

Visions of the 'North' as Ideal Place in Japanese and North American Literature: A Vacation from the Human Condition.

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1. The Place.

Here is how Aritha van Herk—a younger Canadian writer—describes Ellesmere Island, the Ultima Thule of the extreme North:

“Ellesmere is absence, a hesitation where you can pretend there are no telephones in the world, no newspapers, no banks, no books. You are only a body, here in this Arctic desert, this fecund island. Lungs, fingers, a stomach, legs and feet. This fragile world far tougher than you are, a floating polar desert for all characters to emulate.”¹

Ellesmere, since it has no human cultural ‘inscriptions’, is a place where fixed identities can be ‘rewritten’ and new, imaginary selves created. Historically speaking, two kinds of extreme images of the North have dominated the mind of the non-native people of North America: on one hand it was seen as a promised land and the long-sought passage to the fabled Orient and its richness; on the other as an inhospitable land of failure, hell and brutal extinction of all civilized hopes.

Van Herk clearly realizes that the ‘nothingness’ of the North can not only mean a nihilistic negation of everything we know, it can also suggest an affirmative ‘everythingness’ (as it does in the Oriental philosophical tradition), or an opening of new possibilities.

The greatest difference between the ‘Southern Islands’ phantasy that kept occupying the mind of the tired European culture elite till the end of the 19th century and the ‘Northern dream’ is precisely the fact that the whole Polynesian paradise is squeezed into relatively small islands without the space for imaginative expansion and economic exploitation. Now Hokkaido may also be an island, but in spatial terms it is a vast territory compared to the rest of the archipelago. The rosy economic expectations of the empire and its cultural elite were similar, the results

often as hellish as the Canadian ones. From the infernal conditions on the floating crab factories described in Kobayashi Takiji's *Floating Crab Factory* (蟹工船) to the idealistic dreams of the "White Birch" (白樺) intellectuals, Hokkaido never quite fulfilled the expectations. It often served as a transit station between Japan and America (or as a duplicate of the outside world) for those who were looking for a way out of Japan, such as Nitobe Inazo or Uchimura Kanzo. The appeal of Hokkaido as an open, pure space beyond the constricted, tired and fully 'inscribed' mainland continues: in *Wild Sheep Chase* Murakami Haruki inserts a parodic account of a failed rice planting project in Hokkaido during the Meiji period—a futile extension of mainland culture—followed by an Utopian sheep farm fantasy. By replaying the government scenario that includes the co-opting of an Ainu youth whose son later dies a futile death in the Russo-Japanese war, Murakami first exorcizes his novelistic space, clearing away the débris of older cultural projections and inscriptions, and then projects his own post modern fantasy into this free and open space. Interestingly, *Wild Sheep Chase* has a sequel called *Dance, Dance, Dance* in which the narrator, a disgruntled Tokyoite has a lady-friend whose name is Ame and her daughter's Yuki. At the end of the novel, when the narrator goes North to Hokkaido, he rediscovers seasons, especially the beauty of Spring. A marvelous irony is suggested here: to the culture whose whole rhythm of existence was based on seasonal awareness, seasonal forces have become mere buzz-words, just like Gucci or Sonia Rykiel. To recapture seasons and thereby true identity, the narrator has to search for a space that is non-Japanese, or Japanese only very marginally.

Abe Kobo's *Enomoto buyo* (1969) is an interesting historical novel about a group of 300 men under the command of a certain Enomoto, who take over a bakufu ship and establish a Utopian republic in Hokkaido. Abe does not offer detailed descriptions of the Ainu, but Hokkaido nature is portrayed as sublime, magnificent, even awesome. Again, it is a projection of a political Utopia into a marginal space where it is possible and plausible. The Ainu, it would seem, are there only as another anonymous feature of the land, not the most interesting one for that matter. An attitude that seems to be typical for the mainstream of Japanese literature. The Ainu are embarrassingly close to the Japanese ethnically and spiritually, and perhaps better ignored, yet their land teems with unappeased spirits. Is it too late for a *chinkon* ritual, or are these spirits totally irrelevant?

Whether it is in the near North of Tohoku and Hokkaido, the middle North or the extreme North of Canada, there is also a body of literature that recognizes the animal as the essential iconic existence of this landscape. Its writers feel that unless they enter the soul of the animal, they'll never be able to understand this land. Rather than simply 'watching' the animal in its habitat, these sensitive writers long to identify with it, and perhaps enter spiritually into the basic mindframe of the

hunter: in a revelatory dream or shamanic trance the hunter learns the animal's song and partakes in its soul; the true hunter thus ultimately 'becomes' the animal. The quintessential emblem of the 'North country' has always been the smartest and the strongest animal ruling that kingdom: the bear.

2. The Sacred Visitors and Shape-shifting.

The most provocative among the many Canadian stories featuring bears is Marian Engel's *Bear* (1976). It is a story of a middle-aged woman librarian, who is sent to Northern Ontario to sort out a library left by an eccentric colonel. He also left a half-tame black bear who seems to represent everything the woman doesn't understand about Northern wilderness: the shaggy creature is tamed and weakened in the same way that wilderness has been reduced by civilization. In the long solitude of the Northern summer the woman goes from a timid sympathy with the bear toward a weird 'love affair' with him. They swim together in the river, he licks her body and finally she attempts to have sex with him:

"Bear," she cried. "I love you. Pull my head off." The bear did not, but her menstrual fever made him more assiduous. She was half afraid of him, but drunk and weak for danger. She took his thick fur that skidded in her hands, trying to get a grip on his loose hide, but when she went deeper into it she encountered further depth, her short nails slipped... Never mind, she thought, "I'm not asking for anything. I'm not obliged to anybody I don't care if I can't turn you on, I just love you."²

Rudy Wiebe once told Aritha van Herk: "Women write only out of their viscera. The word viscera in his mouth scornful and repellent, plump with blood and bread."³ Engel does write out of her guts, and her heroine tries to 'know' the bear in the most intimate sense she is capable of, in the same sexual way that the old Hebrews understood 'knowledge' of others. It is precisely this gutsy, physical metaphor of a woman writer that expresses a genuine longing of the city intellectual for love of the Northern wilderness and a pathetic misunderstanding of it at the same time. In the most formative bear story of North American literature, Faulkner's *The Bear*, the magnificent animal (Old Ben) is killed, though he willingly participates in his own death.⁴ Here is a woman writer who says "to hell with your devious Hemingway logic of I love you so I have to kill you, bear; I love you, so I want to prove it to you." A powerful 'male' story of ritual killing and initiation is countered by a forceful story of love and initiation of a very different kind.

No matter how risqué, Marian Engel's story still continues the anthropomor-

phic attitude that was typical for writers of Jack London's generation and the native awareness of animals remains unexplored. Miyazawa Kenji's fascinating story "The Bears of Nametoko Mountain" (なめとこ山の熊) is a sensitive elegy for a vanished lifestyle and a vanishing mentality and is far closer to the mindset of the hunting people and perhaps of the animal itself. Whether Kenji was consciously aware of this or not, his story echoes some of the hunting rituals, often in reverse: when the bears congregate around Kojuro's frozen body, lit by the pale light of Orion, we get a reversed version of the common hunting ritual (Ainu, Altaic tribes, North American Indians etc) in which the dead bear is placed in a ceremonial position by the fire and the assembly of hunters entertain its spirit. Perhaps the bears of Nametoko will tell stories to Kojuro's spirit and apologize for having taken his life, as he did to them before he died:

"Don't think I killed you, Bear, because I hated you. I have to make a living, just as you have to be shot. I'd like to do different work, work with no sin attached, but I've got no fields, and they say my trees belong to the authorities, and when I go into the village nobody will have anything to do with me. I'm a hunter because I can't help it. It's fate that made you a bear, and it's fate that makes me do this work. Make sure you are not reborn as a bear next time!"⁵

The paleolithic hunting man, though he felt that he's no more than one link in the chain of life and his own blood by no means exempt from its cyclic flow, did feel a deep dilemma in the taking of animal life and struggled to devise rituals that would make the 'sin' of killing more bearable. One of the most complex among these rituals is the Ainu bear ceremony called *iyomante* (sending off), which is a farewell ceremony for a departing guest. The rationale behind the ritual is this: the bear is not really an animal, but a mountain god (*kimun kamui*) wearing a bear costume (*hayokpe*, also armour, disguise) who comes to the hunter offering the 'gifts' of his skin and his meat. The grateful hunter in exchange presents the god with *inau*, whittled willow sticks with beautifully fashioned curled shavings. The hunter is really doing the god a favour by slaying the 'animal', since he sets free the spirit of the god trapped inside the disguise and enables him to return to his own world. In his history of Ainu epic poems (アイヌ叙事詩)⁶ Kubodera Itsuhiko quotes a *kamui yukar* called "Song of Bear" in which the mountain god (a bear) tells the story of his 'death' and the joyful return to his true home.

Although less ritually elaborate, the belief that a bear is a spirit being dressed in fleshy cloathing, which he presents to the humans, is also common among North American native hunters. The belief that other animals as well are sacred Visitors

who have to be courted and wooed is common among the Indian tribes of Northern Canada, eg. the Montagnais-Naskapi of the Quebec-Labrador peninsula. Their hunting 'power songs' were songs of courtesy and respect that addressed the 'caribou person' as "He who comes looks so fine."⁷

I'll make one exception here and introduce an American novel, because it is so fascinating in this connection. It is James Dickey's *To the White Sea*, a saga of an American flyer who is shot down in his B-29 on the eve of the Allied firebombing of Tokyo. Ironically, this man Muldrow was born and raised in Alaska by an eccentric hunter, and survives the fireflood hiding in a Tokyo sewer. After three days, like the mythical culture hero, he emerges alive out of the fire and the sewer, thanks to his powerful vision of the lifegiving whiteness of his native landscape. "If I can make it to Hokkaido," he thinks, "I'll be all right." And thus starts the strange Odyssey, indeed a modern 奥の細道 (*Narrow Road to the Deep North*) of an American, who is a hunter and hunted prey at the same time. Muldrow not only lives on the edge of life and death as he moves through an absolutely hostile human environment, he becomes a 'shape-shifter' in the ancient native sense of the word. Part human, part animal, he cherishes basic 'principles' of animalness that enable him survival: recalling fondly the animals that move between the snow plain and the treeline, he wants to move freely either way, becoming a master of blending and camouflage. When an American Zen man, whom he meets in Japan (and who promptly betrays him to the Japanese authorities) tells him how beautiful the snow falling on the ornamental rock garden is, Muldrow replies that a fish marten climbing a tree and getting lost in the branches of needles is far more beautiful. Most human ritual is nonsense to him. As he escapes burning Tokyo with the crowds of Japanese refugees he hears them mumble one word-the only Japanese word used in the novel-*taihen*. Wordsworth's "the world is too much with us" comes to mind in this connection.⁸ When Muldrow reaches Hokkaido, he gets gravely injured by a mountain goat, but a tribe of Ainu save his life. As an expression of their friendly feelings, they invite him to participate in the sending off ceremony. Another perverse human ritual he feels terrible about:

"No matter how friendly they were, these men were like all the others and they did the same things as the others. They wanted bear meat and furs and their guilt about it set up all the singing and dancing, and playing those twanging instruments that all sounded out of tune. I say screw that. The animals are a lot better than any such. Better, a lot better than people."⁹

If a feminist looked at this male fantasy of purity, she'd observe that Muldrow also leaves behind women-the mother he never knew, the dead sweetheart

he buried in the Alaska snowbank-and their warmth. The fantasy of the 'Southern paradise' that so obsessed the European mind until the end of the 19th century always associated it with luscious 'primitive' women (most spectacularly in Gauguin's Tahiti paintings.) The Northern fantasy seems to contain only the male self vis avis pristine, white 'Nature.'

Did Dickey's hero then truly achieve a vacation from the human condition? Yes and no. On one hand, he is pretty close to his idealized animals-the fish marten, the lynx and the wolverine-at least through his surface survival skills; spiritually he is still cursed with the human mind. In the end, before the Japanese army catches up with him, he keeps obsessively throwing a bear spear that he stole from the Ainu into a deep snowbank. We feel we've read this before-of course, he seems to resemble Captain Ahab, "piercing behind the mask of whiteness." Very much unlike Ahab, who tries obsessively to unravel the mystery behind the 'whiteness', Muldrow longs for a peaceful dissolution in it, finding death and Nirvana.

I don't have the time here to go into a full discussion of the dramatic shift from the demonization of the 'wild' inhabitants of the North (whether animal or human) towards their idealization in the literature of the last twenty years. But it is interesting to note a similar contrast between the portrayals of the 'mountain people' (山人, believed to be the remnants of the original Jomon hunters and food gatherers of the Japanese archipelago) in Yanagita Kunio and Miyazawa Kenji's texts written more than half a century ago. These are the two writers who exerted a decisive influence on what the popular Japanese mind perceives as the 'North'.

In Yanagita's tales the mountain people are described as "dreadful men" who eat their own children, born by 'rice culture' women they have abducted (Tale 6 and 7) of *Tōno Monogatari*. When someone asks a woman what her *yamaotoko* husband looks like, she says: "To me he looks like any ordinary person but he is very tall and the color of his eyes is somewhat threatening."¹⁰ In Kenji's description the threatening, yellow eyes become "golden eyes, large and round like saucers" and we note the same sympathetic shift as the one from the demonic yellow of the predator (wolf, hawk) to a friendly 'amber' or 'golden' in recent literature. If the eye is the "window into the soul", then the description of its colour and quality suggests the prevailing view of the soul. In Kenji's stories an encounter with the mountain man or mountain woman does not portend death or illness (Tale 4), on the contrary, as in "About Purple-Blue Dying" (紫紺染について) the mountain people may have a useful knowledge of wild herbs and plants, long forgotten by the 'plains people'. In "The Matsuri Night" (祭りの晩) Kenji shows the naivete and the generosity of the mountain man, for whom a villager pays the entrance fee to a sideshow and receives a huge pile of chestnuts and firewood in return. When the villager asks his grandpa what they could possibly give the mountain man in return, we realize with sadness

that nothing is adequate, except giving him back his land, his lost culture and his dignity. As always, the poet's vision was fifty years ahead of time and his truth incompatible with that of the ideologue for the dominant 'rice culture'.

3. Spirits and Dreamtime.

The Northern shamanic tradition has an added appeal that the more benign Southern traditions never had: having had to cope with natural forces of awesome proportions, Nordic shamanism went to the very edge of human imagination, in fact operated on the verge of 'arctic madness' to generate powers equal to the force of the natural environment. Missionaries and dogmatic anthropologists can tell me all they want about the terrible fear the Inuit had of the spirits, of sickness, and the shaman himself, and how grateful they were for being 'rescued' by the white culture. One look at their carvings, at the tremendous power that emanates from the stone or the whalebone will tell us a different story.

Ironically, the nearly insane fear of death, accompanied by an obsession to hoard life for ever is unknown to the Northern hunter, it is a byproduct of the 'agrarian revolution.' With the Inuit, we are talking about extreme Nordicity and perhaps no direct parallels with the Japanese North will hold. However, when I read Yamaori Tetsuo's thorough and interesting discussion of the spirituality of Tohoku, several things struck me: in the itako tradition of Osorezan (the *hotoke oroshi* and the *kuchiyose*), the same stubborn insistence on a vital communication with the spirits can be observed, except that it seems to be more specialized than the Inuit one. It is quite obvious from the depictions of the Inuit shaman, whose head is inhabited by a variety of animal shapes that human spirits are almost indistinguishable from the animal ones and that a constant 'shape-shifting' goes on in dreamtime and in the spirit world. A dead walrus or seal is no less a departed ancestor or *hotoke* than a human. Professor Yamaori explains the charismatic tradition of *sokushinbut-su* at the three mountains of Dewa (出羽三山) as being related to the 'starvation economy' of the area;¹¹ yet the austerities of the Holy man, who assimilates vegetative life by eating pine needles and planting himself into the ground, have symbolic connotations of the agrarian mentality: mummification is related to its central concern with long-term hoarding. Had the Inuit been obsessed with the preservation of bodies, they could have kept whole generations of ancestors in the permafrost, instead of offering them to the animals and thus sending them back into the cycle of life.

The Inuit shaman embodies both traditions, the shamanic and the charismatic one as he undergoes protracted and difficult ordeals to attain power. Perhaps the most ancient layer of Tohoku spirituality-e.g. the belief in the

mysterious Oshirasama and the like-would be comparable with the ancient spirituality of the Inuit. I have searched in Japanese literature for an idealized projection of the Northern spirituality, but found only Mori Atsushi's *Gassan* (月山), a sympathetic evocation of Dewa's religious practices and its folklore, initiating the city reader into premodern notions of death and the ancient mountain cult. There are scattered Nordic motifs (Okhotsk, Bering Sea etc.) and dispersed shamanistic images in Miyazawa Kenji's stories and poems, but these are mostly small scale works and not systematic evocations of a fantasized cosmology of the kind that Canadian writers have attempted in the last twenty years. One might speculate that integrating this imaginative space is not essential to the equilibrium of the Japanese psyche, while it is crucial to the Canadian one.

The two most interesting Canadian novels on Inuit shamanism of the last twenty years are James Houston's *Spirit Wrestler* and C. W. Nichol's *The White Shaman*. James Houston lived with the Inuit of Baffin Island for more than a dozen years as a Northern Service Officer and is well respected by them. His story is not only based on a long and solid experience, he realizes that in the last sixty years or so the Inuit have lived in a zone of mixed sensibilities and checks his own experience of the spiritual world of the Inuit against the authentic accounts of the first European visitors who found the native culture still uncontaminated by the influence of the traders and the missionaries.¹²

The controversial image of the shaman, as portrayed by Houston is very different from the romantic projections of a Castaneda; at first one feels like rejecting this sceptical view as a white man's rationalization, but on second thought one has to accept the tainted and problematic humanity of the Northern shaman as a very realistic one. It becomes clear that Inuit shamans are skilled conjurors and illusionists and their power, almost against their conscious will, is bestowed upon them by the community. If harmful to the community, they may be destroyed. Thus the demarcation line between real psychic power and trickery is extremely vague and flexible, and most of the time it is not clear whether it is the shaman who controls the powers, or the powers that control the shaman. The shaman of recent years is not only the focal point of the community's spiritual energy, he becomes the absorber of intercultural frictions and contradictions. By absorbing this psychic pollution, he loses his positive charismatic appeal and comes to be perceived by his own people as a specialist in destruction; that is the tragedy of Houston's shaman:

“A storm had come in the night...roared down the mountain and tore the church apart, breaking the lumber and scattering it across the hills and out to sea... I saw people along the shore turn their heads and stare at me, pointing and whispering. And a woman standing close to our

boat said: 'He tore it down. Yes, he and that half-white girl he lives with. They hate the missionary.'¹³

In Nichol's case the fantasy of the North as a wide open, liberating space, where inner conflicts can be resolved is clearer: *White Shaman* is the story of a Welsh boy—like the author himself—who grows disenchanted with Anglo culture and attempts to become an Inuit hunter. He confronts his English boss, a caricature of the 'White scientist', whom the Inuit call Nanook (polar bear) for his great strength. After facing up to and killing a real bear with a spear, the boy sheds his Western identity and becomes a marginal figure of the twilight zone between cultures, a destiny very much like the one Nichol chose for himself. When his Inuit friends convince him to make peace with the White authorities, he is killed in a botched up arrest attempt by the RCMP.

Nostos in nostalgia means 'lost home'. If we feel a nostalgia for the mystery of the North, we must realize that this 'Place' consists of two contradictory parts: the land itself, where we have never been and the people, whose spirituality intrigues us by its complexity. This is where a great danger lies: we are tempted to see this complexity as almost equally tormented, even 'mad' as our own.

How real are these fantasies? Could we ever inhabit this 'Ideal Place' again? Not unless we can re-fur, re-leaf and re-place our imagination, and consequently our language. We'd have to take another quantum leap and dump the last vestiges of the sky gods 'ideology and the Cartesian self-nonsel self mentality. Aren't these fantasies also a poignant expression of an exhausted and overheated imagination longing for a peaceful dissolution—and 'cold storage' at the same time—in the innocent purity of Arctic ice? In a world of too much 'presence', the fantasy of total 'absence' is irresistible.

Notes

1. Aritha van Herk, *Places Far from Ellesmere* (Red Deer, Alberta: The Publishers, 1990), pp. 77–78.
2. Marian Engel, *Bear* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1976), p. 111.
3. Aritha van Herk, op. cit., p. 80.
4. There is a Japanese novel—and a film—called *Matagi (The Hunter)*, but since it is a sentimental story of ritual sacrifice and initiation modelled closely on Faulkner, I did not see the need to introduce it here.
5. Miyazawa Kenji, *Winds from Afar*, tr. John Bester (Tokyo: Kodansha Intl., 1972), p. 31.
6. Quoted in Donald Philippi, *Songs of Gods, Songs of Humans* (Tokyo: Tokyo University Press, 1979), pp. 115–125.
7. Calvin L. Martin, *In the Spirit of the Earth* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1992), p. 18.

8. I am grateful to Prof. I. Goody for the suggestion of a possible Wordsworth influence here.
9. James Dickey, *To the White Sea* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1993), p. 250.
10. Yanagita Kunio, *The Legends of Tono*, tr. Ronald A. Morse (Tokyo: The Japan Foundation, 1975), p. 16.
11. Yamaori Tetsuo, "Tohoku genshi no kokoro to nihon," in Umehara Takeshi & Takahashi Tomio, eds., *Tohoku bunka to nihon* (Tokyo: Shogakukan, 1984), p. 239.
12. Especially Knud Rasmussen's "Intellectual Culture of the Iglulik Eskimos, *Report of the Fifth Thule Expedition, 1921-24*, Vol. VII, No. 1 (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1929).
13. James Houston, *The Spirit Wrestler* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1978), p. 242.