

The Canadian Wilderness – a Realm for Individuation – Beaty Popescu

*In this talk, accompanied by images, I will explore how the experience of being immersed in the sublime, but also in the tremendum of the **Canadian wilderness**, fuels the process of individuation. Over many years I have backpacked, skied and canoed into parts of the northern, western, central and eastern Canadian wilderness. I will discuss how being in their very presence, these remarkable spaces challenge us to become more conscious.*

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Wilderness can be understood as the most undisturbed, natural areas left on the planet. In the main such areas are biologically intact, but evidence of minor human impact does not disqualify them from being considered wilderness.

The essence of our relationship to wild nature is that it is a place where we can re-a-tune to the rhythms, and dynamics we share with her, be it Physis - the primeval Goddess of nature, or Gaia – the great Earth Goddess, or Demeter – Goddess of seasons and of the fertility of the Earth.

Wilderness is a place where we are invited to move out of chronological time, or to pass beyond Chronos – father time, and drift into in-determinate time or Kairos. For the ancient Greeks this meant the supreme moment, or that moment in which everything happens. Kairos points to the unified field where synchronicities abound and where conscious awareness and the archetypal conjoin.

Wilderness is a place where the Spirits, Goddesses and Gods dwell, and where the potential to stumble into mysterious realms exists. In world mythologies and pantheons, we find most aspects of wild nature given a great variety of imaginative forms. Seen from this perspective, we awake to the reality that Canada's wilderness is home to myriad archetypal 'Beings', be they in the form of aboriginal spirits and deities, or in the guise of members of other pantheons.

In Canada we are blessed with vast stretches of fairly intact, wild land. Places we can seek out to re- 'member' ourselves, to gather all parts of ourselves together into an indivisible whole. Where we can travel into the wilds with Hermes, the God of transitions and boundaries, the intercessor between mortals and the divine, to be taken beyond the

collective, the rational, and the concrete.

My friend and I were heading into the Lewis Hills, for a week long backpacking trip.

The old Subaru station-wagon sped along the dirt roads put in by the logging company. Once you turned off the Trans-Canada Highway, about twenty kilometers south of Corner Brook Newfoundland, you found yourself on well maintained logging roads. Yet the deeper you penetrated into the wilderness the more eroded and difficult to negotiate these became.

After about fifty kilometers we reached the peridotite massif called the Lewis Hills. (Images can be easily found by googling - Lewis Hills Nfld images.)

These hills, actually plateau lands, are the remnants of plate tectonics. One of the most interesting bedrock, found in western Newfoundland, and which the Lewis Hills are composed of, is peridotite. This rock originates from many kilometers below the ocean floor, and was pushed into position when the American and African tectonic plates collided 500 million years ago.

What is so interesting about peridotite is its toxic influence on vegetation. Due to its high levels of heavy metals, vegetation is unable to break it down into fertile soil, into which it would otherwise seed itself and take root. An alchemical property of peridotite is that when it is exposed to the elements, this otherwise hard black rock, oxidizes into a rich, red-golden color.

Having arrived at the foot of the Lewis Hills we strapped on boots and heavy packs, took hold of our sturdy hiking sticks and headed into wild nature. The first hours took us through long grasses, very muddy and wet ground where moose tracks abound. We were confronted with large areas of stunted spruce thickets that needed to be very carefully negotiated.

After a steady upward climb, we were rewarded with a breathtaking view of the Lewis Hills stretching before us. We could see that it would take one long descent into a river valley, fording the ice-cold water in bare feet, climbing up onto the plateau and hiking toward Petley's

pond, before being able to set up our camp for the night.

Petley's pond is a small lake on the north western corner of the Lewis Hill plateau.

Once we reached the top of the plateau we found ourselves in very strange territory. Pretty well everywhere we looked we saw stretches of ocher rock rubble. And while relatively flat on top, the terrain none the less rose and fell, and had the odd cliff and piles of large chunks of peridotite.

Using map and compass we found our way toward the pond, hiking the last rise before beholding the spectacular view over Petleys pond, and the land and forests far below.

It was on this evening that I experienced a splendor that not only moved me to tears but has stayed with me, like an archetypal dream, ever since. The following event has continued to change me and connect me to the great mystery, which is beyond our comprehension.

From where I was sitting I could see the peridotite plateau stretch to where it was bounded by space. Its edges fell two thousand feet into the surrounding landscape. At that time the sun was beginning to set, causing the ocher peridotite to take on an intense golden glow. Petley's pond, a body of water about half by a quarter kilometer in size, void of plant growth, lay as a deep aqua-marine jewel, in this golden setting.

The great orange disk of the sun was sinking toward the horizon, to my left, pulling up the pale, full moon on my right.

For an eternal moment the sun hovered at the western edge of the golden plateau, while the silver moon sat on its eastern edge, and the blue translucent water danced between these two giants.

In that moment in the Lewis Hills, the heavens, earth and human consciousness aligned. I was graced to witness the sacred dance of: Hera (Queen of the heavens), Helios (God of the sun), Artemis (Goddess of the moon), the Limnades (fresh water Nymphs who preside over

lakes), and Gaia (the great Goddess of the earth).

Here the sacred manifested outside of that time-space continuum we make a habit of living in. And here we meet the sublime, made transcendent through the presence of the numinous.

In 1937 Jung wrote: (CW 11 para 6) [The numinosum is] 'a dynamic agency or effect not caused by an arbitrary act of will. On the contrary, it seizes and controls the human subject, who is always rather its victim than creator. The numinosum - whatever its cause may be – is an experience of the subject independent of [her or] his will... The numinosum is either a quality belonging to a visible object or the influence of an invisible presence that causes a peculiar alteration of consciousness.'

And I was seized and changed by the experience. I felt myself as a small fleshy creature gripped and opened by a mystery that was beyond intellectual comprehension. But I was not only observing this grand event, but feeling myself a part of it. What changed me was the felt sense that I was not a separate, finite being, but indeed a part of unknown worlds and realities.

Jung expressed that the encounter with the numinous was like the feeling of being touched by the supra-ordinate Deity. And Rudolf Otto (in 'The Idea of the Holy'), spoke of the sublime as an authentic schema of the holy. P 46. This numinous event, which unfolded in the wilds of Newfoundland, was indeed an encounter with the supra-ordinary, the sacred and the archetypal.

Years later, on another trip into the Lewis Hills, we entered the plateau lands from the north. This time we chose to ford a river and hike up into a narrow and spectacular gorge that led steeply to the top of the peridotite massive. For four days we explored the north-western edge of the plateau which faces toward the gulf of the great St Lawrence and up the straight of Labrador. The weather was steady and warm.

But on the fifth day winds came up and a heavy sky began to boil. You do not want to be on a high plateau in the midst of a powerful storm, exposed and vulnerable. As soon as we

realized the weather was seriously changing, we headed to the east where our descent awaited us. By the time we got there it was too late as the light had begun to fall. We had no choice but to find a protected spot in between the peridotite boulders, where wind and rain would not flatten the tent, soak us to the bone or blow away our precious body heat. Hypothermia, which is a killer, can cause you to lose body heat to the point where you can no longer survive.

Exhausted, extremely hungry and at our wits end, we set up the tent as quickly as possible. And just as we had it set up and were trying to anchor it into the rocky ground, the rising wind, or Harpyiai, demons of storm gusts, grabbed hold of the tent and took it from us. It tumbled over the sharp rocks, being ripped and frayed as it went. We ran after it in dim light and over slippery and rocky-terrain. And with little blood sugar left in our bodies, we had to be extremely careful. Luckily before the tent was swept over the edge into the two thousand foot drop, we got hold of it.

We fought against the pummeling wind, and carried the tent to our small protected niche, threw our heavy knapsacks inside, placed large rocks into each tent-corner and dove our depleted selves into its enclosing space. Luckily the outer shell of the tent had taken most of the damage, leaving the inner walls relatively in tact. As the night wore on we had to work at keeping our sleeping bags as dry as possible, by wiping and collecting the water that was leaking into the tent. All we were able to eat that night was raw oatmeal, as cooking was not an option.

Needless to say we got very little sleep. The rain lashed hard and the wind rattled the tent all night long. By the next morning the storm was sitting on top of us. The upper clouds were dropping heavy rain, while the lower clouds were settled on top of the plateau. We got dressed, put on our rain gear, packed our belongings, and with great effort fighting with the elements, rolled up the water logged tent, and stuffed its various components into our backpacks.

We now needed to find our way along the edge of the plateau and to the head of the craggy and steep gorge that would lead us to the river some two thousand feet below. The thick fog

or Nephelai (cloud Nymphs), allowing us to only see fifteen feet ahead, created the very real possibility of walking off the edge of the plateau.

We got out the compass and map (which is kept in a water proof, plastic envelope), found the mark we had made on it the night before, showing exactly where we were camped. We set a course through the fog, across the land and into the head of the gorge.

In such difficult circumstances you are on full alert. All your senses are working over-time, everything is striving for survival. There is an inner stillness that comes over you as all of your libido energy focuses in on each moment, each foot fall, each decision.

Once in the gorge we no longer needed the map and compass as we knew that it basically led straight down to the bottom of the plateau. This breathtaking gorge was cut deep into the flank of the Lewis Hill plateau. It started as a rivulet forming a shallow bed and quickly fell downward along the steep gradient that the water has been carving for thousands of years. In a one to two kilometer stretch the canyon drops two thousand feet. At the top the descent was over huge rocks and often beside or in fast moving water that plummeted over falls and impossible boulder chaos. The small brook up top gathered more and more water from the steep cliffs on either side of this sublime gorge. And with the deluge of rain, the flow had become a dangerous and powerful torrent.

The roar of the raging water quickened my heart. We had to be extremely mindful of every decision we made as we negotiated our way down the wet and slippery rocks. One misstep and you could easily loose your life. Thanatos the God of Death was walking with us.

The poet Hesiod in his Theogony writes of Thanatos: '... Death ... has a heart of iron, and his spirit within him is pitiless ...: whomsoever of men he has once seized he holds fast: and he is hateful even to the deathless gods.'

I felt as if I was fighting for my life in the middle of a tempest, set upon by raging Zeus and the wrathful Harpies, while Thanatos patiently waited to see if he could get hold of me.

With time, and as we inched our way down toward the bottom of the two thousand foot gorge, the storm began to let up. But as we came out of the steepest part of the descent we were confronted with the flooded river that spilled over a wide field of round cobbles. While no longer in imminent threat of the plummeting torrent, our tired legs and ankles were now stressed by walking on slick, and rough cobbles, for many kilometers. Here the braids of the river changed dramatically depending on the volume of water. It was not always evident which the easiest and safest way to go, was.

Here, Hydros, the God of primordial waters, was flowing all around us. According to the Orphic Theogonies, Hydros was the child of Chaos, the first primordial god to emerge alongside Creation (Thesis) and mud. He was the earth-encircling fresh-water river, the source of the Gods.

We often had to cross his many river braids, which demanded taking our boots off and walking in flesh-numbing water. With the added volume of water from the storm, we were confronted with a deep and fast flowing current. Therefore the biggest challenge became staying upright in the fast water, while walking barefoot on cobbles that were slippery and at times sharp. Without sturdy hiking sticks and each other to hold on to, the crossings would have been nearly impossible, and Hydros would have swallowed us back into his primeval self.

And once again Thanatos walked with us. My pack weighed thirty-five to forty pounds, so holding my balance while negotiating very fast moving water was difficult. Falling over into the cold surge, and being held under by the heavy pack, awoke me to how vulnerable we were to being cut off from breath.

In 'The Idea of the Holy' (p 63) Roger Otto states, 'Nothing can be found in all the world of natural feelings, bearing so immediate an analogy ... to the religious consciousness of ineffable, unutterable mystery, the 'absolute other' - as the incomprehensible, unwonted, enigmatic thing - in whatever place or guise it may confront us. This will be all the more true if the uncomprehended thing is something at once mighty and fearful, for then there is a twofold analogy with the numinous – that is to say, an analogy not only with the mysterium aspect of

it, but with the tremendous aspect, and the latter again in the two directions already suggested of fearfulness proper and sublimity.'

A sense of complete vulnerability strikes, when you feel the overwhelming power that nature can unleash around you. All at once you take your life deadly seriously. Embraced by natural forces that are so much bigger than you are, definitely puts the fear of the Goddesses and Gods in you.

Another unforgettable experience of the tremendous I encountered, was when I was hiking in Kluane National Park, in the south western corner of the Yukon, during the grizzly bear migration. The park had been closed the week before because of the spring migration, giving these massive bears space for themselves. (Images can be easily found by googling – Kluane National Park Yukon images, Kaskawulsh glacier Yukon images, Grizzly bears images .)

Needless to say we had great fear of the huge predator, and at same time found ourselves in the most sublime landscape on the way to and back from the Kaskawulsh glacier. The entire hike into and out from the base of the glacier we sang and made as much noise as possible to alert any 'ursus arctos horribili' that we were present. Surprising a grizzly is not a very wise thing to do. We heard one week later that a woman had been killed and eaten, and her husband badly mauled by a grizzly, on the same hike we had taken.

Bears are massive and wild, with heavy powerful paws, sharp claws, huge teeth. One of the largest carnivorous land mammals, certainly in the northern hemisphere, bears have been for many cultures a sacred creature that can move between worlds.

Some archaeologists believe that bear worship has been practiced as far back as the paleolithic period among the Neanderthal societies, where bears were the focus of magico-religious and spiritual veneration. And claim that the bear is the oldest European Deity.

Almost every Native American culture that lives or lived in proximity to major bear populations has a commonality of customs, mythology, legends and ceremonies involving the animal. The

bear is a powerful totem which originally sprang, among other qualities, from the knowledge that it was one of the few animals that could easily kill humans. Such fear-inspired respect was reserved for only the strongest of spirits. Bears are also revered as spirits capable of re-birth, for they die into winter, and are re-born in spring, thus bridging this world with that of the spirit world.

The bear is the animal of the virgin huntress-goddess Artemis, 'the one unto herself', who like the she-bear can also be ferocious and dismember anyone who intrudes upon her sphere.

In alchemy the bear corresponds to the potentially devouring affect-laden energies of the unconscious which can seize and destroy us, especially if we are disrespectful and underestimate its significance.

Here we see how appalling frightfulness, and the most exalted sacredness, can go hand in hand. The fearful and the dreadful, felt along with the sublime, is the tremendum.

As we have seen the sublime, the numinous and the tremendum, denote that which is extraordinary and beyond understanding, and can manifest as Spirit, as Deity, as symbol of the Self.

Jung writes in 'Psychology and Religion', par 391, that 'The ego stands to the Self as the moved to the mover, ... the Self surround[s] the ego on all sides and [is] therefore supra-ordinate to it.'

And in the Lewis Hills and the Yukon, I was deeply moved by the encounters with the Self, manifesting in its many guises. I felt embraced by the supra-ordinate.

In 'The Symbolic Quest', p 219, Edward Whitmont writes, 'This archetype [referring to the archetype of the Self] expresses itself in form of predestined wholeness ... the specific wholeness of an individual life, which seeks fulfillment. It may be viewed as an archetype of a central authority, a unitary field, which governs conscious as well as unconscious functioning, outer as well as inner reality; and it manifests itself in both realms in ways which appear to be

governed by the laws of correspondence rather than by laws of cause and effect. Jung refers to this phenomenon as synchronicity ... Outer events quite beyond our conscious control seem to correspond to and give form to various fundamental unconscious trends that are striving toward expression.'

These journeys I undertake into the wilderness, are a questing to encounter and to be united with the great mystery, that trans-personal power that transcends the ego. I immerse myself in wild nature to touch into the synchronic where the archetypal that I yearn to consciously connect with, takes form, be it in the sublime landscape, in the drama of the heavens, in the shape shifting weather or in the presence of the awesome grizzly.

(Edward) Whitmont, ("The Symbolic Quest", p 221f,) writes:

'That state or life dynamism in which consciousness realizes itself as a split and separate personality that yearns and strives toward union with its unknown and unknowable partner, the Self, Jung called the *individuation process*. It is a conscious striving for becoming what one 'is' or rather 'is meant to be'. However since the goal of this process, the Self, is like an '*a priori* existent', 'the God within us,' individuation is always a road, a way, a process, travel or travail, a dynamism...'

It can be a conscious choice to enter wild nature to seek some form of union with the archetypal there. To take yourself into the wild realms of the Spirits and Deities where you might come to know more about who you are meant to be.

(Edward) Whitmont, ("The Symbolic Quest", p 230,) continues:

'There can be no greater psychological tension then that existing between the opposites of finite, stabilized ego and infinite,...,unexpected Self. In their ...encounter lies continuous renewal; the conscious experiencing of their conflict can be most painful, but when a relationship has been established through the symbolic approach, life becomes increasingly full and meaningful ... and unexpected.'

The direct encounters, described above, with the archetypal and mysteries revealing themselves through wild nature, sets into motion a powerful meaning-making process. The

sublime, the numinous and the tremendum charge the moon, the sun, the aqua-marine water, the golden rock, the threatening storm and the gargantuan grizzly, with an otherworldly power that transforms them into charged symbols and mythic largess. The renewal and expansion of ego awareness from such encounters, comes in at least two ways:

One is in the exhilarating and ecstatic feeling of aliveness, that manifests after such experiences, after surviving these conjoinings with the great Self.

Another form, which is deeply informed by the former, is the symbol-making process. This appears in dream material, in creative expression, and in reading and researching to bring more conscious understanding to these mysterious encounters where the veil opens and ego consciousness is touched by unknown mysteries.