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THE UGLY GERMAN: ETHNIC FATHERHOOD AND THE CANADIAN EXPERIENCE IN MARION QUEDNAU'S *THE BUTTERFLY CHAIR*[1]

I have always been scared of you,
With your Luftwaffe, your gobbledygoo.
And your neat moustache
And your Aryan eye, bright blue.
Panzer-man, panzer-man, O You -

Not God but a swastika
So black no sky could squeak through,
Every woman adores a Fascist,
The boot in the face, the brute
Brute heart of a brute like you.

(Sylvia Plath, *Daddy*, 41-50).

The above excerpt from Sylvia Plath's poem *Daddy* expresses the speaker's fear of a tyrannical father figure whose identity is established through images of German fascism and the speaker's feelings of victimization. The father-daughter relationship in this poem reveals the anger, guilt, and shame involved in a daughter's sense of inherited German ethnicity. Although Plath's own father had emigrated to the United States in 1900 (Alexander, 15) and was not involved in World War II, she made use of the stigma of German identity for aristic purposes. Depictions of German fatherhood can also be found in *The Butterfly Chair*, a novel by British Columbia writer Marion Quednau, who in 1987 was awarded the W. H. Smith prize for the best first novel. *The Butterfly Chair* involves

[1] I am grateful to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for providing funding when much of this article was written.

Else Rainer's recollection of her Canadian childhood as well as the old and new world esperiences of her German parents[2]. Foreign views of Canada and Canadian views of the foreign therefore form an important part of the story. One of the most traumatic events in the life of the Canadian-born Else is her memory of Gerhard Rainer's murder of her mother Charlotte and his subsequent suicide. However, the text, which moves between various temporal states, explores more than the mental instability of Else's German father. The author focuses on a daughter's definition of herself in terms of her German *Daddy*, examining the different qualities of her mother and father, particularly as these character traits are related to their attitudes towards Canada, Germany, landscape, power and love. Although the German father seems to permeate the memories of Else Rainer, Marion Quednau also uses German ethnicity to illustrate how the experiences of women in this novel differ markedly from that of the central, authoritarian male figure.

The opening chapter of *The Butterfly Chair* includes the pivotal scene in the novel: Gerhard Rainer's murder of his wife, and his own suicide. The rest of the story consists largely of Else Rainer's remembrance of the creative and destructive tendencies of her father - memories which affect her present relationship with her lover Dean. In its construction, *The Butterfly Chair* emphasises the all-consuming nature of the past (Dixon, 128) through the figure of Gerhard Rainer. The pervasive influence of Else's father on the lives of her mother and the three Rainer children is expressed through her conviction that her "father was never really someone [they] could leave behind" (12). Like the father in Sylvia Plath's *Daddy*, Gerhard Rainer occupies the centre of Else's experience; even though he "was the one taking the shots, he was always very much the subject of the scenes. He was what it was all about" (116). Else comments on the fact that the entire family lived to please this man: "We just lived it amorphously, like the vague shapes in someone else's imagination. In your imagination". (139) In other words, they robbed themselves of distinct identities by trying to conform to his dreams and expectations. The imposing presence of this German father is heightened through a description of his physical appearance during his stay at a psychiatric facility:

[2] Australian writer, A. Fremd, also explores the tensions experienced by German immigrants in the new world. Her novel, *Heartland*, is however set in Australia. Fremd's text depicts an authoritarian father whose relationship with his daugther, Ilse, is problematic.

> Else's father had started an unnatural kind of smiling that looked like the animal in the cage was resisting the stroking. Was baring his teeth. His anger had retreated again behind the cold metal shine in his eyes and his fingers were tapping out urgent messages on the armrest of his chair. (96)

Like the speaker's *Daddy* in Plath's poem, Else's father becomes both the subject of revulsion and fascination. She also senses a clear discrepancy between the endearing, childlike appellation "Vati" (the German equivalent of *Daddy*.) and her image of the man:

> And how shall I speak to you? As "Vati"? A man always so fierce, so forbidding, a man I feared as a child; now, finally, shall I call you Vati? Shall I admit such profound love? (122)

The choice of the German term here is significant, not only because it confers on the father a German identity, but because it places Else in a distinct emotional and cultural relationship to this man.

As the daughter of a German, Else inherits the negative or ugly aspects of German ethnic identity. When she was eight years old, she was called "a Nazi's daughter" (118) by some school boys who imagined her as a future tyrant: "I'll bet you'll wear black boots in a few years and torture guys - take their balls off" (118). It is worth noting that some sociologists define an ethnic group as "an involuntary group of people who share the same culture or... descendants of such people who identify themselves and/or are identified by others as belonging to the same involuntary group" (Isajiw, 24). Although she was born in Canada, Else is ascribed a particularly negative form of German identity by others. Not only is she perceived as an ethnic other or as an extension of her father, but her sexual nature is defined by boys who perceive her as a threat to their masculinity. She is therefore denied the choice to determine her own cultural and sexual self.

The Butterfly Chair also examines the ambivalent attitudes the child of an immigrant parent may have towards her cultural heritage. On one occasion, Else intends to glorify the status of her father, because she wanted to take up "the cause of the man we'd nicknamed 'the German'" (170). However, instead of telling a story which reveals her admiration for her father's energy and her love for some of his "whacky ideas" (171), she offers an anecdote which depicts father and daughter in a clumsy contest. Else tells of the time her father had built a sailboat and wanted to make sure that it would make it through every bridge between their

home and the lake. He forced her to hold a fourteen foot, three inch bamboo pole so that he could stop and carefully measure the height of the bridges. In this story, the authoritarian father becomes a joke, instead of a real threat (80), demonstrating that laughter and pain are often synonymous, and that humour often acts as therapy for suffering. Else's complicity in calling her father the German to please her schoolfriends is another example of the paradox of ethnic affiliation. She exploits her ethnic background to effect a distance between herself and her father's character, thereby establishing a kind of solidarity with other children. This betrayal of her German father is important in the story, because one of Else's most difficult esperiences involves her decision to betray her father to the authorities in an effort to save her mother from further assaults. Such decisions reflect how a child's loyalties can be divided between mother and father, or between family and authority.

The subject of loyalties also acts as an interesting metaphorfor masculine versus feminine esperiences as well as old world (German) versus new world (Canadian) affiliation. Else's sense of German and Canadian cultures is neatly tied to the remarkable differences between her father and her mother and their own reactions to their immigrant status. Gerhard Rainer approaches Canada with the ideology of a conqueror; as an architect, he sees the country as a landscape or tabula rasa on which he can impose his own structure. This attitude is evident in much German and other European fiction about Canada (Beeler). The image of this country as a cultural wasteland which can be shaped according to the dominant ideology of the European reappears in Marion Quednau's Canadian text. Else's father treats his family as unformed beings, and Else describes the family as a landscape... troubled with my father's imagined halls and towers, staircases and entranceways, and with his endless bitterness" (3). Her father reacts in anger and fear to the terrible vagueness of Canada, which is reinforced through the "vague shapes" of his family. As a construct, the Rainer family therefore embodies the conflict between the old and the new, the constrained and the free. According to Else and others, Gerhard Rainer emigrated, but did not leave the Second World War behind him. Instead, he carried it into his family, an explanation which is provided by the psychiatrists who evaluate Gerhard Rainer's condition:

> You had struggled with a question of values common among immigrants of that generation. And European men were harder on their wives as a rule. Your wartime experiences had remained with you in a grim fashion. You had an authoritative

> personality. Men of genius often walked a tightrope between reality and insanity. And on and on... (126)

The cultural dislocation esperienced by the "ugly German" is reinforced through Else's imaginings of her father's loneliness in a huge and terrible land with "empty places to fill" (172). His desire to control the environment and those around him is perhaps the key to his own inability to adapt to Canada. For example, when he builds a church for a Lutheran congregation, he is initially greeted as a hero by the worshippers and exults in the creation of this unified structure. As the years pass, however, the members begin to lose "their common sense of displacement from their homelands" (159) and allow themselves to become separate persons at worship with the help of a Canadian minister. Else describes her father as a man who could not let go or acceptt his new found freedom which becomes synonymous with Canada in the story.

Charlotte Rainer's immigrant experiences and character are diametrically opposed to that of her husband and represent for Else an alternative to the mad, power drive of her father. Instead of viewing Canada as a "godforsaken country", (155) "Mutti" seems to belong in Canada; "she was happy here" (155). The inflexible, teleologically oriented mindset of Gerhard is contrasted with Charlotte's circular thoughts[3], a distinction which feminist writers have often made in their examination of masculine and feminine worlds[4]: "She should have cared more for the straight lines, but she was dreaming of her children and her flowers in the garden" (155). Her domain is that of the garden, a fitting metaphor for the possibilities which Canada offers Mutti. It acts as a refuge from her dangerous marriage to "the German", but it is not by any means synonymous with an escape from all things German:

> In the garden she had a home for her thoughts of the three children, the poems of Rilke she still read like a schoolgirl, the letters she would write to the few family members remaining in Germany. (124)

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[3] J. Kulyk Keefer notes that "Charlotte is seen throughout the novel as a source of constant love and nurturing: she is associated with home and garden and circles, while her husband is linked to more wilful structures - the boat and plane he tried to build from scratch - and the painfully straight lines requisite to his profession as architect" (47).

[4] H. Cixous and Ch. Wolf both address such differences in their respective works. See Cixous' essay "The Laugh of the Medusa" and Ch. Wolf's *Conditions of a Narrative: Cassandra* in Cassandra: *A Novel and Four Essays*.

The poet Rainer Maria Rilke forms an important part of Charlotte Rainer's connection to German culture. A Canadian readership would probably know indirectly of the German poet through Hugh MacLennan's *Two Solitudes*. The title of this novel is taken from Rilke's letter to a friend in which he makes the following statement on love: "...Liebe, die darin besteht, daß zwei Einsamkeiten einander schützen, grenzen und grüßen" ("love consists in this, that two solitudes protect, and touch[5], and greet each other") (Rilke, 80). In Canadian history and literature the expression "two solitudes" has been used to describe the separation between English Canada and Québec, even though Rilke and MacLennan used the term to stress mutual appreciation rather than irreconcilable differences. The image of two nations becomes even more pronounced when the verb "grenzen" in Rilke's passage is translated more precisely as "borders". This subject of national or cultural affiliation is not only present in the Canada/Germany opposition in *The Butterfly Chair*, but in the relationships between Else's parents and her need to reconcile with her distant father.

Marion Quednau makes use of Rilke's name and poetry in a number of ways. To begin with, Rainer, one of Rilke's names, also designates the family depicted in the novel. Furthermore, the epigraph of the novel includes a translated excerpt from the last of Rilke's *Duines Elegien* or *Duino Elegies*[6]. As Ken Adachi notes, "there is an echo of Rainer Maria Rilke's great *Duino Elegies*... in the larger thrust of Rilke's dramatic movement, in which the German poet, recording his inner vision, attempted to heal the fractures of his life" (A24). Because Charlotte Rainer's love of Rilke's writing is linked to her earlier love for her hus-

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[5] In the epigraph to *Two Solitudes*, H. MacLennan's unacknowledged translation for Rilke's phrase includes the translation of the word "grenzen" as touch.

[6] The epigraph reads as follows:

> And yet if the endlessly dead were to try to awaken us,
> to tell us what it's like, they'd point perhaps
> to the catkins of the leafless hazel, those small flowers
> that hand down, or maybe they'd mean the rain
> that *falls* to the black earth in early spring -
>
> and we, because we always think of happiness as rising,
> would feel an emotion very close to alarm,
> the one we always feel when a happy thing
> *falls*.
>
> R. M. Rilke, *Duino Elegies*
> (translation, G. Miranda)

band, Else is able to recover a positive image of her mother which precedes her grisly death. While Gerhard Rainer often represents the destructive aspect of German ethnicity, Charlotte becomes synonymous with the affirmative nature of this cultural identity. As she reads the letters of her mother, Else "translates the German unwillingly" (114) because she is, understandably, reluctant to see how these letters illustrate the extraordinary love her mother once had for her father. This kind of recognition is painful for Else, since her father's beatings of her mother and Else's subsequent decision to call the authorities to take her father away conflict with the sentiment expressed in Charlotte Rainer's letters. However, it is through her memory of her mother's early love for her father, that Else is able to put the horrific nature of her father's actions behind her: "Yes, it was easy to love my mother. The more surprising thing is that she loved you. And that is one of the good things I know about you. That my mother loved you" (125). At this point in the novel, she returns to the feminine to work towards an acceptance of her unstable father. This reconsideration of her parents' alliance is crucial for Else in light of her current relationship with Dean. In order to continue a life with her architect companion Dean, she must address the early love of two solitudes as symbolised by her parents. It is quite appropriate that the I - You relationship between Else and her father, which forms part of the narrative, is replaced by a third person narration that places Else in the "objective" present outside the boundaries of the earlier first person confessional mode. She can therefore move beyond the strict father-daughter bond to a more independent state of mind.

Part of the movement away from ethnic fatherhood in *The Butterfly Chair* involves the presentation of the particularity of women's experiences in war torn Germany. Else's maternal grandmother is one of these women who lived through difficult times. "Oma" is described as a "small, quiet woman who was imprisoned several times during the war for refusing to say 'Heil Hitler'" (141). She tells her granddaughter of the time that she and her daughter Charlotte were temporarily separated because Charlotte saved another woman's life. The maiden name of Else's mother is, appropriately enough, Hardmute (Mut= courage, spirit), which suggests her tremendous courage: "So I see my mother shine in his story, where she would, in her own telling of it, simply have passed quietly through events" (143). As Else recalls the end of the war and its effect on the three Hardmute women (Oma, Mutti and her aunt Hanna), she presents her mother in a context of victory and celebration, thereby displacing the image of her mother as victim:

> And she (Charlotte) puts on her shoes at the end of the war, her silver dancing shoes, and dances a slow, painful dance of love for those who have made it through and are still together. The moon shines on her pale arms raised high in celebration (146).

This dance of hope, executed by Charlotte Hardmute, captures for Else the spirit of difference between her mother and her father, who unlike Charlotte, seemed defeated by the end of the war.

The nature of women's experiences in the old country is reinforced through images of feminism and political activism. Perhaps Marion Quednau's earlier role as a "member of the editorial board *Branching Out*, an Albeda-based feminist magazine" (Kirchhoff, C7) contributed to this focus in the novel. In *The Butterfly Chair*, she reveals through references to feminism how a male world of control is often threatened by a woman's independence. For example, Doctor Heffler, a family friend of the Rainers argues that the desperate struggle between Else's parents echoed the "terrific power struggle" of the sixties when women were moving out of the roles they had previously accepted (80). He feels that the authoritarian front of Else's father was "covering up for a terrible sense of inferiority" (80). This male resistance to change is, as many women can attest, still evident in the 90s, since women are often criticized for any slight gains they may have made in the workplace or other situations. It is a resistance which is reflected in some of the attitudes expressed by Else's lover Dean, who occupies the temporal frame of the present in the story[7]. She believes that he mocks her feminism. For example, in the early part of the novel, Else is delivering a speech on what she calls women's survival art (36). However, she is perceived by her future lover Dean as someone "trying to hold her place among the *fragile* issues of feminism" (my italics, 38); he senses that her commitment to feminism is not strong, which Else seems to confirm: "As though he shared the joke of her role in the awkward fight for women, as though her momentary resistance to him, her apparent independence, would all come tumbling down later" (40). This passage reveals an important dimension of Dean's character in the novel; like Gerhard Rainer he appears to be easily threatened by a woman's independent

[7] C. Rooke states that "this material is much less interesting than the narrator's past; the writing and the novel's structure falter here" (102). I attribute this to the fact that the leading character's struggle with her past does not permit her to become fully involved in her present life.

nature. As Quednau says, the affair between Else and Dean, who is also an architect, "illustrates that there are forms of brutality other than physical violence" ("B. C. Woman", Calgary Herald, F5). Yet the feminist content in *The Butterfly Chair* is not presented without a certain ambivalence. Else's lack of confidence in her involvement with feminist issues lies at the head of a distinction between public and private spheres. Her public speeches on women's issues allow her to distance herself from the emotional turmoil of her past, but they do not appear to provide her with the possibility for a necessary catharsis. Only through a reexamination of her feelings for her father and mother, is she able to move on with her life. The depiction of Else's questionable political activism is also undoubtedly tied to the author's determination to avoid, as one reviewer puts it, "the temptation to pillory the driven father, himself pitiable even though he is the cause of so much destruction, and lasting pain" (McGrath, 78-79). Else's need to communicate with her father throughout the novel in the format of a psychological letter is echoed by her decision to continue her relationship with Dean, despite the rocky nature of the affair[8]. Although Else still has episodes in her past which she cannot reveal to him, Quednau does not isolate this pair at the end of her book: "their argument is over" (202). This would seem to confirm the author's firm belief in not "segregating the world" (Adachi, A24).

The Butterfly Chair provides a study of ethnic identity and the tragic consequences of a German father's culture shock or displacement for his German-Canadian family. Although the text presents some key differences between German and Canadian cultures, there is an interesting historical similarity as German writer, Hans Magnus Enzensberger, has observed:

> I come from a country which is rather like Canada in one respect: Germany has never made a revolution. It is unlike Canada, however, in that it has a history of profound counter-revolution.

This absence of revolution in both countries may also be linked to the national identity crises which continue to haunt Germany and Canada. Parallels between these countries are evident in Quednau's novel when she compares Charlotte and Gerhard Rainer's attitudes towards the end of the Second World War in Germany with their subsequent experiences

[8] R. Dixon argues that *The Butterfly Chair* is "as much about recovery and redemption as it is about psychological destruction" (128).

in Canada. While Charlotte celebrates, Gerhard experiences defeat. The author therefore avoids a mere stereotyping of German identity as an expression of ugly tyranny or despair. Through Else's remembrance of her father's happier moments as well as her mother's courageous feminine spirit and her love of Rilke's poetry, she recovers an affirmative part of her past.

Despite the importance of cultural factors in *The Butterfly Chair*, the novel does not go as far as it could in its examination of the implications of German heritage for Else Rainer. There is, for example, relatively little reference to the use of the German language and its impact on the children of immigrant parents. This leads me to believe that the author is actually more interested in exploring the psychology of relationships between human beings regardless of their cultural heritage, which may make the text more accessible for the non-German reader. Like Sylvia Plath's *Daddy*, Quednau's German father moves beyond his ethnic specificity and becomes a personification of power and death. The German qualities of Else's mother, grandmother and Rilke's poetry are also presented in a more general contest: they are associated with love and recovery. While Quednau does attempt to move the novel into a more positive direction, I would seriously question any analysis of Else as a woman who is "free at last of the impossible burden of her private history" (Kulyk Keefer, 50). Based on my own experience as a daughter of German-speaking parents, I believe that the unpleasant elements of one's ethnic heritage are not so easily forgotten; not only do these ethnic associations affect one's behaviour or interaction with others, but they can also engender cultural biases in those who do not share the same ethnic history.

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ZŁY NIEMIEC: ETNICZNE DZIEDZICTWO I KANADYJSKIE DOŚWIADCZENIA W POWIEŚCI MARION QUEDNAU *THE BUTTERFLY CHAIR*

(Streszczenie)

Wymieniona w tytule powieść ma szczególny charakter. Zaliczyć ją można do odmiany gatunkowej powieści rozwojowej o kształtowaniu i odnajdywaniu świadomości etnicznej.

W powieści *The Butterfly Chair* (1987) topos narodowości niemieckiej w Kanadzie powiązany jest z kanadyjskim pejzażem w wymiarze kultury i obyczajowości oraz z dominacją zakorzenionej w doświadczeniach kobiety patriarchalności. Głównym bohaterem tego utworu jest Else Rainer, która usiłuje zrozumieć stosunek jej niemieckich rodziców do Kanady, ich przybranej ojczyzny. Powieść rozpoczyna się opisem wstrząsającego wydarzenia w życiu Else: zabójstwa matki dokonanego przez ojca i - w następstwie tej zbrodni - jego samobójstwa.

Znacząca część tekstu to wspomnienia Else o życiu jej rodziców w Niemczech i w Kanadzie oraz o tyrańskim sposobie oddziaływania na rodzinę Gerharda Rainera („silnego Niemca"). W powieści tej zawarte są też reminiscencje z poematu Sylvii Plath *Daddy* (*Tatuś*), w którym również uderzają obrazy dręczenia rodziny przez niemieckiego ojca-tyrana. Ambicje Gerharda Rainera jako architekta aby pozostawić swój ślad w kanadyjskim krajobrazie kontrastują z ogrodami matki, które stanowią dla niej schronienie przed napastliwym mężem.

Struktura powieści *The Butterfly Chair* oparta jest na zasadzie wynikania kategorii kulturowych i psychologicznych z podłoża etnicznego i kreuje obraz Kanady postrzegany przez emigrantów. Przedstawia także stosunek Kanadyjczyków do obcych.