

“It should never have occurred”

Documentary Appropriation, Resistant Reading, and the Ethical Ambivalence of *McAlmon’s Chinese Opera*

Despite winning the Governor General’s Award for English-language poetry in 1980, Stephen Scobie’s documentary long poem *McAlmon’s Chinese Opera* has been all but overlooked by literary scholarship. The poem has been touched upon in criticism devoted to other works¹ and is given some attention in Smaro Kamboureli’s study of the Canadian long poem, *On the Edge of Genre* (1991),² but to date the most comprehensive work on *Opera* has been produced by Scobie himself.³ The dearth of critical attention paid to *Opera* seems an echo of the plight of its historical protagonist, Robert McAlmon, a writer and publisher who helped to launch the careers of high-profile modernists but struggled to keep his own work from slipping into obscurity. Like McAlmon, Scobie is better known for what might be termed his literary service; he has written books on prominent Canadian authors,⁴ and has also worked to refine the definition of the documentary Canadian long poem put forth by Dorothy Livesay in 1969. Livesay framed the genre as one marked by didacticism and representative types, wherein “narratives are told not from the point of view of one protagonist, but rather to illustrate a precept” (269); she also contended that such poems “create a dialectic between the objective facts and the subjective feelings of the poet” (267). Scobie has looked to the documentary long poems published in the wake of Livesay’s foundational essay (such as Michael Ondaatje’s *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* and Margaret Atwood’s *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*) and noted that many take up “the persona” of a historical figure whose “biography . . . provides the structure of the book” and whose poetic reconstruction “invokes the authority of fact only to consign it to a systematic blurring of limits”

(*Signature* 121, 122). In doing so, he has situated the genre—and his own contributions to it—within the broader postmodern impulse (particularly prevalent in literature of the 1970s and 1980s) to reimagine and recontextualize historical figures and the materials by which we come to know them. As conceptualized by Scobie, the documentary long poem can be viewed as a poetic strand of what Linda Hutcheon calls “historiographic metafiction” (169), an intensely intertextual approach to postmodern writing that looks to the historical and alights upon “a tension . . . not only between the real and the textualized, but among a number of kinds of reference” (178). Many of *Opera*'s intertexts are themselves marked by this tension; the poem revisits a modernist literary milieu in which, as Scobie puts it, writers “appear as characters in each other's books” (“Biographical” 82). For the speaker of the poem, a fictionalized version of McAlmon, one such appearance represents an unforgivable transgression.

Central to *Opera* is the notion that turning another's life into art is ethically problematic, that an individual ought to retain some control over their own life stories. The poem unfolds as a series of dramatic monologues that zero in on two key events in the historical McAlmon's life: his sham marriage to a wealthy heiress, and the sense of betrayal and emotional turmoil he experienced when, against his wishes, William Carlos Williams (with whom McAlmon had founded *Contact* magazine) published some suggestive remarks about this marriage in his 1951 *Autobiography*. According to Scobie's McAlmon, Williams “took the old scars . . . / and with a scalpel's delicacy / cut them open” (79). The literary betrayal related by *Opera* pertains to an unwanted act of autobiographical disclosure, one that calls to mind a question posed by Nancy K. Miller in “The Ethics of Betrayal”: “If . . . every account of the self includes relations with others, how can an autobiographer tell a story without betraying the other, without violating the other's privacy” while “nonetheless telling the story *from one's own perspective*, which by virtue of being a published text exerts a certain power?” (153, emphasis original). But *Opera*'s engagement with this problematic also calls to mind ethical concerns raised by the genre of the documentary long poem itself, which likewise entails appropriation and commodification of the lives and stories of others. In “Foam (Essay with Rhapsody),” Anne Carson contends that “[p]art of what you enjoy in a documentary technique is the sense of banditry” occasioned by “loot[ing] someone else's life” (45). Scobie employs a criminal metaphor in his discussion of long poems wherein the poet adopts the persona of their historical subject, a technique he calls the “forged

signature” (*Signature* 119). Like Carson, he notes documentary’s transgressive allure: “the persona enables the author, and, vicariously, the reader, to assume the pleasures of the forged identity” (120). At stake in these metaphors of vicarious criminal enticement is a sense of the ethical ambivalence often at play in the genre’s imaginative reconstruction of historical figures and events. The reader may, as Carson and Scobie suggest, take pleasure in the reconstruction, but they may also question the poet’s right to undertake such a project, particularly when—as is the case in Scobie’s *Opera*—the historical subject’s aversion to certain disclosures is well documented.

This essay explores the ethical dimensions of documentary appropriation by looking to Scobie’s poem and staging what Daniel R. Schwarz has termed a “resistant reading” of the text. In “A Humanistic Ethics of Reading,” Schwarz figures resistant reading as an interrogative process impelled by works that “disturb our sense of fairness” (14). It entails the consideration of a given text’s potential to do harm or cause offense, a potential that, to my mind, is exacerbated by works rooted in the utilization of another’s voice and life stories. At first glance, *Opera* might seem unlikely to elicit the sort of resistance that Schwarz has in mind; it is not marked by the “sexist or racist or homophobic connotations” with which he is primarily concerned (6). In fact, Scobie’s McAlmon treats queer contemporaries with more respect than did his historical namesake (as I go on to discuss). Yet in *Opera*, the ethics of autobiographical disclosure and documentary appropriation become intertwined. The resistant reading I advance hinges on the notion that, by dwelling on the historical McAlmon’s marriage and his aversion to seeing it transformed into literary fodder, the poem effectively commits the very transgression it thematizes. *Opera* registers the damaging effects of Williams’ betrayal by framing it as an act of character assassination, but it does so while prompting the reader to further scrutinize McAlmon’s private life. My resistance to these aspects of the text, however, is not unmitigated; while keeping in mind *Opera*’s proliferation of transgressions, I contend that the poem’s inscription of its speaker’s reading act is perhaps just as significant, as Scobie’s McAlmon is able to articulate his own resistance in a way that his historical counterpart was not. Furthermore, I consider the recuperative and corrective work done by the poem, and the ways in which its narrative is shaped by values that the historical McAlmon championed in his own writing. Though the reading I offer focuses on a specific documentary long poem, my hope is that it will facilitate a wider discussion of both the good and the potential harm that can result from the genre’s engagement with historical figures and events.

Questions pertaining to appropriation, authenticity, and poetic licence abound, and these questions rarely (if ever) have stable or singular answers.

One difficulty posed by my reading of *Opera* is that it necessitates consideration of a historical figure whose place in the public imagination owes a considerable debt to various literary embellishments. Outside of Scobie's poem, McAlmon is best known for his appearances in the autobiographical writings of his contemporaries. Though he wrote a memoir—*Being Geniuses Together* (1938)—it was substantially revised after his death by Kay Boyle, who also added interstitial chapters of her own. Sanford J. Smoller's 1975 biography, *Adrift Among Geniuses*, draws on unpublished letters and archival evidence to tell the story of McAlmon's life, but it fills the many gaps in this life story by looking to the autobiographical works of others in which McAlmon appears, and by offering biographical readings of McAlmon's fiction and poetry. The McAlmon who emerges from this web of writings is, decidedly, something of a constructed character. He was among the first to publish works by Gertrude Stein and Ernest Hemingway,⁵ but much of his own writing was quickly forgotten.⁶ In his own time, he gained some notoriety for his acerbic personality and alcohol-fuelled antics, but more attention-grabbing was his controversial marriage to Winifred Ellerman, better known in literary circles by her pen name, Bryher, and in other circles as heir to Sir John Ellerman, an English shipping magnate. The settlement McAlmon received from his divorce would earn him the unfortunate nickname "McAlimony" (Smoller 188), but this was not the crux of the controversy; at the time that Bryher and McAlmon were married, she was the lover of Hilda Doolittle (H. D.), and her nuptial arrangement with McAlmon was merely that: an arrangement, one ostensibly intended to allow Bryher "to escape her father's domination and to be free to travel where, when, and with whom she desired" (Smoller 37-38).

Opera dwells on questions debated by McAlmon's biographer and contemporaries alike: did McAlmon have romantic feelings for Bryher, and did he—despite or perhaps because of such feelings—agree to marry her knowing that the union would be a fraud? Though publicly reticent about his motives, McAlmon did send a letter to Williams not long after the ceremony in which he confessed that the marriage was "legal only, unromantic, and strictly an agreement" (qtd. in Smoller 41), and asked that his friend refrain from discussing the matter with anyone but himself. That Williams disrespected this wish with the publication of *Autobiography* is another biographical detail on which *Opera* dwells. As early as the poem's

first dramatic monologue, Scobie's McAlmon makes plain his unabated bitterness regarding Williams' account of the marriage:

. . . no doctor has to tell me
of how a woman tore me up
leaving me cold and rotten inside
like frozen fruit. He doesn't need
to write that shit for all his
drooling public. It
should never have occurred. (7)

A certain ambiguity attends this stanza's closing declaration, as "It" could pertain to McAlmon's marriage, the account of this marriage offered by Williams' *Autobiography*, or both. More pointed is the reference to "frozen fruit," which evokes Williams' "This Is Just to Say," a poem that details a relatively minor transgression—the theft of coveted, chilled plums. Though the speaker of "This Is Just to Say" asks to be forgiven, their sincerity is called into doubt by the closing lines: "they were delicious / so sweet / and so cold" (41). Williams' poem, then, can be read as an unsolicited exchange in which the text itself serves as recompense for the stolen fruit. By aligning "This Is Just to Say" with *Autobiography*'s unwanted account of McAlmon's marriage, *Opera*'s opening monologue figures Williams as a writer willing to violate the trust of his intimates in order to produce art that will appease "his drooling public." While this description amounts to a mockery of those enticed by literary transgressions, *Opera*'s narrative rests, to some extent, on the potential for such transgressions to capture the reader's interest.

Also significant is the placement of this monologue. Scobie's McAlmon is "60 years old" and "dying of pneumonia" (87) as he narrates the story of his life but, for the most part, that story unfolds chronologically. *Opera* is divided into three dated sections that trace, in order, McAlmon's youth in the American Midwest and early adulthood in New York (where he is introduced to, and marries, Bryher), his transition from early adulthood to middle age in Europe (during which time he and Bryher divorce), and his eventual convalescence in Desert Hot Springs, California (where he receives a copy of Williams' *Autobiography*). Though the opening monologue is not the only instance in which this chronology is disrupted, it is perhaps the most striking, as it establishes meaningful connections between the events detailed in each of the poem's sections. It frames the publication of *Autobiography* as the impetus for *Opera*'s dramatic monologues, while also making central to the life of Scobie's McAlmon a relationship that the historical McAlmon wished to remain private.

Opera not only follows Williams in violating the historical McAlmon's wishes, but also encourages the reader to join in examining his private life. Scobie contends that "the documentary poem is never an enclosed, self-sufficient creation; the reader is actively invited to repeat the poet's research and engagement with the facts" (*Signature* 123). This invitation is all but affirmed by *Opera*'s Afterword, which directs the reader to texts consulted during the poem's composition. The more one looks to these texts, the more it becomes apparent that—although he could be characterized as outspoken to a fault—the historical McAlmon was, as Scobie himself puts it, "exceptionally reticent" regarding any disclosure pertaining to his marriage (*Opera* 89). This reticence is explored at length in Smoller's biography, a text that Scobie acknowledges having "made extensive use of" while writing *Opera*. Scobie also deems the posthumously revised 1968 edition of McAlmon's own memoir "indispensable reading" (93), and this text provides a particularly compelling example of McAlmon's reluctance to publicly address the peculiar circumstances surrounding his marriage. In *Geniuses*, very little is said about the marriage, which is all the more curious when one considers that it is the subject of the book's first chapter. The narrative is set in motion by McAlmon's marriage to Bryher and their decision to spend six weeks visiting her family in London. Though she and her family are sketched in some detail, there is virtually no discussion of the relationship these two writers shared. The reader might well be excused for forgetting that McAlmon is married for much of the decade covered by this memoir, as Bryher makes few appearances after the opening pages. The fact that she is absent from so much of the text stands as persuasive evidence of the historical McAlmon's reluctance to see their relationship utilized as literary material, a reluctance that is key to my resistant reading of *Opera*.

Yet Bryher's part in *Geniuses*, however insubstantial, complicates my reading, as the memoir offers a version of the marriage to which other writers may respond; it can be viewed as having made public the writer's private life, a move which invites both scrutiny and (re)interpretation. But the ethical dimensions of such interpretations remain a salient concern. Though my interest lies in Scobie's treatment of the marriage, Williams' bears some consideration. In *Autobiography*, Bryher proposes to McAlmon during their second meeting, and then reveals herself to be "the daughter of Sir John Ellerman, the heaviest tax payer in England" (176). To this, Williams adds the damning conclusion: "Bob fell for it" (176). With just a few lines, Williams lends credence to the popular belief that McAlmon was something of an

opportunistic gold digger while also, oddly, suggesting that his friend was too naive to understand that he was being duped. I draw attention to these insinuations because Williams' literary transgression is not merely related by Scobie's poem; it is, effectively, reinscribed, given a new textual life. Frank Davey has observed that documentary works "give the old materials"—the sources on which they draw—"new focus" (133). Such an observation certainly applies to *Opera*. However, while the poem brings "new focus" to the historical McAlmon, the focus of its narrative is not exactly new; rather, *Opera* represents a rereading of McAlmon's life in which the most scandalous details are foregrounded and instrumentalized for the sake of their affective charge. This is not to say that McAlmon's importance as a writer and publisher is overlooked by the poem; Scobie's respect for McAlmon's literary output and patronage is apparent throughout. But *Opera*'s narrative places more emphasis on Williams' decision to transform into art, to scandalous effect, the marriage that McAlmon guarded like a secret. That it does so in the (forged) voice of the historical McAlmon signals a need to consider the broader ethical problematics generated by documentary appropriation.

Scobie addresses these problematics in an interview with Margery Fee as they discuss both *Opera* and the documentary conventions on which the poem draws. Though the term "resistant reading" is never used, he notes that *Opera* has already met with some resistance, as it "upset" Kay Boyle, friend to the historical McAlmon and co-author of the revised *Geniuses* ("Biographical" 84). While Scobie ultimately dismisses Boyle's reaction to the poem,⁷ he nevertheless admits that

it does raise a major and quite legitimate question: what *right* do authors have to *use* historical figures in this way? We are in a sense appropriating them for our own purposes, even for our own gain. It's a rather queasy moral point. All I can plead is that if we make something imaginatively genuine out of it, then that carries its own justification. But I can understand people who object, on principle, to the whole idea. (85)

As Boyle's resistance to *Opera* illustrates, the creation of something "imaginatively genuine" is not, for some, sufficient justification for the documentary poet's utilization of another's life stories. Some may specifically object to the poet's decision to take on the voice and identity of a historical figure. *Opera*'s voice is integral to my resistance, though not for the appropriation or "forgery" of identity that it represents. Scobie's McAlmon addresses the reader directly in his evocation of the emotional turmoil occasioned by having his private life reconstructed as literature and held up for public

scrutiny. I resist the poem's reconstruction and the scrutiny it invites, at least in part, because Scobie has fashioned a voice that compels me to do so.

Scobie's McAlmon appeals to the reader's sense of justice by figuring Williams' representation of the marriage as an unwarranted act of character assassination. Throughout *Opera*, this sort of figurative murder becomes a metaphor for the dangers posed by a literary scene wherein one's personal experiences are likely to be transformed into another's art. The poem is replete with references to, and images suggestive of, assassination, many of which pertain to Williams' *Autobiography* and the friendship that it "destroy[ed]" (*Opera* 90). The most arresting of these involves an allusion to Ondaatje's *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, in which the Kid's killer, the nineteenth-century lawman Pat Garrett, is described as both an "ideal assassin" (28) and "a sane assassin" (29). "William Carlos / Williams told me," says Scobie's McAlmon, "I should have been Billy / the Kid" (77). The speaker's remark is not without historical precedent; impressed with McAlmon's fast finger-work as a typist, Williams once compared his friend to the famed nineteenth-century outlaw.⁸ In a nod to *The Collected Works, Opera* expands upon this comparison by having Scobie's McAlmon figure Williams as the Kid's killer and, by extension, as his own:

Hot desert night
Desert Hot Springs / Fort Sumner
no gun in my hands.
Come on in,
Dr. Pat Garrett. (77)

The overlaying of these encounters highlights certain similarities—both involve men of some celebrity who were betrayed by a friend, died in the desert, and have since been reimaged via the documentary long poem's "forged signature"—but it also underscores some notable differences. In Ondaatje's poem, the Kid is caught unawares, but is not defenceless; he has his "guns" and is "Carrying a knife" when Garrett kills him on a "hot night" in Fort Sumner (Ondaatje 92). In Scobie's poem, McAlmon is extending an invitation while unarmed and in poor health. His death is foreshadowed in the previous monologue, where he first extends the invitation to "Come in" after noting that "The eye is narrowed down / to a small burnt hole" by the desert air (76). This image evokes the damage done by a bullet fired with expert aim, but Scobie's McAlmon meets a grislier end, albeit figuratively, when Williams' *Autobiography* is mailed to him "like a bomb in a brown paper parcel" and he is "left to die outside [Williams'] company" (79). Though

engaging with the trope of character assassination, *Opera* reminds the reader that the pain inflicted by this metaphoric assault can be all too real.

Throughout Scobie's poem, the emotional distress resulting from Williams' betrayal is thrown into sharp relief by repeated references to his status as a physician, an occupation conventionally associated with the ethical obligation to *do no harm*. *Opera* actually links Williams' dual roles as writer and physician; he spends "hours in his surgery writing / prescription blank poems" (47), which feature "images drawn with a doctor's precision" (21). Scobie's McAlmon also posits that Williams' interest in his marriage is not merely that of a concerned friend; when the two men reconnect in Paris after several years apart, Williams asks "questions about [McAlmon's] marriage / as a friend but also as a doctor / diagnosing some disease" (47). The conflicted relationship between Williams' personal and professional interests is underscored by the speaker's belief that *Autobiography* pathologizes him in its treatment of his unconventional marriage: "[Williams] saw things crooked, and saw me / cold as a case-book diagnosis" (79). By framing Williams' betrayal as an act informed by the conventions and parameters of medical research, *Opera* draws attention to the fact that, unlike most forms of life writing, such research is subject to ethical oversight. G. Thomas Couser notes that "physicians . . . must protect the confidentiality of their patients or clients in their case histories or case reports. In contrast, no such regulations constrain lay life writing" (xi). *Opera* depicts Williams as a writer who violates the ethical codes of his medical profession by making public the suffering and afflictions of an intimate who is, the poem suggests, also a patient of sorts. As the opening monologue attests, this is a transgression that "no doctor" should commit (7).

But what of the documentary poet? In a sense, Scobie has written himself into an ethical bind; he cannot illustrate the inappropriateness of writing that capitalizes on McAlmon's private affairs without referencing those affairs and, in doing so, inviting the charge of hypocrisy. *Opera* represents an iteration, however marked by different contexts, of the very transgression to which Scobie's McAlmon registers his resistance. This puts the reader compelled by the plight and perspective of Scobie's McAlmon in something of a bind as well; I cannot articulate my own resistance to the poem's proliferation of transgressions without also referencing the historical McAlmon's private life and effectively adding to the proliferation. At the same time, I must recognize that the poem represents a recuperative effort intended to bring McAlmon back from the brink of historical obscurity, and that the resistant reading it models is inextricably linked to this endeavour.

My own resistance, impelled as it is by that of Scobie's McAlmon, cannot be absolute; I cannot, in other words, separate the transgressions enacted and invited by *Opera* from the poem's efforts to do right by its historical subject. It is to these efforts that I now turn.

In his penultimate monologue, Scobie's McAlmon tells the reader: "You have heard me out" (86). At stake in this statement is not merely an acknowledgement of the monologue form's reliance on the presence of an audience, but also—to return to the criminal metaphors discussed at the outset of this essay—the fact that the poem provides the historical McAlmon with an imaginative "hearing" by which he may, through oral arguments, present his own version of events. Much like a legal hearing, *Opera* enters personal, subjective testimony into the public record; however, it differs significantly in the sense that it does so through the lens of literature. This is the kind of hearing that the historical McAlmon, who spent his final years in ill health and out of favour with the publishing world, never received. I would like to suggest that the McAlmon of this period is a "vulnerable subject." A "vulnerable subject," according to Couser, is one whose life story is related by another but who is "deprive[d] . . . of the capacity to take part in, examine, respond to, or resist that representation" (x). The historical McAlmon was not entirely lacking in the ability and opportunity to vent his frustration regarding *Autobiography*; he sent Williams "a long, coldly formal letter" in which he made note of *Autobiography*'s "errors, distortions, and misquotations" (Smoller 306), and "would rail against Williams, often viciously, to mutual friends" (307). But what was denied McAlmon was the opportunity to do so via literature, the medium through which he felt he was wronged, and for which he hoped to be remembered. In *Opera*, Scobie's McAlmon monologues his way clear of this vulnerability.

The hearing made possible by the "forged signature" of Scobie's *Opera* also entails confrontations with and alternative perspectives on other literary representations of the historical McAlmon. Kamboureli observes that the poem's speaker is marked by "the intertextuality of his voice, the extent to which it speaks from within a tradition that . . . dismissed" his historical namesake (92). Much of the poem's intertextuality pertains to this dismissal and the feuds (with other writers) that factored into it;⁹ Scobie's McAlmon satirizes a printer's letter of rejection (38) and directs barbs at more successful rivals such as Hemingway (9) and T. S. Eliot (31). But more compelling is the emphasis he places on how he has been misrepresented by the writings of his contemporaries. Though *Opera*, as a documentary

long poem, represents an imaginative commingling of fact and fiction, Scobie's McAlmon is, at times, out to set the record straight. For example, he addresses a "lie" the historical McAlmon "told to Glassco"; namely, that he had "joined the Canadian Army / and then deserted" (68). McAlmon's service in a Canadian regiment goes unquestioned in both Glassco's *Memoirs of Montparnasse* (50-51) and in Williams' *Autobiography* (172), though in Williams' text no mention is made of McAlmon having deserted. By drawing attention to this lie and the fact that it went unquestioned by both Glassco and Williams, Scobie's McAlmon compels the reader to consider how the writings of the historical McAlmon's contemporaries have dubiously shaped our understanding of the man in question.

At times, the conflation of identities at play in the poem's "forged signature" makes it difficult to determine if the resistance on display ought to be credited to Scobie or to Scobie's McAlmon. Poems narrated by historical personae are, as Scobie has it, "signed by their characters" (*Signature* 120, emphasis original). Consider the impact this has on the resistance registered by the title of Scobie's poem, which may also be read as the title given to the collected monologues of the poem's persona *by* that persona. The title is derived from a scene in *Memoirs* in which a rather inebriated McAlmon is ejected from a saloon for performing his "Chinese opera," which Glassco describes as a "hideous, wordless, toneless screaming" (59). The scene is emblematic of how Glassco makes McAlmon appear both captivating and repulsive at the same time; he is introduced as "a minor legend . . . saddled with the nickname 'Robber McAlimony,'" a moniker he is said to have "gained by marrying a wealthy woman and then living alone and magnificently on an allowance from her multimillionaire father" (51). Glassco soon shifts from casting aspersions on McAlmon's character to ridiculing his writing and intelligence: "There were occasional flashes of observation and understanding, even moments of grace; but the style and syntax revealed the genuine illiterate" (80). Scobie—or perhaps it would be more appropriate to say Scobie's McAlmon—turns the "Chinese opera" of which Glassco wrote into the far from "wordless" *McAlmon's Chinese Opera*, while also framing it as a metaphor for the writer whose voice has been all but lost, who nevertheless persists in making noise to compel our attention:

. . . somewhere in the darkness between stations
a voice is screaming down
the airwaves of the long dead years

McAlmon's Chinese Opera. (73)

In a sense, however, *Opera* imbues the “Chinese opera” with new meaning by remaining true to the essence of its intertextual referent; in *Memoirs*, McAlmon’s performance is depicted as something of an obnoxious party trick, but it also represents a critical disagreement and a refusal to be controlled, contained, or ignored. Perturbed by “The polite ripple of applause” (58) that greets a jazz performance, McAlmon proceeds to engage and antagonize the saloon’s patrons. “Just listen for a moment,” he says; “I’m part of the show” (58). It is only when his expulsion from the saloon is imminent that his speech gives way to a “hideous” song. *Opera* affects a similar disruption; it seeks to unsettle the conversation surrounding the historical McAlmon by interrogating the texts through which he is primarily known. It insists that he be heard—albeit via a “forged” persona—and rails against his absence from the modernist canon by outlining a personal and professional history that makes him very much “part of the show.”

Opera also functions as a necessary corrective regarding some of the actions of its own historical subject. Though he appeared to be comfortable with his own bisexuality,¹⁰ the historical McAlmon would sometimes slander others based on their perceived or actual deviations from heterosexual norms. That Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald were subject to this sort of attack is perhaps unsurprising, as both men were professional rivals with whom McAlmon shared a contentious relationship.¹¹ But the fact that McAlmon is said to have rudely rebuffed the artist Marsden Hartley for offering a “spontaneous display of homosexual emotion” (Smoller 28) is perplexing, as the two were good friends. *Opera* does not address the rumors McAlmon spread regarding Fitzgerald and Hemingway, but it does revisit the Hartley incident in an effort to address its subject’s insensitivity. While the historical McAlmon is credited with making a joke at Hartley’s expense, Scobie’s McAlmon expresses regret for this; he recognizes that Hartley was “torment[ed] for years” by desires at odds with the sexual mores of postwar America, and wishes he could have “brought some peace / to [Hartley’s] restless soul” by reciprocating the affection the artist once offered him (18). This wish marks a striking break from *Opera*’s source material, but—like the text’s reframing of the “Chinese opera”—it also evinces a certain faithfulness to that material. Scobie has cited the historical McAlmon’s literary engagement with queer figures as something that elevates his writing beyond that of more successful contemporaries such as Hemingway, who, as Scobie puts it, “just took refuge in all these terribly phony macho ideals of the real man” (“Biographical” 88). What Scobie claims to admire in

McAlmon's writing is its ability to engage with marginalized individuals "nonjudgmentally . . . without posturing, without moralizing, without evading" (89). The amends that *Opera* attempts to make for McAlmon's treatment of Hartley is a fictional gesture, and doubly so; it locates in the values advanced by the historical McAlmon's writing a resistance to his uneven, and at times antagonistic, engagement with queer figures.

These values also inform *Opera*'s engagement with the sexuality of both McAlmon and Bryher. At one point, Scobie's McAlmon claims that he "cannot quite determine" the "sex" of "last night's lover" (41). More significantly, he does not seem terribly interested in the distinction; as he sees it, "The bitter mechanics of love / for a man or woman . . . / are never more than a night's pretence" (41). Though Scobie's McAlmon gestures towards Bryher's relationship with H. D., he stops short of addressing it directly; his claim that after "twelve days married" Bryher is "still virgin" is actually the closest he comes to identifying her as a lesbian (27). While this comment can be read as endorsing a heteronormative notion of copulation in which lesbian sex does not qualify, *Opera*'s matter-of-fact evocation of queer figures and relationships suggests otherwise. It suggests an ironic echoing of heteronormative discourse, and a resistance to the prurience that marks the poem's source material. The comment is adapted from a remark made by Smoller (46), who has in mind both romantic and physical affection when he calls Bryher an "unloving wife" (47). Though Smoller ultimately concludes that "it is doubtful that [McAlmon's] marriage in itself drove him to men," he nevertheless suggests "that the resultant disillusionment made lasting fulfillment with women impossible" (216). Scobie appears to support Smoller's suggestion when he claims that "there is a kind of emotional deadness in the later McAlmon which does seem to set in around the time of his marriage" ("Biographical" 86), but this is one issue on which the sometimes-hazy distinction between *Opera*'s poet and persona becomes remarkably clear. Scobie's McAlmon claims that whatever is "dead" in him was "perhaps stillborn in South Dakota" long before he met Bryher (55). In keeping with the fact that the historical McAlmon was offended by "Williams' insinuations [in *Autobiography*] that he had been browbeaten and emasculated by . . . Bryher and H. D." (Smoller 307), Scobie's McAlmon rejects a narrative in which Bryher's relationship with H. D. is to blame for his emotional frigidity.

Opera plays a complicated game with the reader; it engenders a respect for the historical McAlmon's wishes, yet it sometimes violates those wishes even as it marks its own respect for them. Nowhere is this ambivalence more apparent

than in the poem's treatment of McAlmon's marriage and his motives for being party to the ruse it represented. Scobie's McAlmon remarks of Bryher: "I will not say I did not love her; / I will not say I did: the truth / is long forgotten by us both" (26). With these lines, he asserts his unwillingness to satisfy the curiosity of the historical McAlmon's contemporaries and biographer alike, and suggests that he could not satisfy that curiosity even if he was inclined to do so. But the poem nevertheless tantalizes the reader with the possibility that McAlmon did indeed love Bryher. Does the opening monologue's reference to "how a woman tore [McAlmon] up" (7) signal an acknowledgement that romantic feelings motivated him to play the part of Bryher's husband, or is it merely an allusion to the picture painted by Williams' *Autobiography*? Does remembered desire inform the speaker's fixation, later in life, with "Bryher's thin body" and the fact that his own "body remembers / seeing her naked as lightning" (84)? *Opera* does not answer these questions, but rather, compels the reader to consider the historical possibilities at play in what the poem has teased as a "truth / . . . long forgotten." It is a documentary gesture that, as the poem and its Afterword make plain, is at odds with the wishes of both Scobie's McAlmon and his historical namesake.

Perhaps the most vexing question posed by *McAlmon's Chinese Opera* is: what consideration, if any, should documentary poets give to the wishes of their historical subjects? Scobie's poem underscores just how fraught and subjective this question can be. Through its reimagining of an unwanted act of autobiographical disclosure, *Opera* asks the reader to consider the ethics of turning another's life stories into art. In doing so, the poem draws attention to its own problematic engagement with this very issue. It cannot tell the story of how Williams betrayed the historical McAlmon without in some way reinscribing that betrayal and bringing renewed attention to the controversial marriage for which McAlmon did not want to be remembered. There is, to me, an ethical dissonance in *Opera's* emphasis on the hurt occasioned by disclosures that the poem itself effectively reproduces. Not all will share my resistance to these aspects of the poem, but *Opera* insists on the importance of such resistance, as it thematizes an interrogative re-reading and recontextualization of much of its own source material. Yet it also insists that McAlmon be heard, however "forged" the voice may be, and that he deserves a place in the modernist canon that he, as a publisher, helped to create. With this in mind, *Opera* serves as a striking example of the ethical ambivalence that sometimes attends the documentary long poem's reconstruction of historical lives.

NOTES

- 1 The poem is discussed briefly in Laurie Ricou's "Prairie Poetry and Metaphors of Plain/s Space" (1983) and in Peter Jaeger's "Theoreographic Metawriting: *The Ballad of Isabel Gunn*" (1994).
- 2 See pp. 91-93.
- 3 Scobie addresses *Opera* in "Amelia, or: Who Do You Think You Are? Documentary and Identity in Canadian Literature" (1984), an article which resurfaces in a highly revised form—with little attention paid to *Opera*—as a chapter in his book *Signature Event Context* (1989). He offers a more thorough discussion of the poem in "Stephen Scobie: Biographical" (1987), an interview conducted by Margery Fee.
- 4 See *Leonard Cohen* (1978), *bpNichol: What History Teaches* (1984), and *Sheila Watson and Her Works* (1984).
- 5 McAlmon applied the Contact imprint to his book-publishing endeavours, among them Contact Editions, which published Hemingway's first book, *Three Stories and Ten Poems* (1923), and Contact Press, which published Stein's *The Making of Americans* (1925). In *Opera's* Afterword, Scobie notes that following the publication of these books, McAlmon's relationship with Hemingway "dissolved into rivalry and bitter enmity" and his "initial friendship with Stein also came to grief" (90).
- 6 Smoller observes that, for the most part, "McAlmon has been ignored by critics and scholars, except for those who have used his memoir, at times extensively, to write about his famous contemporaries" (2).
- 7 Scobie claims that, in addition to his own "evident admiration for John Glassco," Boyle "was upset . . . by the book's departures from factual accuracy" ("Biographical" 84). This, he suggests, represents a misunderstanding of the documentary form, as he "wasn't writing history" ("Biographical" 84).
- 8 See Scobie ("Biographical" 86).
- 9 McAlmon's penchant for speaking ill of other authors alienated would-be publishers. Smoller says of one such incident: "The price extracted from McAlmon for a few foolish, albeit vicious, misconstructions and misrepresentations [regarding Hemingway] was heavy: virtual oblivion" (227).
- 10 Smoller details several incidents in which McAlmon addressed his sexuality, including a public exchange wherein McAlmon told Morley Callaghan: "I'm bisexual myself, like Michelangelo, and I don't give a damn who knows it" (212). Whether McAlmon was comfortable with his sexuality being addressed via literature is, however, up for debate. In "Textual Authority and Modern American Autobiography," Craig Monk—who mistakenly presumes that McAlmon was homosexual and that he "never pronounc[ed] his sexuality publicly"—speculates that in *Geniuses*, McAlmon is perhaps "careful to make frequent, if chaste, references to women encountered during his nights on the town" because he is "cagey about his preferences" (493). McAlmon may well have been concerned that a widely disseminated acknowledgement of his sexuality could be a hindrance to his professional ambitions; that said, if he is "cagey" about his sexual relationships in *Geniuses*, this caginess pertains to relations with both male and female partners—in other words, to the part of his life that (like his relationship with Bryher) he deemed private.
- 11 See Smoller (223-25).

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