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Abstract

Canadians are inclined to be apologetic about their colonial past. Take, for example, D.C. Jones's description of the United Empire Loyalists who fled the rebellious Thirteen Colonies: 'For many of the Loyalists Canada was simply the prize of war, the booby prize.' Jones here expresses the excolonial's embarrassment over his country's failure to fight for its independence and yet emphasizes the distinctive feature of Canada's colonial past - that its slow emergence into nationhood was the result of a deliberate choice between clear alternatives, to remain in the British Empire or to join its cousins to the south in a free republic.

The Imperial Heritage in Canadian Prairie Fiction

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I suggest that it is time we escaped this preoccupation by raising questions not about how Canadian literature thematically expresses our

colonial past but how it may have been shaped in form and structure by Canada's peculiar relationship to its origins.

Prairie fiction can be taken as an appropriate if difficult place to begin raising such questions because it is central. As George Woodcock says, it is the prairie novelists who 'are giving form to the great symbols that express the relationship between man and the Canadian land'.² Prairie fiction also comes equipped with a close comparison — a control group, if you will — in the fiction of the American West, a region which shares some of its geography but not its origins. Comparisons may derive some clarity from the fact that the two regions represent extremes in the New World experience. The American West (with the exception of the Southwest and the Pacific Coast) had no effective colonial past; the Canadian prairies were doubly colonial. As W.L. Morton explains, the prairie West as developed by Upper Canada suffered the disadvantages of being a colony of a colony.³

Comparisons, implicit or explicit, seem unavoidable, the very meaning of 'West' in the Twentieth Century having derived from widely publicized conceptions of the American West. That circumstance has burdened the prairie with the problem of how, given its traditions, it can be 'West' in any recognized sense of the term. The significance of the western frontier has been very different for the two nations. For America, as a revolutionary nation seeking to establish its independence from European cultures, westward expansion was considered the activity in which the character of the new nation would be matured. Long before the writings of Frederick Jackson Turner, America looked to the steadily advancing western frontier for that experience by which they would cease to be Europeans and become Americans. As a result, 'West' and westward movement acquired a weight of emotional, spiritual and political importance. As Richard Slotkin puts it in *Regeneration Through Violence*, in American mythogenesis, the founding fathers were not the eighteenth-century gentlemen in Philadelphia, but the frontiersmen of the West.⁴

Canada, having rejected the American Revolution and accepted the institutions of a mature society, had no interest in a western frontier upon which to mature its culture. Nor was its West a frontier in the sense of a steadily advancing, living edge of the nation's growth; several hundred miles of intractable Precambrian Shield intervened between Central Canada and the arable land of the prairies. The prairie West was therefore developed separately, as a set of remote colonies by the central colonial population of Canada, and rather than looking westward

toward the destiny of the nation it developed looking eastward toward the centres of power. Under such circumstances the direction West and westward movement could develop nothing like the significance they held for the American people.⁵

The most obvious question to be raised here is whether this basic historical and cultural difference is reflected in the fiction of the two Wests, and specifically in the novelists' use of movement and direction. Not surprisingly, in classic novels of the American West, from Cooper's *The Prairie* to Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* to Clark's *Track of the Cat* or Kerouac's *On the Road*, the journey or quest has been a dominant structural element. Physical movement as metaphor for spiritual change and discovery is particularly emphatic when the movement is westward, the direction in which, as Max Westbrook explains, the American imagination seeks contact with that primal reality which will unify and complete its national psyche.⁶ Western heroes such as the mountain men of A.B. Guthrie, Vardis Fisher and Frederick Manfred often literally turn their backs upon the East, the direction of the Old World and the past.

Classic novels of the Canadian prairie are much less likely to have the structure of a journey. This is not as predictable, considering that their earliest models could have been the plentiful travel narratives of explorers, traders, pioneers and cultured visitors to the prairie. Take, for example, such novels as Frederick Philip Grove's *Settlers of the Marsh* and *Fruits of the Earth*, Sinclair Ross's *As For Me and My House* or W.O. Mitchell's *Who Has Seen the Wind*. Even though Grove is writing about the immigrant and pioneer experience, his settlers do not travel west; they merely arrive there. Ross's Bentleys have been shifted from one small town parsonage to another, yet the dramatic tensions in the novel are generated not by movement but by the rigid immobility of their lives in Horizon. The railway which runs westward through the town is only an ironic reminder from Mrs Bentley that there is no escape. At the end of the novel the Bentleys intend to move, but back toward civilization, and the way in which they have resolved their domestic problems makes it seem unlikely that any profound spiritual change has taken place. *Who Has Seen the Wind* dramatizes the passage of Mitchell's Brian O'Connell from childhood without the traditional journey motif.

Underlying the fact that journeying could have been but was not chosen as a main narrative strategy in these novels is the less obvious one that movement and westering do not carry the implications they have in American fiction. Flights to the freedom of nature are recognized as illusions. Spiritual growth and revelation do not necessarily lie to the west.

In Brian's development, for example, the eternal prairie of the West is a vital component, but far from turning his back on the East, Brian finds his place in the natural world with the help of his Ontario grandmother from whom he learns the interconnectedness of humanity through time and generations. Like so much of prairie fiction, Mitchell's novel is more time-oriented and therefore more eastward-looking than typical western American novels. Again, the cultural history seems to have its parallel in the structure of the fiction.⁷

It would be difficult to demonstrate that the same distinction persists in immediately contemporary fiction of the two Wests. On both sides of the border the writers exhibit an increased freedom and variety of form, American novelists criticizing the mystique of the frontier, Canadian novelists choosing journeys as a narrative strategy. Yet the westering motif is still the norm from which the American novelist works, and many recent novels such as Edward Abbey's *The Brave Cowboy* and Robert M. Persig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* preserve its assumptions in spirit as well as form. At the same time it could be argued that the imperial heritage continues to have its effect on the structure and imagery of contemporary prairie fiction. Writers such as Rudy Wiebe, Robert Kroetsch and Margaret Laurence, while they may be stringently critical of the colonial past and the history it has passed down, still reject the myth of westering as a way of giving form to prairie experience. As a result, their uses of movement and direction bear a family resemblance to those in the classic prairie novels. I would like to test some of these resemblances in three of their novels, acknowledging at the outset how much of their rich complexity must be overlooked in order to concentrate on this one aspect of movement and direction.

Wiebe is the most explicitly and unequivocally critical of the imperial heritage, yet in narrative structure he shares some of the tendencies of the earlier writers. In *The Temptations of Big Bear*, epic journeys are essential to the story; the space of the western plains is a vital part of its character; the white inhabitants are almost as nomadic as the Indian tribes, yet only one or two sections of the novel draw their narrative continuity from a journey. Wiebe has instead used movement and direction to create a kind of moral geography within which the action takes place. In broadest terms, the West is good but the westward advance of European civilization is evil. It is seen not through the eyes of the settlers moving west into the future but *from* the West looking east, mainly through the eyes of the Cree chief *Big Bear* and a handful of early pioneers. Missionary John McDougall, for example, counsels the Indians

to sign treaties because he has seen the shape of the future approaching from the East. The eastward-looking tendency of the imperial West in Wiebe has led to a way of looking east in anger. Westward expansion is not the pursuit of an ideal or the fulfillment of any individual or national destiny but the single-minded extension of an empire for the sake of power and gain. Even the territorial commissioners in the novel are usually seen in a posture of trying to explain the realities of the West to the centres of power.

Within this moral geography, movement and direction provide the imagery by which Wiebe portrays the collision of White and Indian cultures which lies at the heart of the novel. The progress of white Victorian civilizations, aptly symbolized by the advancing railway, is linear. With survey grids, fortifications, files of troops, houses and towns, it imposes the geometry of European rationalism on the irregular prairie. The movement of the Crees is rounded to the contours of the prairie landscape, their tepee circles, thirst-dance lodges, migrations, ceremonies and ritual movements circular like the cycles of the sun, the seasons, and life itself. The Indian sees no need for the White's restless linear seeking movement when completion is to be achieved by spiritual participation in the great cycles of the earth. Big Bear exemplifies this belief after having run his last buffalo: 'In the circle of sun and sky and earth and death he stood complete...'⁸

The end of the Indian's hunting culture is signalled when the straight line of the railroad cuts across the cyclical migration path of the buffalo, practically as well as symbolically destroying the completeness of the circle which represents the Indian culture. The Indians lose their land, their freedom of space; they can no longer be as Big Bear, who has 'always moved as far as I wished to see' (p. 29). Yet in the overall moral and metaphysical perspective of the novel, Wiebe will not allow the reality of the Indian's world to be defeated. The spatial movements of the two cultures are related to their perceptions of time, and the Indian's cyclical time comes across as more enduring and more right than the white man's linear time wedded to Victorian ideals of progress toward a technological millennium. The Indian's world is circular, fluid, and eternal; the whiteman's rectilinear world is fixed and impermanent. In a last dream vision Big Bear journeys to the sand hills, the site of the dream vision which gave him his name and his medicine, to complete his own cycle by returning to the earth: 'He felt the granular sand joined by snow running together, against and over him in delicate streams.... gradually (it) rounded him over until there was a tiny mound on the sand hill

almost imperceptible on the level horizon. Slowly, slowly, all changed continually into undistinguishable, as it seemed, and everlasting, unchanging, rock' (p. 415).

The narrative structure of *Big Bear* remains primarily chronological, but Wiebe's moral geography of movement and direction provides much of the dramatic structure, drawing lines across which the generative tensions of the action develop. Wiebe's rejection of the American westering ideal and the Canadian colonial tradition is deepened by the imagery of lines and circles. Westering is condemned as a type of the restless seeking through space of western European culture. The Indian's ritual circular movement is a negation of that and an assertion that spiritual completion is to be found by a proper relation to the place in which you live.

Robert Kroetsch might at first seem un-Canadian in his preoccupation with space. His narratives are frequently built around journeys or quests in which direction has implications closely related to those in American fiction. At the same time he is the writer most expressly devoted to finding a fictional form appropriate to the experience of the prairie West, and his use of journey motifs is usually ironic. The novel which focuses most pointedly on the westering ideal is *Gone Indian*, a post-realist novel which has not had the critical attention it deserves. Its hero, Jeremy Sadness, is a graduate student from New York afflicted with an absurd version of the classic American split between the rational and instinctual selves: to wit, when he lies down he becomes impotent because he knows he should be up writing his dissertation. He also has the classic American faith in the regenerative power of the West. Like the traditional western hero, he seeks a primal reality (to use Westbrook's phrase) which will restore his fragmented psyche, his ego, and his freedom. In the West a man can be reborn into a new individuality, like Jeremy's boyhood idol 'Grey Owl', actually an Englishman named Archy Belaney who disappeared into the Canadian wilderness and emerged to pass himself off as an Indian. When Jeremy is sent to Alberta for a job interview, he begins to imitate his idol, to 'go Indian' in a sequence of surrealist episodes which take him back into the pre-history of the prairies.

The outcome strongly suggests that Jeremy has carried his quest into the wrong fictional West. First, instead of a new individuality, Jeremy acquires a series of shifting identities, eventually vanishing (like the Red Man) into the spaces of the northern prairie. His professor, the narrator of his story, refers to 'the consequences of the northern prairies to human definition: the diffusion of personality into a complex of possibilities

rather than a concluded self.⁹ In the chaos of unbordered space he has strayed into, Jeremy loses rather than finds himself. Second, the primal reality Jeremy finally encounters at the end of his quest is not the vegetable nature or chaste virgin land of western myth but woman, in the form of a powerful earth-mother figure who seduces him in a dark and tangled garden inside a house called 'World's End'. Jeremy recognizes the inevitability of this outcome, calling it 'the Columbus quest for the oldest New World. The darkest gold. The last first' (p. 147). The quest has been circular, bringing him back to beginnings. Jeremy provides an apt image of his questing self as he approaches the final meeting, likening himself to a man lost in a blizzard:

... always the lost man circling blindly, come back upon himself ... finding himself only, his own tracks mocking him ... the dark labyrinth becomes a place of phantasma and fevered imaginings ... possessed by a shuddering dread ... the endless circle his end (p. 144 (his ellipses))

The imagery not only describes the quest but prefigures its sexual outcome. Third, Jeremy's encounter with a primal reality has led not to freedom but to subjection to the oldest primal necessities. Yet it has brought him a kind of wholeness, evidenced in his regained sexual potency, and he refers to himself as 'the free man freed from his freedom'. The phrase is paradoxical, suggesting that along with his loss of self the experience has produced not freedom of ego but freedom *from* ego. He feels freed too from 'locomotion', presumably the linear questing of the conscious ego.

The delusory nature of the westering quest implied in the figure of Jeremy as a Columbus reaching 'World's End' is reinforced by Jeremy's subsequent recognition, embodied in a first line he composes for a dissertation he will never complete: 'Christopher Columbus, not knowing that he had not reached the Indies of his imagination. Imagined he had reached the Indies' (p. 149).

Gone Indian, despite its journey motifs, is as much a critique of the westering myth as Wiebe's *Big Bear*, and Kroetsch's use of an American protagonist throws a peculiarly intimate light upon it. It has the effect of denying the Canadian West to alien myths which do not properly represent its distinctive past, its spirit or its power. While Wiebe's critique is in ethical terms, Kroetsch's is in epistemological: a question not of why westering is wrong but of how the westering myth prevents us from knowing what we are doing, here, in this particular West.

In Margaret Laurence's novels the paradoxes of the westering motif

are nearer to those in the earlier classics of prairie fiction. For Laurence's heroines, westward movement is often an ideal or a promised solution, but because it constitutes flight, it is usually futile, like the restless movement of Ross's Bentleys, who continually encounter only their own unresolved problems. In *The Diviners* Laurence develops her greatest range of implications for movement and direction. Her narrator, Morag Gunn, is more a traveller through time than space as she reflects upon her past, but her life is marked by a series of major east-west journeys which carry metaphorical significance. Morag, a middle-aged novelist, feels compelled to recreate her past partly in the hope of helping her teen-aged daughter find a place in the cycle of generations. Morag herself, in the true colonial tradition, has been raised on the thinning edge of civilization in small-town Manitoba, orphaned and starved for a cultural past. Her imagination has had to reconcile three contending traditions expressed in history books from Ontario, legends of Scottish ancestors told by her foster-father, Christie, and ballads of a Metis hero, 'Rider Tonnere', sung by the French mixed-bloods who are the truly indigenous people of Manitoba. Her daughter Pique is an expression of this tangled and conflicting heritage, being the illegitimate child of Morag Gunn and Jules Tonnere, and growing up in Ontario.

Morag's first independent act, again typically colonial, is to reject her real background, marry an English English professor, and move to Toronto. This first movement, eastward toward the centre of power and of an English culture which is only superficially her own is doomed, because in denying her personal past she is rejecting too much that is vitally a part of her. Her true spirit rebels in the form of creative energies which destroy her sterile marriage. After publishing a novel and conceiving a child by Jules, Morag makes her second major journey, westward to British Columbia. This is again an effort to escape, and the direction is automatic. As Morag says, she cannot explain it, except 'maybe it only ever occurs to prairie people, when they light out, to go yet further west'.¹⁰ But westering, tempting as it may be, is no more efficacious here than in Wiebe or Kröetsch. Like Laurence's earlier heroines, Morag takes the past with her in the form of her unborn child. The main effect of the movement is to convince her that she must face her past.

Morag's next journey, eastward to England and Scotland is not a flight but a seeking, a quest for her ancestral past. Especially in Scotland she seeks the roots denied her by her orphaned childhood, but when faced with the highland countryside she realizes, 'It's a deep land here, all right, but it's not mine, except a long long way back. I always thought it

was the land of my ancestors, but it is not' (p. 319). That is, it is not the land of Christie's legends. As she says, 'The myths are my reality'. Her journeys reveal that 'eastering' is no more effective in reaching the past than westering in reaching the future, because the past, especially for a displaced colonial people, has no physical habitation. The real past exists mythically, and directions of movement have only mythic significance. Thus, when she returns westward, Morag does not go to Manitoba but settles in rural Ontario where she can find 'Land. A river. Log house nearly a century old, built by great pioneering couple, Simon and Sarah Cooper. History. Ancestors' (p. 338). There, in a semi-mythic environment, she can work in the proper dimension, the creative imagination, to recover her real roots, her personal mythology which gives meaning to her life and relates it to the wider world.

It is from this vantage point that Morag hopes to guide Pique, who is beginning her own search for roots or ancestors. For Pique, however, West is the direction of the past, the Manitoba she knows only from her mother's stories and her father's songs, and while Morag knows that the girl's past exists not in Manitoba but in the songs and stories themselves, she realizes that this is not something she can pass on to the next generation. All she can pass on to her daughter is the search itself. Pique must discover her own personal mythology.

The Diviners closes, as it opened, with the image of a river outside Morag's pioneer farmhouse. The image draws attention to relationships between movement, direction and time, but not in the usual way, because the river flows both ways:

The waters flowed from north to south, and the current was visible, but now a south wind was blowing, ruffling the water in the opposite direction, so that the river, as so often here, seemed to be flowing both ways.

Look ahead into the past, and back into the future, until the silence. (p. 370)

This metaphor and statement are suggestive in several ways. Personally Morag moves in two directions at once as she strives to recreate her own past, for that past is yet before her until imaginatively completed. Once created it gives shape and meaning to her future. In that respect she looks back into the future. In another sense Morag, while looking into Pique's future, sees her own past repeated, while in her own past she sees the inevitable lines of Pique's future. Movements through space acquire equally paradoxical significance as Pique is last seen travelling west to the inevitable discovery that the past is not there, just as Morag once found that the past was not to the east.

These three novels are perhaps too diverse in their use of direction and movement to generalize about with confidence, but that is my point. If the imperial heritage has denied prairie writers the shared tradition of a westering motif, with its absorbing narrative structure and its classic directional metaphor, it has also freed them to develop a rich and diverse sense of symbolic movement in their novels. If there is a common quality which they share with earlier writers, it is a certain scepticism about westward migrations, a consistent awareness of the ironies and the paradoxes involved in journeying toward spiritual regeneration. And the structure and imagery of the fiction expresses this quality well. If, as Leslie Fiedler says, 'America had been unremittingly dreamed from East to West as a testament to the original goodness of man',¹¹ then the Canadian West has been part of a more sophisticated dream.

NOTES

1. *Butterfly on Rock* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970), p. 36.
2. *The Canadian Imagination*, ed. David Staines (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977), p. 85.
3. 'Clio in Canada; The Interpretation of Canadian History', *University of Toronto Quarterly*, XV (3), April, 1946.
4. *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), p. 4.
5. I discuss this distinction at greater length in *Unnamed Country: The Struggle for a Canadian Prairie Fiction* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1977), Chapter III and VI.
6. *Walter Van Tilburg Clark* (New York: Twayne, 1969), p. 47.
7. See also Eli Mandel, 'The Border League: American »West« and Canadian »Region«' in *Crossing Frontiers: Papers in American and Canadian Western Literature*, ed. Dick Harrison (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1979), pp. 105-121.
8. *The Temptations of Big Bear* (1973; rpt. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976), p. 129. Subsequent quotations are from this edition.
9. *Gone Indian* (Toronto: New Press, 1973), p. 152. Subsequent quotations are from this edition.
10. *The Diviners* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974), p. 226. Subsequent quotations are from this edition.
11. *An End to Innocence: Essays on Culture and Politics* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), p. 132.