A gentle circumcision

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Abstract
I come from the west, kingdom of the male virgin. I live and write in the kingdom of the male virgin. To be a female and not-virgin, making stories in the kingdom of the male virgin, is dangerous. You think this kingdom is imaginary? Try being a writer there. Try being a woman there.

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A Gentle Circumcision

I come from the west, kingdom of the male virgin. I live and write in the kingdom of the male virgin. To be a female and not-virgin, making stories in the kingdom of the male virgin, is dangerous. You think this kingdom is imaginary? Try being a writer there. Try being a woman there.

This west is a kingdom of discontent. This, the promised land, still regrets Eden, and in that regret edges toward Apocalypse, denying the pastoral fiction that has been imposed upon it from outside. This west is a fiction disintegrating: a kingdom of male virgins who have never forgiven Eve for seducing them.

Genesis: In the beginning, God made Adam and Eve. God said to Adam, 'Do not eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.' Eve wasn’t around yet, according to the story. When the serpent beguiled Eve, and Eve, being a curious woman, ate of said fruit and gave some to Adam, he didn’t resist, although it was to him that God had given the explicit instructions. Look it up. I could enter into a protracted discussion of the intelligence of the curious person, but that would interrupt the story. The long and short is, when God started asking difficult questions, Adam said, 'She gave it to me. Not my fault.' This displacement of blame is a key to the large question of virgins and kingdoms and gardens, but I would like to deal with it specifically in relation to the west and its fiction.

Regret for Eden is peculiar to the fiction of the west, and for good reason. Johnny Backstrom, in Robert Kroetsch’s The Words of My Roaring says,

Christ, you have to dream out here. You’ve got to be half goofy — just to stay sane.

I’m a great one for paradox. My reading of the Bible, I suppose; dying to be born and all that. But really, it isn’t an easy place to live. Like when the wind blows black, when it’s dry, you drive all day with your lights on. Great electioneering weather. The fish lose their gills in this country. The gophers come up for a bite to eat, and they crawl right into the air.
Almost all male tales (tall) attest to drought and death, the quixotic viciousness of the weather, as a counterpoint to the lost garden. And to compound the difficulties of such dyslexia come the definitions imposed on us from outside. We are referred to as the frontier, the wide open spaces, the glorious wilderness, the region of the west, labels always breathed in a properly worshipful tone, this incantation of difference anointing and cursing us at one and the same time. The result is an image of 'contemporary primitivism, a world of romance that sorts oddly with our seasonally-adjusted social order'. And this contradiction has aggravated the kingdom of the male virgin.

There they go, those men of the west, riding horses into the wind, praying to the first rays of dawn, going nobly forward to be hanged: courtly, bashful, foot-shuffling, plowing, plowing, suffering, suffering, yearning, yearning for Eden. The only way to regain Eden is through innocence, abstinence, purity. Just try getting one of them by the belt buckle, let alone getting him off his horse. He's laced up into the chaps of his own myth so tightly that he could just as well be a cowboy who hasn't undressed all summer. And if you think you'll get that oil-rigger's hard hat off his head, you're wrong. Even if you do, he'll consummate the business with his eyes clenched shut and his face averted; afterwards he'll go out into a thirty-below snowstorm and pray to the spirits to cleanse his soul. This is the kingdom of the male virgin. I did not make this up. It was first defined by Robert Kroetsch in a review of Petrigo’s Calgary, a book that attempted to delineate the innate character of that city of male virgins, my home:

Petrigo captures magnificently the failure of sexuality in this new-created city; as if it came into being without anything so gross as a good fuck. Success and money don’t get you laid in Calgary, they get you a big new car. Petrigo is obsessed with the circle, but only at the farthest remove of metaphor is it ever the great vagina that lets us into or out of true being. The world phallus is the city-centre, the world vagina, at its worst, has in its iron centre a huge machine, at its best, a pair of skyscraper teeth or a forest of fern. For Calgary is ultimately Christian in its sexual posture: women are the source only of man’s fall.

Try being female and living in the kingdom of the male virgin; try being female and writing in the kingdom of the male virgin. Women must come to a place in this kingdom themselves but until now it has been dominated by a romantic fiction that is disintegrating like a paper cowboy put into water. This kingdom boasts adventure and chivalry; it proudly displays all the characteristics of romanticism: innovation, spontaneity, sensuous nuance, limitless aspiration. This is big sky country;
both the fiction and its criticism have relied on endless landscape as a metaphor. But it is also a kingdom which practices a kind of perverse courtly love: don’t touch the lady. She’ll sully your purity.

Of course, male virgins take many shapes. Cowboys and Indians, politicians and martyrs, preachers and farmers and studhorse men. In my search for a female place within western fiction, I uncovered the Protean shapes of the male virgin, the grandfathers of this literature.

Virgin Frederick Phillip Grove. Necessarily the first one who comes to mind in our quest for origins and ends. He says in his note to the fourth edition of *A Search for America*:

> Imaginative literature is not primarily concerned with facts; it is concerned with truth.... In its highest flights, imaginative literature, which is one and indivisible, places within a single fact the history of the universe from its inception as well as the history of its future to the moment of its final extinction.  

This is prettily put, except we know that for Grove ‘the imaginative process is not a mirroring of experience ... but the creation of a self or an identity’. Grove created his own personal fiction:

> F.P. Grove is a writer of great moral intensity because he is himself a sham, a liar, a criminal, a fraud. Out of the terrible pressure within himself, he creates moral predicaments and explores in violent and new ways the connections between autobiography and the novel, between fiction and reality.

Here is the virgin imposter, virgin because he re-creates himself pure and chaste, his life created by his fiction. And look at Niels Lindstedt, in Grove’s novel *Settlers of the Marsh*. Virgin incarnate, Niels is a character completely pure, ‘chaste to the very core of his being’. His innocence is more burden than attribute because it prevents him from seeing clearly. He is easily shocked and his fear of passion or desire is underlined by his dedication to an ascetic ideal: work, a homestead, and yes, a wife, but a wife in the genre of the Virgin Mary, a mother who conceives without the messy business of sex. Every aspect of his life is devoted to this ideal. He rises to work at three-thirty in the morning and he works with stolid passion, all the passion he otherwise subverts. He yokes desire with sin and guilt. When he does, finally, give in to desire, he does so unwillingly; in literal and figurative darkness he is enveloped by the arms of a woman and he yields. Of course, the male virgin pays dearly for the loss of his virginity. He marries his seductress because he is so innocent he cannot ‘bear the thought of having gone to bed with a woman who was not [his] wife’, not knowing — or more likely refusing to recognize — that this
woman is the local whore. Their marriage is nothing less than macabre. 'Niels felt as if he must purge himself of an infection, of things unimaginable, horrors unspeakable, the more horrible as they were vague, vague...” And he does purge himself, finally, by murdering the woman, his wife, and paying for that murder in jail. Only then can he return to his beloved land pure, re-virgin, and set about realizing his chaste ideal. In the canon of western Canadian literature, *Settlers of the Marsh* is considered to be of germinal importance, indeed, almost sacred. In *Grove*, we find the implacable prairie imposing on its men the implacable demand of purity. Grove has been foisted on us when in reality he is a virgin imposter, renewing his innocence with every fictional lie.

Virgin Sinclair Ross. In *As For Me and My House*, the failed artist virgin, virgin because he has never and will never consummate his desire to be an artist. He is artist impotent and thus virgin, isolated from his wife, who is the narrator of the novel and whose protective nurturing of her husband has been critically decided as predatory. This novel too is regarded as a bench-mark in western Canadian literature, but not as an articulation of the silenced woman; rather, it is lauded as a eulogy to the hero as thwarted artist.

Phillip Bentley is a preacher, a small-town, down home preacher, not by choice but by necessity, fortune’s implacable hand turning him into a solid wall of restraint, restraint, white-lipped frozen restraint. Most of what we see of this would-be artist, failed preacher, is a closed study door, metaphor of a cloistered monk. Virgin — this character is not only virgin but bloodless. The closest he comes to expressing emotion is a wince, and the most usual physical image of him is one of a man solitary, hunched over a table drawing impotent pencil sketches of the dust-driven world of prairie he lives in. He and his wife are childless; in the whole novel they make love only a few times. That the seed of Phillip’s one outbreak becomes the consolidation of his pitiful position as a failure only underscores his innately virgin soul. This man ought to be a monk, totally removed from secular life, especially the wild and unpredictable life of the prairie. The garden that the silenced Mrs Bentley plants withers and dies. There will be no return to Eden for either her or her husband. In his implacable solitude and restraint, Phillip Bentley remains very much a male virgin; his bastard son only serves to emphasize his virginity by representing dead love. Ross’s writing fits all the preconceptions of the prairie as arid dustbowl, dead garden; he is a virgin refusing to be seduced by the wild artistry of the prairie.

Virgin W.O. Mitchell. The virgin as hired man. The eternal prairie becomes a Wordsworthian pastoral of innocence and experience in *Who
Has Seen the Wind and Jake and the Kid. The presence of the hired man acts as a counterpart to the disappearing father that Harrison has identified in Unnamed Country. The father is always gone, dead or away. Instead of hanging around and displaying the progression of age, he vanishes, leaving behind his youthful, romantic image. He is never going to be caught sucking his gums, incontinent; he remains virgin unviolated by age. And in his place, the hired man: story-maker, myth-maker, infallible forecaster. ‘Jake says...’ is the kid’s most common refrain. Jake has knowledge beyond all ordinary men and the source of that knowledge is his priest-like celibacy: he don’t have nothin’ to do with wimmin. The hired man may be selling his services for remuneration, but he is the surrogate of the disappeared father and as such he is omnipotent, historian and soothsayer rolled into one. He is the real interpreter of the prairie and thus represents the romance associated with the ‘feeling of the prairie’: ‘The feeling has something to do with simple natural beauty, with the basics of life embodied in the prairie rhythms and with the sense of man’s insignificance and responsibility in the midst of vastness. ‘You do a lot of wonderin’ on prairie,’ says Jake.’ Jake’s purity enables him to interpret the mystery; only a virgin shaman can preside over the kid’s coming of age.

Virgin Rudy Wiebe. Wiebe rejecting history, implicated by history, writing visionary virgins. The protagonist as rebel: hero, villain, outlaw. The glory of imperfection; the epic failure that attests to the grandeur of the visionary, the prophet’s aim. Visionary virgin Big Bear foretelling the future, refusing to be seduced by treaty or white man or fine words, wives only to keep him warm at night, no swerving from vision. Recreated virgin pacifist riding through the changing prairie without swerving from his vision/version until at last, a long cold virgin ride into death and Big Bear returns to the earth naked, pure:

what he saw was the red shoulder of Sun at the rim of Earth, and he closed his eyes. He felt the granular sand joined by snow running together, against and over him in delicate streams. It sifted over the crevices of his lips and eyes, between the folds of his face and hair and hands, legs; gradually 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 indistinguishable, as it seemed, and everlasting, un-changing rock.

Virgin prairie, before the white man.

And Riel, trained to be a priest, become an outlaw, refusing to sully the purity of the Metis vision, the Metis cause. Praying through a hail of bullets, never firing a gun himself, finally led to the scaffold a sacrificial
virgin to appease a nation. Clenched against women, Catholic celibacy despite wife and children, recipient of God’s word, divine disciple, the holy fool of Wiebe’s Canadian west crucified for his virginal, naïveté. Both Big Bear and Riel are imposed by Wiebe on the west as historical, archaeological, archetypal virgins in not lie but schism, the wrenching of art into actuality. No wonder Toronto sent out troops.

Virgin Robert Kroetsch. The male virgin with the perpetual hard-on, screwing himself into oblivion. Philandering virgins who are re-created virgins each time they succumb, their reluctant acquiescence always beyond their control. ‘I was framed,’ he says, unzipping his fly, his pants around his ankles. In *The Studhorse Man* the male virgin carries the grail of his calling, to ‘get hold of a mare’.¹⁵ That Poseidon, the horse, never does, is ironically reflected by the promiscuity of his owner, Hazard Lepage. Hazard plays the reluctant virgin again and again seduced by lustful and devouring women. Because every human capitulation is for the sake of his virgin stallion, he is over and over again resanctified, free to resume his quest for the perfect mare. ‘There are virgins and there are virgins,’ says the narrator.¹⁶ Hazard’s fiancée Martha is an inaccessible virgin; Demeter (the mad narrator) is a virgin too, who, when he feels Hazard has abandoned his sacred destiny, takes it over. Hazard’s capitulation (when he and Martha unite) is of course the cause of his death; he has remained intact (!) only through profligacy, and when he betrays that celibate calling, he must die. By death re-virginized, his memory is preserved by his virgin biographer. This is the ultimate example of the kingdom of the male virgin, virginity coupled with the male world in a baroque overstatement of Edenic homesickness.

This kingdom, like most chaste and idealistic worlds, needs some re-evaluation. Those male virgins need to be ravished. Only too readily has literary criticism accepted the facile geneology of Grove, Ross, Mitchell, Wiebe and Kroetsch. Perhaps there is a lesson to be distilled from one ravishment that is not the west as a fiction but this fiction as a west: *The Double Hook*.

In Sheila Watson’s *The Double Hook* there are no male virgins, in disguise or otherwise. This is the kingdom of coyote, the trickster, a true (not Hollywood) western figure, seldom seen but often heard as a shivering song across an expanse of prairie bluff and slough.

James Potter, at the beginning of the novel, having murdered his mother and impregnated Lenchen, is man fallen, already not-virgin. He tries the old virgin trick of running, but is robbed (by a woman) of the money that will buy him a train ticket out, and is thus ‘freed from freedom’.¹⁷ He returns to his levelled home to accept the world he is part of
and to accept woman and child. ‘I ran away, he said, but I circled and ended here the way a man does when he’s lost.’ This is not a case of the disappearing father (although he tries) and the male virgin that we have seen before. This is the kingdom of coyote, the trickster, who forces the reader beyond the personal into the universal, who shoves our noses up against art as more than a tease. It is only too easy to deal with the west as the kingdom of the male virgin, but that kingdom is insufficient. It leaves characters awkward and foot-shuffling, holding their pants up with both hands — or holding something else. Caught in the act. It’s too easy to fall into: we’re the west, that strangely regional region of storytellers manqués. When it would be better to take the following advice from, ironically, one of the virgins:

the artist him/her self

in the long run, given the choice of being God or Coyote, will, most mornings, choose to be Coyote:

he lets in the irrational along with the rational, the pre-moral along with the moral. He is a shape-shifter, at least in the limited way of old lady Potter. He is the charlatan-healer, like Felix Prosper, the low-down Buddha-bellied fiddler midwife (him/her) rather than Joyce’s high priest of art. Sometimes he is hogging the show instead of paring his fingernails. Like all tricksters, like Kip, like Traff, he runs the risk of himself being tricked.

Only coyote can seduce the male virgin, give him experience, sight. Make an honest man of him.

Still, there is something charming about the clumsy manoeuvres of the honest male virgin, the one who does not pretend to be something else, for whom virginity is no ficelle but a real and unfortunate condition which is difficult to cure. Compared to the male virgins created by the senior fictioneers of the west, his voice quivers authenticity.

Calgary Lover

And me,
I shoot roses.

Holding the barrel to each blossom,
I touch the trigger,
as if it might be a thorn.

The petals take flight at the whispered blast.
I protect myself from the tongues of outraged women:

by wearing a parka
by growing pineapples in Pincher Creek
by hanging a black cape over the canary’s cage
by sleeping in a highrise
by eating peanut butter

(It must contain no words. It must be pure. I must allow nothing.)

I carry a gun on the rack in the cab of my pickup.

I shoot roses on sight.

I recognize this one. He comes from Calgary; he’s authentic. I am an outraged woman. I like him. I’ll take him.

NOTES

10. Settlers of the Marsh, p. 149.

The pun of virgin on version is deliberate. This essay stems from my position as a woman writing in the west, the need for alternate readings of our texts. Before I can write, I have to re-write the male virgins.

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