

“My Uttermost Valleys”: Patriarchal Fear of the Feminine in Robert Service’s Poetry and Prose

PAMELA DEN OUDEN

The Northern Review #19 (Summer 1998): 113-121.

*“We get from a writer what we bring to him, and sometimes
we get more than he intended. Our intelligence fuses with his,
and his words go deeper than he ever purposed.”*

Robert Service

The bronze plaque on the wall of the former post office in Kilwinning, Scotland, Robert Service’s boyhood home, calls Service “the celebrated bard of the Yukon.” Although he spent only eight of his eighty-four years in the Yukon, Service staked his claim as a “real bonafide Sour-dough” in a 1948 speech to the Yukoners Association, in which he described his relationship with the North as an intimate one: “I know the land, I know the spirit of the North, I’ve communed with it and it got under my skin; it forced me to write: I take no credit for anything I’ve done, it’s the spirit of the North and that’s what you all have in you—it all got into you and it did something to you; it made you better and finer people than you’d ever have been if you hadn’t gone to the North because the North has *personality*, and it does things to you” (Service, “Gold Rush,” italics mine).

In *Strange Things: The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature*, Margaret Atwood contextualizes Service’s attitude toward the Canadian North in terms of gender. According to Atwood, Service “habitually personifies the North as a savage but fascinating female” (18). In their well-known 1979 study of the patriarchal literary tradition, entitled *Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, two American feminist critics, provide a theoretical framework for Atwood’s observation. Gilbert and Gubar argue that many male writers, including such luminaries as Dante, Milton, Swift and Dickens, have presented their female characters

as angels (21-27) or as monsters (27-35). The angel is characterized by "contemplative purity" (21), while the monster, like a man, seeks "a life of significant action" (21). According to Gilbert and Gubar, whose work draws on the writings of earlier feminists, including Karen Horney, Simone de Beauvoir and Dorothy Dinnerstein, these objectifications of women represent male ways of coping with psycho-sexual anxieties produced by a female Other. Male authors allay their fears of monstrous women by calling them names—"witch, bitch, fiend, monster" (Gilbert & Gubar 28). Of the woman who exemplifies contemplative purity, a male author may tell himself there is no need for him to dread a being who has a "clear line of literary descent from divine Virgin to domestic angel" (20). Building upon Atwood's observation, I will apply Gilbert and Gubar's theoretical perspective to the poetry and prose of Robert Service. For Service, the Canadian North becomes a white, blank page upon which he inscribes his own fantasies about the female Other. Indeed, Service draws these two faces of women—angel and monster—on the face of the northern landscape, thereby revealing what Karen Horney refers to as "men's secret dread of women" (136).

In *Ploughman of the Moon*, the first volume of his autobiography, Service also says that "childish memories seem trivial but they reveal traits that were to distinguish [his] whole life" (9). This seems to indicate the possibility that Service's attitude toward women was "stamped" on him during his formative years—from the time he was a toddler till he was nine years old he lived, not with his mother and father and nine siblings, but in the care of his grandparents and four maiden aunts. Being sent away from his family may have seemed like a rejection to him, and such a rejection may have been the origin of the inferiority complex from which Service says he "never" recovered (39). Several of his early memories recall his guardian aunts. For instance, this from the time he was five years old: "my aunts wore black silk skirts, and as they sat in front of the fire they drew them up over their knees. I was supposed to be too young to notice but the fatness of their legs disgusted me" (4). He also tells about "dar[ing] to peep" while his Aunt Jeannie was changing her chemise: "What I saw made me duck my head under the blankets. If women undressed are as ugly as that, I never want to get married" (14-15). He goes on to say that although his aunts were "gentle", they were "never demonstrative": "Sweethearts kissed and mothers kissed, but outside of that osculation was taboo. I never saw any kissing in my

family. If I had I think I would have been shamed" (10). He notes that "any show of emotion embarrassed [him]" (11). Consequently, he merely shook hands when he parted from his aunts; he was embarrassed when his Aunt Jeannie cried at the station. In addition to illustrating a Victorian repression that was typical of the times, these examples from Service's childhood also show his strong sense of anxiety about himself and his relationship to the women in his life.

Furthermore, Service goes on, in several places in his autobiography, to speak about his inferiority complex. "Banking for me would have been a blind alley; but, as I see it now, with my unstable temperament, all of my life would have been a blind alley. I was as destined to failure as the sparks fly upward" (*Ploughman* 129). Telling of his early time in British Columbia, in a settlement "glorified by the Old School Tie", he says, "Can it be wondered that my inferiority complex flourished in their midst and that I felt a grubby vulgarian" (152). Later, in California, when he could not get a hotel room, he accepted an offer to use a chicken house as accommodation. "Mr. Koenig charged me a quarter for sleeping in his chicken house. I was so weak I had no guts to protest. I mention this to show to what a new low my inferiority complex had fallen. If I had had a tail I would have tucked it between my legs. Every one was handing me a dirty deal, and I was taking it like a yellow dog . . . I was a proper sap" (217). Service says he might have had more respect for himself if he "had learned to do at least one thing well" (20). In *Harper of Heaven*, the second volume of his auto-biography, Service again takes up the theme of his feelings of inferiority. He describes himself in Paris around 1911: "So I bought [a monocle] in a pawnbroker's. . . . *Behind it I concealed my inferiority complex.* Screwing it in my eye I looked superciliously at the world" (97, italics mine).

This inferiority complex governed the way Service related to women. As a shy young man, Service cultivated a "manly disdain for women": he says: "For years I scarcely spoke to a girl. . . I was *afraid* of them, and if by chance I met one I was self-conscious and tongue-tied" (*Ploughman* 117, italics mine). He was a "lone dog": he says, "Never was I more happy, and this because I felt so blissfully alone" (52). He names Thoreau, "who fostered the recluse in [him]", as one of the greatest influences in his life. Service saw himself as one "of the race of men who don't fit in" (65), as a "dreamer and fumbler" and "escapist" (26). He tells of feeling sorry for a friend who, at age 23, was already married with two children

— “in a trap, done for” (27). Service compared this with his own blissful state: “Oh, how glad I was to be free. . . . Free with the promise of a future” (27).

At the age of 20, after working for seven years in a bank, Service decided to leave “the ledger for the land” (127). Wanting “escape, freedom, and adventure”, he decided to go to Canada where he “would be a man in a world of men” (131). Service says he “made himself an authority on the Dominion” (131). Perhaps he felt, that by “throwing over the traces” and living the life of a cowboy (131), he would free himself from his past and his anxieties. In telling of this decision, he engenders the land as female: “Canada held out *her* arms to me. *She* won” (131, italics mine).

Turning now to another part of the Service’s writing, I’d like to consider some of the poems in which he further engenders the land as both an angelic and monstrous female. In “The Law of the Yukon,” Service presents the land as “monster”, one who carries out “significant action” against the “misfits and the failures” (Service, *Collected* 10). In rejecting the “foolish and feeble”, the monster-Yukon proclaims her ruthlessness: “Wild and wide are my borders, stern as death is my sway;/From my ruthless throne I have ruled alone for a million years and a day” (10). Service embodies the North’s desire for a life of “significant action” in strong verbs:

One by one I dismayed them, frightening them sore with my glooms;
One by one I betrayed them unto my manifold dooms.
Drowned them like rats in my rivers, starved them like curs on my plains,
Rotted the flesh that was left them, poisoned the blood in their veins;
Burst with my winter upon them, searing forever their sight,
Lashed them with fungus-white faces, whimpering wild in the night. (11)

So the land, the North, pits herself against those who trespass on her territory. In addition, this monstrous female Yukon takes on the traditionally held male role of dispenser and interpreter of the law: “she makes it plain.” Like the Old Testament prophet, Habakkuk, who God told to “write the vision and *make it plain*” (Habakkuk 2:2, italics mine), the female-North prophesies the destruction of those who cannot live up to the law which operates in her territory. This law is simply that the Strong thrive, the Fit survive, but the Weak perish (Service *Collected* 13).

In “The Law of the Yukon”, by using words reminiscent of those written by Emma Lazarus for the inscription for the Statue of Liberty, Service invites a comparison between these two women: the monstrous female Yukon and the ‘angel-woman’ characterized by purity, service

and selflessness. The Yukon declares that those who are strong, "men of her mettle" are those who will establish her fame: "winning me honor, not shame; / Searching my uttermost valleys, fighting each step as they go" (12). These are men with "hearts of vikings . . . Desperate, strong and resistless, unthrottled by fear or defeat" (12). Service emphasizes the self-effacement of Lazarus' angel by not mentioning her specifically, but by only alluding to Lazarus' "mighty woman with a torch" (Bell 845). Liberty's cry, "Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed, to me" (Bell 845) are inverted in the words of the Yukon, "Send not your foolish and feeble" (Service, *Collected* 10). Like the Yukon, Liberty also has the power of nature at her fingertips: the torch's "flame / Is the imprisoned lightning" (Bell 845). However, this angel-woman does not use the power of nature to destroy, as does the monster-Yukon, but to send out a message of "world-wide welcome." The invitation of Liberty is universal and open, while the invitation of the Yukon is discriminatory and selective. Although both the female Yukon and the Statue of Liberty are portrayed as mothers, they are opposites—angel and monster: selfless Liberty is the "Mother of Exiles" (Bell 845), a comfort to those cast out from other lands, while the Yukon, "monstrous, moody, pathetic" (Service, *Collected* 12), draws to her bosom and mothers only those who are worthy, only those able to survive the harshness of her landscape.

Similarly, in "The Lure of Little Voices", first published in the 1907 collection *Songs of a Sourdough*, the North becomes a rival, a femme fatale, eager to steal a man from another woman who realizes she is helpless to withstand the wiles of such a seductress. First, the man says he hears "the Little voices all a-begging [him] to go"; however, this siren song quickly acquires a sharper focus: "a-begging me to leave you" (Service, *Collected* 47), italics mine). In her boldness, the North gives the man a message to pass on to his woman: He was ours before you got him, and we want him once again" (47). In the fourth stanza, the narrator equates the North with "the womb of desolation: the place where desolation is nurtured and brought forth. In this poem, as in "The Law of the Yukon", the North is seeking men. In her quest, she strips them of their masculinity and virility. The narrator says: "The spell of them is on me and I'm helpless as a child" (48). First the North is a rival, then a stern mother. The man is singular; the woman is plural, with a multiplicity of power. In addition, as the man turns his ear to the "lure of the Little Voices", he begins to be overshadowed and overcome by the cruel nature

of the North. This causes him to treat his woman cruelly: "softly in the sleep-time from your love I'll steal away" (49). In the light of the fact that feminist critic Dorothy Dinnerstein suggests that male anxieties about female autonomy probably go as deep as everyone's mother-dominated infancy (Gilbert & Gubar 28), perhaps in this poem we are seeing Service holding a mirror to his own face, expressing the fear that in entering into a deep relationship with a strong woman, he would be reduced to the status of a child.

On the other hand, in "The Spell of the Yukon", Service emphasizes the angelic side of the Yukon. Gilbert and Gubar explain that male authors fit masks over woman's face to lessen the "dread" of her inconstancy and to allow them to possess her. The North is described as mystic, mighty and majestic. The narrator seems infatuated and enraptured by the land, even though he recognizes the potential dangers. Especially in the fourth stanza, and then on through the rest of the poem, the language used to describe the landscape is descriptive and expansive, echoing the grandeur of the land itself:

I've stood in some mighty-mouthed hollow
That's plumb-full of hush to the brim;
I've watched the big, husky sun wallow
In crimson and gold, and grow dim,
Till the moon set the pearly peaks gleaming,
And the stars tumbled out, neck and crop;
And I've thought that I surely was dreaming,
With the peace o' the world piled on top. (3-4)

This mystic and benevolent view of the North, a mask that Service creates to cover the other face, the terrible killing face of the North, allows men to feel superior to the North, thereby lessening their dread of "her." This dread, at its heart, is a dread of the land, which, as de Beauvoir suggests, represents the female body: "She is the earth, man is the seed. . . . The sod, broken by the plowman's labor, passively receives the seeds within its furrows" (de Beauvoir 163).

In "Men of the High North" first published in the 1909 collection, *Ballads of a Cheechako*, Service shows this bifurcated nature of the female North in a single work. He engenders the land as female and describes the North in soft, glowing terms. For instance, in the line "Islands of opal float on silver seas" (Service, *Collected* 78), the open, long vowel sound of "i" and "o", coupled with the sibilant "s", give a "rounded" and "feminine" feel to the words. Furthermore, in the fourth stanza, the man

of the High North is pictured as a monarch ruling over a kingdom "unravished and gleaming", having been lured to "her vastness taintlessly sweet" (78, italics mine). This is the angelic side of the Female North, one who can crown a man king. If "he" is the king, then "she" must be his subject. However, the other, more threatening side of the North is also evident: not only can she crown him, she can also slay him. "Suffer her fury, cherish and lover her — / He who would rule must learn to obey" (79).

Shortly after Service decided that he was "ready for the greatest of all life's adventures—Marriage" (Service, *Harper* 51), he proposed to Germain Bourgoïn, whom he had known for three weeks. In describing his "peculiarly Scotch" approach to marriage, Service says:

I wanted a wife who would be willing to black my shoes of a morning. I remembered how my dear mother shone the boots of myself and four brothers before we went to school, spitting on them to make the blacking go further. . . . I dreaded a wasteful woman. (52)

Through his description of his relationship with his wife, he shows his desire to maintain traditional male superiority. Service says he feels "a certain restraint" in telling about his domestic life, that "there are matters too sacred to be revealed even to the most sympathetic reader" (Service, *Harper* 54). This "restraint" prevents him from so much as mentioning the name of the woman he marries. Throughout the rest of the book, if he refers to her at all, he objectifies her, calling her "the wife" (55) or "the Missus" (58). Here, Service provides a clear example of a male author killing his female character into his art. In this case, the character that he stills and silences, the one to whom he denies not only voice but also separate existence, is not a fictional character, but Germaine Bourgoïn, the woman he married.

This small sampling of the poetry and prose of the "Bard of the Yukon" (Berton 133) suggests that Service's life and art are one. Service's poetry portrays the North as a frigid and unforgiving land where only the Fit and the Strong survive. Service gives archetypal expression to a deep-rooted male anxiety: in a relationship with a woman, a man must face his fear that he may not be one of the Fit and the Strong, but may instead fall into the other category: the despised, weak, "crippled and palsied" (Service, *Collected* 10) in the sight of that woman. Furthermore, "a man in a world of men" (Service, *Ploughman* 131) must contemplate the fact that although he may be stronger, and may be able to overpower

a woman physically, such strength is no proof that he has searched her "uttermost valleys" (Service, *Collected* 12), finding out and discovering those deepest recesses within her. The sexual act itself exemplifies this anxiety: although the man penetrates the woman, she swallows him, surrounding him with herself until he is no longer seen. In *This Sex Which is Not One*, a landmark collection of essays, French feminist critic Luce Irigaray states: "Women's desire is often interpreted, and feared, as a sort of insatiable hunger, a voracity that will swallow [men] whole" (29). This deep searching and consequent swallowing up is what men both ardently seek and desperately fear.

Although plagued by self-doubt throughout his life, Service was instrumental in writing the mythology of the Canadian North as a place where men pit themselves against the environment and where only the Strong survive. Toward the end of his life, he questioned whether he could call himself a "real honest to God sourdough": "I never packed a piano over the White Path—I never fought prize fighters in the ring beneath the midnight sun; I never saw the shooting of Dan McGrew; I never cremated Sam McGee. . . . No, I did none of those things (Service, "Gold Rush"). What he did was capture the popular imagination. According to biographer James Mackay, it has often been stated that Robert Service is the most widely read poet of this century (397); Service called himself a "versifier, not a poet" (381) who wrote not for the "highbrows" but for the "common people" (380). He believed himself to be "the only living writer who [had] made \$1,000,000 out of writing verse" (387). Service acknowledged his debt: "All I have and am I consider I owe to the North" (Service, "Gold Rush"). With his fame came the renown of the Yukon, a Janus-faced landscape, at once terrible and beautiful, savage and fascinating.

Pamela den Ouden is a long-time resident of Fort St. John, British Columbia and is a member of the Northern Lights College, International Department Staff. She was the editor of the Fort St. John newspaper and writes for *BC Report*. She also writes poetry and literary criticism and she has won numerous literary prizes and journalistic awards.

Note

1. Epigraph from *Ploughman of the Moon*, page 158.

Works Cited

- Atwood, Margaret. *Strange Things: The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature*. London: Clarendon P, 1995.
- Bell, James B. "Statue of Liberty." *World Book Encyclopedia*. 1991 ed.
- Berton, Pierre. *My Times*. Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 1995.
- De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. New York: Vintage, 1974.
- Gilbert, Sandra and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination*. New Haven: Yale U P, 1979.
- Irigaray, Luce. *This Sex Which is Not One*. Ithaca: Cornell U P, 1985.
- Service, Robert. "Gold Rush in the Yukon." Address to Yukoners Association. Vancouver, 1948. Transcribed from a telediphone recording, D.L.O. 38945. Reading, England: B.B.C. Archives.
- . *Collected Poems of Robert Service*. Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1960.
- . *Harper of Heaven*. New York: Dodd Mead, 1948.
- . *Ploughman of the Moon*. New York: Dodd Mead, 1945.