

# THE PRECIOUS SPECK OF LIFE

*Joseph Gold*

*It is the function of art to illuminate the human form of nature, to present the ferocity of the weasel, the docility of the sheep, the drooping delicacy of the willow, the grim barrenness of the precipice, so that we can see the character of the weasel, the sheep, the willow and the precipice.*

NORTHROP FRYE

**T**HE AIM OF THIS ESSAY is to suggest that the animal stories of Sir Charles G. D. Roberts are literature worthy of our attention; that they constitute an important body of Canadian writing; and that they have so far been disposed of with barely a wave of the debonair critical hand. The last part of this contention is more easily demonstrated than the first.

Between 1891 and 1933, Roberts wrote and published approximately 230 stories. Since 1933, when Macmillan published *Eyes of the Wilderness*, there has been a gradual disappearance of books in print until now there remains only *The Last Barrier*, a collection published by McClelland & Stewart in the New Canadian Library, with a copyright date of 1958. Occasionally a story or two has been added to an anthology of stories for schoolboys, not, one presumes, because of their literary excellence but because they contain no obvious reference to sex, politics or religion. As for criticism, Alec Lucas' brief introduction to *The Last Barrier* seems to be the first serious attention ever given to these stories. A

line here or there is all that I can find by anyone else. Desmond Pacey's few lines in his recent book on Canadian literature are typical:

Roberts' stories are good as long as he confines himself to portraying the lives of animals and the environment in which they move, but once he introduces human characters his touch falters and the wildest melodrama results.<sup>1</sup>

Whatever Professor Pacey means by "good", obviously he finds them not good enough to merit any serious critical examination or detailed illustration. Such generalized value judgments are all that one can find.

In fact, Roberts' animal stories constitute, as far as I can ascertain, the only sustained attempt to use the materials of the Canadian Wilderness for the purpose of expressing a coherent view of the world that man inhabits. Roberts has created a Canadian mythology, in which animals, rather than gods, play out a systematic drama of conflict and resolution. This is all done, of course, within the framework of an accurate survey of natural history, and it is a brave man who would casually question Roberts' knowledge of the wilderness. Nevertheless it would be as pointless to apply standards of "realism" to these stories as it would be to question the size and character of William Faulkner's bear, in any discussion of its ultimate significance. Roberts' bear, fox, moose and porcupine are distillations of certain instincts and concretizations of certain abstractions. There are no centaurs or griffins but there are many other creatures who emerge from the author's poetic imagination with equal meaning and consistency and with a similarly forceful effect. This mythology is, at its best, a carefully designed metaphor for the order and structure of nature, as in the story "In the Deep of the Silences". The title itself suggests not just a location but a dynamic force at the heart of things. In the story the elements, land, air and water are represented by a bear, an eagle and a lake trout. Each is king, or god of his domain. This almost Classic arrangement, far from being vague or accidental, is clearly intended. Not only is the story divided into four parts, one to each of the elements, and the last to the conflict between their "gods", but the descriptions themselves indicate Roberts' attitude:

His fierce yellow eyes, unwavering, brilliant, and clear like crystal, deep set beneath straight, overhanging brows, searched the far panorama with an incredibly piercing gaze. At such a distance that the most penetrating human eye — the eye of a sailor, a plains' ranger, a backwoods' huntsman, or an enumerator of the stars — could not discern him in his soundless altitude, he could mark the fall of a leaf or the scurry of a mouse in the sedge-grass.<sup>2</sup>

What could be more suggestive of an invisible sky-god, who unseen himself, sees all beneath him? And when he does descend he comes like a thunderbolt:

There was a harsh, strong hissing in the air, and a dark body fell out of the sky. Fell? Rather it seemed to have been shot downward from a catapult. No mere falling could be so swift as that sheer yet governed descent.<sup>3</sup>

This aura of design, pattern, structure, in a world peopled by creatures pursuing a highly dramatic and meaningful action pervades all the best Roberts' stories, and there are many of them. We will return to the question of meaning later, but for the moment let us pursue the question of the purposeful design in the stories and exactly what attitude Roberts brings to nature and why he writes of animals at all. In an interesting essay, "The Animal Story",<sup>4</sup> Roberts states with admirable candour that the animal story of his time, and as he writes it, is a "culmination". He surveys the history of this mode of writing from its "fabulous" origins up to Kipling and Seton and he asserts that the "psychological" animal story, in which the "personality, individuality, mentality" of an animal is pursued, has evolved fully and can go no further. Roberts clearly does not see himself as writing this kind of story at all. He believes rather that through the animal the writer can approach some larger vision of basic human drives and some understanding of the transcendent universal design to which all things contribute. He says of the animal story:

It leads us back to the old kinship of earth, without asking us to relinquish by way of toll any part of the wisdom of the ages, any fine essential of the 'large result of time'.<sup>5</sup>

By this Roberts means that the artist can use animals to make sense of the world of which man is part and from which he grew, that we are given a detachment and perspective from which to examine the fundamental base on which we rest. Roberts' aim in his stories is to present his own vision of truth, a vision that, value judgments aside, reminds one first of William Wordsworth's and William Faulkner's. What could be more Faulknerian than "the old kinship of earth?" And Faulkner's "verities of the heart" are anticipated in Roberts' mythology as story after story presents the struggle of honour, dignity, courage, love, and hate symbolized in elemental struggle. Roberts ends his essay with this curious statement:

It [the animal story] has ever the more significance, it has ever the richer gift of refreshment and renewal, the more humane the heart and spiritual the understanding which we bring to the intimacy of it.<sup>6</sup>

It is not unfitting that the quotation which heads this paper should be taken

from a study of William Blake. Roberts, too, speaks here of the need for the human mind to "bring" meaning to nature. The world man sees need not be a collection of disparate facts, but a world of potential significance realized and ordered by the artist's imagination. Its significance is more or less, depending on our degree of humanity. The word "humane" suggests human in a compassionate and accepting role. It is possible, says Roberts, to see in the world he presents "clear and candid life".

**R**OBERTS' ANIMAL WORLD amounts then to an affirmative vision in which the conditions of a wilderness struggle for survival are accepted and confirmed. It remains to show the precise terms on which such an acceptance is possible and to illustrate this affirmation from the fiction itself. Roberts was born in 1860 and inherited the full force of nineteenth-century disillusion. The period which saw a search for answers to a godless world culminate in Existentialism made it necessary for Roberts also to seek some positive confrontation with the problem of man's apparent lonely helplessness. Being an artist, not a philosopher, Roberts sought the kind of imaginative understanding that Blake and Shelley and Wordsworth had sought before him. The terms of his clerical background were not acceptable, the raw materials of a New Brunswick wilderness were to hand, and so Roberts brought his imagination to bear on nature and animals and produced his own Canadian mythology. The principal feature of this myth is that, while individual creatures constantly lose the struggle for survival, life itself persists. In the long run death itself has no sting and is ironically defeated by the uses nature makes of its processes. All things conspire to sustain life and the stories create a very strong sense of rhythmic pattern and cycle, of the seasons, of birth and death, of mating and separating, and these patterns persist no matter what the creatures, what the setting or what human interference is attempted. This may not seem like a great deal by which to celebrate some meaning to existence, but after all has man ever been honoured for doing more than living, to the best of his ability?

Roberts is, to my knowledge, the only writer who has used animals to illustrate such a vision. But the effect of his writing is frequently and strongly like that experienced with Becket's *Godot*, or Faulkner's *Dilsey*, or Brecht's *Mother Courage*. It may sound ludicrous to put, say, Red Fox in such company, but

when one has actually read about him the comparison is not nearly so laughable. Certainly it is true to say that Roberts' animals are more dignified and lead more meaningful lives than the characters in the writings of Zola and Dreiser, who were contemporaries of Roberts and whose creatures are infinitely more "animal". "Human" and "animal" are labels earned by the quality of behaviour so that a writer may humanize an animal world or animalize a human one. Roberts is after all a poet, which is to say that his imagination makes definition and his human version of the animal world dignifies and enobles that world. Roberts celebrates courage and endurance and for this reason his stories of defeat and death produce not despair but a sense of elevation, and often something akin to catharsis. His animals and birds and fishes confront overwhelming odds. Every second is a challenge to life itself. The combatants in man's conflict, when not hunger and cold, are accident and disease. For the animal, in exactly the same way, they are the innumerable enemies who see him as food and wait for him in silence. The animal who guards his life best survives longest, but there is never any guarantee that the next moment will not be the last. It is precisely because the contest is always finally lost that the struggle is meaningful. Roberts' animal world, like ours, is a fallen world and the best that can be achieved in it is a persistent denial of death, hunger and fear. Every moment wrenched from time is a major victory and every meal is a conquest over an indifferent universe. Roberts would agree with Blake that "everything that lives is holy" but he would add, I suspect, "And holy because it lives."

The techniques Roberts employs are simple and it is the retention of simplicity that is his greatest strength. There is no commentary, no moralizing, but a stark presentation of animal impulses and success or defeat. *The Last Barrier* is by no means a collection of the best of Roberts' stories, but since it is readily available we must confine ourselves to it. The title story illustrates the Roberts' theme and technique most clearly. The salmon is born, miraculously grows up and dies in the paws of a bear after a hopeless struggle to climb a waterfall. This is the archetypal pattern of the birth-death cycle for all living creatures. But Roberts conveys to the reader a clear sense of his own awe at the fact that the process takes place at all. Survival itself is a miracle and even before this, gestation and birth. The tiny egg, resting at the bottom of a fast stream with "thousands of its fellows," is unaware of the vast outside that Roberts paints for the reader:

When the savage northern winter closed down upon the high valley of the Quahdavic it found difficulty in freezing the swift current that ran rippling over the bar; and when, at last, the frost conquered gripping and clutching through

the long, windless nights, it was to form only a thin armour of transparent, steel-strong ice, through which, as through the mantle of snow which made haste to cover it, the light still filtered softly but radiantly at noon, with an ethereal cobalt tinge.<sup>7</sup>

**T**HE STRONG SENSE of the infinite scale of size in the universe, from the minute forces of energy to the unconquerable seasons, is characteristic of Roberts' awareness. The salmon is not only born but turns into something animate, complete, perfect and volatile and for the humanizing, poetic imagination of Roberts, this is a supreme and even divine achievement:

The deep hollow in the gravel sheltered the moving atoms, so that they were not swept away by the current streaming over them. But minute as they were, they speedily gathered a strength altogether miraculous for their size, as they absorbed the clinging sacs of egg-substance and assumed the forms of fish, almost microscopic, but perfect.

The protagonist salmon of this story follows an almost classic pattern of development and is presented as a case history. Thus a sentence like the following is not indicative of loss of control but mastery of his material:

The egg from which he came having been one of the first to hatch, the tiny salmon mentioned in the opening paragraph was one of the first of the host to find his strength and to start the migration shoreward from the nest of the noisy bar.

One has the sense of reading the commentary of a man peering through a microscope at the astonishing activities of a new world. Certainly, if this writer may judge from his own and from his students' responses, a reading of Roberts produces a different, a more sensitive and a more aware encounter with a world that was originally taken much more for granted. It is unnecessary here to record the progress of the salmon through all its stages, from Parr to Smelt to Grilse to Salmon, or to summarize its ocean voyages and its change from a new born "speck of life" to parenthood in its turn. Roberts writes a history of one sample of myriad life that inevitably ends in defeat, and yet he writes it in such a way as to indicate, not a despairing or cynical view of the natural process, but a celebration of the struggle itself, as a careful look at his wording indicates, "the

pioneer of the shoal found all his ability taxed to guard the speck of life which he had so lately achieved.”

The ending to the *The Last Barrier* is full of meaning. During one of the salmon's annual absences the falls of his stream have greatly changed by virtue of a shift in formation that makes them now insurmountable. The salmon ends itself in vain leaps and is finally injured and exhausted:

When, at last, the salmon came blindly into the eddy and turned upon his side, the bear was but a few feet distant. She crept forward like a cat, crouched — and a great black paw shot around with a clutching sweep. Gasping and quivering, the salmon was thrown up upon the rocks. Then white teeth, savage but merciful, bit through the back of his neck; and unstruggling he was carried to a thicket above the Falls.

The use of the word “unstruggling” is curious here. More than a mechanical description is intended and the word in this context suggests acceptance, resolution, completion. When the fish can struggle no longer it is ready to give up its life, for life and struggle have become synonymous.<sup>8</sup> Nature fulfills itself in many ways and the writer provides a curiously ironic ending in which the fish, unable to master the falls alive is carried to their summit in death, as food in the mouth of the bear. A greater harmony, accessible only to the human imagination, is thus illustrated by the writer. The final victory is paradoxically that of life itself, and many deaths go to its making. In spite of the reiterated patterns of the stronger eating the weaker and cunning or speed eluding the dull or slow, Roberts is not interested in labouring a cliché. He goes to some pains to indicate that not even the fittest survive. The mole-shrew is a “Little Tyrant of the Burrows” and kills grubs, a mole and finally even a snake with equal efficiency, but his sleep of contentment ends in death after the chance passage of a fox discovers his retreat. Other stories show that the fox is subject to other powers, and if the strongest and bravest, the eagle, bear, moose and panther should miraculously elude their animal neighbours man himself is ready to demonstrate his fitness. Finally hunger and cold overcome everything else and these in turn die with the coming of spring. All these are carefully and systematically presented in the stories so that what we see is the survival of life and the process of cycle, of forces struggling against matter and matter itself altered by the operation of natural laws. All things are fit for some time and place. The waterfalls will be mastered one way, if not another.

It is interesting at this point to consider more precisely the basis for the in-

evitable discussion of Wordsworth's influence on Roberts.<sup>9</sup> To suggest the areas of similarity would require a discussion of Wordsworth beyond the scope of this paper. However the Mutability Sonnet is at the centre of Wordsworth's outlook, and it is curious that it reflects so accurately the themes illustrated everywhere in Roberts' prose,

From low to high doth dissolution climb,  
And sink from high to low, along a scale  
Of awful notes, whose concord shall not fail . . .

"Concord shall not fail," Wordsworth says, and later he writes "Truth fails not." Concord is Truth and Truth is Concord; that is all you know on earth and perhaps all you need to know, and this hypothetical dictum might stand as well for Roberts as for Wordsworth. The animal stories also amount to a hymn to concord and harmony, and this "scale of awful notes" along which life and death and change harmoniously run is to be perceived by the imagination of a detached artist, a man possessed of heightened sensibility, who is not confused by spiritual myopia. When this "scale" is heard it produces not despair but a transcendent understanding.

A musical but melancholy chime,  
Which they can hear who meddle not with crime  
Nor avarice, nor over-anxious care.

Roberts says of the animal story that it might, if used as he tries to use it, aid us in attaining such an awareness, "It frees us for a little from the world of shopworn utilities, and from the mean tenement of self of which we do well to grow weary."<sup>10</sup> Roberts quite deliberately seeks to produce a detached awareness in his reader by creating metaphor free from discourse or commentary. The effect is to hold the reader at a kind of intellectual distance whence he may apprehend the vast process of dissolution and regeneration, even unconsciously.

A comparison of the octet of the sonnet and a passage from *The Last Barrier* will perhaps suggest that Wordsworth understands with a penetrating conscious intellect what Roberts incorporates as an integral part of his metaphor.

Truth fails not; but her outward forms that bear  
The longest date do melt like frosty rime,  
That in the morning whitened hill and plain  
And is no more; drop like the tower sublime  
Of yesterday, which royally did wear



His crown of weeds, but could not even sustain  
Some casual shouts that broke the silent air  
Or the unimaginable touch of Time.

Roberts, writing about a change in the natural landscape that proves fatal to the salmon, writes this:

At the very first of spring there had been a land-slide. The great, partly overhanging rock, seamed and split by the wedges of countless frosts, had all at once crumbled down beneath the tireless pressure of the cataract. The lower fall, thus retreating, had become one with the upper. The straight descent was now nearly five feet higher than before — a barrier which no voyager those waters ever knew could hope to overcome.

The whole scene has changed and what was once suitable for salmon is now a new world demanding a new breed to master it. I am not suggesting that the Roberts' image is a deliberate echo of Wordsworth's sonnet, though this is entirely possible. Rather it seems that everywhere Roberts is illustrating an attitude or better still a vision which is central to Wordsworth and is most perfectly distilled in the Mutability Sonnet.

**T**O WRITE ABOUT Roberts' animal stories when only one small volume of some sixteen stories (out of possible hundreds) is available to the reader is at best a difficult task. The writer can count on no familiarity and can make no meaningful appeal to the best work. I have confined myself, mostly, to a single story but other stories persistently present the same vision of struggle and cycle. The wild goose who cannot fly sets out to walk half a continent after its fellows and quickly ends up in the mouth of a fox,

The struggle lasted scarcely more than two heartbeats. The wide wings pounded twice or thrice upon the ground, in fierce convulsion. Then the red fox, with a sidewise jerk of his head, flung the heavy, trailing carcass into a position for its easy carrying, and trotted off with it into the darkness of the woods.

The snake that changed its mind and went quickly underground to seek for food turns into food for insects,

The body of the dead snake was soon a centre of teeming, hungry, busy life, toiling to remove all traces of what had happened. For Nature, though she works

out almost all her ends by tragedy, is ceaselessly attentive to conceal the red marks of her violence.

The very process of death is a process of life too, contributing to the "scale of awful notes." Only life is constant and the endless, indomitable striving for it.

"Truth fails not" and that truth for Roberts is the endless cycle, the supremacy of life, the drama of a struggle in which all things participate, each atom playing some meaningful role in a series of events that conspire to a harmony which the poet perceives and makes into art. I have not found time here to do more than outline the archetypal patterns of Roberts' vision. It is perhaps not possible, until his work is part of an available Canadian literary heritage and education, to make detailed analyses of individual stories. Certain techniques should be part of any thorough discussion of these stories. One of the surest marks of Roberts' genius and an indication of the degree of conscious control usually employed, is his complete freedom from sentiment. Roberts' animals never become pets, the reader is never allowed to lose his detachment and there is no compromise in the recorded events with the bloody processes of universal natural law. There is too, the mastery of perspective, the ability, almost Swiftian, to construct whole worlds scaled to the size of ants as in "The Prisoners of the Pitcher-Plant" or to the world of giant moose and bear as in "The King of the Mamozekel". Nor is there space to pursue the brilliance of poetic description, always used for specific and often symbolic purposes, or to comment on the division of the whole work into groups or types that follow definable patterns. For instance, Roberts varies his stories so as to produce a strong sense of the individual animal personality, as with the King moose or with Kehonka the wild goose, or he carefully avoids any suggestion of personality and constructs the type, where this seems appropriate, as with the salmon or the ant. The former is achieved by introducing some peculiar circumstance into the individual life, the capture and clipping of Kehonka or the bear's attack on the King of the Mamozekel. These and other matters remain to be pursued elsewhere.

I know of no other Canadian writer who has left a body of work so consistently arranged about a clear idea of the order of life itself, or a writer of animal stories who has been at one and the same time so true to the characteristics of his actors and able to produce a genuine, unsentimentalized or dynamic fiction. It remains to give elsewhere the detailed workings of this outlook in other Roberts' stories and in the sustained narratives like *Red Fox* and *The Heart of the Ancient Wood*. It also remains to bring Roberts' work back into

print and restore him, or rather place him, in the forefront of Canadian letters, where he rightfully belongs.

- <sup>1</sup> Desmond Pacey, *Creative Writing in Canada*. Revised edition. Toronto, 1961, p. 74.
- <sup>2</sup> Charles G. D. Roberts, *The Haunters of the Silences*. Boston, 1907, p. 204.
- <sup>3</sup> *Haunters*, p. 213.
- <sup>4</sup> Charles G. D. Roberts, "Introductory" to *The Kindred of the Wild*. London, n.d.
- <sup>5</sup> *Kindred*, p. 19.
- <sup>6</sup> *Kindred*, p. 19.
- <sup>7</sup> Charles G. D. Roberts, *The Last Barrier and Other Stories*. Toronto, 1958, p. 83.
- <sup>8</sup> Roberts' continual use of words like "struggle" and "elemental" is worthy of the reader's attention and would well repay some critical examination.
- <sup>9</sup> That Roberts himself knew the work of Wordsworth in detail is indicated by his critical introduction to *Poems of Wordsworth*, edited by J. E. Wetherell, Toronto, 1892.
- <sup>10</sup> *Kindred*, p. 19.

