Fable, Fiction and Fact: Philip Child's *The Village of Souls*

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The Village of Souls, while scarcely written as a work for the younger reader, offers a number of attractions to that group. Essentially, it remains a highly accessible "adult" work, a stirring account of love and adventure involving many perennial themes of the English Canadian literary imagination. Its pages hold their share of horror: rape, torture, castration. Yet these glimpses of a frontier society at war are never unduly exploited or leeringly presented. Compared to what a young readership devours in movies and TV, the fare here is mild.

There exist numbers of accessible accounts of the experience this novel seeks to communicate: the acceptance of the Canadian environment by the European colonists. *Village of Souls'* particular virtue is not precisely what the public might assume. As a piece of historical fiction it does not offer the reader a painless introduction to certain events in our history. To examine the novel's reconstruction of the setting of New France *ca.* 1665 is to understand how very thinly that setting is portrayed. Some historical personages, some allusions to events of the time, some actions that rely upon a particular historical context for their intelligibility: these ought to convince us that what we are reading is a romantic wilderness adventure set within a sketchily-realized historical era. In terms of its predecessors in our historical fiction – *The Golden Dog* and *The Seats of the Mighty* – or its successors – *River and Empty Sea* and *Temptations of Big Bear* – Child's novel appears a thinner version of their tapestried richness. A virtue, however, springs from this defect.

Child may have intended a full-scale work of historical fiction in the style of those I mentioned. Certainly his introductory Note, in which he pays his respect to the Jesuit *Relations* and notes carefully these episodes which derive from their accounts, would suggest this. An audience like today's can understand that if in fact the author failed in this aim, he nonetheless produced a most effective piece of fictional "psycho-history" on the accommodation of the Old World sensibility to the raw realities of the New. *Village of Souls* doesn't provide the reader with a painless lesson in the history of New France (the sort of value we generally assign to historical novels) at least as we conventionally interpret that history. What it does offer the reader –

and very convincingly at that – is a sense of how the human and non-human realities of North America struck the souls of its early white colonizers. Dealing in passing with the economic, social and military adaptations that the new environment imposed on them, the novel most convincingly depicts the profound psychic disturbance and adaptation the new setting exacted from its visitors. In so doing, the novel also places these happenings within a dimension extending beyond the temporal limits of the story and into what remains a perennial problem in English Canadian culture – the attempt to come to grips with a local reality in a way that does not blindly impose an outside, imperial framework upon it.

Aside from the literary qualities of individual historical novels, historical fiction as a whole possesses the following distinct cultural value: properly executed, it reinforces in a contemporary reader a sense of continuity between past and present. In an era whose imaginative enterprise emphasizes discontinuity and jagged displacements in experience, historical fiction implicitly (and often explicitly) asserts the abiding nature of certain aspects of human experience. By demonstrating that we are here because they were here, historical fiction offers a vision of a continuum of experience, enabling its public to make some sense of its own events. Of course, the abuses of such a conviction are numerous: an emphasis on superficial resemblance at the expense of any comprehension of profound dissimilarities, a false vision of development when in fact decline has taken place, an invalid, sentimental reassurance that things will always be pretty much the same when in fact new and radical challenges must be met by non-traditional means. These abuses fail to invalidate the essential value of the project – the attempt to offer bourgeois, secular man a sense of his place in the order of things. History is secular man's sacred legend, the force he invokes to justify the order he seeks to perpetuate or establish. Historical fiction caters to that need.

Village of Souls fills that need by offering a psycho-history of the establishment of a Canadian reality, placing our historical facts within a pattern of abiding psychic and sexual conflict. In short, Child uses our history as the temporal setting for a fable.

Fable

A brief summary of the story ought to precede any further discussion of *Village of Souls*.[1] Bertrand Jornay, a Canadian voyageur raised as an orphan in the criminal slums of Paris, contracts a marriage with Lys de Faverolles, one of the *filles du roi* brought to New France to provide females for the colony. Her upbringing at the

hands of her father, *soi-disant* nobleman and adventurer, has resulted in her banishment from France after an unjust imprisonment and branding as a prostitute. In seeking to find a way for his new wife to escape from the colony she loathes, Jornay by chance rescues an Indian girl, Anne, from her Iroquois captors. Anne is later schooled briefly by the Ursuline nuns. Jornay's métis partner, Titange, seeks to possess Lys, but is able only to arrange for her abduction by hostile Indians. A series of events caused by Anne's love for Jornay leads them both to join a missionary expedition which he will use as a means for locating Lys. Jornay contracts a bigamous marriage with Anne. Lys, seeking to expiate her past sins, has used her captivity to serve as nurse to plague-striken Indians. Jornay and Anne find Lys in a dying village near Lake Superior, an ironic realization of the fabled land of the after-life contained in the Indian myth of the village of souls. The dying Lys secretly poisons herself to enable Jornay to make an unequivocal commitment to Anne. After a close brush with death from exposure and a vision of the ghost of Lys, Jornay catches up with Anne (who left him with Lys as a way of forcing a choice) and resolves to continue with her in their journey to the heart of the continent.

The summary of the story itself demonstrates the fabular drift of the novel's events, with arrivals and departures cued to the demands of significant narrative rather than to daily happenstance. The summary also suggests the degree to which the fable deals as much with abiding facts of Canadian cultural experience as with sexual and psychological conflict; my concern at present is to discuss the story in psycho-sexual terms and to conclude with an exploration of its specifically Canadian implications.

The world which *Village of Souls* sets forth appears as a binary one, the world of romance, of highly dichtomized individuals and events whose shape reminds us of its stately American predecessor, *The Scarlet Letter*. Torn by stark contrast between good and evil, dream and reality, colonial settlement and the bush, the novel also pits each female lead against the other in terms of the values they embody. As in similar romantic narratives (*Beautiful Losers*, for example) that find their way into the novel form, chiefly because the reading public is prepared to accept any lengthy narrative as a novel and leave the question of how *Ada* and *Cabbagetown* can both be novels to literary professionals, the sharp contrast both within and among people and things will ultimately be resolved. A complexity in values and personalities greater than those of the beginning ought to be visible by the end of the narrative as the story demands that the reader's initial melodramatic clarity of feeling lead to a more sophisticated, "shaded" evaluation of events as characters learn from their

experience. Nonetheless, the tenor of much of *Village of Souls* creates a world suffused with strongly contrasting hues.

An example of this occurs in the female leads mentioned earlier. Like the children versus the old witch on the child's weatherbox, the fortune of each waxes and wanes in contrast to the other's. Thus Lys shows herself frivolous (from the opening pages she complains at length about New France's lack of gaiety), passive (she stands aside in terror when Jornay is attacked in Chapter 3), death-oriented (her residence in the dying villages, her comsumptive physique) and etherealized (Jornay's last sight of her is as a disembodied spirit fleeing skyward). According to traditional sexist stereotypes, she stands forth as a woman's woman. Her chequered past may make her a fallen angel, but an angel she remains, the pale, weak, ultimately helpless and pitiable woman familiar in the many depictions of the Magdalen.

No less stereotypically conceived, Anne is the tomboy, the female whose sex is never in question but whose vigor and capacity for rage link her with a set of "masculine" values. Thus she is savage (not in the sense of racist stereotypes of Indians as savages, but truly savage in her castration of a captive), active (in the scene where Lys stands in terror during an attack, Anne delivers a killing knife thrust to Jornay's opponent), life-oriented (she not only survives as Lys does not at the novel's end, but defiantly leaves Jornay in order to force a decision from him), and fleshly rather than ethereal (Jornay not only brutally takes her in a loveless sexual act, but later grows in the sexuality she offers him).

Two dichotomous figures, the familiar light and dark heroines of Romantic art, mark the novel's pages. Yet a closer examination discloses similarities between them that summon a more complex response from the reader. While Lys is not herself capable of savage behaviour, the novel places her firmly – as part of a death-and-the-maiden motif familiar to Romantic art – within a context of savagery. The murder of her father in Chapter 4 supports this, as does Jornay's first glimpse of her in a flashback in Chapter 2. A Mohawk captive is being tortured to death in Montreal and amid this terrible scene Jornay beholds Lys attempting to maintain an aloofness as she comes face to face with the cruelty. Her mask of indifference drops for a moment and her horror at the event shows, but the novel has made its point that the delicate air Lys conveys cannot be viewed apart from the savagery surrounding her and everyone else in the world of the novel.

Even as this brings her closer to the world of Anne, so does Anne's

participation in the world of torture and violent death. Lys in her final suicide – which merely anticipates her impending end – and in her stay in the deathly village endures with passivity the world Anne dwells in actively. The women are active and passive versions of how to cope with a terrorized environment, rather than dwellers in disparate worlds.

The infernal imagery of the novel reinforces this sense of a unitary environment that can, but needn't always, be viewed in binary fashion. Birds shriek "demoniacally" at least three times in the novel, and fires shade the characters in hellish hues. Resemblances between Titange and Satan are frequently stressed, while Anne seems both "maiden and devil" in an early appearance (Ch. 3). But hell asserts itself everywhere in the novel, in the stricken Indian villages, the fiery tortures each race visits upon the other, in the wasteland of the forest swamp in which Jornay nearly perishes in the final chapter. The fires and terrors that at first appear to denote a sub-world distant from the normal one come to outline a world in which the gates of hell have prevailed against everything but the romantic love that finally enfolds Jornay and Anne.

Dreams and the dreamlike form a persistent motif within the book. They too appear to us first as tough opposites to everyday life, until we reflect that the entire novel is filled with their coexistence. A reader expects the ethereal Lys to be linked with the dreamlike, and so she is, right up to her final moment as an apparition. Anne, however, does not remain remote from this sphere of human activity. Her vision of the white man's coming in the big ships in Ch. 3, is later explained away by Jornay (Ch. 15) as the confused recollections put to Anne by her mother, a Spanish captive according to Jornay. Of course, Jornay's theory is no less a matter of conjecture than a theory that Anne's dream offers an instance of racial memory. What remains significant is that just as we first view Anne with her wrists scarred from rawhide bindings and then later learn that Lys boarded ship from New France in handcuffs, so we also come to grasp the ties between the characters and values we at first saw as resting in opposition to each other.

On two occasions, the missionary Father Bernard (in fact, an historical personage), comes forth with a theory of dreaming. He assumes that the activity exists not in opposition to waking life, but as a way of integrating a hidden self with ordinary existence.

" 'Dreams? . . . What are they often but those memories hidden too deep in our minds for ordinary recollection?' " (Ch. 15; see also Ch. 3). As the figure whom Jornay follows on a missionary journey, one

who aids him in straightening out his life, the priest makes statements that carry a great deal of weight in the novel. In these instances, that weight rests on the integrative aspect of experience.

The novel's shadow-play between a binary and a unitary vision of experience provides an interesting tension in the work itself. It can be summed up by a glance at a single paragraph:

> Inside the hut at Teiomhouskwaronte wood smoke as sweet and pungent as incense, warmth, the illusion of security; outside a gale out of a mackerel sky, tossing an aspen bough against the single window, sending shoals of sere leaves furiously rattling against the walls and along the roof in their descent to mould. An arrow of light from the west entered the window and cut the interior into two limbos of murk in one of which Lys sat with a blanket about her shoulders squaw-fashion, not distinguishable in the poor light from the figure of Anne crouching in Indian isolation in the opposite gloom (p. 105-6).

Observe the dream-like ambience: "incense," "illusion," "poor light," "gloom," "limbo of murk." The enclosed nature of the setting is established by the prepositional oppositions of the first sentence ("inside . . . outside"), yet it is the "arrow of light" from outside that divides the room. Divides the room, yes, but into identical portions. Within each portion crouches one of the opposing females, yet their postures and the atmosphere itself joins them together – despite the difference between Indian and White – in their mutual solitude.

At first, it is tempting to see *Village of Souls* as a modernist historical fiction, chiefly on account of its wasteland of deserted villages and lethal swamps, its pervasive guilt-ridden gloom and tension, its use of a hero in sexual conflict who cannot make up his mind without intense prodding, its episodes of barbarism and violence. Even if Child's next novel had not been an autobiographical one about the Great War, one could still find in *Village of Souls* evidences of its *entre deux guerres* sensibility. A closer look, however, uncovers more pervasive and convincing evidence of its origins in the conventions and preoccupations of Romantic art. Most obviously, some superficial details recall masterpieces of Romantic historical fiction: Jornay's upbringing in underworld Paris and the Court of Miracles recalls Hugo's *Hunchback of Notre Dame*; Lys' branded shoulder, *The Three Musketeers*, and the ruthless aristocratic response to a denial of sexual privileges that results in Lys' banishment, *A Tale of Two Cities*. The Romantic roots of the light and dark heroines have been given earlier mention, while the doubling of Jornay and his wretched servant, Membertou, (see especially Ch.

11) and Lys' ailment of consumption recall what in retrospect appear as Romantic obsessions.

Beyond these evidences of the novel's Romantic, rather than modernist habits, lies its resemblance in overall shape to so typically Romantic a work as Browning's " 'Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came'." My object here is not to predicate " 'Childe Roland' " as a "source."[2] Rather, it is to note that this Romantic poem that sums up so much of the Romantic quest, like Child's novel features a perplexed, guilt-wracked protagonist who must wander through a wasteland on a vague quest and whose final success is implied by reliance upon a purposeful act of the will that circumstances have jarred him into adopting.

Assume then that *Village of Souls* resembles a Romantic fable set within an historical context. Assume also that one of its themes expresses the fact that what the innocent eye beholds as a split world, the mature one must view as a unitary one, where each object studied contains elements of what seemed to be properties only of its opposites. Jornay, for example, comes finally to accept Anne and drop his ready division of persons into the savage or the civilized, through gaining a sense of human unity (Ch. 12). This is no small triumph. In what else lies the moral of the tale?

Surely it lies in this passage from the novel's final paragraph:

> only in the consummation of love can a man share his loneliness with another and make for himself a dust-speck world within the infinite wilderness, forgetting for a little its pressure which never entirely ceases upon a man's spirit (p. 294).

To put it in another fashion, the Western invention of romantic love (which the Romantic era sought finally to domesticate through an impossible ideal of marriage) and the necessary hard-and-fast choice it implies, supplies the basic necessity for the journey to the frontier of the spirit. Even to understand, let alone accept, this white ideal of a single, all-sufficing human relationship proves one of the greatest stumbling-blocks to Anne's relationship with the white world (Ch. 5, 6, 8). Their final union implies that she has accepted the erotic myth, while he – who carries that myth in his cultural cargo – grows to accept her as the partner which destiny has provided for him. Within the capital-R, Romantic novel, the small-r romantic myth emerges as its ultimate message. This, in a narrative so replete with the dream-like, appears the greatest myth of all, making of *Village of Souls* perhaps the last of our literature's 19th-century historical fictions.

Fiction

In considering the novel as fiction, I concern myself with its formal qualities. Despite the impression conveyed by the previous section, the work possesses the architectonic qualities associated with fiction. It is not a simple fable, in which such elements as structure, personal motivation and formal sophistication are brushed aside in the author's race to the moral.

Village of Souls is narrated from a viewpoint that may be termed "modified omniscient." That is, while the main thread of narrative is spoken by a third-person, omniscient narrator, the author takes care also to descend from time to time into the sensibilities of his characters. His introductory Note renders specific his concern to follow the path of Anne's thoughts. It speaks of the difficulties of "dealing with the feelings and thoughts of a savage confronting the white man for the first time," apologizing for any liberties the author may be forced to take but emphasizing his wish for "remaining true to the general pattern of an Indian's thoughts." Leaving aside for the moment the introduction of the term "savage" (for a discussion of this, see Appendix), ponder instead the fact that the author is careful to note in particular passages that the reflections there stem from the mind of one of his characters. Child does not strive for the literal verisimilitude that gives the character an interior monologue spoken with the individuated twists and turns of particular character's speech. Rather, everyone thinks in the same style, that of the omniscient narrator. But the narrator does at least ascribe different contents to the thoughts of each. And when he senses that the thoughts produced may appear a little highfalutin' (as the novel's final encomium to romantic love quoted earlier), Child enters a caveat beforehand: "He may have felt, though he never could have found words for the feeling . . . ."

While the reader never stands in the presence of the kind of *tour de force* that allows a master like Faulkner to speak in a range of tones and voices, Child does provide an alternative point of view – at least in content, though not in style – from which to observe the sensations and reflections of his characters.

Events in the story move through a number of phases, with a new phase occurring after every four or five chapters. For example, Chapter 5 begins after we have learned of Jornay, Lys, and Anne's initial meeting, their subsequent encounter, and gotten ourselves caught up on Lys' and Jornay's Parisian backgrounds. They are all ready for their first journey. Chapter 10 begins after we have learned of Titange's attempted abduction of Lys (that by accident results in

her Indian captivity), Jornay's convalescence from an injury suffered at Titange's hands, his wish to travel in search of Lys, and Anne's pursuit of Jornay. Chapter 9 catches us up on Lys' actual experience of captivity, so that 10 opens a period of despair in which Jornay toys with suicide and takes Anne brutally in the act of loveless sex. Chapter 14 sees the death of Membertou, Jornay's servant and examplar of his dark side, and thus Chapter 15 can begin with Titange's re-entry and gleeful revelation to Jornay of Lys' survival, which will inspire Jornay to seek her before it is too late. This opens the novel's final phase. Jornay and Anne make genuine love and then marry. Titange kills himself, Jornay's final encounter with Lys takes place in the village of death, his final night-sea journey back to Anne then occurs, and the final reunion of Jornay and Anne happens as they set off on their voyage to the Mississippi.

The arrangements of the text then give a near-equal weight to four phases of narrative: exposition and initial conflict (marked by an aborted journey), setback and/or injury to each of the three principal characters, a dark period when it appears that the various defeats will remain permanent in their effects (yet significantly here, the beginnings of another journey, an element whose flowering will overcome the darkness), and a final reintegration of the separated principals, acceptance of tragedy and reconciliation between characters and final exposition of the beginning of a new relationship. Once again, we have a familiar Romantic, comedic pattern, with a hero defining himself through a choice between a light and a dark heroine. This comedic pattern creates a tension by its very existence within a set of events – loss and suicide – not usually found in comedy. We are used to Romantic historical novels crammed with displaced and symbolic deaths, but as in other respects, *Village of Souls* continues Romantic form with Modernist content, so that heroines actually die but a final, fulfilling relationship is still consummated.

In terms of his inability to choose decisively between the two females until compelled by force of circumstances, Jornay is the passive hero that has been a part of Romantic fiction since Sir Walter Scott. Like a Chopin étude, however, the work remains structured around this person's moods. That is, Jornay's periods of energy followed by setback followed by self-doubt control the successive phases through which the narrative passes. Despite the relative lack of interest and identification he arouses in the reader, the novel nonetheless remains *his* book. From the viewpoint of sexual politics, the process of sexual selection within a patriarchal society ensures that even a passive, relatively undynamic male can control events, even if only by his power of withdrawal. This confirms that the principal search of the novel remains firmly "inner", enhancing the fabular

element of the novel, shifting its meaning at times almost into a *psychomachia*, a journey by a mental traveller. An affirmation of this occurs when Jornay talks to Lys of having ' "come through two wildernesses, one in ourselves' (Ch. 6)." At this point, what rescues the work from becoming no more than fable is the temporal and physical setting. Canadian history and the Canadian wilderness see to it that *Village of Souls* maintains its contact with real life.

The specifically Canadian details, and their implications, I will discuss later. Of more immediate concern in this treatment of the work as a piece of fiction is its handling of time and space in general. Time here is seasonal, and coheres around Jornay's fitness to undertake his various journeys. The most important difference between the two editions of the novel is not the shift in the information about Lys' use of poison from one part of the concluding chapter to the other. Instead, the major alteration lies in the omission of the specific date from the opening chapter. The reader could still – through a correlation of the dates for the lives of the novel's historical personages – arrive at an approximate year for the novel's opening, but even the most casual reader can recognize that the specific date is not a matter of great importance. The 1933 edition gives a vague definition of location at the beginning – the *pays d'en haut* – and the reader can determine from the second chapter that Lys and Jornay are travelling through what we now call the Thousand Islands, though again that specificity of knowledge is not that important. The dropping of the date and even the vague designation of space proceed hand-in-hand with the addition of Beny's drawings, themselves unspecific in detail, to emphasize the mythic nature of the events portrayed.

A reader could construct a fair chronology of events. He is told that Lys and Jornay met a month before the story opens, the Lys was of such and such an age when her father was murdered, and so forth. But the time cues are not nearly so prominent as in, say, *Wuthering Heights*, where a quite detailed chronological structure helps to anchor a set of near-dreamlike and mythical events. Characters in *Village of Souls* observe seasonal changes in the landscape. Lys' first spell of captivity occurs in the winter, Jornay's concluding struggle in the swamp takes place in late autumn/early winter when rain is intermixed with snow, but specific times are submerged beneath a pattern of quest, withdrawal and re-emergence. More important than the actual seasons stands a pattern of seasonal myth, in which symbolic death and disintegration are succeeded by birth. In fact, the final image of rebirth, that is the setting out for the Mississippi of the reunited Jornay and Anne, happens in early winter. Scarcely the most appropriate period for beginning a lengthy canoe voyage, the

appearance of winter signifies that the character's seasons have a rhythm of their own that now remains distinct from those of nature. Evoking the natural progression of death and life rather than specific seasonal change seems the novel's chief purpose behind its usage of seasonal time.

Space in the novel alternates between the garrison and the bush, a familiar enough configuration in both our history and literature. As with much else in the book, what seems at first polarities resolve themselves into roughly similar places. For example, the wilderness may contain savagery and horror, but then our first sight of Ville Marie reveals a vengeful citizenry torturing an Indian captive. The Paris whence Jornay and Lys came features its own mutilations and murders. Sole haven from all this, the Ursuline convent in Quebec where Anne undergoes rudimentary instruction in the ways of whites exists as a barely-described haven all to itself. Anne must leave there to realize her own destiny. Progress in the novel may be measured by stepping westward – the journeys are to the Thousand Islands, then to the region of Lake Superior, finally (and in the future) to the Mississippi – but the movement does not proceed from a protected and genteel spot to a wild one. Garden or bush makes little difference in the novel. Hell can be found anywhere.

Jornay, for example, passes his convalescence from the injury Titange dealt him on the farm of the Chenier family on the immediate boundaries of Ville Marie. Repeatedly the reader is reminded of the fact that the Cheniers must farm with their muskets nearby in case of Indian attack, that two of their three sons have been "butchered" by the Iroquois, and that they stand under constant threat. This describes, in fact, most space in *Village of Souls*. The wilderness is no arcadian pleasaunce, but a region of ghosts and plaguey ghost towns. Space abides as an ever-receding horizon, something to be explored because it is there, something ever-receding into infinity. Just as the seasonal rhythms of time are endless, so are the continuing spatial perspectives. Space and time stretch to infinity as in a dream. The reader witnesses those determiners of human existence unloosed from their waking moorings and set off on the dream-voyage that constitutes the chief preoccupation of the novel.

Thus, while *Village of Souls* contains the formal coherence we require of fiction, it takes even those things in experience which usually weight narrative toward the realistic and reshapes them until they come to serve as props for the dream. In different incidents in the novel, Anne expresses her sense of loneliness in white society by observing the wide spaces that the whites keep between each other – "vast rooms where you could not be sure of touching your neighbour

by moving your shoulder a little " (Ch. 8). Lys at the beginning of her captivity, expresses discomfort when she senses that "by moving her shoulder . . . an inch the other way she could have touched the shoulder of an old woman" (Ch. 9). Here are two very divergent concepts of space and our relationship to it. Each observation adds to the specificity of the character making it, thus enhancing the quality of the fiction. Yet these small, shoulder-width spaces exist within a framework of infinitely receding horizons, which themselves add to the fabular texture of the story. Within the fable, lies the fiction.

Fact

Dreams often abound in factual detail: I drive my own car to a cliff I've never seen before, but it's my car and the junk in the dream glove compartment is the same junk as in my real one. An old friend lives in a strange house, but she is wearing the same dress she wore to a party last year. The books on the shelves are "real", the movie on the TV is one I saw last month. So the pages of *Villages of Souls* are dotted with such real names as Marguerite de Bourgeois, Marie de l'Incarnation, Father Bernard, Mme. de la Peltrie, the Sieur de Tracy, the Sieur de la Fredière, Québec, Montréal, Lake Superior, the Mississippi – you can visit there still. Restless young men in New France left the farms and villages for the wilder shores of the high country, Indian warfare was constant of frontier life, smallpox slew the Indians, young ladies without prospects were sent to the colony by the King to help populate it – the history books, the Jesuit *Relations* that Child uses, will tell you of these.

Yet these facts and the fictional structure in which they make their appearance, the fable about the perception of a universe that truly is unitary and coherent if one can only view it from the prospect furnished by romantic love, do not disclose all of the novel's meaning. For its final fabular implication concerns a cultural decision that rests as much in the realm of fact as of fantasy: the choice of what we now call Canada by Jornay. This, after all, is the choice Jornay makes when he finally pursues Anne and abandons Lys. He picks the representative of a new world because it is only through her and it that he can realize his most authentic self. The most culturally relevant aspect of the fable lies in its Canadian choosing. What renders this so interesting to present-day audiences is that this choice historically has never been (and probably never can be) as decisive in actual fact as in this dream. As newcomers to Canada, we boat people were the products of a vast continuum of Western history – Judaeo-Christian religious traditions, Classical and Liberal political traditions – whose patterns of evaluating and enhancing experience we would impose on the new land.

"When we go into the Rockies," George Grant has observed, "we may have the sense that the gods are there. But if so, they cannot manifest themselves to us as ours. They are the gods of another race, and we cannot know them because of what we are, and what we did."[3] The central problem of any Canadian Nationalist version of Canadian experience lies in erecting a reality that is inescapably *here* rather than anywhere else. Because we have made what was once here into a version of elsewhere, our nationalist rhetoric employs a term like "colonial mentality" to excoriate in individuals what is patently a collective displacement. Thus the concept of "choosing" Canada, of integrating oneself into a distinctly Canadian reality (often interpreted as "national", both in the sense of morally superior and physically primitive) in a way so intimate and consuming as to parallel the sexual act, looms as a very important *desideratum* in the culture of Canada. Child's novel offers then another representation of that essentially mythical act, in which an individual's well-being in adopting an unabashedly Canadian stance can be understood as a model for the attainment of a state of grace by an entire culture.

The solidest "facts" of a culture and how it perceives itself are the products of symbolic interpretations of existence. The "fact" of a decisive choice of Canada does not exist except as a counsel of cultural perfection, but the existence of that putative choice underlies much of what stands as our cultural expression and commentary in Canada. Thus, it becomes a fact, an object of our environment that we must always take account of. No one would encourage a young reader to encounter *Village of Souls* because it will provide him with a glimpse of "everyday life in New France." As a treatment of an abiding theme within Canadian culture set in the context of the past, it offers a young audience a sense of the truth that like all other people, Canadians cannot perceive their own past in a way that is utterly divorced from the preoccupations of now. In this respect, *Village of Souls* remains a profoundly Canadian historical novel, which grasps firmly the cultural truth that our deepest search as a nation has been toward a concept of selfhood that could comfort and strengthen one's resolve in the face of infinite horizons.

Few things better capture the apparent split in our present-day culture than the fact that an age of entertainment and information media dealing relentlessly with the drives, distractions and dilemmas of the present must by any account be reckoned on as an age of historical exploration and restoration. Whether one visits such superb restorations as those of Louisbourg or simply drives along a highway every five years and counts the increase in historical plaques, sites and mementoes, the same impression remains of a welter of activity in the cause of presenting to a culture that lives by discontinuous images a

picture of continuity and relevance between past and present. The split between the two cultural obsessions, like the split in *Village of Souls*, is more apparent than real. Mankind by nature yearns for background, for context, so that a time of flickering images naturally heightens the desire to view them in a steadier light. The early stages of deprivation, after all, heighten appetite. Only when the organism has resigned itself to starvation does appetite diminish.

For this reason, historical fiction in general ought to continue to attract a wide audience. A novel like *Village of Souls*, with its intermingling of a past setting, a present concern and a fable that is itself timeless, deserves some of that public.

APPENDIX

The term "savage" as a means of describing both Indians and their mores occurs too frequently in the novel to ascribe it to the points-of-view of individual characters. It is very hard to justify such a usage in a work written as late as 1933 (and by a university professor). Without attempting to do so, fairness compels the reader to observe as well that the Indians are not portrayed as degraded demons on the whole, and that Anne succeeds as heroine because she keeps about her those qualities of toughness and passion associated with her rugged upbringing. The humanitarian sentiments of Father Bernard and his reproval of Jornay for his dismissive attitudes toward Indians (Ch. 6) also help to mitigate the flaws observed. Bernard also forces Jornay – and the reader – into a finer sense of discrimination. When the protagonist, outraged at the barbarism of the mixed-blood, Titange, observes that when drunk the man becomes "all Indian," the Jesuit declares that he is then "not Indian. JUST brute." (Ch. 2). No present day reader's conscience can rest easy with a demonic, métis villain whose villainy is repeatedly ascribed to the racial strains warring within him, but at last the villainy comes about as a result of the mixture of red and white, and not as a result of the presence of red blood.

All defences aside, these racial attitudes conveyed disfigure the novel for today's readers. The question as to the extent of the disfigurement and the degree to which it can be ignored can be decided only by individual readers.

NOTES

[1]All textual references are to the 1948 edition (Toronto: Ryerson Press), which has the advantage not only of wider availability than the original (London: Thornton Butterworth, 1933), but of Roloff Beny's evocative black-and-white drawings at the head of each chapter. The sole differences I have been able to detect between the two editions lie in slight alterations to the final chapter. The final paragraph of the first edition –

> He could not know that the phial of mandrake poison which many

> months ago he had provided for Lys against a different crisis, had served her as a means of death. *Aireskui sutanditenr* [a Huron phrase earlier translated in the novel as "may the unknown God have mercy on us"].

– is inserted as follows into a paragraph appearing several pages earlier in the 1948 edition:

> He did not know that the phial of mandrake poison had served her as a means of death. *Aireskui sutanditenr.*

The second edition divides the final chapter into three, rather than two sections, and includes the information, "*Pays d'en Haut*, 1665" at the heading of the opening chapter.

[2]Interestingly enough, Child's final work, a long poem on the Great War, *The Wood of the Nightingale* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1965), has for its villain a character named Spurge. That rather rare kind of weed is named in Browning's " 'Childe Roland' ", line 58.

[3]"In Defense of North America," in his *Technology and Empire* (Toronto: Anansi, 1969), 17.

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