

The University of Manitoba

The "Indian," the "Other"
in the
Canadian Quest for Identity

by

Joan Bridgeman

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Abstract

"The 'Indian,' the 'Other' in the Canadian Quest for Identity" focuses on four prairie novels of the 1970's to examine the relation of literature to a nation's identity. By looking at the way the authors use Indian characters and the myths of the place to connect with the "Wholly Other," the thesis suggests that some modern novelists see the necessity of learning from Indian characters both the shamanic metaphor--that man must learn to divine the mysteries of life and death--and the Metis metaphor--that we must learn to mix the ancestral presences we bring with us with those we find in the place--in order to re-establish contact with the spirit of the place, the collective unconscious, the sacred "Wholly Other" within and without.

In Gone Indian Robert Kroetsch sets up a dialectic in which the young quester disproves his advisor's inexorably tragic world view by following guides across the frontier of consciousness to overcome his fear of life and death. W. O. Mitchell has his protagonist in The Vanishing Point learn from the reserve, the Indians, and the trickster characters to reject his civilized rational death-in-life and to participate once again in the dance

of the living whole. In The Temptations of Big Bear Rudy Wiebe's attempt to "let the land speak" through an imaginative re-creation of the spirit of Big Bear is qualified by the author's allusive method which subsumes the spirit of Great Parent of Bear to the Christian "Wholly Other." Finally, in The Diviners, Margaret Laurence's heroine overcomes her modern anxiety about life and death by cognizing and recognizing her connections to the on-going cosmic process.

The "Indian," the "Other" in the Canadian Quest for Identity

Dedicated to All People for whom This Land is Sacred.

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Notes	18
Chapter One - The Last Frontier: <u>Gone Indian's</u>	
Message from the Other Side of Self	23
Notes	56
Chapter Two - Contrary the Backwards: The Reversal of Self in <u>The Vanishing Point</u>	58
Notes	84
Chapter Three - Conjuring With Big Bear;	
Rudy Wiebe's Imposition of Self	86
Notes	106
Chapter Four - Divining for the Self; Techniques of Connection with the "Wholly Other"	110
Notes	135
Conclusion	137
Bibliography	140

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Introduction

"It is all so vast, so laid out in unending curving lines that you can begin to lose the sense of yourself in relation to it. . . . it can drive a small man to madness, this incomprehensible unending at any point seemly [sic] unresisting and unchecked space."¹ "It" is, of course, the prairie landscape, as encountered by an outsider, as envisioned by a modern prairie novelist. The landscape itself, the vastness and the emptiness, arouses feelings which lead to losing the sense of self. The questioning of the sense of self--who am I and why am I here?--is the basis of the quest for identity. The questioner, in this case Edgar Dewdney as created by Rudy Wiebe, goes on to comment that "old Big Bear has lived into his own understanding of that land and sometimes while I was out there his seemed the more beguiling prospect; it may, in the end, last much longer than steel."² When the landscape arouses feelings which call up questions which he cannot answer, the sensitive outsider recognizes intuitively that someone who has grown here, who has lived into his own understanding of this land, has the answers. This "other" who can help us find the sense of ourself in relation to this land is most often, in recent prairie

fiction, an Indian character. The Indian as "other" in Rudy Wiebe's The Temptations of Big Bear reminds us of a world we have almost lost; an Indian as "other" helps a White character find himself in Robert Kroetsch's Gone Indian, in W. O. Mitchell's The Vanishing Point, and in Margaret Laurence's The Diviners.

The term "Indian" in my title is used somewhat loosely, in the way that anyone with some Indian blood has popularly been classified as "Indian" in Canadian society. Historically, since Columbus's big mistake, "Indian" has been the term used by Europeans to identify the original peoples of this continent. Legally, in Canada, an Indian is anyone so recognized for the purposes of the Indian Act. He may be a treaty Indian--a member of a band which at one time signed a treaty with the government. He may be a status Indian--a member of a recognized Indian band which has never signed a treaty. He may be a non-status Indian--usually meaning someone who sold his treaty rights for employment purposes or for enfranchisement, or who lost them by marriage. Traditionally, Indians have been willing to accept as Indian anyone who fully espoused an Indian way of life. By this definition, Indian means a way of life which includes a language and a highly structured system of religious belief and ritual which governs every aspect of day to day

life. The language and the religion are so tied in to the Indian's way of perceiving and interacting with his environment that for a traditional Indian, "the land is the culture."³ Modern writers turn to Indian characters for help in learning, in accordance with the root meaning of "culture," how to worship, to communicate with the spirit of the place which informs the way of life, the identity, of the men who inhabit this land.

In the novels to be discussed, the legal Indians include Kroetsch's Daniel Beaver and his family, all of Mitchell's Stonys of Paradise Valley Reserve, and Wiebe's Big Bear and his people. By the traditional method of identifying an Indian, Grey Owl would also "pass," for he lived an Indian lifestyle and came to accept the world view which the land dictates. He was accepted as an Indian by Indians. Anahareo insists that she neither knew of nor suspected his other identity until after his death.⁴ Jeremy Sadness, Carlyle Sinclair, and even the author, Rudy Wiebe as he "unearths" Big Bear, learn from Indian characters those values which most separate the Indian from the White world view--"lands, communal existence, conceptions of freedom, Indian religious attitudes and beliefs, the conception of death, and the value of individual existence;"⁵ a positive passive acceptance of the world as it is;⁶ and a seemingly peculiar conception

of Self as a part of, or connected to, the other people or things around it.⁷

In The Diviners, the "Indian" "others" with whom Morag associates are the Metis family, the Tonnerres. The Metis are people who have a mixture of Indian and White blood. A Metis would generally have a mixture of physical features of both races as well as at least a partial understanding of two languages; a religion, usually Christian, mixed with some native traditions and rituals; and a mixture of values, the significance of which the Metis character is usually unaware. In general it would seem that those Metis, like Jacques Tonnerre, who live closer to the land would have a lifestyle and world view closer to the Indian than would those who live in or on the fringes of White society, like Lazarus in Manawaka. Because of the loss of the traditional communal existence and the adoption of the Christian religion, the Tonnerres, like Morag, have problems with knowing who they are and where they belong. Jules's deracination and confusion are evident. Like Morag he has inherited pride and some techniques of connection which give him the potential to find himself, although in the novel, it is left to Pique to sing Jules's song.

Indian and Metis people often refer to themselves as Natives, especially for political purposes of providing

a united front to deal with government and media. "Native" assumes that the two groups share common goals and objectives with respect to rights and privileges. But the word "native" also implies simply "one who was born here." In this sense, "native" can also apply to White Canadians. White Canadians who were born here, like Kroetsch, Mitchell, Wiebe, and Laurence, are for the first time articulating a knowledge of the land which is indigenous. As Laurence's novel symbolically suggests, the Metis metaphor is necessary for a successful definition of a Canadian identity. Canadians must learn to mix--to accommodate our ancestral origins to the ancestors of our place before we can begin to feel at home with the land and with ourselves. If a Canadian is one who professes allegiance to a geographically and politically defined Canadian community,⁸ then a native Canadian must be one whose allegiance is dependent upon a non-rational understanding of the land from whence he has sprung, an understanding inspired by the spirit of the place within. Thus all identity must first be a regional or at least a local identity, an identification with the peculiar details of a specific place. And the role of Canadian literature in defining identity must simply be to tell our own stories of the "once and future" heroes who inhabit our native land.

Prairie authors have lately been presenting as the "once and future" hero the Indian, our "other." The "other" is usually perceived as somehow different from the self. Historically, the "other" has tended to be either the one on whom we project all the negative and undesirable characteristics which we do not wish to acknowledge in ourselves, or the one who reveals all the shortcomings and faults of our own system.⁹ This latter view is more pertinent to my thesis for, when the Indian is presented in this manner, he reveals more about ourselves than about himself.¹⁰ The former view of the Indian as the totally opposite, "the dark inferior side," is found only superficially in recent novels, as a concept which immature characters learn to overcome. Psychological theory suggests that we must acknowledge the "other" as the other half of ourselves--selves which are a balance of positive and negative features.¹¹ In the four novels being studied, the Indian seems to be presented as a balanced character with a sense of himself as a Whole Person which the White characters wish to emulate. This sense of being a Whole Person seems somehow connected to the Indian character's awareness of the "wholly other" which he has retained and from which modern man "in search of a soul" has become alienated.

C. G. Jung has best explicated this idea of the

Whole Self in his psychological studies. For Jung, the Whole Self is composed of two parts--the ego of which one is conscious and the Self of which one is unconscious. The Self is partly personal and partly universal, connected, in Jung's terms, to the universal or collective unconscious. In order to know the Self, and thus to develop a sense of an identity as a Whole Person, one must become aware of the unconscious and integrate it into daily consciousness. This process of integration Jung calls individuation. The function of relationship between consciousness and Whole Self Jung calls soul.¹²

The term "wholly other" has connotations which Rudolf Otto has discussed in The Idea of the Holy. For Otto, the "wholly other" describes that which is mysterious or quite beyond the usual, the intelligible, and the familiar and which causes the religious feeling of wonder and awe.¹³ Thus, the "wholly other" is holy. The unconscious nightside of existence to which Indian characters retain connection includes that which Otto calls the "numinous"--the "holy" without any moral or rational overtones.¹⁴ Thus the quest for an identity like that of the Indian is a quest for the Whole Self, a quest for the "wholly other," a quest reaching into the personal and collective unconscious to heal modern man's separation from the primal, holy unity which each

and all once knew. As Margaret Atwood's heroine puts it upon surfacing, "the Indians did not own salvation but they had once known where it lived and their signs marked the sacred places, the places where you could learn the truth."¹⁵

Gary Snyder, a western American poet, has explained in his own way the necessity of sacred places in the quest for the Holy Self:

How does knowledge of place help us know the Self? The answer, simply put, is that we are all composite beings, not only physically but intellectually, whose sole individual identifying feature is a particular form or structure changing constantly in time. There is no "self" to be found in that, and yet oddly enough, there is. Part of you is out there waiting to come into you, and another part of you is behind you, and the "just this" of the ever-present moment holds all the transitory little selves in its mirror. . . .

[There is] no self-realization without the Whole Self, and the Whole Self is the Whole Thing. Thus knowing who and where are intimately linked.¹⁶

" [K]nowing who and where are intimately linked."

Each of the four authors to be discussed grew as a child on the prairies in a rural, farm or small town, environment. For them in general, the landscape is not threatening and alien but is rather more often awe-inspiring and evocative of memories of childhood and home. It is part of their personal unconscious. Authors who have grown here hold intuitively similar feelings towards the land, the place, as do the indigenous people. As Dick Harrison has commented, "There seems to be a surprisingly close correlation between a writer's imaginative understanding of the land and his sympathy for the native people."¹⁷

What is it that the Indians know about the land that the White authors have begun to articulate, and how is this knowledge related to a sense of identity? Snyder has described what the Indian meant to him in his personal quest for identity:

As a child I spoke with the old Salishan man a few times over the years. . . . I sensed what he represented, what he knew, and what it meant to me: he knew better than anyone else I had ever met, where I was. I had no notion of a white American or European heritage providing an identity; I defined myself by relation

to the place. . . . [and] never forgot, or left, that first ground: "the where" of our "who are we?"¹⁸

Snyder's experience corresponds with what Harrison sees in Canadian literature. Contemporary novelists, he says, "identify the Indian as the one potential 'ancestor' who is close to the soil, organically and elementally connected with it, and whose culture may reveal what the land has been trying to tell us from the beginning. In this view the land tends to emerge not only sympathetically but as an embodiment of darker subconscious states of the human mind and spirit with which we must re-establish contact."¹⁹

Robert Kroetsch too links the land to Harrison's "darker subconscious states of the human mind and spirit." Musing on the significance of "ground," Kroetsch has said:

Ground. That word so much in use today. What does it mean beyond the dirt that the dirt farmer uses to grow wheat? Some kind of uncondition, existence itself before any naming. The stuff before the stuff that is history or culture or society or art. That which is before the self, even. The stuff of which "place" is made. By dwelling on place we

hope to get back through naming to the ground.²⁰

The quotation reflects Kroetsch's obsession with the necessity to circumvent the words which have tended to obscure or falsify our own perception of this land.²¹ But it also suggests what it is that we have missed or lost in our failure to perceive properly. Ground, he says, is what was there before anything else, "some kind of ur-condition," to which we hope to get back.

What is this ur-condition and how is it, the ground of the place, related to identity? Psychologist Otto Rank, speaking of identity, offers a possible answer:

At the highest level of human personality we have a process that psycho-analysis calls . . . "identification." This identification is the echo of an original identity, not merely of child and mother, but of everything living--witness the reverence of the primitive for animals. For man, identification aims at re-establishing a lost identity: not an identity which was lost once and for all, phylo-genetically through the differentiation of the sexes, or ontologically in birth, but an identity with the cosmic process, which has to be continually surrendered and

continually re-established in the course of self-development.²²

Thus identity means re-establishing our severed connection with the "cosmic process" which Snyder found in his place, and Kroetsch in the "ground," and with which, Harrison says, the Indians provide a link. This cosmic process is that of which Chief Luther Standing Bear is speaking when he says: "in the Indian the spirit of the land is still vested; it will be until other men are able to divine and meet its rhythm. Men must be born and reborn to belong. Their bodies must be formed of the dust of their forefathers' bones."²³ This dust of the forefathers' bones is the very "ground" which peeks around and through the images in a Jackson Beardy painting:

Beardy's technique gives expression to the religio-philosophical view that even as through typicality the individual represents the species, so does the individual and species participate in the seamless indivisible whole that is Kitche Manitou. For the ground colour that breaks through the images represents the divine Kitche Manitou in which individual and species participate. . . . Ground represents the eternal and unknowable

ground of all being.²⁴

Thus the cosmic process with which we must re-connect in order to re-establish our identity is the divine world without us in the ground, in nature, in the universe, and within us in our bodies formed from the dust of those who have died here before us. It is that "primal nothing" for which Jeremy Sadness is searching; the natural world which Carlyle Sinclair remembers he is both alien from and participant in; the Logos with Whom Big Bear communes; and the sacred which Morag Gunn divines.

The sacred "within me and without" is in literary terms a romantic notion; the authors being discussed tend to have a strong kinship with the English Romantic poets, beyond their obvious concern with the landscape and with man's relationship to it. As Meyer Abrams has pointed out, the Romantics were concerned with "the assimilation and reinterpretation of religious ideas, as constitutive elements in a world view."²⁵ Abrams, borrowing from Carlyle, entitles his study "Natural Supernaturalism" for, he says, "the general tendency was, in diverse degrees, to naturalize the supernatural and to humanize the divine."²⁶ But the tendency in modern western Canada seems to be to borrow from the Indians to redefine what is supernatural,²⁷ and to reassert the divinity within the human as within all creation.

An equally Romantic interest in time infuses all four Canadian novels. Professor Madham, Carlyle Sinclair, and the author, Rudy Wiebe, are obsessed with a past which they fear is "forever lost to me but still recoverable to the world." Laurence's resolution to "look ahead into the past and back into the future" echoes Wordsworth's "I look into past time as prophets look / Into futurity."²⁸ This interest in time leads to a parallel Romantic and prairie interest in childhood as that past time of the individual to which we must all return as adults, attempting to combine the perceptions of the child with the intellectual powers of the adult.²⁹ Like Wordsworth who suggests that "the child is father to the man," Jeremy Sadness, Carlyle Sinclair, and Morag Gunn attempt to solve present problems by resorting to strengths and remembered perceptions of wholeness and connection from their childhood, and Wiebe attempts to influence current Canadian attitudes by returning to ideas lost in the childhood of the nation.

The problem of time and of the necessity to return to childhood as a time of remembered cosmic connection leads Romantic writers to the question of memory. Wordsworth's idea that "the mind modifies sensation as much as sensation modifies the mind" is integral to Laurence. In her juxtaposing technique, memories of the past

are modified by and themselves modify the present, fiction modifies fact, and fact changes into myth. Laurence, like Wordsworth, "filters present experience back through memory and the unconscious river in his veins."³⁰ For Wordsworth, "you advance in life by traveling back again to the beginning, by reassessing your life, by binding your days together anew."³¹

Both Laurence and Wordsworth stress the importance of place as "the repository of memory. We can understand the relation in Wordsworth between mind and nature, once we understand that Wordsworth evolves his soul or sense of identity as he identifies more and more hallowed places."³² As Wordsworth attempted to define personal and national identity by naming and recreating the sacred places of his own childhood and of the Celtic and Druidic past of his nation, and to translate with his "spots of time" temporal into spatial experience,³³ Canadian prairie writers of the 1970's return to home ground to identify our sacred places, to make us see that our home, the centre of reality, the axis mundi, is here--at Fort Duhamel, Storm and Misty, Bulls Head Hill, or Manawaka. A hallowed place is any place where someone has been born or reborn or where someone has died. We cannot, as Wordsworth knew, develop a sense of identity without an awareness of these hallowed places where man is

connected through the ground to the divine.

"By affirming both nature and spirit, the Romantic sanctioned at once a poetry of concrete environmentalism, and a technique of access to the sacrality in process of being sacrificed in the drive of western man toward secularization and science."³⁴ Canadian prairie novelists too are concerned with this "technique of access to the sacrality" which in religious terms is defined as shamanism.³⁵ Each of the four novels has a character who communes with, or who helps the hero commune with, the other side: Roger Dorck, Archie Nicotine and the little bare-bum shaman, Big Bear himself, and Christie Logan and Jules Tonnerre. Each of the novelists is using the shamanic metaphor to explain what art does for both the writer and the reader. Each author seems to be aware of Jung's definition of myth as "original revelations of the pre-conscious psyche"³⁶ and thus a vital link with the collective unconscious. Each novelist refers to old mythological heroes such as Weesackachak/Coyote, Buffalo Woman, and the Magic Horse, or to manufactured personal heroes such as Roger Dorck, Mateland Dean, Kitty McLean, or Piper Gunn who fulfil the shamanic role for his or her protagonist, in the same way that the author who creates the hero fulfills the shamanic role for the readers. In our modern secular world, the writer who grew up on the

land has accepted the role of prophet, seer, and healer in the same way that Wordsworth accepted his calling from the Druid priest on Salisbury Plain--"a voice from the past pointing to starry sky / Alternately, and Plain below," and whose rituals were "for both worlds, the living and the dead."³⁷

To reinforce the idea of the Indian "other" who helps re-connect modern White man to the cosmic process, each author describes an hierogamos union between an Indian character and a White character who seeks to regain a lost wholeness. For Jeremy "Buffalo" Sadness and Bea as Buffalo Woman, for Carlyle Sinclair and Victoria Rider, or Big Bear and Kitty McLean, or Morag Gunn and Jules Tonnerre, sexual union provides an experience of mysterium coniunctionis,³⁸ and presages the rebirth of the hero as a Whole Person in an experience which belies the fearful modern question, "Is nothing sacred?" Finally, through sex, as through death and through the art of creation, modern man repeats that sacred unity of earth and sky, that cosmic process, "as it was in the beginning. . . ." ³⁹

Notes - Introduction

¹ Rudy Wiebe, The Temptations of Big Bear (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1973), p. 114.

² Wiebe, p. 115.

³ The title of a film commissioned by the Union of British Columbia Indian Chiefs. Note also that by these definitions, a legal Indian is not necessarily a traditional Indian.

⁴ Lynne Schuyler, "Still Bucking the Wind: The Passion of Anahareo," Today Magazine, 24 May, 1980, p. 9.

⁵ Vine Deloria, Jr., God Is Red (New York: Dell, 1973), p. 55.

⁶ Werner Muller, "The 'Passivity' of Language and the Experience of Nature: A Study in the Structure of the Primitive Mind," in Myths and Symbols, ed. Joseph M. Kitagawa and Charles H. Long (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1969), pp. 227 - 39.

⁷ Dorothy Lee, "Notes on the Conception of the Self Among the Wintu Indians," Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology, 45(1950), 538 - 43.

⁸ Lionel Rubinoff, "Nationalism and Celebration: Reflections on the Sources of Canadian Identity," QQ, 82(Spring 1975), 1 - 13.

⁹ For various aspects of this discussion see: Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., The White Man's Indian (New York: Knopf, 1978); Edward Dudley and Maximillian E. Novak, eds., The Wild Man Within (Univ. of Pittsburgh Press, 1972); Leslie Fiedler, The Return of the Vanishing American (New York: Stein and Day, 1968); John J. Teunissen and Evelyn J. Hinz, "Roger Williams, Thomas More, and the Narragansett Utopia," EAL, 11(1976/77).

¹⁰ Dorothy Livesay, "The Native People in our Canadian Literature," The English Quarterly, 4(Spring 1971), 21 - 32. See also Margaret Atwood, Survival (Toronto: Anansi, 1972) and Elizabeth Waterston, Survey (Toronto: Methuen, 1973).

¹¹ C. G. Jung, "Aion," in Psyche and Symbol, ed. Violet S. de Laszlo (New York: Doubleday, 1958), p. 50.

¹² Jung, "The Psychology of the Child Archetype," in Psyche and Symbol, p. 128. See also the editor's introduction, p. xxxii.

¹³ Rudolf Otto, The Idea of the Holy, trans. John W. Harvey (1923; rpt. London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1978), p. 26.

¹⁴ Otto, p. 6.

¹⁵ Margaret Atwood, Surfacing (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972), p. 166.

¹⁶ Gary Snyder, The Old Ways (San Francisco: City Lights, 1977), p. 63.

¹⁷ Dick Harrison, Unnamed Country: The Struggle for a Canadian Prairie Fiction (Edmonton: Univ. of Alberta Press, 1977), p. 63. Harrison does not develop the idea.

¹⁸ Snyder, pp. 57 - 58.

¹⁹ Harrison, p. 199.

²⁰ Kroetsch journal, cited by Peter Thomas, "Keeping Mum: Kroetsch's 'Alberta'," JCF, 2(Spring 1973), p. 55.

²¹ See "Unhiding the Hidden: Recent Canadian Fiction," JCF, 3, No. 3(1974), 43 - 46, and Robert Enright and Dennis Cooley, "Uncovering Our Dream World: An Interview with Robert Kroetsch," Arts Manitoba, Jan - Feb, 1977, pp. 32 - 39 for Kroetsch's comments on language obscuring perception.

²² Otto Rank, "The Artist's Fight with Art," in The Myth of the Birth of the Hero and Other Writings, ed. Philip Freund (1932; rpt. New York: Knopf, 1959), p. 195.

²³ Cited by Deloria, p. 73.

²⁴ Kenneth James Hughes, Jackson Beardy--Life and Art (Winnipeg: Special Issue, Canadian Dimension, 14, No. 2, 1979), p. 26 and p. 44.

²⁵ Meyer Abrams, Natural Supernaturalism (New York: Norton, 1971), p. 13.

²⁶ Cited by Abrams, p. 68.

²⁷ Dennis Tedlock and Barbara Tedlock, Teachings from the American Earth (New York: Liveright, 1975), p. 151.

²⁸ Cited by Abrams, p. 71.

²⁹ See Abrams, p. 380. See also Jung, "The Psychology of the Child Archetype"; Eli Mandel, Another Time (Erin: Press Porcepic, 1977); Wilfred Pelletier, "Childhood in an Indian Village," in Native Peoples in Canadian Literature, ed. William Mowat and Christine Mowat (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1975), pp. 43 - 55.

³⁰ Robert Langbaum, The Mysteries of Identity (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977), p. 42.

³¹ Langbaum, p. 44.

³² Langbaum, p. 44.

³³ See Deloria on a personal affective rather than an intellectual experience of religion, "Thinking in Time and Space," God Is Red, pp. 75 - 89. See also Langbaum on faith versus revelation, p. 42.

³⁴ Tom Henighan, "Shamans, Tribes, and the Sorcerer's Apprentices: Notes on the Discovery of the Primitive in Modern Poetry," DR, 59(Winter 1979 - 80), p. 607.

³⁵ Mircea Eliade, Rites and Symbols of Initiation, trans. Willard Trask (New York: Harper and Row, 1958), pp. 95 - 102.

³⁶ Jung, "The Psychology of the Child Archetype," Psyche and Symbol, p. 117.

³⁷ William Wordsworth, The Prelude, Book XII, lines 313 - 379, from the 1805 text edited by Ernest de