THE CALL OF THE WILD IN FRENCH AND ENGLISH CANADIAN LITERATURE

par Jack WARWICK

In borrowing Jack London's well known title to indicate the topic of this paper, I am not proposing to extend my comparison to include American authors. I am simply looking for the best cliché to indicate what the topic is, and it happens to be his title. This is also a reminder to us that themes connected with the wild are by no means reserved hunting ground for Canadian authors of either language. Perhaps it is a necessary reminder, because some Canadian writers, like Robertson Davies and Félix Antoine Savard, have looked on the wild with an extremely possessive gaze. What we are dealing with is at one and the same time an extremely widespread spur to the poetic imagination, and a thematic ensemble which has had its own special development in Canada.

Without dwelling too long on the extensive aspect of the subject, we should establish a broad perspective of wilderness themes by reference to a few of the many obvious names: Chateaubriand, Rousseau, William Morris and, no doubt, we can go all the way back to Beowulf. But to establish a meaningful and helpful perspective, it would be necessary to narrow down to some more constant factors. One might, for instance, start with Molière's use of the word "le désert". Does it really mean, as I was taught at school, anywhere outside Paris, or should we take Alceste seriously as thinking of a place where a man who is a man can strike out and start a new life? If we think the essential comedy of this line in *Le Misanthrope* is the clash between these two meanings, then we are identifying an irony which is not uncommon in writings about the Canadian bush.

I am not claiming Molière as an early Canadian author, as certain Americain critics have appropriated the author of *The Tempest.* Far from it, what I am submitting is that even in the most unlikely places, something of the call of the wild is to be found. This is not the same as saying that it is central and fully developed, in the other places where it is found, as it is in Canada.

Irony, moreover, is not the only mood in which the call of the wild is treated in Canada. A prior condition of irony is the positive belief in values; these are to be found in abundance, mysteriously attached to the unsettled regions. Nevertheless, it seems probable from the outset that the Canadian backwoods were not destined to have such a flourishing age of innocence as their American counterpart, the frontier. The two great pro-

phets of Canadian gloom, Michel Brunet and George Grant, both maintain, in different ways, that in Canada the untamed forest brings a sense of loss. For Brunet, it is a commercial loss of far-reaching significance. The Indian Lands whose bicentennial loss is being celebrated this year were the main fur-trading area on which the nascent French-Canadian commercial class depended.

> "Le traité de Versailles, qui mit fin à la Révolution américaine, jeta la consternation chez les hommes d'affaires canadiens. L'un d'eux confie à un correspondant: "Chaque individu se croit voir arracher le bras droit en perdant les pays d'en haut; ... c'est une perte à jamais irréparable... L'agriculture seule nous offre des ressources".

And so, according to Brunet, the *Canadiens* of that period were forced into a pioneering farming for which they had no taste and from which they expected little profit. This cruel destiny completed the decapitation of the middle class, with the social and cultural and ideological consequences which Brunet sums up in the pejorative word "agriculturisme". It seems reasonable, from our point of view, to expect that such an historic blow would also mark the literary imagination. And in fact, I propose to show later how certain works may be related to it.

The later English settlers who arrived to take up pioneer farming do not appear to have liked it either, if the ones who wrote about it are to be trusted. These, too, were people whose other ambitions had been thwarted by major changes in world history. But according to George Grant, the problem goes much deeper. Clearing land to make a new farm is, as we can readily imagine even when we visit our Pioneer Villages complete with pop-stand, a grim conflict with external nature. But for those particular pioneers, endowed with a puritanical religion, it was the visible counterpart of their grim struggle with inner, human nature. This, Grant affirms, established the character of those people and their descendants.

Both these theses present historical problems with which I cannot possibly deal here; indeed, I am aware of reducing them drastically. However, this is roughly how the two writers presented Canada's mental health just before the great debâcle of the sixties, just at the end, they both say, of what Canada has traditionally been and stood for.

Despite the distaste we have mentioned, one of the positive values found in the literary confrontation of the wild country is the affirmation of joy in farming it. In both languages, the *"agriculturisme"* denounced by

Michel Brunet finds its cheerful expression. Grove comes to mind, but I do not think there is a work in English to compare with the lengthy raptures of Antoine Gérin-Lajoie.

In his ponderous propagandizing novel, *Jean Rivard*, this author does occasionally mention the seraphic contemplation of a serene nature, but the main thrust is in the conquest of the forest through a combination of intelligence, endurance, courage surpassing that of a soldier and, as it appears to the cynical modern reader, the shameless exploitation of a hired man. Gérin-Lajoie, visibly worried about the narration of a life which is essentially uneventful, throws in a few exciting incidents, of which the most important is a hand-to-hand combat with a she-bear. Our hero wins, assisted, it is true, by the timely intervention of the hired man with an axe. Fights with powerful animals are not uncommon in Canadian folk tales and literature, and this one clearly symbolizes the domination of hostile nature, as well as giving necessary stature to the hero and relief to the monotonous narrative. Having shown themselves stronger than the strongest animal in the forest, the two men make their peace with nature by adopting the orphaned bear cub. But the author loses sight of this detail as he takes his hero further along the road of conquest, until the forest which originally stimulated his imagination is completely eradicated and replaced by smiling countryside with a prosperous village.

The conquering attitude to external nature found in *Jean Rivard* is obviously like the attitude described by George Grant. Antoine Sirois has made a systematic comparison between this novel and *The Man from Glengarry,* by Ralph Conner. Despite certain major differences—date of composition, place given to agriculture, place given to women— the conquering hero who eventually applies his moral and economic strength to restoring society is very similar.

The man from Glengarry, however, goes much further. He conquers the virgin continent *"usque ad mare",* through business enterprise. This sort of hero is not uncommon in English writing. In Arthur Sullivan's novel, *The Rapids,* the hero is fascinated by the water-falls at Sault-Ste-Marie, wakes up the sleepy little town, and harnesses nature's hydraulic energy to make a mighty industrial centre.

There are some northern utopias in French. In Florin Laurent's SF novel, *Terres boréales,* the tides are harnessed to give enough hydroelectric power to heat up Ungava and grow tobacco in it. But such works are uncommon. The outstanding novel about business in the North-West is *Les Engagés du Grand Portage,* by Léo-Paul Desrosiers. This is based

on the history of the fur trade, and repeats the view commonly held by French Canadians, that the rivalry of the great companies was felt as a conflict of French and Scots. The French lost, and this is faithfully recorded by Desrosiers, who shows one *"voyageur"* entering the dirty commercial world of the winners, and another turning his back on it, to return to the morally healthy life of his village in Lower Canada. The spiritual conquest and the material conquest are thus neatly divorced, and the novel ends in triumph because the hero has chosen the better part. This was published in 1938, and is nowadays turned to derision by such authors as Jacques Ferron. An earlier treatment of the fur trade, *Forestiers et Voyageurs* by Joseph-Charles Taché, published in 1860, had also shown the spiritual victory of the common *"voyageurs"*, but had been more positive about their material possession of the land they traversed. It was a possession based on traditional skill and knowledge, which Taché thought could still be applied in new ventures like the timber trade.

In this second classic reaction to the wilderness, the conquest of space by methods other than farming, we may say that similar ideas are present in English and French, but that they are differently developed, in full consciousness of the historical fact that the French spread to the West was a failure, confirmed by the acts of the young Provincial government of Manitoba.

In French writing, then, the sense of loss evoked by consciousness of history accompanies the expectation of conquest evoked by the pioneer tradition. It is in *Maria Chapdelaine,* I maintain, that we most clearly see the sense of loss to which Michel Brunet referred. In Louis Hémon's Canadian novel, the central pivot is the death of François Paradis, the man of the forest, expert guide and trapper, the living spirit of the *"pays d'en haut"*. It is his death that forces Maria to choose a new and less attractive destiny, from a range restricted to two items, farming, and the American melting pot. Upon this simple, recongnizable pattern, Louis Hémon builds his own complicated nostalgia for a taste of the wild, and with that a sense of human destiny that goes far beyond the angel voices of Peribonka. In the delicate alternation of his style, between acid naturalism and conscious lyricism, he creates a dialogue in which most readers will recognize their own call of the wild in ironic juxtaposition with their own sobering realities. I am informed that the novel was very popular in Cairo, where "la lisière sombre de la forêt" could have little exact literal meaning. What makes the novel live is the richness of the figurative meanings with which the author has charged that forest: attraction, hope of a new life, terror, death, denial. To make this clear, the author has provided us with another key image, the

little square window through which Maria looks out on the world, and through which, at the end, the voices of spring come to tell her that she still has to face life.

It is common to avoid or even sneer at *Maria Chapdelaine* nowadays, because it is not an adequate portrait of Canadian life. But it never was an adequate portrait of Canadian life, despite its detailed observation of a particular and already marginal sector. The little square window is there to remind us that how you look at your surroundings is part of the reality. We need only compare different types of Canadian landscape painting to see how important the culturally accepted act of perception has been in relating Canadians to their untamed regions. *Maria Chapdelaine* lives on as part of a literary tradition, and the most important difference between Louis Hémon's time and ours is that that tradition has grown enormously.

François Paradis, in particular, is alive and well and trapping in the forests of the imagination, with variants of course. In some cases he is a very successful traveller who draws strength from his struggle with the land, as in David Walker's *Where High Winds Blow,* or Yves Thériault's *Agaguk.* Sometimes his connection with the forest is central to the work, as in Bertrand Vac's *Louise Genest,* sometimes it is incidental, as in Hugh MacLennan's *The Watch that ends the night.*

These last two examples will serve to illustrate a principle which is common to such heroes, despite the extreme differences in the way their authors situate them in a social context. Both of them come from the forest, and in effect have no other origin, both are a challenge to society, and both bring the dangerous gift of vitality and love.

Thomas Clarey, the hero of Bertrand Vac's novel, is a genuine *"coureur de bois"* who lives by trapping and identifies himself with the playful otter, his favourite prey. He lives in the forest, where social contacts and codes are minimal. He is naturally attractive to the women he sees on his rare visits to the village, but he is impatient of organized society, including such restrictive institutions as marriage. He offers life and happiness to Louise, whose existence in the village is asphyxiating, but she will die, as it were, of an overdose. Up until the events which precipitate the tragic dénouement, she is made happy, healthy and free. Her flight into the forest with Clarey is presented not as an escapade, but as a journey of self-discovery. Incidental details, such as the canoe which rocks her like a cradle, even suggest a rebirth and accession to the innocence of childhood. But the life she finds in the forest has its own violent and mysterious laws, which she cannot fully accept.

MacLennan's Jerome Martell is a Montreal physician, unaccountably expert at healing, but a nuisance to the hospital administration. At a critical point in the novel, *The Watch that ends the night,* he has to give some explanation of his therapeutic vitality, which will also threaten the life of the heroine by its excess. In a flashback he tells of his childhood. He is almost literally a son of the forest, being born in a lumber camp of no known father, and brought up without normal social contact. In an incident in which sex, violence and awareness of life are totally fused, he makes his escape down a swollen river. Here again, the journey suggests birth, and the forest is described as being magic at that moment.

From this rapid comparison, which could be extended to a considerable range of vitality heroes and healing journeys, we may see the most basic pairing of opposites, creation and destruction, or we may see those attitudes to Canadian nature mentioned by Grant and Brunet, fascination and terror, destiny and loss. I am obliged at this point to reveal my own explanation, which is that a universal archetype and a particular cultural situation activate and stimulate each other.

These feelings are very often caught in purely descriptive poetry , of which I offer two short extracts, one by Wilfred Campbell, the other by René Chopin :

Out of a world of death, far to the northward lying,
Under the sun and the moon, under the dusk and the day;
Under the glimmer of stars and the purple sunsets dying,
Wan and waste and white, stretch the great lakes away.

* * *

Lonely hidden bays, moonlit, ice-rimmed, winding.
Fringed by forests and crags, haunted by shadowy shores;
Hushed from the outward strife, where the mighty surf is grinding
Death and hate on the rocks, as sandward and landward it roars.

Géante elle apparaît, manoir ou cathédrale,
La banquise polaire avec grottes à jour,
Comme un magique écran de clarté sépulcrale
Où l'on voit s'ériger les créneaux d'une tour.

* * *

Les voiles luxueux d'aurores magnétiques,
Déroulant sur le gouffre immense du Chaos
Leurs franges de couleurs aux éclairs prismatiques,
Ont enchanté la fin tragique des Héros.

In each case, the poet stands in awe of the power of nature, and observes its inhuman quality, violence in the one, impassivity in the other. In each case the poet is describing a scene felt to be in some way typical of Canada, although most of us never see icebergs except on Lawren Harris's paintings. Beneath the descriptions, ostensibly pure aestheticism without message, lurk all the conflicting reactions identified with this accreted cultural tradition.

Three recent novels, three very differeent novels, show how that tradition has grown to be a vehicle of literary expression going far beyond its immediate literal content. I refer to *L'Elan d'Amérique*, in which André Langevin returned angrily from the long silence which followed *Le Temps des hommes;* to *Surfacing,* in which Margaret Atwood manages to unify such heterogeneous themes as nationalism, abortion, conservation and aestheticism; and to *Scann,* in which Robert Harlow quite astonishingly revives the old theme of the conquest of the land.

To describe the byzantine structure of *Scann* would go beyond the limits of both time and topic. But I think I can fairly say that the clearest unifying strand in this hydra-headed narrative is a hairy-chested story about a trap-line. The story is told by Scann, a garrulous journalist who has just finished commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of his prosperous little western town, named Linden after the trapper who first built a cabin in that place. Scann is a man with a passion for place; "for him, Linden is the point at which man and nature join, that cruel moment outside of time... which yields the profound enduring strengths of both". Space, apparently, has displaced time, and it is not very hard to see how this comes about. The story Scann is telling is about the moment at which the place, Linden, was taken over from the man, Linden, by Thrain, a hardy businessman who represents the new kind of settler. This is the point of origin, and takes the place, in Scann's mind, of the creation of the world. So that the mythical *"in illo tempore",* to which Mircea Eliade sees us all looking back, and for which George Grant is searching, is here represented by the virgin forest in which an epic struggle takes place. Although the epic struggle turns out to be a tall story embroidered by Scann around the bare facts, it is also a highly idealized

version of the struggles of the first Europeans who tamed nature and founded a dynasty. Thrain, incidentally, is club-footed, like Oedipus who settled the Sphinx and became king. The story is told in such vivid detail that writer and reader feel that they too have undergone the trial of respecting and outwitting the wolverine and the porcupine who resist men's efforts to take possession of the world.

It is also true of *L'Elan d'Amérique* that the most central and unifying narrative thread is the pursuit of a moose through the forest. All the same connotations and expectations are there. Antoine, the hunter, feels a close identity with the animal, and his aim is to assert his right to make his life in the forest. However, all these expectations are thwarted. Antoine, too old for such exploits, has a weak heart. Meanwhile, the president of the paper company which owns the forest is hunting the same moose in a seaplane, with a machine gun. The political implications need no comment; Langevin is bitterly trampling down the whole wilderness myth. There are no more places to go to get back to the beginning of time, and the hero, far from bringing back vitality, has to be carried off, wounded and sick, by an old Indian.

The therapeutic journey to the forest and lake is successful in *Surfacing.* The heroine-narrator succeeds, with difficulty and pain, in stripping off all layers of pretence and plunging back to the sources of life, or of her life. In this novel, the ascesis is pushed to its logical limit, and the traveller, not content with being an expert canoe-ist and guide, has to become like an animal before she can emerge restored. Some of the pretences that have to be stripped off are those of her companions in all but the last stages of the journey, and this allows the novelist a range of satirical comment on social and political attitudes, not normally found in wilderness literature. Her irony even attacks the superficial nationalist attitudes which have become the fellow-travellers of the Canadian wild. This is, then, a work in which the primitivist myth is given a major and positive place, at the same time as the Canadian North is an ironic and often mocking presence. Here, as in *L'Elan d'Amérique,* the hero's search for self is haunted by the advance of a power company which threatens to destroy the forest, and by tourist hunters, who want the quick result of the forest experience without going through the ritual discipline. The ironic juxtaposition of these with the genuine search and the expert traveller who is aware of being spiritually lost, intensifies the accreted literary tradition and perhaps purges it of some of the compla-

cency which success has brought it. For we are now in the period when Canadian Literature is becoming Holy Writ, and the wilderness of the Group of Seven is the Establishment mascot.

It is in this respect, I think, that we can explain why many readers find *L'Elan d'Amérique* disappointing. Langevin has not repeated the tragic success of his earlier novel, *Le Temps des hommes.* There, the traveller had less of the trappings of local colour, did not waste his time hunting a symbolic moose, went straight to the point: he was tracking down God, the answer to major questions and the source of salvation. The wilderness is ultimately a search of that order, supported by locality, scenery, historical association and so on; but these must enrich the essential quest without stifling it.

In conclusion, I raise some theoretical questions I cannot easily answer, but still less avoid. This type of comparative study has made no mention of specific influences being exchanged through documented sources. I do not really know who read what. I can tell that Robert Harlow is familiar with the French-Canadian tradition: he often uses French names for things, and the chief character in his fable, the wolverine, is more often than not called *carcajou,* for no reason in particular. But every Canadian child has to learn about *"coureurs de bois"* and *"voyageurs"* in Canadian history. The most I can say is that specific direct literary influences are yet to be established, but that a general awareness of the North, or the *"pays d'en haut",* is very widespread, and in some cases like Harlow's, the memory of the pioneer town as a social reality is still immediate.

This is, then, one area where the two cultures do overlap. It would be very misleading to conclude from that that they are the same. But in both cultures this is a privileged area, and generates a language of symbols and associations which can be readily understood in both groups. Our statesmen have not been slow to recognize this common appeal, and when they are in political trouble they often give speeches about developing the vast potential of the Canadian North.

However, in this common language different things are said at different times. English works at present are relatively optimistic, despite Grant's gloomy analysis of the puritan spirit. Contact with nature is seen as health and possession; the source of time is surrounded by increasingly arduous trials, but still there. French works are more likely to turn to tragedy, or flight from historical time, or, as we have seen, a self-destructive version of the myth itself. Here, too, we must avoid dogmatic generalization; the balance is easily tipped if we take into

account such songs of Gilles Vigneault as "Le Nord du nord". And above all, the different moods seem to predominate at different times, rather than consistently in the two different languages.

There are, in Canada, groups of eager scholars and students who want to see all Canadian literature subjected to instant comparativism. This must be resisted: comparisons have to be established, not blandly assumed. Nevertheless, the call of the wild does prove to be one area in which there in similarity without necessarily direct interchange. If, in many other areas, it would be more fruitful to compare with writers outside Canada, this is one where internal comparison is profitable, and it invites more detailed research than has yet been achieved. Yet the similarities are not nearly explained by the historical theses of Grant and Brunet. These have little in common apart from their pessimism. History explains only some aspects of literature. The same limitation applies to fundamental myth theories. The literatures of Canada present a precise challenge to the scholar who seeks to relate historical and anhistorical methodologies, to produce a literary theory more satisfying than either of these can furnish independently.

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