

## Existences Unbound: An Exploration of a Liberal Perspective in Rick Bass's "The Hermit's Story"

*There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,  
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.  
- William Shakespeare*

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### Abstract

"The Hermit's Story", a short story written by Rick Bass, has been interpreted as a text whose central element is a de-anthropocentric quality. Although this paper is in line with previous studies in supporting the general claim, it is different from them in narrowing its focus upon the overlooked significance of a character named Gray Owl to prove the point. Below I will demonstrate how the text encourages us to adopt a liberal perspective by representing a gradual transformation of the man, who, after making many misjudgments due to hubris, realizes his own imperfection and unfathomable potentiality of other existences.

**Keywords:** Rick Bass, "Hermit's Story", de-anthropocentrism

### Introduction

Although it is always a difficult task to rightly evaluate a contemporary individual, and even more so if the person is alive, yet, as far as one could surmise from an array of estimations and diverse awards that have been hitherto accorded, Rick Bass appears to have attained the status as one of the preeminent writers of the present day (Landers, 2012; Pagano, 2017; Kidd, 2017). Of note is the fact that his productions have not only commanded enduring popularity amongst non-professional readers, but also attracted keen interest from those in academic spheres.

He has indeed written books of various literary genres ranging from nonfictional ones to fairly long novels. But there is no doubt that short stories have been no small concern to him from the early stage of his career. Among the six collections of them, *The Hermit's Story* (2002), which achieved the Los Angeles Times Best Book of the Year in the year of publication, is an important anthology in that it consolidated his renown.

Along with other sixteen narratives, the collection contains a tale that bears the same title, "The Hermit's Story", which had originally been printed in *Paris Review* in 1999 and then was rewritten when it was included in the collection. In addition, it was comprehended in the latest anthology, *For a little while*, as one of his past finest pieces. Until the present, a fair number of literary critics have dealt with the work and produced a cornucopia of valuable insights into it. As early as 2002, Magliocco gave an analysis of it in his master's thesis, which proclaims that Bass asserts "that new ways of being are possible for creatures of even the simplest intellect" (p. xii), while recently, in her paper published two years ago, Bergman (2017) inspected it with the concepts of *liminality* and *anthropocene*, and concluded that the work "calls for ecocentrism" (Bergman, 2017, p. 556). Besides, Weisheng (2018) claims that the story has "features distinct from previous eco-literature, features characterized...as 'speculative realism'" (p. 319) and tries

“to make the reader forget himself and embrace the breadth of the wilderness and the reality of the natural world” (p. 331). In spite of these studies rich in discernment, though, the text seems in no way able to be fully understood by any one interpretation, nor will it be exhausted by the whole of critical analyses to come.

This paper has an affinity with the studies mentioned above in that it explores one of the unique hallmarks of Bass’s oeuvre, i.e. a de-anthropocentric, nature-oriented quality, which urges readers to adopt a liberal worldview. On the other hand, this brief essay differs from them in intently concentrating upon a succession of scenes which represent a man named Gray Owl in order to prove that point; one should heed that there are not a few situations in which the man errs in his assessment of the land of which he is a local; in other words, he is confronted with a run of theretofore dormant, potential properties of the place where he has lived for a long time.

The argument of this essay would go as follows: after this introductory part, the next section will investigate those incidents in which Gray Owl makes a series of miscalculations about his neighborhood, endangering himself and his companions. Thereupon, a meaningful change which happens in the man after those mistakes and a near-death experience will be discussed. In closing, based on the textual evidence, I will conclude with the suggestion that, by implying that it is unable for one to know an object exhaustively, this text encourages readers to realize inexhaustible potentiality of other existences and thus to adopt a more liberal perspective to see the world wherein innumerable beings coexist.

### **Gray Owl’s Miscalculations and Transformation**

Beginning with three poetical paragraphs each of which is composed of just one sentence, this vignette soon reveals itself to be a frame story. That is, this tale is retold by the narrator who heard those unusual experiences which a female dog-trainer called Ann had undergone in the past. Albeit this narrative structure is another issue to be scrutinized,<sup>1</sup> it will not be treated here to avoid making the argument too intricate.

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Ann, a dog-trainer, is hired by a man named Gray Owl to train his six German short-haired pointers. After coaching the dogs for six months, she successfully makes them well primed for a field trial, and decides to do the text with Gray Owl in his neighborhood of Saskatchewan, which is located in the southwest of Canada, so as both to make a final check on the dogs and to teach the owner how to make the most of their talents. In the vast field wearing already its wintry garments, Ann and Gray Owl commence a one-week field trial to confirm the dogs’ proficiency as gun dogs. No doubt that it is Gray Owl who works as the guide in the district, while it must be Ann who chiefly examines the expertise of the hounds. With detailed descriptions of a snowy landscape, the probation actually progresses with few hitches until the last day.

On the day, it is “almost whiteout” (Bass, 2018, p. 167), namely, visibility there is reduced drastically due to a dense blizzard; an object a few yards away may not be recognized when it is most vicious; as could be understood easily, it is a climatic phenomenon which is so dangerous that it is recommended not to go outside then. Despite the unwished condition, Ann and Gray Owl continue the trial further. It would not be wide of the mark to assume that Ann does not postpone finishing it for one or two days because she has not a little confidence in Gray Owl’s knowledge about the terrain which he should have accumulated over the years and has attested for the previous six days in navigating the party there. That she jokes that she’d like to find the next customer in a warmer area may be

regarded as one example expressing her trust in him. In such a generally congenial air, readers may be surprised that it is shortly revealed that “they [are] lost” (p. 167), by the very mouth of the local man.

Still, he does not display a crumb of uneasiness, saying reassuringly with a smile, “No matter, the storm would clear in a day or two” (p. 167), though there is no description which explains Ann’s opinion about the statement. With the dusk closing in and the temperature sinking with the pitiless north wind, the circumstances are becoming more and more unfavorable for the company. Gray Owl’s credence to his conversance in the territory whose inhabitant he has been, however, never falters for it, enunciating with certitude, “No question about which way south is, so we’ll turn around and walk south for three hours” (p. 167). Even if he says, “[I]f we don’t find a road, we’ll make camp” (p. 167), he should have an entire conviction that he and other members will be on the right track before long.

Unfortunately, things would not develop according to his optimistic expectation. They not only fall into a more uncomfortable plight, but also discover that they would have misread even the rough direction:

After an hour of increasing discomfort—Ann’s and Gray Owl’s hands and feet numb, and ice beginning to form on the dogs’ paws, so that the dogs were having to high-step—they came in day’s last light to the edge of a wide clearing: a terrain that was remarkable and soothing for its lack of hills. It was a frozen lake, which meant—said Gray Owl—*they had drifted west (or perhaps east)* by as much as ten miles. (Bass, 2018, pp. 167-168)

Few should doubt that losing sensation in any physical part would lead to a fatal consequence in such a severe climate; moreover, the passage intimates that the party would have traversed mountainous tracts through the snowstorm, which should have demanded much exertion of the dogs and humans alike. What makes their tense state more critical is that Gray Owl, the man who should be most clued up about the region, is by no means certain even about the rough direction (east or west) that they have taken. Bearing these things in mind, some readers may conceive a doubt whether they really have progressed southward.

With the confidence in his own acquaintance with the features of the land having been shattered, Gray Owl is now made acutely aware of its tremendous potentiality that has been fallow but never dead. As Ann reports, then he “looked tired and old and guilty, as would any host who had caused his guest some unasked-for inconvenience” (Bass, 2018, p. 168); yet, probably hindered by the proud consciousness that he, having passed his life there for many a long day, should know the country best, Gray Owl is not able to verbalize his apologetic feeling toward Ann and the dogs as yet.

It is natural that such an awkward incident would prod the man to be reflective upon his established framework to see the world as well as to compensate for his mistake. Perhaps out of a wish both to make atonement for the predicament which his vain miscalculations have brought about and to have some time and space to be alone, he “walked to the edge of the lake ice and kicked at it with his foot, hoping to find fresh water beneath for the dogs” (Bass, 2018, p. 168), whereupon an unforeseeable event befalls him. Gray Owl, a local man of Saskatchewan who is painfully mindful of his hubris and limitations, vanishes into a lake, under its silver surface:

He kicked at the sheet of ice, the vast plate of it, with his heel, then disappeared below the ice. Ann wanted to believe that she had blinked and lost sight of him...but it had been too fast, too total: she knew that the lake had swallowed him. (Bass, 2018, p. 168)

Not unexpectedly, Ann becomes disconcerted to a great degree. That is not only because of the idea that the fellow man would be dead in a little while, but

also because of the chilly perception that he is swallowed with the backpack containing many items for an emergency such as a tent and food, without which she and the dogs would perish by and by. With a couple of succeeding paragraphs, the text narrows its focus upon Ann, portraying her discomfiture, an agonizing anxiety for the dogs, and attempt to retrieve him and the bag. But she and readers are to be again astonished by the text, with Gray Owl, in a sense, coming back to life from, or rather *in* the nether world:

Ann eased out onto the ice. She followed the tracks until she came to the jagged hole in the ice through which Gray Owl had plunged....

She got down on all fours and crept closer to the hole. It was right at dusk. She peered down into the hole and dimly saw Gray Owl standing down there, waving his arms at her. He did not appear to be swimming. Slowly, she took one glove off and eased her bare hand into the hole. She could find no water, and, tentatively, she reached deeper.

Gray Owl's hand found hers and he pulled her down in. Ice broke as she fell, but he caught her in his arms.... There was no water at all, and it was warm beneath the ice. (Bass, 2018, p. 169)

Soon after the entrance into the underworld, she hears from (revived) Gray Owl that it is not scarce, if not frequent, for one to encounter that phenomenon there during the cold season, and how it is produced. Readers ought to note the answer which he gives to her question posed after the explanation of the natural marvel. "Did you know it would be like this?" asks she, and he simply says, "No.... I was looking for water. I just got lucky" (Bass, 2018, p. 169)

Given its concision and the fact that Ann is to be foregrounded and Gray Owl will recede into the background in subsequent passages of the text, it is admittedly understandable that the significance of this exchange has been overlooked. Yet, the import becomes palpable when it is compared with the representations of Gray Owl that we have heretofore examined; in lieu of neither assuming himself to be knowledgeable about the region, nor uttering an irresponsible declaration (like the prediction that they have strayed *eastward or westward*), here he acknowledges with no hesitation the fact that his survival is not thanks to his skill or knowledge; he plainly attributes his remaining alive to just having been "lucky".

In order to make sense of a part of the transformation after a near-death experience, one could acquire a profound insight from a discussion of Martin Heidegger. Arguably one of those people who most philosophically mused on existence, he speculated as to and theorized about life and death with peculiarly shrewd discernment.

Extremely simply put, Heidegger posits that although humans ordinarily evade facing their mortality, the sole way for them to grasp their authentic self is to square up to the inevitability of death; with the sincere recognition that they must die, they would be free, and able not to be obsessed with what they have gained, be it political clout, academic fame, or an immense fortune; as a result of forfeiting a tenacious clinging to life, they would neither distort nor exploit another being to achieve their own purpose—i.e. by embracing the mortality, a being would accept all forms of other existences in the world as ontologically equal beings (Heidegger, 1927/1962, pp. 279-341).

The impact which Gray Owl would have received from his near-death experience seems similar to that which a being would be given upon realizing the universal mortality of every existence. Just when the frozen surface of the lake collapses under his feet, he must come up against his own imminent death, with a kaleidoscope of memories passing through his mind. Nonetheless, he survives, finding himself to be in a space into which one would never pass usually. it would

not be illogical to conjecture that he ruminates over many things in that situation, including his awful misjudgments that have begotten their current quandary, and that he comes upon a realization that he is merely an ordinary being amongst countless others—that every one of the other existences always retains something hidden, is unable to be exhausted, and always exhibits one profile after another, as the land with which he has assumed himself to be familiar repeatedly betrays his predictions and preconceptions.

As I mentioned, after the other members of the party have entered into the underground space, the text would hardly spotlight Gray Owl, featuring principally Ann, while incorporating the man into one of *them* of the company. But the less presence of him, or his merger with other companions indicates that the turn would have actually occurred in him. Having perceived his own imperfection, the man abstains from flattering himself to be an expert of the region. Instead thereof, readers would see the sundry beings become one single, solid party in order to return to their home. Sometimes humans take the lead, “pushing on from one fire to the next, carrying their tiny torches, while at other times the dogs hew a path, with Ann and Gray Owl following them “closely with their torches” (Bass, 2018, p. 173). The most memorable scene is when they come upon the road, but do not know which direction to take:

Gray Owl, Ann, and the dogs headed south for half a day until they reached the snow-scoured road on which they’d parked. The road looked different, Ann said, buried beneath snowdrifts, and they didn’t know whether to turn east or west. *The dogs chose west, and Gray Owl and Ann followed them* [emphasis added]. Two hours later they were back at their truck, and that night they were back at Gray Owl’s cabin; by the next night Ann was home again. (Bass, 2018, p. 175)

Gray Owl, well conscious of the superiority of the dogs’ perspicacity in the situation, does not intrude himself, and places a total trust into their abilities, which might not be visible, but should exist with inestimable potentiality. That pays off, and all of them successfully arrive home.

## Conclusion

As I pointed out previously, those passages which represent Gray Owl in the text are not plentiful. But it does not mean that they could be discounted, and I hope that the discussion above will be illustrative of it. Gray Owl, though having considered himself to be *au courant* with the properties of his neighborhood, commits a chain of mistakes there, puts the whole company in jeopardy, but cannot admit his liability easily; thereupon, he undergoes a near-death experience, which reshapes him to the extent that he can accept his own arrant fallibility.

Then, what could a reader scoop up from the modification in the mind of Gray Owl after the blunders? If one evaluates oneself metacognitively, she/he would discover that many of the daily faults originate from that assumption which is similar to that of Gray Owl. As Horkheimer and Adorno pithily admonished decades ago, we modern humans tend to look on another existence as a usable instrument to serve our objective, equating *the function for us* with its essence (1944/2002). In reading this text, readers would be induced to weigh up whether they naively view others in that way. Although I do not deem the text to be reducible to any one construal, one possible reading would be that, by letting us appreciate that other existences surrounding us should indeed possess untold, latent qualities, the text, if gently, exhorts us to take on a liberal perspective within the republic of beings.

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