THE MYTHIC AND THE MONO-MYTHIC: REPRESENTATIONS OF THE 1972 CANADA V USSR HOCKEY SERIES

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ABSTRACT

I believe that imagination is stronger than knowledge-
That myth is more potent than history.
I believe that dreams are more powerful than facts-
That hope always triumphs over experience-
Robert Fulghum's credo and his Storyteller's Creed[1]

What fascinates me about the historical, famous, and fabled 72 Summit Series is the latter adjective – fabled. It was and is legendary, epic, extraordinary, remarkable, impressive, and outstanding – it was nominally a summit connoting top, pinnacle, zenith – in so many ways, certainly in the manner it played out and in the way it is remembered. In fact, if the Series had been scripted – and it has in its aftermath – it could not have been contrived to be a better story. For those Canadians over forty, it was a defining moment of their generation. Similar to Fulghum, I too believe that myth can be more potent than history, and even that myth is vital to writing about our past. By myth, I don't mean in the sense of untrue or supernatural story; instead, I use myth as a concept to invoke the idea of a story of meaning, something that informs our sense of who we are as a culture, a set of truths about – in this case – Canadians.[2] What I want to explore and share in this essay is the notion of myth connected to the Series as we look through the lens of representativeness. What is it that makes this set of hockey games mythic? There exists a mythos, a pattern, and recurrent narrative that began during the Series and is echoed resoundingly in the forty years since the actual events. The argument presented in this essay is that the Series encapsulated a whorl of deeply consecrated elements that coagulated into making the Series mythic in proportion, whether deservedly so or not. It may be that nostalgia has enshrined the meaning of the Series out of all proportion to its reality. Nevertheless, we continue to celebrate the event, to walk around it, and to revere and cherish it. If hockey is our Canadian drama, then the 72 Summit Series is, at the very least, a mythic-Series[3] spinoff replete with narratives and narrative richness, speeches, *dramatis personae*, archetypes, video representations and analyses, a voice and voices, an heroic journey, re-created texts and discourses – in short, a cascade of elements that makes the Series' myth more potent than history.

SETTING THE STAGE OF 1972

Every narrative and every drama needs a venue, a time and place for the theatrical to play. The organizational events leading up to the contrived Series are not germane to this essay. However, some important points about the hockey platform are most relevant and pertinent to the 1972 setting. Hollywood movies produced two blockbusters that year: *Deliverance*, starring Burt Reynolds and John Voight; and Mario Puzo's *The Godfather*, featuring Marlon Brando, Al Pacino, and Robert Duvall, among many other 'stars.' Both movies were grand narratives in their own rights and both were 'blockbuster' stories that were literally projected on our imaginations in the months immediately preceding the Series. The dueling banjos refrain from Deliverance was lyrically embedded in our minds as was the fascination with an all-powerful, unscrupulous godfather who could make offers people couldn't refuse.[4] Deliverance-as-theme (not the movie) became the unspoken Canadian chorus

when the nation realized Team Canada had lost three games, tied one, and won one after the 5th game in Moscow. And the 'Don' of Puzo's thriller became The Eagle (Alan Eagleson), in all his manipulative machinations,[5] of the Series suspense.

1972 itself was a year of intrigue – it was pre-AIDS, pre-Baby Boomer angst, and it was a year filled with conflict and atrocities such as the Watergate scandal, the prolonged Vietnam War, the Burundian genocide against the Hutus, uprisings and deaths in Northern Ireland, floods, hurricanes, and the Munich massacre during the Summer Olympic Games, the latter event occurring coincident with game 6 of the Series. Overall, western nations lived in abject, often unspoken fear of 'The Bomb,' the what-if-ness of nuclear warfare. Even though Richard Nixon and Leonid Brezhnev signed the Salt 1 Treaty in May, the specter of the bomb loomed in the global collective unconscious. Parachuting a hockey series into the 1972 maelstrom of events created a new and parallel narrative that mirrored our fears and provided a literal arena or arenas in which the hockey story could be played out. Canada, a nation of perceived values and attributes like ones associated with being polite, peace-keeping, apologetic, non-American, bilingual, and inventors of the game of hockey was pitted against the Red Machine, the Communists, and the presumed, unknown, and dreaded terrors that we all 'knew' lay behind *The Iron Curtain*. The latter vivid metaphor created by Churchill after the Second World War instilled a cold conception of an impermeable barrier between western and eastern European ways of life and political ideologies. In some ways then, the Series became a kind of reiteration or encapsulation of good versus evil, Canada-the-good versus USSR-the-evil. In fabled terms – and fables feed the human imagination at all age levels – we had a hibernal version of Snow White and the seven Dwarfs' tale. Canada was anthropomorphically Snow White, pure and pristine while the Evil Witch clearly lived behind the Iron Curtain, Rasputin-like in appearance and presumed madness, easily mirrored on each visage, menacing under every red-bucket-helmeted Soviet player. The 'dwarfs' of the Series served Snow-White-Canada as Eagleson the Shyster, Dryden the Intellectual, Esposito the Braggart and Victim, Ferguson the Vulgar, Cournoyer the Shy, Sinden the Skinflint, and Henderson the Hero.[6]

THE SCRIPT

In many respects, the Series' set-up was an odd – or better, even – set of games, eight games in total, four to be played in different Canadian cities and four in Moscow at the famed Luzhniki Ice Palace (what better place in which to play out a fable or fairy tale than a palace). The script, in brief:

In Canada :

Game/ Act	Date	Title	Canada	URSS
1	Sept 2	We Lost!	3	7
2	Sept 4	Redemption	4	1
3	Sept 6	The Win that Got Away	4	4
4	Sept 8	Canada Booed Off the Ice	4	5

In Moscow :

Game/ Act	Date	Title	Canada	URSS
5	Sept 22	Buried in Moscow	4	5
6	Sept 24	The Slash	3	2
7	Sept 26	Canada Forces Game 8	4	3
8	Sept 28	Henderson has Scored for Canada	6	5

For those of us who lived during 1972 and from the mountain of descriptions and accounts written long after the events, we felt then and have heard ever since that everything was set for a great Canadian party. Before Eagleson conspired with the NHL to prohibit Bobby Hull, who was at the time, the World Hockey Association's paragon player, from playing, I smirked and opined to my friends and relatives that Hull's slap-shot alone would at once terrify, shatter, and overpower Soviet net-minders. In fact, there was a bobby-ness about the Series itself. For example, Bobby Orr, arguably the dominant player – and clearly Canadian in his Parry Sound, Ontario roots – in the NHL, could not play because of his knee injury issues. American Bobby Fischer beat Boris Spassky for the World Chess Championship title in Reykjavik less than one month before the Series began; for some reason, likely to do with the Cold War aura of the era, that chess event and its outcome was widely followed in the Western media. And Team Canada player, Bobby Clarke, the Master Carver from the Philadelphia "Broad Street Bullies", perhaps another of the archetypal dwarfs, was poised to play his special role in the Series. It was as though 'bobby' was in the arena and media air as much as the certainty of victory seemed at the forefront of the minds of the 100 million worldwide TV-audience for Game 1.

When we lost 7-3 in the first game, it was as though the expected, pre-written, pre-ordained script had to be re-written. It was perceived by the media, and by extension, the Canadian nation as the catastrophe of the century, a shock of gargantuan proportion, hockey humiliation. It became a time of alibis and yes-buts – but, of course, Bobby Orr and Bobby Hull are not playing, our best were not even there!

Sportswriters' rhetoric was critical of everything deemed to be 'wrong' with the Series as the narrative seemed to take on a life of its own in re-inventing meaning after loss. Game 2, perceived by the Canadian media then and since as *the* game of the Series, very likely because of our decisive victory, was preceded by a banquet replete with speeches about Canadian hospitality. Juxtaposed with the ensuing game wherein Cashman "worked the corners" and the Soviet players complained of Canadian 'stick-work,' the platitudes of friendliness sounded hollow and the narrative seemed to sully in its undertones of goons that foreshadowed even more questionable, if not unethical and injurious tactics.

In Winnipeg, for game 3, the shadow of the decision to ban Bobby Hull – the Winnipeg Jets was his WHA team – loomed in the media with clever epithets like, "to Russia with Hull" and the bobby-ness chorus redoubled its perceived importance in the storied circumstances. Preceding the prairie game, the arena, and by extension the viewing audience was invited to observe 30 seconds of silence in honour of the victims of the Munich massacre. The intended respect was genuine and the unintended but very real impact of the reverence was only to heighten the dramatic tension of the Series. And, as if to underscore that tension, the observation of silence was one slice of the game sandwich that was completed by the 4-4 outcome and Coach Sinden's later representation of the significance of that game when he quipped, "Someone once said that a tie [in sport] is as exciting as kissing your sister. Well for the last ten minutes tonight, that hockey game looked like Raquel Welch to me."[7]

Almost every play and therefore every screenplay features at least one monologue and in this Series' script, Phil Esposito delivered his nationally televised speech to Canadians after Team Canada's loss in game 4. In part and abbreviated, he exhorted,

> *To the people of Canada, we tried. We gave it our best. To the people who booed us, geez, all of us guys are really disheartened… We're disillusioned and disappointed. We cannot believe the bad press we've got, the booing we've got in our own building… I'm completely disappointed. I cannot believe it… Every one of us guys – 35 guys – we came out because we love our country. Not for any other reason. We came because we love Canada.*[8]

Beyond the heroic implications of Esposito's speech, what is interesting for the mountainous myth-machine that is the 72 Series, is the comparison of what is now known as Esposito's 'rant' to King Henry V's St Crispin's day appeal – though not a monologue – to his troops[9] preceding the Battle of Agincourt in Shakespeare's *King Henry V.* While Esposito's exposition was nowhere near the elegance of the Shakespearean character's oration, the point is that the association of the two speeches underscores how much the Series' narrative was played out, literally and figuratively, and represented in events such as this one, even to the point of perceiving parallels to the highest forms of drama.

THE HEROIC JOURNEY AND THE MONO-MYTH

In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*[10], mythologist Joseph Campbell described a basic pattern in the hero's journey that is at the core of many, if not most narratives. In stages, the hero departs his or her home; encounters "fabulous forces" in a new land in the second stage; and in the third phase, returns home to bestow what s/he has learned or gained during the heroic adventure. In the Series, Canada's team-heroes, albeit scarred and under-dogged from the first four games, ventured to Moscow and experienced yet another defeat from the CCCP 'forces' in game 5. As every good drama has its chorus, 2,700 Canadian fans at game 5 in the Palace chanted, 'da da Canada; nyet nyet Soviet'[11] in group effort to encourage the players. In game 6, the script's 'The Slash' pricked the heroic bubble when Bobby Clarke viciously stick-slashed Soviet star-player (some say the best player, both teams included) Valery Kharlamov's lower leg, rendering him, euphemistically, "ineffective after that." Team Canada's assistant coach, John Ferguson later said, simply, of the attack, "it was necessary." Brett Kashmere, quite brilliantly, has represented the incident in his 2006 video essay, Valery's Ankle.[12] The incident occurred behind the play and off-camera to the television audience. Soviet outrage was vociferous, as it should have been. I watched the game and even after the game, I was oblivious to the event. We heard about it in the news and its significance, sadly, was overshadowed by the 3-2 score in favour of Canada. Clearly, it was an un-heroic act but in the mythology, as Kashmere noted, the slash still engenders public disgust and private gratitude in the Canadian psyche. It was a miasmic blight, a subterfuge that happened in the background, a highly improper slaying of the Soviet dragon by the Master Carver ignited by his coach's fervor for victory at any cost.

Going into the 8th game, the Super Series' script seemed incredible. What were the chances of an 8-game series – how does one team 'win' a best-of-eight-game series – becoming boiled down to such a powerful climax? Each team had won three games and tied one; the outcome of the eighth game determined the outcome of the Series. It is estimated that fully two-thirds of Canada's population watched or listened to Game 8, a vast audience for this theatre of sport. There could not have been a greater build-

up of uncertainty (the *sine qua non* of all sport), anxiety, and excitement that reached its pinnacle when the Voice of Hockey, Foster Hewitt screamed, "Henderson has scored for Canada." Hewitt's exclamation might be likened to Canada's 'shot heard round the world,'[13] as unassuming and quiet as Canadians are perceived to be compared to Americans and their reverence for baseball. For the mythic and the heroic, Team Canada went through Campbell's journey paradigm in a kind of public and media embrace of 'our' team to dis-grace and a falling out of national embrace, and back, after game 8, to 'our team.' Team Canada completed their heroic journey home, "victorious" and embraced by 80,000 fans in Nathan Phillips Square, downtown Toronto-the-Good. The Series was and it continues to be characterized as Canada's iconic sporting and cultural moment. Famed sports writer Dick Beddoes effused its significance in Canada's national newspaper, *The Globe and Mail*:

> *In Canadian history, we had the FLQ crisis in 1970, the taking of Vimy Ridge in 1917, and we had VE Day in 1945. VE Day and the celebration in 1972 were the biggest this country has had.*

Books abounded from and about the Series: *27 Days in September*; *Face Off at the Summit*; *Hockey Night in Moscow*; *The Days Canada Stood Still*; *Hockey Showdown*; and *Shooting for Glory* are some of the more acclaimed narratives that recount, repeat, and perhaps even reify the events of the 72 Series. In the latter regard, the Series wasn't in any way abstract and made tangible, as the word 'reify' would suggest; however, perhaps no event, certainly no sporting event has been raised to near hagiographic proportions as was the Summit Series. Possibly the most realistic representation of the events is the CBC documentary-snap-shot-styled film, *Canada Russia 72*. Shot in Fredericton, New Brunswick, it comes across as realistic, poignant, well-researched, and punctuated by off-ice narratives that seem to level the impact and importance of the Series some 34 years after the actual event. The characterization, periodization, and the music (such as the song 'Signs' by Five Man Electrical Band being played after Game One's re-enactment) all serve to make the film work. And yet, as realistic as this film is and as accurate as textual and scholarly assessments of the Series might be, the actual narrative, and all of its mythic and mono-mythic representations underscore the potency of myth and the cornucopia of sub-myths, meanings, and narratives in Canada's cultural and hockey history.

NOTES

[1] Robert Fulghum, *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten: Uncommon Thoughts on Common Things* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1988), viii-ix, italics mine. Fulghum offers that this Creed stems from his Storyteller's License. On his official Author's website, it is his front page credo; both end with two more lines, "That laughter is the only cure for grief/And I believe that love is stronger than death." http://robertfulghum.com/index.php/fulghumweb/credo/, accessed 26 November 2012.

[2] I am fully aware that hockey itself is replete with myths related to our culture; myths emanate from the debates about hockey's rightful birthplace to our hibernal "happy naturalism" hockey myth. This paper is selective in looking at representations of the 72 Series myth.

[3] I use the term mythic-Series in comparison to the term, mini-Series. This Series was anything but mini in proportion, at least in terms of the meanings and remembrances attached to it.

[4] The exact line from the movie was, "*I'm gonna make him an offer he can't refuse*," a line that has been copied many, many times in sketches, comedy routines, other movies since Brando's utterance.

[5] Eagleson's leadership role in the NHL Players' Association, in raising players' salaries, making Bobby Orr the richest professional hockey player ever, and his collusions with NHL owners are all well documented. His eventual exposure as a racketeer and embezzler make the 'don' connection even more apropos.

[6] The idea of a Snow White and the seven Dwarfs' application to the Series is not mine in original concept. It was an idea connected with the 2006 CBC documentary production of Canada Russia 72. My intent here is not to make the comparison a literal one but to show how archetypal the Series as narrative was to our collective psyches.

[7] Harry Sinden, *Hockey Showdown: The Canada-Russia Hockey Series* (Toronto: Doubleday, 1972), brackets mine. Raquel Welch was an American actress and sex symbol; the title of her 2010 autobiography, Raquel: Beyond the Cleavage is indicative of her renown and the intention of the citation provided by Sinden.

[8] See, for example, the Youtube clip of the rant at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xM5ihA3NBAo, accessed 30 November 2012.

[9] The speech can be read in the play and, of course, online at http://www.gonderzone.org/Library/Knights/crispen.htm, accessed 4 December 2012.

[10] See, Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (New York: New World Library, 2008, first published in 1949).

[11] The intent, very likely, was to mix words from both languages, most assuredly so that Soviet fans would realize the taunt of 'yes, yes Canada, no, no Soviet.'

[12] *Valery's Ankle*: An Essay-film by Brett Kashmere, Canada, 31 minutes, digital video, colour, 2006. A replication of the text of the video-essay is available at Kashmere's website, http://www.brettkashmere.com/va_essay.htm, accessed 3 December 2012.

[13] The reference is to the now-famous line taken from a Ralph Waldo Emerson 1837 poem about the American Revolutionary War and applied to the walk-off home run hit ('shot') by New York Giants' Bobby Thompson during the 1951 National Baseball League series against the Brooklyn Dodgers.