the agriculture of the cloved marvel. He is struck by lightning, dies, and is buried in his own panic hole.

Ginseng Browne is attracted to wild ginseng and he runs afoul

of the endangered species laws as a result of stealing mature ginseng seeds. He pledges to erect a large Trickster of Liberty statue in exchange for contractual rights to buy wild ginseng. Eternal Flame Browne establishes a "scapehouse" on the grounds of her ancestral baronage as a timely haven to wounded women. Father Mother Browne (he isn't sure which he wants to be—father or mother) establishes the Last Lecture tavern on another parcel of the baronage and there hears confessions. Mime Browne has no palate and so utters unintelligible sounds and silent words. Shortly after Garlic's death, Mime is raped and murdered. Slyboots is the most devious and successful family trickster. He—trickster as entrepreneur—is a graduate of Dartmouth (more academic humor) and soon starts up a microlight airplane factory of Patronia specials, bringing needed cash-flow and economic hope to the reservation. Following the hijinks of such a family, such kinship and individualism does bring an occasional chuckle. But the reader has to work considerably harder at enjoying *Trickster* than Vizenor seems to have done during the writing, a stint the reader envisions as author with tears in his eyes and slap-sore knees.

Anyone who likes watching an author enjoy the process of extravagant authoring and analogizing will, admittedly, find special treats in *Trickster*. Even those favorable readers, those less hidebound to more conservative if not reactionary (out-of-fashion?) ways, are bound to wonder, however, in certain long witty and tricky "adapted" narrative stretches, whether or not they have been tricked right out of consumptions better spent on less condiment and more meat.

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Nairne's Muskogean Journals: The 1708 Expedition to the Mississippi River. Edited by Alexander Moore. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1988. xi, 92 pages. \$17.50 Paper.

The dust jacket of this slim volume proclaims "this book, printed from a previously unpublished manuscript in the British Library, is the earliest known account in English of Muskogean society." Yet, very nearly one-third of the eighty-nine pages of text, foot-