

“LA LEÇON DE LA VIE DES BOIS”

Wilderness and Civilization in Constantin-Weyer’s “La Bourrasque”

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AN IMPRESSIONABLE YOUNG man eager for adventure left France to visit North America at the beginning of this century. His travels ultimately led him to Western Canada and, finding the beauty of the prairies enchanting, he chose to spend the next ten years of his life in Manitoba. He occupied himself with hunting in the north, selling horses and later settling in a homestead. This Frenchman delighted in observing the wildlife indigenous to the Canadian plains and made friends with many Métis and immigrants like himself. However, his life on the frontier ended abruptly with the war; early in 1914 he returned to France. After the war, this young man, Constantin-Weyer, began writing extensively about his experience in the Canadian Northwest. In 1928, he won the Prix Goncourt for his novel concerning the dispossessed natives and the arrival of the immigrants in *Un Homme se penche sur son passé*.

Numerous novels and essays constitute Constantin-Weyer’s “Épopée Canadienne.” These volumes may be divided into two categories: some of his texts like *Manitoba* (1924), *Cinq éclats de silex* (1927), and *Clairière* (1929) recall the author’s encounter with a foreign and primaeval landscape or present vivid vignettes of animal life; his other works on the west, inspired by heroes or explorers of Canada, tell the story of Louis Riel (*La Bourrasque*, 1925; *Cavalier de La Salle*, 1927; *Champlain*, 1931; *La Véreudrye*, 1941).

Readers in France unanimously extolled Constantin-Weyer for his probing of an innovative subject matter — the land, the people, the plants and animals of a new country and for his skill in describing exotic regions and in emulating the dialects of the French-speaking Métis.¹ However, critics in French-Canada were outraged at Constantin-Weyer’s denigration of and contemptuousness toward the inhabitants of Manitoba. The author’s irreverence was incomprehensible to Western Canadian and therefore was bitterly censured. Since these readers were offended, a fierce quarrel ensued, a quarrel led by Donatien Frémont, a French

journalist living in Saint-Boniface. Frémont violently opposed Constantin-Weyer's abusiveness and vulgar sensationalism which ensured his literary success abroad but which insulted the native population in Canada.²

The few contemporary critics of Constantin-Weyer such as Roger Motut tend to mitigate the quarrel about his treatment of pioneer life by arguing that his novels would no longer scandalize if compared to a modern literary text like *The Studhorse Man*.³ Nevertheless, the sardonic tone and the "gaillardise" of Constantin-Weyer remain distasteful to many Western Canadians. The historian W. L. Morton, for instance, is touched by the poetry which emanates from his descriptions of the plains yet hastens to reproach him:

His *Manitoba*, an autobiographical work, and *La Bourrasque*, a novel with Riel as hero, though starred with brilliant descriptive passages, were highly coloured, inaccurate, and brutal sketches of life among the Manitoba French.⁴

It is instructive that Constantin-Weyer was much more respectful and restrained in his later historical novels and this can be attributed to the fact that, as Gérard Tougas notes, his hero La Salle was an illustrious figure known in France and not a "sauvage" from the prairies: "Son esprit railleur, n'ayant plus de prise sur des hommes et des événements entrés depuis longtemps dans l'histoire, se fait révérencieux."⁵

A discussion specifying the various accusations of immorality and falsifications of historical data brought against Constantin-Weyer may in itself be very enlightening. But, in our opinion, this type of commentary does not in any way do justice to the author and his writings on the Northwest. In order to go beyond this quarrel, one should approach the literary texts themselves in an attempt to discover Constantin-Weyer's true vision of nature which provoked controversy and his resulting idea of the underlying conflict between wilderness and civilization.

As hunter and trapper, Constantin-Weyer gained firsthand knowledge about the survival in the wild of the strong and the destruction of the weak. Such experience of nature "red in tooth and claw" or "la leçon de la vie des bois" which the author dramatically objectified in his novels could be related to the biological and philosophical theories fashionable at that time in Europe. This interesting connection or extension between the reality of strife in Western Canadian nature and the influential Darwinian and Nietzschean thought surely impressed Constantin-Weyer, especially since he had the opportunity to enter Valéry Larbaud's select circle. After the war, Constantin-Weyer married the niece of Larbaud and dedicated *Cinq éclats de silex* to the cosmopolitan *homme de lettres*. Larbaud, most assuredly, imparted to Constantin-Weyer some of his own absorbing literary and philosophical preoccupations: the translator of Samuel Butler certainly spoke of his enthusiasm for the discoveries of Lamarck, his reformulations of the hypotheses of Darwin, his fascination with the applicability of Nietzsche's

original system and curiosity about Gide's adherence to the notion of the affirmation of man or "amor fati."⁶

Understandably, the men who opened the west realized that in order to survive the rugged frontier environment they should become of superior physical and moral strength and attain a high degree of resilience and fortitude. This latent Darwinism or survival of the fittest and latent Nietzscheism or the will to power in early Western Canadian life is not often referred to or expressed openly:

Canadians in all walks of life at this time felt that the difficult nature of Canadian soil which meant that men had to struggle so hard would lead eventually to a superior northern nation which would rival those other democratic and northern nations of Europe, from which it had sprung.⁷

Constantin-Weyer's daring adventures in the north encompass these types of struggles for self-preservation and even supremacy. In fact, these struggles can be envisaged at two levels: first, the animal realm in nature where there is an interlocking chain of killing and being killed, and secondly, the human world where some men strive to conquer, vanquish, annihilate.

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HETHER IN A LYRICAL PASSAGE about the northern lights or whether in scenes focusing on Riel's disillusionment about the petitions, the reader of Constantin-Weyer's *La Bourrasque* quickly apprehends that only a few premisses or syllogisms govern this world of experience. One of the most poignant scenes in Constantin-Weyer's novel depicts succinctly how this lesson of the wild prairie nature is essentially the struggle for survival. This scene occurs at the centre point of the Riel novel. Donald Smith, later Lord Strathcona, the man responsible for the building of the railroad across the West, and his personal secretary travel for days by dogsled and will soon arrive at Fort Garry to meet with the rebels. Smith is confident that "les anglais" will easily squash Riel and his band. Although happy to converse at length with his secretary about his plans to attract immigrants to this new land once the Métis have been suppressed and extinguished, he suddenly stops his detailed explanations to demonstrate a perfect image of victim and executioner. Far out in the distance a coyote can be seen pursuing a rabbit. Pointing to the ravage left in the snow, Smith proudly concludes: "— Pas besoin de métaphysique, mon vieux. . . . La voilà la leçon de choses toute trouvée."

With the composure of a huntsman, Constantin-Weyer relishes in drawing attention to the precise action of the merciless slaughter of the feeble. Nature permits this brutality and savagery where "la clémente Nature est un monstre aux griffes rougies de sang!"⁸

[Le coyote] fit un bond dans la neige, le dos courbé un instant, la gueule déjà basse et ouverte. La seconde d'après il lançait en l'air le "jack" énorme, fourré de blanc, et qui s'empourprait déjà de sang. . . . Les pattes de la victime griffèrent inutilement l'air, avant de pendre inertes. . . . Le chasseur, sa proie à la gueule, fila la queue basse.

This picture of the instinctive violence of animals in nature leaves one in an emotional and moral quandary; the tender-hearted would have reason to say it is amoral. To witness such a scene of force and carnage or reflect on such a "leçon" or image of power and powerlessness produces an extremely ambivalent impression on the mind: on the one hand, there is the glory of victory and energy, on the other hand, there is the horror of defeat and death. This mixed reaction to the laws of nature and the struggle of the fitter encourages in man a dual stance where nature becomes at the same time serene yet violent, beautiful yet terrifying, "magnifique et horrible" or in the author's words "Ce grand rythme de la Vie et de la Mort, éternellement, circulairement enchaînées l'une à l'autre, . . . c'est le thème même de la Nature. Elle est merveilleuse et terrible."

The coyote ripping apart the flesh of the rabbit without an iota of sympathy is an ideal metaphor for a stupendously cruel Canadian historical event. In fact, to illustrate the strangulation of the uncouth prairie-born at the hands of the sophisticated forces of state and army, the Riel rebellion is perfect. The inherent laws of nature are re-echoed in the Canadian battle where the natives raged against the government or between wilderness and civilization. In this scheme of things, Donald Smith is the powerful figure who dominates *La Bourrasque*. He is characterized by Constantin-Weyer as a builder, a man of vision and wisdom who never falters in his devising and scheming. This autocrat will "naturally" disarm Louis Riel and the Métis people and obtain western Canada for Britain and the east. After his quelling of the first Riel rebellion, Smith hurriedly promotes campaigns in Europe to fill the western plains with immigrants thereby driving out forever the natives and the Métis. Just as it was expected that the coyote would destroy the rabbit, it was simple for Smith and the bureaucracy to exile the natives or place them in a marginal position.

Because of Constantin-Weyer's unequivocal admiration for the stronger and the more civilized, the novel *La Bourrasque*, which concentrates on the story of the first rebellion, is consequently narrated in a tone of indignation and disrespect for all characters except Donald Smith. Of course, this novel deals with victims, a people plunged in disgrace; hence the author has no inhibitions about resorting to vulgar language, ridicule, sarcasm, and even the grotesque. We recall that it was this attitude of scorn for the Métis people which astounded readers like Frémont and Trémaudan. It is our contention that this profound spirit of irreverence and amorality in the novel is due to Constantin-Weyer's demonstration of the law of nature and the inner struggle of man towards the surpassing of self. With respect

to Riel, throughout the novel, the author resorts to animal imagery which emphasizes the hero as victim and as dispossessed. Riel is thus seen in terms of animal leitmotifs, first as a defenceless sheep brought to slaughter, secondly as a solitary wolf living on the periphery, on the boundaries of civilization. However resourceful in their apprenticeship of political warfare, Riel and the few men stationed in Fort Garry could never hope to impede the forces of government and progress. To his followers, Riel will repeat the idea that the government is playing the unheroic role of a wolf in a sheep-pen: "un gouvernement qui lui paraissait jouer le rôle d'un loup dans une bergerie." And to continue his animal imagery or leitmotiv of the Métis people as hounded sheep, the author will designate all their harangues and discussions as an ineffective "bleating": "un homme et deux femmes braillaient des choses contradictoires, sur le ton de la plus véhémence colère. Au milieu des beuglements discordants. . . ." In order to underline the reality that the Métis are no longer lords of the plain but scavengers on the land, the author equates Riel to a lone wolf:

Très loin, vers l'ouest, . . . un loup hurla, d'un ton de défi plaintif. Riel se sentit frère de cet être qui réclamait, dans la nuit, les droits dont les premières approches de la civilisation l'avaient privé! (p. 102)

Riel fut frère des loups. En marge de la civilisation, comme eux; habitué à la libre nature, comme eux; et comme eux, encore, obligé de mendier ou de voler sa subsistance à un quelconque des poulaillers de la civilisation. . . . (p. 195)

The opposition between Donald Smith and Louis Riel or the executioner and the victim captured in ruthless animal imagery is highlighted further by means of another very pertinent literary device. Out of three epigrams which open various chapters of the novel, two are taken from Rudyard Kipling. These intertextual references written by an advocate of imperialism and included in a novel about skirmishes in an English colony, sum up with clear precision the distinction between symbols of power — the English flag, and Constantin-Weyer's image of defeat — the bleating sheep:

Qu'est-ce que le drapeau Britannique?
Vents du Monde, répondez. (p. 139)

(Kipling, *Barrack Room Ballads*)

Nous sommes de pauvres agneaux égarés . . .
Bée bée bée . . . (p 201)

(Kipling, *Gentlemen Rankers*)

A PART FROM THE MACRO-STRUGGLE or the more overt strife of the Métis in the west against the encroaching powers of progress, there is another very immediate micro-struggle within the Métis' inner self. When Con-

stantin-Weyer arrived in the Canadian West in the early 1900's, the image of the native on the prairie had been totally shattered and even reversed. The native indigenous to the Northwest was now labelled a man of vile appetites, a man without moral conscience, polish, knowledge, or language. For Constantin-Weyer, the concept of the noble savage as promulgated by a James Fenimore Cooper had degenerated into the Métis race.¹⁰ The Métis, by definition, has in his veins the mixture of French or other European blood and Indian blood; therefore, it is a widely held opinion that this inner tension of being situated "betwixt-and-between" gives rise to "the half-blood's enigmatic mediatory place as a new species between primitivism and civilization [and] manifest[ed] at once [by] his capacity for subhuman depravity and superhuman potentiality."¹¹ The idea behind this *mélange* of races or half-blood is that the Métis will be engaged in a perpetual *fight within himself* for the ascendancy of his civilized manners over his savage instincts. Needless to say, knowing Constantin-Weyer's unbridled cynicism *vis-à-vis* the Métis people, the refined manners more often than not crumble and succumb to the brutish ways. This notion of the inner struggle within the Métis where the man of wilderness fights the man of culture parallels the rebellion or the outer struggle in Constantin-Weyer's novel.

Let us look at a few examples to distinguish how the savage-civilization state of inner conflict operates in *La Bourrasque*. Except for rare instances, Louis Riel, as one would expect, leans towards savagery and barbarism. When it comes to sexual exploits, the hero Riel is the epitome of the savage: he is always disposed to go out into the bushes and make love to any wanton Métis girl "et de culbuter sur les feuilles mortes la joyeuse commère, toujours prête à se faire trousser." However, with the respectable wife of Mr. Hamarstyne, Riel is transformed into the most exquisite blushing lover. As he climbs to the lady's chamber, he loses all traces of his savage ancestry and enters the room metamorphosed into a perfect gentleman: "A ce moment, l'amour avait chassé de Riel toute trace de sang sauvage, et il ne restait plus que le Français."

Constantin-Weyer considers Riel's enjoyment in stalking the fields and woods as another expression of the Métis propensity for the untame. For example, while visiting various communities and inciting the Métis to armed insurrection, Riel meets a hunter in the forest. Instead of pronouncing his usual diatribe about injustices and petitions, Riel helps the hunter with his trap and asks questions about the animals in the region. Again, Constantin-Weyer explains this facet of Riel's character by resorting to his notion of the inner struggle or the sheer predominance of the wild over the urbane:

Riel subitement intéressé se pencha. Dans cette minute la chasse seule valait la peine d'être vécue. Le sauvage avait reparu en lui. Il suivait haletant la démonstration du vieux métis. . . . Il n'était plus qu'un chasseur, descendant de nombreux chasseurs.

More significant instances of Riel's metamorphosis from civilized, educated man to savage transpire at critical moments during the second rebellion. When the grievances and land rights of the Métis are demanded and when the history of their expulsion from Manitoba and exile in Saskatchewan is recalled, Riel becomes furious and calls for revenge. To understand Riel's outbursts of hate and vehemence, the author again furnishes us with his idea that the savage in him has resurfaced:

A l'entendre parler tortures, Riel se révélait physiquement un fils des Sioux et des Crees. De la façon la plus curieuse du monde, ses yeux se bridèrent et à eux seuls abolissaient toute trace du sang français. Parallèlement, son âme devenait barbare. . . .

Whenever such violent or extreme actions are planned or carried out, Riel and the Métis people are always judged as having given way to their savage nature: "Le sauvage reparut immédiatement en eux. Il en était toujours ainsi lorsqu'il s'agissait de guerre, de chasse ou d'amour!"

Even with Riel on the gallows, Constantin-Weyer will pursue his thesis of the inner conflict between savagery and civilization. At the end, before being hanged, Riel is asked if he wishes to speak. The officiant reminds him of his pride, his immortal soul, and entreats him to remain silent. However, Riel has a few words to say. This last gesture is interpreted by Constantin-Weyer as a visible sign of the ultimate domination of the forces of unrestraint in the leader and victim:

Comme si le sang sauvage eût brusquement réveillé sa moitié indienne, la couleur revint aux joues de Riel . . . Il haussa les épaules et sourit d'un air dédaigneux . . . Il se détourna à demi, et prononça d'une voix très nette:
— Dites donc? c'est ça, votre civilisation?

THE MÉTIS REBELLION and its inevitable defeat provided Constantin-Weyer with an ideal story which had the built-in drama and conflict between spheres of primitivism and progress. Along with the larger canvas depicting skirmishes between the native population and the dreamers of railroads and expansionism, Constantin-Weyer imagined the more intimate battle waged within the mind of the Métis, as exemplified by Riel, where his inclinations towards the cultivated and refined clash with his Indian past and prairie roots.

This singular vision of "la leçon de la vie des bois" is not only apparent in *La Bourrasque* but is at the heart of most of Constantin-Weyer's novels and essays on the Canadian West. His more well-known novel *Un Homme se penche sur son passé* concerns itself with the same overriding idea as in *La Bourrasque* but from the alternate perspective — the builders of the prairies and not the dispossessed or losers of the land. This later novel, which adopts the format of a confession, pre-

sents the demise of the adventurous frontiersmen and the growth of an agrarian society and the settling of the West because of the influx of immigrants. The hero (like the author) arrived in Manitoba in the early years of this century and swiftly learnt to appreciate the harsh existence of the hunter and trapper on the plain. Soon this huntsman is constrained to interrupt his life-style and become a homesteader. Yet, clinging to the old frontier life, the hero sells horses to farmers and travels to the far north for furs in winter. His close friends, one after another, leave him to find a place where they can recover their peaceful primitive ways: the Métis Napoléon emigrates to Oklahoma and David establishes a fishing trade on Lake Winnipeg. Although the French hero (Frenchy) decides to leave Canada, he is not bitter about his experience nor does he claim to be a weakling who cannot accept change and progress. He regrets the passing of an old way of life; nevertheless, he is impressed with the energy and endurance of those pioneers who fight to maintain farms and build cities in the wilderness. Within the span of thirty years, he has witnessed the complete annihilation of the native and Métis people.

This chain of events whereby Riel's nation was easily destroyed and supplanted by another is not only a remarkable achievement but also an excellent illustration, according to Constantin-Weyer, of the laws of nature. After a trip across the West and prior to his departure for Europe, the narrator of *Un Homme se penche sur son passé* celebrates the victory of civilization and sings the praise of the new strong men of "the great lone land":

J'avais sous les yeux la genèse même d'un pays magnifique. Le triomphant poème de la réussite canadienne chantait à mes oreilles son rythme puissant. C'était la magnifique conquête de la nature par la volonté. . . .

Ainsi, en moins de trente ans, l'effort de quelques hommes, conducteurs de peuples, avait fait de ce désert un pays riche. Une race toute entière avait disparu dans la lutte, et des Sioux, des Crees et des Pieds-Noirs, qui avaient jadis dominé ici, il ne restait plus que quelques rejets destinés à disparaître devant l'effort continu de la race blanche. . . .¹²

NOTES

- ¹ Constantin-Weyer was able to approach a high degree of similitude in his recreation of the French Métis patois. The following passage should be read aloud to savour the colourful dialect: "Voiés-tu Riel, j'ai la doutance que si on attaque les v'limeux sans y offrir à s'rend ça va faire du vilain! . . . eune saprée maudite affaire . . . Ça r'virera en mal, cré Mausus! . . . Et pis, te comprends! jongle moié un peu tout ça, y vaut mieux qu'y ait pas de sang versé . . . y font ds bonnes cordes en Ontario. — J' m'en sacre ben d'être pendu, gronda Riel." Maurice Constantin-Weyer, *La Bourrasque* (Paris: Rieder, 1925), p. 133.
- ² The substance of Frémont's argument in the quarrel could be reduced to this statement: "*Vers l'Ouest* et *La Bourrasque* constituent une défiguration grossière et calomnieuse de l'histoire comme il en existe peu d'exemple. La malveillance et le dessein arrêté de dénigrement sont trop visibles pour qu'il soit possible d'invoquer

- les moindres circonstances atténuantes. . .” Cited in Hélène Chaput, *Donatien Frémont: Journaliste de l'Ouest canadien* (Saint-Boniface: Les Editions du Blé, 1977), p. 148.
- ³ Roger Motut, who has closely examined the quarrel, reports, for example, that in *La Bourrasque* “if the figure of Louis Riel is not true to fact, the scenes that shocked the critics then would perhaps appear quite normal in today’s modern fiction.” “From Ploughshares to Pen: Prairie Nostalgia,” *The New Land: Studies in a Literary Theme*, ed. Richard Chadbourne and Hallvard Dahlie (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier Univ. Press, 1978), p. 66.
- ⁴ W. L. Morton, *Manitoba: A History*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1967), p. 419.
- ⁵ Gérard Tougas, *La Littérature canadienne-française*, 5th ed. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1974), p. 139.
- ⁶ The “correspondance de coeur” between Larbaud and Butler is discussed by Allison Connell in “Forgotten Masterpieces of Literary Translation: Valery Larbaud’s ‘Butlers,’” *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature*, 1, no. 2 (1974), 167-90. And, the affinity that existed between Larbaud and Constantin-Weyer is alluded to in the dedication “A Valery Larbaud,” *Cinq éclats de silex* (Paris: Rieder, 1927), pp. 7-8.
- ⁷ Barbara Thompson Godard, “God’s Country: Man and the Land in the Canadian Novel,” *Revue de Littérature comparée*, 47, no. 2 (1973), 231.
- ⁸ Constantin-Weyer, *Un Homme se penche sur son passé* (Paris: Rieder, 1928), p. 63. Northrop Frye speaks of the manifest Darwinism in nineteenth-century Canada: “the obvious and immediate sense of nature is the late Romantic one, increasingly affected by Darwinism, of nature red in tooth and claw.” “Conclusion,” *Literary History of Canada*, ed. Carl F. Klinck, 2nd ed., Vol. II (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1965), p. 355.
- ⁹ *Un Homme se penche sur son passé*, p. 175.
- ¹⁰ Edward McCourt concedes that James Fenimore Cooper’s ideal of the “noble savage” was hard to erase from the minds of the early pioneers. See “Prairie Literature and its Critics,” *A Region of the Mind: Interpreting the Western Canadian Plains*, ed. Richard Allen (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Center, 1973), pp. 153-62.
- ¹¹ William J. Scheick, *The Half-Blood: A Cultural Symbol in 19th-Century American Fiction* (Lexington, Ky.: Univ. Press of Kentucky, 1979), p. 88.
- ¹² *Un Homme se penche sur son passé*, pp. 205-06.

