

“Susceptible to no
common translation”¹
Language and Idealism
in Sara Jeannette Duncan’s
The Imperialist

At the turn of the century, Canada’s cultural periodicals chronicled an impassioned debate amongst intellectuals and politicians over Canada’s place in the British Empire. For some, imperialism was a relic of the past, tying Canada to colonial dependency. For others, including Sara Jeannette Duncan, it was the key to the future, guaranteeing Canada’s economic and political strength as a commonwealth partner. But for Duncan it was also much more: a lofty ideal essential to national identity and necessary to defend Canada from American materialism. Wishing to silence critics of imperialism who spoke only about trade relations and defence agreements, Duncan in *The Imperialist* defends “the moral aspect” (155) of the British connection, a truth so self-evident as to need no explanation, but so imperilled as to warrant an entire novel in its defence.

According to poststructuralist theory, the search for a self-authenticating truth beyond language is the oldest dream of Western metaphysics, doomed to falter on the bedrock of language (Norris 19).² In *The Imperialist*, the morality of imperialism is the truth that makes all other kinds of judgement and discrimination possible, a transcendent principle capable of governing economic and political decisions. But critics such as Frank Davey and Francis Zichy have contended that Duncan’s support for imperialism is ambiguous; Lorne seems to be set up for failure, his principles inevitably (perhaps even justly) defeated by the monetary considerations and practical realities the imperial ideal claims to govern. Peter Allen argues that uncertainty is the keynote of the novel, making Duncan “an eloquent and important witness

to the ambiguity of our developing national identity in the years before World War I" (388). I will argue that Duncan's ambiguous presentation of imperialism has another source in the "bottomless relativity" (Norris 58) of language itself, as Duncan's privileging of imperial truth becomes entangled in self-generated contradictions. As the novel develops, Duncan makes Lorne's doomed quest to realize the Imperial Idea an analogue for the writer's quest to express the ideal. She opposes spirit to matter, the ineffable to the tangible, and the ideal to the material in order to establish the transcendence of the imperial essence and literary truth, but in both cases her pursuit of the privileged term exposes the ubiquity of its material other. Ultimately, Duncan's irony both acknowledges, and protects against, the inevitability of failure.

The debate over Canada's future *vis-à-vis* the strengthening or loosening of ties with England has been thoroughly outlined by Carl Berger and discussed by a number of critics in relation to *The Imperialist* (Dean, Heble, Tausky "Writing"), so I will not rehearse it in detail except to take a look at one of Duncan's predecessors in the debate. The work of Goldwin Smith provides a useful context for Duncan's emphasis on the imperial ideal. As Ajay Heble notes (218), Smith was one of the most articulate opponents of imperialism; his *Canada and the Canadian Question* (1891) went so far as to claim that Canada's destiny lay in complete political union with the United States. Despite their ideological differences, Duncan was friendly with Smith, having met him during her term as journalist for *The Week* in the 1880s. Duncan had left Canada by the time of the book's publication, voluntarily exiled to Calcutta through her marriage to Everard Cotes. However, given her acquaintance with Smith and her deep interest in Canadian politics, it is likely that Duncan knew of *Canada and the Canadian Question*, in which Smith argued for an American commonwealth on the grounds of economics and utility. Union with the United States, Smith contended, "would greatly raise the value of property in Canada" and would generally "bring with it a great increase of prosperity" (212). According to Smith, all of Canada's "natural relations," that is, her "diplomatic and commercial" ties, were with the United States (192). Where once, it is true, the Empire had offered needed military protection and markets, now the imperial connection was an economic and military handicap for both Britain and Canada, weakened by distance and difference of interests.

Of imperial affection, moral allegiance, or principle, Smith had little to say; imperialism was a pretty flower, "[b]ut to be sound, it must after all

have its root in some kind of utility, and when the root is dead the days of the flower are numbered” (201). When Smith spoke in metaphors, he tended to figure imperialism as a flimsy garment or fabric, its lack of hard substance a marker of its unimportance. Loyalty to the Crown, for example, was merely an “airy fabric” (211). And if the economic and political bases of imperial connection (trade relations, imperial defence) were more tangible, they also comprised a thinning garment: “Of dominion over the Colony,” Smith claimed, using a metaphor that positioned Canadians as mice or some other destructive vermin, “barely a rag remains to the mother country, and even that remnant is grudged, and is being constantly nibbled away” (194). Speaking of the prestige attributed to the imperial connection, Smith asserted that the Dominion merely “bears the train, not wears the royal robe” (198). These metaphors of thin or useless fabric—a rag, a remnant, inconsequential finery—represent the imperial connection as insubstantial and flimsy, not durable enough to clothe the body of political destiny.

It was arguments such as Smith’s, if not Smith’s itself, that Duncan had in mind in *The Imperialist*, which attacks the economic obsessions of the age and fears for the survival of the intangible in an era dominated by business values. In launching such an attack, Duncan was hardly alone; Jeff Nunokawa has argued that Victorian and Edwardian novels are obsessed with money and with marking out some human sphere safe from “the comprehensive grasp of the commodity form” (3). The emphasis in *The Imperialist* on metaphors of fabric in opposition to figures of economic calculation (it is, as we will see, the very insubstantiality of the Murchisons’ “spiritual and mental fabric” [45] that elicits the admiration of Duncan’s narrator) suggests Duncan’s privileging of what Smith dismissed as immaterial. In *A Different Point of View*, Misao Dean shows the extent to which Duncan was influenced by idealist philosophy, which “saw the material world as an embodiment of transcendent values whose significance could be brought out in realist fiction through careful selection of detail” (11). Detailed description was valuable not because it represented a thing in itself but because it evoked unchanging truths and values.³ In *The Imperialist*, Duncan sets out to shift the terms of debate away from economics and towards the “ideals that transcended the profit motive” (Dean 16).

As she surveys her small Canadian town, Duncan’s narrator suggests that it is still possible to call upon the “sentiment of affection for the reigning house” (62) to distinguish Canadians from Americans, despite the fit of

American shoes on Canadian feet (144). But defining the distinctiveness of Canadian values is no simple task. What matters is often what is most difficult to put into words: passions, principles, and moral truths quite “outside the facts of life” (63) and only to be grasped “by deed of imagination and energy and love” (82). Describing the Elgin townspeople’s loyalty to England, the narrator emphasizes that it is inarticulate: imperial affection “was among the things not ordinarily alluded to, because of the shyness that attaches to all feeling that cannot be justified in plain terms” (63). Although critics such as Faye Hammill (157) have interpreted this statement as demonstrating the philistinism or hard-headed practicality of the people of Elgin, Duncan emphasizes that it is shyness, not disregard, that prevents speech. Some of the most positive characters in the novel—particularly John Murchison—refrain from speaking about the things they cherish, as if protecting their ideals through silence.

Thus, Duncan’s challenge in *The Imperialist* is to give words to ideals even while recognizing that what is most valuable in human experience escapes language. The parallel with her hero, Lorne, is obvious, for Lorne too is able to look beyond the obvious and “to see larger things” (83). Lorne also insists on speaking about what other people in Elgin acknowledge only obliquely. He is indignant to discover that the newspapers discuss the Imperial Question as if “all its merits could be put into dollars and cents” while ignoring “the higher level” altogether (155). Although he recognizes the practical spirit in Elgin, its preoccupation, even “on the eve of a great far-reaching transaction with the mother country” with the material “terms of the bargain” (171), Lorne is finally unable to confine himself to a strict economic reckoning. Lorne’s surrender to “the rush of the Idea” (262) separates him absolutely from characters such as Octavius Milburn, whom Duncan condemns with an economic metaphor as the “man of averages, balances, the safe level” (53). Risking speech is dangerous, but essential if human values are to survive the onslaught of economic doctrine.

In championing Lorne’s ideal, Duncan is not suggesting that material considerations are irrelevant. She concedes the fundamental importance of such business ventures as John Murchison’s stove manufactory, but also insists on its less obvious significance. Lorne’s father’s business acumen and commercial success are held up for admiration by Duncan’s narrator when readers are invited to share the satisfied glance of John and Dr. Drummond around the prosperous store-room at the beginning of the second chapter:

“It was no longer a light stock. The two men involuntarily glanced round them for the satisfaction of the contrast Murchison evoked” (22). As she depicts their quiet appreciation of the fuller stock, the narrator emphasizes the shop’s status as a signifier of material prosperity. Only the “[f]inicking” would complain about the “iterating ring” from the iron foundry up the street (23) and only the hopelessly class-conscious, such as Alfred Hesketh, would feel anything but respect for John Murchison, a man at whom “[p]eople looked twice” (19).

But Duncan also suggests that the shop plays a part in a less tangible transformation, which is the process by which the two men have become Canadians, mingling not only their material fortunes but their whole being in the “fabric” of the new country (20). The two men immigrated around the same time “to add their labour and their lives to the building of this little outpost of Empire” (20). Introducing the men, Duncan refers to this transformation, and although her language denotes an economic exchange, business is a metaphor for some deeper transaction of the spirit. The men’s participation in building the community was “the frankest transfer, without thought of return; they were there to spend and be spent within the circumference of the spot they had chosen, with no ambition beyond. In the course of nature, even their bones and their memories would enter into the fabric” (20). In the description, physical and spiritual, bones and memories, the business cycle and natural time, are placed side by side, the intertwined threads weaving the fabric of the new country, built of hard work and moral commitment.

In working such metaphors, which negotiate between material facts and transcendent truths, Duncan’s textual strategy supports Lorne’s idealism. Duncan’s blending of economics with the immaterial fabric of national existence emphasizes that prosperity, though important, is not everything; it alone does not make a country great. In an essay on imperialism and morality, Terrence L. Craig points out that the equation of morality with the British Empire is so self-evident to Duncan as to require no explanation: “for all the debate and rhetoric staged throughout the novel, the moral base of the British Empire is presented as a given, and as an incontrovertible argument” (419). This is true, but Duncan’s reticence about the explicit meaning of British morality may also stem from her sense that it cannot be calculated or measured: it is, in Advena’s words, “the thing itself, the precious thing” (121) that stands above what are “only political, economic, material” realities of social development (123, emphasis mine). As a centuries-old civilization,

England “has accumulations that won’t depreciate” (156), a kind of cultural capital worth significant investment by the colonies (156), even if the returns cannot be entered in any ledger. Here, Duncan’s references to economics serve to emphasize the values that surpass it.

A number of critics have noted Duncan’s privileging of the imagination. As Tausky observes, the capacity for imaginative vision is a line of demarcation distinguishing those characters Duncan approves from those she dismisses (*Novelist* 161-62).⁴ Lack of imagination, for example, mires Hesketh in class consciousness in the very moment of denying it, when in his determination not to condescend to Lorne’s shop-keeping father, he can’t help but condescend. Fortunately for his own self-satisfaction, he can’t recognize his failure and is able to “reflect [] afterward that he had been quite equal to the occasion” (174). By contrast, Lorne’s imagination allows him to see his father for a moment as Hesketh does, and to adjust his conception so that it contains, without being altered by, Hesketh’s view. Believing with Henry James that the novelist’s experience of life could be likened to “a huge spider web of the finest silken threads suspended in the chamber of consciousness, and catching every air-borne particle in its tissue” (83-84), Duncan creates a novel that evaluates its characters according to the fineness of their perceptions and at the same time emphasizes the novelist’s own sensitivity of response.

This sensitivity is particularly attuned to the ineffable. When she describes what separates the Murchison family from the other citizens of Elgin, Duncan emphasizes both the Murchisons’ superiority and Elgin’s limitations with reference to an indefinable quality. The Murchisons are “too good” for their community, but their difference is subtle: “[i]t was a matter of quality, of spiritual and mental fabric; they were hardly aware that they had it, but it marked them with a difference, and a difference is the one thing a small community, accustomed comfortably to scan its own intelligible averages, will not tolerate” (45). The Murchisons threaten Elgin because there is something about them that cannot be “scanned,” made intelligible. This difference baffles Elgin in refusing to take a recognizable form (such as excessive piety or greed, the accepted idiosyncrasies) and the Murchisons themselves are not even conscious of the quality. Duncan’s qualifications (“in a manner,” “hardly aware” [45]) emphasize the subtlety of the distinction, highlighting her own wariness of over-statement, her consciousness of the potential in language for clumsy simplification. Duncan’s interest in the limits of language—and conversely, in its limitless possibilities—is foregrounded.

Here and throughout the novel, her thematic emphasis on an elusive “spiritual and mental fabric” (45) is paralleled by her rhetorical technique, which might be likened to the practice of disentangling the threads of a fabric, tracing its complex interweaving without threatening the integrity of the fabric. As we will see, a certain unravelling is inevitable.

That the Murchisons’ difference is “susceptible to no common translation” (45) validates them as a subject of Duncan’s novel, for her success in translating them will prove *The Imperialist* to be an *uncommon* translation. One of the many damning revelations about Dora Milburn is the grossness of her capacity to translate details into abstract truths. Duncan’s description of Dora as possessing a “dull surface to the more delicate vibration of things” (272) seems to echo James, above. Noticing Lorne for the first time, Dora interprets his value based on physical characteristics, “the set of his shoulders and the carriage of his head” (60), rather than on the qualities of character that they denote, and the narrator tells us sorrowfully that Lorne’s attractiveness “might have been translated in simple terms of integrity and force by any one who looked for those things. Miss Milburn was incapable of such detail, but she saw truly enough in the mass” (60). The uncommon skills needed to translate the Murchisons legitimize both their moral worth, at the level of plot, and their textual worth, at the level of novelistic discourse. Dora, on the other hand, is worthy only of a dime novel.

Even the narrator’s rather flippant comment that “there was an allure about a young man in a bank as difficult to define as to resist” (47) suggests that we are attracted to what cannot be pigeonholed by language. And when Walter Winter translates Lorne’s as yet inarticulate ambitions into crude self-promotion, commenting that it would be a “[v]ery useful thing” (58) for Lorne to have a part in the Ormiston defence, Lorne shrinks from his corrupting language, and the narrator commends his delicacy, noting that “[i]t is one thing to entertain a private vision and another to see it materialized on other lips” (59). Sometimes, Duncan intimates, an ideal is best maintained when it is not articulated at all, as when Lorne’s family discusses the practical aspects of the trade delegation (such as which arguments will work best with the English) while content to allow the larger implications, for Lorne and the country, “to sit there with [Cruickshank], significant and propitious, in the middle of the sofa” (99). They glance at it occasionally with great satisfaction but do not speak of it.

If we turn next to Duncan’s description of Elgin, we notice again her

preference for fine distinctions and complex processes of transformation: the social subtleties that demand an uncommon translation. The “analysis of social principles in Elgin,” the narrator warns, is “an adventure of difficulty” (48); its complexity requires the skills of a serious and astute observer. Thus Duncan begins her social history by highlighting the challenge it offers. Elgin originated in a transplanted English order, complete with rigid social distinctions, and has experienced the “process of blending”—awkward but ultimately salutary—that goes into “the making of a nation” (49). While still caring about “where to draw the line,” Elgin is rapidly becoming an essentially classless society of “hard-working folk together” (49). Duncan focuses on the elusive alchemy that turns a collection of business enterprises into a vibrant, spirited community. Through the struggle to survive, Canada has become a more egalitarian society than England, “too fundamentally occupied with the amount of capital invested, and too profoundly aware how hard it was to come by” to care too much about the degree of social deference due to the piano tuner or the drygoods merchant. Ultimately, it is not the remaining class distinctions that matter, for they too will fade, but the “certain bright freedom” that is “of the essence” (49).

Duncan emphasizes that this breaking down of social distinctions is connected to trade but not reducible to it. Twice she describes, in lists, the forces responsible for smoothing over the “lines of demarcation” brought to Canada by the original English settlers (48). What happened to dissolve the Family Compact social order of judges, doctors, lawyers, and preachers was that “[t]rade flourished, education improved, politics changed” (48). Only a few sentences later, Duncan repeats this triumvirate, emphasizing that the “original dignified group” (48) was broken up by the new social forces in the country: “Prosperous traders foreclosed them, the spirit of the times defeated them, young Liberals succeeded them in office” (49). Typical here is Duncan’s blending of ideal principle with economic fact. At the same time that trade begins to level the social hierarchy, public education gradually spreads to everyone, making self-determination possible. Material development underpins social progress, but less tangible achievements such as social cohesion, egalitarian community, and that “new quality in the blood” (142) are what really matter—and escape quantification—for the political idealist and the novelist.

The focus on social alchemy is also evident in an oft-quoted passage describing market day in Elgin, “a scene of activity but not of excitement, or

in any sense of joy" (80). Duncan's account performs the transformation from commercial transaction to community spirit in the progressive abstraction of its language. It begins with a description of market activity; market day is a scene of such seriousness ("the matter . . . of too hard an importance" [80]) that any conversation not necessary to business is thought frivolous. Duncan suggests, self-consciously, that one should not idealize this hard scramble for livelihood because "[l]ife on an Elgin market day was a serious presentment even when the sun shone, and at times when it rained or snowed the aesthetic seemed a wholly unjustifiable point of view" (81). In consequence, the language is strictly economic: the "margin" between misery and prosperity is small; the farmers and shoppers take part in an "enterprise" long established; that enterprise is their "narrow inheritance" from Fox County forebears (81).

But as if the allusion to inheritance has opened a wider view, Duncan's metaphors shift. Reference to the "bones" in the village graveyard is succeeded by a description of the "enduring *heart of the new country* already old in acquiescence" and the "deep *root of the race* in the land" (81, emphasis mine). The economic is succeeded by the organic, "twisted and unlovely," but nonetheless promising growth and endurance. Whereas a few sentences earlier, Duncan had stressed that the struggling vitality of the market square represented "no fresh broken ground of dramatic promise," her reference to the "root of the race" is accompanied by the declaration that this race "hold[s] the promise of all" (81). In the space of a few lines, Elgin Market Square is translated from a mere centre of commercial activity to a microcosm, a metonym, of "the history of the whole Province" (81).

For such translation to take place, Duncan suggests, young visionaries like Lorne Murchison are necessary. Lorne occupies the intermediary position in the lists Duncan had articulated, standing for education and the "spirit" of the new country. He is particularly capable of responding to the idea of his country. Descending from his law office opposite the market square, Lorne experiences a mystical sense of oneness with, and a subjective possession of, the struggling farmers and merchants of Elgin:

A tenderness seized him for the farmers of Fox County, a throb of enthusiasm for the idea they represented, which had become for him suddenly moving and pictorial. (82)

One might note in passing here Duncan's contradictory insistence on the presence and absence of class in this moment of identification (an issue

developed in detail by Teresa Hubel). Lorne's sense of his identity as a Canadian is confirmed as he stands watching the merchants engaged in the hard struggle for economic survival. Lorne has no real part in this struggle, yet he claims membership through sympathetic identification. Through an exercise of the imagination that transcends class boundaries even as it depends on them, Lorne comes into possession of his national identity.

The fact of Lorne's escape from the struggle allows his romanticized perception of it, enabling Duncan, who had earlier warned against idealizing market day, to indulge in such idealization. What seems to authorize such idealization is the sensitivity of the observer and fidelity to two kinds of truth. In the moment that Lorne takes possession of Elgin's essence, the farmers of Fox County are both real people and wonderful abstractions: Lorne translates them into idea, but he doesn't lose sight of their material struggle. The ability to balance these two kinds of vision is crucial—both to politics and art. Duncan even describes it as a mysterious inspiration: Lorne's apprehension of his country seizes him just as suddenly and completely as does his vision of Walter Ormiston's innocence, which "came to him and stayed with him like a chapter in a novel" (95). In Lorne, the "narrow inheritance" (81) of commercial activity—the hard possibility of livelihood—becomes the "great and helpless . . . inheritance" of the man of principle who carries a vision of his country (82).

In the character of Lorne, then, Duncan vindicates not only fidelity to ideals but her own craft as political novelist: both create a vision, in language, of something greater than its vehicle. For example, when describing how Lorne manages Walter Ormiston's defence, Duncan stresses Lorne's fidelity to fact, combined with an almost mystical divination of human nature; the description might just as effectively be applied to the novelist's art. Lorne's argument succeeds because of his mastery of narrative design and literary truth; he tells his story so well that the listeners in the courtroom, including the jury, "[see] the plot at once as he constructed it" (96). Logic, rebuttal, and counter-evidence are part of Lorne's procedure, but they are not the whole or the strongest part. His real power is his ability to transform facts—some of them rather damning—into a beautiful narrative of wronged innocence. Like the novelist, Lorne persuades through the smoothest of trickery, a sleight of hand (Duncan uses the word *legerdemain*) more convincing than fact because it appeals to that quality of "romance . . . not yet . . . trampled down by reason" (96).

The “not yet” introduces doubt into the sentence, suggesting that Lorne’s rhetorical power may not last. But Duncan doesn’t suggest that artful rhetoric is manipulation only. Lorne’s whole quality of being is an essential part of the defence: “His nature came into this, his gravity and gentleness, his sympathy, his young angry irony” (96). And in the early weeks of the election campaign, the effect of Lorne’s rhetoric on the farmers to whom he appeals is at least as powerful. If language can work transformative magic, Lorne’s certainly does, for “his talk had been so trenchant, so vivid and pictorial, that the gathered farmers listened with open mouths, like children, pathetically used with life, to a grown-up fairy tale” (258). In consistently paralleling the writer’s craft with the politician’s mission, Duncan implies that both succeed when they summon a vision of something fine and elusive. But Lorne’s ability to ply his art is soon checked by his political advisors, who fear the force of reason—or at least, of self-interest. Lorne’s language saves Walter Ormiston’s life; the irony is that when he stands “at the bar for the life of a nation” (267), idealist language is insufficient, as it was, ultimately, for Duncan’s novelistic defence (Tausky “Audiences” 470, 482).⁵

In “This little outpost of Empire,” Heble suggests that a primary turning point in Lorne’s attitude to England occurs after his visit to London as part of the imperial communications delegation. From slavish imitation and idolatry of all things English, Lorne comes to regard Canada as England’s equal, if not its superior, a recognition that forms “a crucial stage in the process of Canada’s decolonization” (Heble 220). I would argue that this shift is less one of substance than of emphasis. The trip to England does nothing to diminish Lorne’s zeal for what England symbolizes, for Lorne carries back with him certain “beautiful beliefs” unspoiled (143). The visit strengthens his faith in the practical virtues of Canada, its clean air, open spaces, and economic opportunity, but it also strengthens his conviction that practical virtues are not enough for Canada: the nation needs the vision of the political idealist, “the inrush of the essential” (131), to be made real. While the other members of the delegation are “full of the terms of their bargain” with “little use for schemes that did not commend themselves on a basis of common profit” (130), Lorne looks beyond the material level, “higher and further . . . he only lifted up his heart” (131). Although Lorne can and does argue the economic aspect of imperialism, stressing in a conversation with Hesketh England’s need for a boost in manufacturing, his economic theories all proceed from—and are designed to support—a messianic vision of

England as the moral centre of culture, “the heart of the Empire, the conscience of the world, and the Mecca of the race” (140).

Even while admiring Lorne’s vision, however, Duncan stresses how the bottom line ultimately encroaches upon the most ardent idealism. Moral and cultural values are vulnerable to—in fact, are underwritten by—monetary interests, and we are meant to understand it as a damning moment indeed when, having delivered an impassioned plea for his higher vision at the final election rally, Lorne must listen to the Minister of Public Works deliver “a telling speech, with the chink of hard cash in every sentence” as political corrective to his own dangerous oration (268). Having planned, at the urging of his advisors, a speech to enumerate the tangible material benefits that Fox County has received from the Liberal party, a solid listing of the Liberal account, Lorne finds himself delivering the visionary “jihad” (261) he had composed in the early days of his candidature. This speech best reveals Duncan’s preoccupation with language straining against its limits.

Most critics have assumed that Lorne’s unleashing of his ideal during the crucial election speech is a simple, disastrous miscalculation. Tausky calls it a “fatal error in tactics” (*Novelist* 156); Michael Peterman sees the moment as evidence of Lorne’s “failure to maintain a realistic perspective” (351). The constituents of Fox County may like the idea of Empire, but they vote where their material interests lie. Even Lorne recognizes that “[a]fter all, victory was the thing” (258), agreeing to limit his speech to practical issues. Why then, does Lorne return to his transcendent ideal at the crucial moment? Perhaps Lorne’s inability to abandon his original speech reveals his intuitive understanding that one cannot hold to a principle while betraying it in practice, that if one “submitted the common formulas” (as Cruickshank does during the imperial trade delegation), then one also inevitably “submitted to them” (131). Zichy argues that Lorne’s speech fails because it reveals ambiguities in Lorne’s and his community’s conception of imperialism, exposing a bitterness toward England that Lorne may not even recognize (397). I would argue, instead, that in both its elegiac tone, already lamenting what it claims to propose, and its revelation of the insistence of the material in the ideal, Lorne’s speech foreshadows rather than causes his defeat.

In his speech, Lorne pleads with voters not to let selfish considerations or rational calculation determine their vote, instructing them to be true to the idea of imperialism—its ideals of loyalty, self-sacrifice, justice—regardless of how the practical implementation might affect them. In voting for the

Liberals, they will not be voting only for Imperial Preference Trade, but for “the ideals of British government” (264) and for Canada’s full participation in British civilization. But while Lorne insists on imperialism as a transcendent principle, his language continually evokes the material practices of empire: trade, immigration, invasion, commerce. His metaphors suggest that it is difficult to talk about the ideal of empire apart from material transactions. The transfer of power from Great Britain to North America is figured in terms of “port” and “entry” (263). Lorne refers to a “momentous sailing-day” in “the far harbour of time” that will see the administrative centre of empire cross the Atlantic to the Dominion (263). In Lorne’s impassioned rhetoric, British political and constitutional principles are a “precious cargo” (264) that Canada has been fortunate enough to import, a cargo that the Americans, in an allusion to the Boston Tea Party, have precipitously thrown “overboard” (264). In gratitude, Canadians “chose rather to render what impost it brought” (246). Lorne figures Canada’s relations with the U.S. in terms of cheap, unsatisfactory “commercial bargains” (246), matter not of weighty transport but of “pine plank” and “bushel of barley” (265). Attempting to articulate the higher meaning of imperialism, Lorne cannot escape an economic framework. Even the most abstract ideals—loyalty and national character—are couched in the language of trade and commerce.

With all his talk of imperial relations—the mingling of peoples and the birth of nations—Lorne’s language turns to sexual relations. Defining Canada’s history, her “spirit of amity” with the mother country, in opposition to America’s intemperate revolt (267), Lorne refers to the United States using the metaphor of prostitution. America is a woman who sells herself, sacrificing better feelings for market relations; she is “[t]he daughter who left the old stock to be the light woman among nations, welcoming all comers, mingling her pure blood, polluting her lofty ideals until it is hard indeed to recognize the features and the aims of her honourable youth” (267). Here, the United States is linked with immorality and miscegenation, while Canada is linked with fidelity to family origins. As if beyond his control, Lorne’s pursuit of imperialism’s truth betrays a preoccupation with the bodies of prostitutes. Lorne quickly switches metaphors. Rejecting the intemperate figure of the prostitute for one drawn from his own, more respectable, field of Law, Lorne imagines a future “union of the Anglo-Saxon nations of the world” and prophesies that “the predominant partner

in that firm will be the one that brings Canada” (267). Piling metaphor upon metaphor, Lorne gropes for the figure to house the Idea, to embody the abstract principle of Empire, yet he finds himself “hopelessly adrift” (264), not only from his planned speech, but from any stable chain of metaphors. Even while his language endeavours to infuse the material practices of empire with the animating fervour of imperial loyalty, that language suggests, despite his best intentions, that empire is unalterably a matter of trade, easily detachable from (in fact, more workable and profitable without) the abstractions of imperial sentiment or idealism.

Perhaps more disturbing is the fact that Lorne’s speech is not really so different from Alfred Hesketh’s ludicrous paean to imperial greatness in Jordanville: although in form more elegant, in expression more striking, and in intention more sincere, Lorne’s speech, like Hesketh’s, relies on an assumed reverence for the British connection in the abstract, a respect based on tradition and colonial idealism that has little purchase in the every-day life of the community. Hesketh’s speech has too many references to noble lords, and too much emphasis on empty abstractions for his Jordanville audience of “big, quiet, expectant” farmers (219). Hesketh’s declaration that “[e]ven proposals for mutual commercial benefit may be underpinned . . . by loftier principles than those of the market-place and the counting-house” (223) strikes his listeners as both condescending and suspicious. And yet surely these words are really Lorne’s, absorbed by Hesketh’s “open” (read empty) mind during one of their many discussions; it is Lorne, after all, and not Hesketh, who has held to the ideal of imperialism. The idea that economic alliances might be cemented by nothing firmer than “the mutual esteem, the inherent integrity, and the willing compromise of the British race” (223) is rightly dismissed by the working people of Elgin, and yet Hesketh’s is precisely the argument from “the moral aspect” that Lorne urges Hugh Finlay to preach to his congregation (155). The problem of the ineffable, Duncan suggests, is precisely that, unrecognized and inarticulate, it may be nothing at all. What appears most remote from material contamination may paradoxically be that which is most easily appropriated, most subject to the pollution of insincerity and formulaic observance.

Lorne’s celebration of imperialism is meant to support Canadian nationalism in emphasizing a greater role for Canada within the empire, but in practice, his appeal to patriotism only further muddles his representation. If the essence of imperialism is moral rather than economic, centred in

character and ideals rather than military power, then it is a fluid commodity indeed. While Lorne may declare that England is the “heart of the Empire” (140), his description of Canada’s place in the body of the Commonwealth frequently disregards anatomical rigour. In Lorne’s vision, the mantle of imperial power passes to Canada as the spirit passes from a corpse to a vigorous host. “England has outlived her own body. Apart from her heart and her history, England is an area where certain trades are carried on—still carried on. In the scrolls of the future it is already written that the centre of the Empire must shift—and where, if not to Canada?” (262). Although Lorne’s praise of Canada is meant to support a reinvigorated empire, it appears to predict its imminent demise.

As Berger has pointed out, imperialists never advocated maintaining the status quo in their support for the imperial connection; on the contrary, they believed that Canada would increase its power in relation to England because “[t]he British Empire belonged to Canadians [and] the power it represented was rightly theirs to share” (108). In imperialists’ grand vision, Canada would compensate Britain for its losses due to over-population, pauperization, and unhealthy industrialization, all of which were producing a sickly and demoralized citizenry. In one of his arguments with Hesketh, for example, Lorne points out that England needs Canada, with its healthy farmers, as a bulwark against “the degeneration of the class she draws her army from” (138). Canada, “the northern and strenuous half” of the North American continent, is “destined to move with sure steps and steady mind to greater growth and higher place among the nations than any of us can now imagine” (263). Although Lorne maintains the over-riding importance of England’s “heart and her history” (262), he suggests that England’s dying body will not long maintain its animating breath, and that the spirit of the empire will also pass across the Atlantic, that in fact, “for all the purposes that matter most,” it already has (264). Although the dematerialization of empire is necessary to Lorne’s grand conception of Canadian destiny, it ultimately leaves the future of relations between Canada and England on less than solid ground. Taken all together, Lorne’s statements seem to leave the heart of the empire dangerously stranded somewhere mid-Atlantic. One wonders how the heart of Britannia can survive at all when the body is so close to failing; yet over-attention to the body may well destroy the heart, as imperialists recognized in their quarrel with the Manchester school, who stressed the costs to England of maintaining

colonies. In the inevitable muddling of his metaphors, Lorne's struggle to articulate his ideal is doomed.

Some critics have interpreted the ambiguities in Lorne's speech to mean that Duncan does not support Lorne's political vision. Davey has suggested that *The Imperialist* demonstrates the inevitable and appropriate defeat of idealism, exposing "both the shallow pragmatism of Elgin's Canada and the emptiness of British 'principle'" (431). There is further evidence for such a view in Duncan's handling of sub-plots. By paralleling two romance plots with her story of political ideals, Duncan invites readers to interpret Lorne's political commitment alongside the romantic idealism more conventionally anatomized by novelists. She even brings romance and politics together when she suggests that love of country and sexual love may spring from the same source: both originate in "the shadow of the ideal; and who can analyze that, and say, 'Of this class is the will to believe in the integrity of the beloved and false; of that is the desire to lift a nation to the level of its mountain-ranges?'" (300). Here, Duncan suggests that the naïveté enabling Lorne to continue to believe in Dora's purity (despite every evidence to the contrary) is the same enabling fiction behind his loyalty to imperialism. And although Duncan often links the novelist's art with that of the politician to celebrate both, she also links writing and passionate idealism to their mutual detriment in her description of Advena and Hugh's affair. Advena and Hugh's courtship centres on a shared love of books, and their long discussions of truth in art both conceal and exacerbate their longing for one another. Eventually, they try to substitute a noble ideal of self-sacrifice for the consummation of physical love, risking their happiness in the process. Exposing the inadequacy of their "aesthetic ecstasy of self-torture" (212), Duncan suggests that the endeavour of the novelist may also be merely deception, a wasteful pursuit of "realms of idea lying just beyond the achievement of thought, approachable, visible by phrases, brokenly" (212). In both cases, desire is maintained only through its continual frustration. Perhaps politics too works through the promise of what can never be realized.

Such irony persistently troubles Duncan's presentation of the ideal, and some critics have suggested that it undermines it fatally. Zichy, for example, detects "a note of underlying scepticism" throughout the narrator's presentation of Lorne's imperial ideals (389). Zichy claims that Lorne's idealism cannot contain the deep contradictions in Canada's historical relationship to Great Britain; ironically, Lorne's very assertions of loyalty and respect for

the British connection reveal “a subdued and sometimes sorrowful calling into question of the very tradition being invoked” (397). Although Zichy’s reading is essentially right, I think it over-emphasizes the contradiction in Lorne’s appeal to the moral values of sacrifice, suffering, and loyalty. When Lorne exclaims, in the passion of his nationalist jihad, “thank God, we were long poor” (267), Zichy detects a note of defeatism: “Lorne is asking his audience to be grateful for poverty, to take pride in self-limitation” (397). I read Lorne’s celebration of poverty not as a mark of resignation or acceptance of limitation, but as the promise of future greatness, for as in the Loyalist tradition, the very sacrifice of those loyal to the Crown guaranteed their eventual triumph. Nonetheless, Zichy is correct to highlight the many ironies that trouble Lorne’s idealism throughout the novel (395). Tausky, in contrast, refers to Duncan’s “sympathetic irony” (“Audiences” 475), suggesting a much softer criticism of the characters she admires. The question here is how to read Duncan’s irony. I am inclined to think that Lorne’s difficulties and failures work, paradoxically, to affirm the value of his ideal.

In commenting on the work of another ardent Canadian imperialist, Stephen Leacock’s *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town*, Jack Hodgins has suggested of Canadian irony that it has a pre-emptive function: we “quickly mock ourselves rather than have others think we presume to take ourselves seriously” (188). Such self-mockery is a protective cover for more serious idealism, in Leacock’s case for the “defiant eulogy” (189) that Hodgins finds at the heart of *Sunshine Sketches*. Given Duncan’s insistence on the importance of the unspeakable, and on the necessity of striving to voice what is bound to fall short of full expression, I think it likely that scepticism and irony in Duncan similarly function to protect, even while exposing, idealism and its failure. Linda Hutcheon categorizes this as “irony self protective” and defines it as “the irony that saves face, that allows what one critic calls the contemplation of life’s absurdity without being defeated by it” (7). Lorne’s rhetorical excesses and confusions are indeed targets of irony, yet that irony functions as a form of narrative armour, set up to shield something precious and vulnerable. Ironic perspective allows Duncan to expose the “inevitable poignant bruising of ideals” (Hospital 313) by ruthless materialism and yet to maintain the ideal as something that deserves to “stand[] by itself to be considered, apart from the object, one may say” (167). Irony means that the Canadian ideal can be rescued over and over again from its collision with the real.

Even if we accept Lorne's defeat as appropriate, we recognize that chronicling a defeat does not preclude one from admiring what is defeated: Duncan did, after all, read Lorne's speech at a Toronto reception held in her honour (Tausky, "Audiences" 470). Ultimately, her novel is a defence of idealism as well as a wry, elegiac admission of its vulnerability. Duncan's much-celebrated irony and linguistic play support a complex vision in which serious interrogation and nostalgia co-exist. The fact that the ideal is continually betrayed at the level of praxis means that the desire of the idealist politician, and of the writer, is forever frustrated—but also forever renewed.

Duncan wrote at a time when the Canadian economy was shifting away from agriculture towards industry, and when the critique of materialism waged in the pages of Canada's cultural periodicals seemed helpless against the dominance of business ideology. As Zichy comments, Duncan's open-ended conclusion reflects the inconclusiveness of the Imperial Question when Duncan was finishing her novel.⁶ In her final paragraph, the parallel between Lorne's partnership with Cruickshank and the possibilities of an alliance between Canada and Great Britain cannot be traced because "it is too soon, or perhaps it is too late" (309). Duncan's final sentence evokes the fabric metaphor by which she has emphasized both the strength and the mystery of national affairs. "The shuttles fly, weaving the will of the nations, with a skein for ever dipped again; and [Lorne] goes forth to his share in the task among those by whose hand and direction the pattern and the colours will be made" (309). It is a particularly cumbersome and obscure sentence, and in a novel that has privileged the unspeakable and the unseen, this is perhaps a fitting note on which to end. Yet the fact that Duncan chooses again to emphasize the link between her (chastened yet) idealistic hero and the young country whose essence he so vigorously championed suggests that Duncan continued to value "the impulse that is beyond our calculation" in her reckoning of Canada's future (300). For Duncan, the future was indeed uncertain, an uncertainty tied to her fears that materialism would cease to be the foundation of national strength and would become the entire edifice. Her belief in fiction offered no guarantees, for language revealed its instability on every level. In writing her elegy for the ideal, Duncan thought to immortalize it in language, even while alert to the multiple ironies in the project.

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- 1 Duncan 45.
- 2 Poststructuralist explorations of language have been developed by many thinkers; among the most accessible are Christopher Norris and Stephen Scobie. See, for example, Norris' discussion of deconstruction's insistence on the "irreducibility of metaphor" (66) and the need to subject the "figurative props" (80) of thought to a thorough scrutiny. See also Scobie's description of the metaphysics of presence and the Derridean critique:

Every metaphysical system presupposes that there is at least one positive term, that there is a privileged spot at which the whole system of proliferating differences begins. This spot may have many different names—God, truth, beauty; a transcendental signified; the Platonic Idea; self-presence, the individual subject; history; the triumph of the proletariat; "external reality"—but in each case it is a source, an *origin*, a point beyond which there is no further back to go, an always without an already. But Derrida's argument is that, if we take Saussure seriously, if we accept that there are no positive terms *at the level of the signified*, then no such origin can exist. The origin is, always already, non-original. (3, emphasis in original)
- 3 See especially 11-18; 41-57; 82-89; 103-14. Dean traces the historical context for Duncan's interest in balancing the real against the ideal, locating it in "the popular version of idealism, derived from Carlyle and Arnold, which eventually came to dominate Canadian intellectual life and which persisted in Canada long after the rest of the English-speaking world had gone on to modernist materialism" (11). According to Dean, "[t]he necessity of connecting the ideal with the real, and of preserving the ideal against the incursions of the real, is a prominent theme in all of Duncan's work" (53). Dean's study, which makes many insightful points about *The Imperialist*, is particularly concerned with exploring Duncan's "theory of literary realism" (46). My analysis essentially agrees with Dean's conclusions except that I detect more conflict at the discursive level in the balancing of ideal and real, and I look in more detail at the manner in which Duncan's use of metaphor plays out this struggle.
- 4 Hammill extends this observation by demonstrating that "characters are frequently defined against one another in terms of their reading habits and views on literature" (157).
- 5 Tausky notes that "some of the reviews of *The Imperialist* in England were not only the most negative Duncan ever received in her career but also often insufferably patronizing" ("Audiences" 470). Some of these reviews are collected in Tausky's *The Imperialist: A Critical Edition* (312-29).
- 6 Writing in 1903, Duncan could not know the fate of Joseph Chamberlain's campaign for imperial federation in England, which was decisively defeated by the Liberal election victory of 1906 (Tausky, *Novelist* 160-61).

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