

LIVES OF THE HUNTED

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IN *O Canada*, Edmund Wilson confesses that Americans in the early nineteen hundreds tended to imagine Canada “as a kind of vast hunting preserve convenient to the United States”; he goes on to recall that myth of an edenic, pristine Canada which the majority of outlanders still seem to cherish:

Canada comes back to me from childhood as a realm of huge forests, frozen lakes, large and dangerous animals—animals which, however, in Ernest Thompson Seton’s stories, seemed to constitute a special race that was capable of communicating with men, of becoming our fierce foes or our loyal allies.

Typically American, we sigh, to see Canada as a hunters’ game park and to hold firmly to the legends transmitted by an outdated, scarcely respectable branch of our literature. Our own attitudes toward the natural world are less confident; much serious Canadian literature seems to express a jittery fear of the wilderness as a place which threatens human endeavour and self-realization, rather than a robust Leather-stocking-like delight in it as a challenging playground for the hunter, a kingdom of communicating animals. In “Wolf in the Snow”, Warren Tallman identifies “the continent itself — the grey wolf whose shadow is underneath the snow”¹ as a forbidding presence which baffles the characters’ aspirations in Canadian fiction, and Northrop Frye finds “a tone of deep terror in regard to nature” in Canadian poetry:

It is not a terror of the dangers or discomforts or even the mysteries of nature, but a terror of the soul at something that these things manifest. The human mind has nothing but human and moral values to cling to if it is to preserve its integrity or even its sanity, yet the vast unconsciousness of nature in front of it seems an unanswerable denial of those values.²

The turn-of-the-century animal story may seem to sugar-coat this distinctly Canadian vision of Nature, inasmuch as it attempts to shape the “vast uncon-

sciousness" through animals often equipped with at least quasi-human and quasi-moral values, to see Tallman's generalized "Wolf in the Snow" as a single furred individual with every day, minutely-described problems. In fact Sir Charles G. D. Roberts states that the function of the animal story is to mediate between the best of two worlds: it "helps us to return to nature, without requiring that we at the same time return to barbarism" and "without asking us to relinquish by way of toll any part of the wisdom of the ages."³ Obviously these remarks are wrapped around the horns of a familiar Romantic dilemma: Nature is good, but uncivilized; Civilization is good, but unnatural. However, Roberts insists that the kind of animal story he has in mind is of a specialized type, "a psychological romance constructed on a framework of natural science."⁴ He notes that Ernest Thompson Seton's works fit his category, but *Black Beauty* and Kipling's "Mowgli" stories are alien to the genre, since the animals are "frankly humanised" and their notions too "complex" to be realistic.⁵ What Roberts is really announcing in "The Animal Story" is the inadequacy of British fictional conventions to the Canadian landscape. The British writer, steeped in the social order, is doomed to transform his animals into miniaturized people: thus the moles, toads, rats, weasels and bunnies in Kenneth Grahame and Beatrix Potter have class accents, wear clothes and own houses. Whether dressed or not, the British animal usually inhabits a domestic world of farmyards and happy endings: Lassie comes home through hedgerows and towns — and she does come home. The supposed "wildness" of the animal is beside the point: Kipling's jungle beasts are disguised sergeants and schoolmasters. The Canadian writer of animal fiction, less concerned with a structured social milieu and living in a less cosy natural environment, is likely to find the British animal story an unconvincing model; Roberts and Seton each chose to create a mode of approach distinctively his own.

Distinctively Canadian? Roberts does not mention any American writers in his essay, possibly because the treatment of animals in American fiction is so different from his own practice as to seem irrelevant. The attitude toward Nature in America has remained firmly anthropocentric from the Puritans' identification with Israel in the Wilderness down through the great quest romances of the Nineteenth Century to the fiction of Hemingway, Faulkner and Mailer. Nature exists to challenge man, to jolt him into self-discovery, to reveal the truths of a transcendental universe, to shout out sermons from stones. Animals are often introduced to give striplings a chance at initiation into manhood, but even the animal as sacrificial victim has a way of turning into a furred or finned symbol, a cosmic beast whose significance transforms the insight of the hunter. Moby

Dick, triumphant and elusive at the heart of the tradition, is the classic example, but he (or He) is not alone. Indeed, the patterns in American writing about animals seem almost inverted in Canadian counterparts, where the emphasis is not on man at all, but on the animal.

A GROUP OF REPRESENTATIVE BEARS from both the American and Canadian traditions may illustrate the difference. The hero of Seton's *The Biography of a Grizzly* begins life by watching his mother and siblings killed by a hunter; he is painfully wounded in the paw, but flees into the forest, orphaned and whimpering. He grows up into "a big strong sullen bear, with neither friendship nor love", plagued along the way by unfriendly animals, hard winters, and the traps and rifles of men. In a fit of savage temper he mauls two hunters to death, Seton assuring us that this is only fair since the hunters wanted to kill him. In middle age he finds no mate, is afflicted with rheumatism and is finally tricked by a lesser bear into fearfully relinquishing his territory. At last, exhausted, half-blind and racked by physical pains, Seton's grizzly commits suicide, choosing to enter a glen filled with poisonous gases and to die in peace — "a truly Roman end", as one critic has remarked.⁶ The polar bear cub in Roberts' "The Summons of the North" also has an unhappy career. He loses his mother to hunters, then is picked up by a ship and imprisoned in a zoo. He seems to endure this last indignity with a noble indifference, until a blizzard in the zoo recalls to him his lost arctic home: "to his heart it was the summons of the north, — and suddenly his heart answered."⁷ His heart apparently cannot stand the strain and the bear collapses by the edge of his man-made pool, never to rise again.

We have no choice but to identify with these persecuted bears as they struggle to survive and heroically accept a defeat which is inevitable — "the life of a wild animal *always has a tragic end*,"⁸ Seton writes, and the italics are his. In William Faulkner's "The Bear", on the other hand, we are on the side of the young hunter who seeks a grizzly "absolved of mortality," a bear magnified into "an anachronism indomitable and invincible out of an old dead time, a phantom, epitome and apotheosis of the old wild life." There is an armada of critical exegeses on this story, but perhaps it is enough to say that the hunter's all but mystical encounters with the bear make him comprehend the inviolability of the wilderness and lead him to question the honour of his ancestral history: the real bear resolves into a personal symbol illuminating the life of the seeing "I". The plot

of Norman Mailer's *Why Are We in Vietnam?* centres upon a ritual bear hunt unifying, and then alienating, father and son. D.J., the hip young hunter, here finds a larger truth transmitted through the gaze of a dying grizzly: "something in that grizzer's eyes locked into his, a message, fellow, an intelligence of something very fine and very far away . . . those eyes were telling him something, singeing him, branding some part of D.J.'s future." Canadian bears are notably less spiritual and communicative, and it is not because Faulkner and Mailer may be "better" or "more serious" writers than Seton or Roberts; the difference is between the lives of the hunters and, to borrow a title from one of Seton's story collections, the lives of the hunted.

Sympathetic identification with the hunted is sustained in Canadian animal stories even when the narrator is also the hunter. Seton's "Lobo, the King of the Currumpaw", for example, is told by an expert in wolf-traps and poisons, but all the interest is in the wolf: his tragic early childhood, his cleverness in survival, his loyalty to his mate, his poignant, dignified death. When Seton was denounced for the unhappy ending of "Lobo", he insisted on the priorities of the hunted:

In what frame of mind are my hearers left with regard to the animal? Are their sympathies quickened toward the man who killed him, or toward the noble creature who, superior to every trial, died as he had lived — dignified, fearless, and steadfast?⁹

Conversely, the American story told from the animal's viewpoint tends to evade tragedy and slip into a celebration of the hunter's world. Jack London's *White Fang* seems to be a "Canadian" tale in its first half, where we follow the trials of a wolf as he endures the cruel north and even crueller men. But halfway through, White Fang is redeemed by the love of a good master, moves to California, begets children, alerts the family when his human "love-master" (London's phrase) breaks a leg, saves the household from a murderer, and is canonized as "The Blessed Wolf" by the admiring populace of Sierra Vista. This Horatio Alger-like rise to the top is alien to the Canadian tradition; in fact, in "Wully, the Story of a Yaller Dog", Seton gives us the pattern in reverse. Wully is a good sheepdog who, through human neglect, declines into a sheepkiller and is mistaken for a wolf. He is shot as he tries to attack his kindly owners when they find him out; redemption through "love-masters" is not a feature of the animal in Canadian literature.

Admittedly the human beings in Canadian animal stories are not often lovable. Wully's derangement is caused by a thick-skinned sheepherder who abandons

him, and the hunters in other stories are often petty-minded, vicious and crass, such as the drunken coyote killer in Seton's "Tito" or the callous "sportsman" who shoots the leader of a seal herd in Roberts' "Back to the Water World". Man's world is anathema to the animals: the vixen in Seton's "The Springfield Fox" feeds her baby poisoned meat rather than see him live a captive; in "The Grey Master" Roberts shows that for a true wolf death is more honourable than pacing a cage as a spectacle for unfeeling people. By shooting two panthers, a man saves the lives of two children in Roberts' "Do Seek Their Meat From God", but the stark conclusion reminds us of the animals' rights: the children are saved, but two panther cubs now lie dead of starvation. The elegiac endings to many of these Canadian stories, particularly Seton's, remind us that the human world in a larger sense and as a whole is gradually obliterating the animals' domain. The coyote-protagonists of "Tito" survive through their cunning, but the buffalo and the antelope, we are mournfully told, have largely been hunted out of the Badlands. In "Redruff", a noble partridge dies in an untended snare, one of the last of his breed to flourish in the Don Valley: "now no partridge comes to Castle Frank," the story concludes, "and in Mud Creek Ravine the old pine drum-log, since unused, has rotted in silence away."¹⁰

These doleful endings and the number of stoic moose, tragic bears, grouse dying in the snow, woodchucks devoured, salmon failing to make it upstream, grief-stricken wolves and doomed balls of fur, feathers or quills squealing for dead mothers tend to instil a certain fatalism in the reader; it is interesting to speculate about the influence of Roberts' and Seton's books, as popular reading for children, on the collective Canadian psyche. Is there anything the Canadian animal may gain from his struggle, beyond survival? Does suffering improve his soul? Is tight-lipped Presbyterian endurance his only recourse? Certainly some animals are allowed to live beyond the last paragraph, but that this is an unusual event may be indicated by one of Seton's titles: "Badlands Billy: The Wolf that Won."

Roberts' animals are generally more cheerful and pragmatic than Seton's, and when the struggle is localized in a particular inter-animal fight, as in many of the stories in *The Kindred of the Wild* and *The Wisdom of the Wilderness*, the protagonist-animal often wins. But in the struggle with man even the rare triumph may seem an evasion, as in the conclusion of Roberts' novella *Red Fox*, in which the hunted fox hitches a ride on a wagon and is removed to "a wilderness to his heart's desire, a rugged turbulence of hills and ravines where the pack and the scarlet hunters could not come." The availability of more and better wildernesses

is not offered to every fox, however, and the captive animals in Roberts' *Kings in Exile* can only meet their defeat with outrage and forlorn dignity. Joseph Gold has argued that Roberts' stories affirm a larger vision of the natural cycle: "While individual creatures constantly lose the struggle for survival, life itself persists."¹¹ However, life's persistence offers little comfort for the animal one is sympathizing with in a given story; true, the cycle persists as the bear eats a salmon in "The Last Barrier", but it is the *salmon's* story.

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N SETON'S WORK, Nature can occasionally persist with a vengeance. The hunter who shoots a splendid mountain sheep for money in "Krag, the Kootenay Ram" grows obsessed with his kill and keeps the corpse with him in a mountain shack. Then "the Ram's own Mother White Wind" descends, "charged with a mission of revenge",¹² to crush the shack in an avalanche. The hunter's remains — "broken bones with rags and grizzled human hair" — are found beneath the body of Krag, whose shining golden eyes remain unclouded even after death. The hunter is forgotten, but the ram's head is "enshrined on a palace wall today."¹³ Nature prevails, but not a friendly Mother Nature or even a Thornton W. Burgess Mother West Wind; rather, it is chilling Mother White Wind, a personification of the kind of natural world Warren Tallman finds a dominant presence elsewhere in Canadian fiction and characterizes as "old Mother North America with her snow hair, her mountain forehead, her prairie eyes, and her wolf teeth, her wind songs and her vague head of old Indian memories."¹⁴ Seton's concern for the uncompromising aspects of Nature is also evident in his painting "The Wolves' Triumph" which depicts a pack feeding on a human body in the snow. The painting, rejected by a Paris exhibition for its revolting subject matter, was finally shown at the Chicago World's Fair in 1893, "much against the wishes of some members of the Toronto selection committee," according to S. E. Read, "who were inclined to believe that it might leave an unfavourable impression of the Canadian way of life."¹⁵

In his writing Seton conscientiously tries to correct unfavourable impressions in several ways. There is an unconvincing "Angel of the Wild Things" who flits into the occasional story to guide the animal on the right path, and in *The Natural History of the Ten Commandments*, Seton tries to show (with dubious success) that animal behaviour may run parallel with the laws of the Decalogue. However he is too professional a naturalist to depend on angels and Christian teaching in his best stories, and usually goes out of his way to deny his animals a

metaphysical aura. Thus Lobo "had *not* a collar of gold about his neck nor was there on his shoulders an inverted cross to denote that he had leagued himself with Satan";¹⁶ he is a great wolf, but a real one. Yet in *The Trail of the Sandhill Stag* Seton writes a story which seems to follow the American pattern, complete with the redemptive "cosmic beast". Yan, the protagonist, grows from youth to manhood in his pursuit of a great stag, yet when he is at last face to face with the animal, he fails to shoot. Long years in the woods have taught the hunter to respect his quarry, and the deer's serene gaze quells the hunter's desire to draw blood. The story ends with an apostrophe to the stag:

I may never see you again. But if only you would come sometimes and look me in the eyes and make me feel as you have done to-day, you would drive the wild beast wholly from my heart, and then the veil would be a little drawn and I should know more of the things that wise men have prayed for knowledge of. And yet I feel it never will be — I have found the Grail. I have learned what Buddha learned. I shall never see you again. Farewell.

The pattern of the story may be American, but the spirit is undoubtedly Canadian. Even here, Seton's usual elegiac tone is evident: the stag will *not* return to drive "the wild beast" wholly from the hunter's heart, and in spite of having learned what Buddha learned, Yan accepts the limitations on his knowledge rather fatalistically. There is identification with animals throughout: on the trail, Yan feels "the strange prickling that he knew was the same as makes the wolf's mane bristle when he hunts". When Yan realizes that wolves are hunting him just as he hunts the stag, he reflects, "Now I know how a deer feels when the grind of a moccasined foot or the click of a lock is heard in the trail behind him," and at the end he addresses the deer as "Little Brother". Other men jeer at Yan for his persistence — indeed, in this story it is not always easy to tell the hunter from the hunted.

Whether or not the Ten Commandments, Buddha, individual victories, natural process or "The Angel of the Wild Things" offer convincing affirmations in a given animal story, a sympathetic identification with the hunted remains a constant factor. Perhaps this is connected with a Canadian habit of mind which shows up also in partisan emotions at the slaughter of baby seals, in campaigns for the better understanding of wolves, or in the popular adoption as a national symbol of the Ookpik, with its defenceless feathers and persecuted eyes. Certainly the obsession with survival in the Canadian novel, from Sinclair Ross and Ernest Buckler to Margaret Laurence and Mordecai Richler, may indicate that the animal story is more closely allied with the mainstream of our literature than it

would appear. At least, the predicament of the individual struggling for life with an indifferent natural world on one side and a hostile society on the other is as evident in, for instance, *The Mountain and the Valley* as in *The Biography of a Grizzly*. In recent Canadian fiction, the protagonists often seem to be copying their survival techniques directly from the animals: the man in the tree at the end of *Beautiful Losers* (a title that would do for a collection of Canadian animal stories) is literally one of the hunted. While her fiancé brags of his hunting prowess, the heroine of Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* crouches in the Ladies', feeling kinship with a roll of toilet paper which is described as "helpless and white and furry, waiting passively for the end". Robert Kroetsch's Stud-horse Man, moving from one narrow escape to another, is repeatedly identified with his stallion, last member of a breed faced with extinction. However, at the finish there is a bleakly comic reversal: the stallion kills the man and becomes a respectable member of society, impregnating mares for science and birth-control, while the true spirit of the wild dies with his master.

As Canada's perennial questioning of its own national identity is increasingly coupled with a suspicion that a fanged America lurks in the bushes, poised for the kill, it is not surprising that Canadian writers should retain their interest in persecution and survival. The didacticism and elegiac melodrama of the turn-of-the-century animal story have given way to irony and black humour, and we look back on the golden age of nature writing from an iron age of urban desperation. But as Britain has not deserted the social order in its fiction (see Anthony Powell, or Anthony Burgess) and as America continues to turn out quest romances (see James Dickey), so Canadian literature may not be as far away as we think from the preoccupations of Seton and Roberts, the lives of the hunted.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ *A Choice of Critics*, ed. George Woodcock (Toronto, 1966), p. 10.
- ² *Literary History of Canada*, ed. Carl F. Klinck (Toronto, 1965), p. 830.
- ³ Charles G. D. Roberts, *The Kindred of the Wild* (London, 1903), p. 29.
- ⁴ The same, p. 24.
- ⁵ The same, p. 27.
- ⁶ S. E. Read, "Flight to the Primitive: Ernest Thompson Seton," *Canadian Literature* 13 (1962), p. 51.
- ⁷ Charles G. D. Roberts, *The Haunters of the Silences* (London, 1907), p. 30.
- ⁸ Ernest Thompson Seton, *Wild Animals I Have Known* (London, 1902), p. 12.
- ⁹ Ernest Thompson Seton, *Lives of the Hunted* (London, 1901), p. 12.
- ¹⁰ *Wild Animals I Have Known*, p. 58.

- ¹¹ Joseph Gold, "The Precious Speck of Life," *Canadian Literature* 26 (1965), p. 25.
- ¹² *Lives of the Hunted*, p. 103.
- ¹³ The same, p. 104.
- ¹⁴ *A Choice of Critics*, p. 76.
- ¹⁵ "Flight to the Primitive," p. 50.
- ¹⁶ *Wild Animals I Have Known*, p. 53.