

NORTHERN UTOPIA

Allison Mitcham

A VERY GREAT NUMBER of contemporary Canadian novelists, both French and English, have focused on the northern wilderness in the belief that it is what makes Canada distinctive and original. For novelists with styles and attitudes as diverse as Gabrielle Roy's and Margaret Atwood's, Yves Thériault's and Henry Kreisel's, Claude Jasmin's and Harold Horwood's¹ (and the list could go on and on . . .) the northern wilderness has become the dominant Canadian myth.

For all these novelists the northern wilderness is a place where men and women in flight from what they feel are the decadent and sterile values of the "South" may seek a heightened self-awareness — perhaps even perceptions so transcendental as to be termed "salvation". In their terms the "South" frequently becomes not only the towns, cities and outposts of civilization in Southern Canada or even the United States, but by implication all Western civilization. The North thus represents a vast and pure, though at the same time a terrible and cold, reservoir of enchantment, where the disenchanting individual can hope to escape from the false utopia in which he feels trapped. His choice, if he remains in the "South" appears to be between a mechanistic, communal and soft "brave new world" and a mechanistic, communal but humiliatingly brutal and ugly world approaching that of Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The North — a new utopia, as many seem to see it — stands out frequently in contemporary Canadian novels as perhaps the only place left, not only in Canada but in all the Western world, where man can yet pursue a personal dream — where he can hope to be individual.

The farther north they go, our novelists feel, the more likelihood there is of their protagonists fulfilling their dreams. Thus Paul, the terrorist-protagonist of Jasmin's *Ethel et le terroriste*, who is an expatriate to the United States after his act of terrorism in Montreal, engages in a mental flight to the North Pole. If he could only get there, he feels, he would be able to purify and renew himself:

Nous roulerons vers le nord et nous dépasserons le pays. Nous irons jusqu'au pôle, chez les Esquimaux. Et là, on se déguisera avec de la loutre, de la martre, du phoque. Nous nous construirons un joli peti iglou. Nous serons bien, au propre, au frais, au blanc. Le pôle sera notre retraite, notre ultime voyage de noces. Et là, on se laissera geler. Mais bien geler pour un temps infini. Nous hibernerons, Ethel. Jusqu'à ce que cette crise passe. Quand nous nous réveillerons de notre long sommeil, il se sera passé peut-être tout un siècle et nous serons demeurés jeunes et frais, dispos, prêts à rouler de nouveau, à fuir autre chose. Et quand on sera fatigué de nouveau, eh bien, on reviendra, on remontera encore une fois tout là-haut, au pôle et de nouveau ce sera un long sommeil congelé.

It is also to the far north, the Ungava Bay area — and once again Eskimo country — that Pierre, Gabrielle Roy's artist-hero in *La montagne secrète*, goes in pursuit of artistic truth; and it is there that he finds his inspiration, his magic mountain. Pierre's love of the North produces a magic glow in his work. Consequently, the expansive and genuine feelings behind his northern drawings stand out in contrast to the cramped and bleak feelings which seep from drawings such as those produced by Sinclair Ross's artist-minister Philip Bentley in *As for me and my House*. Philip, in contrast to Pierre, has lost the capacity to dream, the imaginative quality so necessary to the artist, by being confined within the false-fronted limits of a series of Southern Canadian small towns such as Horizon.

ARTISTIC IMAGINATION and fulfilment are again linked with the North as inspiration in Yves Thériault's *Tayaout, fils d'Agaguk*. Tayaout, an Eskimo boy inspired by visions of past Eskimo traditions, dreams of travelling alone northward, far beyond the present habitations of man — and of finding there the mystical lost stone of his people. When he does make the perilous northern journey and does find the stone, he dreams of forms which he must extract from this special stone. In turn he tells other members of the tribe that they must consult their own dreams so as to perceive and bring out the individual soul dormant within each stone. Art thus becomes the province of every individual able to heighten his perceptions through meditation and exclusion of the materialistic values which rule the "South". All goes well until the tribe is lured into selling sculptures to a "Southern" trader and consequently betraying their dreams and their traditions.

Yves Thériault and Harold Horwood are the two contemporary Canadian novelists who are perhaps most convinced of the ideal or utopian aspects of the North. Both subscribe to the notion that the Northland is, as Horwood put it,

“such a splendid land — . . . splendid like a country in a vision”,² and that the Eskimos are, potentially at least “a nation of visionaries”.³ Heroic characters are the result of the authors’ subscribing to this thesis. Tayaout, Agaguk, and Gillingham are epic heroes — legendary figures who stand out in stark contrast to the usual non-heroes of contemporary Western fiction. All three work toward achieving an ideal which is at once physical and spiritual. Physically, they are all of exceptional strength, with an ability to survive in the world’s harshest climate. Spiritually, they are committed to an ideal: Tayaout and Gillingham to restoring to the Eskimo the past traditions which the white man, whether missionary or trader, has in his meddling intrusions into the Arctic almost succeeded in destroying; and Agaguk (and his family) to living a solitary Thoreauvian type of existence in a Walden wilder than anything Thoreau imagined even in the wilderness of the Maine woods. The magical aura which has surrounded the lives of Gillingham and Tayaout persists during their final disappearance and presumed death, and we are led to believe that, in much the same way as Saint-Exupéry’s “petit prince”, they are endowed with immortality for those who sympathize with them.

The Eskimos alone among the peoples of the Western world have at their best, Thériault and Horwood maintain, an ideal of excellence divorced from materialism. Thus if an ideal society is to exist anywhere, they see the far North — the North well beyond the greedy reaches and the endurance of the men from the South — as the land where dreams can be pursued and sometimes fulfilled, provided that the individual has extraordinary strength of body and of spirit. The land itself, the Arctic, moreover demands the preservation of such qualities as generosity, trust and loyalty as the price of survival: “If you live in the Arctic your life automatically is in your brother’s keeping.”⁴ Affection and loyalty then are shown to be, ironically, much more in evidence in the Arctic than in any “Christian” country paying lip service to such ideals because of the Eskimos’ natural personal warmth and the fact that “the people they love are left free.”⁵

Another Canadian novelist who is also aware of the dream of a northern utopia is Henry Kreisel. Kreisel’s immigrant, Theodore Stappler in *The Betrayal*, in his flight from the remembered horrors of Nazi Germany finds Canada generally an “innocent country” because it has been spared the mass betrayals and the gas ovens. However, it is only when he goes to the Arctic as a doctor that he finds peace and fulfilment: “. . . he found there, in the Arctic wilderness, a kind of peace, and a sense of unity with elemental forces.” For Stappler, as for Dostoevsky’s Raskolnikov, the northern experience is a healing one — an experience

which dissipates his intellectual arrogance and endows him with the faith to commit himself to life. Like Gillingham and Tayaout, Stappler is at last mysteriously swallowed up by the strong and violent forces of the North.

Margaret Atwood in *Surfacing* and Gabrielle Roy in *La Rivière sans repos*, like Henry Kreisel, give only fleeting glimpses of the ideal possibilities of the North.⁶ The ideal is quickly obscured, they show, by Southern and particularly by "American" invasions which result in the destruction of the natural environment and the disruption of established patterns of life. The heron killed only to satisfy a crude blood lust and left hanging putridly from the tree on the portage represents for Atwood the destruction of Northern purity and innocence sacrificed to Southern lust and insensitivity. Roy's novel begins with the rape of Elsa, a gentle Eskimo girl, by an American G.I. during his brief stay at the Fort Chimo base. The rape seems for Roy symbolic of a more general American (and Southern Canadian) rape of the North. Such a rape results in the birth of a new sort of individual who really belongs nowhere — a being out of tune with the traditional rhythms of the North. Despite the wilderness flights of the central characters in both Atwood's and Roy's novels, they remain unhappy and dissatisfied because they are too firmly caught in the nets of civilization to be able to escape permanently — to fulfil themselves in the wilderness as Tayaout, Gillingham and Stappler do.

Nevertheless the pattern of northward flight in pursuit of a utopian dream is clearly a dominant pattern in contemporary Canadian fiction.⁷ The farther into the northern wilderness the characters go the more hope there seems to be of their dreams being fulfilled. Indeed all the novelists looked at in this essay seem to agree that "This land gets better as you go north. . . . Cleaner."⁸ They also seem to subscribe to the Thoreauvian pronouncement that: "In civilization, as in a southern latitude, man degenerates at length, and yields to the incursion of more northern tribes."⁹ Obviously then, according to our novelists, we would do well to learn from the North and from the Eskimo — and to learn our lessons well — before we destroy him and his environment, and thus perhaps our dreams of a northern utopia.

NOTES

¹ Gabrielle Roy (particularly *La Montagne secrète* — 1968 and *La Rivière sans repos* — 1970), Margaret Atwood (*Surfacing* — 1972), Yves Thériault (particularly *Agaguk* — 1961, *Tayaout, fils d'Agaguk* — 1970, *Ashini* — 1963, *Le ru d'Ikoué* — 1963), Henry Kreisel (*The Betrayal* — 1964), Claude Jasmin (*Ethel et le terroriste* — 1964), Harold Horwood (*White Eskimo* — 1972).

- ² Harold Horwood, *White Eskimo*, p. 59.
- ³ *Ibid.*, p. 67.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 174.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 72.
- ⁶ Roy's idyllic episode is longer and more memorable: her depiction of the happy and productive life which Elsa, Jimmy and L'Oncle Ian live at the old Fort-Chimo before Roch Beaulieu, the policeman, is sent across the river to bring them back to civilization so that Jimmy can attend school.
- ⁷ Some other novels dealing with this theme are: André Langevin's *Evadé de la nuit* (1951) and *Le temps des hommes* (1956), Bertrand Vac's *Louise Genest* (1957), Ethel Wilson's *Swamp Angel* (1954), Roger Lemelin's *Pierre le Magnifique* (1952), Robert Harlow's *Scann* (1972), Harry Bernard's *Les jours sont longs* (1951).
- ⁸ Harold Horwood, *White Eskimo*, p. 130.
- ⁹ Henry David Thoreau, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, Signet Classics, p. 57.

POEM

P. K. Page

Prince, to whom three ladders lead,
 dreams and dreaming are my lot.
 Waken me and help me up
 rung by glittering rung until
 fetters fall from me and free
 those I fetter, those I love
 locked in my entwined embrace
 like an endless knot.
 Let us move as air in air
 skywards up the Cosmic Tree
 and where its blueness fades to white
 and the Tree begins to shine,
 let us through its silver leaves
 glimpse its golden fruit.