

“The profound poverty of knowledge”

Sandra Birdsell’s Narrative of Concealment

Sandra Birdsell’s fiction has attracted a wide range of different labels, variously identifying her as a “feminist . . . Prairie, Mennonite, magic-realist and autobiographical” writer as well as a post-modern one (see Harrison 24, 33). However, none of these categories proves fully satisfactory. Birdsell’s background, for instance, is far more complex than either “Prairie” or “Mennonite” indicates, as she comes from a Mennonite-Catholic Métis milieu and specifically writes about the Red River Valley area. She has also expressed discomfort with the label “feminist,” asserting that she is “not an ideological feminist. I’m interested in seeing how women cope with life, in dramatizing how they reach some sort of rapprochement” (quoted in Adachi), and she has equally rejected the notion that her work is autobiographical (see Twigg 22). To call her work “postmodern” in an effort to account for its uneasy location between short-story collection and novel (see Harrison 26) is to ignore the well-established tradition of the short story cycle in Canadian literature (see Lynch 94). Although she cites the work of Gabriel Garcia Marquez as a major influence, she implicitly resists the label “magic realism” for her own writing when she insists that she has kept “elements of the unexplainable or the magical or supernatural” at a minimum (“Up Front” 11).

In her resistance to literary pigeon-holing, Birdsell demonstrates her determination not only to bring to the fore people and regions that rarely find themselves at the centre of attention, but also to flout the “master-narratives” of literary criticism which by their very nature sabotage Birdsell’s explorations of the peripheral, while praising her for it (see Diehl-Jones 93-94). None of the approaches that have been brought to bear on Birdsell’s writing

facilitates a greater understanding of her narrative configurations. Rather than proposing yet another frame-work with which to read her fiction from the top down, I propose to reverse the process and look at it from a narratological perspective, with a special emphasis on “The Man from Mars,” from Birdsell’s most recent collection *The Two Headed Calf* (1997).

The close scrutiny associated with the study of narrative structures is necessary if, for example, one is to appreciate the reasons why Birdsell chooses to arrange sections of her story not in a *linear* way, but rather by *association*. Often the relationship between one episode and a succeeding or preceding one seems tenuous: events are combined by means other than temporal succession or causality, which are the “two main principles of combination” in narrative (Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan 16). Birdsell likes to accelerate her narrative by inserting ellipses, and it is not immediately clear what has been omitted from the story, why one segment of text has come to an abrupt halt. There are occasions, too, when she devotes substantial textual space to what appears to be an insignificant piece of dialogue, or a brief period in the story. At such times, she tends to disregard the conventions of story duration, in which “acceleration and deceleration are often evaluated . . . as indicators of importance and centrality” (Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan 56). By so doing, she encourages the reader to reappraise the information s/he has been given.

The tools of narratology enable the student of Birdsell’s work to identify these shifts in narrative pace, and examine their effects on meaning. The precision of narratology clarifies the distinctions between the various anachronies in Birdsell’s fiction, and helps one explain devices such as paralipsis. Paralipsis is a term used by Gerard Genette, to describe a narrative omission, a lateral ellipsis where the narrative does not pass over a moment in time, but sidesteps it; details of an event or character are deliberately withheld from the reader. I shall argue that, at the heart of Birdsell’s story, there is such an omission, one which constitutes the “profound poverty of knowledge” in the title of my essay. The “poverty” refers to the disabling effects of the narrator’s Mennonite upbringing; structurally, it is the device which prevents both the narrator and the reader from fully understanding “The Man from Mars,” the narrator’s father. This lateral ellipsis is a deliberate, and meticulously executed part of Birdsell’s narrative design.

In her book, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (1985), the narratologist Mieke Bal explains that there are various ways of disrupting the linearity of a literary text, thereby “forcing the reader to read more intensively” (Bal 52). She notes:

Deviations in sequential ordering [can be] so intricate as to exact the greatest exertions in following the story. . . . Playing with sequential ordering is not just a literary convention; it is also a means of drawing attention to certain things, to emphasize, to bring about aesthetic or psychological effects, to show various interpretations of an event, to indicate the subtle differences between expectation and realization. (52-53)

Such deviations are often called *anachronies*. The word “anachrony,” coined by Gerard Genette, refers to a discrepancy between story-order and text-order in narrative.

The “story” in a narrative consists of a succession of events, while the “text” is “a spoken or written discourse which undertakes their telling” (Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan 4). In the text, the events do not always appear in chronological sequence. Mieke Bal imagines a narrative in which the following sentences occur: “John rang the neighbours’ doorbell. He had so irresistibly felt the need to stand eye to eye with a human being . . .” (Bal 51). She explains that “in reality (fictitious or not), the sequence of events must have been the other way round,” pointing out that, even without indications in the text, the reader will, with his/her “sense of everyday logic” impose order on the “data in the contents” (51).

Birdsell employs various techniques in her attempts to disrupt text-time linearity, and make the reading experience more intensive. She claims that “fragmentation” is a hallmark of her fiction, arguing that her “ability to go in and out of the mind almost within the same sentence [in] the way memory works” is what she likes most about her stories. She is adamant that, “as a larger picture, [the pieces] come together” (Twigg 19). In “The Man from Mars,” the writer’s manipulation of time is part of a consciously crafted narrative aesthetic. It is an aesthetic which does indeed “exact the greatest exertion in following the story,” but which also serves to enrich and unsettle the reading experience.

Asked what is the main theme or proposition in *The Chrome Suite* (1992), Sandra Birdsell delivers this insight: “The presence of absence in a person’s life. And how they attempt to fill it, because you never can, I don’t think” (Smith 39). It is with the “presence of absence” that “The Man from Mars” is, I shall argue, primarily concerned.

At the heart of this complex narrative is a mystery, one surrounding the narrator’s bitter, luckless father, and the reasons for his expulsion from a Mennonite community. He is “The Man from Mars” of the title—alien and unknowable—someone who “did [the family] a favour when he stepped into the path of an oncoming car and was killed instantly” (Birdsell 116).

The narrator, Sara, endures a childhood blighted by a “profound poverty of goods and knowledge” (98), and the entire narrative, it seems to me, is a recounting of the many ways in which she, her sister and both her parents are deprived of these commodities. It is with the intention of solving the mystery of her father, and finding some explanations for his actions, that the narrator embarks on her meandering, faltering, exploratory journey. Birdsell’s tortuous narrative, with its many discontinuities, omissions and retardatory devices, hints at, but never fully explains the enigmas which are posed. In the end, the narrator seems to accept that her father was always cursed by the constant longing for what he could never have: sympathy, opportunities, material wealth, encouragement, success. He was weighted down by “the presence of absence.”

The first sentence of the story begins: “My mother must not have cut my father’s hair at all during that long trip” (Birdsell 87). The epistemic modality of the verb phrase “must not have cut” is grammatically irregular, with the logical necessity of the auxiliary “must” weakened by the negated main verb. The resulting verb phrase is regarded by some linguists as impossible. Here, its usage seems to foreshadow what I shall argue is a central theme in the narrative—the qualification of likelihood, the nonfulfilment of expectation. Further markers of modality occur in the first paragraph, when the narrator recalls how her father behaved “during that long trip” north, on the family’s return to Manitoba, from Mexico. In documenting these changes, she casts doubt on the accuracy of her recollections, and on her father’s explanations for his behaviour. In the following extract, I have italicized instances of doubt:

But it *seemed* that the farther north we travelled the more enigmatic my father became. He no longer approached a store or filling station *as though* he were stalking it. He *seemed* to know, too, if a greeting was in order when he entered a place of business, a smile, or a “how do.” Truncated greetings were the way of the English, he *apparently* thought. . . . It was *as though* a light had come on, he said. *As though* he’d never been away. (87)

At the outset of the narrative, the father’s interpretation of events is disputed, his authority undermined, and this undermining tends to affect the reader’s reception of his subsequent opinions and statements.

The narrator’s parents are both Mennonites, whose families came first to Manitoba when they emigrated from Germany, but left for Mexico in 1948, to live in a “Mexican Mennonite ghetto.” Sara reports that her father’s family “exchanged the black soil of the Red River valley for their new *Heimat*, a place

of clay and gypsiferous loam on a semi-arid plateau peopled by squatters, *agaristas* . . .” (90). The narrator does not fully discuss the circumstances in which large numbers of Mennonite families left Manitoba, but one can imagine that, in the immediate post-war years, anti-German sentiments ran high in Canada, a country which had lost, proportionately, more men than any other member of the Allied Forces.¹ The fleeting reference to the Mennonites’ “earlier *Auswanderung* [from seventeenth century Prussia] to the steppes of Russia” is an allusion to a history of diaspora, and iniquitous prejudice, but that history is not elaborated upon. The poverty and degradation which the narrator’s father, Willie, must have endured, are tersely narrated, with understatement and summary used to fill in background details: thus, the narrator refers obliquely to her father’s memory of Manitoba, pre-1948, as a time of “comfort, and the benefits of electricity and tractors whose rubber tires had not been taken off” (90). It is not until some pages later that the significance of their removal is explained: in the Mexican colony where the family lived, the only “powered vehicles allowed” were tractors, and these had their “tires removed to discourage exploration beyond those borders” (96).

The restrictiveness, and the insularity of the Mennonite culture, whose people are called “*muy astrasado* [backwards]” (90) by the native Mexicans, are recurrent motifs in Birdsell’s narrative. Early in the story the narrator recounts her father’s memories of times before the exodus to Mexico. She explains:

His father had had an agreement with a cheese factory in Miami, he said. Others in the community *hadn’t approved of his father doing business with outsiders*, just as in Campo 252 they *hadn’t approved of my father doing business with the ranchos of Mexicans or in any of the other towns.* (88; italics mine)

Worth commenting upon in the above passage are the examples of lexical repetition and parallelism in those parts of the clauses I have italicised. Only the possessive pronoun is different. The subordinating “just as,” which introduces the clause of similarity, makes the connection between the two attitudes of disapproval seem even more marked, and the sense of a traditional, inherited suspicion of outsiders among the Mennonites is powerfully conveyed. There is further evidence of Willie’s distancing from a community that preaches solidarity and resistance to progress, one which forbids exogamy, and discourages contact with non-Mennonites. When the family’s car breaks down near the village of Lowe Farm, the narrator remembers that her father once lived there, before the flight south. She informs the

reader that her father has tired of the “communal farm life” and now seeks the “anonymity [of] a life in the city” (91). Later, in a daydream, Sara tries to recall the various townships and settlements her family has drifted to and from, noting that they seem to her “not places . . . because we had always camped away from the other workers, from the other town” (96).

That Willie appears marginal in the Mennonite community is clear. That he has contravened certain codes relating to trade with outsiders is indicated more than once. There is evidence, moreover, that Willie is resentful of Mennonite prescriptions and uniformity; for example, he is bitter that he has never learned to read English (104). As the narrative unfolds, other reasons for the family’s sudden, shameful flight from Mexico are obliquely suggested, and shed some light on a mystery which lies at the heart of the narrative—the nature and provenance of the force that controls the narrator’s father, “compacting him, flinging him outwards and away from us” (111).

There are several references in the story to Willie’s consuming rage, and it is a rage provoked by “the profound poverty of goods and knowledge” (98) that blights the family, particularly the female members. They are denied any useful learning, any participation in public life. While “the boys were allowed elementary arithmetic, weights, measures, and volumes to ensure they would not be defeated in business transactions,” young girls read only from antique scriptures. The narrator, weighted down by her useless knowledge, “gained not a shred of information that was transportable beyond the hills that rimmed that horizon” (96).

Evidence of the narrator’s mother’s disabling ignorance is abundant. She accepts her husband’s rough and violent sexual advances, asserting, unironically, that “he used her often” (97); in the Manitoba town in which they settle, she sees nothing amiss in having to beg for underwear, to replace that which Willie has torn in his desperation for intercourse. It is a constant source of shame to the narrator’s father that he “remains a man without sons” (95), and it is clear that the narrator’s mother accepts the blame for this state of affairs, making regular visits to a bone-setter for a possible remedy. The reasons why the couple are unable to produce numerous children, in the philoprogenitive Mennonite tradition, are not reflected upon, but there are grounds for believing that the father’s promiscuity may have made him vulnerable to a sexually transmitted disease. Early in the story, the reader learns that Eva is very ill with what turns out to be some kind of urinary infection, which “sulpha drugs” (99) eventually cure; later, the narrator, speculating on why her parents produce no more children, reveals that

her father “had likely drilled for more than water among the señoritas” (95). Details of Eva’s illness, her visits to the bone-setter, Willie’s apparent infidelities, his greedy sexual appetite, are cursory, but they are not as arbitrary as they may appear. The reader is being invited to make connections between these superficially discrete pieces of information. For Birdsell, writing and reading are both acts of association, rather like “memory, the way our minds work, [always] seeking a resonance, a connection” (Garrod 17).

The young narrator’s memory of the family’s arrival in the Manitoba town, Sparling, is fragmentary, and the gaps and omissions in the narrative are important means of creating the “psychological effects” that facilitate “various interpretations of an event” (Bal 52-53). The reason why the narrator’s mother did not cut her husband’s hair, as she was apparently wont to, is not given, but might justifiably be attributable to her ill health, or perhaps to Willie’s increasing eccentricity, his enigmatic withdrawal into the land of his childhood. The manner in which Birdsell presents and juxtaposes certain snippets of her narrator’s retroversions is worthy of scrutiny. For example, she has her narrator allude to Eva’s anxiety about the mysterious Winnipeg contact whom Willie is to meet, an “elusive Johnny Peters who had been successful, he’d heard, in finding work in the railyards of that city” (Birdsell 91). The parenthetical reporting clause detracts from the reliability of the information Willie has been given, and questions his wisdom in believing it. The clause seems to weaken the word of the father. Its function resembles that of the report clauses in the opening paragraph, which ironize Willie’s claim to some kind of spiritual affinity with Manitoba.

Doubting the likelihood of Peters arriving to meet them, Eva voices her concern. By reproducing, rather than merely reporting her mother’s plaintive question—“What if Johnny Peters isn’t in Winnipeg yet?”—the narrator enhances the importance of the inquiry, and at the same time gives more substance to the mother as a fictional character. Eva says very little in the narrative—her direct discourse is mostly monosyllabic, and consists of questions, such as “What does it mean?” (108) or child-like statements such as “I hurt” (99). Significantly, her question about Johnny Peters is not answered by her husband.

There are several points in the story when the narrator notes her father’s disregard for her mother. There are occasions when he completely ignores, or rudely silences her. When the narrator describes her mother’s vomiting by the side of the road, miles from Winnipeg, she conveys the extent of Eva’s suffering, and the lack of the attention paid to it by her husband. After their

car breaks down, the family begin walking towards their destination, and it is when the narrator's mother collapses in pain that they illegally board a train which has stopped at a siding. Having no money for either transport or shelter, they must depend on the town's charity, and, in return for cheap accommodation, Willie carries out menial work for the municipal council.

The narrator's description of her sick mother is among the most vivid of her episodic memories: she remembers how her "eyes glittered with fever and her face had turned the colour of pie pastry, slick with sweat" (98). One of the reasons why the image is so powerful is because its insertion into the narrative is sudden and of short duration; it is what Mieke Bal terms a punctual analepsis, one which is narrated in the simple past tense, or sometimes the past perfective, and recounts "a brief but significant event [whose] significance justifies the anachrony, despite its short span" (Bal 62). The revelation of this incident is *postponed*, prefaced by details of how affectionate (Birdsell 87), touchingly candid (90), anxious (920), stoical (93), and sexually passive (97) the mother is. The true extent of Eva's suffering and ill health is not revealed to the reader until well into the retrospective account, and, by such postponement, Birdsell deepens the sympathy for the likeable character she has created. The reader is not encouraged to sympathize with the narrator's father, for he is portrayed in a less favourable light. Indeed, how Birdsell has chosen to disperse the characteristics of her story's main participants is significant: thus, in the first few paragraphs of the narrative, the reader learns that Willie is "enigmatic" (87), withdrawn and volatile. How the writer arranges and presents the various anachronous episodes in the narrative can be seen to affect the reader's response to characters, and her/his interpretation of events.

The absence of a reply to Eva's question about the mysterious Winnipeg contact merits some discussion. It is one of the few occasions in the story when her voice is heard, and in the narrator's memory of the incident, her father chooses to ignore his wife. In pragmatics, the study of speech acts, a sequence of two related utterances by two different speakers is known as an *adjacency pair*, a term coined by sociolinguists Schegloff and Sacks in 1973 (see Levinson 303). In such a structure, the second utterance is a response to the first, as in question-answer, accusation-denial. When the response does not conform to the expectation generated by the first utterance, it is thereby made salient, as is the absence of any reply to Eva's question.

In linguistics, there is a distinction made between the preferred and dispreferred response to the first utterance in an adjacency pair, and in this

short story there are quite a few examples of the latter. The notion of preference does not relate to the interlocutors' wishes, but, as linguist Stephen Levinson explains, "corresponds closely to the . . . concept of markedness" (307). The dispreferred response will be marked in some way; for example, the delivery of a reply will be delayed, or prefaced by some qualification, such as "Well." Often, a dispreferred response is, simply, silence. The dispreferred responses in Birdsell's story invite examination, because they shed light on the relationship between the narrator's father and mother, and, more specifically, on the character of Willie. It is, after all, with the intention of understanding him that the narrator has undertaken her journey.

When the family's car breaks down, leaving them stranded miles from their desired destination, Winnipeg, Eva is stoical about their dilemma, suggesting that "Maybe that's the way it should be" (Birdsell 93). This display of simple fatalism provokes the following reaction: "'It's not for you to say,' Willie said. He spat. Spit bubbled on the gravel" (94). The contiguity of the verbal dismissal and the angry physical gesture conveys Willie's contempt for his wife. In a harmonious relationship, one would expect a partner to welcome the attempted reassurances of the other; here, Willie's response is a harsh rebuttal. A little further on in the story, he rebuts Eva's proffered comfort.

The family are accommodated in a house reserved for the indigent, "those used to no better than a house made of mud" (100). Tired and humiliated by the work he does for the town, Willie often drifts off into his past. He remembers his family's leaving Manitoba in 1948, escaping a law which insisted that children be taught in English, and he "blurt[s] from nowhere" his bitterness at being uprooted from Canada, for Mexico. Eva tries to console him:

"Willie, Willie," Eva sighed and reached, as though she wanted to touch his shoulder.

He turned on her, jaw muscles jumping. "You keep the pig's ass that you call your face shut," he said.

The heat of his anger radiated from his body as he passed by me and went out into the shed. (104-05)

The context in which this outburst occurs invites examination, if the reader is to understand what fuels the character's seemingly ubiquitous rage. Eva, as I discussed above, is naive and poorly educated: she does not speak fluent English; she is socially rather gauche, as she demonstrates in her visit to the German-speaking neighbour (107-08); she disapproves of non-Mennonite fashions and habits, considering them slothful or improper (106); she dresses her daughters so that they resemble "turn-of-the-century

peasants" (98). Unlike her husband, Eva does not fulminate against adversities, but accepts them as the workings of fate (93). She epitomizes qualities admired in the Mennonite community; indeed, one might describe her as a caricature of its most reactionary features. The anger so clearly illustrated in the excerpt above is the expression of Willie's frustration, as he looks back on the opportunities he believes were denied him because of the culture and heritage Eva represents.

On more than one occasion, the narrator suggests that her mother is sexually passive, and that her father treats sex as instinctual, coercive. When the family's car breaks down near Lowe Farm, she recalls that her father orders the two girls to disappear, while his gaze follows his wife's movements across a field, "his eyes never leaving her" (95). She recognizes the "same guarded expression" (95) on his face as the one he wears when discussing the servicing of a mare by his stallion. The narrator remembers times when she and her sister Helena slept at night in the car, and would awaken to find their mother gone, summoned by their father to the cedar woods nearby, from where strange sounds emanated, noises "that sounded like quarrelling . . . something wild" (97). This "something wild" is, the narrator firmly believes, the reason why the family had to flee from Mexico, and it constitutes the tension, and secret, of the narrative.

These references to Willie's sexual urges are oblique and carefully placed: their significance might be overlooked in a cursory reading. Thus, Willie's eyes pursue Eva, not, it would seem, out of concern for her welfare, but out of lust. As he watches his wife walk away, Willie rolls a cigarette, "his fingers working, rolling, lifting the paper's edge to his tongue" (94-95). The succession of present participles conveys his agitation. The imperatives he delivers to the narrator—"Go get a cover from the car. . . . Take your sister and find some shade. Take a sleep" (95)—seem more peremptory because they are clustered, and occur in sentences where monosyllables predominate. The effect created is one of urgency. That the father is sexually aroused is confirmed for the reader by the narrator's recognition of the furtive "guarded expression" she has seen him wear before. These character indices are inserted by Birdsell in contexts where they are made to appear important: the rolling of a cigarette might in one context convey an easeful nonchalance; here, it conjures an image of salacious anticipation.

The fact that the narrator's family had to leave Mexico suddenly and in suspicious circumstances is mentioned several times. Early on, the reader learns that the car passed over the Canadian border with its "headlights

darkened,” and that there was “the need for stealth” (89). When their car breaks down, and an inquisitive farmer questions Willie, the narrator reflects on their flight north. Her reflections are structured in a remarkable way:

But why we’d had to leave so suddenly, secretly, and at night, our dog, Oomtje, tied up in the summer kitchen so it wouldn’t follow the wagon, lights left burning and supper dishes sitting on the table, was a mystery to me. (92)

In this periodic multiple sentence, the independent clause—“[It] was a mystery to me” is delayed until the end, preceded by several finite and non-finite subordinate clauses. The interrogative clause, “But why we’d had to leave so suddenly, secretly and at night” is the subject of the mystery, and Birdsell intensifies the enigma, by listing so many adverbials relating to the family’s leaving. The father seems to have made treble sure that no-one would witness it, and the reader infers that he must have committed some serious misdemeanour.

What Alice Munro calls the “soul of the story” (Metcalf 224) is the true nature of the father’s crime, and the possibility of its being revealed is his greatest fear. Indeed, he is terrified of disclosing anything about himself, especially if it could be construed as emotional weakness. One incident in the narrative symbolizes for me his terror of revelation. During his mowing of the Municipal Hospital lawn, Willie chances to look in a window and see a coroner conduct a postmortem. He watches as the head of a corpse is sawn away, “like the lid of a jar” (101), and in his reporting of it to his family, one of his rare anecdotal moments, he conveys both his astonishment and his fear. The narrator observes that “It must have frightened my father to see a man being taken apart, the doctor’s hands probing what he believed held a person’s innermost secrets” (102). The thought of such exposure is anathema to someone practised in concealment and repression.

That the father committed some sexual crime in Mexico, for which he was banished from the colony of *Altkolonier*, is implied in the narration. The reader is not told the unequivocal truth about the incident, but Birdsell’s narrative configurations, her syntactic structures and lexical choices encourage such a reading of events.

In an interview cited by Dallas Harrison, the writer elaborates on the strategies she adopts to disrupt the sequential ordering in her fiction. Of her first novel, *The Missing Child* (1989), she writes:

I wrote it straight—chronologically, “once upon a time”—and after I finished writing I shifted it all, cut it together like you would a deck of cards, with one focal point, so the story goes up, and keeps coming back to the centre. (McCormack 13)

The idea of the narrative encountering, and then retreating from its “focal point” is important in relation to “The Man from Mars.” The reasons for the family’s sudden flight from Mexico constitute the focal point of the story; the consequences of that flight are recounted by Sara, and its implications are of major importance to any kind of understanding she might gain of her Mennonite father. There is, however, information omitted from her account—information she cannot reveal because she does not know. She can only speculate, and speculate with some insight, because she is portrayed as observant and clever. The gap in her narrative account is not of a temporal kind, but is the result of a paralipsis, “the omission of one of the constituent elements of a situation in a period that the narrative does generally cover” (Genette 52). In “The Man from Mars,” possible reasons for the family’s flight from Mexico are suggested, but none emerges as the definitive answer, and both the narrator and the reader can only speculate.

The narrator withholds, until the latter part of the narrative, details of an incident concerning her father. What she reveals strengthens my belief that Willie’s misdemeanour in the *Altkolonier* was a sexual one. There is only one occasion in the narrative when Eva exercises any power over her husband, and it is when she suspects him of harbouring sexual feelings towards the younger daughter, Helena. He had given the children a pet dog (which he appropriates and trains) and, pleased with their obvious delight, he pulls Helena towards him, drawing her “between his knees” (Birdsell 110). The narrator recalls how “[H]er puzzled eyes asked me for direction. She pulled her head into her neck, a startled turtle . . .” (110). When Eva bursts in on the scene, she immediately senses that her husband’s actions are inappropriate, and swings a broom at him, demanding that he “leave her be.” The narrator thinks that her father will insult and dismiss Eva as he has done so many times before, but this time her mother stood her ground, exclaiming: “‘It’s not right for a father to touch his daughter,’ . . . and it was Willie who turned away first, uncertain, and then deflated” (111).

This incident is an important link in blocks of narrative which, in Birdsell’s aesthetic, are tenuously contiguous, connected by association. These chunks are not linked by linearity. This scene I interpret in the context of the recurrent references to the father’s sexual appetite, and to his inability to express any tender feelings. The narrator has already observed that Willie “never touched us. He seldom looked directly at us, either, and if by chance our eyes met, his would look away quickly, as though he knew things he didn’t want us to know” (95). Helena’s shock, and discomfort, at

her father's sudden embrace, are clearly evident; moreover, that Eva should reflexively assume that the embrace is sexually charged, would seem to substantiate a reading of this scene as further proof of Willie's sexual unsavouriness. The mother is depicted as the epitome of stoicism, patience and candour; her spontaneous reaction, therefore, might be seen as a reliable indicator of truth. Elsewhere in the narrative, Willie is portrayed as dominant, his wife decidedly subordinate, and, in this incident, his chastening is unambiguously conveyed.

The paragraph following the description of Willie, looking "uncertain and then deflated" consists of an account of his trouble with the police, for stealing, failing to pay his debts, and for fighting. The town's constable arrives at the house, to confront the narrator's father with his crimes. Willie's reaction to this humiliation, in front of his family, is to disappear into the fields, "becoming smaller and smaller" (111). Shortly afterwards, he is killed by a car, miles away from his family, in Dakota. After his death, the mother and her daughters flourish. Sara and Helena become the pride of the community, feasting on the learning of which they were starved by their father's ostracisation. The mother finds her voice; her laughter "always dominated the conversation" and the narrator remembers her constantly surrounded by people. One day, Sara returns home to find her mother "standing at the kitchen window, singing '*Sieg, Sieg, mein Kampf is aus*'" (117).

The narrator alludes several times in the story to voice, and to silence. Because these allusions are foregrounded, by techniques such as lexical recurrence, narrative configuration and ellipsis, they assume considerable thematic importance. In one particular instance, the manner in which Birdsell juxtaposes references to voice and silence is worthy of scrutiny. I earlier suggested that Eva's voice is not always listened to: she is reproached by her husband for offering an opinion, and her questions and statements are often ignored. During the visit to the German-speaking neighbour's house, Eva, desperate for someone to talk to in her native language, becomes garrulous, talking in a voice that is "too large, too eager" (109). The perspicacious narrator delivers the wry observation that her mother is "Happy at last, enjoying herself, oblivious that the woman's laughter was directed at her" (109). This piece of narration is followed by an ellipsis, after which the narrator recounts her father's sudden appearance at the door of his daughters' bedroom, where he stands, silently watching.

Genette defines an ellipsis as "a nonexistent section of narrative [which] corresponds to some duration of story" (93). Birdsell's ellipsis fulfils two

functions. First of all, it enhances the impact of the narrator's indictment of snobbery, and at the same time celebrates her mother's candour, that "lack of pretence that is often mistaken for simple-mindedness" (Birdsell 90). Secondly, the textual space makes the contrast with the next sentence—"That night I woke to a presence in the doorway of the room" (109)—more marked. Juxtaposed are two sentences referring to the narrator's parents, one recounting the mother's blissful ignorance of malice, the other suggesting the father's faintly sinister watchfulness. The negative connotations of the father's presence in the doorway are sustained in the sentences:

Then he stepped back into shadows and disappeared. A sour odour lingered, hops, cigarette smoke, and fear, reminiscent of the night we had left Campo 252. (109)

The ellipsis is not only a means of accelerating narrative. In Birdsell's fiction, it often imparts salience to what precedes and succeeds it. In this instance, it separates contrasting images of the narrator's parents: her mother's "large and eager" presence is set against her father's retreating absence.

The direct discourse of the two sisters is sparse, limited to only a few brief exchanges between them. There is scarce evidence of the sisters' communication with their peers. They are the victims of vicious prejudice which manifests itself in hostile silences and acts of aggression. The narrator remembers how street children's noisy chatter would abruptly cease "like a tap shutting back water" (113) when she and her sister walked by, and she describes an incident when she rescued Helena from bullies who were "grinding snow into her face" (114). As they run off, the tormentors shout vile insults, and Sara confesses that she hated her father then, for bringing such vilification upon his children. She recalls, bitterly, that, by his misdeeds and his obduracy, her father condemned the family to opprobrium. They were regarded as "perverse people obstinately pursuing poverty, . . . *examples of what not to be*" (116; my italics).

The character of Willie is associated with negation and separateness. To use Birdsell's words, he is perpetually aware of the "presence of absence" in his life. I earlier discussed his marginality in a community that is known for its solidarity, its resistance to outsiders. The fact that he is without land and sons, the two primary markers of prestige in the Mennonite community, is a stigma he can never remove. It is suggested that others consider his failure to be the result of "conceited ambition" (95): this ambition may, as I argue above, consist of a desire to move outwith the stifling insularity of the Mennonite way of life. In his determination to deal with outsiders, Willie, paradoxically, intensifies his family's poverty and isolation. Presented at the

outset as a man in vain search of his Manitoba roots, impossible to trace in a landscape so vastly changed, he is portrayed thereafter as a man unable to forge connections with any person, place or thing. The narrator remembers his speaking perpetually in “curt demands” towards the “Indians who had worked the well-digging rig with him, the village herdsman returning late with the cows, my mother [and] the dog” (113). This sense of her father’s withdrawal from a world he can neither comprehend nor respect is powerfully conveyed in the final scene, where the reader is returned to the primary level of narration.

The sisters, now middle-aged, meet briefly in Winnipeg, where the narrator lives. They are discussing their father’s expulsion from Mexico, and speculating on the reasons. Sara thinks “it had to do with sex” (118), whereas Helena believes that there had been some problem with money. The younger sister has been reading about the Mennonites in Mexico, and tells the narrator that, while there are some advances in education and some improvements in health provision, the way of life is still repressive and reactionary. She informs her sister that

nurses still tell stories of being chased from hospital rooms by husbands who want to have sex with wives who often have only given birth. “It’s like these guys are living on Mars,” she said. (118)

The narrator reflects on this observation, thinking of how out of his element her father always seemed weighted down and cumbersome, disorientated, like “a man from Mars” (118) on a strange planet. Throughout the narrative, the father is presented as gauche and unresponsive, alien and incongruous. He is portrayed as a character marked by absence or deficit: he searches for roots that are no longer traceable; he has no skills for work other than menial; he wants a Mennonite lineage but has no requisite sons; he does not know how to express himself in anything other than elliptical statements, grunted replies and angry commands. He is defeated by his “profound poverty of goods and knowledge”—goods and knowledge which, it is suggested, he once possessed. He remembers the family farm in Manitoba, complete with “comforts and benefits of electricity and tractors whose rubber tires had not been taken off” (90); able to speak English, he was prohibited from reading it (104) and thus furthering his education. The radio set, at that time a sign of advancement and luxury in a Mennonite household, Willie never manages to set into working order, for it lacks an aerial, and the static buzzes (110). The useless, stolen radio—damaged, missing a vital connection, not belonging, emitting incomprehensible messages—could be regarded as a

kind of mise-en-abyme in the text, representing the inscrutability, the “unknowability” of the story’s central character. In her retrospective reappraisal of her father, Sara tries to reach some kind of understanding of him, but in the end she learns nothing that will alter the portrait presented to the reader, of a man who is incapable of being understood, someone from a world alien and formidable, discouraging of visitors.

In this complex narrative, Birdsell’s intricate and abrupt disorderings can make for unsettling reading, and they do “exact the greatest exertions in following the story” (Bal 52). But what Birdsell does is to simulate in narrative form, the kind of meandering, exploratory journey that her narrator must undertake, through her past, in her struggle to unravel the mystery of her father. What the writer sets out to do is to take the reader towards the same indeterminate conclusion with which her narrator is faced. Her story keeps going up to, receding from, and then coming back to the centre, the focal point, where there is an absence of knowing. The story does not move over this absence, but swerves to avoid it. The moments of sidestepping, and the various instances of omission and ellipsis in the text can be identified, because Birdsell wants her reader to notice them. These constitute the “profound poverty of goods and knowledge” at the heart of the Mennonite father’s life, and that is Birdsell’s focal point, the reason why the narrator and the reader are prevented from knowing any more.

NOTES

- 1 Over 700,000 Canadians saw active service in World War II; 40,000 died.

WORKS CITED

- Adachi, Ken. “Sandra Birdsell: A Profile.” *Toronto Star* 4 Nov. 1984. G8.
- Bal, Mieke. *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* 1985. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1997.
- Birdsell, Sandra. *The Two-Headed Calf*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1997.
- . *The Chrome Suite*. 1992. Rpt. London: Virago, 1994.
- . “Suite Science: Sandra Birdsell’s New Novel Goes Inside Out to Tell a Story of Loss and Remembrance.” Interview with Stephen Smith. *Quill and Quire* July 1992: 39.
- . “Up Front and Centred: Sandra Birdsell.” Interview with Maurice Mierau. *Prairie Bookworld* 2.1 (1991): 11.
- . *The Missing Child*. Toronto: Lester, 1989.
- . “Sandra Birdsell.” *Strong Voices: Conversations with Fifty Canadian Authors*. Madeira Park, British Columbia: Harbour, 1988, 18-23.
- . “A Conversation with Sandra Birdsell.” With Eric McCormack, Kim Jernigan, and

- Peter Hinchcliffe. *A Special Issue on Sandra Birdsell*. *New Quarterly* 8.2 (Summer 1988): 8-22.
- . *Agassiz Stories*. Winnipeg: Turnstone, 1987.
- . "Sandra Birdsell." With Andrew Garrod. *Speaking for Myself: Canadian Writers in Interview*. St John's: Breakwater, 1986. 13-33.
- Diehl-Jones, Charlene. "Sandra Birdsell's *Agassiz Stories*: Speaking the Gap." *Contemporary Manitoba Writers: New Critical Studies*. Ed. Kenneth James Hughes. Winnipeg: Turnstone, 1990. 93-109.
- Genette, Gerard. *Narrative Discourse*. Trans. Jane E. Lewin. Oxford: Blackwell, 1980.
- Harrison, Dallas. "Sandra Birdsell (1942 -)." In *Canadian Writers and their Works: Fiction Series*. Volume 12. Ed. Robert Lecker, Jack David and Ellen Quigley. Toronto: ECW Press, 1995. 15-68.
- Levinson, Stephen C. *Pragmatics*. 1983. Rpt. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994.
- Lynch, Gerald. "The One and the Many: English-Canadian Short Story Cycles." *Canadian Literature* 130 (1991): 91-104.
- Metcalf, John, ed. *Making it New: Contemporary Canadian Stories*. Toronto: Methuen, 1982.
- Munro, Alice. "What Is Real?" *Making It New: Contemporary Canadian Stories*. Ed. John Metcalf. Toronto: Methuen, 1982. 223-26.
- Rimmon-Kenan, Shlomith. 1983. *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*. London: Routledge, 1997.
- Saywell, John. Canada: *Pathways to the Present*. Toronto: Stoddart, 1994.
- Twigg, Alan. "Sandra Birdsell." In *Strong Voices: Conversations with Fifty Canadian Authors*. Madeira Park, BC: Harbour, 1988. 18-23.

