

A NEGLECTED THEME

IN *Two Solitudes*

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IT HAS BECOME almost a commonplace of criticism of Hugh MacLennan's *Two Solitudes* to say that the novel succeeds brilliantly up to the end of the twenty-ninth chapter, portraying the death of Athanase Tallard, but is less convincing in the last twenty-three chapters portraying the symbolic resolution of the theme in the education and maturation of the members of the second generation, Paul Tallard and Heather Methuen, and their eventual marriage. The following quotation from critic George Woodcock is in this respect typical: "If *Two Solitudes* had ended with Tallard's death, it would have been a moving and cohesive book. But up to this point it merely presents the problem of racial relations; it does not have the logical completeness of presenting a solution, and this MacLennan seeks, at the expense of his novel, in its later chapters."¹ I think the time has come for a reassessment of this position. To my knowledge, the only critic who has dissented from the majority view of the concluding chapters of *Two Solitudes* is Robert D. Chambers, who observes:

The second half of *Two Solitudes* has been criticized as over-written and unconvincing, and it is interesting to note that MacLennan has allowed some pruning for the paperback and school editions. Nevertheless, the latter parts of the novel carry through his vigorous assault on the pillars of Canadian respectability, and his closing picture of intelligent Canadian youth facing with tolerance and humanity the problems of their generation seems made of stuff that will adhere.²

It has also become a commonplace of criticism of *Two Solitudes* that "the idea of Canadian unity becomes the main symbolic theme,"³ which MacLennan attempts to embody in the lives of his characters. Without pretending to deny the primacy of the theme of Canadian self-awareness and unity, I would like to suggest that the novel contains an important subsidiary theme which most critics have overlooked and which helps to unify the novel. I refer to the theme of individual self-awareness, worked out in terms of a contrast between two types of persons, those who learn to come to terms with what MacLennan calls "the ultimate soli-

tude” and those who don’t. The title thus has another dimension than the French-English dichotomy to which it is usually applied. The quotation from Rilke which constitutes the novel’s epigraph is an important clue to its meaning: “Love consists in this, that two solitudes protect, and touch, and greet each other.” Rilke was almost certainly referring to individuals, not societies, though it would be pedantry to attempt to limit the range of applicability of the quotation; and the novel’s dedication which precedes the epigraph, “To Dorothy Duncan with admiration and love,” suggests that MacLennan was also thinking of individuals and their personal relationships.

TO ANTICIPATE my argument briefly: those characters in the novel who learn to come to terms with “the ultimate solitude” are most notably Captain Yardley, Paul Tallard, and Heather Methuen, who becomes Paul’s wife. The characters who most dramatically fail to come to terms with the ultimate solitude are Athanase Tallard, his second wife Kathleen, his son by his first marriage Marius, such satiric figures as Huntly McQueen, General Methuen, et al, and Janet Methuen. Of Captain Yardley MacLennan writes:

Though Yardley had never had an academic education, he had slowly learned how to read books and how to think. As a sailor, and then as a ship’s master, he had known solitude in strange places. He was persuaded that all knowledge is like a painted curtain hung across the door of the mind to conceal from it a mystery so darkly suggestive that no one can face it alone for long. Of ultimate solitude he had no fear, for he never let himself think about it. But he knew that if he once started, fear would be there.

With its overtones of T. S. Eliot’s concept that most people cannot bear very much reality, this passage may seem to contradict rather than confirm my argument. But clearly, Yardley has learned how to handle solitude and the fear which lurks within the recesses of the human mind surrounding the “mystery.”

The passage I have quoted is followed by a longer one in which Yardley reminisces about an experience in the tropics, when he spent an afternoon leaning over the taffrail and watching sharks and barracuda “gliding through ten fathoms of sunlit water below. . . . Self-centred, beautiful, dangerous and aimless: that was how they had been, and he could never forget it.” In this symbolically important passage, the sharks and barracuda represent the undirected passions. One is reminded of the beautiful, dangerous (for Athanase), and fundamentally self-centred and aimless Kathleen, gliding about the Tallard seignory house. Like Athanase, she is basically lacking in self-knowledge. One is also reminded of Marius Tallard, who is described as follows addressing an anti-conscription meeting:

Marius Tallard was drunk with a new knowledge of himself. He stood in the big hall before the meeting with his feet apart, swaying from the hips, his arms folded across his chest. Now and then his right arm shot out and the long fingers of his hand wove gestures in the air. His white teeth flashed rare and bitter smiles in his white face. His black hair was loose on his long, narrow skull. He pulled emotion out of the crowd and threw it back at them.

Marius' white teeth and "long, narrow skull" remind one of the sharks and barracuda. His "new knowledge of himself" is spurious, a dangerous and deceptive substitute for the true self-knowledge of a Captain Yardley. Like the *anglais* capitalist Huntly McQueen, Marius remains fixated on the memory of his dead mother. His Oedipus complex leads him into conflict with his father and the social authority his father represents.

Marius' opposite number is of course his half brother Paul, who in the latter part of the novel reaches a truer understanding of himself as a result of his travels and writing. Yardley's words to Paul on the occasion of his father's death pick up the theme of solitude and the failure of Athanase to come to terms with it: "I tell you how it is, Paul. Your father being a Catholic again — if that's what it means, the candles and the things by the bed — well it means he got lonely and wanted to be what he'd been all his life, I guess. Or maybe it means something else so big I can't understand it." The only hint of self-knowledge on the part of Athanase is the extent to which he seems to have consciously brought Paul up as a synthesis of the two cultures.

Following the death of his father, Paul makes a symbolic ascent of Mount Royal which represents by anticipation his quest for true knowledge, including self-knowledge. The attainment of vision (in the deepest sense of the term) is portrayed symbolically in the panoramic view of Montreal which greets Paul from the summit, in the paragraph beginning: "He was breathless from his climb, but now he was on top of the mountain and could see the whole city spread out beneath him." This passage anticipates Paul's attainment of a comprehensive overview of Canadian society as it is to be expressed in his as-yet-unwritten second novel. At the end of the chapter in which this passage occurs, MacLennan indicates that an important ingredient in Paul's continuing maturation is the "loneliness" which "struck right through him." In this respect he is contrasted to his mother: "And he knew now that although her smile was as sincere as possible, it was still somehow automatic, a gesture as natural and unconscious as the sway of her hips when she walked, and that behind it her mind was a stranger."

Parallel to Paul's development is that of Heather, who impulsively leaves Huntly McQueen's pretentious dinner party and the company of the predatory Fletchers (cf. the sharks and barracuda) to make her own ascent of Mount Royal, which is contrasted to Paul's climb by being made in an automobile at night and taking her to a lower eminence of the mountain. The beneficent effects of solitude

are again suggested: "It was wonderful to be alone." At twenty-three Heather feels she has reached a crisis in her life. So far she has followed the Methuen pattern, attending school in Lausanne for two years and studying French as a social accomplishment rather than as a help to her in the province of Quebec. She has also had her debut and picked up a college degree. Unlike her sister Daphne, she has not rushed into a prestigious marriage, and her mother is beginning to consider her a social liability. Her painting, paralleling Paul's interest in writing, is her only asset other than the Methuen money, which she has not helped to earn. Unwilling to become a St. James Street wife, she finds that Canadian discrimination against women stands in the way of any career she might choose for herself except the most conventional. Her vision from the Westmount summit of the mountain, from which "only a portion of the city could be seen," parallels Paul's more comprehensive vision in its symbolic connotations and is really different rather than inferior to his, as her exclamation "Oh, lovely!" and the delicate description of the moon-coloured scene suggest.

WHEN KATHLEEN MARRIES the American Henry Clayton, thus merging her identity in the American melting pot, Paul experiences the most intense loneliness of his life thus far: "If loneliness is a man's inability to share his feelings with another, Paul had never been as lonely in his life as he was now. The whole ceremony seemed shocking to him." As for Kathleen, whose possession represents "the only real purpose Henry Clayton had ever known," her fading physical charms are portrayed as a surrogate, a sweet substitute for a sense of inner purpose which Clayton lacks and Paul is in the process of acquiring. As MacLennan remarked earlier apropos of Athanase: "Incredible, that for most of a lifetime a man could imagine that beauty was enough, or that women could satisfy the ultimate solitude."

In contrast to Athanase, to whom women were "necessary," Paul undergoes a lengthy period of relative sexual abstinence during his European venture. Heather similarly sees through the "cold surface beauty" and "mechanical sensuality" of Daphne and Noel Fletcher. The intellectual pursuits of Paul and Heather (she is reading the post-war novelists as well as painting; he wants to be a writer) are paralleled by those of their spiritual mentor, Captain Yardley, who is interested in astronomy and, with Paul's help, begins studying Greek at seventy-six. MacLennan suggests that both Yardley and Paul are learning to come to terms with the ultimate solitude, and that for Paul the process involves physical as well as mental effort (he is a graduate of the University of Montreal and has had a brief career as a hockey player):

For a long time now it had been growing, all through his teens, and getting steadily tighter. It woke him nearly every morning, except when he was physically exhausted after a hard game. It was more than a physical state of nerves; it was a quality of mind, breeding a kind of solitude of its own.

This may be compared with a passage earlier in the novel in which MacLennan remarks of the Canadian soldiers returning home from the First World War: "Some had learned peace through an ultimate knowledge of themselves."

The loneliness within Paul the acceptance of which leads to self-knowledge finds its objective correlative in the sense of desolation in the northern forests as he recalls a trip to Lake Superior on a lake boat:

A sunset burned through Fort William and Port Arthur and hurled gigantic shadows of the grain elevators forward on to the trembling waters of Thunder Bay. . . . As night closed over the ship the colour had died, and nothing was left but the sounds of millions of shallow waves turning over in the darkness, an astringent wind keening blindly out of the empty forest to the north, the quick spatterings of lifeless fresh water whipped by the wind over the waist of the ship and wetting the deck. It was only a few days later, away from this sense of desolation in the heart of a continent, that they were passing so close to shore in eastern Ontario he could look into the windows of houses when the lights were on after dark. He had seen men reading in arm chairs and children going to bed, and once a naked woman thoughtfully combed her hair before a window, her lips open as though she were singing to herself. The ship had passed and left her there, strangely transfigured.

Here the description of the landscape reminds one of certain Group of Seven paintings, such as J. E. H. MacDonald's "The Lonely North," and the naked woman combing her hair before the window and singing like a mermaid or a wood-nymph symbolizes the spirit of the land. The result is what Robertson Davies has somewhere called a kind of northern mysticism. In coming to terms with the inner loneliness, Paul is also coming to terms with the outer loneliness, and the growth of MacLennan's protagonist towards self-knowledge parallels a similar development in the young nation.

In *The Watch That Ends The Night* George Stewart makes a canoe trip to Lake Superior and likewise confronts the spirit of the lonely land, which MacLennan explicitly compares to Group of Seven paintings. This spirit finds its individual parallel in that of Catherine, who was "strangely solitary in her core," and in that of Jerome Martell, who as a boy confronted the loneliness of the New Brunswick forests. The repetition of the quotation from Rilke in the later novel, and George Stewart's statement that "She [Catherine] and I had protected and touched and greeted each other reasonably well in the past nine years, but Jerome was a part of her core," show that each of the three protagonists is invested with a measure of the solitude that characterizes the theme of the earlier novel. And when Jerome tells George that Catherine "must be enabled to live her own death"

and makes it possible for George "to live her death with her," the concept of losing one's life in order to gain it is given a radically Christian emphasis which contrasts with the more existential treatment of the theme in *Two Solitudes*.

WHEN PAUL SHIPS OUT of Halifax harbour aboard a merchantman, he seems to be trying to emulate Captain Yardley, his spiritual father. But Paul's travels are also a kind of preparation for his vocation as a writer, a self-chosen period of solitude. They are also a way of testing his love for Heather. In a hotel bar in Athens Paul witnesses a scene involving a German seducing a French woman which seems symbolic of the changing face of European society, and may be contrasted to the nude Canadian woman singing to herself. Following this scene, MacLennan describes Paul's recurring feeling of loneliness: "the city surrounded him like a giant presence of loneliness. It was no new feeling; most of his life he had known it, and now it was recurring again like a periodic disease. . . . He wondered if Heather had ever felt as he did now. Two solitudes in the infinite waste of loneliness under the sun." This is the only occurrence in the novel other than the title and the epigraph of the phrase "two solitudes"; and it is significant that, in its context, it refers not primarily to the fact that Paul is of French and Heather of English extraction, but to the existential and individual aloneness which both characters are learning independently to face as part of maturation. The passage from which I have just quoted ends with Paul rejecting the opportunity to have a casual affair with a woman sitting at a nearby table, and the statement: "He wasn't equal to that kind of loneliness today." Again, there is the solitude of those who learn to come to terms with their existential loneliness, and the solitude of those who don't. MacLennan suggests that the latter kind of solitude is potentially dangerous, causing wars and other social upheavals:

Athens could be London, Rome, New York, Paris, Berlin or any other great city. This was where it had started. In the city. Any city. . . . the new city-hatred (contempt for all things but cleverness) of the slum man for the Jew, the owner for the worker, the worker for his fear of himself, the bourgeois for his own thoughts in the dark, the hatred of them all for the old men washing their hands.

These thoughts are directly related to the novel Paul is trying to write, "Young man of 1933." The chapter ends with the theme of solitude taking on overtones portentous of the coming catastrophe:

Below in the Hodoss Stadiou isolated figures still prowled with the furtive urgency of single men alone in a city after dark. In the far distance, somewhere in the streets beyond the Place de la Constitution, the horn of a taxi with a short circuit in its ignition system howled like a wolf in the darkness.

When Paul returns to Canada and marries Heather, MacLennan emphasizes the solitude of the lovers in a way that reminds one of a line from Kahlil Gibran: "Let there be spaces between your togetherness." A good example of this is when Paul spends an hour talking with some French-Canadian fishermen, and Heather feels temporarily bereft. The description of the gulls and gannets at Percé Rock parallels that of the sharks and barracuda earlier:

The gulls must be diving like mad down the line of the cliffs. She remembered them as she had seen them yesterday wheeling out over the water about the rock; beautiful, aloof, cruelly competent, and farther out were the gannets with wing-spread wider than a swan's and rusty eyes. When the gannets dipped their wings they plunged to the water like bombs.

Again there is a symbolic suggestion of the destructive course of the undirected passions and a hint of the impending war.

Brooding about his book "Young man of 1933" and the as-yet-unrealized subject of his next novel — the changing shape of Canadian society — Paul contrasts the state of affairs in Canada with that in Europe: "The same brand of patriotism is never likely to exist all over Canada. Each race so violently disapproves of the tribal gods of the other. I can't see how any single Canadian politician can ever imitate Hitler — at least, not over the whole country." Rabid nationalism of the Hitleresque variety finds its Canadian counterpart in Paul's half brother Marius, who claims he is not a fascist, but is obsessed by thoughts of "a pure race, a pure language," and seems to Paul to be binding himself in a strait-jacket.

Opposed to the failure of self-knowledge leading to disaster is the sense of wonder and ability to grow which Captain Yardley retains until his death — an event which leaves his daughter Janet "prostrate with grief, not knowing that grief is always for the self." Now Janet feels things falling away from her, "leaving her solitary in the way of life to which she had bound herself." Hers is the loneliness of those who have not learned to come to terms with their solitude. This failure of self-knowledge manifests itself objectively in her opposition to the love of Paul and Heather. The same is true of Janet's sole remaining prop, Huntly McQueen, who attempts to separate Paul from Heather by shunting him off to an obscure teaching job in British Columbia.

The conflict between the older and younger generations is integrated with the wider theme by the suggestion that the generation of Janet Methuen and Huntly McQueen and Sir Rupert Irons is responsible for permitting the rise of Hitler, and hence for the coming war. "Had there ever been a time in human history like the present, when the older generation was blind to nearly every vital issue for which their children were prepared to fight and die?" Another anticipation of *The Watch That Ends The Night*. When Janet fakes a heart-attack upon learning that Heather is married to Paul, the old bridge-playing doctor who attends her and

gives equivocal answers to Heather's questions also seems to represent the older generation and its failures. When Paul confronts the doctor, demanding the truth about Janet's health, it is as though the younger generation is confronting the older generation with its mistakes which have led up to Munich. And when Paul confronts Janet with the news that he is going to enlist, it's as though he is emphasizing the need for the generations to stand together in this time of crisis: "I don't want to do it. Everything that's in me cries out against the waste of the only talent I've ever had. But I've got to go. And when I'm gone, I'd like to know that you and Heather are together." The impending war emits sparks which are jumping the gap between the two different kinds of solitude. But Paul's kind of solitude is also protecting and touching and greeting Janet's.

The concluding chapter departs from the private lives of the novel's human characters to emphasize the coming together of the nation's energies to meet the wartime crisis. The portrayal of the autumnal face of the Canadian landscape reminds us that the country both human and natural is the real hero of this novel. The theme of solitude — what MacLennan previously described as "race memories lonely in great spaces" — is also evident, along with its counterpart, the theme of self-awareness:

Then, even as the two race-legends woke again remembering ancient enmities, there woke within them also the felt knowledge that together they had fought and survived one great war they had never made and that now they had entered another . . . And almost grudgingly, out of the instinct to do what was necessary, the country took the first irrevocable steps towards becoming herself, knowing against her will that she was not unique but like all the others, alone with history, with science, with the future.

Canada in relation to the European countries is like Paul and Heather in relation to the older generation: neither has made this war, but both recognize the importance of seeing it through. And like Paul and Heather, Canada is approaching self-knowledge and the self-sufficiency that comes from an acceptance of the ultimate solitude.

NOTES

- ¹ "A Nation's Odyssey: The Novels of Hugh MacLennan," *Odysseus Ever Returning* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1970), p. 17. Cf. Peter Buitenhuis, *Canadian Writers & Their Works: Hugh MacLennan* (Toronto: Forum House, 1969), p. 30.
- ² "The Novels of Hugh MacLennan," in *Hugh MacLennan*, ed. Paul Goetsch (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1973), p. 65; reprinted from the *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 2 (August 1967), pp. 3-11.
- ³ George Woodcock, "Hugh MacLennan," in *Hugh MacLennan*, ed. Goetsch, p. 17; reprinted from *Northern Review*, 3 (April-May 1950), pp. 2-10.