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“SECRETS OF THE PRISON-HOUSE”: MRS. MOODIE AND THE CANADIAN IMAGINATION

“If these sketches should prove the means of deterring one family from sinking their property, and shipwrecking all their hopes, by going to reside in the backwoods of Canada, I shall consider myself amply repaid for revealing the secrets of the prison-house, and feel that I have not toiled and suffered in the wilderness in vain.”

As we struggle in Canada to define our national identity in terms of a literary tradition, we repeatedly come up against Susanna Moodie's *Roughing It in the Bush*, a conceded classic, but a book which has resisted definition and critical assimilation. Part of the reason for this is formal. *Roughing It* is generically a collection of sketches, and this loose narrative form admits the inclusion of almost any kind of literary expression: landscape description, character portraits, legends and anecdotes, philosophical reflection. Mrs. Moodie accordingly lets the Crusoe-like interest of the book (her account of survival in the backwoods) be diverted for long stretches at a time by other preoccupations. But perhaps the greater reason for our confused and dislocated responses to this book lies in our learned cultural expectations. As North American we have been conditioned to view the pioneer experience as the heroic period of our history, as a simpler and more affirmative era in which our ancestors made creative sacrifices to ensure and enhance the lives of future generations. But *Roughing It* is no splendid celebration of pioneer life such as we find in the classic texts of American literature, no Franklinesque account of how to rise in the world; rather it is a tale of hardship and misery which culminates in withdrawal and defeat. Above all it is a book which denies the myths

of renaissance and individual power in a new land. As Canadians we are now making many reversals in our thinking, and if we are willing to relinquish what ideally might have been our first account of heroic pioneer life, we will be rewarded in turn with a book which is imaginatively much richer than we might have guessed, a book more subtle, complex, devious.¹

A collection of sketches (and Thoreau's *Walden* is a good example of this form developed to its highest literary and philosophical end) achieves its unity and interest from the personality of the writer, and it is with this aspect of *Roughing It* that I am most concerned. Formally speaking, Mrs. Moodie's journal is not a work of art; however, the personality of the narrator has an imaginative numinousness which has caught a sympathetic reflection in the contemporary sensibility (witness the collection of poems by Margaret Atwood, *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*) and which is often paralleled in the work of Canadian artists in the past. What is initially so fascinating in the journals is the way Mrs. Moodie's public statements continually belie the drift of her unconscious feelings. As Margaret Atwood has put it, Mrs. Moodie speaks with two voices:² with one, her public voice, she attempts to affirm the myths of the pioneer experience and lauds Canada as the land of future promise; but with the other, her private voice, she inadvertently expresses negative, inadmissible feelings which invalidate her patriotic rhetoric. The fundamental opposition or tension between these two voices (between what is socially acceptable and desired and what is privately felt) gives the book an imaginative dimension which other accounts of life in the Canadian backwoods do not have.

Mrs. Moodie's imaginative conflict is most strikingly apparent in the book's style—in the contrast, for example, between the Wordsworthian response to the Canadian landscape and the writer's detailed, day-to-day observations. Nurtured on the romantic myths of early nineteenth-century England, Mrs. Moodie, on first viewing the rugged scenery along the St. Lawrence, responds in a rhapsodic manner:

The previous day had been dark and stormy, and a heavy fog had concealed the mountain chain, which forms the stupendous background to this sublime view, entirely from our sight. As the clouds rolled away from their grey, bald brows, and cast into denser shadow the vast forest belt that girdled them round, they loomed out like mighty giants—Titans of the earth, in all their rugged and awful beauty—a thrill of wonder and delight pre-
vaded my mind.

The spectacle floated dimly on my sight—my eyes were blinded with tears—blinded by the excess of beauty. I turned to the right and to the left, I looked up and down the glorious river, never had I beheld so many striking objects blended into one mighty whole! Nature had lavished all her noblest features in producing that enchanting scene.³

The landscape in this passage is scarcely described; the distant panorama yields to an idea and correspondent emotion which blinds the narrator to the actual scene itself. The idea of nature as an unfailing source of inspiration persists throughout the journal, and in her public-spirited, affirmative mood, Mrs. Moodie asserts that "Nature ever did, and I hope ever will, continue: '*To shoot marvellous strength into my heart.*'" (p. 100) But that very passage is followed by a confession that her feeling for Canada was like the feeling of a condemned criminal whose only hope for escape is through the grave. In the accounts of day-to-day life there are descriptions of nature which, far from Wordsworthian rhapsody, direct us to an undercurrent of negative feeling about the country and the conditions of pioneer life:

A thaw in the middle of winter is the most disagreeable change that can be imagined. After several weeks of clear, bright, bracing, frosty weather, with a serene atmosphere and cloudless sky, you awake one morning surprised at the change in the temperature; and, upon looking out of the window, behold the woods obscured by a murky haze—not so dense as an English November fog, but more black and lowering—and the heavens shrouded in a uniform covering of leaden-coloured clouds, deepening into a livid indigo at the edge of the horizon. The snow, no longer hard and glittering, has become soft and spongy, and the foot slips into a wet and insidiously-yielding mass at every step. From the roof pours down a continuous stream of water, and the branches of the trees, collecting the moisture of the reeking atmosphere, shower it upon the earth from every dripping twig (p. 151).

In this mood the author describes not just the horizon, but the details in the foreground in a realistic, documentary style which is closer to the style of F.P. Grove than to her contemporaries. This is the mood in which the author explores her genuinely imaginative feelings about Canada, though at the same time never allowing herself to abandon the nineteenth-century myths of nature, mother country and pioneer.

The conflict of styles, however, involves much more than simply a literary manner unevenly executed. The Wordsworthian stance was for Mrs. Moodie not just a learned set of attitudes or an affected literary pose, but something integral to her personality—a definition of self fundamental to survival in the backwoods. What emerges in the author's

account of her rude experiences is a deep-seated fear of social contact, and her *role* as a gentlewoman in the wilderness is clearly a vital defence against what she fears most. By defining herself as both a gentlewoman and a woman of letters she is able to evade a reflexive relationship with the other settlers in the area. Even more to the point she is able to evade the social failure such relationships might precipitate. Likely our first opinion of Mrs. Moodie is that she is an intolerable prude, that she is proud and affected beyond endurance. She defines her Canadian neighbours as her inferiors, both socially and intellectually, and thus explains her reluctance to participate in their society. At times we may feel like her nearest neighbour, "Mrs. Joe", who one day finds Mrs. Moodie scrubbing a tubful of clothes and says, "Well! I am glad to see you brought to work at last. I hope you may have to work as hard as I have. I don't see, not I, why you, who are no better than me, should sit still all day, like a lady!" (p. 101) But it is a simple truth that pride invariably has its source in feelings of self-doubt, and in order to read Mrs. Moodie's journal with any sympathy we must recognize that her role playing throughout is a bulwark against a profound sense of inadequacy. At the time of Mrs. Joe's sneering remarks, she is in fact engaged upon a task at which she is hopelessly inept: she has rubbed the skin of her wrists in her effort to wash out the baby's things. Similar situation recur throughout the narrative; one remembers especially her fear of milking cows, her fear of wild animals in the woods, her failure at baking bread.

But Mrs. Moodie's sense of failure and inadequacy, which she in part cloaks under her role of gentlewoman in the backwoods, extends further than ineptitude at frontier tasks; it is rooted deeply in her nature and finds direct expression when she reflects on her separation from England. In outbursts of homesickness she upbraids herself as a guilty, unworthy creature whose exile in Canada is a form of punishment for an unspecified crime. Consider the psychological innuendos in this frequently repeated lament:

Dear, dear England! why was I forced by stern necessity to leave you? What heinous crime had I committed that I, who adored you, should be torn from your sacred bosom, to pine out my joyless existence in a foreign clime? Oh that I might be permitted to return and die upon your wave-encircled shores, and rest my weary head and heart beneath your daisy-covered sod at last! (p. 56)

Death is the price the writer is willing to pay in order to be reunited with the maternal land. The same bargain is metaphorically struck at least twice again in the narrative. When taking up her first residence in the backwoods her thoughts are full of England: "One simple word dwelt for ever in my heart, and swelled it to bursting—'Home!' I repeated it waking a thousand times a day, and my last prayer before I sank to sleep was still 'Home! Oh, that I could return, if only to die at home!' " (p.67)⁴ Later the sound of the stream near the log cabin makes her thoughts journey back to England and she concludes that her only escape from Canada will be "through the portals of the grave" (p. 100). Although Mrs. Moodie nostalgically romanticizes the past ("the daisied meadows of England ... the fragrant shade of her green hedgerows"), a conviction of guilt and failure is her actual legacy from the mother country, which did not provide her family with a livelihood and forced her to emigrate. When she first reaches Canada she looks upon the new country as a possible refuge, a "second Eden". As she and her husband step ashore at Grosse Isle, they instinctively draw away from "the noisy, riotous crowd" to a little secluded cove by a river. The scene inspires Mrs. Moodie with Wordsworthian content at having found a refuge from "the cold, sneering world", but the idyllic Canadian scene is spoiled by "the profane sounds" and "discordant yells" of her fellow emigrants whom she bitterly designates as "filthy beings". In spite of her Wordsworthian faith in nature and the ennobling effects of poverty, Mrs. Moodie quickly finds Canada no second Eden. Her sense of failure is reinforced by her anomalous presence in the backwoods, and she retreats into her role as a gentlewoman in exile. Nor is there escape for Mrs. Moodie through her husband, for he is a weak, unsuccessful man and during moments of crisis is invariably absent. Only through her writing can Mrs. Moodie salvage something of her life, and here she significantly evades self-confrontation and dramatizes herself as a martyr figure—a victim of unjust social conditions in England and a heroic pioneer, sacrificing personal happiness so that a new country can be formed.

But *Roughing It* is no affecting creation story with Mrs. Moodie a figure of fertility. The author remains emotionally fixated on the past ("Dear, dear England") and her creative instincts are immobilized by feelings of rejection and inadequacy. In lieu of personal achievements her narrative focuses on an impersonal image of growth—the idea of

Canada, "a noble, free, and rising country" (p. 56) and the idea of mankind in general slowly but surely moving toward the fulfilment of a sublime and mysterious destiny (a sentimental vision accommodating both Victorian Christianity and something like Social Darwinism). Such statements throughout the book project an idealized and dramatic sense of self in relation to society, but one which fails to convince as a total self-image. More revealing and suggestive is the way random vignettes in the narrative—the character sketches and anecdotes—fall together to form a pattern of social aversion and a preoccupation with failure and death. All the characters that Mrs. Moodie describes at any length are, like herself, totally out of place in the backwoods. The pattern is begun with the description of the Moodies' friend in England, Tom Wilson. Scarcely a promising pioneer, he is described as "a man in a mist, who seemed afraid of moving about for fear of knocking his head against a tree, and finding a halter suspended to its branches—a man as helpless and as indolent as a baby" (p. 49). The mood here is deliberately comic, and yet there is a note of concern in the narrator's voice which suggests a sympathetic identification with her friend. In the same vein she writes: "Tom would have been a treasure to an undertaker. He would have been celebrated as a mute; he looked as if he has been born in a shroud, and rocked in a coffin" (p. 50). Tom has already failed as an emigrant to Australia and soon matches that adventure with a similar experience in Canada. The Moodies look after him for a while (characters like Tom Wilson are the only society they ever do entertain), but he eventually returns to England, having lost everything he started out with.

Tom Wilson belongs to a remarkable gallery of characters who are failures (often guilt-ridden, like Mrs. Moodie), and who are associated with death in some form or other. After Wilson leaves, the Moodies hire an Irish boy, John Monaghan, who is seeking refuge from a harsh master. He is a spirited youth, but dogged by misfortune which he attributes to the fact that he is an orphan. Again we hear an echo of the narrator's own preoccupation—she calls herself an "orphan of civilization"—which is underscored by Monaghan's obsession that he is actually of gentle birth. Brian, the Still-Hunter, another emigrant from Britain, is a man of genuine despair. He appears at the log-house one day without speaking and follows this visit with several more, doing little kindnesses for Mrs. Moodie. Once a man of much promise, he

began drinking and as he grew more incontinent, he became self-disgusted at having betrayed his family's hopes. A first attempt at suicide (he slashed his own throat) failed, but Mrs. Moodie tells us that some years after she left the bush, she heard that he finally succeeded in taking his own life. Brian's sense of guilt and his suicidal despair seem to touch something at the quick of the narrator. The story of Phoebe R—, the sensitive and gentle child born to the uncouth family of "Uncle Joe", is paradigmatic of the author's own feeling of being unappreciated and unjustly treated by the world. That girl's early death moves the narrator to an outburst of grief that is coloured by self-pity: "Gentle child of coarse, unfeeling parents, few shed more sincerely a tear for thy early fate than the stranger whom they hated and despised" (p. 120).

Perhaps the most vivid of the character sketches is the portrait of Malcolm, "the Little Stumpy Man", who, uninvited, stays with the Moodies for nine months. Mrs. Moodie's unyielding social manner is nowhere as omnipresent and oppressive. One critic has suggested that Mrs. Moodie's fear of Malcolm and his ill temper is actually sexual in origin, that she is at a fundamental level attracted to him physically.⁵ Typically, Mrs. Moodie deflects the reader's attention from herself to the unscrupulous character of her visitor (as she does in describing her borrowing neighbours) and thereby covers her true feelings. She was writing, of course, in a prohibitive, genteel tradition, so that sex is limited to such innocent vignettes as the courtship of the servants, Jacob and Mary. But when sex does appear (and sex does represent the most complete form of social communion possible) violence and death are its corollary. When Malcolm, left alone one day with Mrs. Moodie, tells his story, he reveals that he is a murderer (he once shot a man in South America) and is haunted by guilt. The same unrecognized equation is more blatantly operative in the charivari stories where sex is invariably a cause for violence and, in the case of the Negro who marries a white woman, the occasion for death.

We do not know the exact process by which the journals took final shape (whether extracted from diaries or written as sketches entirely from memory), but in the reshaping of the original experience Mrs. Moodie selects and omits detail in response to the unconscious drift of her feelings and in accord with a dramatic sense of self. Though not a work of art *Roughing It* has a definite imaginative shape in both the

structure of its events and its patterns of imagery. The picture of Canada as a land of failure and death is present from the beginning with the ship of emigrants journeying into a country laid waste by cholera. The first paragraphs of the book describe the inspection and warning by the health officers when the boat reaches Montreal, and one of the doctors is described as "no bad representative of him who sat upon the pale horse" (p. 19). Mrs. Moodie emotionally seeks a "second Eden", but when she looks at the new land she says "the lofty groves of pine frowned down in hearse-like gloom upon the mighty river" (p. 37). Montreal is a city of death, and among the first people that the Moodies meet and talk with is a middle-aged couple who have just lost their son in the plague—their son who was their only hope and their reason for coming to a new land. Mrs. Moodie later tells her reader that after you have stayed in Canada for a long time "it is as if the grave has closed over you" (p.91). The same image recurs when she designates Canada her prison and "the only hope of escape being through the portals of the grave" (p. 100). Her sense of expiating some unnamed guilt, however, brings her to love her prison, her grave in the backwoods, and when her husband finally arranges that they move to Belleville, she is reluctant to leave "her dear forest home ... consecrated by the memory of a thousand sorrows" (pp. 229-231). Mrs. Moodie's final stance in the book is not unlike that of the Ancient Mariner who tells of his voyage through guilt, despair and death and who reemerges to warn those who might follow in his path.

The important question remains to be asked: in what ways do Mrs. Moodie and her journal represent the origins of a Canadian imaginative tradition? At least three definable aspects of her experience seem to be continuous in Canadian life. First, the Moodies, like the United Empire Loyalists before them and like great numbers of people since, came to Canada not with a dream of carving individual empires, but with the modest hope of salvaging a way of life threatened at home. In the Moodies' case poverty was the specific ill which caused them to emigrate, although political and religious reasons were also common. Like so many of the genteel poor from England and Scotland the Moodies sought in Canada a refuge, a way of saving pride in the face of ever dwindling economic and social circumstances. The contrast to the creative and forward-looking American experience in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is absolutely crucial to understanding a

distinctively Canadian imaginative tradition. Seeking a haven in which to preserve customs threatened at home is imaginatively at the opposite pole from rejecting the old order and emigrating in order to begin life anew. The backward-looking nature of the Canadian experience is reflected in Mrs. Moodie's nostalgia for the daisy-covered fields of her England home. The original sense in Canada of being nowhere, or in exile, has left an indelible print on the Canadian psyche, as witness the quest by contemporary writers to discover ancestors and landmarks, whether in native inhabitants (see John Newlove's poem "The Pride") or in the animals and pioneers of the backwoods (see Margaret Atwood's *The Animals in That Country* and *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*).

Secondly, the image of one of our first settlers as a self-pitying failure rather than a bouyant pioneer characterizes a literary tradition in which fictional protagonists more likely lose than win, or are, at best, sorely compromised by their situation in life. The hard, intractable landscape seems to breed a conviction of inescapable defeat in the Canadian hero, a feeling which also colours his social relations. One thinks here especially of Grove's defeated heroes, Sinclair Ross's failed artist in *As For Me and My House* and Ernest Buckler's David Canaan, whose death in the snow is a preferred emotional alternative to a painful life of failed opportunities. The American hero in contrast may lose his property, his sanity, even his life, but while he lives he never loses his dream, his sense of life's wonder and promise.

Thirdly, the curious affection Mrs. Moodie feels for her forest home at the time of departure is an ascetic form of imaginative pleasure which recurs with significant frequency in Canadian art. Through suffering and self-denial Mrs. Moodie has become attached to her way of life in the backwoods and to her home which she describes as "consecrated by the memory of a thousand sorrows." In a harsh, punitive landscape life is imaginatively conducted with a heightened sense of formidable odds and an almost pleasurable certainty of ultimate defeat. The image of one of our first writers in a backwoods log house working far into the night by sluts (twisted rags soaked in lard) is powerfully suggestive, and it is probably more than coincidence that Grove gives us an image in his autobiography, *In Search of Myself*, of similar pains taken (this time wearing mittens against the cold) in order to write during a Canadian winter. Ben Franklin of course

submitted himself to similarly astringent circumstances in order to realize his ambitions both literary and political, but what a difference there is in his recounting of those sacrifices. His confidence as a youth and his self-satisfaction as an old man telling his story of success are in marked contrast to Mrs. Moodie's caution to the reader and to Grove's underlying conviction that his life has been a failure. The Canadian imagination responds not to life's possibilities but to the limitations imposed by geography and climate; instead of looking to the horizon and the future, the Canadian artist more likely takes pleasure in what is domestic and secure, however small and humble. One might recall Thomas McCulloch's crippled Stepsure and his pleasure in a plain wife and humble cottage, Grove's "domesticated island" in the frozen wastes, or those lines from Margaret Avison's "New Year's Poem": "Gentle and just pleasure / It is, being human, to have won from space / This unchill, habitable interior..." Mrs. Moodie's *Roughing It in the Bush* is not a work of art, but the narrator's personal drama of rejection and exile and her search for a refuge from an uncaring world is very central to what is imaginative in the Canadian experience.

NOTES

1. The imaginative character of the book has teased the minds of several critics. Clara Thomas in her essay "Journeys to Freedom," *Canadian Literature* 51 (Winter 1972), writes: "The book is a bewildering, contradictory amalgam of personal moods and literary modes—sentimental, comic, tragic, didactic. It is also unmistakably, the work of a gifted, but embryonic, novelist who, in a dozen or so characters and as many scattered scenes, moved from the raw world she lived in towards the timeless reality of a contained world of the imagination" (p. 18). Professor Thomas, however, does not go on to suggest the nature of that imaginative world to which Mrs. Moodie's vision was directed. My purpose here is to begin exploring those qualities which give the book an imaginative dimension and which suggest that Mrs. Moodie is a figure central to our literary tradition.
2. Margaret Atwood, *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 42.
3. *Roughing It in the Bush* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1964), pp. 22-23. I have used the abridged New Canadian Library edition because of its ready availability to most readers.
4. Mrs. Moodie's retreat from the world is through nostalgia. The one passage in Margaret Atwood's poetic recreation of Mrs. Moodie which fails to convince in terms of psychological verisimilitude is when the narrator withdraws into herself like an animal and grows fur. Mrs. Moodie never conceives of herself as becoming part of the primal landscape; she escapes reality through her dreams of returning "home".
5. See R.D. MacDonald, "Design and Purpose," *Canadian Literature* 51 (Winter 1972), p. 25.