

RE-PERFORMING MICROHISTORIES: POSTMODERN  
METATHEATRICALITY IN CANADIAN MILLENNIAL DRAMA

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Twenty years ago, Ric Knowles published a seminal article, “Re-playing History: Canadian Historiographic Metadrama.” In that article, he transposes Linda Hutcheon’s model of historiographic metafiction—which she applies almost exclusively to novels—to drama and by doing so fills a significant generic gap. The result was the identification of a corresponding corpus of postmodern Canadian plays written between 1973 and 1980. In a series of case studies, Knowles examines historically inflected metadramatic plays by three prominent playwrights—Rick Salutin (*1837: The Farmer’s Revolt; Les Canadiens*), Sharon Pollock (*Walsh; The Komagata Maru Incident; Blood Relations*), and James Reaney (*The Donnelly’s* trilogy). Knowles concludes that these plays undertake similar work: despite their divergent approaches to documenting historical events, they all actively “eschew any attempt to canonize official history or establish a stable national mythology” (230). Instead, by destabilizing history through the use of metadramatic strategies, these historiographic plays present the making and remaking of history as a

contingent and ongoing process. Ultimately, these plays do participate in nation-building, not by telling history, but by challenging contemporary audiences to tell new and better stories in the creation of a future Canada.<sup>1</sup>

In the intervening years since Knowles's 1987 study, Canadian playwrights have continued to draw on historical sources for dramatic material. In the millennial period, say, 1998 to the present, there has been a noticeable burgeoning of self-reflexive plays about history that, following Hutcheon, we might also think of as "postmodern." To revisit Hutcheon's model and assess its continued relevance for dramatic works, I will draw a representative sample of these second-generation historiographic metadramas, including John Mighton's *Possible Worlds*, *Perfect Pie* by Judith Thompson, *In On It* by Daniel MacIvor, and Michael Redhill's 2005 play *Goodness*. Placing this set of later postmodern plays alongside those of Knowles, I propose to outline what I see as the principal differences between them in terms of their metafictional strategies. Metafiction and metatheatre are premised on the essential gap between the actual world of the play as an event and the fictional world contained within. Any time this gap is brought to the awareness of the audience, we get metatheatre.<sup>2</sup> By taking this layered ontological structure as central to metatheatricality, it becomes possible and indeed fruitful to parse metatheatrical events in this way, describing versions of this reflexive device in terms of the specific hierarchical organization (or disorganization) of multiple worlds. Here, the comparison of first- and second-gener-

1 In viewing these plays in terms of their tendency to deconstruct national myths, Knowles is responding to earlier critics (Neil Carson, Don Rubin, Robert C. Nunn ["Performing Fact"]), who, surveying this same trend to historical subject matter, focus on the plays' construction of those same foundational myths.

2 See Slawomir Świontek's "Le dialogue dramatique et le metathéâtre," as well as my critical introduction to Świontek's work with translation of excerpts from this article ("Meta-enunciative Properties").

ation historiographic metadramas will demonstrate that key differences occurring at a structural level function to send quite different political messages about how the audience ought to respond to the performance of history and the potential role of performative mythmaking in the creation of a Canadian self. Just as experience organized by narrative is the core of the psychological self, so, too, on a macro level, do stories concerning our collective history stand at the very centre of how a population composes its national identity. By radically destabilizing the ontological structure of storytelling, millennial metadramas target the foundations of historiographic narrative in two ways. First, these plays demand a reassessment of what we mean by history; and second, these plays question the viability of that basic link between experience and narrative, between the events of the past and their retelling.

As an initial comparative framework, Knowles divides the playwrights and their plays by ideology, suggesting that the techniques of metadrama are used in different ways by each. He names Salutin's metadramatic approach as Marxist, Pollock's as feminist, and Reaney's as mythopoeic. Under each of these headings the plays do indeed promote varying political agendas; however, I disagree with Knowles's assessment that these ideological differences are manifested through the diverse application of metadramatic devices. Although it is put to a variety of uses, ultimately only one basic metatheatrical strategy is employed in every case. This primary overarching technique is the establishment of a frame around the main historical enactment. In this type of play-within-a-play, the present-tense-containing frame is temporally separated from the main play, projected into the future at some distance from the historical re-enactments that constitute the main action.

So, for example, *Walsh* begins with a dreamlike fragmented prologue. The character of Major Walsh, older and no longer a member of the North West Mounted Police (NWMP) but now civilian Commissioner of the Yukon, sits in a Gold Rush saloon.

As Pollock notes in the stage directions, “The scene is from Walsh’s point of view, and the freezes are momentary arrests in the action, and are broken by the character’s speech or action following. The impression given is similar to that experienced when one is drunk or under great mental stress” (141). Events in the bar provoke reminiscences. And as the action slides into the past, the characters in the saloon prologue transform into people from Walsh’s past, marking the main action as a memory play, originating in Walsh’s own mind.

Whereas in *Walsh* the play arises out of memory with ghost-actors, Pollock’s *Blood Relations* sets up a formal performance with actors who play-act history. Even so it retains to some degree the insubstantial conditional quality of Walsh’s imaginings; Pollock describes it as a “dream thesis” (13). Ten years after her acquittal, Lizzie Borden is pressed by her actress friend to reveal the truth around the gruesome murder of Lizzie’s father and stepmother. To explore the events of that day, the two women enter into the past via a role-play with the actress playing Lizzie and Lizzie playing the maid, Bridget.

A subsidiary metadramatic technique at work in the other plays from Knowles’s grouping is the employment of a highly presentational acting style that foregrounds the innate theatricality of the event. In plays like Salutin’s *1837* and *Les Canadiens*, and Reaney’s *Donnelly’s* trilogy, scenes are fluid and impressionistic. Actors perform not only a large range of character roles but also use their bodies and voices to create stagecoaches, threshing machines, houses and horses, among other things. In this non-illusionistic performance style, we witness the theatrical “transformation of simple stage props—sticks, stones, ladders and so on, into fiddles, swords, roads and fences” (Knowles 253). In *1837*, four actors use their bodies to form a large head, which then speaks, delivering a political address as Upper Canada Lieutenant-Governor Sir Francis Bond Head (212). Given the pronounced theatrical magnitude of these performances that make visible the technique of the actors throughout the

play, I argue that rather than constituting a second distinct type of metatheatre, this is simply a variation of the metatheatrical frame. Like temporal framing, which establishes a re-enactment of the past, underscoring the historical story explicitly as performed or revisited as ghostly embodied memory, the marked presence of actors as actors also sets up the same kind of aesthetically distanced relationship between the story and the theatrical mode of its telling, between the fictional world inhabited by the characters and the actual world of the play event inhabited by real people who are actors. By reassembling all these first-generation plays under the single metadramatic strategy of framing, it is evident that they exemplify a shared perspective, emphasizing the processes of making and unmaking history, focusing their attention on telling and retelling stories. And so, at a foundational level all these plays are mythopoeic, doing what Knowles describes Reaney's plays as doing—deconstructing old mythologies to produce new ones. But as Knowles notes, “it is the *process* of mythologizing and re-mythologizing that is important” (235).

Although Knowles does not classify these plays as mythopoeic, he does conclude that these first-generation historiographic metadramas invite audiences to rethink our common experience in the creation of these myths. Within the frame, the plays display historic events—the biography of Major Walsh of the NWMP and his meeting with Chief Sitting Bull; the legend of the persecuted Donnelly family of southwestern Ontario; the 1976 election of the first separatist government in Quebec, and so on. By doing so, they affirm this history as our history and as history worth knowing. Yet, at the same time, the built-in post-modern self-reflexivity reminds explicitly us that these stories are just that, stories. These plays are intentionally ambivalent. They present history while simultaneously destabilizing history. Knowles calls them “deconstructionist” (241). But they do not reach the point of nihilism. Destabilization presents possibility *in* knowledge but not impossibility *of* knowledge. Implicated in

that construction of stories, we are encouraged to “make history.” Even if the stories are creations, they are our creations and make a nationalist contribution to defining who we are as Canadians. Doubtless, unmediated non-“meta” history plays could also implicitly pronounce this same challenge, but the self-reflexive critique through the use of a present-tense frame (either temporal or theatrical) showing the constructive process effectively shifts the lesson of history into its future, our present, making it immediately relevant as we participate in the shared moment of the storytelling frame. All these plays communicate through their metadramatic framing an “exhortation to social responsibility through historical self-knowledge” to imagine “a better story” (Knowles 241).

This emphasis on the present-tense constructedness of history and the need to take up creative responsibility for those stories is shared by the millennial historiographic plays, but they differ from their early counterparts in several significant ways. The first difference relates to how millennial Canadian metadrama thinks about history. Consistent with Hutcheon’s key examples of historiographic metafictional novels, the selected metadramas of the 1970s draw on history on a relatively large scale, presenting eccentric views of significant historical figures and events (Hutcheon 114). By contrast, the second-generation dramas stage quite minor events. Among these plays, history operates at an entirely personal level. The histories that are re-performed are individual histories, unconnected with the larger sweep of national or even regional history. Moving to this narrower view of the past need not exclude these stories as history *per se*. I would argue that the shift from “history” to “biography” to “autobiography”—from stories of famous people to stories of less public figures—does not constitute a distinct break but rather posits a spectrum of increasingly intimate perspectives. As with the first-generation historiographic plays, these millennial plays also set up structural frames, employing nested worlds-within to dig into the history of their characters. Notably, in each case the specific catalyzing historical event at the core is a violent trauma—a fatal car crash

(*In On It*), sexual assault and a train crash (*Perfect Pie*), and the disembraining of a murder victim (*Possible Worlds*). Certainly, the first-generation historiographic metadramas sampled by Knowles also feature violent events, but the difference is that for the later plays violence targets the story of history itself. These violent events inhibit memory, either physically or emotionally, thereby obscuring or repressing knowledge important to the self-actualization of the damaged character. In the reduction of scope to the history of one person, these plays explore the exigencies of losing history altogether when the sole repository of that history is so easily damaged.

One millennial play, *Goodness*, seems at first to work slightly differently. *Goodness* is set within the context of an unnamed genocide and so at first appears as if it will engage history on a larger scale. (The library subject catalogue classifies it rather prosaically as “Genocide—drama.”) Yet, the play is aggressively indeterminate about its historical situation, as if there is a collective amnesia about the details. The genocide in question seems to be of the recent past, but no date is given; it might be Bosnia, or Rwanda, or Cambodia, or elsewhere. The characters will not say. Likewise they cannot agree even on how many people were killed. Moreover, although one character does recount her direct experience during the time of the purges, the play’s central narrative drive is toward the murder of a single, almost incidental person, occurring years after the cessation of hostilities. So although it is set in the larger flow of history, *Goodness*, too, is the history of the intersection of a few people leaving no obvious mark on their world writ large. For these later metadramas the, history is microhistory. Moving away from large-scale social science and instead adopting a more narrative approach, microhistory as a genre is the “practice based on the reduction of scale of observation, on microscopic analysis and an extensive study of the documentary material” (Levi 99).<sup>3</sup> Documentary material here, it must be noted, is limited almost exclusively

3 See Giovanni Levi and David A. Bell for more on microhistory.

to personal narrative performance and memories. For these extremely marginal figures, official documentation does not exist. Yet, as Michael records Althea's memories in his notebook, Patsy remembers Francesca, and Brian and Brad perform for us the story of their relationship; the performance-within of biographical history is itself a move toward documentation.<sup>4</sup> Unlike the postmodern historiographical works noted by Hutcheon and Knowles, which find their main characters in the intersections of history, bystanders to wide-reaching historical events, these plays take up core features of microhistorical practice, purposely narrowing their concern to the events of a localized single and palpably fragile life. In this shift from collective accounts to the story of an individual, millennial plays augment the potential instability of history and underscore the obstacles encountered in linking narrative to experience.

This leads to the second principal difference between first-generation historiographic metadramas and their millennial counterparts. At a foundational level, all of these metatheatrical history plays feature the same basic ontological structure of nested fictional worlds, which we can imagine as a series of concentric circles. World<sup>a</sup>, represented by the outermost circle, is the real world where the audience attends the performance of a play as an actual world event. Inside that circle is world<sup>b</sup>; it is the first or highest fictional world, usually that of the theatrical or memory frame. So for example, the older Walsh inhabits this world as does older Lizzie and her friend the actress. The next subsequent fictional world—world<sup>c</sup>—moves into the past rel-

4 Two other millennial historiographic metadramas focus in particular on the vagaries and fragility of documentation. In *Scorched* (2005) by Wajdi Mouawad, a traumatized mute mother leaves an elliptical will that guides her children to travel deep into her biography as they search for their own origins. Also with specific reference to typical historical documentation, one of their key discoveries is that their birth certificates tell a false story. In Michel Marc Bouchard's play *Written on Water* (2004), a flood damages the "Writing Room," containing autobiographical sketches of the history of the town.

ative to world<sup>b</sup>, presenting the historical story-within. As Walsh falls into his dream-within and Lizzie and the actress begin their role-play, these characters become playwrights and generate subsequent nested narrative worlds. Although the two sets of historiographic metadramas share this basic layered structure, they differ significantly in terms of the veridical stability of the various world levels. In the historiographic plays of the 1970s, history is world<sup>a</sup> history and the ambiguity around the epistemological stability of history is generated in world<sup>a</sup>, whereas in millennial historiographic drama, the histories are world<sup>b</sup> histories and issues around the accessibility and truthfulness of these histories are generated in both world<sup>a</sup> and in world<sup>b</sup>. For first-generation plays, postmodern irony and critical distance are generated through the simple framing of history. The relation of world<sup>b</sup> to world<sup>c</sup> is that of a frame to the framed story-within, but world<sup>b</sup> is also the present to world<sup>c</sup>'s past. In fact, world<sup>c</sup> is past tense to both worlds <sup>b</sup> and <sup>a</sup>, since the events of world<sup>c</sup> are drawn from our own "real" history. In this way, these plays highlight the gap between world<sup>c</sup> fictional history and world<sup>a</sup> real history, mediated by the world<sup>b</sup> performance frame. We are disoriented when we match the differences between "real" history and its representation and discover the liberties taken and uncertainties introduced. Notably, there is no disorientation or ambiguity at the level of world<sup>b</sup>, that is, the characters are not confused. Any rethinking of truth happens in world<sup>a</sup>, in communication between the playwright and the audience via the metatheatrical strategies outlined above, either through the implied framing in <sup>a/b</sup> theatricality, which foregrounds the actor's technique, or through explicit <sup>b/c</sup> temporal framing.

With regard to the millennial plays, then, the shift to local/personal history is more than just a shift of scale; it is a sea change in the ontological structure of the created dramatic worlds. By repositioning lived history from an actual world<sup>a</sup> to a fictional world<sup>b</sup>, world<sup>c</sup> becomes past tense only to world<sup>b</sup>, and any authenticating connection to world<sup>a</sup> is lost. In these plays,

world<sup>c</sup> is entirely fictional and, notwithstanding some slight contextual references typical of any fictional world, has no obligation to represent world<sup>a</sup> events. As a result, the responsibility for authentication of the past rests entirely with world<sup>b</sup>, itself already a constructed fictional world. From this ontological arrangement alone, the story of history is already problematized insofar as it is, from the outset, unmoored from any solid foundation in lived experience. By establishing history itself as a fictional world object, these plays sever the expected truth-based relationship between so-called known history and its accounts.

But in addition to this, millennial plays further commute the disorientation and ambiguity about history from the world<sup>a</sup> audience in the 1970s plays to millennial characters existing in world<sup>b</sup>. While in first-generation historiographic dramas world<sup>b</sup> provides narrative stability and trustworthiness, in the later plays narrative authenticity is actively contested at this level. World<sup>b</sup> narrators and performers engaged in accessing and re-performing world<sup>c</sup> are persistently undermined. In *Goodness*, for example, world<sup>b</sup> is inhabited by a fictional doppelgänger of the playwright Michael Redhill also called Michael Redhill (but performed by the actor Jordan Pettle in the original Tarragon Theatre production). Like Michael<sup>a</sup>, Michael<sup>b</sup> has also written a play called *Goodness*. He addresses the audience: “I’m trying to write a play... although if you can hear me, I guess it’s finished. Even though right now I could throw it through a window” (9–10). Even as the play is being performed, in the threat to throw it away, Michael<sup>b</sup> acknowledges the possibility of destroying the world he has created even as he accepts his own role as creator of that world. The play takes Michael, our narrator, into his past (world<sup>c</sup>) to a meeting with a genocide survivor named Althea. As she tells him about her own past (world<sup>d</sup>)—about the ethnic purges and the incarceration of accused war criminal Mathias Todd—her memories come alive to re-perform her history. But as these stories emerge, Michael argues with Althea; he questions and quibbles with her narra-

tive. When there is a gap in her story around an event she did not witness, Michael, the writer, tries to fill it in with his own imaginings. Althea vacillates between an insistence on invisibility—“Put your little notebook away” (30)—and her desire for her story to be recorded: “Feverishly taking notes, are you? [...] It’s all right. I want you to... I thought about it. Who am I to say I own an atrocity? Go ahead” (71). In the end, Althea claims Michael’s notebook, saying, “Now we’re back where we started. I’m harmless and you know nothing” (101). And he departs without this document, paradoxically without the script of the play we have just watched.

On the surface, *Perfect Pie* tells two stories running in parallel. In the present-tense world<sup>b</sup>, Patsy is visited by her estranged childhood friend Marie (who has become a well-known actress and renamed herself Francesca). Interlaced with the older women’s visit is a world<sup>c</sup> re-performance (a shared flashback) of key moments in their friendship with two younger actresses doubled in those roles. As the story progresses, all four characters in two worlds converge on the horrific events of the last night Patsy and Marie were together. Walking home from the Sadie Hawkins dance, Marie is sexually assaulted by a gang of local boys. At the climax of the play, a feverish Patsy and the traumatized Marie cling together on the track as they face an oncoming train. Ambiguity arises when the play introduces a strong suggestion that Marie did not survive the crash.<sup>5</sup> In Patsy’s opening monologue, which is ostensibly a tape-recorded letter to Marie, she says, “[T]he crash... does flash out, in my mind; like a sheet; of lighting, and when the flash is over, all is dark again, I know you did not survive, Marie. So how is it? How is it that I see you there, out there, in the world?” (4). Immediately after that the entirety of scene two is this stage direction: “*Light on MARIE/FRANCESCA, in her own dark apartment in the Big City,*

5 In support of this interpretation that Marie is killed by the train, see Marlene Moser and Nunn (“Crackwalking”).

*a great view of the city at night behind her. She remembers...*" (4). At the end of the play, Francesca does not exit so much as fade away: Francesca "*backs out of the set, looking at PATSY until she disappears*" (91). Finally, the play is bookended by Patsy's repeated line, taken from the Old Testament *book of Isaiah* (49:15) "I will not forget you. You are carved in the palm of my hand" (3, 91). All these markers indicate the assignment of authorial control to Patsy, who (maybe) has conjured a future for her dead friend and through that intermediary world is able to confront the trauma of the past. The setup of Patsy as a nearly divine author-creator combined with the dream like surreal quality of Francesca's conjuring and disappearance contribute to the destabilization of both world<sup>b</sup> of the women's visit and world<sup>c</sup> of their (Patsy's?) re-performance of the past. In this ontological arrangement, Patsy as auxiliary playwright resides alone in world<sup>b</sup>, the visit of Francesca constitutes world<sup>c</sup>, and the re-performed past is world<sup>d</sup>. However, reflecting on the illumination of Francesca in scene two, I would add that as Francesca is "born" into world<sup>c</sup> through Patsy's creation, the stage direction "*She remembers...*" admits her as a co-creator of the past memories of world<sup>d</sup>.<sup>6</sup> As in *Goodness*, characters with disparate ontological status meet and combine to create/negotiate shared histories. Narrative instability as a result of cross-world interference is a central feature of these millennial historiographic plays. In first-generation historiographic metadramas, narrative authority transmitted from world<sup>a</sup> into world<sup>b</sup> is successfully masked; world<sup>c</sup> seems to emerge spontaneously out of world<sup>b</sup>, untroubled by mediation. By contrast, in the millennial plays, that transference of creative narrative power that allows for mythmaking, for making history, is pointedly highlighted at the level of the fictional-world<sup>b</sup> storytellers through various disruptive strategies.

6 For a more extended discussion of Patsy as the playwright-creator of Francesca, see Stephenson, "Kneading You: Performative Meta-Auto/Biography in *Perfect Pie*."

The third difference between these two groups of historiographical metadramas also pertains to the organization of ontological structures. First-generation plays maintain the solidity of boundaries between worlds. Following Silvio Gaggi's typology of self-referential strategies, we might term this "neat metatheatre." He writes, "The logical levels of the various narrations, dramatizations or pictorializations can be either honoured or confused" (15). To exemplify, Magritte's paintings of paintings are generally neat. Escher's works are often messy (15). So whereas first-generation plays are neat, carefully maintaining the boundaries between the several worlds, millennial plays are exuberantly messy. As mentioned earlier, Patsy in *Perfect Pie* collaborates with her own memorial creation, Francesca, to remember their shared past. The characters from Althea's memories in *Goodness* express an awareness of themselves as memories, commenting on how the performance is developing. They talk to Michael about his ex-wife. They steal his notebook. One of them drinks his tea. In *In On It*, the multiple worlds fold over like a möebius strip. Brad walks off the stage, exiting through the audience to go run errands in Brian's car, where he will be killed once again in a head-on collision with a blue Mercedes driven by his own fictional character named Ray. In *Possible Worlds*, George imaginatively transcends his world to understand that he is a brain held captive in a vat—his entire sensory world only electrical impulses. In the last scene he looks out over the water and sees blinking indicator lights outside the vat.

What are the implications of this preference among millennial dramatists for messy metatheatre as opposed to neat metatheatre? Each of these world boundaries represents a change in reality status, defining the ontological difference between creator and created, between the artist and her art. These boundaries are generated by the exercise of divine performative power to create a world-within. Neat metatheatre communicates through continued security of these borders that this hierarchical relationship is reliable. It tells us that superior artist-creators main-

tain control over their creations. It tells us that performative language works; we can create worlds with words. It also means that superior worlds are largely impervious to change by lower orders. Higher-order worlds are only changeable insofar as the past changes the present or as the potential change of storytelling is metaphorical, opening listeners to new understanding. Messy metatheatre, on the other hand, rejects these assurances of authorial control and authentication across worlds. By contrast, it shows us that sometimes these rules will not hold. First, performative language is not always effective downward. When boundaries between worlds are breached, the authority of the creator may be contested by his or her creations. In *Goodness*, the ghost characters arising out of Althea's memories argue with their playwright, objecting to his exercise of authorial control over their actions.

JULIA. You don't get to reinvent your world using me.

YOUNG ALTHEA. Using us.

STEPHEN. User. (61)

Another character disabuses the idea of writing a play at all. "All those people—real people—died for you, and the best you can manage is a little play?" (76). In *Possible Worlds* George exerts only tenuous control over his journeys across possible worlds and storylines. The fluid changes and shifts into and out of each storyline seem to be always beyond him as he arrives disoriented in each new world. Just as characters rise up into higher-order worlds to debate their story, storytellers in the present tense frames refuse to descend into fictions. Both Redhill (*Goodness*) and Brian (*In On It*) are characters with a doubled or even tripled ontology, existing in the actual world, in the interstitial world<sup>b</sup>, and, knowing how the past of world<sup>c</sup> turns out, they balk at retelling/reliving it. For example, in MacIvor's *In On It*, Brian knows that his play will end with the death of his lov-

er Brad in a car collision. The premise of the play is to imagine the motives of the other driver in the accident. Brian and Brad (possibly a ghostly recursion of himself) rent a theatre and stage a play to imagine a man named Ray with terminal cancer. As the end of the play approaches and the accident looms, Brad is about to get the car to run errands. Brian's first strategy is to change his last words.

BRIAN. You've helped me to see the beauty in people and you've been a really good friend.

BRAD. (*mildly scolding*): That's not how it went.

BRIAN. Shampoo.

BRAD. Shampoo.

BRIAN. And not the cheap stuff. (198)

When that fails, he takes a different tack, rewriting the story from Ray's end, changing his diagnosis. He scripts Charlie the doctor to say,

"Well at this point it could happen any time. We could be talking about days or weeks. Maybe months. Possibly as long as thirty or forty years." [...] And then a look of confusion, which slowly becomes understanding then relief. Ray looks out at the audience [...] Then he steps off the stage, through the audience, out the door, into the world ready to begin his new life. (198)

But even this revision will not avert the inevitable, and we hear the offstage sounds of the accident.

Second, performative language is used to change superior worlds—really change them. For world<sup>b</sup> storyteller characters, their attempt to create world<sup>c</sup> histories through re-performance, inhibited at the structural level by the destabilizing framing problems arising from radically subjective, fractured, or multiple narration, is also further complicated by fictional problems.

So, not only is the story subject to threat from without, that is, to its organizational ontological structure, but there are also internal obstacles to the story. Another shared feature of these millennial metadramas is the presence of characters who suffer violent trauma directly related to their narrative capability. For characters in world<sup>b</sup>, knowledge of the past is obscured by brain injury, Alzheimer's disease, emotionally traumatic events that block out memory, or simply by secretive, hostile, or lost sources of information. In this way, violence is doubled at both the fictional and structural level, and in both cases these attacks on narrative capability impede access to any kind of stable history. Attempts at re-performance and storytelling in world<sup>c</sup> by these damaged characters help fill in the gaps, recuperating fractured narration. The creation of subsidiary worlds-within is therapeutic insofar as it aids in the creation/recreation of the selfhood of these characters.

As a faithful record of past events, history, then, in these later plays, is radically ambiguous. History is not just performed as an alternate perspective to lived experience as in the earlier plays but becomes totally unknowable. The earlier plays are concerned with displaying the inevitable historiographic ambiguity attached to any attempt to know what happened. Millennial plays, on the other hand, don't even care what happened. Arguably, the characters do care; but the play doesn't. For these plays, presenting history is not the point. Instead, the later plays are almost exclusively concerned with the process of how we create what happened—not how we respond to the ambiguity of the past but rather to the fraught exercise of performative power in creating any past. First-generation historiographic metadramas use the “presentness” of the re-enactment to move responsibility for mythmaking to the audience. The conversation about history happens “over the heads” of the characters—between the playwright and the audience. The work of writing and rewriting history with an eye to discovering our collective obligations to those stories is entirely a world<sup>a</sup> enterprise, occurring in the ac-

tual world and performed by actual people. Millennial plays also take as a central theme the promotion of the audience's social responsibility as witnesses to history, connecting this duty more strongly to our theatrical role as audience. Reflecting on their generic context as theatre, the performance strategies employed fold back on themselves to envelop the complete theatrical situation. In earlier historiographic plays, it is the playwrights who retell history. In the later millennial plays, it is the world<sup>b</sup> characters who do this work that first-generation plays imply ought to be done by the world<sup>a</sup> audience. It is the characters themselves who attempt to re-perform their own histories and who struggle with ambiguity and the destabilization engendered by the metafictional awareness of history as a construction. Their performative efforts in the face of this destabilization become the story. Ultimately, for millennial metadramas, the story of the historical event is more important than the historical event itself. There can be no resolution about history because the emphasis is entirely on process.

It might be suggested that plays concerned solely with the trials and tribulations of fictional characters are narcissistic and apolitical in terms of Knowles's stated goal of Canadian postmodern mythmaking. Certainly, by turning the focus away from lived history and increasing the emphasis on performative creation, these millennial plays open themselves to this charge. Rather than seeing these plays as closed, I would argue that they are still open to the world and still do important work in the formation of a national identity. However, instead of endorsing a path to identity as an attainable goal, these plays imply that identity can be defined at a "meta" level—by the values under which we search for that identity. Beyond showing alternative histories, these plays complicate the telling of those histories. Instead of showing an alternate truth, millennial plays are asking "What is truth?"; "Is there even truth out there that I can know?" The plays raise ethical issues, asking "Whose story is this?" and "Who is allowed to tell it?" and "Who will get hurt by

it?” Rather than asking the epistemological question “Who am I?” these millennial plays shift the frame to ask an ontological question: “How am I?” or simply “Am I?” So, rather than defining our Canadianness through the stories we tell and challenging us to make new stories, these plays seek to define us by how we engage with the problem of telling the story in the first place. In the new millennium, these plays suggest that we are no longer defined by our answers (even as a multiplicity of answers) but instead by how we ask the questions.

## RE-PERFORMING MICROHISTORIES

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