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From Animal Story to Animal as Symbol

De l'histoire sur les animaux à l'animal comme symbole

Monica Bottez

Abstract

This paper starts with an analysis of a representative Canadian naturalist animal story, Charles Roberts' "Do Seek Their Meat from God," and then passes to a discussion of two more short stories in order to demonstrate that in the modern Canadian narrative discourse animal images usually work as symbols. For example, in Margaret Laurence's "The Loons" the bird images in the title appear as a symbol of a character's state of mind and fate, while in Guy Vanderhaeghe's "Dancing Bear" the bear image illuminates the protagonist with a feeling of brotherhood with all God's creatures. This makes him experience a strong psychological identification with the bear, which thus becomes a symbol of his humiliated dignity and pride, before finally becoming a metaphor of death.

Keywords:

animal story, Margaret Laurence, Charles G.D. Roberts, Guy Vanderhaeghe

Résumé

L'étude part de l'analyse du récit naturaliste avec des animaux intitulé "Do Seek Their Meat from God" ["Et ils cherchèrent la nourriture de Dieu"], représentatif du Canadien Charles Robert, pour poursuivre avec l'analyse de deux autres nouvelles afin de démontrer que, dans le discours narratif moderne, l'image de l'animal fonctionne d'habitude comme un symbole : dans "The Loons" ["Les Huards"] de Margaret Laurence, l'image de l'oiseau du titre apparaît comme un symbole de l'état d'esprit et du sort d'un personnage, tandis que dans "Dancing Bear" ["L'Ours qui danse"] de Guy Vanderhaeghe, l'image de l'ours illumine le protagoniste d'un sentiment de fraternité avec toutes les créatures de Dieu et lui fait ensuite vivre une forte identification psychologique avec l'ours devenu ainsi le symbole de sa dignité et fierté humiliées, avant de devenir finalement une métaphore de la mort.

Mots-clés: l'histoire sur les animaux, Margaret Laurence, Charles G.D. Roberts, Guy Vanderhaeghe



The wilderness is the image that comes to most people's mind even now when they think of Canada, but, because it was a significant aspect of the Canadian landscape, it was also the stereotypical image that was almost exclusively associated with this country a century ago. That is probably why "the realistic animal story was the first original genre developed by Canadian writers" (Watson 8). Wildlife and pristine forests were the background of the childhood experiences of two gifted late-19th-century Canadian writers, Charles G. D. Roberts and Ernest Thompson Seton, who wrote about their boyhood experiences – Roberts in New Brunswick and Seton in Ontario. They are generally credited with having established the form and tradition of this genre, which is represented by such remarkable later writers as Grey Owl, Roderick Haig-Brown, Farley Mowat, Fred Bodsworth, Cameron Langford and David Allenby Smith. It is also worth mentioning that in Romania, too, the first translations from Canadian literature (1929) were from Seton's best known book, *Wild Animals I Have Known*.

I have chosen to analyze "Do Seek Their Meat from God" (1892) as a representative Canadian animal story because this frequently-anthologized piece is Roberts' first story of this type and it thus sets the tone and possibly a pattern for subsequent creations; at the beginning, however, its innovative vision created great problems for its author in that it was difficult to get it accepted by any publisher (Seifert 44). Also, because this novelty is suggested by the ambiguity contained in the title, for there the verbal form – which may be read as Simple Present elliptical of subject, but also as an imperative – seems to urge the reader to understand that wild animals are not cruel but obey the law of their nature (of God's creation), and thus it challenges the reader to understand upon reaching the end of the story that man had been just as cruel to the panther cubs, who were thus doomed to starvation. After all, the panthers would have been good providers had they been successful hunting down the man cub and feeding it to their offspring.

Roberts provides a classical structure for his short story (exposition, rising action, climax and denouement), where the narrative voice is that of an external agent endowed with the attribute of omniscience. The central structuring principle is that of contrast between man and nature, or culture/civilization and nature, an antithesis that the author eventually deconstructs. Thus, the setting described in the exposition foregrounds from the beginning this opposition, as it is the liminal zone between "the ancient unviolated forest" (19) and "the settlements [that] had been making great inroads on the world of ancient forest" (20). The time frame is a pitch black night. The darkness, with its archetypal associations with danger, evil, and death, creates a suspenseful, mysterious and romantic atmosphere that is gradually brightened by the rising moon. But this brightness that "lit *strangely* the upper portion of the opposite steep" only enhances the frightening eerie atmosphere with its "*elvish* decolorizing rays" that lent a "*spectral* aspect" (19, my emphasis) to the first



animal hero of the story: a male black panther. The visual images that have prevailed so far are now complemented by the first auditory image, the acoustic element also holding a central place in the narrative: it is “a shrill cry...terrible, at once plaintive and menacing, ...a summons to his mate, telling her that the hour had come when they would seek their prey” (19). This cry that seems to ring a note of doom will later be echoed by the five-year-old boy’s shrill wailings “crying long and loud, hopelessly” (20) when he finds himself alone in the cabin.

The second animal actor is now introduced, the female panther suckling her two very young cubs. Having gone practically without food for the last two days, the two parents are fierce with a hunger “now grown savage” (20). The narrator hints that the blame for this situation goes to the settlers’ “inroads on the world of the ancient forest, driving before them the deer and smaller game,” thus anticipating the eco-critical attitude of such a writer as Farley Mowat.

In his description of the wild animals’ conduct, Roberts relies on “anthropomorphic assumptions about animal behavior” (Moss 310), adopting their perspective. For instance, “[t]hey purposed to steal upon the settlements in their sleep” (19) reveals at least “something akin to reason” (Seifert 46). But in one particular passage the narrator clearly uses the male panther as a focalizer. It is a passage rendered in Free Indirect Thought that can be read either as disclosing the dam’s reasoning that the male agrees to, or, most likely, his own reasoning for letting his mate devour the little food they had slain in the last two days, “for had she not those small blind cubs at home to nourish, who soon must suffer at any lack hers?” (20)

Also, upon hearing the child’s desolate cry they are perceptive enough to discern in it the boy’s loneliness and vulnerability, as it sounded “as if there were no one by to comfort it” (20). I would like to call attention here to the poetic quality of the description and narrative lent by the imagery but also lent by prosodic means such as alliteration: “Thither they bent their way, fired with fierce hope. Soon would they break their bitter fast” (20). The alliterative word string beginning with “f” suggests the beasts’ smooth noiseless progress, whereas the next alliterative phrase suggests the explosion of hope in the panthers’ stream of consciousness.

Next the narrator resorts to an analepsis in order to explain the present situation and to introduce the human actors. They are also an antithetic pair along class lines: one is “a shiftless fellow” (20) given to drinking and using “unsavoury language” (21) and father of a seven-year-old boy, the other is a prosperous pioneer “master of a substantial frame-house on the midst of a well-tilled clearing” (20) and father of a five-year-old. The two formed a friendship that was soon forbidden by the prosperous farmer, on account of the bad influence of the drunkard’s son. But the little boy had that day surreptitiously gone to visit his friend without knowing they had left the solitary cabin they had occupied in the thick of the woods, a cabin that



was at least a mile away from the nearest road. Finding nobody there and besieged by the gathering dusk, the boy had been afraid to go back, taking shelter in the cabin, where after a while he started crying with fright.

Now the prosperous farmer is returning wearily on foot from a shopping day in town and hears the lonely boy's wailings. It is a coincidence that can be called Hardy-esque (Seifert 48). He immediately indignantly blames the drunken squatter for his neglect of the child, hesitates in his progress, but decides to trudge on, foot-sore and driven by his hunger and the anticipation of the good meal prepared by his wife. Although the Victorians considered man superior to nature because man is "with safe conscience blest" (to quote Matthew Arnold's "In Harmony with Nature"), it takes the prosperous farmer quite some time to overcome his selfishness and decide to stumble back and then off the main road for a quarter of a mile. It is significant for the parallel Roberts draws between beast and man that they are both motivated by hunger, but in the beast's case it is a matter of survival, not only their own, but that of their offspring as well – that is, that of the species. Yet eventually the empathetic thought of his own son being in such a dangerous situation melts his heart and he returns to rescue the child.

By giving an internal view of the farmer's mind, Roberts now facilitates the reader's identification with the man. However, before giving an account of the encounter between the feline hunters and the human hunter, the thus far covert narrator pauses to make an overt, if not downright obtrusive, didactic comment:

It would be thoughtless superstition to say the beasts were cruel. They were simply keen with hunger and alive with the eager passion of the chase. They were not ferocious with any anticipation of battle...Theirs was no hideous unnatural rage, as it is common to describe it. They were but seeking with the strength, the cunning, the deadly swiftness given them to that end, the food convenient for them. On their success ... depended not only their own, but the lives of their blind and helpless young, now whimpering in the cave on the slope of the moonlit ravine. (22)

The verb "seek" that is recurrently used to refer both to the beasts and humans, sends us repeatedly back to the title, which is an intertext, a fragment from line 21 of Psalm 104: "The young lions roar after their prey, and seek their meat from God." Moreover the passive "given them" calls to mind line 24 of the same Psalm, which praises God's creation: "O LORD, how manifold are thy works! in wisdom hast thou made them all: the earth is full of thy riches."

The Darwinian presentation of the dark forest, where the weaker or less swift are "devoured" (19) by the stronger and swifter, is now followed by a discursive outburst that echoes Blake's wonder at the sublime mystery of creation:



Tyger! Tyger! burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?
[...]
When the stars threw down their spears,
And watered heaven with their tears,
Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

For Blake the Tiger is a counterpart to the Lamb, and though many think of it as a manifestation of evil, it merely symbolizes fierce energy (external but also internal); it is still a manifestation of God's energy that can, and should, be revered. Roberts' outburst may also remind us of Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner's* conclusion, similar to it in its didacticism, even if somewhat different in content: "He prayeth well, who loveth well/Both man and bird and beast" (613-14) and "For the dear God who loveth us, / He made and loveth all (617-18).

But when the narrative is resumed, in the account that follows the focalizer is again the farmer, and the effect of this strategy is to make the reader naturally identify with him against the beasts: "He had a vision of his own boy, at home with his mother, safeguarded from even the thought of peril. And here was this little one left to the beasts! "Thank God! Thank God I came!", murmured the settler, as he dropped on one knee to take sure aim" (23). And next the mangled farmer is overwhelmed with happiness to find out he has saved his own child. It is a situation that again reminds us of Hardy and his vision of "Life's Little Ironies." It is ironic that the mother panther cuts a better figure than the settler's wife, whom the latter regards as a loving nurturer, but whose eye has definitely not been as vigilant as it should have been.

The narrative does not end here, though. In a neutral reportorial tone, the narrator recounts the settler's discovery a few weeks later of "the dead bodies, now rapidly decaying, of two small panther cubs" (23). And, unsentimentally, the reader has been shaken into realizing man's cruelty – albeit unwitting – and a new wave of sympathy with the panthers sweeps the reader.

The remarkable originality of Robert's story lies in "its mixing of Darwinian insight and Romantic sensibilities in an innovative fusion of the scientific and rational with the mysterious and the inexplicable" (Seifert 50). We may conclude that in the realistic animal story, the animal plays a character's role and is endowed with a specific psychology. It is not a symbol, nor does it allegorically embody human features as in the traditional fable genre.



Animal symbols are similarly crucial to Margaret Laurence's "The Loons," the second short story I have chosen to dwell on. It is part of the volume entitled *A Bird in the House* (1963), which may be read as an autobiographic episodic novel or as "a collection of eight interconnected stories set in a small prairie town during the Great Depression" (Xiques 47). By choosing this form "Laurence shows a profound knowledge of how childhood works, for the very nature of growing up is fragmentary, fractional, segmented" (Huggan: 193). The title foregrounds the image associated with a certain place and moment that has led the protagonist narrator to an epiphany "of adult social guilt" (Morley 46). The narrator Vanessa MacLeod has the comfortable station of a doctor's daughter. The father takes pity on a young girl named Piquette Tonnerre, a "half-breed" girl of thirteen whom he has been treating for tuberculosis of the bone at the hospital in which he practices. As the mother had abandoned her family, Piquette has to work hard to keep house for her father. The doctor proposes they should take Piquette on a family vacation to their cottage on Diamond Lake one summer.

A central theme of the short story is racism, with the half-breeds' marginalization being reflected geographically too: they are ostracized to live in a miserable shanty outside Manawaka, as they don't belong in the Cree reservation, and neither do they belong among the Scots-Irish and the Ukrainians of Manawaka. When she hears the doctor's suggestion, his prejudiced mother promptly refuses to share the cottage with somebody that has no recognized identity in society, being "neither flesh, nor fowl, nor good salt herring" (143), and his wife objects because she is sure "she has nits in her hair" (144). The mature narrator remembers her younger self's neutral attitude to her classmate, as the girl's "vaguely embarrassing presence" left her outside her circle of friends, but also her subsequent efforts to please her father by making friends with Piquette during the summer they spent together. However, her efforts were in vain: the girl kept aloof from her, preferring the mother's company, but always keeping silent and shut up like a clam. Vanessa's approach is all wrong. As she has the revelation that the half-breeds are also Indian, she recalls all her historical knowledge about Big Bear, Poundmaker, Tecumseh and the Iroquois who ate Father Brébeuf's heart and her bookish romantic images derived from Longfellow and Pauline Johnson and engenders the stereotype that an Indian is "a daughter of the forest, a kind of junior prophetess of the wilds" in possession of secrets of the woods. But when she asks Piquette about the woods, the girl feels insulted, thinking Vanessa had referred to their wood surrounded shack. The Tonnerre youngsters are all "Unfamiliar with laughter" (143) and Piquette has "dark unsmiling eyes" (147). Piquette refuses to come to the lakeshore to listen to the loons' cry, and Vanessa does so only in the company of her father, who prophesizes the loons will be scared away by the numerous holiday makers in a few years. The unforgettable ululating, peculiar sound of these "phantom birds" gets imprinted on Vanessa's memory: "Plaintive, and



yet with a quality of chilling mockery, those voices belonged to a world separated by aeons from our neat world of summer cottages and the lighted lamps of home” (147-48). Moreover it is only at the end of the narrative that the reader makes out the anticipatory symbolic hint at death suggested by the phantomatic aspect of the birds.

Vanessa's next encounter with Piquette takes place when the girl is 17, totally changed into a more forward person with a striking slender body, boasting of her engagement to be married to a fair, tall, handsome English stockyard worker. Vanessa has a glimpse of the real Piquette as “her defiant face momentarily, became unguarded and unmasked, and in her yes there was a terrifying hope” (150). This is the hope of the pariah to become integrated in a society that previously had only heaped scorn on her and her folks. But when she last hears of Piquette, her mother tells her of the girl's dreadful death at the age of twenty: her marriage had come to nothing, and she had returned to live at the shack with two children and had taken to drinking. She had internalized the stereotype of the Native as “drunk and disorderly, of course,” and was frequently taken to court (151) for, as Charles Taylor has underlined, a person or group “can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves” (Taylor 75). In winter the shack caught fire from an unprotected stove and the mother who had been drinking all day, burned to death with her children.

Haunted by the look of terrifying but illusory hope in Piquette's eyes, when she returns the following summer on the shore of Diamond Lake, now renamed Lake Wakapata, Vanessa realizes that the loons were no longer there, and they had vanished, as her father (now dead) had anticipated. She imagines that “perhaps they had gone away to some faraway place of belonging. Perhaps they had been unable to find such a place, and had simply died out, having ceased to care any longer whether they lived or not” (151). And she has an empathetic epiphany of the symbolic analogy between the fate of the loons and that of Piquette, and maybe her people. The “neat” orderly dominant society has turned the Indian into a tourist attraction, appropriating their old geographical toponyms but does not care a whit about the actual people. The last paragraphs of the narrative reveal a personal feeling of shame, which may also echo a sense of collective guilt, at having failed to reach out to a miserable human being belonging to a racially oppressed people. Now she suddenly understands the symbolic analogy between the plaintive cry of the birds and Piquette's self-pity, between their mocking sounds and her defiant attitude, their need to withdraw from encroaching invaders and her withdrawal, yet their common need to find a place of belonging. Thus, embedded in Vanessa's realistic narrative, the recurrent auditory image of the birds plays a central symbolic role in conveying her retrospective intimation of a significance that had been a “mystery” (148) to her as a teenager.



The third short story that I have chosen to discuss is Guy Vanderhaeghe's "Dancing Bear" (1982), where the Canadian writer explores the protagonist's subjectivity and keeps wholly within the boundaries of psychological realism, while using the image of the bear, with rich metaphorical or symbolical valences. The protagonist is Dieter Bethge, an old man of German stock whose parents had been German colonists in Romania, before emigrating to Canada. Old age has brought Bethge a lack of control over his muscles, so he has to put up with the indignity of having a rubber sheet placed on his bed by Mrs. Hax, the housekeeper his son has hired for him.

Mrs. Hax treats Dieter Bethge as if he were a child under her total authority as he no longer has the capacity to do things for himself. Thus, when she helps him sit up on his bed she encouragingly coaxes him with an "upsy daisy" (405); she menacingly warns him: "complainers' noses fall off" (405) and talks to him about projected actions using the irritating pronoun "we." That she behaves as if he were a child to be firmly treated but also humoured now and then is likewise emphasised by her remark when tidying up his room: "the old bugger made more work than a whole tribe of kids" (404).

Like most elderly people, Bethge relives significant moments of his past, the ritual of rocking himself gently helping him to leave the ignoble present behind and start travelling back in flashbacks of revelatory scenes. The first flashback carries him to an epiphanic moment he had experienced at the age of five. Using the child secretly hidden in a manger as a focalizer, the narrator recounts an innocent boy's witnessing of his father skinning a bear. Though he knows the bear had been a marauder and a killer, the child's heart goes out to him, corroborating Margaret Atwood's remark in *Survival* that Canadian animal stories are almost always failure stories, ending with the death of the animal; but this death, far from being the accomplishment of a quest to be greeted with rejoicing, is seen as tragic or pathetic (74). Seeing the body stripped of its furry skin, the child suddenly intuits that that shape is not a bear. "Two arms, two legs, a raw pink skin. A man. Under all that lank, black hair a man was hiding, lurking in disguise" (407). Moreover, when, frightened by his sudden discovery, the boy cries for his father, the man who appears in the doorway to soothe him is "covered in grease and blood, a murderer" and the child feels like "an unwilling accomplice to murder" (407). The feeling of brotherhood with all God's creatures that the boy experiences is of a religious quality, also directly suggested by the recurrent image of the manger in which the child hides (406, 407), whereas the description of the skinned bear's body reminds us of the Crucifixion. This religious streak in Dieter Bethge's psychological make-up has not been lost with time, as the depiction of his eyes in old age testifies: "they shone with the dull glazed intensity of the most devout of worshippers" (406).

It is perhaps the protagonist's feeling of oneness with all creation that accounts for the rich animal imagery that pervades this short story. From the very first paragraph the old man's helplessness is suggested by the omniscient narrator's comparing him



with a butterfly that is about to be placed in a glass case: “The old man lay sleeping on the taut red rubber sheet as if he were some specimen mounted and pinned there to dry” (404). The image, at once reminiscent of victimization and even perhaps of the spearing on the cross, also implicitly suggests the old man’s inner beauty. But numerous central animal images evoke a Darwinian, predatory universe as they mostly reflect Mrs. Hax’s perspective: the relationship between Mrs. Hax and Mr. Bethge can be appropriately depicted as cat and mouse play (Mrs. Hax actually describes herself feeling “like a drowned cat”, 414). To Mrs. Hax’s eyes Mr. Bethge’s tongue “flickered angrily, darting and questing like a snake’s” (405); at other times she indirectly calls him a pig (“I stepped in and saved your bacon” (410)); elsewhere she deems him “crazy like a fox” (408) or similar to “the cat who swallowed the canary” (409).

The second bear flashback is triggered by the word “tune” that Mrs. Hax recurrently uses in order to imprint on Mr. Bethge’s mind her position of power. He is enraged by her vindictive retaliation of cutting off all his cigarettes that day, and his feeling of humiliation is acute. So he tries an act of rebellion and a gesture of authority, telling her she is fired. But Mrs. Hax ironically reminds him that “he who plays the pipe calls the tune” (409) and therefore she can only be fired by the man who has hired her – that is Mr. Bethge’s distant son.

Mr. Bethge remembers a sunny day when he was a boy of twelve back in his native Romania and he witnessed a scene of great cruelty on a market day. A dancing bear led on a chain attached to a ring through his nose gave a performance to the tune played by his master. But the pace of the tune was too lively and at a certain moment the bear could no longer maintain his human posture, and fell on his back, refusing to stand up again and continue his dance. Yet when the initially admiring crowd turned away sniggering, the bear’s pride was offended and he started dancing again, to an imaginary tune. But the bear’s master, furious that he had raised no money, twisted the bear’s nose ring, punched his head and kicked his belly until the bear squealed with pain. The boy experienced a strong psychological identification with the bear, like a reverberation of the epiphanic moment of yore. Bethge projects his sense of humiliation upon the bear, his awareness of being in a subaltern position (having to dance to a tune imposed by the people in power), his sense of sexual impotence (he notices how “[t]he pink tip of his penis jiggled up and down in the long hair of his loins,” 412).

The boy would have liked to explain to the trainer that a bear was a man in masquerade – perhaps even a judge, but at the very least a brother (413). For him the bear was an embodiment of dignity and pride, a symbol of majesty and power. That is why he resented the man’s humiliating behaviour and imagined the bear would stand up for himself, would rebel and take revenge. Although nothing had happened then and he had simply left in dismay, the image of the bear dancing when he willed, rather



than when ordered to fill the old Dieter with a spirit of rebellion. Therefore, when Mrs. Hax leaves the house to get something from the store, he petulantly locks her out in the rain. Exhausted by the effort, but happy with his gesture of defiance he has a third vision of the bear: he dreams of the dancing bear performing a dance only for him, a gift freely given (416). We become aware that the bear has now changed into a tutelary spirit, a mythical figure (he is growing larger and larger) offering Dieter what he most needs: freely given warm affection and friendship. In a fourth appearance in the narrative, the bear comes to free Dieter from a life of humiliation, with a welcoming warm embrace, becoming a symbol of death. Death is thus euphemized and the bear turns into metaphor of brotherly love and support. At the same time Bethge knows that the bear is the holder of a truth that he had intuited himself, the truth of the brotherhood of all creation. The bear also acquires the protective qualities that Indian mythology ascribes to him (Chevalier, Gheerbrant: ours) and becomes a psychopomp animal.

By way of conclusion, I would like to draw attention to just how frequently the bear image or even motif appears in Canadian literature. A mythical beast in Howard O'Hagan's *Tay John*, Rudy Wiebe's *The Temptations of Big Bear*, or Robertson Davies's *The Manticore*, this animal becomes in Marian Engel's *Bear* a metonymic symbol of nature, instinct and natural behaviour as against the artifice and shallow rationality of stereotyped behaviour in contemporary society. As a general remark deriving from my analyses of the three short stories, I would like to conclude that animals are not frequent actors in modern and postmodern fiction but the recurrent symbolic animal images reveal them as a rich hormone of writers' imagination, a remarkable example to this effect being Ravi Hage's *Cockroach* (2008).

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