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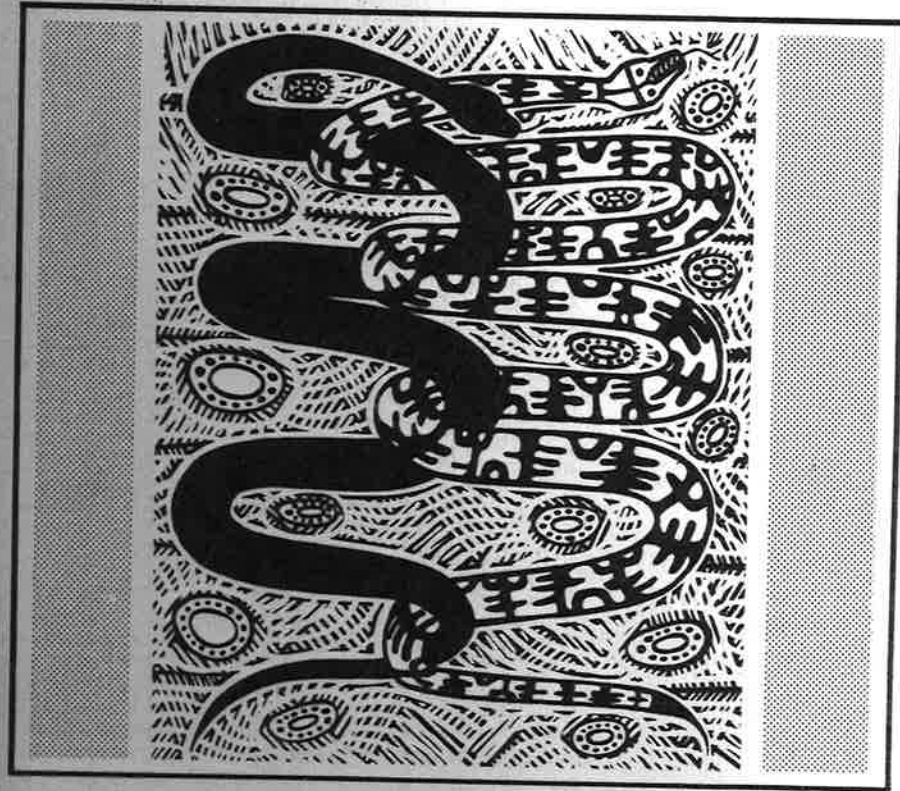
- a journal for the humanities & the social sciences -



vol. 6, no. 2
1989

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Re-reading the Origins in Quebec

jack warwick

The 'origins' discussed in this paper are the first narrations of travel to Canada at the time of contact between writing and non-writing cultures.[1] This large corpus is alternatively known as travel literature or discovery literature; both terms give rise to qualifications which I will not be able to discuss.[2] I shall give a brief outline of the striking changes in the readership of these texts and their problematic inscription in the literary canon. Travel literature has been increasingly associated with the other literary genres and is itself in need of better definition: I shall illustrate two of the features which I find necessary to such a definition as it pertains to New France.

In seventeenth-century France, *récits de voyage* were more popular reading than novels. Their continuing influence is evident in the Enlightenment figure of the *bon sauvage*, though the original narratives may by that time have been somewhat neglected. It was in Quebec, in the nineteenth century, that they were transformed into the works we recognise today. Abbé Laverdière collected all the individual reports and letters of the Jesuits in Canada and published them, in 1858, as 'the' *Jesuit Relations*. In 1870 he made a similar edition of the *Voyages of Samuel de Champlain*. These collected editions were monuments to be placed on patriotic bookshelves; Laverdière and his collaborators implicitly recognised that language is history and readership an historical act. Their influence has proved durable; Ned Pratt made the *Jesuit Relations* into an English-Canadian epic and schools in new suburbs such as North York are named after his heroes.

Twentieth-century historians have ransacked these monuments in search of what they call 'documentary sources'. Their reading method is extractory; once the 'objective' information has been removed, the original writer's discourse can be discarded. Reassembled in a new discourse, the extracted data enable the scientific historian to attribute praise and blame for making Canada what it is or failing to make what it might have been. This method is shared by nationalists who would have preferred a powerful French-speaking nation state and ethno-historians who lament the arrested development of the native peoples in a French colony.

Under the aegis of more general re-definitions of literature, these texts are being recuperated as literature or even as Quebec literature. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the mysterious workings of literary institutions: I am accepting as a sign of consensus that discovery literature was included in the *Dictionnaire des Oeuvres Littéraires du Québec* and *Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature*. Current scholarship returns to the original author's language

and space, seeking in them the structures of a reality which is both ours and other. Political and philosophical sub-texts, an abundant intertextuality and the incorporation of classic archetypes and narrative models reveal a literary genre far more complex than the factual document, while less monolithic than the national monument. From this extensive problematic I can merely select and sketch two characteristics. The first will be the figure of the savage[3], the supreme form of alterity encountered by Counter-Reformation travellers. This is the most frequent topos discussed by modern readers, whatever their approach, as if its disturbing ambiguities are directly related to our own problems. My second choice is the literary typology found in the narration of the factual journey. I shall refer to four writers publishing from 1603 to 1703.

Although Champlain is in many respects unlike the other travel writers of his time, his early work *Des Sauvages* (1903) is a striking example of how the stereotype of the savage combines with the specificity of the journey. While its published title, echoing Montaigne's famous essay *Des Cannibales*, leads us to expect a discursive treatise, the author's narrated journey occupies most of the work. All Champlain's subsequent publications are more appropriately entitled *Voyages du Sr de Champlain* (1613, 1619, 1632), with the same mix of narrative description, as if the words savages and voyages were interchangeable. Some details about the natives are repeated in the succeeding works, despite the fact that Champlain is describing different nations. All savages are more or less alike because they are perceived predominantly in terms of their alterity. Having no social structure or religion of their own, they are ready to receive the message of Christianity without impediment. They are sexually promiscuous and therefore in urgent need of Christian instruction. Champlain is obviously drawing on an existing typology, and blending it with a mass of referential information enhanced by the prestige of his own prodigious achievement in the fabulous New World.

Although precise allusions to literary sources are not obvious, Champlain's savages are part of a standard doctrinal discourse on pagans. One party argued that there was, as it were, a spiritual void waiting to be filled with Christianity; others argued a natural recognition of the deity, waiting to be brushed up and corrected. Either way, it was appropriate to evangelise the recently discovered lands and to go on discovering more of them with appropriate financial backing and the possibility of discovering the North-West Passage.

The coherent blend of factual information, dogmatic speculation and ambitious politicking in Champlain's writing did not offend the sense of reality. The historiography of the sixteenth century generally grafted new information on to known truth, aiming at a total or perfect history.[4] In the critical terms of our own time, we would say that his reference to the 'savages' has a series of second signifieds. *Ces grands peuples sans Loix*, as one great freethinker - Guy de la Brosse (1943, p.18) - called the pagans, were figures in the elaboration of the new myth of Nature. Champlain's remarks signify a particular position in this much debated process. Ostensibly the most factual of writers, he channels his observation through the rhetorical figures which mediated all the early accounts of

the Amerindians.

For the missionaries, among whom most of the writers are found, the problem was not simple. They had to maintain public support for their cause and therefore show the trading partners of the French as good candidates for Christianity; yet they had to give some explanation of the miserably poor record of conversion, which was most evidently attributable to the obdurate resistance of the savages. In the first *Relation* of the Jesuit Father Paul LeJeune (1632), we can see a clear balance sheet between vices and virtues found in the Montagnais Indians. A qualitative and quantitative analysis of this text leaves little doubt; the virtues are few and dubious, while the vices are many and real. Nevertheless, LeJeune can use the figure of the good savage to chastise Europeans: if we were without Christian instruction as they are, how much worse we would be.[5] LeJeune's physical description of the Montagnais supports this contradictory view; they have the stature of Roman Emperors as seen in classical busts, but their facial and body decorations are comic. LeJeune's sub-text is plain enough; savages need to be civilised, but the civilisers must maintain their superiority by a strict discipline which would not allow them to fall below the savages in any single respect. We know that the clergy already felt their efforts were undermined by young Frenchmen 'going bush'.

In the works of Friar Gabriel Sagard (1632 and 1636), the same contradictions are found but the balance goes the other way. Although the sexual promiscuity of the Hurons is shocking to Christians, the love which binds their family system together is greater than anything seen in France. Although they are cruel and vindictive when torturing prisoners of war, their skirmishes do not devastate the civil population as European wars do. Although they are barbarians without the light of the true faith, their burial customs show a natural piety in which God would be pleased. There are no beggars among them and they are shocked to hear of such lack of generosity as there is in France. At the time he wrote in this way, Sagard's religious order was excluded from Canada; having no immediate failures to excuse, he could more easily argue that the savages were natural Christians awaiting the return of the Franciscans to show them this happy truth. In retrospect, he could reconstruct the Huron village as a primitive paradise.

A very striking feature of Sagard's (1632) writing is the equal density given to learned illustrations and to his first-hand testimony. 'It happened in our time [at Quieunonascaran...] I was an eye witness of it' are expressions that come frequently into his text to assure the reader of the authenticity of some extraordinary characteristic of the Hurons, be it their praiseworthy care for children or their bizarre sexual orgies. Yet at the same time he has to quote Tacitus on the Germans to prove that barbarians are morally and physically more robust than Romans and Frenchmen, or Plutarch on the heroes of antiquity or Pliny on the wonders of natural history to give credence to observations which must have seemed fabulous at the time - as some of them still do. To the modern reader it seems at times that Sagard's perception of the savages is dominated by his reading of the classics; what we receive is a justification of the

virtuous pagan camouflaging the more complex picture of the noble, filthy, loving, lecherous, generous, cruel and, on the whole, likeable savage. Such a reading would be anachronistic. It would also be inexact, for Sagard is careful to say what he actually saw, though he sees no reason for foot-noting his borrowings. In the tradition of Christian Humanism, he is trying to synthesise new experience, Christian revelation and classical wisdom. The integrated vision is completed in the act of writing, which fully assumes the act of travelling.

A convincing journey exists necessarily in referential time and space. Like the other writers in this corpus, Sagard gives dates, toponyms, distances and latitudes, the latter easily copied from Champlain. He maintains a high autobiographical presence, describing views he personally admired, such as his first sight of the St Lawrence. He explains the mode of travel in a Huron canoe and narrates memorable incidents such as running a Kichesipirini blockade[6] on the Ottawa. All these writers make their displacement in time-space historic, in the double sense of circumstantial and significant.

However, on the level of circumstantial narration there are some significant disproportions, which I shall describe here by reference only to Sagard. What Sagard makes the reader experience is a journey of discovery with a particular profile: a slow meandering search, a long arduous climb, a plateau of illumination situated in the country of the Hurons and a rapid descent to Quebec and Paris. In a trivial way this corresponds with the hydraulic realities of the canoe route; up takes longer than down, but not twice as long, as it appears by a simple page count. The profile of climb, plateau and descent corresponds much more significantly with the figurative journey in spiritual writing; I have argued elsewhere that this journey later became a major archetypal pattern in French-Canadian literature involving self-discovery (Warwick, 1968). Considered in the context of its own time, it is another way in which the personal testimony of the traveller gives substance to a global vision of man. Sagard had a long, hard climb to his illumination, both in his birch-bark canoe and in the Paris library where he completed the experience by writing. The referential journey is totally integrated into a narrative structure for which I am unable to advance any precise literary model he might have consciously copied. I maintain nevertheless that here, just as in his accounts of pagan virtue, Sagard is fusing his personal testimony with a literary myth. Such journeys are too frequent and too fundamental in Christian literature to be discarded for lack of an attested direct influence.

The best known example of the mythic *bon sauvage* arising from the literature of New France is Adario, the intelligent Huron invented by Lahontan to criticise French society. Lahontan really had travelled in New France and had an axe to grind; most of his *Voyages* (1703) are sober geography and chronicle. In the third volume the character of Adario is an ironically conscious fiction created for satirical purposes.[7] However, this fiction also had a referential model. Kondarionk, a Huron whom Lahontan had known, had not travelled the world and did not speak like an early Voltaire, but he is a model for the tantalising verisimilitude of the outrageous Adario.[8] He may have supplied ideas as well as

local colour, for he appears to have been a fine representative of traditional Huron wisdom. Lahontan could have known this both by direct contact and by reading Sagard and the other missionaries. So the literary process may have moved, without break in continuity, from ethnographic information structured by myth to conscious fiction informed by real cultural interaction. Sagard, LeJeune, Champlain and Lahontan make different mixes in the same spectrum. In their different integrations of first-hand experience and derivative speculation, of archetypal and referential models, the narrated journey plays a greater or lesser but always indispensable role.

The re-reading of the literate origins of Quebec has been inspired in varying degrees by a desire for cultural recuperation identified with national place.[9] However, travel literature is an abundant genre with wider implications for our continuous redefinition of literature. The travel writers of New France, imposing their own literate myths on the unwritten world they experienced, represent an extreme form of a constant tendency. The world is apprehended through language, but language is not self-sufficient. The referential journey has been called a viaticum (Doiron, 1988, pp.82-83) without which the journey from language to chaos and back to the language of the writer cannot be paid. The search for meaning encounters the testimony. 'I was there, I saw'. The perception of the savage and the recollection of the journey, as I have briefly indicated, borrow the models of what we might prefer to call fiction. Such meeting of the archetypal and the referential journey has concurrently played a vital part in the development of modern novels. And fiction, as John Fowles claims in an eminently quotable remark, is woven into all new reality.[10]

Travel, like fiction, is the concurrent discovery of Self and Other. The savage portrayed by early travellers is an extreme form of alterity and their efforts to come to terms with it invite more analysis than I have been able to show here. Our own discovery of those travellers is a second degree of alterity, for while we cannot accept the prejudices of those interfering missionaries we are, like them, literates invading a predominantly non-written world.

In Quebec, the ambiguous relationship with the Other has a special acuity. In a first phase the discoverers were objects of ancestor worship, made into textual monuments by editors seeking to create a heroic national identity. At present, the colonial origins are subjected to critical iconoclastic readings.[11] New ambiguities are found in the relationship of Quebec self and the Otherness of both French and Indian ancestors. New literary awareness seems to be the most hopeful way of resolving this conflict. On the other hand, we are far from having the definitions of travel literature we need.[12]

Towards such a definition I am proposing two elements. Travel is a form of autobiographical writing in which the narratorial 'I' is disclosed more through its reflections of Other than through overt introspection; the encounter and partial interiorisation of alterity is a necessary element, without which the narrative would be a mere report. Secondly, the narrative content has to be situated in referential time and space, yet it reveals more than a purely physical displacement. This

surplus of significance over signified determines the degree of literary interest. In both these propositions I am maintaining that the fusion of the archetypal and the referential gives substance to the writer's message. This is then subject to post-textual re-mythifications, amounting in some instances to a complete reduction to cliché. The language of the original remains, however, giving renewable access to the writer's own *bricolage* of lived and written experience. In a post-colonial society, these adventures in language and space have been particularly important and their successive re-readings still play a crucial role in maintaining a coherent relationship with historical place.

Notes

1. The perception of the origins through the oral memory of the Amerindians requires a specialised methodology to which I cannot claim: it remains largely apart from the written tradition to which I am referring.
2. In a broad sense, all narratives, descriptions and in-depth reports written about one continent for readership in another are travel literature. Yet many writings from New France belong more obviously to an already established genre, such as the *Annales de l'Hôtel-Dieu*. The religious orders (Franciscan and Jesuit) already had their traditional forms of writing from missionary outposts. *Récit de voyage*, a term generally used in French, specifically implies a narrative content of unspecified proportion. In the genre thus loosely defined, while it is impossible to arrive at an exact figure, New France counts some sixty or seventy authors in the seventeenth century.
3. The term 'savage' will be used without quotation marks to refer to the literary figure best known in English by Dryden's famous phrase, 'the noble savage', and not to the Amerindians on whom it is partly based. In dealing with French materials we also have to note that the degree of pejorative meaning in the word *sauvage* can only be judged by context: for the Latin-trained missionaries the etymological sense (*selvaticus*, a forest dweller) may have been uppermost, while in popular Quebec usage it is to this day a fairly neutral if not wholly acceptable way of referring to the Indians.
4. Compare Frank Lestringant (1988, p.51) 'Les Indiens antérieurs (1575-1615)'.
5. Compare Yvon le Bras (1988, pp.141-50) 'L'Autre dans les relations de Paul LeJeune'.
6. The Kichesipirini, known to Sagard and his Hurons as Honqueronon, occupied a strategic point on the river and exacted a sort of toll from travellers. Sagard's canoe seems to have been unable to pay.
7. See Louis Armand de Lom d'Arce, Baron de Lahontan (1703, 3 vols.). Vol. III contains a supplement usually subtitled *Dialogues curieux entre l'auteur et un sauvage de bon sens...*
8. Compare Therrien (Ed.) (1988, pp.362-63) 'L'Indien du discours'.
9. Canadian place has never, or at least not until recently, been defined by boundaries. For the men who explored it in the seventeenth century, Canada meant a particular set of routes through the great waterways. New France included Canada and a few posts on the Atlantic coast, although these names were not used consistently at the time. The type of identification being made today is not so much with delimited territories as with a linguistic tradition related to space.
10. Quoted by Waugh (1984, p.2). Chupeau (1974, pp.536-53) argues convincingly that travel stories are close in genre to the novel ('Les récits de voyage aux lisières du roman'), while Adams (1983) makes an ambitious survey of the concurrent and interdependent rise of both genres.
11. Laflèche (1988), in particular, in the first of five projected volumes, analyses the institutional nature of the *Relations*. He made a brief statement on this topic in 'Les Jésuites de la Nouvelle France et le mythe de leurs martyrs' (1987, pp.35-45). Ouellet's article in the same volume 'Entreprise missionnaire et ethnographie...' (1987, pp.93-104) sharply criticises Jesuit accounts of the Indians.
12. There is, for instance, no clear distinguishing point between what I have called discovery literature, ordinary travel and a fully colonial literature. We can see a marked diminution of the fabulous from the beginning to the end of the seventeenth century and its replacement by conscious fiction such as that of Lahontan. Pierre Boucher (1664) is the first writer *from* Canada in the sense that he grew up there, but this fact is far from establishing a general change.

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