

Transformation and puppetry in the illustrations of Elizabeth Cleaver

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Résumé: *H. Thompson examine comment les illustrations déclenchent et encouragent une lecture plurielle du texte écrit et permettent à l'imagination de s'épanouir; elle s'attache particulièrement à l'oeuvre d'Elizabeth Cleaver et montre par quels moyens cette dernière transforme la thématique des ouvrages qu'elle illustre et par quels procédés sa technique infléchit l'interprétation du récit.*

In picture books like Mary Alice Downie's *The wind has wings* (1968) and William Toye's *How summer came to Canada* (1969), Elizabeth Cleaver's ability to create paper collage, which changes her hand-made paper with its torn edges into a picture on a paper page, has a magical quality. The magic has much to do with the transformation of a tear into a wave, a hill, or a snow-capped mountain. But there is no illusion or hidden artifice here; the magic is enhanced by our seeing the transformation occur.

Furthermore, this particular form of magic is a revelation in keeping with the traditional tales Cleaver chose to illustrate. Her art is appropriate not to stories "of dreams come true, but of reality made evident" (Opie 11). In commenting on traditional stories, the Opies explain the nature of this revelation: "The magic in the tales (if magic is what it is) lies in people and creatures being shown to be what they really are" (11). In a parallel fashion, the torn paper edges and the mottled tones of the coloured paper Cleaver pulls wet from a glass plate tell us that waves, hills, mountains, sky, leaves and green grass lay hidden within the monoprint, waiting for the artist to reveal them to us. We anticipate the geography of her pages in the colours and shapes which impress us when we first see them. Cleaver makes her landscape manifest through the magic of her art while showing us how she effects the transformation.

Her characters are equally transformed. Cleaver's cut-out figures and linocut illustrations hold within them the essence of puppets long before she focuses her stories on puppets in *Petrouchka* (1980) and in *The enchanted caribou* (1985). She explains that her later experiments with puppets in picture books fulfilled her desire to find ways "in which my cut-out collaged figures would come alive" ("Fantasy" 68).

If her characters appear puppet-like, it is because of the manner in which she creates and positions them. The cut paper and linocut characters are stylized,

two-dimensional figures standing, almost posed and certainly ready for action rather than in action, before the stage sets created with her torn paper (Nodelman 77-78). In using cut-out figures with children in the classroom I have myself noted the effectiveness of the simple two-dimensional figure whose paper limbs can be folded by children to suggest action.¹ In drama-in-education, like a Cleaver illustration, the simple puppet-like form encourages the participant to anticipate action, while, it is hoped, stimulating his/her kinesthetic awareness.

Transformation and the Creative Process

While her landscapes and puppet-like characters engage her readers, Cleaver's illustrations explore the theme of transformation. In *How summer came to Canada*, Glooscap finds Summer and reveals the fertile and beneficent land of Canada held captive by the icy realm of Winter. In another Canadian Indian legend, *The fire stealer* (1979), Nanabozho brings fire to his people at the same time as he gives us the extraordinary colours of a Canadian fall. He, like other creative artists, can change our view of the world. His nature reflects Cleaver's understanding of the artistic process, for he is a shape-shifter with the ability to become what he creates. Cleaver's classic illustration of Nanabozho becoming a birch tree anticipates her later comments on Petrouchka: "the idea of bringing to life puppets. in [sic] order to create anything we have to project ourselves into it" (Typescript in the National Library of Canada). The analogy is between giving feeling to an inanimate object and Cleaver's creative imagination which, like Keats', requires empathetic transformation into the being or object being created. This idea of projecting the imagination can apply to all creative artists, from writers to painters, to actors—and especially to puppeteers, who must project their energy and feelings into an inanimate object.

Furthermore, this aspect of transformation is particularly appropriate to the traditional nature of the stories Cleaver illustrates. In his essay "Concerning the Problem of Transformation in the Fairy Tale," Hedwig von Beit suggests that:

In a mythical thinking process a mystical partaking of all beings one from the other, and the secret connections and ties between natural beings and objects, are taken for granted There is a secret oneness of all forms; or better, there is a oneness of power, which governs everything which is experienced by feeling. (60)

Von Beit's essay explores the problems of a symbolic interpretation of traditional stories while emphasising the immediacy of experience which informs the "archaic nature" (70) of these tales. Cleaver's understanding of the artist's need to transform herself into the being, plant or object she creates is akin to the mythical thinking process described above, and typical of the Indian stories of Nanabozho and Glooscap who can change form at will.

Cleaver's interest in puppetry took her also into the "archaic" world of folk stories when she travelled in Turkey and Greece in 1970-72. Here she watched

the shadow puppet plays which are so popular throughout this region as well as in Indonesia, India and Malaysia. The stories told are ancient: stories of deities and of human and super-human heroes. Cleaver explores this mythic and geographical region in her work, illustrating and recreating the story of *The miraculous hind*.

Transformation: Image and Text

The miraculous hind (1973) is the most puppet-like of the picture books created before *Petrouchka*. The story tells of the mythic transformation of a nomadic people into a nation of Hungarians settled in one geographic area. Their transformation is effected by the guidance of an animal helper: an elusive hind who leads them first to the Sea of Asov and then on to the Carpathian Basin. Cleaver uses linocuts of figures whose potential both to move and to become fully realized human beings is held within their stiff forms and costumes. The internal coherence of the design is maintained by the repetition of these figures and of the decorative linocuts which form the theatrical backdrop to the action

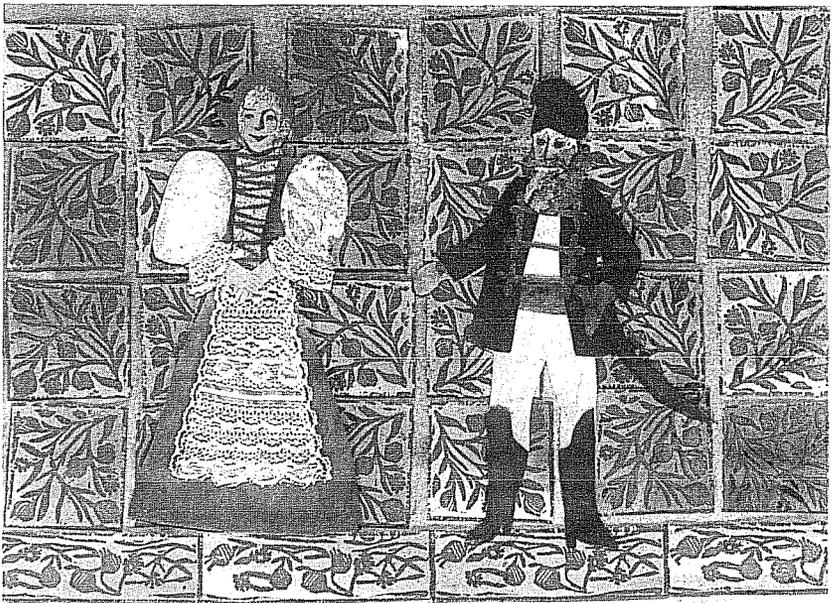
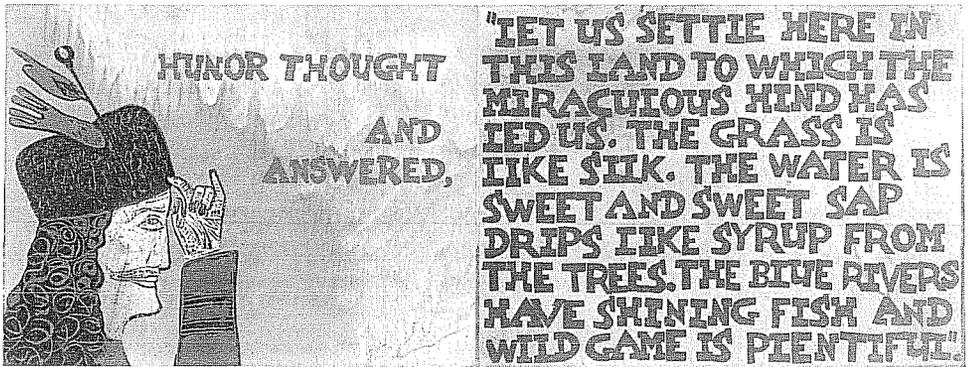


Figure 1

The design of these figures remains the same throughout the story. However, and with corresponding tension, it is the text rather than the images which undergoes transformation. Throughout the quest the text appears in black typescript at the foot or head of the page. But, as the heroes arrive in the promised land, the exterior description of their action changes. Hunor, his profile huge on a pink

background, thinks in poetic language and creates a panegyric on the land. Cleaver uses more elevated language and creates holographic cut-out letters in coloured paper on paper of a different colour.



The image and the text interlace and become one at this magic moment of transformation.

The technique is repeated at other magical points in the text. For instance, at the in-between time of twilight the orange holographic letters reappear on a blue monoprint:

AT TWILIGHT, THE MAGIC
 TIME BETWEEN DAY AND
 NIGHT, A STRANGE THING
 HAPPENED AS IF IN A
 DREAM THE MEN BEGAN
 TO HEAR MUSIC LIKE RIP
 PLING WAVES DRIFTING
 THROUGH THE WOODS STIR
 RING DEW DROPS ON THE
 BLADES OF GRASS. (40)

Theatricality, language and art come together in *The miraculous hind*, even though the theatre is not the focus of the work. Cleaver created the accurate costumes which dress the paper doll-like figures using ethnographical material from the Royal Ontario Museum, with advice from Veronica Gervers. The staged backgrounds for interior scenes use a repeated square linocut turned in various directions, thus repeating the pattern but at different angles, with a rectangular series of similar cuts being repeated for the floor. The cut is based on Turkish tiles “that were ordered in 1640 by the Transylvanian Prince, George Rakotei I, for decorating the walls of the audience chamber in his castle at Sarospatak, Hungary” (64). The figures of Magyar and Hunor appear to stand, as if on a stage set in front of the background without interacting with it (as in figure 1).

This collage is fitted to simple human forms. They resemble nineteenth-century cardboard puppets whose arm and leg movements occupy the same plane as the body. Here the use of puppets is suggested in the forms, but the transformation of the text is achieved both in theme and in image by the words Elizabeth Cleaver cuts and pastes onto her coloured prints.

Transformation and Puppetry

If puppets lie dormant within the cut-out figures used before *Petrouchka* (1980), they are, however, reminiscent of the playthings of children rather than of the complex creations manipulated by modern performance artists in Western theatre. Two-dimensional figures like jumping jacks, they could be moved by strings or sticks like the Greek shadow figure of Karazog, seen by Cleaver in her 1970-72 visit to Greece and Turkey.

My own experience of this character was in 1983 at the Puppet Centre created by Malcolm Knight in Glasgow. The lone puppeteer (on tour from Greece) worked behind a screen using Karazog, as well as knights and the heroic figure of Alexander. He made his own sound effects, special effects, silhouettes, scenery, and puppets. For these he used heavy card and transparent acetate which he painted different colours. He entertained an audience consisting of Greek immigrants in Scotland, myself and my two friends. We passed children and food among us as we shared the magic of this long performance of folk theatre. Later we examined the flat puppets whose limbs were manipulated by hinged horizontal sticks, but whose movement was limited to an arm and/or a leg. Karazog is not the hero, who was Alexander, but was rather a comic fool, a foil for the heroic action.

The archetypal figure of the clown/trickster underpins Cleaver's character of *Petrouchka* and her then current view of her own artistic process: "I feel *Petrouchka* reflects the sensitivity of all artists. *Petrouchka* is a *universal character*.² In Turkey he is called Karazog, in Italy he is called Pulcinella, in England he is Punch. I love this clown/puppet image" (Typescript in The National Library of Canada). The clown in *Petrouchka* depends more on the romantic French pastoral figure of Harlequin than he does on the anarchical English trickster Punch. While *Petrouchka* fights the Turkish Knight for love of the Ballerina, Punch kills his wife and baby and then defeats the devil (and all other authority figures) to save his soul. However, both these clown/puppets undergo transformation into a spiritual state, or another state of being.

As Cleaver worked on her M.A. thesis for Concordia University, she delved into the work of psychologist Carl Jung and sacred-psychologist and drama practitioner Jean Houston ("Fantasy" 67). The work of Carl Jung and his concept of individuation, which transforms an individual into a conscious unified being, is commonly known.

Jean Houston is also internationally known through her workshops and

through her Mystery School in New York State. Her work is particularly relevant here because she uses drama as a technique to encourage self-actualization through dramatic participation in re-enactments of mythic stories.³ These stories she calls root stories: those which are at the root of the development of spiritual awareness for various groups, regions and individuals. She feels that the stories of Percival, Jesus, Ulysses, Rama and St. Francis touch us at many levels: physical, psychological, mythic and religious ("Fantasy" 67).

It would seem that Cleaver feels the same about the story of Petrouchka: "Petrouchka is a story about feelings. Petrouchka is a trapped soul who cries out to be human. He expresses a variety of feelings: joy, anger, pain, dejection, humiliation, love, triumph [sic]" (Typescript in National Library of Canada). She also believes that the puppet figure can represent the spiritual transformation of an individual who has achieved self-actualization and has become "human": "The puppet is a symbol of the self⁴—he is deep down in the human mind a primordial symbol of the human being;" and "I love the idea of a puppet suddenly endowed with life" (Typescript in the National Library of Canada). This awakening of the puppet is akin to the self-actualization / individuation of a human being. At the same time, Cleaver feels that the artistic process aids in her own discovery of self (or transformation). Also, the nature of the subject chosen for the picture book stimulates growth and self-discovery in her readers.

Transformation and Puppetry: Petrouchka

Petrouchka is unlike Cleaver's other picture books in that a frame surrounds the illustrations and text. The style of illustration, of the frame, and the position and type face of the text are constant on each page, and this uniformity is broken only by the changing strip of colour caught in the black lines of each frame. Within this frame, furthermore, the city wall often forms the background to the action, and its appearance intimates to the reader a stage set within a proscenium arch. This message is repeated by the image of the puppets presented on stage within the simple frame of the puppet theatre. This use of a container for these images focuses the attention of the reader, indicating his/her function. The implied role is that of audience anticipating an exciting play; and we are simultaneously audience for both Cleaver's illustrations and for the puppet play.

There are many frames here. The narrative frame begins with children coming to enjoy a Shrovetide fair: "Near the gate of the city, sleighs raced over the snow, jingling their bells" (2). Here too the author informs us of the frame of memory: clearly the story is not set in Canada but in a place beyond the frame of reference of contemporary Canadian readers. The use of the old city walls as the setting puts us on the edge of a place of work yet outside the functional occupations of a people different from us but who have travelled here for entertainment, just as we have opened the pages of the book with the same motive. This event, an annual fair and the enjoyment of this special picture book,

is beyond the pale of ordinary life.

So, the reader is audience anticipating the fun and then participating in it. The children at the fair make up the audience for the various entertainers at the fair. These entertainers are the minor characters: mostly dancers, they are foils to the plot. The major characters are not human: they are the puppets and the puppet master (an almost supernatural figure). The interaction of illustration and reader preserves the aesthetic distance of theatre: as if on stage, the eyes of the performers rarely catch the eye of the reader. In *The miraculous hind* the hunters often share the fun of the quest by looking out of the illustration directly at the reader. Here, during the puppet performance, no eye contact is made with the reader (7-12). Throughout the story peripheral characters, such as the drummers (7) and the children (2,3,4,5,20), make contact with the reader. Only in his final triumph does Petrouchka smile directly at the reader from above the frame of the puppet stage. He has been released from bondage and is transformed into a sentient being (see figure 3).

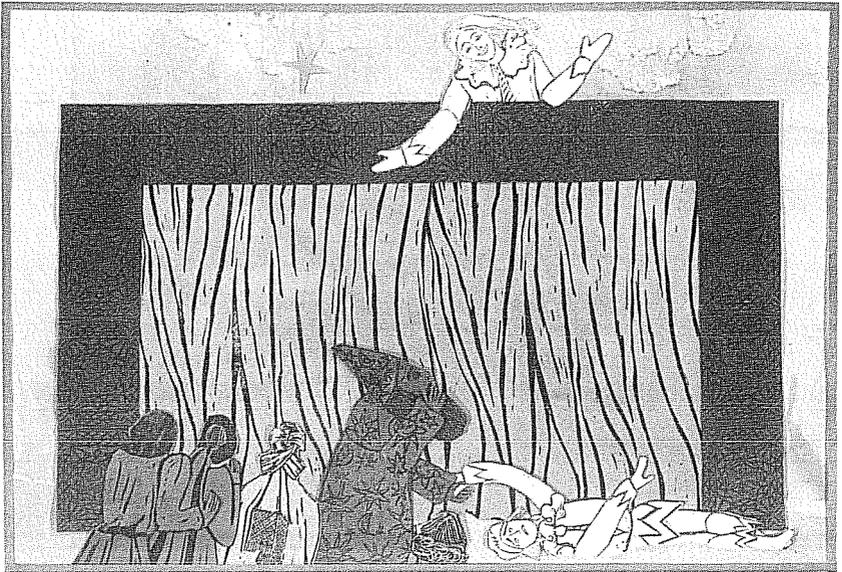


Figure 3

The artistic tension in *Petrouchka* comes from those factors which Cleaver was integrating: “I feel that through this picture book I have been able to rediscover for myself images and a variety of feelings. I have been able to integrate my love for the magic of the puppet theatre, ballet, music, costume and stage design” (30). The mobile arts of marionette theatre, ballet and music are difficult forms to present in still pictures, while costume and stage design can render such a picture static. These contradictory elements cohere only because of the theme of transformation. Dance is at the heart of that theme. The clown

wishes to be released from his prescriptive—clumsy and funny—character. He wants to dance out of love for, and to impress, the beautiful ballerina: “Petrouchka was filled with delight and leaped awkwardly about the room to show his pleasure” (14). The clown’s inability to dance and to share love are one and the same tragedy. His puppet nature makes him incapable of graceful movement and also of feeling. His possession of a soul makes him aware of his own nature and of his tragedy. His efforts to fulfill love precipitate his escape from puppet-life through puppet-death. His soul will live forever (30). Petrouchka’s transformation into a feeling human being means that he will join in the dance of life.

The illustrations which depict this process of transformation also maintain internal coherence through frames and container images. The visual and narrative frames, the puppet stage and the rooms the puppets inhabit behind the stage, are forms of containers which can be broken by deep feelings and by dance. When the ballerina is disgusted with Petrouchka, she leaps through the walls of his room to find the Moor. When Petrouchka is overcome with fear for the ballerina’s safety, he too leaps through the wall of his container. Likewise, when the Moor becomes enraged with him, Petrouchka runs outside the frame of the puppet-stage to die in the open space in front of the city walls. Finally, of course, Petrouchka leaves the realm of puppets (represented by the proscenium arch) and from on top of the puppet stage smiles his triumph.

A connection can be made between this use of frames, or containers, and the poetic image of the house: “On whatever theoretical horizon we examine it, the house image would appear to have become the topography of our intimate being Not only our memories, but the things we have forgotten are ‘housed.’ Our soul is an abode. And by remembering ‘houses’ and ‘rooms,’ we learn to ‘abide’ within ourselves” (Bachelard xxxiii). For his examination of this image Bachelard allows two chapters. Here I simply want to suggest that Cleaver has chosen the image of rooms and containers to explore the memories and pleasures of her own life, while using the same image to represent the constrictions on the abode of the soul of Petrouchka. He was possessed of a soul within the constraints of a container (a puppet body). His release is symbolic of the expansion of his soul, of his transformation into another aware state of being. Self-actualization and individuation could describe his new state. The story is, of course, based on Igor Stravinski’s ballet. Thus Cleaver uses the motif of the dance as well as container to manifest the transformation of Petrouchka. The puppet used in the illustrations is a flat, two-dimensional, paper cut-out similar to the figures in *The miraculous hind*. His limbs move as they did, at the elbows and knees and on a flat plane (see figure 4).

Such limited movement is appropriate for the clumsy clown who cannot dance to please the ballerina. Yet at his death we realise that this was not the puppet Elizabeth Cleaver was depicting. The puppet master comes to the dead puppet and “Hastily, he lifted the straw-filled puppet, hoping he could repair the damage” (29). This confusion between the marionette and the cut-out paper

puppet can be seen in Cleaver's notes on Petrouchka's gestures found in the National Library of Canada. She talks of his movements as "rigid" and adds in a hand-written note "above him, as if to be controlling his actions," which would suggest a stringed puppet. On that same page, however, another hand-written note describes Petrouchka further: "P. paper-cut-out parts are moveable and P. is made from moveable cut-out parts." Here the art-form she uses for her illustration comes into conflict with the concept of a marionette, a more traditional representation of these descendants of *commedia dell'arte* puppets.⁵ Ballet leaps would certainly be easier to accomplish with a marionette. Nevertheless, in the nineteenth-century, cut-out figures of Harlequin, Columbine, Clown and other *commedia dell'arte* characters were available as playthings. Again, the puppet form Cleaver is drawn to is the childhood toy rather than the professional stage puppet. This would explain the contradiction we see in the use of puppetry in *Petrouchka*.



Figure 4

Transformation and Puppetry: *The Enchanted Caribou*

MAGIC WORDS

In the very earliest time,
 when both people and animals lived on earth,
 a person could become an animal if he wanted to
 and an animal could become a human being.
 Sometimes they were people
 and sometimes animals
 and there was no difference.
 All spoke the same language.

This poem forms the frontispiece of *The enchanted caribou*. It reflects the “mythical thinking process” in which “the secret connections and ties between natural beings and objects are taken for granted” (Von Beit 60). Indeed the vehicle of transformation, the doll she has made which disenchants Tyya, is explained in Von Beit’s essay, for he tells us that objects that are related to, or are parts of, the natural being are as efficacious for change as the whole being (60). Equally, then, images of natural beings can call forth the whole dynamic of that being.

This is what Cleaver discovered when she used shadow puppets at Baker Lake before writing this picture book. In a hand-written note in the National Library she comments:

The Eskimo language has no word for shadow puppetry my translator had problems finding a word for it—Finally she used the word ‘spirit puppets’ which caused great concern among parents. They were worried that they would not be able to explain questions about spirits to their children and did not think it was a good idea to call forth spirits of animals or human beings. I realized that they associated shadows with ‘spirits’ and that the demonstration of shadow puppetry was magical.

One can understand this thinking. Shadows are already transforming reality: they are images (sometimes distorted) of the real thing. Their effect on the mind

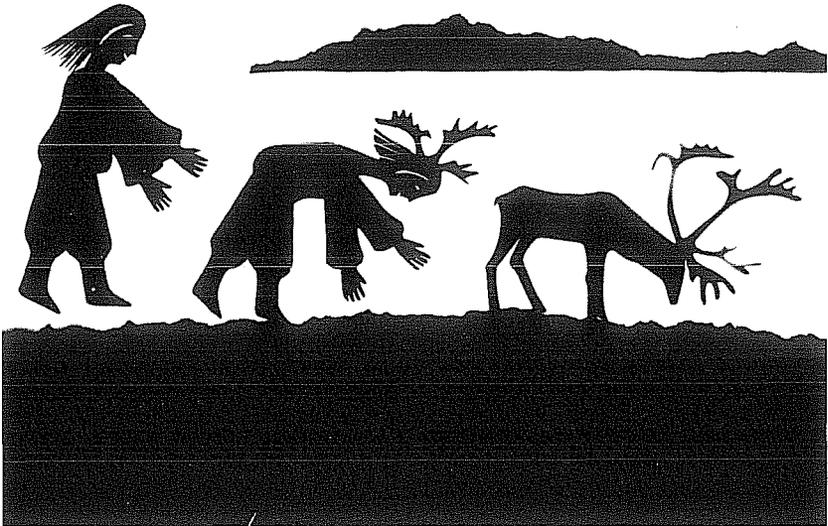


Figure 5

and imagination is intense and profound. And Cleaver's use of the theme of transformation within the text adds to this mystery: "It can be the most poetic form of puppetry since it is ideal for presenting dreams, visions and transformation scenes" ("Fantasy" 72). (See figure 5)

The character of Tyya is transformed twice. She becomes a white caribou through the power of an evil shaman (female) and she becomes human again through the impact of objects that belong to her, or that she has made, and that are thrown on the caribou's back by her young admirer Etosack. This act was also performed under the influence of a wise old woman: Etosack's dead grandmother advises him on his actions in a dream. Simultaneously Tyya changes from a young girl into a woman ready to "live together happily" with Etosack. Her transformation under the guidance of these wise women (both hostile and benign) is her initiation into adulthood.

The focus of the Baker Lake Project which spawned *The enchanted caribou* was teaching and learning. Elizabeth Cleaver's work with Centaur Theatre ("A Shadow Puppet Show" based on Eskimo Fables, Christmas, 1970) and her subsequent tour of Turkey, Greece and Iran increased her enthusiasm for sharing her shadow puppets: "I wanted to do something with this experience and knowledge and worked out a project where I could combine my interest in literature, puppetry and the visual arts and decided to go to Baker Lake and work with children adapting Eskimo fables to shadow puppetry" (Report on Baker Lake Project to Canada Council, National Library of Canada).

This need to share her knowledge and promote exploration takes Cleaver outside the picture book and into the classroom. Yet for this last picture book the learning and discovery are not limited to art work alone, but to a stage of development in the female quest. Although passive on her quest, Tyya does journey alone, and her activity is that of an artist making dolls from feathers, bone and driftwood. Though Etosack performs the act of throwing these articles on the white caribou, it is Tyya's own creations that bring her back. Without her own actions, her transformation would have been a lonely and tragic one.

Cleaver clarifies the aim of this work to be Jungian self-actualization. Her subject matter and her shadow puppet pictures promote self-discovery in both writer and reader:

In shadow theatre, through illumination, the shadow figure appears as a transformed object. In analytical psychology, the first stage in the individuation process leads to the encounter with the shadow, where the term 'shadow' refers to the unconscious, repressed part of the personality—the dark side. Shadows present us with fleeting images whether they are projected from the mind or on a screen: they define the border between light and dark. Thus both the shadow theatre and the Jungian shadow attempt to lead man to self-realization and transformation. ("Fantasy" 77-78)

Cleaver's use of the theme of transformation and her puppet-like illustrations reach their peak in *The enchanted caribou* where the art form and her aim are so coherent.

Puppetry and transformation are found in Cleaver's art of collage where the paper reveals the landscape; in her use of legends whose essence is a major event

or transformation of nature or of people; in her creative process where she projects her imagination into the objects and beings she creates; and in her theme and aim for her picture books. Self-discovery and learning, "self-realization and individuation" is ultimately the way she comes to define "transformation."

NOTES

- 1 In my work in drama-in-education in England with Dorothy Heathcote I observed this technique. I have used it myself in Nova Scotia. *Language Arts*, Fall, 1985 (in which a Heathcote article is published), has a cover reminiscent of a Cleaver illustration, using torn coloured paper and black cut-out figures.
- 2 Cleaver's emphasis. She draws a box around the words.
- 3 At the Omega Institute in New York State I undertook a three-day workshop with Jean Houston during which she talked of her philosophy. The discoveries made in her workshops (reworked in many ways with her graduate students from Union College) are published in the books listed here under Works Cited.
- 4 Cleaver crosses out "man" and replaces it with "the self."
- 5 In Belgium I saw a folk play based on the adventures of Karulka. Though the play was in Flemish, I could recognize the marionette figure from his costume as Pulcinella. He is described in Pierre Duchartre's classic work on *The Italian comedy*. George Speaight in his *History of the English puppet theatre* also spends much time on the touring marionette figures of the *commedia dell'arte*.

I would like to thank Irene Aubrey for her help with the Cleaver holdings in the National Library of Canada.

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Illustrations from *The enchanted caribou* (Oxford UP, 1985) and *The miraculous hind* (Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1973) reprinted with permission from Frank J. Mrazik.

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