

THE CHRONOTOPE OF THE PRIMORDIAL: YURI RYTKHEU'S *WHEN THE WHALES LEAVE*

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1.0 Introduction

The basic purpose of the present article has been to investigate whether a work of literature written by an author representing an indigenous people might reveal an understanding of the world that in certain ways might be qualitatively different from our own. Is it possible that such a text might bring to light ways of thinking the world, nature and man's role in it that would be rarely expressed in texts by authors representing our own Judeo-Christian culture? For this purpose we have chosen to perform a close reading of Yuri Rytkheu's short novel *When the Whales Leave* (1977). In this story, the author, has drawn extensively on myths and legends of his native Chukchi people, a fact that presumably might increase the possibility of finding textual evidence of what we are looking for. The work was originally written not in the Chukchi language, but in Russian, which makes it a part of Soviet Russian literature. In some ways the work itself has the form of an ancient saga. It would seem that this has made the author feel free to disregard certain token requirements of socialist-realism that he was usually careful to observe before the 1980s. Yet while there are certainly more elements of indigenous culture in this work than in most of Rytkheu's other work, (at least before the 1990s) it is still represented in a literary form recognized as a short novel rather than a fable or mythical story by Russian and Western readers.

For this investigation we have chosen to make wide use of Bakhtin's idea of the *chronotope*, literally "time-space". In order to grasp how authors of different times understand and think the world, careful observation of the way time and space are represented in the text has proven to be an expedient method. Bakhtin himself in several works has amply demonstrated this, notably in "Forms of time and of the Chronotope in the Novel".¹ In similar fashion, we expect that an investigation of chronotopic properties of Rytkheu's text might reveal information as to the most basic worldviews not only of the author himself, but of the indigenous culture he represents. Albeit for other purposes, Tatjana Kudrjajtseva similarly made use of the chronotope in a study of plot structure in literary texts from the Russian arctic², while Kolupaeva, studying time in Rytkheu's work also made use of Bakhtin's idea of the chronotope.³ The idea of the chronotope provides a versatile instrument for analysis of literary texts in general, but is probably particularly useful in cases where we deal with texts where underlying notions of time and space might differ from those we are familiar with in our own culture.

It is difficult not to discover that "When the Whales Leave" has an ecological message. Although in a cautious manner, it advocates the traditional values of the

¹ Bakhtin, 1996.

² Kudrjajtseva, 2007.

³ Kolupaeva, 2005.

author's native people and warns against ruthless, unsustainable exploitation of natural resources. In this respect Rytkeu did not differ from contemporary Russian Village Prose writers, such as Valentin Rasputin. In the present article, however, we shall see that the ecological message is conveyed *chronotopically*: The way we think and understand time deeply affects the space we live in.

2.0 Biographical and bibliographical notes on the author.

Yuri Rytkeu is probably the most well known writer representing one of the indigenous peoples of the Russian arctic regions. A Chukchi, Yuri Rytkeu, was born in 1930 in the village Uelen on the Chukotka peninsula in North Eastern Siberia. He died on the 14th of May 2008 in St. Petersburg. He published his first volume of short stories in 1953. His books have been translated into many languages of the world. During the Soviet period Rytkeu's books were printed and sold in large numbers in Russia, but after the Soviet Union broke down, Russian publishing houses neglected him. He was attacked for having been too deferential to Soviet authorities. According to the BSE (Great Soviet Encyclopaedia) he was a member of the Communist Party since 1967. Still, according to Aleksandr Rubashkin, he was privately opposed to the Soviet system.⁴

Unable to publish, to work and get paid for his work, Rytkeu even considered emigration to the USA, but then his writer colleague Chingiz Aitmatov introduced him to a Swiss publisher, Lucien Leites.⁵ His books began appearing in German with notable success. His books have been translated into Norwegian, Danish, Dutch and English. During recent years there has been a marked growing interest in the English-speaking world.⁶

In Russia, however, interest in Rytkeu's work seems to remain comparatively low, although Rytkeu's books eventually returned to Russian literature, but in a somewhat unexpected way. Printing of one of Rytkeu's latest novels, *Skitanija Anny Odintsovoi (The Wanderings of Anna Odintsovaia)* was financed by the famous oligarch Roman Abramovich, who apart from being the owner of Chelsea Football Club is also the governor of Chukotka.⁷ The last works of Rytkeu in Russian were thus distributed in Chukotka only, although they could for a while be bought on the internet. Thus the paradox remains, that Rytkeu's recent works of the post Soviet period is much easier to find in translation into German or English than in the original Russian.

Jurij Rytkeu's life and background were quite rare for a major writer of fiction. While any octogenarian living today can claim to have seen times that were indeed

⁴ Rybashkin, 2005.

⁵ Sonkin, St. Petersburg Times, 2008.

⁶ A volume of Rytkeu's stories *Stories from Chukotka by Ritheyu*, was published as early as 1956. During Soviet years, some volumes of his stories were published in English by Soviet state publishers. During recent years *A Dream in Polar Fog* was published in 2006 and *The Chukchi Bible* in 2009. This book was given an extensive and favourable review in *New York Review of Books* 18 Aug. 2011, p. 56.

⁷ Karljukevich, 2004.

different from our own, Rytkeu was the son of a hunter, who chased seals and walrus in a kayak made of walrus hide and who killed his game with a handheld harpoon. On the shore women worked the skins with instruments made of stone. Rytkeu's early childhood was spent in a *yaranga*, a tent made of walrus hides with a fireplace and a *polog*, a special little tent for sleeping. His grandfather's profession was that of a *shaman*. Indeed, it seems that Russian Orthodox missionaries were rather unsuccessful on the Chukotka peninsula. During a hundred years of Christianisation, very few Chukchi were actually baptised, and even those who were seems not to have left their shamanistic beliefs and traditions.⁸ Thus, the Chukchi went straight from their shamanistic beliefs to Soviet style atheism. Christian ideas seems to have left little or no imprint on the Chukchi's world view. In other words, when we are reading Rytkeu, we are reading books written by a man who in some respect has experienced life as it was during the Stone Age and made the leap to modernity within the timespan of his own lifetime.⁹

Thus the lifespan of Jurij Rytkeu in a certain sense comprised all the eras of human civilization from mesolithic times and up to today. Among all the writers living in our time, there are few that could write about *primordial times* with such authority as could Rytkeu.

As a matter of interest, Rytkeu's family chose to move out of the *yaranga*, or skin tent, when Jurij learned to read and write, because there was no way he could do his homework properly when sitting on reindeer skins on the floor near the fireplace in the *yaranga*. For work with books, ink and paper, you need a table, a chair and a lamp, and for that again you need a normal house, as the author has explained. Rytkeu also uses this motif in the novel *Ostrov Nadezhdy (Island of Hope)* from 1987. Here an Inuit family chooses to move out of their traditional tent and into a Russian wooden house for similar reasons.¹⁰

On the other hand, it is impossible to understand Rytkeu as a writer without considering his Russian and Soviet backgrounds.¹¹ Rytkeu learned the Russian language to near perfection and diligently studied Russian literature from Pushkin and onwards from an early school-age. To put it simply, while his native Chukotka always provided the material for Rytkeu's work, Russian language and literature provided the necessary means of communication and the literary forms (such as genre) he needed to transform this material into works of art intelligible and recognizable as such to Russian and Western readers. A dominant theme in most of Rytkeu's works is the meeting of cultures, the highly specialised and therefore fragile culture of an indigenous people encountering European culture, most often

⁸ I. S. Vdovin, *Ocherki istorii i etnografii chukchei*, Izdatelstvo "Nauka", Moskva Leningrad 1965, pp. 254-256.

⁹ *Novaia Gazeta*, 2006.

¹⁰ Rytkeu, 1987, p. 251.

¹¹ For a discussion of Rytkeu's Russian and Soviet influences, see Kuhnke 1977.

represented by Russian officials, but sometimes by American traders or Norwegian explorers.¹²

One of Jurij Rytkeus main interests in life were ecological questions. In one interview he calls himself an “ecological spy”, since his interest in ecological questions and frequent trips to Europe and Alaska, according to himself, aroused suspicions that he might be a spy.¹³ Indeed ecology is an important theme even in *When the Whales leave*.

2.1 “When the Whales leave”

When the Whales Leave (Kogda kity ukhodjat) was published in 1977 in a volume by the same name. It is quite different from most of Rytkeus other works. An English translation is not yet available. The great bulk of these does perhaps not differ greatly from works by some other Soviet authors of the same period, such the Kyrgyz Tshingiz Aitmatov and the Russian *village prose* writers. Some works by Rytkeu, are historical novels describing the Chukchi’s encounters with famous polar explorers such as Amundsen (Magicheskije chisla) and Ushakov (Ostrov nadezhdy). *When the whales leave*, as indicated, is much closer to the Chukchi oral story telling tradition.

2.2 Short summary of the story

A young girl is walking alone on a northern seashore. She seems to lack any kind of knowledge of anything: She does not even realise she is human. She is surrounded by nature. Significantly, she does not feel apart from it, on the contrary she feels she is a part of its wholeness. Out at sea a flock of whales is swimming about, as whales do. It happens that one of them falls in love with the girl whom he sees walking on the shore. He takes on human shape in order to be with the girl.

The whale who has become a man, is called Reu. Surprisingly perhaps, it is he who makes the girl, Nau, conscious of her own humanity. Reu, moreover, becomes the *cultural hero*. He knows how to make tools, how to build a dwelling, and in the end builds a *bajdara*, a boat. Now he can follow the seals and the walrus into the sea and hunt them.

Nau discovers she is pregnant. As the time to give birth is approaching, she feels a need to go down to the shore and immerse herself in water. She now gives birth not to a human baby, but to a little flock of whales. Nau is surprised at this, but Reu calmly explains it is probably because, after all, *he is a whale*.

The next time, however, Nau gives birth to perfectly normal twins of human shape. Reu gets old and dies, while Nau keeps on living.

The text tells how generation is followed by generation on the shore by a people who honours the whale as their brothers, their own forefather was a whale. We hear

¹² In the short story “Chisla Kakota” (“Kakot’s numbers”) (1977) as well as the novel *Magicheskije chisla (Magic Numbers)* (1985) Rytkeu describes the meeting between the Norwegian North-East Passage expedition of 1918-1920, which was led by Roald Amundsen, and the native Chukchi population.

¹³ Karljukevich, 2004.

of Enu, a gifted individual who organises an expedition to foreign lands, and of Givu, who has shamanic powers. Game is plentiful and the whales help them finding it. People are born, grow up, grow old and die, and yet Nau, the foremother of them all *keeps on living*, seemingly for all eternity. As time goes by, however, people tend to look at her stories about her husband Reu and how she birth to whales as mere tales, or as myth in the derogatory sense. In spite of this they continue to honour both her and the whale.

In the end a boy with the sinister name of Armagirgin is born. He is a great hunter, but unlike his predecessors he has no respect for the game. He kills as many walrus as possible, so that this animal never returns to spend the summer on their shore. He has no respect for Nau and her stories. Eventually he is one day hunting a bearded seal that keeps evading him. Furious, he catches the animal at last and takes it ashore without killing it. Now he proceeds to skin the animal alive and then lets it swim away with a trail of blood after it, telling the poor animal to tell the *ocean gods* of his, Armagirgin's, powers. The people of the village are horrified at this. A period of terrible weather and desperate hunger follows, but under Armagirgin's leadership, people still get along somehow. Yet in the end Armagirgin ventures to kill a young whale for meat. As old Nau, the eternal woman learns of this, her head falls off, and she dies. The next day the killed whale is gone. Instead of the whale they find a young man dead on the shore. At this moment the sky is black, the shore barren and the whales leave for the last time.

2.3 The problem of genre

2.3.1 A family saga novel

In his book *Jurij Rytkeu – pisatel' Chukotki*, E. S. Rogover simply states that, to his mind, *When the whales leave* is a novel.¹⁴ Rytkeu, on the other hand, defined *When the whales leave* and *Teryky*, another story which includes motives from Chukchi myth, as “contemporary legends”. It is a question that needs some discussion. On the one hand, the text represents a terse, and for the most part, fairly realistic description of the life of indigenous people living on a pebbly arctic shoreline. On the other it is based on a Chukchi etiological myth (a myth describing how the Chukchi people came into being) to which Rytkeu makes several references in many of his work. While the original etiological myth is very palpable in the beginning, the work develops into a family saga, although this family originates from the unlikely union between an autochthonous woman and a whale that love transformed into a man.

However the mythological beginning is soon replaced by a fairly realistic description of walrus hunting at sea, other forms of food gathering and the processing of hides for making tents and clothes. Still, even in the beginning of the story fantastic events typical of the myth is accompanied by certain realistic details, something which may be observed in records of oral Chukchi mythological narratives also.¹⁵ Thus, the narration of Nau giving birth to a little flock of whales is

¹⁴ E. S. Rogover, *Jurij Rytkeu, Pisatel' Chukotki*, OOO TM "Russkaja beresta" 2007, p. 115.

¹⁵ See for instance Bogoras, 2007.

accompanied by a realistic description of how Nau lowers her body in the water and struggles to position herself so as to breastfeed the whales, how it feels when they touch her nipples with their peculiar whales' lips.

Like many other family saga novels, it is a story of growth and eventual decline. Every generation seems to represent a step further away from the original ethos that made this family or people strong. For each generation, the narrator focuses on one main character, who is endowed with individual traits and personal thoughts in a manner which is certainly more typical of a modern, European novel than of a mythological narrative.

Yet while there are certainly strong elements of the European, or Russian, novel in this work, it is perhaps still too steeped in myth and folklore, too close to a fable, to qualify as a novel in the usual sense of the word. The characters are still too simple, too dominated by single characteristic for the work to be read plainly as a modern novel. It is tempting to describe the work as an *epic* rather than a novel.

2.3.2 *An etiological myth*

From the beginning the narrative is clearly based on an *etiological myth*: it describes the origin of a family, or a tribe. As we have seen, when the reader is introduced to Nau, the original mother, the author emphasises she is *not aware of the fact that she is human*. Importantly, she does not have a language. Not conscious of her human nature, she is lingering in a prehuman state of mind. It could be argued, therefore, that she herself *is not yet human*. She does not seem to have known parents, nor to have ever belonged to a group of any kind. She is therefore *autochthonous* in the sense that she is born out of the Earth itself.

Reu, the original father, is a whale, but *Great Love* transforms him into a man, he walks ashore and marries Nau. Love is what makes both Nau and Reu become human. Loving each other, they feel the need to talk and thus acquire language. The faculty of speech seems to come to them by itself. Their phrases, however, are short and terse, always carrying great weight and essential information.

Reu the whale becomes a man, but there is also a strong substratum in the text to suggest that the whale remains the totemic animal, in other words, an animal that defines Reu and Nau, their children and the generations that follow. They remain, in a sense, whale-people. Interestingly, Nau, the original mother, is not *religious* in the sense that that she sees the whale as a god. She claims to know no gods, and continues to live in a pre-religious and essentially totemic state of mind. Speaking to young people about Reu, she makes explicit that Reu is indeed *not* a god, just their predecessor and brother.¹⁶

In a later non-fictional work, *Dorozhniĭ leksikon* (Road encyclopaedia), Rytkeu confirms that Chukchi myth indeed has it that the Chukchi people descend from the original mother, Nau, and Reu, the whale that love transformed into a man.¹⁷ He also confirms that the Chukchi traditionally regard the whale as a sacred animal. However, there does not seem to be any evidence at all that there has ever been a

¹⁶ Rytkeu, 1977.

¹⁷ Rytkeu, 2010, p. 134.

taboo on killing and eating the whale (as a totemic animal). On the contrary, the Chukchi have traditionally been great whalers, and whale blubber is a national delicacy. Armagirgin's killing of the whale, therefore, is hardly a violation of any known taboo. On the other hand, Rytkeu's own account in *Dorozhnii leksikon* and other works, such as the novel *Ostrov nadezhdy* (*Island of Hope*), published in 1987¹⁸, clearly indicate the whale hunt and the preparation of its carcass for food and materials were accompanied by religious rituals, which Armagirgin typically fails to observe.

2.3.3 Chukchi storytelling and the Russian literary tradition.

The work as a whole is quite short. The style is laconic, yet poetic in its own right. We are basically told about the lives of the most important person of the tribe of each generation, although it also seems that not all generations are accounted for. These characters are typical leaders, either a very successful hunter or a shaman. However, we do not learn much about these people – a few important actions and some important dialogues, usually with Nau, the original mother, who does not die until the end of the saga. Then we suddenly learn that the person in question has become old and prepares to go through the sea and sky – that is to die.

This manner of narrating has its roots in traditional Chukchi oral storytelling, with which the author of course was very familiar. In Chukchi tales and mythological stories collected by among others Bogoras, death often occurs in a surprisingly sudden manner. Many of these stories end abruptly with the sudden death of the protagonist.

In an interview, Rytkeu told Tamara Lönngren: “The Americans have a very good definition: *story teller*. So I am a storyteller: not a philosopher, not an intellectual, I do not even belong to the *intelligentsia*”.¹⁹ Sablin, who has used Rytkeu's works extensively in an ethnographical study of the problem of diverse Chukchi identities, notes that Chukchi culture knew the profession of the *travelling storyteller*.²⁰ Rytkeu himself tells the story of one such legendary storyteller, Nonno, who had encyclopaedic knowledge of Chukchi and Eskimo life and legends, and who knew all the languages and dialects of the region, and even Russian. Nonno's legendary performances attracted great, enthusiastic audiences.²¹

Nevertheless, records of Chukchi stories that were collected by the antropologist Vladimir Bogoraz (spelled Waldemar Bogoras in English translations) around 1900, are simplistic to such a degree they are sometimes barely intelligible to a European reader. While this could have served as an indication as to the extent of Rytkeu's adaptation of his material, it should be noted that Rytkeu himself looked at ethnographic compilations of similar stories with utter contempt: “If a folklorist with a taperecorder appeared in some remote settlement, this was a real holiday for chronic alcoholics. More often than not this learned collector did not know the

¹⁸ Rytkeu, 1998.

¹⁹ Lönngren 1999, p. 16. My translation.

²⁰ Sablin, 2012, p. 33.

²¹ Rytkeu, 2010, pp. 367-383.

[Chukchi]language, and his records would represent a sad, primitive retelling of legends and fairy tales in Russian, heard at some time by someone through a drunken haze".²² Bogoraz, however, made his records at a much earlier stage, and did in fact know Chukchi language.²³

For *When the whales leave* is also a written work, written in Russian originally, and it therefore belongs to Russian (and Soviet) literature also. This quality is emphasized by the fact that the text even contains easily recognizable references to Dostoyevsky and other Russian authors and, as we shall see, even to the Bible. *When the Whales Leave*, therefore, presents itself as a rare amalgam of widely different genres: the European novel, biblical texts and the etiological myth of an indigenous people.

3. Chronotope

3.1 Bakhtin's literary space time

The term *chronotope* derives from Greek. Bakhtin borrowed the term from the natural sciences. He felt the need for a term to describe literary space-time. A literary work must necessarily have a spatio-temporal framework. In works such as "Forms of time and of the Chronotope in the Novel", Bakhtin discusses how this framework has changed through history. However, in the essay *Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity*, he also uses the chronotope as an instrument for textual analysis, especially in the chapter on Goethe (the essay *Roman vospitania i ego znachenie v istorii realizma.*)²⁴ Here, Bakhtin is interested in how an author thinks the world in spatio-temporal terms in order to recreate it in literature. He observes, for instance, that Goethe had an astounding capacity *for seeing time in space*. As example, he cites a passage from *Annals*, where Goethe demonstrates that he is able to *see* that a certain German village had a very good mayor about thirty years earlier. He could see that the village had been planned by one gifted individual, and he could see from the age of trees of alleys and parks when this had happened.²⁵ However, a work does by no means have to be written by an author with a particularly acute sense of time and space to be analysed chronotopically. In the essay *Forms of time and of the Chronotope in the Novel*, Bakhtin's own analysis of spatio-temporal characteristics of the Greek romance provides a striking example of this. The ancient authors seem to have been oblivious of *any* problem of time and space.²⁶ The point is rather that it is probably impossible for an author of fiction, consciously or not, to not convey certain spatio-temporal ideas, or basically his own understanding of time and space.

As compared with other famous terms coined by Bakhtin, such as "polyphony", "dialogue" and "carnivalization", Bakhtin himself did not develop the idea behind

²² Rytkeu, 2010, p. 368.

²³ See for instance Waldemar Bogoraz, *Chukchee Mythology*, Forgotten Books, Marston Gate 2007. www.forgottenbooks.org. Originally published in 1910.

²⁴ Bakhtin, 1986.

²⁵ Bakhtin, 1986, p. 224.

²⁶ Bakhtin, 1996.

the term extensively. It has therefore been understood and used in different ways. In the present work we shall understand chronotope as a means to analyze and define spatio-temporal properties of the literary text, and how these serve to create a literary “universe” typical of this particular work of literature.

3.2 Chronotopic properties of “When the whales leave”: the primordial.

3.2.1 *The absolute primordial*

One would be hard put to find a more striking example of *primordality* in literature than the first chapter of Rytkeu’s *When the whales leave*. On the first page we hear this:

Nau felt that she was at the same time the breeze, the green grass and the wet pebbles, the high clouds and the dark blue bottomless sky.

And when frightened birds, ground squirrels and greyish summer ermines ran away from her feet, Nau shouted loudly and joyfully, and the animals understood her. They looked after the tall girl with her black hair that looked like wings.

She never looked at herself from a distance, and she never thought about how she was different from those who dwelled in holes in the earth, from those who had nests on the cliffs and from those who were creeping on the ground.²⁷

Signs of primordality here are the facts that Nau does not feel herself different from the animals that surround her and that these animals are also able to understand her. In many cultures the beginning (and at the same time the end) of time – in illo tempore – as Eliade calls it,²⁸ is characterised by animals and people being able to understand each others speech, indeed that men are not aware of their own humanity as something that sets them apart from animals.²⁹ In Judeo-Christian tradition Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden is an obvious variant on this theme. Kolupaeva states that the author “takes the reader to a special, prehistoric, mythical time”, something which especially holds true for the first part of the text.³⁰

Yet in Rytkeu’s primordial chronotope time is something very concrete. The arctic summer is short and violent, and Nau is noticing changes every day. The author names an astounding number of different *arctic animals* surrounding his heroine. They fill the air with a cacophony of sounds and these animal sounds are actually the most basic expression of both time and space at this point. The following passage, however, is interesting for several reasons:

Every day the tundra became more colourful and flowery. Nau’s feet became black from berry juice. An old tundra she wolf licked them and looked into Nau’s eyes with her sad, loyal eyes. She felt the winter approaching, and for her own part

²⁷ Rytkeu, 1983, p. 438. Here and henceforth all translations from this publication are mine.

²⁸ See for instance Eliade, 1987 on the idea of “In illo tempore”. Eliade uses the term frequently in many of his works.

²⁹ Sokolova cites for instance an Even legend beginning with the words “In the beginning there lived a bear-man, the dog, too, was human”. Sokolova 1998 p. 57. My translation.

³⁰ Kolupaeva, 2005.

even death, because she was already good for nothing: A hard life and age had worn down her teeth.³¹

The tundra becoming more flowery while the winter is approaching clearly suggests the circularity of time; the seasons of the year. Yet we are allowed to observe that time also has a linear quality, and this is expressed through the ideas of death, and that of an individual creature's lifespan, albeit that of a wolf. A lifespan necessarily has a beginning and an end, and is therefore suggestive of linear time.

During those years nobody measured time, because it was visible anyway. It left prints on the faces of people and it was itself marked by the births of children, their growing up and by people becoming old and going away through the clouds.³²

Although "time was not measured", it is conceived as *linear* in this case, in the sense that it pictures the life-span of an individual, and therefore has a beginning and an end. It is interesting to observe that the author implies that this is an *ancient* way of perceiving time. Traditionally, we think of circular time as ancient, whereas linear time, a Judeo-Christian concept, is modern. Ancient and indigenous cultures tend to be characterized by the circular aspect of time, thus focusing more on the people, or the tribe, which is renewed by new generations, rather than on the individual. Nevertheless, the *particular chronotope of the human body* is something that at all times necessarily must have made men aware of the linear aspect of time, although even this aspect has been disregarded in ancient literature, such as the Greek romance.³³

Furthermore, the image of the *wolf* licking the girl's feet is actually another striking example of the primordial: for it is only when man becomes a keeper of livestock that the wolf is seen as a thief and a dangerous killer. The image of a *friendly* wolf, therefore, is palpably very ancient, or to put it more exactly, it is *Mesolithic* rather than *Neolithic*. Rytkeu belonged to that part of the Chukchi people who hunted sea mammals. The motif of the friendly wolf would probably be less likely to be popular and survive among those Chukchi who were primarily reindeer herders.

No less striking is a short sentence a little further on:

As Nau was walking the tundra she dug out mouse holes to get sweet roots [collected by the mice] out of them.³⁴

Now, many authors with knowledge and imagination would be able to write more or less convincingly of primordial life, but it would certainly take one who has actually experienced the lifestyle to even imagine such a way of obtaining a snack. This amusing detail, therefore, gives the text the quality of chronotopic genuinity and great realism. To sum up, the chronotope of the primordial as generated through this particular work of art is an amalgam of the essentially realistic chronotope of everyday life and of a mythical chronotope.

³¹ Rytkeu, 1983, p. 440-441.

³² Rytkeu, 1983, p. 478.

³³ Bakhtin, 1996, pp. 89-90.

³⁴ Rytkeu, 1983, p. 445.

3.2.2 From the primordial to the modern: “When the Whales Leave” as a history of thinking the world

After Reu’s death the tribe on the shore continue the basically mesolithic or epipaleolithic form of life that the indigenous peoples of the North have continued until less than a century ago. The narrative makes brief but pointed accounts of every generation, so that comparatively small amounts of text, or of words, account for large amounts time. At the same time, the spatial aspect remains unchanged. All of the action takes place on the same pebbly shore where the story started, or at sea, where the hunting and encounters with whales take place. Significantly, at one time a few members of the tribe undertake a long voyage towards the south. However, the story does not follow the voyagers to other lands. Only when they return many years later, do we hear of their experiences as they tell their story to the rest of the tribe. Thus, the story becomes reminiscent of a mounted camera that records from exactly the same angle over a long period at very high speed.

An element of the mythical chronotope never quite disappears, because Nau, the original mythic mother keeps on living while generations follow generations around her. The appearance of the supernatural beings such as the *Rekken*, also serves to emphasise that mythical chronotope is never set apart from the chronotope of everyday life. On the other hand, the expression “to go through the clouds”, meaning to die, also suggests the presence of another mythological chronotope, of which the characters have do direct knowledge. It should be noted at this point that for instance in the novel *Ostrov Nadezhdy* (Island of Hope), Rytkeu time and again makes the point that to an indigenous people (in this case the Inuit), the mythic is very much a part of their every day reality. Yet while it seems that the characters in *When the Whales leave* do not have knowledge about “the upper world” where good people go after their death, stories and tales about people going to the upper world, talking to its inhabitants and returning to Earth are not unheard of in Chukchi folklore.³⁵ Rytkeu’s text, like Chukchi mythological stories, typically represents an amalgam of mythological elements and realistic detail.

However there is certainly a development in the way the people of the pebbly shore *think the world*. To the first generations Nau’s mythical account of how she became human and subsequently the original mother of their tribe were as real and true as anything they experienced in their daily lives. Yet as one generation replaces the other while she still keeps living, they start to disbelieve her. While still accepting the whale as their brothers, and as their highly esteemed totem animal, they shrug at the literal content of the myth. At one time though, a group of hunters in distress at sea are saved by a flock of whales that lead them towards the shore. The belief in whales as their real brothers is thus rekindled – for the time being.

The story of the voyage also reveals that “scientific” thought has begun to replace mythical ideas. The character Klau, for example, *reasons* that if one did what

³⁵ See for instance the story “Skazanie o Tirkinpyneu – Solnechnoi starukhe” in L. V. Belikov (editor, compiler and translator), *Chukotskie narodnye skazki, mify i predaniya*, Magadanskoe knizhnoe izdatel’stvo 1982, pp. 138-149.

whales do when it is autumn; that is follow the sun until it returns, one would live in perpetual summer. He *reflects* on where migratory birds go, and thus becomes aware of the necessary existence of *another space*. In other words, mythical explanations are no longer sufficient or satisfactory for Klau. He feels the need for empirical knowledge. His “scientific” wondering is what brings about the voyage, which is in effect an expedition, an exploration of foreign lands, that actually seems more typical of Europeans than of Chukchi and other indigenous peoples of the North.

Indeed, the later generations of the tribe on the pebbly shore become ever more modern, ever more European in their way of thinking the world, although no Europeans ever appear in the story, nor are Russia and Europe, or Canada and USA for that matter, even mentioned. Every generation represents a step further away from the primordial way of thinking the world, which is related not only to space and time, but to a set of values, primary among which is the axiom that whales and men are brothers. Thus, there is a chronotopical development in the story. The chronotope of the absolute primordial, which is cleanly set in the mythical absolute past, is replaced by a chronotope of gradual development towards the modern. The people of the pebbly shore become aware of other geographical spaces. In their thinking they set themselves more and more apart from their surroundings, including the animals. Still, at least so long as the eternal woman Nau is alive, the story retains an element of the mythical chronotope. The absence of Russians contributes to this. Not at any point does it make sense to try and guess what *year* the action takes place. All we can say is that either it takes place before the Chukchi comes into contact with the Russians – or that the story is set in a mythic, *unhistoric* - or rather *ahistoric* - chronotope where Russians or other Caucasians have no place. Nevertheless, as we have seen, the modern, European way of thinking the world is represented by changes in the Chukchi’s own way of thinking the world.

3.2.3 *Armagirgin and the Chronotope of Armageddon*

Thus, we have seen that the people of the pebbly shoreline are becoming ever more modern, in a certain sense, European in their way of thinking the world. The only people from the outside they, (and only one shaman), ever comes into contact with are the *Rekken*, a kind of hobgoblins of Chukchi folklore, who, although involuntarily, are carriers of disease. It would seem that in folklore, the *Rekken* are basically evil spirits and little else, but Rytkeu endows them with human traits and individuality. (It would seem that only in Rytkeu’s text the *Rekken* are *involuntarily* carriers of disease.) At the same time they could represent a cryptic reference to European influence, since the Europeans always have brought with them new diseases and alcohol when they enter into contact with indigenous peoples.

At the end of “When the whales leave” Armagirgin, a great hunter is born into the community on the pebbly shore. Armagirgin is a Chukchi name, yet when introduced into a European work of literature, by its phonetic characteristics, it seems to suggest *Armageddon*, the apocalyptic end of time and space.

There can be no doubt that Armagirgin, more than any character before him, represents what Rytkeu conceives of as the *European* way of thinking the world.

Armagirgin is a European and a *Christian* in the sense that he sees man as a creature *qualitatively* apart from and *above* all the rest of nature.³⁶ This is highly untypical of how indigenous people think and understand the world. Thus, in Bogoraz' *Chukchee Mythology*, we find phrases like "... some *people* came, driving reindeer. *They were wolves*" and "Once (there were) two Polar-Bear *women*. They landed (on shore. They were) very pretty. On the land a *man* saw them. He married one, and took her home and anointed her."³⁷ In other words, animal species are typically referred to as different peoples. Examples of this phenomenon are ubiquitous in indigenous peoples' narratives. Typically, among indigenous peoples, species of animals are conceived of as different peoples or nations and thus the equals of men. Even the Kyrgyz writer Chingiz Aitmatov has made a point of showing that a horse or a camel is a man's friend or brother, thus in many ways his equal. The Kyrgyz nation converted from an animist religion to Islam about 200 years ago.

Yet as a boy, Armagirgin refuses to think of whales as brothers, to him they are ugly monsters. "We (men) are the masters of the world," he cries, reciting *Genesis* as it were. There is also a palpable dialogue with Dostoevsky at work here. Armagirgin is a Chukchi nihilist, certainly a relative of characters like Raskolnikov, Stavrogin and Ivan Karamazov. With his novel *Besy, The Possessed* (1872) Dostoevsky argues that man needs God above him in order to remain human. In *Brat'ja Karamazovy, The Brothers Karamazov* (1880) elaborates further on this thought. If man does not believe in God, he will believe he himself to be a god and then *everything is allowed*. According to Dostoevsky's logic, man will then no longer have a conscience to guide him and do evil with no restraint. Rytkeu lets Armagirgin³⁸ repeat the exact words uttered by the Devil in Ivan Karamazov's nightmare³⁹: "все дозволено", that is precisely "everything is allowed", using the slightly quaint дозволено rather than the more neutral позволено for "allowed". For Dostoevsky *chelovekobog*, or man-god, is a man who does not believe in God, and who therefore believes himself to be the highest being in the universe. Yet for Dostoevsky, man needs God to remain human, without God he will deteriorate into something other than man. Believing himself to be God, he becomes a demon.

For Armagirgin too, man is the master of the universe. He does not have to pay respect to anything. Now, Armagirgin has lost and forgotten the *Great Love*, which is exactly that which in the beginning of time made Nau and Reu human. He forswears his totemic kinship with the whale. Armagirgin, the Chukchi nihilist as it were,

³⁶ This meaning becomes obvious if one compares *When the Whales Leave* with the more recent novel *The Chukchi Bible*, which is basically a retelling of the same story in the form of a more realistic, modern novel, although this work too starts with the cosmogonic Chukchi myth. Yuri Rytkeu, *The Chukchi Bible*, Archipelago books, New York 2011.

³⁷ Bogoraz, 2007, p. 173.

³⁸ Rytkeu, 1983, p. 499.

³⁹ F. M. Dostoevskii, *Bratja Karamazovy, Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, tom XV, Izdatelstvo nauka, Leningrad 1976, p. 84.

becomes a Chukchi equivalent of Dostoevsky's *chelovekobog* (man-god). In Rytkeu's universe to disrespect ancestors and traditional beliefs, and above all, to set man apart from and above nature means exactly the same as not believing in God means to Dostoevsky. Interestingly, Armagirgin is also referred to as a "real man" (настоящий человек), thus ironically invoking the Chukchi word for "Chukchi" *luoravetlan*, literally "real man", and perhaps even Boris Polevoi's famous socialist-realist novel by the same name.⁴⁰ Rogover notes references to another novel by Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, and Raskolnikov's idea of a superman, to whom, again, even murder is *allowed* albeit under certain circumstances.⁴¹ Rogover also notes references to Gorky, Nekrasov and Valentin Rasputin.

When hunting, Armagirgin kills everything he can lay hand on, so that, unlike his ancestors, he hunts in an *unsustainable* way. Unlike them, he is also cruel to the game. Sea mammals like seals and walrus become scarce and eventually disappear. Armagirgin is oblivious of nature's need to regenerate, in other words, he is oblivious of the *circular aspect of time*. He ostentatiously has no respect for ancient rules and rituals, and in the end he breaks the ultimate taboo and kills a whale. This is when Nau, the original mother, dies. Her head simply falls off and she is dead. The pebbly shore is then devoid of life and the sky is dark. Armagirgin, with his European way of thinking the world, has brought about Armageddon. Armagirgin typically understands time only in its linear aspect. As a result of this he has overexploited land and sea, making both empty. One earlier saying by Nau rings especially true here at the end of the story: "As long as there is mystery, reason will live".⁴² Thus, with the death of Nau we see that the actions of Armagirgin bring about the end of *mythical time*. As indicated even in the title of one of his books, Eliade understands the basic characteristic of mythical time as *eternal return*, a concept that comprises qualities of both circularity and eternity.⁴³ In *When the Whales Leave*, however, mythical time comes to absolute end. As a great, unexpected paradox, mythical time has become linear.

When the Whales Leave has a very distinct ecological message. We should not be blind to the fact that this work certainly also represents a critique of the modern, European way of thinking the world. We learn that in pure form the linear concept of time, which is essentially Judeo-Christian, becomes a self-fulfilling prophesy of Armageddon, because it means not only exploiting, but in the end even exhausting the resources of the Earth.

To the author, however, there is no distinction between ecology and the ancient traditions of his people. They are one and the same. Underlying this message is the

⁴⁰ Polevoi's novel is about a war hero, a pilot who has both legs amputated after severe combat wounds, and fights his way back to the cockpit so he can continue to fight. The image of this "real man" made its way into popular mythology, and plays an important role in Pelevin's novel *Omon Ra* (1993).

⁴¹ Rogover, 2007, p. 128.

⁴² Rytkeu, 1977.

⁴³ Eliade, 1991.

arguably most important chronotopic property of the work; the linearity and ultimately, the termination of mythical time.

The most interesting part of the critique voiced in *When the Whales Leave* is that it comes from a representative an indigenous people who learned Russian language and the language of Russian and European literature in order not only to learn from us, but to teach us as well. Paradoxically, it is the voice of primordial man, spoken in modern language. It would be unwise not to listen.

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Summary

Yuri Rytkeu (1930-2008) is a Chukchi novelist who wrote in Russian. During recent years his works have been published into German, English and other languages. His popularity outside Russia is rising. The present article introduces the reader to Rytkeu and his works and goes on to a reading of *When the Whales Leave* (1977), a short novel written in the form of a family saga with many elements from the author's native Chukchi myth. Special attention is given to chronotopic properties of the work. The article also argues that *When the Whales Leave* draws attention to ecological problems and represents an indirect critique of the European (Christian) *Weltanschauung*, where man is the master of nature rather than a part of it.

Keywords

Rytkeu, Chukchi, chronotope, myth, indigenous author, *When the Whales Leave*.