

MOUNTAINEERS AND SWIMMERS

Tom Marshall

*Roberts, moving yet on the high
green hill over Tantram, needed
the distance from which he looks.
Carman, his cousin, not so lucky
as to have found distance,
made of our vagueness
a virtue, a voice for loss
and the uncertain floods of longing.¹*

IT IS INTERESTING to compare Roberts' poem "The Tantram Revisited" with Bliss Carman's "Low Tide on Grand Pré". Both poems are concerned (as is Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey", their likely ancestor) with loss and the return to a remembered landscape. But Roberts remains aloof from the beloved landscape, attempting to hold it unchanged in his mind:

Summers and summers have come, and gone with the flight of the
swallow;
Sunshine and thunder have been, storm, and winter, and frost;
Many and many a sorrow has all but died from remembrance,
Many a dream of joy fall'n in the shadow of pain.
Hands of chance and change have marred, or moulded, or broken,
Busy with spirit or flesh, all I most have adored;
Even the bosom of Earth is strewn with heavier shadows —
Only in these green hills, aslant to the sea, no change!
Here where the road has climbed from the inland valleys and
woodlands,
Dips from the hill-tops down, straight to the base of the hills —
Here, from my vantage-ground, I can see the scattering houses,
Stained with time, set warm in orchards, meadows and wheat,
Dotting the broad bright slopes outspread to southward and
eastward,
Wind-swept all day long, blown by the southeast wind.

From his vantage-ground Roberts surveys his country's stretching space but also recalls the precise details of interiors:

Yonder, toward the left, lie broad the Westmoreland marshes —
Miles on miles they extend, level, and grassy, and dim,

Clear from the long red sweep of flats to the sky in the distance,
 Save for the outlying heights, green-rampired Cumberland point;
 Miles on miles outrolled, and the river-channels divide them —
 Miles on miles of green, barred by the hurtling gusts.
 Miles on miles beyond the tawny bay is Minudie.
 There are the low blue hills; villages gleam at their feet.
 Nearer a white sail shines across the water, and nearer
 Still are the slim, grey masts of fishing boats dry on the flats.
 Ah, how well I remember those wide red flats, above tide-mark
 Pale with scurf of the salt, seamed and baked in the sun!
 Well I remember the piles of blocks and ropes, and the net-reels
 Wound with the beaded nets, dripping and dark from the sea!
 Now at this season the nets are unwound; they hang from the
 rafters
 Over the fresh-stowed hay in upland barns, and the wind
 Blows all day through the chinks, with the streaks of sunlight, and
 sways them
 Softly at will; or they lie heaped in the gloom of a loft.

Here is a power of observation like that of a Maritime realist painter. Roberts' verse is "Homeric" in its sweep and its enumeration of particulars, as Lampman was probably the first to note.² As the Tantramar lands are bounded and preserved by dykes, so the poet attempts to hold them in timeless suspension in the microcosm of a poem whose repetitions of phrase and whose rhythmic rise and return themselves embody the sense of an endless cycle.

Yet, as I sit and watch, this present peace of the landscape —
 Stranded boats, these reels empty and idle, the hush,
 One grey hawk slow-wheeling above yon cluster of haystacks —
 More than the old-time stir this stillness welcomes me home.
 Ah the old-time stir, how once it stung me with rapture —
 Old-time sweetness, the winds freighted with honey and salt!
 Yet will I stay my steps and not go down to the marshland —
 Muse and recall far off, rather remember than see —
 Lest on too close sight I miss the darling illusion,
 Spy at their task even here the hands of chance and change.

Roberts holds the landscape of remembered happiness at a distance. He seems to want to be godlike, above the battle. By contrast, Bliss Carman immerses himself in the intensely re-lived experience of love and loss in "Low Tide on Grand Pré". The landscape is made expressive both of his remembered joy and the grief that followed it.

A grievous stream, that to and fro
 Although the fields of Acadie
 Goes wandering, as if to know
 Why one beloved face should be
 So long from home and Acadie.

Was it a year or lives ago
 We took the grasses in our hands,
 And caught the summer flying low
 Over the waving meadow lands,
 And held it there between our hands?

The while the river at our feet —
 A drowsy inland meadow stream —
 At set of sun the after-heat
 Made running gold, and in the gleam
 We freed our birch upon the stream.

There down along the elms at dusk
 We lifted dripping blade to drift,
 Through twilight scented fine like musk,
 Where night and gloom awhile uplift,
 Nor sunder soul and soul adrift.

* * *

Then all your face grew light, and seemed
 To hold the shadow of the sun;
 The evening faltered, and I deemed
 That time was ripe, and years had done
 Their wheeling underneath the sun.

So all desire and all regret,
 And fear and memory, were naught;
 One to remember or forget
 The keen delight our hands had caught;
 Morrow and yesterday were naught.

The night has fallen, and the tide. . . .
 Now and again comes drifting home,
 Across these aching barrens wide,
 A sigh like driven wind or foam:
 In grief the flood is bursting home.

At first everything is hazy, as in an impressionist painting or a romantic film resorting to slow-motion. For a magical moment it had once seemed as if love could stop time. The captured bird, the slowed stream, the rhyme-scheme and the metre reinforce this idea. But the final stanza returns us to the present with a vengeance. The bird of happiness (or youth?) escapes; it is the sun (and not "time") that falls like a ripe fruit; days and summers end; the tide comes in. The hands of chance and change are victorious here, too, but unlike Roberts, Carman makes no attempt to distance himself from the situation. He lets it, so to speak, wash over him.

Roberts, at his best in "realistic" poems of observation, is the man who culti-

vates olympian detachment; Carman, the lyrical impressionist who advised "paint the vision, not the view", is the man who plunges into emotional experience.³ Many of our best poets later on have been either mountaineers, who "free" their myths from fact (Pratt, Birney, Purdy, Newlove), or swimmers who explore their depths (Klein, Layton, Cohen, MacEwen, Atwood). These figures, as anyone who has read much Canadian poetry knows, actually occur in some of our most significant poems, a thing not surprising in a country with so much rock and water about. Sometimes, as in Frank Scott's poem "Lakeshore", the figures of swimmer and man on mountain (in this instance Noah) are combined. Mountains evoke (among other things) objectivity and a god's-eye view of the dangerous external world, water the ever-changing depths of the self, the collective unconscious and the racial and evolutionary past. But it is, as I suggested before, a difference of emphasis or method rather than of essential purpose that I mean to stress, since all good poems embody the relationship between inner and outer worlds, and great art is subjective and objective at once. Consciousness involves a continuing inter-action between "fact" and "dream".⁴

ROBERTS was the first Canadian poet of impressive achievement. He deserves his special position as the father of Canadian poetry, and, as we know, he gave particular impetus and inspiration to Archibald Lampman, who in turn encouraged Duncan Campbell Scott. In this context Lampman's well-known account of his discovery of *Orion* is worth our examination:

It was almost ten years ago, and I was very young, an undergraduate at college. One May evening somebody lent me *Orion and Other Poems*, then recently published. Like most of the young fellows about me I had been under the depressing conviction that we were situated hopelessly on the outskirts of civilization, where no art and no literature could be, and that it was useless to expect that anything great could be done by any of our companions, still more useless to expect that we could do it ourselves. I sat up all night reading and re-reading *Orion* in a state of the wildest excitement and when I went to bed I could not sleep. It seemed to me a wonderful thing that such work could be done by a Canadian, by a young man, one of ourselves. It was like a voice from some new paradise of art calling us to be up and doing. A little after sunrise I got up and went out into the college grounds. The air, I remember was full of the odour and cool sunshine of the spring morning. The dew was thick upon the grass. All the birds of our Maytime seemed to be singing in the oaks, and there were even a few adder-tongues and trilliums still blossoming on the slope of the little ravine. But everything was transfigured for me beyond description, bathed in an old world radiance of beauty [by] the magic of the lines that were sounding in my ears, those divine verses, as they seemed to me, with their Tennyson-like richness and strange, earth-loving, Greekish flavour. I have never forgotten that morning, and its influence has always remained with me.⁵

What I find interesting in this passage, apart from the attractive enthusiasm of youth, is the suggestion that poetry, acting upon the mind and sense, fuses two worlds, the immediate physical beauty of Canadian spring ("our Maytime") and the "old" world (which is, to the Canadian on the outskirts of civilization, a dream-world) of the cultural past: "everything was transfigured . . . bathed in an old-world radiance of beauty [by] the magic of the lines that were sounding in my ears, those divine verses . . . with their Tennyson-like richness and strange, earth-loving, Greekish flavour." These poets, as British North Americans, felt the need to impose the European cultural past on Canada.

Possibly, as I suggested before, the savagery and mystery of Greek myth — the stories of Orion, Marsyas and Acteon for Roberts — proves more appropriate to the savage and beautiful character of the new land than the high art of settled Europe. A classical education could take on a new meaning in a harshly lovely land.⁶ Looking at Roberts' poems one feels that something in the nature of the new land could, with some degree of appropriateness, be rendered in terms of a "Greekish" and "earth-loving" (though hardly a Tennysonian) sensibility. Consider these lines from "Orion":

All the morning's majesty
 And mystery of loveliness lay bare
 Before him; all the limitless blue sea
 Brightening with laughter many a league around
 Wind-wrinkled, keel-uncloven, far below;
 And far above the bright sky-neighbouring peaks
 And all around the broken precipices,
 Cleft-rooted pines swung over falling foam,
 And silver vapours flushed with the wide flood
 Of crimson slanting from the opening east . . .

This could as easily be Canada as Greece; the passage has the same sense of distances as does "The Tantrammar Revisited" but not, unfortunately, the complementary vivid focus on particulars. Instead we get this "classical" description of a woman:

For there beside him, veiled in a mist
 Where — through the enfolded splendour issued forth —
 As delicate music unto one asleep
 Through mist of dreams flows softly — all her hair
 A mist of gold flung down about her feet,
 Her dewy, cool, pink fingers parting it
 Till glowing lips, and half-seen snowy curves
 Like Parian stone, unnerved him, waited SHE . . .

This mélange of mist, music, gold and marble tangled up in a somewhat labyrinthine syntax may (or may not) have excited the undergraduate Lampman, but

it is more likely to suggest a coy, artfully posed statue to us than the warmblooded woman called for in Roberts' happy ending to the story of Orion. The "Tennysonian" prevails.

Roberts is at his best in almost purely descriptive landscape poems. He shies away from any very acute consideration of human relationships, and his overtly "philosophical" poems are too grandly general to be very convincing. Aside from "The Tantramar Revisited", it is the sonnets — "The Potato Harvest", "The Pea-Fields" and "The Winter Fields" in particular — that constitute his lasting achievement as a poet. Except for the delightful "Pea-Fields" these poems tend to be sombre in tone.

I like to ask my students whether these poems make them think of another well-known poet, and someone usually volunteers the name of Robert Frost. "The Winter Fields" is similar in theme to Frost's poems "The Onset" and "Desert Places". In all three of these poems there is sharp observation of the coming of winter, but there is this important difference: Frost is strongly present in his poems both as distinctive voice and as character; Roberts is the remote, god-like observer. Unlike his pupil, Lampman, he would never offer such self-revelation as we find in this famous passage from Frost's "Desert Places":

They cannot scare me with their empty spaces
Between stars — on stars where no human race is.
I have it in me so much nearer home
To scare myself with my own desert places.

It is also interesting that Frost, an American wrestling with the optimistic ghost of Roberts' and Carman's kinsman, Emerson, is able to suggest the possibility imaged in the snow's blankness — that existence may be a meaningless void — while the Canadian Roberts refuses, in his official "philosophical" poems, the possible implications of his own description of New Brunswick's "amber wastes of sky", "wide flats", "lonely flush", "lonely reaches", "waste of hard and meagre weeds", "brackish pools and ditches blind", "low-lying pastures of the wind", "crying knives", and "sleet and frost that bites like steel" — these quotations are all from the descriptive sonnets — affirming instead (in the windily unconvincing "In the Wide Awe and Wisdom of the Night") an Emersonian "august infinitude of Man." It is not so far, after all, from New Hampshire to New Brunswick. In his anguished doubt and self-doubt the somewhat younger Frost became a modern poet. Roberts maintained an official Victorian optimism, but only, it appears, by refusing to enter completely his native space. Still, the best poems remain to show us that he began the journey.

Carman too exhibits a certain cultural schizophrenia. The official optimism of British and American taste-makers sorts ill with his sense of the haunted quality of his homeland. His emotions are usually expressed in terms of natural processes,

most notably those of autumn's colourful decline and decay. His characteristic self-images are tiny flowers, moths, children or waifs, whose beauty is ephemeral and doomed. He feels what I have called the eeriness of the Canadian space:

Come, for the night is cold
The ghostly moonlight fills
Hollow and rift and fold
Of the eerie Ardise hills!

The windows of my room
Are dark with bitter frost,
The stillness aches with doom
Of something loved and lost.

In this poem, "A Northern Vigil", the absence of an imaginary girl named Guendolyn, who is characterized as the soul of the place, is lamented, i.e. this place is empty of spirit or meaning. The early Carman seems quite happy with Edgar Allan Poe's myth of the lost beloved, and perhaps feels himself, as Poe apparently did, to be a culturally displaced person.

A little later, having gone completely American, he writes his cheerful but empty vagabondia poems to protest, unconvincingly, a Whitmanesque optimism. There are also, however, poems on classical themes (like "The Dead Faun", which objectifies Carman's own sense of death and loss in terms of the classical world), the successful adaptations of Sappho, and a mixing of mythologies that foreshadows the work of Leonard Cohen. (In a number of ways Carman was the Leonard Cohen of his time, a restless man with a remarkable lyric gift much appreciated by an international public; one could even view Cohen's song "Suzanne" as an updated version of Carman's "Lady of the Rain": in each a versatile mother-goddess or Isis-figure is celebrated).⁷

It seems to me, as I've suggested above, that Carman's best poems convey a sense of loss, of that psychological and cultural displacement that many sensitive Canadians have experienced. Carman does not, like Crawford and Lampman and Scott, go forward from this to engage the gods of place on their own ground. But he leaves us, in his own vague, musical and impressionistic fashion, with an atmosphere, a sense of the problem.

NOTES

¹ Tom Marshall, "Macdonald Park."

² A. J. M. Smith (ed.), *Masks of Poetry* (Toronto, 1962).

³ *Literary History of Canada*, p. 413.

⁴ "I often wish," said Carman, "that I could rid the world of the tyranny of facts. What are facts but compromises? A fact merely marks the point where we have agreed to let investigation cease. Investigate further and your fact disappears. Under the scrutiny of thought all facts are alike, from the atom to the universe . . ."

and they dissolve . . .” (James Cappon, *Bliss Carman’s Beginnings*, *Queen’s Quarterly*, Autumn 1929, p. 657). More recently, William Irwin Thompson writes interestingly of the physicists Weizsäcker and Heisenberg and their awareness of the “psychological implications of the quantum theory” in his *Passages About Earth* (New York, 1974): “. . . if the modes of perceiving [subatomic particles] through laboratory instruments and mathematics after the material itself, then, as Heisenberg would say, we no longer have a science of nature, but a science of the mind’s knowledge about nature” (p. 91). Similarly, the most basic techniques of poetry (which are extensions of the body’s modes of sense-perception) after the “object” of the poet’s attention, however “objective” he may think he is being. His true “subject” and what it is that demands that he find the exact form for his utterance, is himself experiencing the world.

⁵ “Two Canadian Poets: A Lecture, 1891,” *Masks of Poetry*, p. 30.

⁶ Similarly, a biblical story could express man’s relationship to a cruel nature. Northrop Frye has elucidated the hidden “Canadian content” of Heavyside’s “Jephthah’s Daughter” (*The Bush Garden*, pp. 150-51).

⁷ In a letter to Michael Ondaatje in 1967 or so I called Cohen (rather unfairly) “the Bliss Carman of the sixties”. Later, looking at *Read Canadian*, I noticed that Dennis Lee had had at some point a similar thought.

IDLE

Anne Corkett

I could believe
I am water — disliking
pressure, I meander; am much
given to idle
reflection.

There is a certain
amount to be learned
from the way water
manages its shallows,
the dull resistance
of stones, the earth
readily giving way.

I could believe
I am all things did
I not lack the perfect
accord of things whose
purpose is not
to seek purpose
but to teach there is
no elemental bar to the design.