

# Space in the Canadian Novel of the West

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*translated by Joyce Marshall*

NO form serves better than the novel to elucidate the sort of relations that a civilization, or in a more restricted sense a society or a community has established with time and space. If the novel does not exist in Arab Islam that is because in this civilization space is strictly governed by time under the rule of a sovereign God. A civilization turns to narrative, and more particularly to the novel, when its space extends into time. The novel is at its apogee when a society has reached the limit of its space. The novelist can then perceive this space in its coherence if not in its totality even before it shatters and the structures of society collapse.

The civilization of the United States is a civilization of space without time. It cut its ties with the mother country. Communities in turn chose to enlarge their space, proceeding from the discovery to the conquest and from the conquest to the devastation of a nature that took the place of time. Since there is neither past nor traditions, each generation begins the conquest of the world anew. The American West has always stood for "somewhere else," that forever distant place one can never attain but which is still the dreamed-of destination and the culmination of a search that will never end. If in Islam the desert ruled out any extension of space into time, the rejection of time ultimately reduced American space to desert. The novel cannot delineate the boundaries of a space that is viewed as being limitless since

any attempt to assume and explore this space will itself lack definition.

Cut off from all extension in time, space becomes a dream and an abstraction, the source of a popular myth that has been diffused and ultimately manufactured by the cinema. The western cowboy is an outlaw who establishes order on his own condition. He rejects past and traditions. For him everything is born afresh each day. Action consumes its own substance and has no significance. The cowboy does not explore space. He conquers and subjugates it, occupies it and lays it waste. He is pursuing a "somewhere else" that he will never find. A linear character, without inner life, he travels the surface of the earth and is himself only surface, so his relations with others exclude any exchange but are those of hunting and pursuit. When not himself the quarry, he sets out in search of an enemy whom he must invent if he does not exist. Death becomes a game. There is no tragedy since time is denied.

If there are no great novels of the American West, that is because the West has never existed as reality. There is only perpetual movement through abstract space. When they are not outlaws, these horsemen of space are, like the characters in Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, perpetual victims. In *On the Road* Kerouac reaches the edge of the continent only to realize that travelling across space is simply to transport evil from one place to another and find the same anguish and unhappiness wherever you go. This book, which marked so many of the young, announces the end of a dream. In *Lolita* Nabokov describes this space, always similar to itself, forever repeating, and as in any tautology the repetition adds nothing to the sense. Any movement across a space so devoid of meaning is pointless. Corruption and violence appear to be the only solution. But this is a false resolution since corruption is only the dramatization of the inner void that is itself the reflection of a linear space.

As counterweight to this cinema myth of the outlaw, the American East with its ethnic diversity has invented its own reductive form: the musical. Human relations shrink to entertaining and meaningless gestures. Character holds forth in a composite space blended of song and dance, costume and decor. Entertainment creates its own space and abstraction requires no space of any kind, not even imaginary space.

In his exploration of the West, the Canadian followed another path, largely because his point of departure was very different. By opposing rebellion, the Loyalist accepted as his own the civilization of the mother country continued on another soil. The link with time was not cut and space was simply the prolongation of another space. Thus it is not surprising that the mythic character of the Canadian West should not be an outlaw but rather the upholder of the law: the Mountie. The West was not space to be occupied and violated so that man the hunter could prove his virility by the unceasing pursuit of some dream of freedom, since freedom for the Loyalist lay not in the conquest of space but in faithfulness to a tradition and the conquest of the self.

Obedience to the law of man symbolizes and embodies obedience to the law of God. There is suffering and tragedy side by side with joys, pleasures and happiness. The important thing is not movement but discovery. Men are not divided into victims and executioners. Nor are they engaged in a perpetual hunt for an adversary who is constantly renewed (since he was at the outset hypothetical). The pioneer of the Canadian West is not an outlaw striving to subdue hostile natural forces but a man who accepts the physical world as God's gift and is trying to establish his home there. He is not alone but a member of a group. A group he is endeavouring to transform into a community and that is united in prayer and in obedience to God's word. The unity of the group was the result of shared interests and opinions. But what is to be done to prevent these com-

mon interests from transforming human relations into complementary egotisms? French Canada tended to reduce religion to law and to subject the social structure to priestly imperatives. Man's destiny is thus immutable since it is simply a manifestation of divine will, and to resist one's fate is to risk offending God.

At one period in his history the French Canadian, abandoned by France and threatened with being engulfed by an Anglo-American ocean, expressed his will to survive by resignation. Endurance was the only possible resistance. But though there was wisdom in acceptance, the call of adventure was never quite silenced. Thus to try to reduce *Maria Chapdelaine* to a myth of resignation and acceptance of immutable fate is to forget the presence of the parallel theme of adventure and departure, which to threatened minorities is synonymous with exile. There is an alternation in *Maria Chapdelaine*, a movement back and forth between adventure and departure on the one hand and resignation to immobility on the other, a hesitance between exile and the kingdom without its every being quite clear whether the kingdom is departure or resignation.

In *Un homme et son péché* Charles-Henri Grignon describes, as if in spite of himself, the reductive force of the will to build a community in a hostile environment. To colonize the land of Cain is to abandon all hope of conquering space or vanquishing nature. Heroism under these conditions is not to roam the woods as a *coureur de bois* but to convert an arid soil and hostile nature into some sort of dwelling and habitation. The price is heavy. Adventurers and fools abound who try to coerce nature but it is apparent from the outset that the battle is unequal and resistance will lead only to their destruction. They have no choice finally but to obey her laws. Nature is grudging and niggardly and prudence dictates that they must be just as grudging and just as niggardly. Though they may dream of a free life as a *coureur de bois*, reality will be a mean little cabin in the wilderness.

Germaine Guèbremont presents a different portrait of the adventurer. He is the "outlander," a man who has known exile and returns. Space for the French Canadian is always two-fold — it is the plot of land he has managed to wrest from nature but also a place of illusion, an imaginary space from which one must return. Return is thus a reminder of adventure, that other sort of space, and of defeat.

In *La dalle des morts* Félix-Antoine Savard acknowledges the existence and full extent of space but gives it a spiritual dimension since for him space is consecrated to God and before the immensity of God's presence all space is tiny. Thus each stage in the conquest of this transfigured space becomes a station on the way of the Cross. Hostile nature is tamed and conquered since this is one of the trials demanded by God's service. Like the "outlander," the pioneer does not need to ravage nature to assert his strength. For him heroism lies in obedience to divine will.

In the Canadian West we find the same phenomenon. British traditions persist but in the little communities that must determine their particular conditions for endurance and survival, these traditions must be reinterpreted and only those kept that can be adapted to this new life. Nature cannot be violated since it must be made permeable to the life of a group — a group situated between the kingdom and exile, between the conquest of nature and its rejection, a group in other words that is striving under unfavourable conditions to establish a harmony and exchange between man and his new home. Used as protective armour against the hostility of nature, its stinginess and its menace, traditions lose their dynamism.

Puritanism impregnates the life of the new communities, thus enduring that the law of man will prevail and that he will identify with nature as the provider of the means of existence and not with nature as the wellspring of violence. The heroism of these pioneers can be expressed only in silence. Violence has been contained and throttled. The call of space must be silenced, space itself interiorized or

transformed into a domain where the will of God will prevail.

Like her biblical namesake, Hagar Shipley, the heroine of Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel* is a woman abandoned in the desert. She herself forges her weapons for survival. All illusion, every appeal of the imagination, all emotion is dangerous since it might turn her from this primordial task. Death would then prevail. Her husband, who might have conquered space, is an unsuccessful farmer. Since he is neither Cowboy nor Mountie, she cannot count on him, even less lean upon him. She attempts to dominate her son lest he be dominated by a space of which he will never be the master. These men are heroes *manqués* who accept the law because they cannot do otherwise. They are not free even to be resigned or to accept their fate. The woman is the guardian of time since it is through her that the generations are transmitted. She is continuance. To bear this weight, she must prove herself enduring, impervious to instinct. She stifles all capacity for emotion in herself by sheer determination and a blind will for autonomy. To survive in a natural world that is stingy and ungenerous of its gifts, she needs all the armour of her puritan faith. All free play of instinct or emotion are suppressed. She is like nature itself — nature who will devour a man who has not the strength to lay it waste.

There is a great temptation to transcend this space, which shrinks always to an acre of snow and to consecrate it to God. But God's gift comes only as the result of choice and freedom. This is the lesson that emerges from the long apprenticeship of Philip, the prairie minister who is the central figure of Sinclair Ross's *As for Me and My House*. This man of God, who might have conquered space by transcending it, has lost his faith. His life is outwardly austere, as austere as the communities he serves. The few things that are real to him — his persistent hope of becoming a painter, his affair with his neighbours' maid — he lives in secret. They cannot free him from the

prison of a space he can neither conquer nor control. Mere endurance is his only victory. His wife, who is sterile, is more comprehending than he is and accepts her husband's illegitimate child as a renewal. Here again the man is defeated in advance. Even his double life and the mask he wears cannot help him break the vice that holds him fast. He can only find ephemeral consolation, the soothing of an ill that is beyond cure. For death has marked this life from the beginning and there can be no triumph without a sense of guilt. The world Ross creates is impermeable to religious feeling. God is an abstraction, a need and a convenient excuse. Otherwise all coherence is lost. The desire to believe is present but the need and necessity for belief prohibit any questioning or doubt. It is taken for granted that everyone has faith. Those who do not possess it act as if they did. This is a universe of false pretenses in which everyone strives to correspond to an abstract and neutral image that disturbs no one. There is a fundamental dishonesty in Philip. Though he is certainly not a hero, he cannot be accepted as a victim. His failure, like that of the communities he serves, lies in the relations he has established with space, and this failure prevents any relationship with God.

How can this vice of impotence be broken? Only by madness and violence. This is the conclusion of Sheila Watson's *The Double Hook*, which more than any other novel plunges to the heart of the dilemma. How can space be conquered if fear smothers all emotion, stills every gesture, halts all movement? Man considers himself and sees that he is not strong enough to confront the elements. *Fear making mischief. Fear skulking round. Fear walking round in the living shape of the dead.*

Perhaps nature, which seems to be a wall, hides closed doors and would open them to anyone who could find them. *Dear God, she said, the country. Nothing but dust. Nothing but old women fishing. What can a person do?* In this anonymous desert, this limitless aridity, men meet.

They would like to join hands, press their bodies together, find in their coupled animal heat a sense of strength, form a mass that would balance this blind and silent space. *One man's one man and two men or ten men aren't something else.*

They may try to flee, but where could they go? They would only circle around and not even deceive their fear. There is only solitude and impotence. Few doors remain open except those all inter-connected ones of madness, violence and despair. And so the repressed violence bursts from this mild and docile West with its strong sense of community, its population of believers and professional preachers. *The Double Hook* exposes the impossibility of building a human community when nature has not been subdued and people are not subject to God's will, when man has formed no direct ties either with nature or with God. This is a civilization of waiting — or of suicide. Is it this that has prevented Sheila Watson from writing a second novel? *The Double Hook* is an attempt to examine an insidious and invasive incoherence. This is the threshold of madness, and any literary work appears derisory when it does not establish a link with a civilization, an extension of space into time.

Does this mean that American civilization will prevail and that we must accept the same violence and devastation now that the Americans realize that they have reached the end of the road and have transformed their space into spectacle? Surely a civilization whose traces have not wholly disappeared still constitutes a barrier and the awareness of man's impotence before space will prevent any setting forth in search of an adventure that would be only an insane self-destruction. Silence lies in wait when the acceptance of solitude is the ultimate affirmation of man's pride and of his refusal to be crushed. Only the writers can express this silence.