

The 1919 Winnipeg General Strike and Margaret Sweatman's *Fox*

History and the Novel

Gerald Friesen's *The Canadian Prairies: A History* (1987), the most authoritative history of Western Canada, describes the Winnipeg General Strike as follows:

In April 1919, when the increased militancy of the workers faced the determination of the employers, two relatively minor bargaining stalemates in the construction and metal trades were quickly transformed into a city-wide confrontation. The workers bore part of the responsibility for the crisis because they decided to test the newly fashionable weapon of the 'general strike', the mere threat of which, they thought, had won a similar contest in Winnipeg in the summer of 1918. And the employers bore part of the responsibility because, having bowed to the general strike threat a year earlier, and having heard the revolutionary talk of the labour leaders, they were not prepared to budge. . . . Huns, Bolsheviks, aliens—in short, revolutionaries—were threatening. . . . (Friesen 361)

Thus, the historical prose sentence: a line, a law of speech. Under a transcendent eye, the subjects methodically deploy verbs and causes: the workers test, threaten, and think (if mistakenly); the employers bow once, hear, and then refuse to budge. The transcendent voice develops ironies at the expense of both sides, the one too fashionable, the other using an antiquated jargon—"Huns, Bolsheviks." Balanced constructions, such as "the increased militancy of the workers faced the determination of the employers," promise not an incipient literariness, but the mimetic weight of balanced political forces and the author's equally-divided blame. The historian is not quite done with metaphors, but prefers those like "faced," "stalemate," and "bore," whose metaphoric qualities have mostly dissipated. These techniques allow

the historian to avoid the partisan rhetoric that often plagued interpretations of the Strike, interpretations on which Margaret Sweatman relies for her historical novel, *Fox*. Some early interpretations—one in Rev. John MacLean's diaries and another produced during the trials of the Strike leaders—made the Strike a revolutionary bid to destroy Western civilization, while later interpretations—such as those in Kenneth McNaught's *The Winnipeg Strike: 1919*, McNaught's *A Prophet in Politics: A Biography of J.S. Woodsworth*, and Mary Jordan's *Survival: Labour's Trials and Tribulations in Canada*—made the Strike an Alamo, an injustice around which Canadian labour and the New Democratic Party could rally.

Much as one might prefer Friesen's even-handed account, it too requires belief: in the structuralist faith that binaries can accurately represent the chaos of history, and in the academic faith that there is such a thing as transcendence, a voice removed from the chaos but still able to understand that chaos as if from inside. Hayden White, building on Émile Benveniste's analysis of the speech act, has called narrator-less description the dominant mode of emplotment in historiography: "events are chronologically recorded as they appear on the horizon of the story. No one speaks. The events seem to tell themselves" (3). Objective narration attempts to repress both the more obvious figures of writing and the present's use of the past. Historians, fearing the literary significations of their plots, have more and more attempted to drop signs of the 'ego' from the discourse, particularly by avoiding 'great man' histories in which one dominant 'ego', like the protagonist of a novel, gives shape to events. The result of such an attempt may be seen in R.T. Naylor's *Canada in the European Age* (1987). The narrative is marked by Naylor's wish to avoid names, history becoming entirely the circulation of capital and resources rather than the migrations and *gestes* of people. One might invert Stephen Dedalus's words: writing is a nightmare from which historiography is trying to escape.¹ But one cannot, Paul Ricoeur argues, simply "get rid of the *ornaments of prose* to do away with the *figures of poetry*" (Ricoeur 35, his emphasis). Much earlier, Walter Benjamin had already phrased White's and Ricoeur's recognition in a more positive way: "the past can be seized only as an image" (255). Without making a facile equation between history and fiction, these theorists insist that histories inevitably retain fictional qualities, even after repressing the more obvious signs of the novel.

Four main impulses have variously structured the image of history in this novel: a) the wish to remain true to the past; b) the wish to recover the

urgencies of the past; c) the wish to undermine historical 'documents' by exposing them as partisan constructions; d) the wish to expose what it is in the present that desires and uses the past. The first impulse corresponds to the ideals of traditional historiography and naturalistic fiction, the novelist following Zola's demand that fiction submit to the rigour of what is known. According to Robert Spoo, history is conceived of as "the substantial term, the ground of all legitimate verbalizations. Language is suspect until it is placed in the service of documents and statistics" (116). The second impulse opens room for fiction among the documents: whereas a history which aims at objectivity must limit itself to those passions inferred from actions and diaries, and must refrain from exploiting the passions of the reader, a historical fiction (such as the actions of Edward Waverley in Scott's *Waverley*) can make not only the passions of the larger history (the Jacobite rebellions) intelligible, but can also make that history seem urgent. For Tolstoy and Walter Scott, to revisit the historical line is to borrow from history, to weight the daydreams of literature with the specific gravity of history. Taken together, the first two impulses form the mimetic underlay of the traditional historical novel—the first impulse reaching for the dignity of an exact copy of the past, the second *embodying* that past.

For E.L. Doctorow, Salman Rushdie, and George Bowering, however, to revisit the historical line means to parody it, at a distance filling the same sentence that Henry Ford, Mohammad, and George Vancouver would take up, but replacing them with three unballasted Mahounds. Impulses c) and d), having slowly evolved out of b), thus correspond to more recent historiographic theory where, in White's "emplotment," "story," and "seem," the historian repeatedly undermines the idea of a narrator-less, transcendent form. These postmodern impulses make the traditional historical novel seem all but impossible by inverting the first two impulses, so that the knowledge that past documents are constructions constantly intrudes upon our sense of 'true' history, and the *present's* urgent desire for a particular past repeatedly colours *past* urgencies. We have been too easily knocked out by documents, decides the postmodern novelist. As a result, postmodern distrust of both the copy and the embodiment has been marked by a playful and strategic distortion of documents, and often, though not always, by an anti-mimetic tendency.²

Fox, Sweatman's award-winning novel about the Winnipeg General Strike, shows signs of *all four* impulses, and in Sweatman's unwillingness to

choose between postmodernism and the traditional historical novel lies much of *Fox's* power. The novel follows two young, upper-class women: Eleanor becomes romantically interested in MacDougal, a Methodist minister who holds with the radically communitarian politics of the Social Gospel, while Eleanor's sensual cousin, Mary Trotter, prepares in a more designing fashion for marriage to the capitalist Drinkwater. Sweatman's use of documents and her attempt to make past languages (especially that of the Social Gospel) intelligible tie *Fox* to the older tradition of the historical novel, yet a willingness to change historical documents and events, coupled with a willingness to let the present self-consciously appear in the novel, ties her to postmodernism. The mixed genre novel of Dos Passos and, in Canada, of Michael Ondaatje is particularly suited to such an evocation of a variety of impulses and voices. Unlike her more recent novel, *Sam and Angie* (1996), in which a single ornate voice dominates, *Fox* contains letters, posters, newspaper headlines, newspaper articles, an insurance disclaimer, telegrams, diary entries, and prose fiction. Sweatman moves beyond Dos Passos and Ondaatje because she "relines" what were formerly prose documents. For Dos Passos and Ondaatje, the historical document generally symbolized a limited and objective account, between the lines of which the writer must search for the historical subject and into the frame of which the writer injects his or her own agonies.³ For Sweatman, conversely, the relined and sometimes altered document can in its own figure already show not only 'true' history, such as it is, but also the intrusion of the present upon the past.

Socialist Gospels

There is, in *Fox*, an instructive moment during which the reader reads through the eyes of MacDougal not quite reading:

When he sits at his work places, MacDougal is astonished to discover the notes half-hidden under splayed books, his up-and-down lopped-off handwriting, . . . *spiritual interpr . . . n earth of . . . nd love . . .* But his tin table is the place for composing the Book, *lowship welc . . . or race . . . en free . . .* like a wave curling back on itself. (47)

The trajectory of work and discovery mimics the passage of time, that process which Ricoeur calls the very basis of narrative. Written documents, "splayed" and "lopped-off" (only partially recoverable where, as in "*lowship*," enough of a word appears), further confirm for the reader an

embodied past, as if the writer were being faithful to a decayed manuscript. But a decayed manuscript is not what we are confronted with; rather, we feel the impressionistic limits of MacDougal's perception (on one level), and we sense Sweatman's decision to limit the reader's information (on another). The passage's alternation between the form of the prose sentence and a more elliptical form also reminds us of MacDougal's disjunct reading of the Social Gospel and our own disjunct reading, with Sweatman guiding, over his shoulder. MacDougal and Sweatman represent two extremes of historical access—MacDougal's lyrics the fund of documented history and Sweatman's self-reflexive lyrics the debt that the present must incur in all of its reconstructions of the past.

MacDougal is evidently based upon the Reverend William Ivens. Ivens ministered at the McDougall Memorial Methodist Church in Winnipeg and was deposed by the church board in 1918, specifically for his pacifism during World War I, but also more generally for his socialist sermons. Though references to the historical Ivens also appear in the novel, MacDougal's material simplicity recalls Salem Bland's description of Ivens (Butt 33); Ivens founded the Labour Church, at which the fictional MacDougal occasionally preaches (Sweatman 47); both ministers were, at least initially, patriarchal in their attitudes towards women (Butt 90-91); MacDougal is rousted out of bed to be arrested on the morning of June 17th as Ivens was (Jordan 123, Sweatman 184). The historical Ivens would not, however, have made much of a romantic hero: he was married at the time, and he looked a bit like Winston Churchill.

MacDougal's language—

*The Labour Church must be
the beacon
that flashes the glad message
from city to city
until the whole earth
is aflame
(80)*

—is that of the radical ministers who, like Ivens, were directly involved in the Strike, or who, like Salem Bland and J.S. Woodsworth, laid the foundation in Western Canada for the Social Gospel, a discourse central to the Strike and to the subsequent founding of the CCF (later the NDP).⁴ Sweatman breaks up the line of inherited socialist prose in order to recover, through poetry, the fervency of socialism in 1919. When the censor, Bill

Benstock, investigates MacDougal's bookshop, three book titles become quite evocative:

Benstock speaks precisely, must write a sharp memorandum. "Yes. But the censorship laws are still in effect."

"Yes, well that is a concern of ours, mine."

Ours.

*The Communist Manifesto The Origin
of the Family Private Property
and the State Wage Labour and Capital.
Marx and Engels. Engels and Marx.*

"These are books, words on a page."

"Mr. MacDougal, do you know what sedition is? It's a hot word in a dry place." (23)

We may call the relined titles MacDougal's poem. The line break after "Origin" deflects "Origin" away from the ensuing phrase and back, appositively, towards "*The Communist Manifesto*." *The Communist Manifesto* becomes the genesis of the social moment, the novel, and of history. The repetition of the authors' names in reverse order echoes, probably unconsciously, the opening of Gottfried von Strassburg's *Tristan*—

A man, a woman; a woman, a man
Tristan, Isolde; Isolde, Tristan (von Strassburg, 43)—

a rhetorical (even mythic) technique which by its circularity implies that everything essential has been said.

Often the poeticized line overflows into prose narrative. In the same section the legislators' dialogue (dealing with the June 5th–6th Immigration Act amendments which allowed authorities to deport those immigrants—read strikers—found guilty of sedition) completes the found poem:

*modern bourgeois society
that has sprouted
from the ruins
of feudal society
has not done away with*

Gentlemen. It is late and we are all tired. We have worked hard tonight. (170-71)

Into the Marxian historical narrative of feudalism and bourgeois capitalism enter the words "Gentlemen" (which, it is true, have not been eliminated) and "worked," a highly loaded word when surplus value is at issue.

By relining sentences that MacDougal reads in *The Communist Manifesto*, Sweatman evokes the strikers' utopian fervour, the urgencies of 1919:

*the bourgeoisie
 has drowned
 heavenly ecstasies of religious
 fervour,
 in the icy water
 of egotistical
 calculation. It has
 resolved personal worth
 into exchange value.* In a used bookstore in Winnipeg, a man is chewing on an
 unlit pipe and reading, late, late into the night, into the small hours of the morning.

*all that is solid
 melts into air
 all that is holy
 is profaned, and man
 compelled to face
 his real conditions
 his mutual relations
 with sober eye.*
 (171-2)

Sweatman's refraction emphasizes the poetic qualities that are already there in Marx's "hot words," as she shapes the parallel clauses and phrases into direct counterpoints. In the first part of the quotation, the balanced parallelism between material solidity and metaphysical holiness discovers that the radical Methodists' unMarxian sense of spiritualized labour was already prefigured in Marx's language. Against his intent, Marx thus enters the Labour Church as an Isaiah. The phrases "his real conditions" and "his mutual relations" not only balance internally, but balance "all that is solid" and "all that is holy" across the verb "compelled": the gap after "compelled" acts as the caesura, while "compelled" itself becomes very nearly zeugmatic, distributing the destruction of traditional relations and the new free-market conditions in a counterpointed necessity. At the same time, the relining of the second part of the quotation excavates an economic metaphor buried under the balanced constructions: "worth" appears directly under "calculation," and "value" directly under "resolved," as if the poem were a balance sheet. Sweatman also focuses Marx's baptismal metaphor by maintaining the reference to "religious fervour" while deleting the original "chivalrous enthusiasm" and "philistine sentimentalism" (Marx 44), so that Marx imitates MacDougal's language and avoids the etymological joke—*en theos*—at the expense of spirituality.⁵ Likewise, the "Toast & tea tea & toast" (85) refrain for a whole week of telephone operators' meals exaggerates the historical menu that Doug Smith reports in *Let Us Rise!*, where "Toast and tea" are eaten only at breakfast, while "Salmon sandwiches," "Bread and honey,"

and a few other plain meals alternate at lunch and dinner (Smith 42). At the same time as the document-poems help embody the operators' hunger and the ministers' urgent link between Marx and Methodism, the altered menus and edited words make the narrative slightly less reliable. Upon the palimpsest of MacDougal's poems and Marx's prose intrude Sweatman's contemporary poems.

On the opposite side of the Strike, with The Rev. John MacLean, Sweatman's relining of historical prose also conveys the urgencies of the past and the intrusion of the present. While his diaries provide a first-hand account of the conservative Methodist hierarchy's reactions to the Strike, and although his Methodist Conference committee decided to force Ivens' resignation from the ministry, MacLean never directly becomes a character in the novel, but Sweatman several times quotes him, ⁶ and, at the end of her last quotation of him, she finds the bones of his prose:

<i>Thank God</i>	<i>Civic</i>	<i>our Dominion</i>	
<i>our</i>	<i>Firm</i>	<i>except aliens</i>	
<i>Governments</i>	<i>Citizens</i>	<i>and Bolsheviks</i>	
<i>firm citizens</i>			(173)

The relining drops the logical connectives in MacLean's prose, connectives that are not supplied by argumentative coherence so much as by the grammar. Once the grammatical connections disappear, the fervent rhetoric and narrowness of MacLean's "our" appear starkly. His rhetoric aggressively displays the coordinated powers of religious authority, the state, and race; and is, therefore, quite susceptible to the late twentieth-century ironist.

As with that of the strikers, Sweatman occasionally alters the speech of the conservatives. For a lecture that the "Reverend (Captain) Wellington Bateman" gives to Mary, Sweatman stitches together quotations and paraphrases about the perfidy of the Hun from the Rev. Capt. Wellington Bridgman's book *Breaking Prairie Sod: The Story of a Pioneer Preacher in the Eighties with a Discussion of the Burning Question of To-day*, "Shall the Alien Go?" Bateman describes how returned soldiers broke up a socialist meeting on 26 Jan. 1919, some months before the Strike, chasing the unionists into the Austro-Hungarian Club and the German Club. Beyond the inevitable editing required to fit Bridgman's language to the occasion, Sweatman's additions exaggerate his British inflexion and make pointed the ironic contrast between Bateman's ministry and his xenophobia: "Well, it is a blessed mercy our boys were there to set things right. . . . we smashed them right

proper" (19). Here, again, Sweatman's changes to the historical discourse give socialism a moral precedence over conservatism.

Public Ownership

By giving MacLean a much less compelling rhetoric than MacDougal, Sweatman begins to expose what it is in the present that desires the past. The desires in *Fox* may be divided (for the moment) into the political and the private, roughly corresponding to the division of ideals between Eleanor and Mary. "I had this righteous idea that a book would be politically active," Sweatman has said (Sweatman 1993), and certainly Eleanor's development confirms the importance of a communitarian political desire in the novel. Eleanor moves steadily out of her father's sheltered Crescentwood, and begins, through her desire for MacDougal, to engage with the sweeping changes demanded by the strikers. Eleanor's engagement contrasts Mary's entrenchment. Mary retreats to the cottage and becomes engaged to Drinkwater, both to secure herself against any diminution of the comforts granted by private property and to collect all traces of the sensual.

The model of desire used here is one inadvertently articulated by Walter Dill Scott in 1911: "The man with the proper imagination is able to conceive of any commodity in such a way that it becomes an object of emotion to him and to those to whom he imparts his picture, and hence creates desire rather than a mere feeling of ought" (quoted in Ewen 31). Such a model avoids the psychoanalytic reduction of desire to the motivations and effects of a single ego or to the effects of a single set of impulses such as those that make up sexuality; at the same time the model leaves, under the rubric of "emotion," a place for the instincts, and therefore leaves a place for the sexual content of Eleanor's and Mary's desires. Scott's model is discursive, connected to possibilities and limits inherent in language, and is not restricted to its initial coercive context: we might call the advertiser a type of the writer, "commodity" a type of any human or natural production including, no doubt, both conservative and socialist discourses.

If fiction initially conveys the past's urgencies, in the depiction of desire, fiction also inevitably conveys *present* urgencies. At times it is difficult to know when Sweatman is quoting an historical source and when she is quoting herself. Some of the quotations can be identified, such as the first stanza of Sam Walter Foss's poem "The House By the Side of the Road," which Sweatman evidently found near the end of J.S. Woodsworth's *My*

Neighbour. However, by taking the poem out of the context of the social gospel and by dropping the more obvious social utilitarian stanzas, Sweatman creates a tone rather different from the original:

*There are hermit souls that live withdrawn,
In the peace of their discontent.
There are souls like stars,
that dwell apart,
In a fellowless
firmament.*

[Eleanor and Grace] climb the stairs like dizzy children, swaying and bumping shoulders while they talk. They wander through the upper storey, past Eleanor's rooms, to Tony's. . . (31)

The new lining avoids much of the sing-song meter of Foss's original, and Eleanor's nearly sexual fascination with her dead brother, Tony, disturbs the poem's nineteenth-century optimism and Woodsworth's utopian use of the poem. At best, the image of past cannot be contained in the past; more likely, it is rarely even a writer's intention that the "commodity" be uninflected for the present reader.

Eleanor's stirring discovery—"We are floating on the surface. Mary's face is falling from her bones, her face like crumpled paper. We are fictions" (56)—soon reminds us, in postmodern fashion, that the desires expressed in *Fox* belong also to the 1980s. The novel's final words, under the heading "Photograph #6," remind us again: "It is the photograph on the front page today. The familiar brutal erotic. Pentimento. A momento" (200). If the pentimento, often called 'the painter's first thoughts,' signifies not only Eleanor's return to a photograph that began her journey towards the strikers, but also Sweatman's return to a historical photograph of the Strike (perhaps one found in *Let Us Rise!*), then Sweatman's identification with Eleanor requires us to ask how exactly the events of the late 1980s appear in Eleanor's utopian desire for community and Mary's sensual desire for things.

Sweatman's chapbook, *Private Property* (1988), provides the crucial link. Pentimentos of another sort, the stories entitled "Spoons" and "Eleanor's Operation" are first thoughts on the way to *Fox*. "Spoons" takes place in 1987, as Eleanor Grace Somerset Montague celebrates her birthday and her friend Drinkwater rages against a science fiction film that represented humans living outdoors eight years after a nuclear war:

"We're talking about man. . . . Someone would say, hey no one's got the monopoly on separating oil and natural gas, stick a pipe down. . . ."

"I don't know how to do that," Connie says.

Drinkwater finds this painful. "Somebody would know. It's easy. Make the pumps and levers. And there'd be no competition! A free field!"

"I don't know how to make a pump. And there wouldn't be any screws," says Connie. (9)

Here Connie's ironies—that nuclear war would destroy the educational and technological infrastructure—are directed against an over-optimistic faith in capitalism and against Drinkwater's troubling fantasy of deregulation, a faith and a fantasy expressed through the Drinkwater of 1987; later Sweatman transposes those ironies forward against the Drinkwater of 1919. In both versions, Sweatman supports the value of Eleanor's communitarian desires. Clearly, Sweatman's critique of capitalism arises not out of a particular interpretation of the Winnipeg General Strike, but, conversely, the interpretation of the Strike arises out of concerns about capitalism in the late 1980s. For Sweatman the present comes first, then the past.

Thus Fox's dramatic return to the Strike, that originary moment of Canadian socialism, may point spectrally to an identity crisis of Manitoba socialism in the 1980s. In the late 1980s the New Democratic Party was attempting to hold onto its socialist rhetoric, a rhetoric which held so much symbolic value for its members (McAllister 9, Loxley 330) at the same time as the party resisted any actions—such as nationalization—which could be interpreted as threatening to private enterprise. After NDP premier Ed Schreyer's initiative to nationalize car insurance in the early 1970s,⁷ neither Schreyer's second administration nor one-and-a-half Howard Pawley administrations (1981 until 1988) unveiled any distinctively socialist policies. The liberal makeover of the NDP helped the party at the polls, but weakened its sense of mission.⁸ Via Eleanor, MacDougal, and the 1919 General Strike, Fox takes a different tack: the novel yearns for socialist origins, prior to the compromises of power.

Private Property

Yet the present has other, less-idealized desires, and those desires are also figured through Sweatman's handling of the past. The most significant earlier fictionalizations of the Strike tended to use the private self not just to embody, but to neutralize the Strike's politics. Rev. Charles Gordon (under the pseudonym "Ralph Connor") allowed individual passions in *To Him That Hath* (1921) to completely explain political action. Like many works of the period, *To Him That Hath* incongruously displays both a trust in

American optimism and a strong sense of genetic determinism along class and racial lines. Owner-employee relationships contain a high degree of condescension, and function only as long as the worker remains subordinate. Any questioning on the part of the worker symptomizes personal failings rather than social inequity. Where Sweatman de-romanticizes the “Special” constables, Gordon had romanticized. Also in contrast to *Fox*, *To Him That Hath*'s dénouement consists of a *striker* accidentally shooting someone, reversing the historical events of 21 June 1919, Bloody Saturday, on which day the Royal North West Mounted Police killed two strikers and wounded about thirty. Gordon's interpretation of the Strike had a good deal of force since Gordon was one of the ‘neutral’ mediators on the Council of Industry in Manitoba (represented in the novel as the General Board of Industry) set up after the Strike (Vipond 39).

Douglas Durkin's *The Magpie* (1923), though more complex and more sympathetic to the strikers' grievances, ends with a pastoral denunciation of both labour and capital. The novel's capitalists appear either decadent, wedded to comfort, or dictatorial. The Strike leaders are no better—either they are opportunists or they preach “a Gospel of Hate” (190). By the end of *The Magpie*, the protagonist leaves stock-broking to farm the land. The humane individual can only withdraw from the extremist politics of both sides and abandon the city, the locus of the new industrial economy. Anne Henry's play *Lulu Street* (1967) likewise reduces political commitment to personal integrity. The political meaning in the arrest of a Strike leader near the end of the play is transformed into the symbolism of personal expiation.⁹

Fox shows some direct debts to these neutralizing fictions, as well as displaying neutralizing elements of its own. It seems likely that the sexual aura surrounding Eleanor's interest in her dead brother, Tony, is Sweatman's elaboration of a phrase in *To Him That Hath*: “[Annette's] great passion was for her brother—her handsome, vivacious, audacious and mercurial brother, Tony” (Connor 31). *Fox* also recalls *Lulu Street* in that Elly's desire to go into the yard and dance without any clothes on (70) may have suggested Eleanor's dream of appearing in a negligé before MacDougal and other men (Sweatman 83), while Mary's pathological interest in Walter, a returned soldier, echoes Elly's wish to find out whether the returned soldier Ernie had killed anyone (Henry 24).¹⁰

Moreover, alongside Sweatman's transformation of non-fictional historical prose into fervent socialist poems, are lyrics of another sort. Marx's

phrase “melts into air” echoes Eleanor’s earlier and very different use of “deliquescent”:

Recumbent. A Word

And tomorrow she will stand in the middle of every room, astonished, deliquescent. She can’t concentrate.

She knows
what his hands
feel like
(soft)
she is so in love
with him
she can’t read
she doesn’t know
what happens
to her
with him. (111)

The aesthetic and lyric interpretation of Eleanor’s politics as a product of romantic and sexual desire for MacDougal reduces the novel’s political impact. Style is the sign of the individual, the private apprehension of the phenomenal world, and Sweatman has hinted that style can immunize against politics: “Being fixated by style, as I always have been, I can read descriptions of atrocities and be studying the syntax. It’s so grotesque, that characteristic of mine” (1993).

The sensuousness of Sweatman’s language inevitably recalls Mary’s sensual interest in private property—that of others as much as her own: “Mary is still not convinced thinking is any different from feeling, rubbing up against things” (61). Sweatman’s second novel, *Sam and Angie* (1996), technically quite accomplished, arguably surrenders to a sensuous language. Although Sweatman implies a moral frame around both Sam’s surveillance of his wife and Angela’s aesthetic domination of all experience, the multiplicity of historical voices in *Fox* nevertheless devolve into a single and elegant contemporary voice in *Sam and Angie*. Sweatman’s work-in-progress, a comic history set during the early years of Manitoba between 1869 and 1895 seems to promise a return to a multi-voiced form, but in *Sam and Angie* the voice almost always belongs to Angela, as in the following passage:

He had chosen. . . Chinese neolithic water jars, a ram-shaped aquamarine of buff-ware with a green glaze decorated with pellets, discreet and intricate, gnomonic, silent, autotelic. Each object was sufficient unto itself. Every object worthy of

devotion. She counted these things as part of herself, as if in looking at Sam's tasteful acquisitions she were looking at her own portrait. (18)

Angela's desire, like the property, is private—more private even than sexuality. What comes first, we may ask of both novels, the autotelic beauty of objects or the moralizing narratives which ironically report thefts and infidelities?

The description of the telephone strike in *Fox* exemplifies the same problem, though less starkly:

Five hundred Hello Girls working the nightshift. Making connections, quieter city, hum turned down low but potent nonetheless. Switchboards threaded through arteries, organized and labelled by locals, the voices entering through the headphones attached to the Hello Girls

 who receive them and give them to you.
Wait I'll Connect You.

Today is the Fifteenth of May, the very centre of spring. The sun outshines the light bulbs when the girls unscrew the little electric globes that register your call. There's half a minute when their hands forget their task, rest. Then they remember. They reach into pockets and purses and drawers, 500 hiding places for 500 small pieces of cork. And they put one piece of cork in the middle of the circuitry. Then they walk outside and there isn't anybody coming in to replace them. But they've left a message: This morning, the Hello Girls are saying Goodbye. (86)

Style here—the attempt to register events and machines sensately, the pull of metaphors, the thematic of communication, switchboard connections across the empty white of the page—almost neutralizes the historical role of the telephone operators as the first group to strike in sympathy with the Metal Trades, the first sign of a *General Strike*. By emphasizing the individual romantic creator, style resists communitarian ideals, and even in texts without postmodern intentions becomes self-referential. For this reason, historians have generally preferred the 'plain' or 'middle' style in the wish that it would seem to be no *style* at all. At the same time a developed style, speech writers and historical novelists know, is what pulls the past into emotional proximity, as it does when Mary thinks about her dying mother:

Summers, as a child, Mary would sleep out here on the chaise, and her mother would stay with her.

*husha, you are sleeping
my hands on
you my magic
lantern*

Together they would sleep here, summer nights. There are snow geese too. Mary hears the silver anguish in their voices. The doors are open. It's cold. Across the yard, broken willows, the frozen river, wide, the ice shifting, the echo of whales. She looks back to the open door in a shudder of wind. The geese fly north. Mama Mama, they cry. (52)

The reader's emotional proximity in this case is with the suffering upper class. "Spoons" too ends not where one might expect, with the separation of the other characters from the capitalist Drinkwater, but in his dance with Eleanor: "Eleanor wraps her heavy legs around Drinkwater's waist and they swing. They really swing" (10).

Sweatman has admitted feeling "illegitimate" in the presence of left-wing discourse (Sweatman 1997). Although Sweatman's grandfather, Travers Sweatman, died before she was born (Sweatman 1997), he had belonged to the Citizens' Committee of One Thousand which had suppressed the Strike, and later he had helped to prosecute the Strike leaders.¹¹ Her family, wealthy and still prominent in Winnipeg, has generally supported the Liberals. Sweatman herself has not been much involved in politics, but she did work briefly on a Liberal campaign (Sweatman 1997). One could perhaps be tempted to argue that *Fox's* adoption of socialist discourse and Sweatman's depiction of Crescentwood rather than the North End respectively repeat the Liberal adoption of CCF/NDP social policy (unemployment insurance, old age security, and Medicare) and the Liberals' close ties with long-established Canadian elites. Terry Eagleton (145) and Gerald Graff have complained about what they see as the postmodern tendency "to reduce political alignments to matters of style and epistemology" (Graff 852).¹² Sweatman's more pessimistic comments on the political status of her novel go well beyond even the materialist critics: "It'll never actually make any difference in the world. If I was politically committed, I wouldn't be writing novels" (Sweatman 1993). A materialist might argue that by focussing on Eleanor's political development, Sweatman inoculates the reader against more fundamental systematic change.

Style and History

Yet history doesn't disappear under style in *Fox*. We have already seen how Sweatman refuses to overwhelm the socialist rhetoric of the past—not with her own sensuous language, not by means of irony. Indeed, stylized language, not just direct political action, shaped the Winnipeg General Strike,

as both sides used the 'common knowledge' of the day to prove the extremism of the other side. Both sides appealed to the British spirit of justice and fair play (Mitchell and Naylor 184);¹³ both sides lamented the Kaiserism of the other side; the *Western Labour News* complained that the partisan nature of the *Manitoba Free Press* made it impossible for workers' voices to be heard, while the *Free Press* complained of censorship when, in the early stages of the Strike, walkouts prevented the *Free Press* from publishing. The charges that finally resulted in jail terms for the Strike's leaders were of seditious conspiracy, not of direct revolutionary action. Owning and agreeing with *The Communist Manifesto* ultimately cost R.B. Russell two years in jail (Smith 54). At Gibson's Landing, B.C., Woodsworth's family buried his writings in a bread box under a fallen log, fearing that the literature would be used in a charge of sedition against him (MacInnis 141). Language during the Strike was a thing in itself, a mediator between the individual and the collective, not merely a displacement of economic events.

We might go further: if Hayden White has shown just how impossible is the fantasy of a plain language 'without' or 'beyond' style (White 26-57), it should also be impossible directly to equate a particular style with a particular politics. While one might want to equate the mixed genre with socialism (after the example of Dos Passos), the aesthetic style with conservatism, and the refusal to decide between styles with liberalism, style can never tell the whole story of emplotment and historical mimesis. Since *Fox* not only lets the author's style intrude upon the past but also allows past languages to assert themselves, the novel cannot be reduced to a political proposition, including the potential thesis of a Liberal mediation between socialism and capitalism. Via Eleanor, the novel searches for moral legitimacy in the political sphere but, via Mary, despairs of such a direct fulfilment of political desire. More appropriate than a political label, a metaphor for Sweatman's relationship with the past appears when Sweatman describes a discovery that her protagonist Eleanor makes, a discovery curiously reminiscent of MacDougal's disjunct style of reading:

She has recently discovered (and maybe this discovery has given her freedom) that she can indeed listen in a fragmentary way, skipping like a thin stone in and out of these conversations, alternating her listening with a conversation that she has begun with herself. In this way, Eleanor has discovered, she can listen and place the fragments that she takes from the men according to her own translation. And another thing: it doesn't matter anymore that her patterns of translation differ from MacDougal's or her father's. The men speak their public language and

it is a marvel, their absolute sentences, and Eleanor, living under and between, always outside, has a place she can furnish according to her own design. She has decided this is good. (120)

Eleanor among the men is, historically considered, a surrogate for female suffrage, often allied to, but not exactly coincident with the Social Gospel; discursively considered, she is also a surrogate for Sweatman's procedure in the archive. Eleanor's "room of one's own" in language means that she dips in and out of the language of the Social Gospel in a way that describes *Sweatman's* form, no longer traversing the inherited line like a pilgrim. Sweatman's poetic style is her fragmentary reading of MacDougal's Book. MacDougal's Book is the rhetoric of the past—resisted and desired.

Fox culminates in the riot of Bloody Saturday, the day on which the Royal North-West Mounted Police and the Special Constables finally charged the crowd. The novel's line of sight is, in the end, from the point of view of the strikers. Sweatman qualifies history's referential and teleological emphasis by relining history and imagined history into a bewildering aesthetic object, as in the unclosed poetic fragment that ends the day:

Everyone has gone home, except the red-coats, except the militia sitting in their cars with their machine guns, except a couple of Citizens who want to turn back. The city is quiet as a man with his hands up. He sees the blood blooming behind his eyelids, he lifts his face to the sun.

Deep in the ruined gardens of the Canon's mind
(198)

Here is White's historical sublime, an apperception in which history has no rational coherence. The presumed subject of the line, Canon (and poet) F.G. Scott, historically never experienced Bloody Saturday, having been called back to Québec before the Strike was over. A much-loved army chaplain, Scott had been called in as a mediator, and the army's inexplicable recalling of Scott to Québec prompted the suspicion that his assessment of the Strike was running counter to establishment interests, that his superiors had been urged to remove Scott so as to negate the moral authority he held over the veterans.¹⁴ The distress of Bloody Saturday makes style and the altered record seem indispensable for an empathic apprehension of the past. The Canadian romantic poet who thought that good will could mediate between competing claims is in *Fox* forced to see what historically he did not see and react as historically he did not react. Yet *Fox* remains true to the major events of Bloody Saturday—the two deaths, the many wounded, the

labour surrender—just as the novel had earlier remained true to the Strike’s competing voices. After the de-politicization that style can produce, Sweatman’s continuing, though not total and not impartial, recourse to history in *Fox* betrays an appropriate paranoia that the past will escape us and that we will be left alone with our style.

NOTES

- 1 In contrast to Naylor’s aseptic and unmotivated narrative, Burke describes a number of more successful challenges to the grand narratives of traditional histories.
- 2 This is generally the case, although the postmodern resistance against history and mimesis has sometimes been exaggerated by literary critics such as Foley. Often, distortions of history are set beside careful historical reconstructions, so that the relative emphasis on the historical and the ludic depends very much on the interpreter’s preference. For example, Doctorow quotes directly from Ford’s autobiography *My Life and Work*, but inserts the quotations into his own narrative form without signalling their presence. Rushdie’s problematic treatment of Mohammad in *The Satanic Verses* has been well documented, particularly in Ruthven. ‘Mahound,’ however, may be contrasted with Rushdie’s careful use of al-Tabari’s ‘satanic verses’ incident.
- 3 On the usefulness of mimesis to postmodern novels, see Kramer.
- 3 It may be argued that the list of Buddy Bolden’s bands and the list of his song titles in *Coming Through Slaughter* become poems, but Ondaatje’s rhetorical shaping of these ‘found’ poems is not apparent.
- 4 Sweatman has said, “I hadn’t worried about characters for my novel at all. The characters evolved out of styles, ways of speaking, ways of seeing the light in the room” (quoted in Prokosh D7). The cobbling of documented rhetoric onto her elegant descriptions of inner states, so successful in the novel, became a hindrance when Sweatman adapted *Fox* for a Prairie Theatre Exchange stage production in March of 1994. She discovered that she not only had to change the vignette structure of the novel, but also that characters required a more specific, moment-by-moment motivation.
- 5 Her paring down of quotations is also significant. “Left-wing discourse is awful when it’s full,” Sweatman says. In creating *Fox* she often started with longer archival quotations and had to pare them in order to lessen the melodrama, likening the original effects to an excess of ink in a painting. She adds, “I wanted to give the impression of it being historical discourse, but still make it palatable to the contemporary reader, because their real discourse was *so* melodramatic” (Sweatman 1993). Turning nineteenth- and early twentieth-century prose into poetry lifts some of the weight off the language.
- 6 By relying on Kenneth McNaught’s transcriptions in *A Prophet in Politics: A Biography of J.S. Woodsworth*, Sweatman unintentionally seems to have gotten some of MacLean’s entries wrong, though the changes do not necessarily affect the interpretation of the material. For example, McNaught cites MacLean’s June 9th entry as reading “Rev. J.S. Woodsworth, son of Dr. James Woodsworth came all the way from Vancouver and

addressed the Bolsheviks last night at the Labour Temple. His mother and his brothers, sisters and family are feeling keenly his attitude." The reference in the diaries actually occurs a day earlier, and uses a different vocabulary: during his address to the Labour Church, Woodsworth "showed himself an ultra-pacifist and an agitator." He was, MacLean says, "breaking his mother's heart" and forming a "sad commentary upon the beautiful life of his sainted father" (MacLean, June 8, 1919). Perhaps there is, in contrast to the "General Diary," a "Special Diary" of which I am unaware.

- 7 Schreyer's was the first NDP government in Manitoba, from 1969-1977. While the nationalization of car insurance through the Manitoba Public Insurance Corporation (commonly known as Autopac) early in Schreyer's first term created a certain amount of socialist euphoria, James McAllister nevertheless shows how subsequent attempted reforms of the economic system—the creation of the Manitoba Development Corporation, Pharmacare, the short-lived Guaranteed Annual Income, the jettisoned Treasury Branches Act—amounted merely to the "socialization of costs and the private appropriation of profits" (James O'Connor quoted in McAllister 68). Autopac, the least financially attractive type of insurance, remained the only 'nationalization' that did take place. The federal NDP had already begun to reject nationalization in the early 1960s.
- 8 Although McAllister sees the 1970s as the watershed, the crisis made itself most felt in the 1980s—the publication date of McAllister's book, 1984, being a case in point. In the early 1980s it could be (and was) argued that it was only Schreyer's tight leadership which moved the party in a Liberal direction. While the Pawley government had relatively better relations with labour than Sterling Lyon's PC government had (Black 92-127), major labour requests for anti-scab and plant closure legislation were denied. The bargaining request that the NDP did grant, Final Offer Selection, was proposed in the first Pawley term, but wasn't enacted until 1987. In 1987 the government also had discussions in hope of purchasing InterCity Gas as a public utility, but negotiations broke down (Tudiver 313).
- 9 *Lulu Street* was first performed at the Manitoba Theatre Centre in March 1967, and was published in 1975.
- 10 Apart from these minor parallels, however, the two works are very different: *Lulu Street* takes place through characters from the North End, *Fox* mainly through those from affluent Crescentwood.
- 11 See Jordan's account.
- 12 One of *Fox*'s reviewers, Ormond McKague, argues that "the language of languor and elegance" doesn't fit the turbulent struggle, and that Sweatman disembowels the Strike (McKague 28).
- 13 Mitchell and Naylor imply that the appeal to British fairness may not have been simply a rhetorical tactic, but a camouflage for the nearness of radical political change: "If radical ideas about running the city and defeating capitalism were not loudly articulated—and the General Strike period was remarkable for workers' rhetorical restraint—was it because they were no longer thought? or was it that the deepening of the crisis meant that they were closer to fruition, and thus more dangerous to voice?" (Mitchell and Naylor 25).
- 14 Scott was the father of the poet and lawyer F.R. Scott, who became one of the primary authors of the Regina Manifesto.

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Surrender

There are places in our midst
akin to larger rivers,
 or a vast terrain—
 you will continue to traverse.

All you have encountered
 more than Epictetus
or other destitutes in ancient places
 you must consider.

Now wander with crossings
 more than the Greeks ever did,
this beginning of new life—
 without the sense of history.

Conquest at the fingertips,
 spires raised higher,
as if there's joy always
 in stars moving.

The instinct of an ocean is what you bring
 to this place with tides,
as I keep looking back at houses
 on stilts, one with another.