Keith Waddington

L. Groening

Engl. 470F/4

20 4 94

The Myth Making Machine

Any analysis of Canadian narrative poetry which builds its foundation upon the manliness of genre is likely to prove a rickety-rackety configuration liable to tumble at the slightest whispered wind of reason. This is not to say that such edifice cannot be imagined, but that their existence would reflect supreme casuistry and rhetoric and preconception rather than the work they attempt to investigate.[1] If we examine primary texts with something more of an open mind, if we avoid selective analysis which reshapes their shape to fit rigid prefabricated frameworks, then we might perhaps do justice to both truth and the texts themselves. Accordingly, when we examine the representation of native in several Canadian narrative poems, the picture we see is not one filtered by a dubious masculine genre; rather, it is demonstrative of two things: firstly, and most obviously, the intrinsic nature of each respective poem--the intent of the author; secondly, when we view the works collectively, we find, to all intents and purposes, a myth making machine.

A clear connection between the classical epic and the long

---

[1]Margaret Doodie's lecture on the "Feminine" form of the novel might be taken as an example of such conjuring and slight of mind.

narrative poems of nineteenth century Canada can fairly be made--a fact particularly noticeable in Oliver Goldsmith's *The Rising Village.* It is, of course, the Vergilian secondary epic which most shows its influence, but this influence is manifest more as a traditional imperative than a structural formula. *The Rising Village* demonstrates by its invocation of the muse the essential difference. "Do thou, to thy fond relative impart/Some portion of thy sweet poetic art." (2) The muse, in this case, is actually, "Thou dear companion of my early years"(2)--a relative; thus, what was once spirit is made flesh and blood. Similarly, the high hero's of Homer and particularly Vergil, aided and related to the gods, are reduced to the everyman whose lofty connection and assistance comes rather from England.[2] If we see then *The Rising Village* as a modest *The Aeneid*, vastly reduced and reshaped, then the rising village itself becomes a humble recast of the rising Rome. In this general reductionism, it is not surprising that the realm of the mythical antagonist is peopled not by The Furies, Allecto nor the flying Harpies, but by the "wandering savages."(3)

It is mainly by diction and juxtaposition of images that Goldsmith's mythogenesis of natives takes place.

> Till morning comes, and then is made no more
> The shouts of man, or beasts appalling roar;

---

[2]This is essentially the movement which, in the genre of dramatic tragedy, saw is final expression in Miller's *Tragedy and the Common Man.*

The wandering Indian turns another way,

And brutes avoid the first approach of day.(4)

Here we see native's first associated with "beasts" by juxtaposition, but also by their shared habit of night activity. The connection becomes stronger when "brutes," which seems to describe the native, actually refers, according to the logic of the parallel sentence structure, to the beast. But it is by associating the native to night that Goldsmith creates not simply a primitive man but a mythical creature robed in the sinister supernatural. To infer that Goldsmith portrays natives merely as nocturnal in their despicable habits, is to suggest that Stoker[3] simply imagined a night flying bat. The supernatural quality of the mythical native is expressed more overtly when we find:

Whilst every hut affords another friend.

And now, behold! his bold aggressors *fly*;

To seek their prey beneath some other sky;

Resign the *haunts* they can maintain no more.(4) (my italics)

The juxtaposing of Indian and beast, the blending of one with the other by diction which suits one but ostensibly describes the other, is repeated in identical manner towards the poem's conclusion:

Not fifty Summers yet have blessed thy clime,

How short a period in the page of time!

---

[3]Author of *Dracular.*

> Since savage tribes, with terror in their train,
> Rushed o'er thy fields, and ravaged all thy plain.
> But some few years have rolled in haste away
> Since, through thy vales, the fearless beast of pray,
> With dismal yell and loud appalling cry,
> Proclaimed his midnight reign of terror nigh. (13)

Such sentiments as "what noble courage . . . /How great the ardour . . ./and braved the perils of the stormy seas,"(3) underline the Vergilian influence, and this, in small part, explains the mythical qualities of the antagonists.

Since darkness is the realm of the bestial native, it seems entirely appropriate to see, as the poem draws to a close, night and day being used as a metaphor for Canada's progress.

> And as the sun, with gentle dawning ray,
> From night's dull bosom wakes . . .
> So may thy years increase, thy glories rise (14)

Day has no place for creatures of the night, and they are thus vanquished, to exist only as mythical monsters of darker days.

In *The St. Lawrence and the Saguenay*, Charles Sangster uses the long narrative poem not so much for the epic tradition it offers, but rather as the most appropriate form for his own particular agenda. Certainly, there are classical references, and Sangster makes greater use of the epic simile than does Goldsmith; but *The St. Lawrence and the Saguenay* is much less a country building poem and much more a personal visual journey in which the loveliness of what can be seen is combined with sentiments of romantic love.

Since it is the seeable that provides the refection for Sangster’s reflection, and since Sangster also relegates the native to history, it is not surprising that his reference to them is, like his drifting boat, only passing. Sangster begins his first and only direct reference to the natives by establishing that they are indeed the stuff of which myth is made.

> Many a tale of legendary lore
>
> Is told of these romantic Isle. The feet
>
> Of the Red Man have pressed each wave-zoned shore.
>
> (54)

Here then the race now exists not merely in history but in his story. As well as this, the entire race is collected together into one legendary singular and greatly capitalised “Red Man.” Sangster’s remembrance of Indian history lasts only a single verse. The English French hostilities, on the other hand, are much attenuated. Of course, as we have said, it is the visible world that incites Sangster’s musing, and so it is the concrete remains at Quebec, “QUEBEC! how regally it crowns the height,/Like a tanned giant on a solid throne,” (60) of European history in Canada, that provides for the lengthier description. We might notice too the majestic imagery used to describe the concrete European culture. European history then provides monuments to itself which allows for a sense of continuum. The extinct Indian, though obviously more extant than believed, leaves no castle walls to commemorate his passing, and so becomes that less tangible stuff of midnight myth. Indeed, the

association of Indian and night we discovered in *The Rising Village* also occurs here. In a less direct manner, Sangster equates history--and so logically Canada prior to the European domination--with darkness and the present with light and truth and good.

William Kirby begins *The U.E.--A Tale of Upper Canada* with a traditional invocation of the muse and offers occasional classical references to maintain the epic tone. Kirby also establishes owner ship of the country by the repetition of "our" in the second stanza. And the country, indeed, is depicted in pleasant European pastoral terms. Canada's worth owes much to its establishing ancestry--which is, of course, English. Just as William Blake's aspirations suggested the building of a new Jerusalem in "England's green and pleasant lands," so too we find Kirby's adulation of the old country an expression of the ideal which should be built upon in establishing Canada.

> England alone, behind whose bulwarks ran,
> The vestal Virtues, and the hopes of man,
> From first to last, maintained the holy cause
> Of justice, liberty and social laws. (87)

Kirby's intense loyalty to Britain and his national fervour allows for the depiction of English settlement in Canada as a story of modern day *The Aenid,* and this is manifest in a much more overt manner than any other of the nineteenth century Canadian narrative poems. Thus, the household furnishings brought by the settlers are likened--with perhaps absurd grandiosity--to the household gods bore by Aeneas. Also:

Gigantic Power of Steam! fit emblem thou
Of iron days and mighty toils below,
When man to earth inverts his searching eyes
And worships Vulcan in modern guise. (107)

In all the glorious Union Jack waving, in the grandeur of classical association, the native finds no place: "Marvellous change! along yon paved way/The Indian war path ran but yesterday. (109) Kirby's depiction of native people is certainly less mythical than we have previously seen--and, in effect, more realist. Accordingly, we see the conquered Indian--briefly--as a fringe element of society, begging for bread and selling trinkets. Even so, there is still something of the fantastical about Kirby's Indian, something not quite human, something chimerical. He watches "cold incurious"; (100) he moves "glides with noiseless tread."

Kirby, to a greater extent, follows the tradition we have begun to see established: the native exists as an aspect of threat; as a personification of wild war. Their sole reference, for Kirby, is as a vanquished foe reduced to beggary. They are, in essence, a signifier to the forgotten, a people pushed asunder by conquest and, above all, progress.

Alexander McLachlan's *The Emigrant* begins:

Thou art not a land of story;
Thou art not a land of glory
No tradition, tale, no song
To thine ancient woods belong.

This, in essence, describes the vacuum that existed in the

unpeopled pre-European country. And it is this need for story, for tradition, tale and song, that provides another explanation for the abduction of the remembered native and his rerepresentation as something suitable in tale-telling. Like all myths, finding their origin in actuality, their growth in the oral tradition,[4] their immortality in literature, so too is the character of the Indian. Nowhere is this lineation more clearly delineated than in *The Emigrant*. Chapter VI, "The Indian Battle," begins by describing the natives in typically mythical terms: they are animalistic only to become cannibalistic; demon-like, they cry like "fiends let loose from hell," (114) "A devil if there e'er was one'; (146) antithetical to the English tradition of material inheritance, "Hate," (145) is their heritage, handed down from "age to age." (145) After the initial fear of the imminent Indian attack, the settlers, armed and ready to give up their own lives only at great cost, discover that, indeed, a false alarm was called. We see, though with great irony McLachlan does not, that the Indians' motives have been entirely misconstrued. Certainly, they are gathered for battle, but the battle is between two rival nations and is conducted in a manner more civilised and displaying more courage than any European conflict writ in the annuls of war: only the chief of each nation fights, and the losing side accept with calm and grace. In this single scene, the Indian is exposed in all his unmythical nakedness. And yet the myth goes on. Indeed,

---

[4]Tittle-tattle and gossip not excluded.

the loosing chief is described at the very conclusion of the episode as having been “slaughtered.” (148)

To underline Mclachlan’s inability to see the real native rather than the mythical one, we need only turn to the short “Parable” in Chapter IV. In it we are told of a

> . . . simple honest race;
> They were ignorant of art,
> Yet they had far more of heart
> Than the people of nowadays. (134)

As we read on, we learn also that everything was held as communal property, that money was a thing unknown, that each was a law unto himself and that their society was classless. As we read on, this idealic description of native people begins to realise its parable character: these people, it turns out, are not native people after all. They are nothing more than a lesson in morality--as indeed is the whole of *The Emigrant*. McLachlan is once again the cause and object of dramatic irony: his fantastical description of morality more closely resembles the natives prior to their “contact zone” clash than does his attempt at accurate portrayal.

The false alarm of the “Indian Battle” clearly demonstrates the mythical Indian to be both a widely held belief--evidenced by the general fear of the settlers--and also far from their actual character--evidenced by the nature of the battle itself. When we turn to Joseph Howe’s *Acadia*, the disparity is made even more poignant.

Once again, the stories, like all mythical tales, speak of

"scenes which never can return again." (22) What differentiates Howe's mythical Indian from the others' is the intense and continuous negativity of his description. This is not to say that we have elsewhere seen a positive portrayal, but Howe's diction brings about a virtual molestation. Of course, the drama we see is particularly brutal and based to some extent upon reality. But it is not so much the kicks and blows and scalping that is questionable, but the dark diabolical terms used to describe the natives compared with the light moral ones of the settlers. The Indian attack of *Acadia* presents us with the element of truth required by the mythographer--the deed--and the misunderstanding that allows for his flight of fancy, turning what truly was into what has truly never been.

In Isabella Valancy Crawford's *Malcolm's Katie*, Max, the hero, labours not merely to win his love, Katie, but also to create a community in which the poor and destitute and suffering and oppressed might find safety. Alfred, the almost amoral antagonist, brings into question the longevity of the burgeoning civilisation and so provides something of a counter view to the patriotism found in the other poems. No matter the longevity of the society, no matter the seeming peace that prevails, Crawford, like her fellow poets, excludes the natives from that society.

If we see the mythopoetic treatment of the native as, essentially, the plundering of the Indian's physicality, rendering him that ephemeral silent gliding night-time mythical presence, then this reaches its ultimate expression in *Malcolm's*

Katie. Here, Crawford's mythical Indian is entirely robbed of individual presence and appears, instead, as a number of conceits.

The violent conflict between either natives or French and English settlers is recast: the battle continues, but the foe has changed:

> Soon the great heaps of brush were builded high
> And, like a victor, Max made pause to clear
> His battle field, high strewn with tangled dead.

This, in effect, provides us with our initial conceit, for the recasting is incomplete: the trees themselves have become Indian. "The mossy king of all the woody tribes"; (164) "Mills to saw the great wide armed trees."[5] (167) Finally, Crawford combines the well-established notion of Indian relegated to time past with her personal personification of native as an aspect of non-animal nature: "The steel tongue of the Present, and the wail/Of falling forest--voices of the Past." (167)

The most notable and consistent conceit though is one which depicts the native as elemental: "The south wind laid his moccasins aside"; (161) "The South Wind crept on moccasins of flame," (162) "From his far wigwam sprang the strong North Wind,/And rushed with war cry down the steep ravines/ . . . And hunted with his war cry . . ." (174) Beguiling or belligerent,

---

[5]This might be compared with Howe's *Acadia*, where the Indian presence is more concrete and so personification of forest deliberately avoided.

the amorphous Indian does not feel himself.

The Native weather--so to speak--is maintained only to a certain point:

> A voice from God came thro' the silent woods,
>
> And answer'd him--for suddenly a wind
>
> Caught the great tree-tops . . .

Here, all at once, all of sudden, the conceit is dropped. The personification continues, but his character is no longer Indian. The explanation seems clear: the context now includes God, and, perhaps unconsciously, Crawford excludes her paganistic conceit.

As we have seen, the several poets here examined each, in his own particular way, attempts to reshape the Indian as mythical being. We have already noted two reasons for this: the epic traditions need of mythical antagonists and Canada's own need, as expressed by McLachlan, for a history. But a third explanation seems to suggest itself. Generally speaking, each poet attempts to define the Canadian national identity in a context of moral building. There is, however, an acknowledgement from several of the poets that the Europeans had overtaken land which was inhabited and so, logically, not theirs to take nor build upon. Significantly, no counter argument, no justification ever seems to be offered. Certainly the glory of the empire and Christian virtue serves as a distraction, though the question of theft remains. In actual fact the counter argument is offered in all the poems: the humanity of the native is first question, the answer--in the negative--reiterated and given authenticity by

the inviolability of the written word, and the creation of the mythical Indian formalised. The mythical being is not the human being: not only is he relegated to the extinct past, but also his very nature speaks of something other than human. The native then, in his mythical garb, is essentially dehumanised; and it is for this reason that the idea of "Their right to rule the mountain and the plain" (40) needs no counter argument. This then is the process of abjuring guilt through mythmaking. The mythogenesis of the native served to establish the struggle and valour of God fearing Englishmen as well as their moral duty to bring law and order to the new world. But, with the passage of time, with moral struggles replacing the initial physical struggles, the mythical red man monster becomes a phantom like creature whose ethereal reality is nothing more than the reality of metaphor.

Works Cited

Goldsmith Oliver “The Rising Village” Nineteenth-Century Narrative Poems

Hollinger Road, Toronto. McClelland and Stewart Limited. 1972.

Howe Joseph “Acadia” Nineteenth-Century Narrative Poems

Hollinger Road, Toronto. McClelland and Stewart Limited. 1972.

Sangster Charles “The St. Lawrence and the Saguenay ” Nineteenth-Century Narrative Poems

Hollinger Road, Toronto. McClelland and Stewart Limited. 1972.

Kirby William “The U.E.--A Tale of Upper Canada ” Nineteenth-Century Narrative Poems

Hollinger Road, Toronto. McClelland and Stewart Limited. 1972.

McLachlan Alexannder “The Emigrant” Nineteenth-Century Narrative Poems

Hollinger Road, Toronto. McClelland and Stewart Limited. 1972.

Crawford Isabella Valany Crawford “Malcolm’s Katie” Nineteenth-Century Narrative Poems

Hollinger Road, Toronto. McClelland and Stewart Limited. 1972.