

TRANSFORMING THE WILDERNESS INTO GOD'S CREATION: JOHN JAMES AUDUBON IN A CANADIAN LITERARY SPACE¹

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“Creation, property, enjoyment form a sinister trinity in the human mind”.
E.M. Forster (1988: 208)

“Every object in the world can pass from a closed, silent existence to an oral state, open to appropriation by society, for there is no law, whether natural or not, which forbids talking about things. A tree is a tree. Yes, of course. But a tree as expressed... is no longer quite a tree, it is a tree which is decorated, adapted to a certain type of consumption, laden with literary self-indulgence, revolt, images, in short with a type of social *usage* which is added to pure matter”. Roland Barthes, “Myth Today” (in Dana Phillips 2003: 9)

It is a long-established belief in our civilization that reality is only complete when it has been expressed verbally, when it has been organized within the structure of human language so that it can be transmitted to other individuals as information or knowledge. This is not always made explicit in cultural manifestos, but our eternal search for meaning implies that this quest requires some kind of articulation, and the word has been conceived of since the beginning of time as the light thrown by intellect.²

The European colonizing process of new territories has historically exemplified the assumption that reality without language is a blank or a chaos and cannot be possessed by humans. A taxonomic fever took over the Natural Sciences in the

eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; the discovery of new species of animals and plants at an astonishing pace made it necessary to find a common nomenclature, and once Linnaeus's naming system (1735) became popular, the almost Adamic experience of seeing and naming for the first time produced a classificatory eagerness among naturalists. This anxiety was both the product of the desire to accumulate facts for science and the desire to possess the 'contents' of the new lands.

John James Audubon, the American ornithologist, painter, and writer, incarnated this need to identify and copy God's creations through images and words in what was in effect a race to be the first to see, name, and portray. His life, like that of other naturalists, explorers, and surveyors, involved a tragic existential paradox: the description of wonders that disappear because of their very description. In order to *execute* a painting, he had to make life still, that is, he had to kill his birds. In her novel *Creation* (2002), Katherine Govier imagines John James Audubon's vicissitudes in the Labrador expedition he and his son undertook when, halfway through the mission of drawing every bird in North America, he decided to go "north and off the map" (3) to find new bird species. These few months in the life of the world's most famous "living bird" artist, partially documented in his Labrador journals, give Katherine Govier the opportunity to observe Audubon's encounter with an unapproachable and intractable wilderness where land and water are indistinguishable and birds become a blurred mass; the landscape an unusable space, hostile and unsuitable for people. This uncharted territory in Labrador baffles Audubon's usual power to name and to draw, and takes the reader back to the myth of creation, to the "Genesis", where it is clearly established that nothing really exists without the confirmation of language.

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These two issues: the *kind* of knowledge historically imposed upon the wilderness of the New World and the threat that nonverbal reality poses to the human mind permeate all creation stories (i.e. narratives of origins) and exploration accounts; Govier's novel extracts these narrative genres from the whirlpool of history in order to identify some of the irrational assumptions which lie at the heart of what is regarded even today as the body of truths that science has extracted from nature. I will analyze her critical position in conjunction with John James Audubon's *Journals* which, although heavily edited by Audubon's granddaughter Maria, still stand as a valuable biographical document which allows us to follow his train of thought and assess how Govier picked up on Audubon's reflections about the nature of his vocation.

The above-mentioned "kind of knowledge" refers to what Mary Louise Pratt (1992: 15) has called a new form of "Europe's planetary consciousness": while the project of mapping the world's coastlines had been underway for several centuries,

a new daunting task became a governmental and scientific duty: the systematizing of nature in order to construct global-scale meaning in view of the amount of discovery of plant and animal life in the European colonies. To throw the grid of classification over the American wilderness meant to render each species as discrete entities in visual terms and, especially, it meant giving them a name. This endeavor, however exhilarating, was further encouraged by the naming strategy devised by Carolus Linnaeus (Carl Linné) in *Systema Naturae* (1735), which enabled scientists to pin down living organisms yet unidentified. Latin was the chosen language because it did not belong to a particular nation. However this transnational attempt at knowledge transmission was in fact a gatekeeper for those without access to classical education: Latin's scientific aspirations obliterated earlier vernacular plant classifications (Shteir 1996: 29-30). Additionally, Latin established Europe as the main observer. Linné's achievement was really to launch an index of life forms through a two-word code phrase, the genus plus the species (Koerner 1999: 15-16). Particular nomenclatures over which there was some disagreement apart, the real influence that the apparatus of natural history had in all cultural spheres was that it considered nature as a container of separate *objects* of different sizes and shapes. Its strategy was to parcel out the natural world and give each item a term, and this practice imposed a structure of knowledge difficult to challenge because it was thought to be the handmaid to rationality.

The political circumstances in which Eurocentric Naturalism confronted the wilderness made of taxonomy more than an absorbing pursuit for collectors and scientists. The listing and describing of the new species of plants and animals found in the colonies responded to European expansionist desires and also to New World patriotism. Mapping landscape and describing its contents meant control over them. Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785) demonstrates how natural history—more specifically the identification of more than one hundred American bird species—was used to argue for the uniqueness of the United States of America and for its right to classify the native national resources. Scientific projects (land surveys and biological classifications) sought administrative regulation under growing pressure for ownership.

The confluence of knowledge and commodity also worked at other levels: moral, aesthetic, heroic, and commemorative. Botany was regarded as morally uplifting because it showed the virtues of organization and of decorative art. There is a long tradition that unites women and botany within their roles of mothers and educators, and botany was also part of a polite British culture which relished the belief that there were discoverable patterns in nature (Shteir 1996: 4, 21, 29, 199, 234). At a more elitist scientific level, enlightened naturalists identified classification as the boundary between science and the disoriented efforts of the predecessors, whom

they considered mere collectors, and this move from the empirical toward the abstract was considered to be a triumph (Ritvo 1993: 238). Naturalists were considered to be the heroes of the scientific cause, and while, for example, the French naturalist and prolific writer Count Buffon (1707-1788) believed in the degeneration of American animal species, other naturalists, such as the father of American ornithology Alexander Wilson (1766-1813), was considered a hero in the cause of New World scientific independence because he showed the contrary to be true (Souder 2004: 10-17, 29-44). In view of all that organic hotchpotch waiting for a terminology, the New World was infinitely open to acts of commemoration, and its geographical and biological items became the recipients of names in memory of personalities of public or sometimes more private significance, contemporaneous with the explorers and scientists, a christening activity not devoid of the excesses of the ego (New 1997: 55-57; Spufford 2003: 150-159).³

Furthermore, taxonomy provided a new way to construct an identity for oneself through the epics of naming, and so produced a race of white males whose identity was secured through exploration, mapping, naming, and drawing the wilderness. John James Audubon (1785-1851), the “American woodsman” and naturalist who painted birds was among them (Audubon 1999: 865). His scientific zeal, his heroic status and the ethos in which he lived animated a life devoted to seeing for the first time as well as cataloguing what no other Euro-American eyes had seen before. This is what Audubon called “the non-descript” (1986 I: 88): an animal, a plant, or a piece of landscape thanks to which a man could achieve a sense of creation. The actual basis of this stereotyped climactic mental structure was that the act of knowledge was confused with the birth of the object. In this particular meaning-making approach to reality, the “act of knowledge” can be defined as the singling out of an uncatalogued natural item for the purpose of naming, and the “object” refers to the living organism under observation.

In her novel *Creation* Katherine Govier chooses for its plot Audubon’s journey to Labrador, those three problem-ridden months otherwise cursorily mentioned in Audubon’s biographies, and in so doing, the novel gets involved in an intricate site of meaning within the Canadian literary context. It is not only that the author rescues an American figure from sanitization (a common strategy in Canadian literature), but that she has to confront the idea of Labrador as the supreme wilderness, a space resistant to contour and definition. My essay will specifically focus on the clash between a man who represents a relentless will to draw animal distinctions and the existence of a Canadian space not amenable to geographical and animal segmentation.

The voyage through the dangerous passage between Labrador and Newfoundland had Audubon confined to the ship, desperately gazing at an unapproachable

shoreline, and finding the wilderness appalling for the first time in his life. In his journals, Audubon repeatedly speaks of a rugged, dreary, inhospitable and mournful country, barren, forbidding and terrifying. He speaks of “stubborn, precipitous rocks” (I: 404), of “terribly wild shores, fearfully high and rugged” (396), of “the most extensive and dreariest wilderness I have ever beheld. It chilled the heart to gaze on these barren lands of Labrador” (403). In addition, the birds Audubon expected to see, the Labrador Duck and the Great Auk, were already extinct. And true to history, the novel records that Audubon's powers to locate, discover, and draw distinct species of birds fail him for the first time.

The idea of a Canadian psyche dependent on the impact of “these vistas of desolation” (Atwood 1997: 1) has recurred in seminal literary works and in the declarations of important Canadian cultural figures, and Govier's novel brings together the nineteenth-century hunger for naming new species and the Canadian penchant for the unnamed and the undefined.⁴ In spite of an alertness on our part towards the misapprehensions that generalizations may entail, there seems to be a lingering fixation in Canadian letters with the emotional implications of the clash between a stretch of land and a non-indigenous language, that is, with the moment/s where language is exiled from reality. This is due partly to the influence of postcolonial theory but also to the primacy of the construction of Canada as *space*. Thus, in the face of the inadequacy of words to capture the environment, there is “the temptation of silence” as Kroetsch (1980-1981: 16) calls it, which seems to surface as an important issue in many literary and critical works dealing with the way relevant Canadian figures have expressed an awareness of their history and geography.

The canonization of certain imaginative obsessions in Canadian literature has revolved precisely around an alleged failure in verbalizing nature. The impossibility of humanizing the wilderness through language is a dilemma often repeated in the Canadian literary imagination: for example, after the arrival of Europeans in Eastern Canada (Frye 1967: 824), and later first contacts made with the prairie (Harrison 1977: ix). The idea of geography as obstacle, not “morally explicable”, impossible to express through the romantic perspective, and undermining the conventions of speech seems to fit a Canadian tendency toward namelessness. According to Kroetsch, this “nurturing of namelessness” (1989: 46) results not only from the deliberate avoidance of a name, but also from the will to un-name and to un-invent the world. Whereas Frye (1967: 826) had problematized a lack of articulateness: “One wonders if any other national consciousness has had so large an amount of the unknown, the unrealized, the humanly undigested, so built into it”, Kroetsch (1989: 36-71) claimed a notion of definition that abolished any inherited system of identities.⁵

The entering and settling of Canada as a dumbfounding, annihilating experience has been made more recognizable by comparison with the way that the United States has imagined itself and exported its history. Whereas American history still insists on what the heroic explorer and purposeful pilgrim saw, Canadian history focuses on what the unlucky explorer and reluctant immigrant failed to see. We are equally familiar with Jacques Cartier's vengeful definition of Canada as the "land God gave to Cain" as compared with Captain John Smith's hopeful phrasing: "Heaven and earth never agreed better to frame a place for man's habitation". According to Simon Schama (1995: 517): "There have always been two kinds of Arcadia: shaggy and smooth; dark and light; a place of bucolic pleasure and a place of primitive panic". The characteristics of Labrador terrain provoke dismay and, by way of presenting their moment of origin, Canadians have preferred to quote the disappointment felt at the sight of this uninviting wilderness, a moment later theorized as the terror provoked by a nature which dwarfs the individual who tries to come to *terms* with it.⁶

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Govier invokes Audubon within this unavoidable mystique of the Canadian landscape tradition, when halfway through his mission of identifying and drawing every bird of North America for his book *Birds of America* (1827-1838), he is transported to a place which cannot be defined as *land*. During this voyage North, Audubon meets the captain of a Royal Navy surveying vessel, Henry Bayfield, a man also involved in a life-giving and life-taking vocation related to the representation of the wilderness on paper: Bayfield is charting the elusive and murderous coast of Labrador. He is devoted to making the wilderness readable, to naming places and registering boundaries between sea and land. Bayfield represents the British Empire and has never allowed himself to question the validity of his mission: "containing" nature is a duty prescribed in the Bible (86-87). He had been in charge of verifying the American boundary from Montreal to Kingston; his job had proved a hellish task because the islands he found outnumbered the words they possessed to name them, and because this boundary was made of water, "a most unreliable surface":

Come to survey a boundary and found nothing so simple as a line through water: found land smashed up and broken to bits, humped and rising out of water, shallow and sometimes disappearing. Irrational, useless and obstructing land, needing to be made sense of. (61)

While Bayfield's unflinching skills as a boundary maker are being constantly challenged by the fog and the violent ocean, Audubon revises his own personal origins and those of his civilization, and finds in the *Book of Genesis* the fateful phrases in which man —under the pretext of God's command— arranged the hierarchies of the living, positioned himself on top, and ranked the rest of living

creatures as servants at his beck and call. According to the Bible, God had said to man, "have dominion over" and "subdue the earth". What a convenient organization, Audubon thinks pitifully (244).⁷

In the King James version of *Book of Genesis* —initially published in 1611, when England's colonizing of the New World was just beginning— the original act of creation is immediately followed by the act of dividing and of naming: "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep" (*The Holy Bible* 2002: 4). The second sentence makes the first sentence anti-climactic: it presents the first act of creation as deficient, an incomplete state of affairs which has to be remedied. The climax will occur later on, with the separation of the different kinds of matter and their categorization: "God divided the light from darkness" and "called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night" (4). After this, God established the boundary line separating earth and sea; then he gave them their names. After the separation and the branding of darkness and light, water and dry land, grass and trees, day and night, seasons and days, he blessed his divisions: "God saw that it was good" (4-5).

In this ever-present text, creation is not mainly a matter of making anew (only one sentence is devoted to the act of creation), but of desiring distinction and separation. Out of an original formless substance, things must take different shapes, and names are necessary so that they achieve the status of identifiable objects. As if the manifestations of nature did not exist until they were given a name; as if all pre-linguistic existence was to be discarded as blank or useless. As if the nondescript ran the risk of being swallowed back into a terrible void. It is the eternal clash of being versus nothingness, which our civilization has fully accepted as a linguistic triumph. Victory in this fight is represented in the Bible as the elimination of the threat of an undifferentiated wilderness. The wilderness was thus created in a context of fear and opposition, it was dark, sinister, and chaotic and it stood for moral chaos (see Nash 2001: 3, 24).

In the Bible, no time elapses between creation and language, and such simultaneity makes the act of naming as fundamental as the act of creation. Identity is made to depend primarily on language. Additionally, God hands the gift of naming over to Adam, and the name Adam decided upon for each living creature was to remain. This God-given faculty of first seeing and then verbally representing is the capacity explorers and surveyors can put to use in the New World. Audubon's role as a first seer of a parcel of God's creation and his will to coin a name for every living bird is based on the idea of the power of language over existence, on the power of representation over the life of the creature being named.

Audubon needs to kill birds in order to reproduce them as if they were alive, and in doing so, he becomes a kind of Noah in reverse: he kills animals in order to save them in eternal images. Abstraction is morally superior to contingent flesh. His duty is therefore to stop the life of his models in order to copy and organize God's creation; then he can produce information or knowledge. Once he translates the real creature into an image and a little biography, this image can become a visual reference with a classificatory caption.

The reader of *Creation* and particularly of Audubon's *Journals*, will surely be shocked at the degree of carnage in which Audubon was involved in his explorations; it is paradoxical that while he made of his animals subjects of visual adoration, he was often blind to their agonies.⁸ A bird is not thought to be truly real until its life pours out on paper. Only then does the idea of a bird come into existence and ensures success for the painter: he can secure fame and another page for his book. Audubon imposes a paradoxical stillness on the most ethereal of creatures —wild birds do not stay put, they do not naturally lend themselves to observation. Nevertheless, he promoted himself as the only bird artist who drew birds from nature, the only “living bird artist”.⁹

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Audubon stands for the white man's agency in the nineteenth century, when new territories and their contents were claimed by naming them. His images perpetuate in another legible medium the lethal fixing power of the word because they rob birds of their movement and their sound in order to achieve a reproducible proof of their existence. Seeing comes before words and no other document can offer such direct testimony as the image. The painted image represents the moment of man's victory over the elusive, when reality is substituted for by a human code. An act of knowledge which, in Audubon's case, entailed the disappearance of the represented being, an act then mistakenly taken for a discovery and an addition. The painting also exerts the power of naming, and therefore of appropriation. The appetite for wild images of America —another confirmation of the power of ocularity— raises the question of why Audubon's subscribers wanted to buy his book, but more fundamentally, the question of *as who* or *as what* did they look —do we look now— at his pictures. John Berger (1972: 86-87) defined painting as an instrument of knowledge which denotes an assumption of property: it confirms the possession of all that is beautiful in the world. Audubon turned nature into a pleasurable spectacle; his precise drawings contained an aesthetic dimension, which turned them into a commodity for us. The spectator's relation with the image follows only one direction: we are observers/owners of an object once alive. The line between the scientific and the decorative fades away.

These ideological dilemmas are not forced into Govier's novel with a view to making Audubon either the victim or the mouthpiece of contemporary critical

apparatuses. The novel is built on careful attention to Audubon's life and historical background, attention which fuses the documentary and lyrical. The fluidity with which the novel is written, the philosophical digressions, the impact of the events themselves prevent an easy indictment of Audubon based on a failure to take into account commonly held beliefs of that day and age. Govier summons us to imagine the complications of that lost summer and restores us to a truth otherwise lost in the epic. She is not making Audubon too aware of his sins when the novel records the pain of every individual bird that the term "species" conceals. She has been faithful to Audubon's spirit as expressed in his journals: he registered every tragedy he left behind; he catalogued what birds and other animals do when wounded or about to be killed; his descriptions are full of birds trying to save their young from slaughter. He felt the tragedy first and then rejoiced at having found a new species ahead of his rivals. Then, he dissected the animal and measured its entrails.

That naming and killing happen simultaneously can be seen in the following passage from the chapter "Baffled":

The body is there, in the moss. In a moment Audubon is holding it in his hand, its wings spread open in his palm. He strokes its feathers. He can feel the life ebbing, the heartbeat diminish.

It is lovely. It was even lovelier when it sang, and now the air is lonely without it. When the young gentlemen catch up with him, he is still gazing into the palm of his hand.

"A new species", he says.

It was what he wanted, more than anything. It is what he must do here: find new species, to keep ahead of his rivals. To prove his worth, not just as a painter, but as a new kind of bird artist: an ornithologist who observes in the wild.

"I'll name it for you, Tom. Tom Lincoln's Finch. *Fringilla lincolni*"

In that instant the bird grows cooler and lighter in Audubon's hand.

"There must be another. And a nest as well".

The two young men are off to prowl the thickets, squatting, reaching with their guns. He tucks the little creature into his basket and races back to the *Ritpley*. He tries to remember the song but he cannot, exactly. Bachman is right when he tells him he needs bird-song lessons. (109-110)

In this passage, we become witnesses to Audubon's naming paradigm, the benign and abstract appropriation of the planet that Mary Pratt (1992:33) relates to a particular voice: urban, lettered, male, and authoritarian. It is this imaginary European nineteenth-century human being—an innocent man whose thirst for knowledge reduces to insignificance any possible harm caused by him—that Audubon tries to impersonate so that his experience rises to biographical record.¹⁰

The naturalist, as a desirable model of manhood, implied a detachment from the place and time in which animals made their first appearance and then died, an

abdication of experiential reality in favor of representation. After watching for a while a female bird and shooting her behind the head, Audubon thinks: “The time when he was one with the bird is all that ever was. And when the bird is gone it will be as if that time never happened” (279). However, literature, in contrast to science, makes the reenactment of the feeling possible. As Horace Engdahl (2002: 5) says about testimony literature: “[it] annihilates the time between the perpetration of a crime and our reading or its account”, the event never stops happening.

Birds eventually prove to be moulds for a name (Audubon 1986 II: 19). Audubon’s main regret is not that they disappear, but that they disappear before he is able to present his readers with their complete history.¹¹ Govier is recurrently able in her novel to capture the beauty and the gore that tinged Audubon’s life within a delicate narrative where violence is registered but overridden by classificatory excitement. And this level of the narrative, which embodies the inherent paradox in the notion of *still life*, parallels an investigation of the effect of taxonomies, especially those of organic distinctions, which western civilization has used for clarification and knowledge as well as for empowerment.¹²

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Natural science’s penetration into reality is analogous to that of language: what every language does is to cut up the world into units for the sake of linguistic identification. Audubon’s techniques of visuality show the same urge towards segmentation: he first separated a bird, or a couple of birds, from their natural context: a tree, a mountain, or a flock. Then he dissected their parts and reconstituted them, putting the birds in the foreground: neat, bulging out of the picture, as actors under the spotlight. Then he created an artificial background with plant species which enhanced the beauty of the main performers. Birds were painted as if caught in a climactic moment of self-exposure: Audubon did not register reality but encoded it. He even completed his pictures with drawings of parts of the bodies of birds for a better, more precise observation. For him, to think of nature otherwise would have been impossible, given the generic load of conventional observation of the wilderness. His shooting down and re-arranging becomes in the novel a metaphor for the power of language to falsely isolate elements from reality and for science’s complicity with this linguistic project.¹³

Some linguists, such as Benjamin Lee Whorf (1993: 240-244), have warned against the dangers of ascribing a semi-fictitious isolation to parts of experience through words. Western Indo-European languages —unlike Native American languages, for example— make us regard the universe as a collection of detached objects of different sizes because the supreme kind of word is the noun: “as such it enjoys the superior prestige traditionally attaching to the subject or thing class” (244). According to him, nouns persuade us to regard some elusive aspect of

nature's endless variety as a distinct thing, almost like a table or a chair, and this kind of conceptual partition is crucial for our understanding of reality because languages are not only for voicing ideas, or even the shaper of ideas, but "the program for the individual's mental activities" (212). That is, the linguistic phenomena govern the speakers. Whorf (1993: 240-241) claims that English and similar tongues are too ready to manipulate concepts as if they were nouns, distinct things, ecstatic essences:

What do different languages do, not with these artificially isolated objects but with the flowing face of nature in its motion, color, changing form; with clouds, beaches, and yonder flight of birds? For, as goes our segmentation of the face of nature, so goes our physics of the Cosmos.

That is, the restricting thinking patterns of a language are the restricting thinking patterns of science. Science —and Whorf (1993: 269-270) is talking about the science that depends on "Western Aryan grammar"—has not freed itself from some illusory linguistic necessities: "necessities for substances which are only necessities for substantives in certain sentence positions, necessities for forces, attractions, etc. which are only necessities for verbs in certain other positions, and so on".¹⁴

Audubon's naming in the previous passage from *Creation* reflects this ingrained necessity to deal with living beings as if they were substance, substantives, and therefore isolatable, objects that the mind fixes in separate terms for the purpose of knowledge. In his drawings, Audubon applied his language to the wilderness: what he did was to break down nature into parts in order to fix and secure his unities of "visual" lexicon: the birds.¹⁵

Whorf suggests that it would be better to deal with the manifestations of reality as if they were verb-like concepts: different grammars lead us to different types of observations and evaluations (221). If we translate this proposal to our damaging linguistic formulation of birds, it would follow that a bird could be better thought of embodied in a different grammatical function, such as a verb, for example, and so it could be conceptualized as a description of movement, or as the enactment of song, or as a performing fluidity, and that way it would be less susceptible to being transformed into an object which suits our current techniques of observation and linguistic branding. Thus its dying would not be discounted as a negligible aspect of our experience of "it".

Audubon and Bayfield lived a dilemma: their attempt at charting the wilderness put that very wilderness at risk.¹⁶ Their tragedy points up one of our human limitations: we cannot think, or live, without ordering systems (Hubbell 1999: 160). These characters embody the impulse to draw clear lines of definition and the coherence of their purpose is upset by their voyage to Labrador, a geography

which unremittingly blurs those desirable lines. Both in Govier's fiction and in Audubon's biographical notes, we see that Audubon temporarily becomes unable to draw birds, the loon, the Esquimaux curlew: "they are difficult to imitate or represent" (1986 I: 393-394, 422), he says. He also loses command of his so far reliable vocabulary and cannot find appropriate words to describe weather conditions or landscape structures: "This afternoon I thought the country looked more terrifyingly wild than ever; the dark clouds, casting their shadows on the stupendous masses of the rugged rock, lead the imagination into regions impossible to describe" (390). During his journey to the Gulf of Saint Lawrence Audubon felt that youth was leaving him (*Journals* I: 426, *Creation*: 266). And for the first time in his life, his vocation recedes: "I write now from a harbor which has no name, [...]; but it matters little" (*Journals* I: 406).

Some exploration narratives tied to colonialism show an epistemological instability when explorers come across landscapes that produce humility or fear: they recognize their inability to use maps and language to describe territory, things turn more and more indescribable:¹⁷ "Once underway, they are among rocks and islets, shoals and inlets so confusing they soon lose sight of what is mainland and what is an island masking the mainland, a kind of screen, or foil" (*Creation*: 191).

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This instability is produced by the underlying notion, which ruled Audubon's entire career, that nature is a decipherable book (see Souder 2004: 32). Audubon thinks through the novel's narrator: "There were moments among those islands, moments of perfect stillness, heat, sunlight, with nothing around except the horizon like the dial of a compass, and he the pin that held the needle in place" (190). However, his strong belief in natural life as a legible and measurable system was at times about to give way as we notice throughout "The Labrador Journal"; an uneasiness also reflected in the novel.¹⁸

In *Creation*, the Labradorian landscape is used as a de facto element which represents a resistance against the foundations of modern knowledge. Naming is seen as futile as the drawing of lines over water: the fog, the tide, the hidden rocks prevent the preciseness of maps. The novel is full of bewildering mixtures and "chaotic messes" (79) of water and rock, grass and earth, air and sea, day and night, which characterize Labrador's landscape and seascape. Far from presenting the undefined or the "undigested" as a problem, the novel strives for a mode of truth that is beyond fixed categories. Thus, it reenacts Robert Kroetsch's (1989: 61) notion of "pre-history"; he identifies a recurrent Canadian meta-narrative that expresses a will toward silence, a refusal to name, and an impulse towards the uncreated. "We return to the condition preceding creation", Kroetsch (1989: 56) had remarked when analyzing the need to count and to catalogue and the absurd implications of our naming.

Govier describes the North in a chapter entitled "Counting" as "the unpainted version", "created by taking away" (267), showing the same understanding of the impulse to unwind history for the purpose of merging with nature's basic elements. Govier anchors her narrative in the ideas and emotions implicated in the existence of the "perfect" non-descript (Labrador), and adds new nuances with her analysis of our fear of the collapse of distinctions. And she does so through her resuscitation of another real legendary figure swamped by the Canadian wilderness' reluctance to be catalogued and understood. But Govier is not only nurturing or debunking myths in *Creation*; she finds the reasons for Canadian inversions of the Bible and for their difficulty in getting past the second sentence of Genesis.

Significantly, Govier has chosen Audubon's written testimony to present a view of nature where neither God nor man has yet imposed any distinction. The sight of this dark, blurred, and shapeless Canadian landmass with no sign of grass or trees resembles "the earth without form" (*Genesis 4*) that the Supreme Being created at the beginning before he separated day and night, earth and land, and named them, and "saw that it was good". It is a useless space, where earth and water cannot be separated, still unnamed, a void and a chaos. This Canadian landscape seems deeply anchored in the impasse between creation and language. *Creation* implies that the existence of such a space, yet unnamed and unconquered by the imagination, entails hope, however dangerously it threatens self-preservation and our mentality. The journey to such a land implies a voyage through time into a truly unique condition, claiming existence and identity for certain manifestations of nature not yet possessed by the white man's language and indeed threatened by it. In this space Adam does not fail because human language is not the only instrument of presence.

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The characteristics of Labrador country take us back to an ancestral fear of impassable and appalling lands, as Audubon ironically remarks "where cupidity and the love of gold can alone induce man to reside for a while" (*Journals I*: 379).¹⁹ Canadian writers such as Katherine Govier do not invoke this pre-linguistic world with terror but as a path to inquiry into the consequences of pacifying chaos through rational systems. Labrador is seen as the proof that the world can exist without the confirmation of language by imagining creation as a step away from, and not necessarily toward language. This pointing in a different direction shows how wrong we have been about the redemptive potential of some of our efforts toward knowledge. In an early passage of the novel we read:

THE IMMENSITY AND THE SHEER STRANGENESS of this place never fails to astonish him. The way it can become, suddenly, one mass of rock and water and sky, one colour, and one deadly hazard to sailing. The opposing mood can strike: sun exploding out of cloud, water turning to turquoise and lichen to flame. And this is only the beginning. (8)

This passage describes the beginning of Audubon's journey to the North. The allusion to the first lines of "In the Beginning" in the "Genesis" is patent. But the view of a primeval sea depicted in the novel calls for enjoyment. It is so because *the aesthetic* has not been tainted by *the taxidermal* yet, and the novel's narrator seems to relish the moment when all matter is one single miraculous mixture and taxonomies have not yet been forced upon it.

Notes

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². Some well-known contemporary critics, such as Charles Taylor (1996), claim that the self is inescapably linguistic in essence, achieving its status only through narrative. According to Keith Harvey (1997: 1), for example, our verbal resources are the principal means we have to alleviate the effect of experience on us. As George Melnyk (2003: x) has put it: "We know that reality is separate from language and beyond language, although language claims to offer us the truth of reality. At the same time, we are not comfortable in a reality beyond the explanations of our language. If we find ourselves in a situation that is unexplainable we become either fearful or we struggle to find within our language some explanation. Trapped in the discourse created by our culture and our time, we are lost without it".

³. The classificatory craze worked differently for men and for women. Whereas men made themselves through feats of

geographical and scientific discovery, botany was thought to be the science amenable to women's care-giving aptitudes. Their keenness for plants suited perfectly their aspirations towards mental cultivation and artistry. Botany, as a rational recreation which gave order to nature, was thought to teach moral and religious lessons (see Shteir 1996: 173). Audubon's lover, Maria, is a clear example of the women's stance at the time: she was only allowed to paint the vegetation around the specimens that Audubon had previously discovered, captured, named, stuffed, and drawn. Her role was to add color and fantasy to the background of his pictures. She complains to Audubon in the novel: "Yours is the world; mine is the parlour? Yours is the frontier and mine the garden? Yours is the bird and mine the bud?" (115).

⁴. The image of Canada as a God-forsaken piece of land that precludes verbalization has been typified, among others, by well-known critical pieces of Northrop Frye (1967), Margaret Atwood (1972), Dick Harrison (1977), etc. Also in poems widely used in Canadian Literature classes: Douglas LePan ("A Country without a Mythology"), Atwood ("Progressive Insanities of a Pioneer" and *The*

Journals of Susanna Moodie), etc. Lecker (1991), Corse (1997), Moss (1999), Hulan (2002), or Blodgett (2003) have analyzed the prototypical patterns of Canadianness in literature created mainly for the sake of a homogeneous sense of nation. Many have been the attacks against the belief in a recurrent plot in Canadian literature, but although this initial canon has been widely contested, the idea of the Canadian landscape as a thorny psychological challenge still proves enticing for authors. Also for foreign teachers and students (see Stanzel 1986). Definitions of national character revolving around the ideas of invisibility and elusiveness have served to add strength to these views: see, for example, Cook (1984), Davies (1986), or Callaghan (1988).

⁵. For a gender-focused critique of Kroetsch's proposal, see Dorscht (1994).

⁶. Newfoundland and Labrador remained for centuries undefined colonies for the crown: their fishing resources and topographical characteristics turned them into places for trading, not for settling (Taylor 1994: 292, 300). Their political status was further complicated by the shifting of borders between the U.S.A. and Canada and also within the boundaries of some Canadian provinces (Taylor 1994: 409). Labrador has also historically represented a challenge for explorers due to its nihilistic appeal, and accounts of explorations ending in death in the Labrador wild have been popular reading in the twentieth century, such as Dillon Wallace's *The Lure of the Labrador Wild. The Story of the Exploring Expedition conducted by Leonidas Hubbard, Jr.* Also in the twenty-first century, such as Roberta Buchanan's and Bryan Green's edition of Mrs. Hubbard's *A Woman's Way through Unknown Labrador: An Account of the Exploration of the Nascaupe and George Rivers*. Mina Hubbard's expedition managed to complete her late husband's failed attempt at mapping Labrador.

⁷. Here one cannot avoid noticing that Audubon, both as ruthless hunter and as spokesman of preservation, is caught up in what Mary Louise Pratt (1992: 15) has

described as "that hegemonic reflex that troubles westerners even as it continues to be second nature to them".

⁸. Extreme cruelty to animals is normally beyond the reach of moral judgment in Audubon's journals —see "The Missouri River Journals" (1843) (*Journals I and II*)—, but it became a problem for him in Labrador, especially when he witnessed the abominations of the eggers (see the episode "The Eggers of Labrador", *Journals I*: 406-411). The pain inflicted on animals is also reflected in Govier's *Creation* (see pp. 74 and 201, for example).

⁹. He recounts in a chapter of his journals entitled "My Style of Drawing Birds" (*Journals II*) that his art came to him as a revelation: after hopelessly trying to imitate motion in birds by looking at dead specimens, he went to the river and shot the first kingfisher he saw. After stuffing it, he devised a complicated system of wires which allowed him to articulate the pierced bird's limbs in the desired position by fixing them on a board, simulating motion and vividness.

¹⁰. A similarly revealing example is analyzed by Gordon Sayre (2002: 36-37). In an episode of the account of an early exploration, in Le Page du Pratz's *Histoire de la Louisiane* (1758), the leader of an expedition of men who were observing a beaver team build a dam killed one of the beavers for the sake of disinterested scientific enquiry. His utopian image of himself as harmless observer prevented him from noticing the incompatibility of his approach.

¹¹. See http://www.audubon.org/bird/BoA/BOA_index.html (Last retrieved 27 February, 2011), a webpage which collects Audubon's account of birds already extinct or endangered at his time. Some of the birds Audubon comments on are related to his experience in Labrador.

¹². Although the novel does not deal with another terrifying use of taxonomy, that of human classifications, it is mandatory to note that, since organic distinctions helped to delineate the exact boundaries that each

being occupied, they were fitfully applied to the human races in order to prove the superiority of the Caucasian type or "knowledge-species": "no such nondescript as a white savage was every discovered" (Gutjarh 2001: 757), read one of the antiabolitionist tracts which circulated in America before and after the Civil War. The danger of the descriptive apparatus of natural history manifested itself more tellingly when authors of those tracts, also of phrenology treatises, show their disgust at intermarriages which blur the boundaries among human species and incur in "the foul sin of amalgamation" (Gutjarh 2001: 762). The savage was precisely defined because of his blindness to "fundamental distinctions between people" (Wahrman 2001: 1247). See also Young (1995), chapters 3 and 7.

¹³. In a different order, this time the appropriation of other peoples through the particular naming systems of an imperialist culture, *Orientalism* by Edward Said shows how a refinement in vocabulary did not historically serve to truly identify with Oriental cultures but to produce palatable or convenient scientific and artistic discourses distant from those cultures, i.e., to produce indexes that distorted and harmed the "subjects" under study.

¹⁴. All languages perform this artificial chopping up of the flow of existence in a different way. As speakers of a language, we project the linguistic relationships of a particular language upon the universe and see them there (Whorf 1993: 262). However, Whorf's thesis is that there are languages, such as Apache, Nootka, Shawnee and, in general American Indian languages, where separate terms in English are not so separate, since they are made to come together in synthetic creations (241). According to Whorf,

the English technique of apprehending the universe depends on the contrast of two artificial classes, substantives and verbs, which produces a bipartite ideology of nature (242).

¹⁵. For a discussion, from a different perspective, on the parallelism between European visual codes and verbal structures, see New (1997: 22-23).

¹⁶. Audubon was obliged to manufacture his own version of reality before the times in which photography could fix life. The daguerreotype was invented one year after the fourth and final volume of the Folio edition of *Birds of America* was completed, in 1838.

¹⁷. See, for example, Rick Van Noy's interpretation of *The Exploration of the Colorado River of the West and Its Tributaries* (1875).

¹⁸. Apart from the references already mentioned, Audubon mentions the appalling or indescribable character of the Labrador wilderness on pp. 392, 394, 397, 403, 406, and 424 of his *Journals* I.

¹⁹. The absolute degree of wilderness of Labrador in the imaginary collective of the time can be seen, for example in an excerpt from Henry David Thoreau's *Journal*, August 30, 1856: "It is in vain to dream of a wildness/ distant from ourselves. There is none such./ It is the bog in our brains and bowels, the/ primitive vigor of Nature in us, that inspires/ that dream. I shall never find in the wilds of / Labrador any greater wildness than in some recess/ of Concord, i.e. than I import into it". (in Schama 1995: epigraph). In his journals, Thoreau often refers to Labrador as the paradigm of the wild and fearful space.

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