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**Nostalgia, the Liminal, and Feral Love
in Guillermo Enrique Hudson's "Green Mansions"**

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"One is always at home in one's past."

~Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*

1. Introduction: *Nostalgium*

If our reminiscence of early memories tends to be highly selective and for the most part unreliable or incomplete, precipitating us back to the few moments that are amplified by emotional hyperbole, then nostalgia is real only in its sentimentality. Sentimentality itself is a powerful and deceiving elixir, even when our childhood mates assure us that "it was never just so." To dwell in the liminal space between 'what was' and 'what could have been' is to create reminiscences that are demi-plausible, that one wishes had happened, a form of delusional wishful thinking -- a *microgenesis* of myth making.

But when idolized versions of what our lives could have been--green forests and pastures, care-free play, a love that seems impregnably eternal, and other sweet-sour moments--are sold to us as very improbable beginnings, then one can be equally cajoled into a yearning for false nostalgia. The ad industry and never-was "nature" excel at this sort of mass impressment.

Moreover, our fear of missing out (FOMO) has become an all too frequent and intensely felt phenomenon with the accelerated development and pace of virtual social media (Simon, 1982; Przybylski et al 2013). This is a more invested effort than to occasionally fix in time significant but patchy moments captured, like some of us did long ago, with a *Kodak Instamatic*. Today's fear of missing out, it seems, extends to the capture and all-too-public revealing of and reveling in every moment of every day; too many selfies and smiles than is prudent, decent, or practical to socially accommodate. This is not the case of living in the moment Zen, even with the best cup of tea in a crooked cup.

Clearly, and as De Vries wrote (1959), "Nostalgia, ... ain't what it used to be."

Interestingly, becoming falsely nostalgic has elements of the feral: today is predictable and banal, yesterday was open-ended, mysterious, and exciting; our smaller statures aggrandizing realities. The convenience of false memories makes for wilder and taller tales.

A better crafted and honestly novelistic exercise in nostalgia is William Henry Hudson's (Guillermo Enrique Hudson) *Green Mansions: A Romance of The Tropical Forest* (1904). Hudson published *Green Mansions* (GMs) a full decade before Edgar Rice Burroughs published his *Tarzan of the Apes* (1914) in book format. Hudson's novel is selected here as being a better exemplar of *ecopsychological* themes and sentiments and thus of a more authentic *ferality* and nostalgia. In essence, Abel's and Rima's story (GMs), Tarzan's endless adventures, and pastoral reminiscences are attempts at selective reconveyance of imaginings sweet and dear, fantastic and telluric. *That many facts are invented, borrowed or played up in their importance is a manifestation of what is meant by nostalgia. That some facts are not easily categorized makes them liminal material: Snow shadows, the spaces between leaves, and dancing coywolves.*

With Hudson's work as an idea foundation, the following sections explore, in addition to the exemplar *ecopsychological* themes and sentiments, the degree to which the gist of any given narrative, including those based on past reminiscences and nostalgia, can be evaluated, somehow, on the basis of authentic versus "hear-say" or impossible experiences. When grandpa told us with a straight, wrinkled face and Norwegian accent, "I used to walk three miles through four feet of snow to get to school...without socks," few of us would want to challenge his recollections, particularly when he could show us his amputated toes. People were a lot shorter in those days too.

2. The Jungle and Rima as *Nostalgiums*

Hudson was born in Argentina in 1841 and grew up around *Chascomús*, his intellect early impressed by natural history and the wildness of a frontier that was not linked with railroads to Buenos Aires until the late 1860s. His love for birds took him to the remoteness of Patagonia. His travels there could not be replicated today to the extent that 'wildness' suffers at the hands of 'progress.' These were journeys on foot, hoof, muzzle tack, wool, pistols, leather, and brass. By the time Hudson arrived in England, in 1874, to live there permanently after the Argentinian tumultuous internal trine of the decade before (civil war, the suppression of indigenous revolts, and an emerging national identity), he had accumulated an enviable encyclopedic knowledge of biology, anthropology, and psychology to add factual fodder and imagination to thirty-one publications of fiction and non-fiction material.

In the context of his later life as an author living in England and finally becoming "English," and consistent with an exploration of feral life, Hudson himself is "an exotic," a child of American parents, born and raised in wild Argentina, even in his time, less a republic than puzzle pieces of contested municipalities and territories. It could be argued that this authentic *ferality* endears him to a Victorian public eager to read tales of adventure. In this, he inhabits and projects an identity conveniently liminal, one of the many factors of his success. One can image the sort of projections invested in Hudson while in England: the wild American child, wilder yet for having been born in South America, and wilder still, for having chosen a life of adventure. A saucy Mark Twain could not have done better.

Hudson's real-life experiences inspired other adventure-prone novelists such as Ernest Hemmingway, who specifically recommended two works by Hudson: *The Purple Land* (1885) and *Far Away and Long Ago* (1918).

It is more challenging to deduce what concoction of memories as real experiences, secret loves forlorn, and acquaintances inspires him to write GMs. His second novel, *A Crystal Age* (1887), anticipates plot lines found in GMs. This last novel has been described as a *pastoral utopia* (Pfaelzer, 1984), given recurring "ecopsychological" themes that, with Hudson's other novels, are said to have inspired back-to-nature movements in England.

We know he remained a bachelor until his mid-thirties when he married his landlady, a singer, Ms. Emily Wingrave. And as far as we can surmise, Ms. Wingrave was no Rima, the dulce and feral heroine of GMs, except for her singing talents.

Hudson's detailed but alas imaginary descriptions of jungle life and ecology set in "Venezuela" are rooted not in his wanderings around Patagonia, but in his experiences around *Chascomús* and Paraguay. Some early authors questioned the degree to which Hudson knew enough about jungles at all to set GMs in such a recondite and unknown region of Venezuela. For example, Roberts (1924) quizzically, and perhaps with a touch of writer's envy, stated the following:

Especially it is marvelous that he [Hudson] so caught the wonder and power of the tropic forest, for never in his life did he come near one and enter into its mysteries. The Pampa of the Argentine and the grey plains and rolling country of Patagonia are practically treeless, and the biggest woodland he ever knew was in England. He had not seen palms or tree ferns or any jungle ... It was from Bates and Bell and Wallace, that he drew the spirit of the woods, and he placed the story in Venezuela, which he had never seen ... (1924: 118).

Indeed, this comment aside (made three years after Hudson dies and cannot make a response) it is nevertheless consistent with the exaggerated notion of nostalgia elaborated here.¹ In fact, it is the mark of a great writer, of his/her inventiveness, to do so. GMs is, after all, a novel. It is "marvelous" indeed that Hudson writes about the "jungle" in incidental terms focusing on elemental forces and their effects on mood--psychology. As some of these passages illustrate, a jungle theater from which love emerges, personified in Rima, was already rooted in keen and expert observations and a passion for natural places. Here are two at-length passages, one a description of light filtering through the jungle canopy and the other the protagonist's, Abel, "ecopsychological" response:

Here Nature is unapproachable with her green, airy canopy, a sun-impregnated cloud—cloud above cloud; and though the highest may be unreached by the eye, the beams yet filter through, illumining the wide spaces beneath—chamber succeeded by chamber, each with its own special lights and shadows. Far above me, but not nearly so far as it seemed, the tender gloom of one such chamber or space is traversed now by a golden shaft of light falling through some break in the upper foliage, giving a strange glory to everything it touches—projecting leaves, and beard-like tuft of moss, and snaky bush-rope. And in the most open part of that most open space, suspended on nothing to the eye, the shaft reveals a tangle of shining silver threads—the web of some large tree-spider. (Chapter 2: 1904)

And:

Thus in idleness, with such thoughts for company, I spent my time, glad that no human being, savage or civilized, was with me. It was better to be alone to listen to the monkeys that chattered without offending; to watch them occupied with the unserious business of their lives. With that luxuriant tropical nature, its green clouds and illusive aerial spaces, full of mystery, they harmonized well in language, appearance, and motions—mountebank angels, living their fantastic lives far above earth in a half-way heaven of their own. (Chapter 2: 1904)

He also makes this contrast, in Chapter One, which is consistent with his own experiences in Argentina during long stretches of political chaos and war—his escapades into nature perhaps his only solace. Abel's psychological turmoil that still lingers from the political violence and failed

¹ Roberts 'knew' Hudson, but not well enough to recount in full the early years of his enigmatic subject. His book is written mostly in admiration. Generally speaking, it is a good introduction to the man and author.

enterprises he had engaged in previously are his central preoccupation before the power of natural spaces subdues his darker and morose passions:

Doubtless into the turbid tarn of my heart some sacred drops had fallen—from the passing birds, from that crimson disk which had now dropped below the horizon, the darkening hills, the rose and blue of infinite heaven, from the whole visible circle; and I felt purified and had a strange sense and apprehension of a secret innocence and spirituality in nature—a prescience of some bourn, incalculably distant perhaps, to which we are all moving; of a time when the heavenly rain shall have washed us clean from all spot and blemish. This unexpected peace which I had found now seemed to me of infinitely greater value than that yellow metal I had missed finding, with all its possibilities. My wish now was to rest for a season at this spot, so remote and lovely and peaceful, where I had experienced such unusual feelings and such a blessed disillusionment.

This was the end of my second period in Guayana: the first had been filled with that dream of a book to win me fame in my country, perhaps even in Europe; the second, from the time of leaving the Queneveta mountains, with the dream of boundless wealth—the old dream of gold in this region that has drawn so many minds since the days of Francisco Pizarro. (Chapter 1: 1904)

Out of the depths of a forbidden jungle perceived and experienced with such emotion and sense of revelation appears Rima, first as a teasing bird calling during several days and at last in the flesh:

Something else was there, which I did see; instantly my cautious advance was arrested. I stood gazing with concentrated vision, scarcely daring to breathe lest I should scare it away.

It was a human being—a girl form, reclining on the moss among the ferns and herbage, near the roots of a small tree. One arm was doubled behind her neck for her head to rest upon, while the other arm was held extended before her, the hand raised towards a small brown bird perched on a pendulous twig just beyond its reach. She appeared to be playing with the bird, possibly amusing herself by trying to entice it on to her hand; and the hand appeared to tempt it greatly, for it persistently hopped up and down, turning rapidly about this way and that, flirting its wings and tail, and always appearing just on the point of dropping on to her finger. From my position it was impossible to see her distinctly, yet I dared not move. I could make out that she was small, not above four feet six or seven inches in height, in figure slim, with delicately shaped little hands and feet. Her feet were bare, and her only garment was a slight chemise-shaped dress reaching below her knees, of a whitish-gray colour, with a faint lustre as of a silky material. Her hair was very wonderful; it was loose and abundant, and seemed wavy or curly, falling in a cloud on her shoulders and arms. Dark it appeared, but the precise tint was indeterminable, as was that of her skin, which looked neither brown nor white. All together, near to me as she actually was, there was a kind of mistiness in the figure which made it appear somewhat vague and distant, and a greenish grey seemed the prevailing colour. This tint I presently attributed to the effect of the sunlight falling on her through the green foliage; for once, for a moment, she raised herself to reach her finger nearer to the bird, and then a gleam of unsubdued sunlight fell on her hair and arm, and the arm at that moment appeared of a pearly whiteness, and the hair, just where the light touched it, had a strange lustre and play of iridescent colour.

Rima is of the jungle; light itself. A petite figure in harmony with her environment.² One thinks of imagined fairies when one reads the above description (“...a kind of mistiness in the figure which made it appear somewhat vague and distant, and a greenish grey seemed the prevailing colour”). Such a sight, vulnerable and ancient, is sure to elicit an archetypal need for protection in man or woman. Rima is also believed to be a Di-Di, a demon, by the neighboring tribe. This ambiguity, this ambivalence with added and projected nuances, is definitive of what is perceived as feral: For Abel, Rima is a child of the jungle both delicate and strong, empathetic and nurturing. For the indigenous groups at *Parahuari*, Rima is an incomprehensible being who thwarts their efforts to hunt in her domain. In their view the feral is also demonic. This slippery valence is also seen in Edgar Rice Burroughs’s *Tarzan of the Apes* (1914) and subsequent installments. For Tarzan also is an enemy of the local tribes. There are openly racist passages in both stories, but particularly in Burroughs’s. What once was or could have been civilized and has been affected by ‘wildness’ can be entertained and apprehended as having fuller potentiality. This ambiguity, a convenient duplicity, serves Hudson well as an Argentinian writer in England.

A parallel case can also be drawn with Victor, the wild child of France, found in 1797 in the Aveyro region. Itard’s (1802/1962) writings, his teacher and therapist, are a mix of hope and despair as Victor’s own potentiality to submit to civilized society, despite some gains, fades in the end. The feral so tamed is a sad shadow of its wilder self. Itard finally placed Victor under the care of a matron, the feral misshaped by “scientific education” fading into domestic liminality.

Read in the context of this monograph, two *nostalgiums* are front and center in Hudson’s imagination and reminiscences: the telluric and fugacious qualities of Rima, which represent a jungle’s emergence and incarnation, and Rima herself. Days before Abel encounters Rima, he hears her--she is like a ghost, like many familiar animistic feelings when traversing recondite forests: a complex ecology of sounds, smells, colors, textures, topography, easily invoking moods and latent agency. Jungles are alive, because they are, and because a human observer completes a biosemiotic communicative circle of expectation and interpretation. Rima herself is that impossible depository of feminine qualities, an amalgamation of unlikely attributes contained in just one person.

3. Love, is Feral

Abel and Rima have fallen in love. Abel resists as long as possible the urge to “cover her face with kisses”:

² A movie was made after the book, in 1959, by the great Mel Ferrer and starring Audrey Hepburn and Anthony Perkins. When it is said that a movie does not do justice to a classic, well, this movie did not. I had read GMs in my teens, in Spanish, and later on, several times, in English, and Audrey Hepburn was the last person I would have imagined playing Rima.

But the shame was as nothing in strength compared to the impulse I felt to clasp her beautiful body in my arms and cover her face with kisses. Sick with desire, I turned away and, sitting on a root of the tree, covered my face with my hands. (Chapter 13: 1904)

When Abel first kisses Rima, an unavoidable outcome of two lonely creatures searching for each other and themselves, it is exquisitely captured in lovely romantic and sensorial detail. The entire passage is shared below so as not to take away from the building crescendo of sentiments and its aftermath, the confirmation of reciprocal love:

I could almost believe that, like the forest flower, in this state and aspect it would endure forever; endure and perhaps give of its own immortality to everything around it—to me, holding her in my arms and gazing fixedly on the pale face framed in its cloud of dark, silken hair; to the leaping flames that threw changing lights on the dim stony wall of rock ...

This feeling took such firm possession of my mind that it kept me for a time as motionless as the form I held in my arms. I was only released from its power by noting still further changes in the face I watched, a more distinct advance towards conscious life. The faint colour, which had scarcely been more than a suspicion of colour, had deepened perceptibly; the lids were lifted so as to show a gleam of the crystal orbs beneath; the lips, too, were slightly parted.

And, at last, bending lower down to feel her breath, the beauty and sweetness of those lips could no longer be resisted, and I touched them with mine. Having once tasted their sweetness and fragrance, it was impossible to keep from touching them again and again. She was not conscious—how could she be and not shrink from my caress? Yet there was a suspicion in my mind, and drawing back I gazed into her face once more. A strange new radiance had overspread it. Or was this only an illusive colour thrown on her skin by the red firelight? I shaded her face with my open hand, and saw that her pallor had really gone, that the rosy flame on her cheeks was part of her life. Her lustrous eyes, half open, were gazing into mine. Oh, surely consciousness had returned to her! Had she been sensible of those stolen kisses? Would she now shrink from another caress? Trembling, I bent down and touched her lips again, lightly, but lingeringly, and then again, and when I drew back and looked at her face the rosy flame was brighter, and the eyes, more open still, were looking into mine. And gazing with those open, conscious eyes, it seemed to me that at last, at last, the shadow that had rested between us had vanished, that we were united in perfect love and confidence, and that speech was superfluous.

One can easily imagine the impact these passages might have had on English speaking audiences after Jane Austen's novels were republished in the 1830's and gained a wider audience, irrespective of what one might think of Rima. In cognitive terms, a literary genre and 'prime' existed ready to accommodate Hudson's fantasies. Some later critics (Fairchild, 1959) find Rima's *ferality* a bit too much: "One cannot believe in her as anything. Too avian to be human and too human to be preternatural, too unearthly to be a woman, and too womanly to be a bird." (1959: 357). But that is precisely the point: *Rima is a liminal being*. As such, love is reimagined as possessing at least some of the qualities of her own liminality in balance with her feral nature, which is liminal as well. And this combination is an easy formula for nostalgia: pliable, fertile, and satisfying--for Hudson at least.

The difficulty that authors like Fairchild have with these descriptions (and Rima) may be due to already engrained, jaded and/or commercialized notions of "romance" present in the 1950's. It is important to situate Hudson's publication of GMs a decade before WWI and several decades

before WWII. Verily, our collective innocence is truly lost after that--and has been many times over since then.

4. Conclusion: Nostalgia and "Nature"

In the context of the themes presented in this volume, it was important to select a South American voice, both autochthonous and situated in a time when some semblance of "naturalness" still existed. Hudson also witnesses the horror of bloody conflicts. The point was made earlier that this might be a more credible position from which to explore idealized notions of what is feral, liminality, and nostalgia. Many works that pass for "ecopsychology" are riddled with syrupy affectations (hyperbolic affect) of a different sort, however, none rising to the literary level of Hudson's work--so much so, that oftentimes it is difficult to tease out what the "ecopsychological" author has actually experienced, what he/she imagines or reimagines the world could be, and the many mansions of wish-fulfilling prophecies. They are audacious in their claims but only, it seems, out of neglect or ignorance.

To the extent that nostalgia is not foresight and that hindsight is corrupted by nostalgic sentimentality, it is quite impossible to obtain an acceptable rendition of liminality in some of these presentations of "nature" simply because the known territories, as authentic experiences, are fairly corrupted--or non-existent. Hudson was a naturalist. He traveled and suffered through "nature" in Patagonia. He amassed encyclopedic knowledge about birds and their habitats. Thus, he was quite capable of constructing the sublimity of Rima as a credible liminal category. The love that Rima exuded must also be ethereal and eternal in credible ways. In a sense, Hudson is entitled to his *nostalgiums*, Rima and the jungle, because he earned that right: the right to reminisce like an old toeless Norwegian grandfather.

In the same "ecopsychological" circles, the gravest of all errors is to cherry pick some notion of *indigeneity*, while adding a sprinkle of "ontology," a few drops of the "magical," and a percussive or sonorous element that makes an idea "sexy" or "exotic." *If nostalgia grows from these unveridical foundations, then it is truly false and its sentimental procreant an unacceptable witness to life experiences: no toes missing at all!*

Imagine the situation of a person not understanding what "nature connection" means in formidable and terrifying ways: lighting striking and splitting flesh atoms, Rima ultimately burnt alive by the natives, Abel bitten by a coral snake, the natives returning to the unguarded forest to kill, kill, and kill any edible bit of animal configuration. How is nostalgia informed without these facts, also? Nuflo, Rima's old grandfatherly guardian, describes the end of their lives in the jungle thusly: "They have come--the children of hell have been here, and have destroyed everything!" "The children of hell" is a reference to the natives and to their unyielding practicality of ridding a good hunting place of the Di-Di, Rima.

Hudson's reminiscence is integral. He has a realistic view of the potential for humanity to do harm. He understands and accepts the fact that even in the midst of chaos there can be beauty. In GMs he details profound moments of despair and sorrow. Green mansions, when widely conceived, realistically accommodate perils and joys, discovery and triumph, the civilized, the derelict, the feral, and the native, as well the vanishing echoes of past love. ☞

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