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UNIVERSITAT DE LLEIDA
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SECCIÓ D'ANGLÈS

THE CANADIAN LANDSCAPE THROUGH POETRY

VOLUM I



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N E L A B U R E U i R A M O S

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3.— CANADA: A HEALING EXPERIENCE.

In the book Harsh and Lovely Land, Tom Marshall observes:

*There is more continuity in the development of Canadian poetry than our literary historians have always suggested. (*13)*

Marshall refers mainly to the recurrent vision that sees the Canadian wilderness as a source of delight and fear, but his words may also be applied to the line of thought initiated by the Confederation poets and the artists of the Group of Seven who stressed the invigorating power of northern lands.

The myth of the North as a land of promise already existed before these poets and painters touched on it. What the Confederation artists did was to articulate it and, therefore, bring it to awareness. How far back into the past this myth may reach I dare not surmise, but it is a myth that has persisted throughout history though it

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has assumed different forms since every age has its own rendering of the same idea. In an article entitled "The North Pole: Reservoir of Sanctity", John Robert Colombo traces the myth of the North back into ancient Greece and explains that the Greeks held fanciful notions about the land they called 'Hyperborea' meaning 'the mysterious region beyond the Boreal (or Northern wind)'. This critic also explains that occult-minded Christians located the Garden of Eden in the North and that a prestigious scholar named B.G. Tilak claimed that Mount Meru, the original home of the Aryan people, was in the Arctic region. Finally, John Colombo says:

*Closer to our own time, speculation has been sparked by the Hollow Earth theory of the nineteenth century: that there is a Polar Opening which leads into the interior of the earth, which is illuminated by a "central sun", for the benefit of the races that dwell within, an inner world of peace and plenty. (*14)*

Such a mysterious and spiritual conception of the North may lie beyond the irresistible attraction that this region has always exerted on Canadian artists since Confederation. This vision,

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together with the belief in the invigorating power of northern lands and the need to forge a Canadian identity help understand the sense of affirmation that pervades an important part of Canadian poetry.

In spite of the fact that nature's latent hostility is generally felt in the poetry of the Confederation group, there is a certain serenity and ease in their nature poems because the northern wilderness takes on an aura of holiness that exorcises the malign spirits that have haunted the imagination of artists such as Earle Birney. E.J. Pratt clearly deviates from the norm that all is well with nature but he does not renounce the vision of Canada's northern environment as an inextinguishable source of physical and spiritual vigour. Similarly, Al Purdy reproduces an experience that is deeply implanted in the mind of Canadians, the experience of being northerners and all that this represents. Indeed, Purdy places a considerable stress on the North as a land of wonder and continuing inner discovery.

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In the poetry of all these artists an instructive point is being made about the savage beauty and restorative effects of the Canadian wilderness. This positive attitude towards the physical world provides a significant alternative to the established Canadian myth that sees the development of Canadian art as a struggle against the violence or indifference of nature. The poetry of Wilfred Campbell, Bliss Carman, Charles G.D. Roberts, Archibald Lampman, Duncan Campbell Scott, E.J. Pratt and Al Purdy proves that the Canadian landscape is not only conceived of as a threat but as a promise of adventure, a source of wonder and mystery, a land of spiritual and physical renewal, a perpetual prospect of liberation.

If Earle Birney's "Bushed" epitomizes the negative response that the Canadian wilderness has elicited from its artists, Irving Layton's "Butterfly on Rock" illustrates the Romantic belief in the fertile interplay between man and nature and in the individual's power to alter the

world around him by altering the ways of seeing
and interpreting it imaginatively:

*The large yellow wings, black-fringed,
were motionless*

*They say the soul of a dead person
will settle like that on the still face*

*But I thought: the rock has borne this;
this butterfly is the rock's grace,
its most obstinate and secret desire
to be a thing alive made manifest.*

*Forgot were the two shattered porcupines
I had seen die in the bleak forest.
Pain is unreal; death an illusion:
There is no death in all the land,
I heard my voice cry;
And brought my hand down on the butterfly
And felt the rock move beneath my hand. (*15)*

The rock in Birney's and Layton's poems may be seen as the symbol of the Canadian landscape because, as June Callwood observes, Canada is a country with "two million square miles of lunar rock, some treeless tundra and a thin strip of arable land".(*16). However, in Layton's poem, the mass of rock which Birney's imagination had shaped into an arrowhead ready to destroy life, becomes, together with the butterfly, the symbol of life's striving for itself by virtue of the poet's alignment with the dynamic and creative aspects of

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being. In "Butterfly on Rock", Irving Layton seems to suggest that the aeon-old Canadian landscape may be awe-inspiring but that the working of the human mind is a far more breathtaking reality. The poet also implies that the benefits to be gained from being creatively open and affirmative far outweigh the dangers of the closed mind and the negative attitude. However, what is really relevant here is that Layton's message represents a Canadian literary trend which describes the relationship man nature, nature man through images of fulfilment and victory rather than denial and defeat. To ignore this positive trend is to miss a very important trait of Canada's cultural personality and a valuable aid in understanding the Canadian identity.

CONCLUSION : NOTES

1. William Kilbourn (ed.) in the introduction to A Guide to the Peaceable Kingdom. Toronto: MacMillan, 1970, pp.xvii-xviii.
2. William McGraw (ed.) in the introduction to Inventing Countries. Span, n.24, 1987, p.iv, published by the University of Wollongon, Wollongon, Australia.
3. David Stouck, "Notes on the Canadian Imagination" in Canadian Literature, n.54, Autumn 1972, pp.9-10.
4. June Callwood, Portrait of Canada. New York: Doubleday, 1981, p.xviii.
5. Northrop Frye, Divisions On A Ground, James Polk (ed.). Toronto: Anansi, (1912), 1982, pp.58-59.
6. Hugh Hood, "Moral Imagination: Canadian Thing" in A Guide to the Peaceable Kingdom, William Kilbourn (ed.). Toronto: MacMillan, 1970, p.31.
7. Malcolm Ross, The Impossible Sum of Our Traditions. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, (1911), 1986, p.117.



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8. Robert Fulford, "The Canadian Identity" in Saturday Night, vol.85, n.1, January 1970, p.33.
9. Al Purdy, "Man Without a Country" in The Collected Poems of Al Purdy, Russell Brown (ed.). Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1987, pp.312-315.
10. Northrop Frye, The Bush Garden. Toronto: Anansi, 1971, p.141 and p.103.
11. Peter Aichinger, Earle Birney. Toronto: Twas, 1979, p.103.
12. Earle Birney, "Bushed" in An Anthology of Canadian Literature in English, vol.I, Russell Brown & Donna Bennett (eds.). Toronto: Oxford University Press, (1942), 1982, pp.404-405.
13. Tom Marshall, Harsh and Lovely Land. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, (1938), 1980, p.29.
14. John Robert Colombo, "The North Pole: Reservoir of Sanctity", in Canadian Literature, n.98, Autumn 1983, p.13.
15. Irving Layton, "Butterfly on Rock" in Selected Poems 1945-89. A Wild Peculiar Joy. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, (1982), 1989, p.79.
16. June Callwood, Portrait of Canada, op. cit. p.xiv.



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