

A Train to Castle Von Aux: Patrick deWitt's Fiction and the Transnational Paradigm

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Although Patrick deWitt's writing enjoys considerable commercial and critical success worldwide, situating it within a particular framework—generic, tonal, and perhaps especially cultural and/or national—poses quite a few challenges. Not impossibly, the difficulty with figuring out this Canadian-American has contributed to forestalling a more pronounced inquiry into the writer's output. What the following paper seeks to do is, first and foremost, to initiate an academic conversation about the significance and cultural impact of deWitt's fiction and to catch up with the conversations already in progress, as it were, between literary critics on both sides of the Atlantic. Second, my goal is to contend that, rather than relying on the residual mistrust towards cultural production that courts foreign markets—which, I fear, drives much of the academic neglect of deWitt's work by Canadianists—his fiction, or at least some portion of it, can be more fruitfully studied under the rubric of the transnational. What I argue below is that while some of his writing has engaged with US American culture in more predictable ways, at least one among his novels—the 2015 *Undermajordomo Minor*—builds towards a transnational aesthetic (as theorized, for instance, by Peter Morgan and Kit Dobson), complemented by a transgeneric approach and an intertextual scaffolding, to construct a fantasy *mitteleuropäisch* space not unlike that of Wes Anderson's *Grand Budapest Hotel*.

DeWitt's non-academic recognition is considerable and well-documented, both in North America and on the other side of the Atlantic. One need only mention the Canadian Governor General's Award, and nominations to other major prizes: the Man Booker, the Giller, and the Writers' Trust. His novels (especially his 2011 bestseller, *The Sisters Brothers*) have been translated into numerous languages, and two of them have been adapted to film by celebrated directors. In September 2018, Jacques Audiard's *The Sisters Brothers* premiered at the Venice Film Festival to a standing ovation (Gibbons), and while Kelly Reichardt seems to have temporarily put her filming of *Undermajordomo Minor* on the backburner (Raup), the expectations are very high: the film news outlet *Ion Cinema* listed it as number one among its fifty most anticipated American Indie Films of 2019 (Lavallée). Meanwhile, deWitt's fourth novel, *French Exit*, published in August 2018, was reviewed in

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the likes of *The New Yorker*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Times*, usually within a week of the book's launch.

While the commercial aspect, coupled with high critical regard, would be difficult to deny, the construction of the writer's identity has been more complex. This is evident, for instance, in David Ebner's *Globe and Mail* review of *French Exit*. For one thing, Ebner's text does the now familiar Canadian-American dance: deWitt is referred to as "the Vancouver Island-born and Portland, Oregon-based novelist" (Ebner)—a fact of origins that, for example, neither *The New Yorker*'s Katy Waldman nor Anna Mindow, writing for *The Washington Post*, consider important enough to include in a full-page review. In contrast to such tacit co-options of deWitt as an American (or as close as makes no difference), James Walton in *The Times* identifies the writer as Canadian, omitting his current residence altogether. On the face of it, then, Ebner, the Canadian reviewer, is the only one to potentially regard deWitt's work as a transnational phenomenon. And yet, this position is somewhat complicated by Ebner's mention, early on, of the Canadian journal *Brick* in the context of a little-known short story entitled "The Looking-Ahead Artist." While DeWitt's Canadian publisher is the "mid-sized" House of Anansi (York 23), his four novels were famously picked up by American or British houses: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, Ecco (HarperCollins), Granta Books and Bloomsbury. DeWitt's other short stories ("The Bastard" and "Reed & Dinnerstein Moving") were published in *Electric Literature*, an American quarterly; *Brick* is thus the outlier, the rare exception, and thus its prominent appearance in Ebner's text can be read as an instance of what Cynthia Sugars has called "proprietary Canadianness" (86). Attention is certainly being paid, at home, to the outstanding success story of this "Generation Giller" representative (Barber).¹

As already mentioned, despite all the international renown and critical acclaim, deWitt's writing has thus far inspired very little academic scrutiny. However, *Undermajordomo Minor* was reviewed—and favorably, at that—in the prestigious journal *Canadian Literature*. In its Autumn 2015 issue, Laura Cameron argued that the novel's "fresh take on the Gothic romance is just as dazzlingly realized as [the] reconfigured Western" in *The Sisters Brothers*, finding in deWitt's third novel "a dynamic space where even the oldest of motifs and conventions . . . can live on: surprising, contemporary, and certainly undead" (132-133). Regardless of Cameron's enthusiasm, the fact of a *Canadian Literature* review in itself could be read as a clear signal from the writer's native British Columbia: not only is deWitt—once accused of never having been to Toronto (Bethune)—"Canadian content," but, despite his largely apolitical flirtation with popular genres and crafting self-avowed "user-friendly books"

(Ebner), his work is worthy of consideration in the country's foremost academic journal.

While the sentiment is seldom expressed openly, I am inclined to read the academic neglect of deWitt as fueled by a sense of nationalist wariness, to which Cameron's review can serve as a rare counter-example. This approach is, of course, hardly new. Debates over the extent of various writers' Canadianness have been familiar fare since at least the 1960s' nationalist turn in literary criticism, which kickstarted the careers of such authors as Alice Munro and Margaret Atwood—today, ironically, the most commercially viable Canadian export, adaptable for Netflix or Hulu. Naturally, it would be unfair to suggest that this suspicion of non-Canadian content in homegrown literature has been consistent over the last four decades. For instance, the situation became more complex in the nineties and early noughties, when—in keeping with one visionary Canadian's predictions—the world was increasingly being seen as a “global village’ ... a single constricted space resonant with tribal drums” (McLuhan 31). At least one opinion voiced during that turbulent time continues to resonate today, and for that reason deserves particular attention: the ever contrary Stephen Henighan's 2002 collection of essays, *When Words Deny the World*.

Among other things, Henighan lamented that Canadian culture, and even the idea of Canada, was being destroyed by the Free Trade Agreement, resulting in what he termed “free trade fiction.” Arguing against literary globalization enthusiasts such as Pico Iyer (Sugars 86), Henighan chose as his primary targets two Canadian novels that had done very well abroad in the 1990s: Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* and Anne Michaels' *Fugitive Pieces*. Especially the former, as Sugars reminds us, was widely considered at the time to have brought about “the internationalization of Canadian literature,” spelling out “an instance of [Canada's] postcoloniality” (84). For Henighan, however, these two successful novels were examples of “self-negating literature” (156), in which he saw—among other failings—the triumph of metaphor over historical specificity. He accused Ondaatje and Michaels of fleeing from history and locality, as if their pursuit of “high art” and sophistication depended on “settings remote in time and place from the Canadian present” (138-139). This tendency was described as “merely the latest chapter in the Canadian epic of perpetually forestalled literary innovation” (204). Reasoning on an assumption that literature may ultimately be, or has often been, the only way in which a country is memorialized, he bemoaned Canada's “failure to feast fictionally on [its] own reality” (208) and made truly dramatic proclamations: “No one will know how we lived. . . . No one can remember Canada in the 1990s” (179-80). In novels like Carol Shields'

The Stone Diaries, Barbara Gowdy's *Falling Angels*, or Mordecai Richler's *Barney's Version*, Henighan saw the setting as "deliberately suppressed . . . assiduously unevoked . . . obstinately anachronistic . . . or assimilated into the free trader's homogenized 'North America'" (180).

For Henighan, the key term in this discussion of insufficient Canadianness was naturally globalization, "postcolonialism's bleakly homogenizing successor" (100). He argued that in the Canadian context, globalization was simply equivalent to Americanization (134) and that it was becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish between the two (101). He even went so far as to argue that

[h]istorically, almost no Canadian prose writer has continued to write literary fiction during a prolonged residence in the United States. . . . The power of U.S. mythology, with its insistence on both the distinctness and the "normality" of U.S. life, makes a belief in the slightly askew reality of Canada exceptionally difficult to maintain, let alone embellish and reimagine in fictional form. The writer struggles against the predominant U.S. notion that Canada does not really exist, that it is "just like us, only boring." (208)

When Words Deny the World has remained a point of reference over the years; for instance, analyzing Henighan's position almost a decade later, Cynthia Sugars argued that "[h]is protectionist stance conceals an avid cultural imperialism" (89). More recently, in his *Transnational Canadas*, Kit Dobson recognized Henighan's critique of globalization as important, but saw his defense of "notions of national belonging for the sake of resisting capitalism" (Dobson 164) as questionable, and argued that Henighan's rhetoric reduced the complexity of numerous arguments being made in the field of transnational studies (xi). Dobson contends that "writing in Canada has become transnational . . . in terms of its interest and its politics, and in terms of the publishing industry that supports it. . . . [It] is concerned with crossing national borders thematically, just as it is concerned with marketing on a global scale" (xvii). However, far from lamenting this fact as Henighan does, Dobson regards such thinking—beyond the national—precisely as an opportunity to bypass the complicity with global capitalism and corporatism. "[C]ultural production and literature"—the author of *Transnational Canadas* maintains—are "tools that might be capable of constructing new social relations despite their absorption within capital and the machinery of the nation-state" (146). According to Dobson, then, the dichotomy which Henighan erects—the nation versus the globe—is invalid, because "both operate as interconnecting

nodes of neo-liberal capitalism” (154). It is with such a notion of transnational literature that my reading of deWitt’s fiction, and specifically of *Undermajordomo Minor*, is aligned, even if only with the modest ambition of initiating a broader assessment of the writer’s work.

According to Lorraine York (the foremost authority on the ramifications of Canadian literary celebrity), writers of deWitt’s generation, such as the very successful Esi Edugyan, inevitably face challenges of this sort: the “policing of a familiar boundary” (27), couched within what Sugars has called the “generative circuit of global yearning and cultural angst” (79). In a number of interesting ways, deWitt’s work and its cultural ambience actualize some of the issues raised above. For instance, his material has invariably been picked up for adaptation by non-Canadian directors: two Americans (Azazel Jacobs and Kelly Reichardt) and a Frenchman (Jacques Audiard). What exactly is deWitt’s transnational appeal, then?

One aspect worth pointing out is, as expected, the avoidance of markedly Canadian settings. The scenery of his 2009 debut, *Ablutions*, is, for the most part, a rather unpleasant nook of Hollywood by night; and when the protagonist embarks on a supposedly life-changing journey to quit drinking, it is a voyage into the American sublime, with an underwhelming Grand Canyon at its center. The trip has clear Kerouacian overtones, even if the suicidal bartender resembles *Big Sur*’s world-weary Jack Duluoz rather than the eager Sal Paradise from *On the Road*; and if deWitt’s protagonist is Canadian, he remains mute on the subject. Although Kerouac’s own Americanness has been convincingly contested (see for example van der Bent; Sorrell), the trope of the regenerating journey by car is, one could say, as American as apple pie.

Furthermore, the action of the bestselling *Sisters Brothers*—styled as a postmodern noir western—is set, naturally, in the Gold Rush-era Wild West, between Oregon and California. Here, too, one supposes, the reader is expected to take the Americanness of the fraternal duo, Charlie and Eli, at face value; for Brian Bethune, the setting and characters “could scarcely be less Canadian.” DeWitt’s 2018 novel, *French Exit*, marketed as a “tragedy of manners,” returns to a more contemporary temporal backdrop, with the first part set squarely in New York, and the second in Paris; the main characters, Frances and Malcolm Price, continue the American trend, with childhoods spent in the Adirondacks and skiing in Vail, Colorado. Taken together, these three novels would seem to attest to Henighan’s decades-old claim that for Canadians, globalization equals Americanization. But perhaps this should not surprise us; after all, does an author born in Sidney, British Columbia, who has spent a large part of his life in Portland, Oregon, and in France, really have

any ethical obligation to rise to Henighan's desperate call, and—paraphrasing slightly—“remember Canada in the 2010s”? Could Canada simply be “a good hotel to write from,” as it apparently was for Yann Martel (Sugars 86)?²

This elective Americanness in deWitt would be more easily interpretable if it were not alluringly disrupted in *Undermajordomo Minor*, published in 2015—between *The Sisters Brothers* and *French Exit*. In many ways, *Undermajordomo Minor* is deWitt's most transgressive and mischievous novel, and certainly no “free trade fiction,” as I intend to demonstrate. Instead, I argue, it may be considered under the rubric of literary transnationalism, as defined by Peter Morgan:

a relatively new term . . . critically mediating the relationships between national literatures and the wider forces of globalizing culture. . . . [The] point at which two or more geo-cultural imaginaries intersect, connect, engage with, disrupt or conflict with each other in literary form. . . . [It] involves a level of cognitive dissonance as the recipient interprets and processes the differences and similarities of “nation” and “other,” or of “us” and “them” (3, 14).

Unlike the three novels discussed above, which engage with US American space and culture in rather straightforward ways, *Undermajordomo Minor* can be said to attempt something far more ambitious, and aligned with Morgan's definition: arguably, what one encounters there are “two or more geo-cultural imaginaries” which “intersect, connect [and] engage with” one another to produce a transnational cultural space.

Interestingly, before writing *Undermajordomo Minor*, deWitt set out to produce a contemporary novel about a New York investment banker, but, in a characteristic lateral move, he put that project aside.³ What he undertook in turn was a bizarre quasi-gothic, fairytale narrative⁴: a story of a delicate, affected youth (truly “minor” in a number of ways) with the gender-bending name Lucy, who undertakes an absurd job at the mysterious castle of a frenzied, lovesick Byronic baron. If we trust the writer's account of its origins, the novel was inspired by a collection of European fables and folktales which he stumbled upon at a Parisian bookshop and then read to his young son (see Fitz-Gerald). To deWitt enthusiasts, the story of an accidentally found source must have sounded familiar: after all, the narrative of *The Sisters Brothers* was reportedly inspired by a dime novel about California gold diggers, itself dug out of a yard sale pile of dusty paperbacks. In both cases the anecdote is perhaps also a way of affiliating one's own work not so much with any

particular reality to be mimetically rendered, but vis-à-vis books, myths, and legends, that is, the realm of the fictitious and artificial.

Readers of *The Sisters Brothers* will recall that its plot revolved around a miraculous formula which illuminated all the precious metal in the river; in an analogous metatextual gesture, deWitt was able to turn the old formula of the western into fashionably postmodern gold, lacing a traditionally one-dimensional, conflict-based narrative with a darkly humorous existentialist sensibility. That novel's success, it seems, depended largely on deWitt's willingness to remain within the confines (however updated) of the genre. And yet, in *The Sisters Brothers*, Hermann Kermit Warm's formula proves as helpful to locating gold as it is dangerous to one's health if overused; it should perhaps come as no surprise that in *Undermajordomo Minor* deWitt broadens his repertoire, resisting the urge to repeat the trick by inhabiting one particular tradition. Instead, he juggles several tired genres, such as the fable, the gothic romance, and the novel of apprenticeship.

The action of this transgeneric work is set, most likely, in the 19th century. Where deWitt's other novels are rather precise in their geographical mapping, *Undermajordomo Minor* occupies a vaguely defined space, bearing certain marks of the European landscape: railway tracks span a continent still governed by feudal institutions. What we are dealing with here, however, is fantastic geography with a Germanic tinge, where recognizable place names (such as Ravensburg) hardly denote familiar localities, while others become oddly meaningful. For instance, the protagonist's dreary, dead-end town is logically called Bury, and the ordinary English suffix—hiding in plain sight in names such as Salisbury or Glastonbury—is here put to semantic work. Lucy Minor's journey by train from that unappealing location to his new post with the Baron lasts entire days, and yet, pointedly, no borders are crossed, nor is language ever a problem. Rather, Lucy's native town of Bury, as much as Ravensburg and Castle von Aux itself, all seem to lie on an endless, transnational plane, as if nations, languages, and identities were all nebulous concepts at best. Perhaps this is why none of the characters really understand or care to discover the reason for the war continually being fought on a mountain slope in the background; the two opposing parties remain curiously indefinite, their disputes shrouded in mystery and almost certainly absurd.

The names of characters in *Undermajordomo Minor* offer a similar European mélange: next to those of Anglo-Saxon provenance (Minor, Broom, or Olderglough) one finds more German-sounding names, such as Klara or, indeed, Adolfus. However, proper names are not to be trusted, either; for instance, the Baron's seemingly grand surname 'von Aux' points to a cluster of German and French prepositions which in themselves are,

practically, semantic nullities, suggesting something like “the baron of *of*.” In this way, the novel subtly reveals its politics, ridiculing the vacuity of aristocratic pretensions, while ultimately cheering for the underdogs: the servants, such as Lucy himself and his love interest, Klara.

The transnational element in *Undermajordomo Minor* is very strongly underscored by the novel’s intertextual borrowings, both literary and cinematic, which—as I intend to demonstrate—lean heavily towards the culture of that hazy, mythicized entity known as Mitteleuropa. The appendix to the novel, in the form of a list of writers and artists to whom deWitt apparently feels indebted, is noteworthy in itself, perhaps even more so that among the nineteen names not even one is Canadian, but nine belong to US Americans (including Robert Coover, Shirley Jackson, Harry Mathews, and Steven Millhauser). Reviewers of deWitt’s fiction (for example Mundow) have made use of the list, pointing out, among other things, that his reliance on stylized, witty dialogue is inherited from English novelist Ivy Compton-Burnett. However, what seems far more important for the novel’s thematic scope is its indebtedness to several German-language texts, most of all Robert Walser’s *Jakob von Gunten* and Thomas Bernhard’s *Gargoyles*,⁵ with the inevitable long shadow of Kafka’s *Castle*.

Bernhard and Walser seem to be little read in Canada—or in North America, more broadly—at least in contrast to their stature in a number of European countries. However, their influence can still be felt in the work of some of Canada’s more idiosyncratic writers. Strong Bernhardian inflection undoubtedly runs, for instance, through the manic rants of Rawi Hage’s narrators (especially in *Cockroach*), while John Gould, in his miniature, “palm-of-the-hand” stories from collections such as *Kingdom of Heaven*, seems to have made fruitful use of Bernhard’s odd, recursive syntax (as in “How One Becomes Lonely” or “Hum”). Notably, the Austrian’s name appears in the list at the end of *Undermajordomo Minor*, but rather than appropriating a certain stylistic quality, deWitt—a writer of a very different temperament than the fiery Hage or the cerebral Gould—appears to have used *Gargoyles*, an early novel of Bernhard’s, as a thematic blueprint. For instance, the madness of *Undermajordomo Minor*’s Baron von Aux seems to be modeled on the symptoms of at least two patients treated by the doctor in Bernhard’s novel. Also, the situation of a young man initiated into the world’s unsettling complexities by an older one who is world-weary to the point of lunacy mirrors the relationship between the doctor’s son and Prince Saurau, whose deranged monologue takes up almost half of *Gargoyles*. In fact, the theme of apprenticeship, more typically manifesting as a master/assistant dynamic, is one which runs through a number of other intertexts, discussed below.

The Kafkaesque element is definitely present in the scenery used by deWitt: Castle von Aux, itself primarily a chronotopic object (cf. Smith 49), marking the narrative's allegiance with the fairy tale, medieval romance and the gothic tradition. Parodic echoes of land surveyor K.'s predicament can be heard in Lucy's prolonged inability to approach the true seat of power: apparently, only the elusive Baron can explain the boy's actual role in this muddled microcosm. This aspect of the novel also brings to mind another name mentioned in deWitt's list—that of Robert Walser, a writer of whom Kafka himself was very fond (Middleton vi, xix; Coetzee), and who has arguably influenced Bernhard's idiom. Indeed, deWitt's inspirations appear to be enmeshed in an intertextual web of their own. As regards Walser, although deWitt prefaced his own work with an excerpt from the Swiss writer's 1913 story "Balloon Journey," *Undermajordomo Minor* is particularly indebted to the 1909 novel *Jakob von Gunten* (Young). This peculiar narrative of the eponymous Jakob's non-adventures at the Benjamenta Institute, a bizarre school for servants—apparently based on Walser's own experiences during his appointment at "a Silesian château" (Middleton xi)—reverberates through deWitt's text. The waning Mr. Olderglough is evidently a version of the sinister but actually feeble Herr Benjamenta, while the alluring, sensuous ennui of Fräulein Benjamenta certainly informs the character of deWitt's voluptuous Baroness von Aux. Naturally, in this setup, Lucy Minor figures as an incarnation of Jakob von Gunten: the pupil, desiring to reinvent himself and become the perfect servant, destined to outlive and outshine the institution that (mis)shaped him.

What I find striking about deWitt's concoction of these themes and attitudes from Walser, Kafka, and Bernhard is how successfully he is able to mine their comic potential, using them to his purpose without becoming enslaved by any particular rhetoric. In his transnational novel, deWitt manages to channel his Swiss, Czech, and Austrian literary ancestors within a mock gothic scenery of castles in the snow which also seems intensely cinematic, recalling the delightfully goofy world of Roman Polanski's *Fearless Vampire Killers* or Wes Anderson's *Grand Budapest Hotel*. Indeed, there is a particular filmic quality to deWitt's work in general—the brisk, clever dialogue, the channeling of popular genres, the eccentric characters, the propensity for grotesque savagery—and his alliance with cinema, first through the *Terri* screenplay and then through the two novel adaptations, should come as no surprise.

However, I believe that there are a few other reasons why Polanski's late 60s parodic take on the vampire genre and especially Anderson's more recent 'conciierge dramedy' come to mind as immediate intertexts. Firstly,

deWitt's tone (in general, but even more so in *Undermajordomo Minor*) is close to the quirky sensibility as theorized, among others, by James MacDowell: an "ongoing tension struck between attitudes that seem definable as coolly 'ironic' and warmly 'sincere.'" What MacDowell sees as this sensibility's defining qualities are an "aesthetic that finds various ways of evoking a simplified and fastidious 'artificiality,' a comic register combining bathetic deadpan, comedy-of-embarrassment, and physical humor, and a thematic interest in childhood and 'innocence'" (84). Secondly, common thematic ground between the two films and deWitt's third novel is the exploration of the master/assistant dynamic, also crucial to *Jakob von Gunten* and significant in *Gargoyles*. Thirdly, and more importantly for this particular study, both films have the comedic duo's adventures play out against the backdrop of a mythical *Mitteleuropa*: a landscape where national boundaries are either invisible, or are currently undergoing a very unnatural and unpleasant rigidification.

In *Fearless Vampire Killers*, as in deWitt's novel, the feudal structure overrides national allegiances: with the action supposedly set "deep in the heart of Transylvania," what matters most is the parasitic relationship between Count von Krolock's castle and the village, or perhaps shtetl, as several important characters are Jewish. Although the main protagonists, Professor Abronsius and his assistant Albert, have traveled from Königsberg, all characters share a *lingua franca*, figured in the film as English. Crucially, most—except the very articulate Professor, the mute Koukol and the archly Germanic Count—speak this language with a deliberately emphasized Eastern European accent.

This is not to suggest that, despite his comedic approach, Polanski paints a rosy, idyllic picture of this Transylvanian space, but merely that its problems seem to preexist the idea of the nation-state. In the Stefan Zweig-inspired *Grand Budapest Hotel*, Wes Anderson performs a similar gesture, constructing a transnational Middle-European space with a conspicuously Austro-Hungarian tinge, fantastically united through language. However, his transnational, romanticized Imperial *Mitteleuropa*—with the imaginary Republic of Zubrowka somewhere at its very heart—is on the cusp of crumbling, and, as Kevin Henderson claims, "the fragile concept of civilization . . . hangs in the balance" (188). Two crucial, mirrored scenes in the film portray an unexpected halting of the train at a newly erected national border, where rowdy, markedly Germanic soldiers in shabby uniforms stop Monsieur Gustave and his assistant Zero, demanding to see valid travel documents. Significantly, both document inspections are preceded by the passengers' incredulous question: "Why are we stopping in a barley field?" In its preposterousness, the transmogrification of indistinctive white space (the

field seems bare of anything, including barley) into a national border appears as absurd as the war fought on the slopes of the mountain in deWitt's novel.

Thus, in *Undermajordomo Minor* deWitt undertakes something markedly different from the strategies typical of what Stephen Henighan dismissed, two decades ago, as "free trade fiction." These goals may be more modest than what Dobson would see as bypassing the complicity with global capitalism and corporatism, but neither does deWitt take the easy route of emulating recognizably American genres or modes for the immediate profit of readerly appeal. Just as the cracking yet carefully maintained toughness of Eli and Charlie Sisters in his breakthrough novel gives way to Lucy's delicate "alternative masculinity," so the American pop influences are replaced by a more heterogeneous cultural backdrop with a nostalgic, distinctly *mitteleuropäisch* feel. I argue that through its generic promiscuity (encompassing, among others, the fairytale, the gothic romance, and the novel of apprenticeship) and its diverse network of allusions (ranging from Kafka's *Castle*, through Walser's *Jakob von Gunten* and Bernhard's *Gargoyles* to Zweig as re-appropriated by Anderson in *Grand Budapest Hotel*), deWitt establishes in *Undermajordomo Minor* a heterogeneous, transnational space which complicates reception and invites an intertextual reading. This imaginary geography is admittedly not Canadian, either, and will make it no easier for anyone to "remember Canada in the 2010s"; and yet, the novel's vortex of literary and cinematic references, sharing the same semantic and cultural core, belies its apparent lightness, adding an intertextual adventure to those that make up its wildly improbable plot. While my article, intended as prolegomena, merely gestures towards a few possibilities of critical endeavor, I firmly believe that the novel—and deWitt's work in general—deserves more academic scrutiny, in North America and elsewhere, than it has thus far received.

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Notes

¹ In his October 4, 2011 piece for *The Globe and Mail*, John Barber used the term "Generation Giller" to describe a group of young writers "[taking] centre stage" (Barber) after the finalists for the prestigious 2011 Scotiabank Giller Prize were announced. Apart from deWitt, nominated for *The Sisters Brothers*, this group included Esi Edugyan (currently a household name with two Giller wins for *Half-Blood Blues* and *Washington Black*), David Bezmozgis, Lynn Coady, and Zsuzsi Gartner. According to Lorraine York, Barber's use of the term was at least partly negative, suggesting that "certain of these young writers [were] fashioning their cosmopolitan narratives . . . in order to court international markets" (York 24-26).

² In his Man Booker acceptance speech, the famously multicultural Martel used this phrase to describe the writing of his awarded 2001 novel, *Life of Pi*.

³ As Harvkey observes, “[j]unking one book to pursue another is, it turns out, an action with which deWitt is all too familiar. In fact, for every book the author published, he has discarded another. . . . Between *Ablutions* and *The Sisters Brothers* he wrote and junked two books, partially salvaging one by adapting a section [as a screenplay for Azazel Jacobs’s 2011 film *Terr1*]” (Harvkey 39).

⁴ I am certainly aware of the critical dissent as regards the exact semantics of the term “fairy tale” as demonstrated in the work of such scholars as Bruno Bettelheim, Jack Zipes, and Maria Tatar. For the purpose of this article, my sense of the “fairy tale” element is that described by Kevin Paul Smith as the “architextual/chronotopic,” that is, having to do with the setting and environment more than with, for instance, explicit or implicit references to particular texts or repurposing old familiar narratives: “a type of intertextuality that leads the reader to recall a genre, rather than specific examples of that genre” (Smith 48-53).

⁵ The novel’s original title, *Verstörung*, denotes disturbance, disorder, or perturbation.

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