

# Authenticity and its Discontents: *The Mountain and the Valley*

Thus far, most criticism of Ernest Buckler's *The Mountain and the Valley* has focussed on David's progressive isolation and the question of whether or not it is his fault. Most such discussions come down to an analysis of the ending of the novel, where the verdict is based on the critic's determination of whether the ending is pathetic, tragic, or ironic. Eschewing this approach, I propose to re-evaluate the novel from the perspective that it is, in part, the story of its own creation. Specifically, I will argue that *The Mountain and the Valley* reconstructs and explores the aesthetic and cultural conditions of its own genesis.

This clash between representational ideologies is most clearly plotted as an opposition between Ellen Canaan as a storyteller and David Canaan as a (would-be) novelist.<sup>1</sup> Ellen bears the ideological burden of the premodern, characterised chiefly by authentic artisanal production. Conversely, David bears the ideological burden of modernity, characterised by his inability to reconcile the tensions intrinsic to the oxymoron "exact representation" and his quest for currency in a global marketplace. And while these tensions ultimately lead David to his death, *The Mountain and the Valley* itself stands as monument to Buckler's ability to find a way out of them by subordinating the realist imperative of exactness to the anti-modern quest for authenticity, thus achieving a satisfactory resolution to the seemingly irresolvable contradictions facing the modern novelist.<sup>2</sup> As such, *The Mountain and the Valley* takes an anti-modern stance in its self-reflexive exploration of the problems of realistic representation in a world that increasingly reveals such representation to be inadequate and inauthentic.

Ellen Canaan represents the most clearly drawn aspect of these tensions. From her initial appearance as a Fate, weaving destiny into her rug (which

she finishes only when David dies) to her Marlowe-esque role in presiding over the novel's beginning and ending, Ellen is portrayed as a storyteller by virtue of the connection between her narrative and material productivity. The defining feature of the storyteller's narrative production is a capacity to weave together strands of experience to produce a narrative that is both communally and personally significant: "The storyteller takes what he tells from experience—his own or that reported by others . . . and . . . in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale" (Benjamin, "Storyteller" 87). This narrative function is facilitated by, and embedded in, a setting of premodern material craftsmanship: "[the art of storytelling] is lost because there is no more weaving and spinning to go on while [the stories] are being listened to. . . . When the rhythm of work has seized [the storyteller], he listens to the tales in such a way that the gift of retelling them comes to him all by itself" ("Storyteller" 91). Narrative and material production are thus linked in an almost magical dialectical relationship in which the rhythms of premodern labor spontaneously conjure the secular "gift of tongues" that is storytelling.

This fundamental dialectical relationship is captured ideally in Ellen's activity of rug-making. As she pieces together her rugs from fragments of castoff clothes, Ellen weaves symbolic fragments of experience into useful artefacts, producing both homey floor coverings and authentic repositories of communal experience. As she draws bits of fabric from her bag to add to her rug, she remarks on their associations: "Yes, that was brown. That was the stocking cap Chris had worn the day Joseph tied a bag of straw on the trailsled for a seat and took him back to the woods for the first time" (10).<sup>3</sup> There are numerous other examples of this associative practice in the Prologue alone, but this particular example is striking because Ellen's associations with the stocking cap extend all the way back to its genesis in precisely the kind of setting identified as fundamental to the storytelling tradition: "She had spun that yarn herself, and knit it, and dyed it with alder bark. She could see the stain of brown on the kindling stick she'd stirred the salt into the dye with, to set it" (10). In addition to having a use-history that is simultaneously a fragment of family history, then, each piece of fabric also potentially brings with it the story of its own creation, revealing the originary link between narrative and material production in the storytelling tradition. Ellen's activity is thus archetypally that of the storyteller, simultaneously identifying the garment with the story of its genesis *and* with the later narrative in which it plays a part, all within the context of premodern material production.

That such associations and their significance are not merely the caprice of an elderly woman is illustrated when the Canaans move into a new house: "Martha rearranged the furniture from the old house every day at first. It had to be spaced so thinly to go around that the pieces seemed to lose touch with each other. The walls yawned backward from them. The tables and chairs had a bare and helpless look. . . . But when Ellen's rugs were laid on the floors they brought a contractual warmth into each room" (114). Ellen's rugs instantly *communicate* a personal and communal history of lived experience, transforming the Canaans's new house into their new home. The two uses of the rugs, as floor coverings and as repositories of family history, are indistinguishable from each other in this episode, as they are together indistinguishable from Ellen's role as storyteller throughout the novel.

Just as Ellen's rug-making brings together the elements of traditional domestic production of goods and authentic representation, so her encounter with a fugitive sailor when she is still a young woman brings together the two categories into which storytellers fall: "the resident tiller of the soil, and . . . the trading seaman" (Benjamin, "Storyteller" 84-85). Ellen's discovery of the fugitive sailor while she is planting potatoes brings the two figures together and generates some of the richest material in the novel. When Ellen tells Anna about her encounter with the sailor, she activates its significance in both personal and communal registers, providing a textbook example of how storytelling simultaneously communicates and accretes experience. As the introduction to her story of harboring the fugitive sailor, Ellen relates some of his experiences as though they were her own:

'I could tell you about places where they've never seen snow,' she said.  
'Never?'

Ellen seemed to be talking to herself.

'Or where the sea is blue as—what's the bluest thing you can think of?—and you can always smell spices.'

'Where did you see them places?' Anna said.

Ellen hesitated. 'Right here,' she said. (26)

Ellen's trance-like impressionistic incantation evokes Benjamin's description of the enchanted nature of the storytelling impulse: "the gift of retelling . . . comes to [her] all by itself." Anna's disruptive question, with its presumption of Ellen's firsthand experience, breaks the isolation of the storytelling trance ("Ellen seemed to be talking to herself") and broadens its sphere of influence to activate its true function, that of communicating (rather than simply reliving) experience. Ellen's hesitant response to Anna's question reveals that what she can pass along is the experience of *being told* of such

wonders, rather than that of actually having experienced them. Her somewhat deflationary answer shifts the emphasis away from the experiences themselves and onto the experience of hearing about them. She never does tell Anna about “places where they’ve never seen the snow . . . or where the sea is as blue as—what’s the bluest thing you can think of?—and you can always smell spices.” Rather, Anna’s question (with its emphasis on “you” rather than “where”) and Ellen’s answer disrupt the storytelling ritual, seemingly threatening the aura of authenticity created by Ellen’s impressionistic preamble.

Yet this shift in emphasis, and the increase in narrative distance it implies, does not argue for the inauthenticity of Ellen’s tale, but for its authenticity. Her retelling of the sailor’s experiences is not meant to duplicate the sailor’s account of such wonders, but to recreate the sense of wonder that those images evoke for Ellen. The point of Ellen’s story has less to do with its specific content than it has to do with the power and significance of authentic communication of experience as she once experienced it. And in this regard it is eminently successful; Ellen’s retelling is a friendly appropriation of the sailor’s stories that allows the images to accrete another layer of personal experience as she incorporates them into her own personal narrative. This appropriative retelling thus produces a sense of wonder in Anna akin to that Ellen feels upon first hearing the sailor’s stories. Anna’s response reveals that the sense of aura is not shattered but deepened when Ellen reveals that she has not seen these sights herself: “Anna giggled. This was a real story after all” (27). Far from being disappointed by Ellen’s revelation, Anna anticipates a more significant, because more personal, narrative to follow. And when Ellen finishes telling her story, its success as an authentic communication of personal experience is registered in Anna’s declaration that she intends to marry a sailor one day (29). Having captured the sense of personal significance conveyed in Ellen’s story, Anna automatically seizes on its content and reconfigures it so that it bears directly on her own personal experience, suggesting that the cycle of retelling and accretion of experience will continue.<sup>4</sup>

The radical difference between Ellen and David is highlighted when Ellen gives David a locket containing the sailor’s picture, simultaneously recognising his storytelling impulse and the insurmountable difficulty he faces in attempting to realise that impulse: “‘But what . . . ?’ he said. It was a tiny locket. ‘Shhhhhh’” (166). This gesture may, in fact, be read as an attempt by a master storyteller to direct David’s attention to the message encoded in the medium, signalling modernity’s degradation of the value of content.

Perhaps because Ellen realises that she cannot effectively speak to David's fundamental conflict between his storytelling heritage and his modern existential condition, she provides not a single word of explanation, even shutting off David's puzzlement with an inarticulate "Shhhhhh." Thus, whereas the content of the story when told to Anna is subordinated to the situation and way in which it is told, the uncaptioned photograph forces David to subordinate context to content, bypassing the latent message encoded in the photographic form and focussing on the picture's manifest content. And in terms of that manifest content, David does indeed appear to have much in common with the sailor, though he is excluded from the implications such an identification could have for his storytelling ambitions. Though he looks like the sailor (a type of "the trading seaman"), he is blind to the relationship between the gift of the locket and himself as "resident tiller of the soil," manifest in his recent inability to leave the valley and subsequent triumph in dislodging the "big rock" from the field (152-66). Without any contextual information from Ellen, the gift of the photograph is not *communication* at all but rather a powerful manifestation of the collapse of authentic storytelling in the ascendancy of modernity.

This implicit commentary is bodied forth in the way the photographic form of David's identification with the sailor undercuts its capacity for authentic communication. For Ellen, the photograph in the locket has "cult value";<sup>5</sup> it is ritually significant to her in its intrinsic connection to the story of the sailor. "The cult value of remembrance of loved ones, absent or dead, offers a last refuge for the cult value of the picture. For the last time the aura emanates from the early photographs in the fleeting expression of a human face" (Benjamin, "Work of Art" 226). When Ellen passes the photograph on to David, it loses its cult value because she offers no explanation with it; it is simply an image with an indeterminate significance. In contrast to the impressionistic preamble and productive interaction of teller and listener that characterises Ellen's telling of the story to Anna, David is given no evocative sense of the special value that the locket bears for Ellen. He is simply handed a formal representation that seemingly has no relation (beyond a surface resemblance) to his specific time, place, or person. When Ellen tells her story to Anna she does not show her the locket, but Anna grasps the aura of the experience; when Ellen gives the locket to David, he has the exact representation, but completely misses its aura. In the interim, "captions have become obligatory" (Benjamin, "Work of Art" 226), but David is denied any such device; the communicative potential of Ellen's gift

is undercut by David's inability to personalise a form with an indeterminate (and indeterminable) content. He is presented with a radically decontextualised mechanically reproduced (and reproducible) object that is seemingly devoid of any intrinsic or connotative meaning. That he identifies himself with such an object ("The face was familiar. He'd seen it somewhere before. And then suddenly he knew where he'd seen a face like that. He was looking at it right in the mirror" [166]) tells a story to which Ellen's narrative power is inadequate.<sup>6</sup> In its decontextualising transference from Ellen to David the photograph simultaneously becomes a metonym for the large-scale loss of cult value in the twentieth-century evolution of the artefact and hints at the problems such a loss poses for identity itself.

This moment is profoundly important to our understanding of David's predicament. Given a signifier which he must make signify, for which he must find or create a story that explains it, David cannot. As soon as he attempts to go beyond the strictly physical resemblance between the sailor in the picture and himself, his attempt to caption the photograph breaks down. As with so many other of his attempts to capture something "exactly," he quickly slides back into ambiguity, explaining Ellen's motivation only by guessing that she had "sensed somehow what had happened" (166). The vagueness of this attribution (we are never told *how* Ellen sensed "what had happened," nor even what exactly *had* happened for that matter) automatically limits David's chances of fitting the picture into his own connotative, symbolic world. In a valiant effort to reciprocate the intuitiveness he ascribes to Ellen, David finally arrives at the phrase Ellen had used earlier, "like everything was somewhere else" (28 [Ellen], 166 [David]), in a vague resolution to an ambiguous struggle prompted by an enigmatic gesture. David recognises a resemblance to himself in the sailor's photograph, but without the context of the story to go with it, the photo can communicate nothing more to David. Thus, while Ellen uses the phrase, "like everything was somewhere else" to capture the authenticity of her lived experience with the sailor, David conceives of the phrase only as "a mocking" (166) of his failure to leave the valley. Later on, when David puts on Toby's cap and stands in front of the mirror he actually *becomes* the picture in the locket, but still has no caption to go with the image; he is so poor in lived experience (both his own and that of others) that he can provide no signified to accompany the signifying image. The photograph and the sense of longing it evokes can be attached to no specific experience, remaining ungrounded, incommunicable, and ultimately unproductive.

The shift in emphasis from Ellen's communication of her experience with Anna to that of her failed communication with David extends to the differences between Ellen's and David's modes of production. In this context, the shift is from face-to-face communication preserving the cult value of the storyteller's 'work of art' to an impersonal exchange of an image that is reproducible and, hence, has exhibition value. Ellen's intuitive connection to her community is countered by David's willful separation from it. And as the storytelling tradition dies in David, a much more modern "novelistic" condition comes into being: "The novelist has isolated himself. The birth-place of the novel is the solitary individual" (Benjamin, "Storyteller" 87). David's self-imposed isolation is the first condition of his role as a novelist; the nature of his response to that condition reveals the deeply modern cultural conditions that contribute to it. As the abstract category of "novelist" is a symptom of the literary artist's response to the cultural conditions of modernity, so David's novelistic ambitions may be read as symptoms of his modern condition. Thus, the loss of community and communicable personal experience that David feels manifests itself in a paradoxical desire for both authentic communication and abstract global recognition. Following the lead given him by Ellen in her gift of the picture (and failing to recognise its inadequacy despite his experience of it), David seeks such authentic connection through a world in which works of art are not only mechanically reproducible, but "designed for reproducibility" (Benjamin, "Work of Art" 224); he longs for global recognition as a writer of books. As such, David inverts Ellen's artistic value system by privileging exhibition value over cult value, fame for achievement over achievement itself; he devotes himself to achieving recognition for the authenticity of his purely imaginary representations, rather than to achieving authentic representation itself.<sup>7</sup>

David's focus on the exhibition value of his work leads him to quest obsessively for the "exact" representation of the people of Entremont "just as they are." This quest for exactness is motivated by his desire to "find their single core of meaning" and to "show that there is more to them than the side that shows" (292, 294). That is, he seeks photographic representation that will somehow also capture aura, maintaining realist mimetic exactness even as it strives for cubist inclusiveness. This confusion of techniques and effects amounts to David's misrecognition of his project; he conflates exactness of description with capturing aura: "David believes that he can find the words that express the thoughts of another, yet, as before, the inner 'tune' [read: "aura"] of this other person goes unnoticed" (Wainwright 87). David's

descriptions are attempts to capture what is being described; they are processes of reification that amount to treating people as things. His descriptions must render the described people into commodities for exchange in the “impersonal marketplace” if they are to be embedded in a novel.<sup>8</sup>

This is not to lay the blame entirely on David, however. In the disjunction between Ellen’s authentic storytelling production and David’s inauthentic (would-be) novelistic production, we find Buckler’s critique of modernity. The need for reproducible representation that can be adapted to any context with an appended caption is a reflection of the changing modes of artistic production arising from the encroachment of capitalism into rural communities. As the face-to-face element of exchange and day-to-day relations is replaced by catalogue mail-order exchange and the impersonal marketplace, so the conditions of possibility for personal face-to-face exchange of experience are reduced. Practically, fewer face-to-face encounters mean fewer opportunities for storytelling. For example, when the American lumber companies buy out the neighboring farms, the Canaans’ neighbours move away to the city (which Buckler saw as the *locus classicus* of modernity), isolating them in the countryside and reducing the frequency of face-to-face contact, reproducing urban conditions of isolation, alienation, and fragmentation in a rural setting. Glenn Willmott, drawing on marxist geographer Neil Smith’s formulation of the relation between the city and the countryside as an ongoing process of differentiation and equalization<sup>9</sup> argues that “the Canadian rural landscape is no Eden of premodern farmers, ready to quit the land for the seductions of the city. Those farmers are already living in an invisible city, with its modern modes of production and class-social structure” (307). Thus David’s tangible but elusive condition of modernity may be ascribed to the possibility that he is living in an “invisible city,” that “although David loathes the *copy*, he himself, a modernist existential hero, can never locate an *original*, for nothing is essential or natural to him” (Willmott 310). As the novel progresses, there is a steady dwindling of the rural population as commercial interests buy up farms and the residents move to the city; the countryside is differentiated by its low population density and designation as the site of agricultural and commercial resources for development, but it is also equalized by the onset of the invisible urban elements of isolation and an economy based on symbolic exchange rather than material barter. This progressive isolation of David and Ellen is a powerful commentary on the ubiquitous influence of capitalism (and its cultural manifestation, modernity) as it draws more and more people to the cities, literally



removing the necessary conditions for storytelling from the rural setting.

This closing isolation of David and Ellen emphasises the two disparate modes of artistic production they embody and powerfully foregrounds David's dilemma, which is characterised by a repeated cycle of insight and deception.<sup>10</sup> His loyalty to the rural setting and way of life is undercut by the irremediable fact of his modernity, characterised as it is by a simultaneous facility and difficulty with language. This cycle of insight and deception reaches its climax in David's lengthy moment of "translation" as he climbs the mountain in the Epilogue. Here David seems to achieve a union between representation and represented as he re-experiences the past events of his life as though they are present: "It is not a *memory* of that time: there is no echo quality to it. It is something that deliberate memory (with the changed perspective of the years between changing the very object it lights) cannot achieve at all. *It is not a returning*: you are there for the first time, *immediately*" (283; my italics). But David's dilemma is modernity, and not so easily remedied. Buckler quickly undercuts the promise of exact coincidence in representation by making the episodes David recollects "authentically" those of his most excessive self-deceptions. The cumulative weight of inauthenticity as the recollections pile up finally challenges the authenticity of his "translation" as a whole when David's sense of immediacy is juxtaposed directly with a characteristically illusionary ambition: "Everything inside his mind was gathered up in one great shiver of unity. He knew he'd be the most famous mathematician there ever was. . ." (284). Of course, David never becomes any kind of mathematician, let alone the most famous one there ever was; his sense of unutterable potential is forever degraded by the inadequate signifiers with which he attempts to represent it to himself. His attempts to force his sense of things into a framework of significance that is clearly influenced by global capitalism (and is, hence, deeply modern) forever defeats the authenticity of his insights. By repeating this movement of insight and deception, Buckler prevents the reader from ever truly believing in David's final vision as anything other than his greatest deception. As Buckler tells us, David dies having "achieve[d] one final transport of self-deception" (quoted in Bissell 71).

Buckler extends this repetition of the cycle of insight and deception by allowing David a glimpse of what authentic representation must capture: "There is an original glow on the faces like on the objects of home" (283). The "original glow" corresponds to Benjaminian "aura," especially as it is bound up with the phrase "like on the objects of home." Yet Buckler also reveals to us why David can never transcend this cycle of insight and deception. David

believes that in order to convey the sense of a thing he must represent it exactly: “And now the fact of exactly the way that *faces* happened to be — exactly that way because of exactly all the *feelings* behind them” (286). Rather than relying on the accumulation of associative meaning, as Ellen does in her rug-making, David seeks to attach the sense to some concrete negotiable representation; he seeks to possess it through naturalistic description (189). David mistakenly assumes that in order to convey the feelings behind the faces, he need only describe them “exactly.” In a curious yet characteristic move, David has forgotten all about the “original glow” that was the primary component of his revelation and he falls back into the futile pursuit of exact representation: “He was almost running now, as if in escape. But the faces pursued him, with the relentless challenge of exactly how each one was” (287).

Despite his growing desperation, though, David is still on relatively authentic ground as his sense of the “glow” of the various faces manages to outshine his desire to describe them feature by feature. In short, they yet retain a glimmer of cult value for him. A subtle shift occurs, however, when David expands his vision to include “All the faces there were everywhere else in the world, at every time” (289). When he extends his purview to include the whole world and all of history, David stretches the possibility of authentic representation past its limit and slips finally from insight into deception. In the absence of some particular event or emotion, some context by which to describe the multitudinous faces, David reverts to naturalistic description of features and implicitly acknowledges his inability ever to capture their “auras”: “There was the listening fact of the presence outside him of every eye, every lash, every smile-wrinkle of every cheek that had ever been; possible to be known, but unattended, *because he had never seen them*” (289-90; my italics). The fact that David has no personal experience of “everyone in the world” removes the possibility of authentic portrayal. Having never seen “everyone in the world,” David is forced to reduce them to objects that can be anatomized; the extension of his attempt to represent the entire world carries with it the necessity of reification and commodification. The empty significance of the photograph in the locket returns to haunt David’s attempt to represent authentically; in the globally capitalist marketplace, there is room only for signifiers to which customers will attach their own significances if they can. David’s failure to be able to do so with the photograph in the locket drives his recognition that no matter how accurate his representation is, it may still be devoid of the significance he wishes it to carry. The authenticity of David’s predicament, of his inauthen-

ticity, is the source of our sympathy for him as his historical situation forces him to return again and again to naturalist modes of representation in his quest for an “exactly” suitable representation that will forever elude him.

David’s final slide into complete self-deception is characterised by a return to his own personal experience and the subsequent breakdown of his representational ambitions and techniques as he attempts to come to terms with his father’s death. He abandons his traditional pattern of narrative avoidance which sees a larger-than-life David performing astounding feats of bravery, strength, and intelligence, compensating for the failure of real life to satisfy the demands of his imagination. Rather, he determines that the significance of his father’s death must be present in its setting, and he pursues a logic of natural determinism that extends even to the way the roots “wandered exactly as they did under the earth” (290). This strategy leads him down an endless trail of deferral in which the cause for any action is never fully present: “And exactly what was his hand, with the chemistry of the hair on the back of it exactly so, and there then, partly because of exactly all the things it had touched” (290). David’s quest for the “exact” explanation behind why events transpired as they did leads him away from discovering the true significance of his father’s death and draws him into the similarly unfathomable workings of language itself:

And ‘hand’ is a word, and what is a word? . . . And ‘n’ is a letter in the word, shaped exactly that way, and sounded by exactly that movement of the tongue, and in exactly how many other words? And behind the tiniest delta in the tiniest line in my father’s cheek, and behind the smallest of the smallest arcs of movement of his arms, were implicit exactly all the thoughts that led him here . . . exactly here . . . exactly then. (290)

This transition marks the beginning of a desperate spiral in pursuit of a single determinable cause and an all-encompassing account, the result of which is an almost pathological self-consciousness: “He screamed, ‘Stop, stop . . .’ Then he thought: Myself screaming ‘Stop.’ Then he thought: Myself thinking of myself screaming ‘Stop,’ thinking of myself thinking of myself thinking of . . .” (291). The graphic portrayal of David’s fragmented self ends with him screaming “Stop” over and over until the word ceases to have any denotative meaning, and becomes a talisman against the deferral of meaning always implied by representation. Yet moments later his mania for narration returns to him, and he decisively re-enters the fray: “I will *tell* it, he thought rushingly: that is the answer. I know how it is with everything. I will put it down and they will see that I know. . . . All he’d have to do . . . oh, it was so

gloriously simple . . . was to find their single core of meaning" (292). The drive to have his genius recognized, to maintain his illusion, to have "them" see that he "knows" forces him into a position of blindness regarding his recent revelation: "He didn't consider *how* he would find [their single core of meaning]. . . . It would make him the greatest writer in the whole world" (293). The balance of self-deception, disturbed as it was by his remembrance of his father's death, is now restored and David basks in the culminating glory of his illusive (and perpetually elusive) mastery over the voices that "swarm" around him.

The re-establishment of David's self-deception also finally defeats his quest for authenticity when he contemplates the alternative pole of representation as embodied by Ellen. Having finally climbed the mountain (by now grown nearly impassable with accumulated symbolism), David's artistic backwardness in the grip of modernity is registered topographically as he looks back down into the valley rather than cresting the mountain and pushing beyond the confines of the valley to see what is on the other side. Looking down from the top of the mountain, David spies Ellen standing on the porch of their home and condescendingly fails to acknowledge her capacity for authentic representation: "She is old, he thought, and *she* sees everything so dimly" (293). David's 'clarity' of vision blinds him to the living practical example of the "how" of authentic representation that forever eludes him. This blindness is finally driven home in David's declaration that he will "go over and tell her that's the prettiest rug yet" when he gets home (293). David's obsession with exactness keeps him from recognizing the value of Ellen's artistic production, and he lapses finally into his fantasies of global recognition, this time characterised by the rewarding of his work with a prize (294). The recognition David seeks now takes the overt form of exhibition value and generates a kind of income even as he undervalues the non-economic worth of Ellen's rugs. While basking in this 'false consciousness,' David dies and is buried under a blanket of "absolute white," as pristine as a (forever) blank page.

As though David's self-deception were not evident enough, Buckler further undercuts his final "translation" with two ironies.<sup>11</sup> The first, and most obvious, is that David never does actually write any novels at all; he never has to address the question of the "how" of artistic production in any extended way. The only instance of David's creative output is the short story that he writes when Anna and Toby are visiting. In this story, David writes about war experiences he has never had, precluding any possibility that he can describe them "exactly," according to his ethos of strictly literal mimesis.

This point is driven home when Toby, who *has* had such experiences reads a stray page. Faced with this litmus test, David utterly repudiates the authenticity of his representation: “War was about as much like that as . . .” (257-58).<sup>12</sup> The fact that David never even completes this simile reveals the extent to which his failure to represent a particular experience threatens all representation. Further, it reveals his utter inability to transcend the realm of the literal for the higher truth of the figural. Yet, as in the more pivotal closing episode of the novel, “the validity” soon creeps “back into it all over again” (258), though David has to get partially drunk before the painful self-awareness brought on by Toby’s reading of one of the pages of the story subsides enough for this to happen.

The second and more powerful irony that Buckler uses to undercut David’s final revelation comes in the shift from the scene of his death to its inscription as the completion of Ellen’s rug.<sup>13</sup> The two last rags she uses represent the alpha and omega of David’s deceived life. The penultimate circle is hooked with a scarlet rag that “was the cloak David had worn the night someone laughed at his piece in the school play” (294-5), evoking David’s first failure to manipulate reality through language. The last rag that Ellen hooks into her rug is a “scrap of fine white lace” (295). This rag is significant both for its evocation of the blanket of white that covers David after his death, and for its lack of an attendant anecdote. The absence of a story attached to the piece of lace recalls the blank page suggested by the whiteness at David’s death, “made of all the other colours but of no colour itself at all” (294); as the rug’s centre, the lace is evocative of the unrealised potential of David’s life around which the events of the novel revolve. No doubt the fragment of lace will come to symbolise for Ellen the day of David’s death;<sup>14</sup> the manner in which she incorporates it into her rug before she comprehends its significance illustrates the intuitive mechanics of the accretion of experience in the storytelling tradition.

Ellen’s completion of the rug as a telling of David’s story in an authentic mode of artistic production is also a claim to authenticity on Buckler’s part. By positioning Ellen as a rug-weaving Fate presiding over the narrative, and crafting his novel in the image of her rugs, Buckler places himself as the happy reconciliation of David’s desire to write and Ellen’s ability to capture “aura.” The semi-autobiographical link between David and Buckler is diluted by Buckler’s Ellenesque orientation towards the problem of representation. The storytelling impulse not only to communicate experience but to contribute to it as well leads Buckler to attempt what David fatally defers.

The issue of whether or not Buckler succeeds in his attempt where David failed has elicited critical comment ranging from Barbara Pell's assertion that we have "the novel itself, the book that David could never have written but that Buckler did write" (27)<sup>15</sup> to Janice Kulyk Keefer's "it is manifest that David Canaan could never have written a book that would do justice both to his own tormented sensibility and to the robustly natural life of the villagers of Entremont. Ernest Buckler himself could not manage to do this in *The Mountain and the Valley*" (226).<sup>16</sup> I side with the former position, best articulated by Douglas Barbour: "Buckler successfully does what David conspicuously fails to do while showing us, with precision and clarity, why David fails" (65). As a conditional resolution to the tensions that ultimately keep David from writing, Buckler seeks a middle ground between exact, reproducible representation and radically context-dependent and connotative representation. Thus, David's compulsion towards exactitude and originary causality plays no part in Buckler's simile-laden descriptions of "the way it was":

The 'it' of 'the way it was' is the meanest of terms but on it is placed the burden of conveying the most transcendent experience of unity in the fleeting moment. . . . The 'was' of the phrase thus represents a complex of times in which the moment being lived by the character is contrasted with an ideal might-have-been which in turn is extracted from the recollection of an actual 'was' of the character's past. . . . This is a language of simile—not what *is*, but what it is *like*. (Spettigue 99-100)

Though Buckler admired the "exactness" of Hemingway's writing (Bissell 64), he recognized that exact description is incompatible with an "aesthetic of getting-it-all-in" (Ricou 685): "If there is any purgatory more undiluted than attempting to trap the quicksilver of life with the laggard spring of words, I don't know it. . . . For life is so infinitely tangential. It flees touch like a ball of mercury flees the finger . . . At best, writing is only a shadow" (Buckler, "First Novel" 22-23, 25). The best Buckler can hope for is to accomplish his goal in failing to achieve it, to capture the aura of the people and place despite their reification in language and commodification in the novel.

If the realist novel as a form can be thought of as an exoskeleton that emits a particular kind of ideological message (Jameson 151), then Buckler's project can be described as a re-encoding of the traditional content of that form so as to counteract its formal message. He recognises that the novel can never achieve "logocentric transcendence" (Van Rys 77) in his acknowledgment of the overdetermined nature of representation; where David tries to construct monologic statements that are incompatible with the

polyphony of reality (Van Rys 75), Buckler makes it precisely his point to demonstrate that such containment is impossible and that truly authentic representation conveys the authenticity of this predicament. He “draws and redraws his maps of identity and place, but is never able to settle them, to provide the authoritative moment, mood, or meaning” (Willmott 306).<sup>17</sup> The formally encoded values of exact description and ascertainable meaning are countered by Buckler’s reliance on associative descriptions and his rejection of determinable linear causality. This tension is encoded in his novel as an anti-modernist opposition between Ellen, the storyteller, and David, the modern (would-be) novelist. Buckler explores the tension between the exigency of communicating experience and the impossibility of true realistic representation by focussing on David’s dilemma and positioning his novel as a conditional resolution. As a novelist, he is clearly aligned with David; in his effort to capture the aura of “the way things were,” he attempts to align himself with Ellen. At the novel’s end we have the “sense that David is just beginning the process which Buckler as novelist is just completing” (Chambers 82). David’s death is the death of the artist in chrysalis that becomes Buckler; it blends into a blank page from which Buckler starts out again, writing, achieving all that David found impossible.

#### NOTES

- 1 My use of these terms is drawn from Benjamin’s essays “The Storyteller” and “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.”
- 2 As Margaret Atwood points out, “The paradox that confronts us is that Ross, Buckler and Gibson have created memorable works of art out of the proposition that such a creation, in their environment, is impossible” (191).
- 3 Throughout this paper otherwise unspecified parenthetical page references refer to *The Mountain and the Valley*.
- 4 Buckler problematizes this episode by using Anna’s eventual marriage to Toby as an ironic counterpoint, marking the end of the communication and accretion of experience that characterises the storytelling tradition rather than its perpetuation; his stories only deepen her sense of isolation and alienation rather than alleviating it (231).
- 5 “Cult value” designates the ritual function that works of art originally served, and carries with it a uniqueness that necessitates a distance from the general mass of humanity; the more “original” a work of art is, the more aura it may be said to have. The opposite of cult value is “exhibition value,” which Benjamin applies to reproducible works of art; he views the mass reproduction of works of art as an attempt to efface the cultic distance of the original work of art by making it present to the masses. Hence, exhibition value displaces cult value as reproducible works of art displace authentic originals.
- 6 Despite this inadequacy, Ellen’s gift may be read as prophetic in its revelation to David that exact representation is inadequate to authentic communication of experience. The

- problem of representation captured in this crucial moment is the very problem Buckler addresses with the novel as a whole, as I shall show shortly.
- 7 This is precisely the condition that dogs David's other utopian aspirations throughout the novel, providing him with a vicarious thrill of recognition without ever requiring real effort; his ambitions always take the shape of "being" rather than "doing": "he'd be the best fiddle player . . . he'd be the most famous mathematician . . . he'd be the most wonderful dancer . . . he'd be the only man who ever went every single place in the world and did everything in the whole world there was to do . . ." (284-85).
  - 8 Janice Kulyk Keefer writes that "this 'phallogocentricity' is the hallmark of Buckler's narrative style. Writing for him was not so much expression as possession" (226), conflating David with Buckler and maintaining that using words to portray feelings and thoughts that are not "word-shaped" is inherently inauthentic. While Keefer has a point about the inauthenticity of linguistic representation, she asserts that "visual and tactile mediums would best express their lives" (227), revealing that she has missed the point of the difference between David and Buckler (and perhaps revealing why she conflates them as she does); the problem of representation and inauthenticity in the novel is with mediation itself, not with different kinds of mediation.
  - 9 "Differentiation" is the process by which the city produces the countryside as a differential, underdeveloped space; "equalization" is the attendant process by which the city also produces the countryside as a potential double of itself, as not only the site of resources, but also an unexploited market.
  - 10 John Van Rys traces a cycle of "sought unity and withdrawal" that roughly corresponds to what I mean by "insight and deception" in each section of the novel (65-79).
  - 11 Douglas Barbour has already pointed out the existence of these two ironies (that Ellen is the artist David fails to be and that Buckler writes the novel we would expect from David), but he does not elaborate on them after identifying them (64-75).
  - 12 This breakdown of language in the face of its own inadequacy is the essence of David's dilemma and reinforces Laurence Ricou's suggestion that "Perhaps he is distressed, too, by the contradiction between the spare, colloquial style of his story and his fronding, million-capillared vision" (693).
  - 13 Gregory M. Cook argues that the rug is in fact a top view of the mountain, with snow on the peak, and the red indicating the blood of the wounded animal David notices before dying (165-66).
  - 14 Robert D. Chambers offers an alternative reading of the symbolism of the fragment of lace, arguing that it symbolizes the wedding of the mountain and the valley and David's acceptance of himself as one of the locals (83). The divergence in our readings stems from a fundamental problem in criticism of *The Mountain and the Valley*; that is, whether or not we are to read David's final "translation" and death as ironic. I do so, and thus do not agree with Chambers' association of redemption with the fragment of lace.
  - 15 See also Ricou 687; Chambers 82; Atwood 189, 191; and Bissell 71-72.
  - 16 See also Fee.
  - 17 Pell's formulation that "Buckler, like David, often seems to be attempting to achieve a romantic comprehensiveness of, and transcendental signification for, all experience through his metaphorical and metaphysical style" (74) misses the point that such an attempt may be made in full acceptance of its impossibility, that such recognition may in fact be precisely the sufficient and necessary condition of possibility that allows the writer to write at all.



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