Marginalization and the Natural World: Choice or Destiny

La Marginalisation et le monde de la Nature : choix ou destin ?

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Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/eccs/2932>

DOI: 10.4000/eccs.2932

ISSN: 2429-4667

Publisher

Association française des études canadiennes (AFEC)

Printed version

Date of publication: 4 December 2019

Number of pages: 49-66

ISSN: 0153-1700

Electronic reference

Virginia Harger-Grinling, "Marginalization and the Natural World: Choice or Destiny", *Études canadiennes / Canadian Studies* [Online], 87 | 2019, Online since 01 December 2020, connection on 18 June 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/eccs/2932> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/eccs.2932>

Marginalization and the Natural World: Choice or Destiny

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In several Canadian, Quebec and North American works of the 20th and 21st century, the theme of the marginalised character and the depiction of the solitude experienced by this individual in relation to the society around him or her is also often presented as a criticism of that society and a regret for a past of different values. The individuals in these works – isolated by their “différence” and their individual histories – and the works themselves can be considered extended metaphors for a greater reality.

Dans plusieurs œuvres de l’Amérique du Nord du XXe et du XXIe siècles, y compris le Québec, le Canada anglophone et l’Alaska, les thèmes de la marginalisation et de la solitude se présentent et se lisent aussi comme critiques de la société moderne. À cette critique de la société s’ajoute un regret pour les valeurs du passé et un rejet du présent. Les personnages dépeints dans ces œuvres, isolés par leur « différence » et leurs histoires individuelles, et les œuvres mêmes, peuvent être considérés comme des métaphores pour une plus grande réalité.

“J’étais un enfant dépossédé du monde.” This opening line of Anne Hébert’s *Le Torrent* essentially expresses both the negative and positive connotations of solitude. In this case the “child” lives alone separated from others and from society in general, represented by the village or town from which his mother came. This solitude is a negative force impacting on his development and eventual suicide while solitude was, for his mother, a positive reaction to a society which had presumably condemned her for the child she had out of wedlock. In isolating herself and her son, she intends to take vengeance on that same society. The minimal contact she allows her son with that society is intended to further his development and eventual career into the priesthood from which point she will presumably be able to complete her vengeance on society.

The terminology of solitude

Before further examining the tortuous and troubled relationship the son – François – has with others, it is useful to examine certain concepts linked directly to that of “solitude”. Two other terms, those of marginalization and the “other”, are to be considered in this context together with further elaborations which have added to the understanding and use of the terminology to be discussed.

It should be noted that solitude itself together with its synonyms, isolation and seclusion, evokes different degrees of separation. As discussed above, the word “solitude” in the singular and often in the abstract has both

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¹ The author would like to acknowledge the assistance given by Margaret Connors, her graduate student, in the research and editorial aspects of the essay.

positive and negative connotations. Often however the positive will outweigh the negative as it indicates the individual's choice to remove or distance her or himself from society or from others – as is the case with La Grande Claudine (François' mother) in *Le Torrent*. On the other hand, isolation, such as that imposed on François by his mother, would not indicate a voluntary choice but a situation imposed on the individual by others or factors such as weather, climate or geography. Such examples are illustrated in Yves Thériault's novel *Agaguk*, Jamey Bradbury's recent novel *The Wild Inside* or Gaétan Soucy's disturbing work *La petite fille qui aimait trop les allumettes*. In all these works, for certain of the protagonists, the choice for isolation is theirs, while for others in the same works isolation is imposed on them by those who chose separation.

Marginalization and the “other”

Coming to the two other concepts mentioned above, the first is that of marginalization, with its connotation of being away or separated from the so-called mainstream. With this idea is that of the marginalized individual or group made to seem unimportant (Collins English Dictionary, 2011) and often powerless, occasionally exploited and threatened. Often seemingly part of “established” society, they are marginalized by virtue of their own history, their personal choices or their own lives.

In both literature and in reality, marginalization of a group or individual and its associated powerlessness occurs for a variety of reasons. Exclusion from mainstream society may be a consequence of gender, cultural, linguistic, racial, sexual and physical difference or simply of geographical isolation. Regardless of cause, those involved slide into unhealthy social relations and risk spiraling into degradation and despair, often with lethal consequences. In such marginalized groups, the values of the past and the power of the patriarchy often endure to the detriment of that group and the resultant patriarchal society is one with all the negative traits of hegemonic masculinity resulting from its marginalization. The novels to be examined reveal insights into how these subcultures function, the relationship between the subculture and the mainstream and finally, what hope exists for redemption. The American novel *Winter's Bone* by Daniel Woodrell (2006) tells of such a group. However, in other novels the authors also depict the struggles of male protagonists to adapt to a world – be it urban or rural – in which they are now marginalized. They are at war with themselves and the world they live in. Remnants of another age and its supposed glory, they are often the descendants of conquerors and colonizers, now faced with a reality which underlines their flaws and their inherent weakness. For these are all flawed characters who react to the world around them with incomprehension and even violence. They maim and kill those they suppose to be weaker than themselves

MARGINALIZATION AND THE NATURAL WORLD: CHOICE OR DESTINY

and escape in drugs, alcohol, and nostalgia for an imaginary glorious past. Interestingly, in these works, the female protagonists, some of whom are victims, present a different resolution to their situation and in some cases prove to be stronger and point the way to new directions for their race and humanity.

A second, almost overly popularized concept to discuss within the framework of this study is that of “the other”, capitalized or not, and its further extended forms such as the recent term “othering”. The concept of the Other in different works of literature and in historical, sociological or other documents is not new. When this is applied to Canadian literature or that of the far North, it is often directly associated with the essence of the North. Such works necessarily contain the element of isolation – willed or not – and the theme of survival is omnipresent. Encompassed is the notion of survival in or against the wilderness and survival of a certain past which has lost its life force in the American continent of the present. In certain of these works – *Agaguk*, *Bear*, *L'Élan d'Amérique* and *The Wild Inside* – the protagonists through their connection with their past and with the natural world indicate the need to go beyond established society and past failure to find truth and a meaningful existence.

Returning to the concept of the Other, Yiannis Gabriel has discussed this concept together with the idea of “othering”. What he says in his article presenting both the history of the concept and its application in many different fields is that it is “the process of casting a group, an individual or an object into the role of the ‘other’ and establishing one’s own identity through opposition to and, frequently, vilification of this Other” (GABRIEL, 2012).

Such ideas have generated the verb “to other”, a concept of the last twenty years and variously used in different discourses such as feminist, postcolonial, civil rights and sexual minority. Gabriel proceeds to discuss the effects of “othering” on the Other, no matter what group is referred to. His analysis incorporates key theorists such as Lacan, Levi-Strauss, Rorty and even Freud and Hobbes. He speaks of the Hobbesian view of “homo homini lupus” (a human is a wolf to a fellow-human). The novel *The Wild Inside* takes this further, introducing the possibility of a real relationship between the wild inside and the seemingly civilized exterior.

The essential question posed by Gabriel is whether it is possible to go beyond “othering” and attain true understanding of the Other and consequently also of oneself. The idea of cannibalism is of interest here as in many of those societies where cannibalism was practiced, it was often with the idea of consuming the other and taking from this act the power of the other, which is obviously the extreme extension of the “othering” act. One of the works to be

analyzed here does suggest this act in part by the drinking of the blood of various animals. This is the novel *The Wild Inside* in which elements of the fantastic and the supernatural enter into play. All this is reminiscent of vampires and vampirism.

Hugh MacLennan - Two Solitudes

The first novel of interest on the general subject of solitude in this essay bears the noun in its title. This is the 1945 publication *Two Solitudes* by the English Canadian from Nova Scotia, Hugh MacLennan. The novel received various awards and much recognition but was also vilified by many critics. Taking place in the province of Quebec, the frontispiece has a quote from the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke: "Love consists of this: two solitudes that meet, protect and greet each other," with the concept already of a mutual understanding in spite of differences. MacLennan establishes a veritable geography and comprehension of the area in which his novel takes place from the first chapter. As the critic Zachary Houle stated, "*Two Solitudes* is a fine novel by any writer, and any students wanting to know how Canada has been shaped would be wise to take a gander here." (HOULE 2018) The author's description of the distribution of the lands to the *habitants* along the Saint Lawrence and his moving portrayal of the great river spilling into the sea lead to the small town in which the main events are to take place. The reader is introduced to Father Beaubien with all his insecurities and prejudices, his fear of a new invasion by the Protestants and the English and his pride of the overly grandiose church he has had constructed. The reader is struck by his ignorance of the world beyond his parish, by his condemnation of the France he rejects as anti-Christian and by his lack of "charity". Also soon introduced is the *seigneur* – formerly part of the nobility of *la Nouvelle France* and who still has a toll-bridge over a river that runs through his "lands". The last vestiges of the seigneurial system did not disappear in Quebec until the 1960s and Tallard, slim, elegant and polished is a reminder of the glory of the past. The device of "je me souviens" is all too present in the parish of Saint-Marc-des Érables.

Through the introduction of the various characters with their prejudices and their limitations, or occasionally their openness and willingness to adapt to a changing world, the reader is introduced to the history of Quebec and to its situation within the whole of Canada. While the author has presented the various types representing the two solitudes in Canada at this time, it is very obvious that these two groups are limited to English and French – the two "founding peoples" of Canada. Apart from a derogatory comment about some blacks made by one of the English characters, there is absolutely no reference to the indigenous peoples of Canada or North America nor to the Métis – omissions which in the 21st century

MARGINALIZATION AND THE NATURAL WORLD: CHOICE OR DESTINY

would seem to be unacceptable. None of the characters in the novel are particularly likeable. They seem to be more representative of certain semi-caricatures of different types, such as the priest, the *habitant*, the Irish girl, the English Canadian financier etc. and as such have very little in their character to redeem them. Nevertheless, by their representation they do offer insight into the civilization and culture of French Canada at the time of the First and Second World Wars. MacLennan's description of the farmers working for their *seigneur*, their life of eternal struggle and meaninglessness on this earth to be only – perhaps – rewarded in Heaven is all too reminiscent of Ringuet's *Trente arpents*, a work with which MacLennan was very familiar and which he admitted influenced him. Athanase Tallard's conflicted loyalties, his fond remembrance of France where he studied as a young man, his hatred of religion as represented by Father Beaubien in spite of his simultaneous admiration for the finer religious minds of past and present make of him a remnant of a past glory no longer to be acceptable in the present. Alienated from his two sons and young wife, his solitude is that of the individual who no longer belongs to the time he is living in. His rebellion against Church and state is too early for the changes to come in the 1960's. He will be ostracized and marginalized by the community he had hoped to see flourish and on his death bed will renounce the changed life he had hoped for. To an extent he is reminiscent of the former *coureur de bois* Antoine of *L'Élan d'Amérique*. The vital life force of the North American continent depicted in these two men out of time isolates and marginalizes them in the society in which they live.

The families depicted in this novel, as is the case with families in the other novels to be studied, are a microcosm of the society. There is very little love between parents and children or between spouses. The lives they lead are those of silent desperation. Tallard's Catholic Irish Anglophone wife, Kathleen, resembles Emma Bovary in her frustration and isolation and recognition of the failure of her husband. Tallard's two sons – a point of anger for the priest who still believes in *la revanche du berceau* – from his two wives have little in common with their father. Marius will eventually become part of the society against which he rebelled and Paul – completely bilingual – will write "the novel" which will eventually reconcile the two sides of his being. Although he finds love and understanding of himself and the Other in the person of Heather, the daughter of wealthy and well-known English Canadians, the novel ends with his enlistment and departure for the war.

MacLennan uses the term "two solitudes" just once, near the end of the novel, speaking to the racial divide through the plight of his star-crossed lovers. For MacLennan, it is the city that is the most alienating element. In the midst of multitudes, the individual is lost and as in many works of the modern era, wanders

VIRGINIA HARGER-GRINLING

through labyrinthine streets not finding his way nor able to truly communicate with others:

This loneliness of all large cities, the solitary man reading his newsprint, the instinctive hope that there is new life just around the corner if you go to it, but around the corner always the same emptiness, the urgency which makes you want to prowl always a street further; and through everything, beating into the mind like a tom-tom, the shuffle of other people's shoe-leather counterfeiting the motion of life. He wondered if Heather had ever felt as he did now. Two solitudes in the infinite waste of loneliness under the sun. (MACLENNAN 1945, 305)

The theme of alienation and solitude in the urban area in the first half of the 20th century – reinforced by works of authors such as Franz Kafka – was to be replaced by the desire to escape from such situations and to either start anew elsewhere away from the urban sprawl or to go back in time to connect with Nature and the environment such as it still existed.

Anne Hébert - Le Torrent and Kamoraska

Written in the same year as the publication of MacLennan's novel, 1945, *Le Torrent* was published in 1950. This novella – part of a collection of short stories – is once again situated in a small rural community. Here, as mentioned above, the story of François is told – a story of isolation and violence against the background of a church dominated society, xenophobia and ethnocentrism. Nature, used as a background in MacLennan's novel but described with awe as in his depicting the Saint Lawrence River, becomes an integral part of Hébert's work. Water, the river and its rushing sounds, the sky and the harsh unforgiving landscape are both the internal and external forces leading François to his final destination. Because the novella is written in the style of stream of consciousness, the distinction between the external and internal worlds does not exist for the reader as it does not exist for François. The untamable stallion which kills his mother is inseparable from François – rendered deaf by his mother and unable to communicate except through violence. The family unit here – fatherless and thus making François almost an orphan – is one of hatred, domination and vengeance. With no self-love François cannot establish any relationship based on respect for another or for himself. The vagabond he takes into his home will rob him and eventually leave him. The torrent inside him – caused partially by the deafness inflicted on him by his mother, the rushing sound resembling an extreme case of tinnitus – will draw him to the real torrent and to his eventual suicide.

MARGINALIZATION AND THE NATURAL WORLD: CHOICE OR DESTINY

As is usual in Hébert's novels, animals embody parts of the character's self. The wild stallion in *Le Torrent* will be reflected in the black stallion drawing the sled of Dr. Nelson – inexorably leading to the murder of Antoine Tassy in *Kamouraska* (1970). In both instances these animals reflect the internal character of François and Dr. Nelson. Similarly, François' semi-captive companion, whom he names Amica, has the eyes of a cat and the character and independence of the feline. The turbulence of the stream or torrent on La Grande Claudine's property, the desolation of the same landscape again, as in Hébert's poetry, are both the inner self and the outer manifestation.

Kamouraska, as is the case with most novels from Quebec, can be considered a retelling of the history of the province up to and including the *Révolution tranquille*. Hébert has taken a true incident and used this to reinterpret history. The Other in this novel could be considered the American doctor George Nelson or any of the characters in the work as they are a manifestation of an historical situation as well as an indication of the impossibility of communication between individuals and simultaneously the recognition of the Other in oneself. The novel begins with Elisabeth d'Aulnières at the bedside of her dying second husband, whom she had married after the events of her first husband's death. This second husband is deathly afraid of his wife, who was complicit in the murder of her depraved and abusive first husband, Antoine Tassy. The only communication Elisabeth had with Tassy was through violence and abuse. Their love-hate relationship ends with Tassy's murder by her lover, the American Dr. Nelson. Once again the relationship is based on love and death. Her decision not to flee the country – and exile herself with her lover – is based on the desire for self-preservation. Elisabeth denies the self that has been fascinated by violence and death and must await the maturation of her son by Nelson – representative of the new generation to come. Elisabeth has succeeded only in isolating herself from the society in which she lives and from those around her. She is, as described in the last pages, a woman buried a long time ago and now living with her self-imposed solitude and emptiness.

Nature and the Environment

While the animals in these works are representations of the self of the protagonists, they are used as metaphors to reveal the Other within the self – often hidden to the individual. However, the animals are not in the real sense part of the wild or of Nature, as the Canadian North could be described. With the appearance of Thériault's *Agaguk* in 1958, nature and animals take on a more important role in Canadian and North American literature.

VIRGINIA HARGER-GRINLING

In the so-called civilized North American mind, the episteme of a scientific and rationalizing system keeps animals under control, or attempts to, regulating the space they can occupy and the appearances they can make. But in literature and film, where the shock of the unfamiliar can have an epistemological effect, there has been a trend in this and the last century to explore the previously impervious boundaries between the human and the other animals.

As previously observed:

[i]n the thought of Canada's aboriginal peoples and of those white settlers who, by dint of a long experience of living away from human company, close to nature, have developed a similar pattern of perception, the animals of Canada's North have retained a position similar to the one Michel Foucault describes in *Les Mots et les choses* (1966) when speaking of the Medieval mind, which also approaches that of Buddhist thought (HARGER-GRINLING 1998, 54):

[...] c'est que la nature, en elle-même, est un tissu interrompu de mots et de marques, de récits et de caractères, de discours et de formes. Quand on a à faire l'histoire d'un animal, inutile et impossible de choisir entre le métier de naturaliste et celui de compilateur: il faut recueillir dans une seule et même forme du savoir tout ce qui a été vu et entendu, tout ce qui a été raconté par la nature ou les hommes, par le langage du monde, des traditions ou des poètes. (FOUCAULT 1966, 55)

The North -Agaguk

In Canadian literature the necessary counterweight to mercantilism and degeneracy would seem to be depicted in the trope of the wild animal, a wild animal which would seem to be the antithesis of the excesses and corruption exhibited by the society of what were originally European settlers. In several instances the animal depicted in the work is almost mythical. Examples of this are to be seen in *Agaguk*.

Some critics took the story of the novel as a barely concealed depiction of Quebec (see for example SHEK 1991, 79). Be that the case or not, the rejection of established society by the protagonist, Agaguk, and his subsequent establishing of his own settlement away from the village of which he was formerly part, make the novel an important element in the discussion of marginalization, solitude and the Other. The village in which Agaguk lived before his departure is controlled by corrupt leaders and inhabitants afraid of both their leaders and the Canadian police sent to control them. When Agaguk decides to leave, he takes with him Iriook, a young woman whom he will first treat as women in his tribe have always

MARGINALIZATION AND THE NATURAL WORLD: CHOICE OR DESTINY

been treated. He will beat her if she disobeys and take her as he wants. When she bears him a daughter, he insists she let it die in the snow as female children are essentially worthless. At this point Iriook will begin to reveal her strength and will refuse to do as Agaguk demands. She is, after all, his sole companion, hunting with him, helping to build the igloos and she too has chosen to marginalize herself with him away from the village. Agaguk is handsome and strong, able to fend for his new family and to combat corruption. He does not hesitate to wreak revenge against the trader who cheated him.

Taking place in northern Quebec, nature plays a major role in this story of the Inuit and more particularly of Agaguk. The tundra and its wildlife are Agaguk's life. Nature supplies food, clothing and weapons but can destroy and maim. The English title, also that of the film made from the novel, *Shadow of the Wolf*, brings to the forefront the power of the natural forces with which the Inuit struggle.

Agaguk depicts an Inuit society of tradition in which the masculine hegemonic qualities of bravery, integrity and fidelity to the values of ancestral spirits are prized above all others. Such were also the values of chivalry in Europe before the modern age. In this depiction of Inuit life, however, there is a further goal – that of attaining a balanced relationship with the environment. This would offer to Thériault's readers a vision very different from their industrialized society at a time when there was very little concern for ecology or the environment. Such a depiction of the Other was remote from the industrialized society and the horrors of an all too recent war.

The metaphor is obvious in this work and can be interpreted on several different levels, as will also be seen in two further works to be discussed, *L'Élan d'Amérique* and *The Wild Inside*. However, unlike the works by Hébert that have already been examined, these and the subsequent works to be discussed feature animals that are at once physically real and metaphorical representations of the protagonists. In *Agaguk*, three animals stand out – representative of the Canadian North – but also go beyond the simple depiction of these animals. There is the mighty eagle, an inspiration to Agaguk and representative of future hope, of past ancestors, and perhaps glory, unfettered by the land below. The polar bear, so easily recognized as the North, able to erupt in mindless anger as when it attacks Agaguk's igloo, paying for this with its life. Then there is the wolf, whose shadow haunts Agaguk day and night, and which will fight to the death with the Inuk. After the battle with this almost supernaturally threatening creature, Agaguk will be so disfigured that he will be unrecognizable to all except his wife. He is by this however saved, as he is no longer recognisable as the one who killed the trafficker nor is he the Agaguk of old who would have left his female child to die. He is

able to start a new life based perhaps on a very ancient and non-patriarchal structure. He has conquered Nature and his inner beast and has attained legendary status.

Whether the novel should be taken simply as an example of the struggle for survival in the Canadian North against the gradual encroachment of civilization in the form of the white traffickers, police and other representative of government and trade, as Thériault was part Montagnais, is a moot point. In the almost contemporaneous *Never in Anger*, Jean Briggs emphasizes the importance of the interrelatedness and interdependency of all members in the Inuit family that are essential to ensure the survival of the community. This interrelatedness is missing from *Agaguk*. Chelsea Vowel's *Indigenous Writes* permits the reader to gain a deeper understanding of traditional Inuit knowledge. (VOWEL 2016, 61)

Marian Engel - Bear

Nature and the animal world have also been an important part of English Canadian literature. Jack London's dog/wolf stories are a popular example but there is one work which is very different in its approach to animals and the Canadian context. Marian Engel's *Bear* was published in 1976 and won the Governor General's Literary award that same year in spite of its somewhat controversial sex-with-animals content. The protagonist, having chosen to exile herself away from the city and her somewhat stifling job as a librarian, agrees to look after the inventorying of a deceased colonel's ephemera in an isolated "cabin" in the wilds of Ontario. There she discovers a bear chained in a shack behind the colonel's house.

The emphasis by most critics of the novel has been on the positive side of Lou's relationship with the bear as essentially a recognition of Nature and a refusal of the Winter-like side of her life before coming to the island. Such an analysis does not take into account the many different aspects of her stay on the island – through spring, summer and the start of fall. The house she finds on the island does not at all resemble a rural retreat but seems rather the desire on the part of the builder to reconstruct the ideals of English landed gentry. As such, the house is beautiful in summer and spring but would be uninhabitable in winter. On this remote island Lou discovers the bear, which, for her, will become "Bear". Encounter with the wild it is not. Of an unknown age, the bear has spent its life chained in a small shed and fed dog food. A hundred-year-old First Nation woman seems to be its only companion. Lou gradually befriends the bear, which is hardly an example of "nature red in tooth and claw" as it is characterized later in the novel. Her relationship with the bear frees them both from the chains of their previous existences until the moment when Lou realizes she is unable to face the

MARGINALIZATION AND THE NATURAL WORLD: CHOICE OR DESTINY

true reality of the wild – and she will leave both the island and the bear. The bear will go with its First Nation keeper to the far North to hibernate and Lou will return, tanned, scarred, and smelling still of “Bear” to the city. She has combatted black flies, mosquitoes and the heat of summer. She has known a form of selfless love far removed from her previous relationships, but she has left before the harsh reality of winter sets in and the bear she has known and “loved” is so far from the real that her relationship with this Other is one of deception and illusion.

André Langevin – L'Élan d'Amérique

Of the works studied, the most tragic could be considered *L'Élan d'Amérique* by André Langevin (1972) for this novel is not simply the relating of the decline of a patriarchy but rather that of a whole civilization. The main male character, Antoine, is the embodiment of the *coureur de bois*. He represents an ancient social division within Quebec (that between the cultivator and the independent outsider to his own society). He is part of the forest, believing in his own invincibility if he follows the laws of Nature – an element like himself weakened by outside forces beyond his control. In this novel also, the relationship between Man and Beast is revealed as indicative of the evolution of Man when faced with the Other. However, in the Langevin novel this relationship is one of a gradual recognition of an impending doom, of a world lost, and possibly irretrievable. While Nature in the form of the giant moose is the creature with which Antoine identifies as part of a glorious past, the Other is also represented in the form of Stephen Peabody, the American industrialist who will shoot the moose from his helicopter, thus negating all concepts of hunting known to those who are part of the forest and demonstrating the destructive and alienating force of the modern North American civilization. Antoine tries to believe in his own invincibility, but he has an inherent and inherited weakness or flaw, symbolically manifested in his mutilated right hand, indicating his inability to deal with the new world facing him and his race. He has failed to prepare for the future and he has forgotten the lessons of the past; he has believed himself stronger than tradition and has in part lost his ability to communicate with others and even with Nature on all levels. Both he and the stricken moose are surrounded, Orestes-like, by small buzzing flies mocking these two male Northern legends – the *coureur de bois* and the giant moose. But it is again the wolves – reminiscent of *Agaguk* – howling to get at the remains of the bloodied moose, who threaten Antoine in his status as a rogue element out of control. Believing in the superiority of strength and Nature, Antoine has failed to understand:

En forêt on avait un regard désolé pour celui qui se vantait de l'avoir vu; c'est qu'il était au bout de son rouleau, au bout de sa solitude parmi les hommes [...] un porte-malheur qui avait reçu le mauvais présage de la

VIRGINIA HARGER-GRINLING

forêt, le baiser de la mort. [...] Il lui avait semblé que ces deux apparitions lui communiquaient un message précieux, qu'il avait été désigné, et lui seul, pour témoigner de quelque chose de grand, de la pérennité de la race des géants, de la continuité du règne de la forêt et des mâles, de la puissance de la vie sauvage et libre. [...] Cette créature des premiers âges, du pays vierge n'annonçait pas le malheur, mais, au contraire, par sa seule existence, elle affirmait que ce pays-là vivait encore, intact, puissant, inépuisable. Trop vaste pour que les petits hommes des bureaux et leurs inventions parviennent jamais à le saigner à mort, trop farouche pour se soumettre à une nouvelle race d'hommes débiles qui l'attaquaient à la machine pour ne pas éprouver la chaleur de sa chair. Une telle bête n'avait pas d'existence dans les cartes perforées ni dans les livres des sous-hommes instruits. Aucun technicien n'en pouvait témoigner. Parce qu'elle était la vie dans son élan créateur, foisonnante imprévisible, sauvage impétueuse. [...] Parce qu'elle était son père, et le père de son père, et tous les siens, tous les fils des bois, nés vagabonds et libres. (LANGEVIN 1972, 122-124)²

Isolated in the forest, Antoine is also isolated in society. His wife only rarely allows him into their home, having had the son and daughter that she wanted, she now has no need of him. He believes he has found a soul-mate in the South American exotic dancer who names him El Condor. Unlike those of the North, she has the confidence of her Peruvian ancestors and has a real lust for life and animal energy. Ironically, in giving Antoine the name of the Condor, she is placing him with those creatures facing extinction – magnificent though they may be. The title of the novel in French *L'Élan d'Amérique* is the standard European French for “moose” but is also indicative of the life force or vitality of America threatened by technology and small-mindedness.

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² In the woods one looked with pity on he who boasted of having seen it (the great Moose); it meant he was at his wit's end alone amongst men [...] a Jonah who had received the bad omen of the forest, the kiss of Death. [...] It had seemed to him (Antoine) that these two apparitions were giving him a precious message, that he had been appointed, he alone, to bear witness to something great, to the perennity of the race of giants, the continuity of the reign of the forest and the male, of the force of the wild and free. [...] This creature of primeval times, of the virgin land was not announcing misfortune but, on the contrary, by its very existence, affirming that that place was still alive, whole, powerful, inexhaustible. Too vast to be bled to death by the little office workers and their inventions, too fierce to submit to a new race of weakly men attacking it with machines in order to avoid the heat of its flesh. Such an animal did not exist on perforated cards or in books of learned submen. No technician could bear witness to it. Because it was life in its creative *élan*, abundant and unforeseeable wild and impetuous. [...] Because it was his father and the father of his father and all of his family, all sons of the forest, born vagabond and free. (translation by the author)

Communication and Language

Communication and language are key in the novel. Lack of understanding and recognition of the Other as part of oneself or one's heritage leads to tragedy and death. Antoine believes he has found himself with Maria but fails to understand her Spanish. The young wife of Stephen Peabody is – like himself – alienated in language and self. Neither recognizes in the other their own reality. They do not speak to each other in the French they both know but avoid using and believe the other to be the outsider. As Antoine has been forced to live almost as a “lone wolf” in his own country, Claire has never known her own country until the moment of reckoning with Antoine. Like the barefoot dancer quoted at the start of the novel “*muerto [...] por el amor*” (LANGEVIN 1972, 21) she will destroy all she loves, just as she had crushed a canary given to her when she was a child.

In the above novels isolation has been imposed in space. In one work, there is isolation in both time and space imposed on the protagonists. In Soucy's *La petite fille qui aimait trop les allumettes* (1998), the family has been isolated from society by their father who returns them to an almost medieval system of values. This work, while it received a great deal of praise and positive criticism upon its appearance, was also negatively viewed by others, in part because of the language in which it is written, but also due to the extreme violence of content. The novel was the first ever published in Quebec to be nominated for the celebrated *Prix Renaudot*.

The language of the novel can only be described as tending towards “obscurantism”. It is a combination of archaic expressions, linguistic inventions and what could be described as *très soigné*. Whether this was an expression of the isolation imposed on the family, whereby the children develop their own form of the language, or whether it is a deliberate attempt at indicating the removal of a group from the mainstream with the consequent development of that group's own language – reflecting perhaps the development of Quebec French – is a moot point. What the resultant “language” effectively does is strengthen the family's ethnocentrism and isolate the family from the outside world. In this new language's confusion of gender and person, there is a cruel depiction of abuse, religious hypocrisy and the deliberate attempt by the patriarch to separate his family from outside influences and culture. The novel could almost be considered a post-referendum retelling of Anne Hébert's *Le Torrent*.

The novel opens with the discovery of the death of their father – by suicide – by the two teen-aged “sons”. Raised as they were in isolation, educated with seventeenth- and eighteenth-century notions of religion, philosophy and

chivalry, they are ill-equipped to deal with the outside world. The book is the “work” of one of these adolescents, who has assumed the role of the “secretarian”. Through those recordings the reader learns of the brutal power and abuse their father has used in controlling his family. One also learns that one of the young teenagers is in fact a young girl and not a boy as she herself imagined. Seemingly basing his family grouping on religious values, the father M. Soissons de Coëtherlant, formerly part of the Church, abuses the sacraments of the Church with his brutal treatment of his family. The father’s death forces his children to leave their domain and face the outside world. The discovery of the Other leads to a recognition of the hidden self and to the cruel deception practiced by the father on his family.

If the novel is – as could easily be suggested – a metaphor for the past values and evolution of society in Quebec, it obviously represents a denunciation of the abuse by the Catholic Church of many in its colleges and schools. Escape from the past and the supposed glory of the past has once again led to failure in the present. The novel would seem to condemn what were considered values in the past – a past not based on chivalry and the greater good but rather on abuse and abusive power of the weak. The ex-priest patriarch of the family, like Claudine in Hébert’s *Le Torrent*, has ruled by fear and deliberate obfuscation, isolating the family such as it is from the outside world and eliminating any possibility of integration into a supposedly normal society.

The Fantastic

If there is a fantastic or semi-fantastic element in each of the works discussed above, this fantastic element can be viewed as a simple metaphor of the real or as a literary device used by the author to illustrate or externalize what is interior to the characters. The stallion – untamable and destructive – killing François’ mother, the cat-like eyes revelatory of the character of the semi-wild young woman François takes into his house, can all be interpreted on the level of the fantastic or as literary depictions of the internal character. Similarly, the various creatures of the wild or not so wild in *Agaguk*, *Bear* and *L’Élan d’Amérique*, even the black horse owned by George Nelson in *Kamouraska* are so closely associated with the characters that their reality could be called into question. They take on the stature of myths within the narrative. In the Soucy work, creatures such as the pet frog force-fed flies by the two children and the old cruelly treated horse just serve to underlie the abusive character of the relationship the father has with his family.

Jamie Bradbury - *The Wild Inside*

Published in 2018, *The Wild Inside* by Jamie Bradbury, while not a Canadian novel, is part of the true North and revelatory of the theme of solitude and difference. The narrative voice in this novel is reminiscent of that of the young protagonist, Ree Dolly, in the American novel *Winter's Bone*. Both are expressed in a first-person semi-literate monologue and both works take place in communities isolated from the "outside" world. In *Winter's Bone*, it is an Ozark community and for *The Wild Inside*, it is in an isolated area of Alaska. In the latter, however, animals are an integral part of this work, which is half thriller with an element of horror, and half fantasy. The novel is the inner voice of a young woman, Tracy Petrikoff, brought up in the wilds of Alaska in a family whose main interest and work is running and training sled dogs for mushing. Despite the reader's possible antipathy to the protagonist, she is an extraordinary character, strong in body and self. She is much more a part of her environment than her family wants her to be and, as the novel slowly reveals, is more akin to the wolves, dogs and wild animals than to the humans around her. Tracy has always felt she can communicate with dogs and to an extent with other animals. Having been brought up in a family famous for its mushing, racing wins and handling of dogs, this is not so surprising. While her brother wants to get away from it all and does succeed in this, Tracy gradually realizes that not only does she share her family's taste for isolation in the far North but that any other life is impossible for her. She gradually develops a taste for blood, first taken from newly trapped animals, and then eventually, in spite of her mother's warning, taking a person's blood. As Tracy says, "I learned in school that blood has a memory. It carries information that makes you who you are." (BRADBURY 2018, 2) It is the blood drinking that brings her ever closer to the wild animal world and to a realization of what and who she is. Her gradual realization of how she shares her mother's difference and desire for solitude leads to her eventual total isolation from humankind and to a life outside the restrictions of established society.

Unlike the sexual overtones in Engel's *Bear*, Tracy's relationship with animals is akin to that of the wolf. She is more than at home with the family sled dogs, cuddling up with them for comfort and warmth, but she hunts alone to satisfy her hunger for blood, a hunger probably inherited from her mother. Her gradual realization of the need for her solitude and eventual isolation from others to survive, will force her to leave her family and to exist alone on the outskirts of society. The Other inside her distinguishes her from others and from her brother and father. That interior Other had been recognized by her mother as untamable and uncontrollable. There is to be no reconciliation for Tracy Petrikoff. With the murder of the gentle caring woman who tried to replace her mother, Tracy will

have no choice but self-imposed exile into the wild. The wild inside is completely integrated into the wild outside.

Conclusion

The concepts of solitude, marginalization and the Other are to be found throughout literature and the arts from time immemorial. In the case of literature from Canada and the far North, these themes are developed in parallel with the country's evolution. The experience of being on the periphery relative to centres of power – Canada and the British Empire; Quebec and France and Canada; Alaska and Russia and the lower-48 states – is frequently explicitly or implicitly reflected in the literature from these spaces. The texts chosen for discussion, while treating of the principal idea of solitude, also reveal changes in attitude as regards the self and others as well as the nation or continent. It cannot be ignored that survival is also a key element in North American development and history.

In *Two Solitudes* the title describes the “divide” between the two European founding nations of Canada while taking place in the province of Quebec. In the novel, the history of the province is shown through the figures of the “seigneur”, the village priest, the young revolutionary and the writer foretelling the future along with various other representative populations such as the Irish Catholic and the Ontarian and Nova Scotian Protestant. The different factions never fully comprehend each other, nor do past, present and future find reconciliation.

Hebert's writings tell of the desolation and isolation, not only of the individual within his or her community and even family, but also suggest the need for revolution. The concept of the woman out of time and place seeking to assert herself could be considered a metaphor for Quebec at all levels. Almost fifty years later, Hébert revisits the impact of marginalization on the power relationship between mother and child. Set in the same time and space, the austerity that coloured the atmosphere of *Le Torrent* is conveyed only by allusion, but the impact of solitude and “othering” remains. The male protagonist of *L'enfant chargé de songes* is able to reconcile his past and move forward with new dreams.

Engel's novel, *Bear*, describes again the isolation of the individual within her society and the city amongst her imagined peers. Her supposed revelation and redemption through her relationship with Nature in the shape of the bear is illusory and she will return to the city with the idea of seeking a new beginning but without the courage to face the real wilderness she had only temporarily and partially known.

MARGINALIZATION AND THE NATURAL WORLD: CHOICE OR DESTINY

L'Élan d'Amérique tells of the tragedy of the loss of the vital force of what was the whole American continent. The characters in the novel fail to understand the reality of the present, living in a no longer viable past. They are unable to communicate with those they believe to be Other but who are in reality more like themselves than they realize.

La petite fille qui aimait trop les allumettes is the violent telling of a father removing his family from what he considers a corrupt present, but he succeeds only in destroying that family and rendering the future impossible for his surviving progeny.

Finally, the semi-fantastic story *The Wild Inside* tells of a complete and irreversible renunciation of society and return to a primitive nature resembling the origin of the continent, while underlining the essential loneliness and solitude of the individual.

There is no reconciliation in any of these works and no real ability to communicate or establish a real relationship with another. As Margaret Atwood's work *Survival* stated – in the end the aim is simply survival. Notwithstanding the harsh realities of these works, they stand as a warning and serve to illustrate the consequences of self-imposed solitude in response to marginalization and "othering".

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