

The Frontier beyond Empire

East of Everything in Thomas Raddall's
The Nymph and the Lamp

If in Canada the Western genre is one of the favourite resources of the experimental writer, as Arnold E. Davidson has demonstrated, this is not only because of a perennial Canadian obsession with its historical and ideological differences from the United States and its myths. The larger cultural discourse to which the Western belongs, antimodernism, is also indigenous to Canada and its myths, and has been an experimental resource—if not avant-gardist, yet unconventional and problematized—in modern-period Canadian writing. This is not surprising, perhaps, where antimodernism and the modernity it sees as its enemy are coeval with the postcolonial self-fashioning and self-contesting of the new Canadian nation—a nation whose origins in military conquest are repressed rather than nostalgized, and whose memory stares out at the frontier, and beyond, looking for something else. In the novel which here serves as a case study for some reflections on this problem, the Western genre and its antimodernist values are disfigured in such a way as will suggest that this something else belongs not to the originary hostilities of the frontier but to a rather sentimental conquest—which is just as fatal.

In *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns* (1992), Jane Tompkins argues that the generic Western in American popular culture arises at the turn of the twentieth century primarily as the reaction of a disempowered male mass culture to the growth of a commercially and socially powerful women's culture throughout the previous century. To the latter's social-activist and moralistic, sentimental fiction genre, the Western comes as a

resentful, often corrosively nihilistic answer.¹ It expresses the frustration in an individual experience of disempowerment for men created by the capitalist modernization of its own patriarchy.² Ironically, while one might have expected men to identify themselves with modernity, they in fact saw themselves disappearing into it—and blamed this loss of self upon a “feminization” of society which was part and parcel of modernity. The American historian Jackson Lears, in his study of this modernist crisis in masculinity, attributes its masculinist reaction to the feminization of culture to a conservative critique of modernity as “over-civilization.” Lears calls this reaction “antimodernist” because of its nostalgic idealization of worlds characterized by a primitivist and masculine, “martial ideal” of physical action and honour, contrary to the supposedly feminine vanities of commercial profits and pleasures.

The concept of antimodernism can be confusing when translated from historical to literary discourse, in which literary modernism is itself usually understood to be an ambivalent response to historical and cultural modernism, and can thus embody “antimodernist” values.³ The distance between literary modernism and antimodernism is not that of the contrast implicit in the prefix, but that of the position they take as genres with respect to the modernity they view with discontent: the latter remaining powerfully just within its forms and functions, the other venturing without. But the line is a razor’s edge, as we shall see, because literary modernism is a constitutive tendency within a literary aesthetic which is suspicious, as antimodernism is, of established beliefs and conventions which hold society together, and so, suspicious even of words themselves. By also insisting on a renewed simplicity and transparency in signification, purified of the abstractions of metaphysical sentiment and authorized by the violent and fragile life of the thing itself, antimodernism walks a thin line between the conventions of realism and a challenge to conventional form. As such it provides a useful additional term for the understanding of fiction which falls on neither side of the canonical divide between the anticonventional aesthetics of modernism and conventional realism (especially in modern Canadian literature, which tends typically to a dysfunctional form of romance). Antimodernism is that element of literary modernism that would, with a turn of the screw, recontain modern discontent, formal and thematic, in the accessibility of generic and popular forms.

The contradictions of antimodernism are nowhere more starkly revealed than in the Western genre, which American historians Peter Filene and

Lears recognize as the powerful symptom of a self-destroying and self-destructing, masculinist modernity. Tompkins suggests how the genre epitomizes—against a perceived feminization of culture produced by the massive movement of women out of the home and into public life, and their domination of a modern, Christian popular culture—a reactive masculinism: indifferent to homes or churches, to contemporary Christian values, and to the inspiration of the latter by a pastoral experience of nature; and hostile to women’s social or communal values, to womanly words, and to the popular culture and ideals of mass civilization. Some of the definitive motifs of the American Western can also be found translated to the Canadian East, where there have been corresponding historical interactions of modernity and antimodernism—particularly the interaction gendered into “the war of the words” (to use Gilbert and Gubar’s phrase) initiated by a similarly male antimodernist reaction to a supposedly feminized modernity. In her seminal study, Gwendolyn Davies has shown how, just as in the United States, an increasing presence of women’s literature in Canadian Maritime popular culture developed alongside a strong women’s culture of (mainly Christian-based) social activism. From 1880 to 1920, writing was not only a mirror of women’s collective entry into the public sphere, it was a mechanism of collectivization itself which embodied the social ideals of the activists. So it is that for L.M. Montgomery’s Anne, words work to undo alienation in her world—especially her own—and her “story club,” while literally true to the women’s “study clubs” which gradually became vehicles for social action, more generally allegorizes the social culture produced by women’s writing (as opposed to the way words work for Ernest Buckler’s individualistic David Canaan, for whom social community is mute or expressed in a wordless music). By the early twentieth century, there is good reason to believe that men in Eastern Canada might feel threatened by a kind of abstract “story club” permeating public culture, a new and collective power in women’s words.⁴

Men appear to have responded to this alternative, women’s writing culture in Canada much as they did in the States, with a masculinist antimodernism which gendered an “over-civilized” and sentimental modernity as feminine, and erected at its fictional, primitive frontier the lonely figure of an authentic man. In the Maritimes alone, this can be seen in canonical novels as diverse as James DeMille’s *A Strange Manuscript Found in a Copper Cylinder* (1888), Frank Parker Day’s *Rockbound* (1928), Raddall’s *Roger*

Sudden (1945), Buckler's *The Mountain and the Valley* (1952), and Hugh MacLennan's *Barometer Rising* (1941). This Eastern frontier is exemplified in Raddall's 1950 novel about 1920s Maritime life, *The Nymph and the Lamp*, which romanticizes a primitive edge of the continent just as symbolically distant from the mythic, civilized "East" as is the mythic "West." Here, the frontier is the sea, and its primitivist heroes those who work the sea. While "big sky country" thus shifts locations—from the hostile, arid desert to the cruel, expansive ocean—the heroic types and conflicts of this sea adventure genre remain much the same. Strong, silent, cynical, individualistic men devote themselves to an absurd cult of action and work, root themselves in landscapes of isolation, suffering and death, exert a violent mastery over themselves and their natural environment, love and hate other men more profoundly than other women, and reject the illusory social and aesthetic values of an emasculated, modern mass civilization.⁵ But on Raddall's frontier—even more so than for the self-problematizing world of Joseph Conrad, whom he admired—none of this quite works out.

Thomas Raddall, born in England in 1903 and raised in Nova Scotia, was not only a successful popular historical novelist but a regional historian and an influential activist in the preservation of local cultural history.⁶ The historian Ian McKay has argued that Raddall's series of popular historical novels set in different periods of Nova Scotia's colonial and postcolonial development (of which *The Nymph and the Lamp* is the best known) and his activities in cultural preservation belong to two dimensions of an anti-modernist project in the region to construct the discourse of an authentic "Folk" identity prior and alternative to modern civilization. This is not a pastoral Folk belonging to a peaceful countryside, but a more aggressive Folk belonging to a rugged frontier of wilderness and open sea, who represent the "individualism" and "virile dynamism" of a masculine drive at the heart of the business and military activities of empire.⁷ Popular imperialism in the first half of the century shares with the ideology of the Western this antimodernist vision of the twentieth century as a modernity gone wrong, a capitalist culture of the frontier that is degraded by a mass culture of the civilized world which follows on its heels and feeds on its labours. Popular imperialism of the postcolonial period—abstract from simple British patriotism, and with the ethnic and historiographic parallels that unites narrative fiction as otherwise diverse as Ralph Connor's British-centred *The Man from Glengarry* (1901), Laura Goodman Salverson's Scandinavian-centred

The Viking Heart and Pauline Johnson's Native-centred *The Shagganappi* (1913)—is as definitive a mythological discourse of the frontier in modern Canadian culture as is the Western in modern American culture. Where the two antimodernist discourses intersect, as in *The Nymph and the Lamp*, a closer analysis will illuminate the similarities and differences between them.

The first pages of the novel evoke the setting where most of the action will take place, the tiny and desertified “sandy speck” of Marina Island, “in the North Atlantic eighty miles from the nearest land.” Marina is a “lonely outpost” far from life and civilization, dreaded as “a desolate place” by men of the land, and by men of the sea as the “scene of many wrecks,” for it is a legendary ocean graveyard. The motifs of the place—death, desertification, and marginality from social order—suggest that, in the North Atlantic of all places, something like an American Western might play itself out. Its legendary hero is Matthew Carney, who appears, like John Wayne rising out of the desert in the opening sequence of *Stagecoach*, as an extension of the starkly reductive, desertified landscape: “men spoke of [him] as ‘Carney—you know, Carney of Marina’, as if he were a part of the place like one of the wild ponies on the dunes” (11). Unlike the restless, pleasure-seeking young men and women of his modern world to whom he is contrasted, Carney is taciturn and ascetic, a loner whose minimal society is with other loners brought together only transiently by “a kind of cult” of their work. The latter is the spiritually rather than economically defined work of radio operators before the advent of commercial or public radio, when the highly specialized technology and its fragile, global network demanded a monastic asceticism in the form of an exclusively male community. Always working in a room or ship cabin, these “ops” work alone, moving from post to post around the world, drifters devoted to their specialized work and practical knowledge. They are “a band of men, most of them young, set apart from the rest of mankind by a curious knowledge” alien to, and tight-lipped before, the chatter of modern, commercial society (17). In this work and its curiously abstract, global frontier, a masculinized discontent expressing faith only in its existential vitality—as opposed to an ostensibly feminized civilization with faith in moral knowledge—comes to define the protagonists and setting of *The Nymph and the Lamp* just as they define the marginal, stripped-down heroes and deserts of the generic West. There are differences, of course,

which upon closer examination suggest a significant difference between otherwise homologous Canadian and American antimodernist cultures.

The novel involves three main characters: Matthew Carney, Isabel Jardine, and Gregory Skane. Carney and Skane are the two rugged radio-operators who vie for Isabel's love. The two men have many similarities. They are both married to their work, known both for the high speed at which they can bang out the dits and dashes of the wireless key, and for their honourable reluctance to provoke the showdowns between operators which prove it (167-69). They are both taciturn and inward, figured as ascetics withdrawn in body and word from normal social life (21, 25-26, 121, 143). These similarities bind them to the nature and technology of the Marina setting itself. Its nature is figured as a kind of petrification of the desolate infinitude of the sea into waves of desolate sand (72, 107), in which humans wander on the edge of madness or death (11-12, 110, 191-92). Like the un-Romantic nature of the West, this nature is adversarial rather than sympathetic (153), and explicitly contrasts the sentimental domesticity (74, 85) and materialism (32, 56) of modern North American society. This modern society is periodized as post-World-War-One, and as Ian McKay has noticed, it is insistently portrayed in the "feminized" and "over-civilized" terms of antimodernist reaction described by Lears and Filene.⁸ For example, the novel opens with Carney's first trip ashore in Halifax since before the war, and records the way everything in the "world" had changed (14). Though Raddall acknowledges the change in pace and technology of public life, his feminizing imagery is obsessive. He describes women's new clothing and cosmetics in detail, only noting with disapproval men's emasculating lack of beards. He figures the activity and anxiety of the public space as a crowd of women shoppers, saying nothing of men (15-16). Carney's own head office, which used to be an unadorned building full of men in easy camaraderie, is discovered to have been divided up into rooms overseen by secretaries who mediate the men's attention and contact (17). His new, postwar boss is a type of the feminized and modernized man:

His gleaming black hair was neatly brushed and there was a carnation in his buttonhole. There was a touch of the sea about him, faint and remote, as if it has not lasted long and as if a good deal of office air had intervened. He had the look of a man who for years had enjoyed good meals, steam heat, a soft bed, and the embraces of a satisfactory wife. (18)

He is soft, dandified, domesticated and superficial. At the same time he represents a mechanistic and commercialized mass culture, with its destruction

of a more human and masculine one, for he has eradicated men's social interactions from the workplace in order to put the principle of efficiency foremost:

It had taken him some time to clear out the old easygoing atmosphere and put the office on what he called a proper business footing. The old days were gone. There were so many operators now, and so many more important things than personnel. 'Find out what they want,' he had told the girls, 'and get them out as quickly as you can.' (17)

As his name suggests, the feminized and modernized Mr. Hurd is a type, one of the crowd. The two other city characters drawn with any substance, Miss Benson and Mrs. Paradee, are individualists who express the same superficiality of character, emotion, and communication with others (41-42, 46). Echoing for all these characters the transition between the prewar and postwar gender of modernity, the "improved modern" voice of postwar radio technology has changed the "hoarse bass" of Marina's signal to a "shrill treble," which as Skane grumbles, "has made a eunuch of us" (14).

In the extreme symbolic geography of this novel, the city becomes a synecdoche for the whole continent which lies behind it. The city is the gateway to a modernity figured as land itself, as an American or Americanizing element in which all is soluble and nothing remains itself:

the scrabble for cash that could not buy security, the frantic pleasures that could not give content, the pulpit-thumpings that could not summon virtue, the Temperance Acts that killed temperance, the syncopated noise that was not music, the imbecile daubs that were not art, the lavatory scrawls that were not literature, the flickering Californications that were not drama . . . (321)

and so on, a mind-revolving homogenization of capitalism, decadence, popular-cultural Americanization (Black and White), Group of Seven modernism and the social gospel and temperance politics associated with women—a whole "dim bulk of land" which slips away, as Isabel takes her final view of it on her way to Marina, "like a shadow, an illusion after all" (321). Those who pass through or remain on the city's continental side, like Skane and Hurd, are the villains of Raddall's romance, while those who pass through to and are able to remain on its other side—the side lacking the terra firma even of the frontier, the side more real, not as a place, but as a nearly metaphysical, marine perspective—the side east of everything—become its heroes.

Nature stands for a clean slate, and the men who choose it do so, like Carney and Skane, because they consciously reject that modern society. They are both men who have lost youthful ideals, have seen through human illusions to a cynical or absurdist truth, have distanced themselves from women as well as the love and morality which women represent, and have embraced only their physical work in relative solitude (12, 22, 25, 28, 32, 49, 103, 113). They choose a world, as Tompkins says of the film *Cowboy*, “without God, without ideas, without institutions, without what is commonly recognized as culture, a world of men and things, where male adults in the prime of life find ultimate meaning in doing their best together on the job” (37). The role of technology is a key to this value in the physical world and its nature. One might be surprised that Raddall’s antimodernist heroes would be figured as radio operators, as men bound to modern technology. But Raddall insistently dates this technology as pre-war, and shows it to be so crude that no special knowledge is required for it, and no belief in progress embodied in it. It is operated by instinct, as an extension of the physical body. Carney cannot understand the technical books about radio (23), and says that “once you’ve got the feel of it, you’re simply part of the machine. The stuff comes in on the aerials and runs right down to your fingertips” (197).

But the thematic significance of Marina’s radio is that it combines the technological primitivism of the Western, in which the only authentic value inheres in the work of a physical world and its mastery, with the ideology of communication of the Western, which Tompkins describes as, “at heart antilanguage,” by which she means that “doing, not talking, is what it values”: “Westerns distrust language. Time and again they set up situations whose message is that words are weak and misleading, only actions count; words are immaterial, only actions are real.” And this opposition to language belongs to the larger paradigm of antimodernism in the Western, in which there are “two choices: either you can remain in a world of illusions, by which is understood religion, culture, and class distinctions, a world of fancy words and pretty actions, of ‘manners for the parlor and the ball room, and . . . womanly tricks for courting’; or you can face life as it really is—blood, death, a cold wind blowing, and a gun in the hand” (48-50). Both Carney and Skane, like Western heroes, are men of few words (26, 121, 191). When called upon to justify their actions—actions violent or sympathetic, whether shooting ducks beyond what can be eaten, collecting human bones from the dunes, swimming in the dangerously cold sea, or playing

Chopin *études* upon the piano—they can only say it is for “something to do” (122, 134, 145, 141; and repeated throughout). But they must communicate with each other, just as the Western must communicate to its audience: the antimodernist Western is paradoxical in positing a language which dislikes itself. Tompkins notes how Western heroes speak a kind of “minimalist” language which uses understatement, epigrams, and ellipses in a “desperate shorthand” which attempts “to communicate without using words” (51). The ultimate truth is always communicated in action, which if it has a language, is the bang-bang of the guns. It is this minimalist language of the Western which Raddall is able to conflate with the primitive technology of the Marina radio operators, who speak in a language (and a purely functional one) of literally explosive dots and dashes. This is figured explicitly in Raddall’s portrait of the young operator “in the barren cell” of his radio room, who begins “to talk in dots and dashes” when Isabel sees the men at work for the first time: “Isabel, standing on the greasy floor, was startled by a terrific sound as sharp, as deafening as rifle shots, and the little engine room was lit by a rapid succession of bright violet flashes that sprang, like the sound, from the revolving brass spark-studs at the end of the generator shaft. Involuntarily she shrank against [Carney’s] stalwart form . . .” (107-08). The violence and abbreviation of the language, and its distance from the degraded languages of modern civilization, make it a kind of transcending anti-language which seems to restore a lost brotherhood: “For a space you were part of another world, the real, actual living world of men and ships and ports. . . . Whistling, growling, squealing, moaning, here were the voices of men transmuted through their finger tips, issuing in dots and dashes, speaking twenty languages in one clear universal code . . .” (193). The dots and dashes have little meaning beyond safe navigation; they represent the mute mastery of a physical world by men. Its least meaningful function is phatic, merely a sign of desire for contact with the signal “CQ” (13), while its most meaningful is “SOS,” a sign whose value is also ultimately physical, rather than significative (194-96). The radio operators use their dots and dashes as the cowboys do their guns, to communicate authentically at the margins of a world whose language is trivialized.

This antimodernist ideal of technology as a minimalist language which bonds men together without their interpellation (the term Louis Althusser has used to describe induction into the ideological discourse of a modern society) by any determining system of goals or beliefs, suggests a correlation

with the art of fiction writing—insofar as this can suppose a technical autonomy from social function or didactic ends.⁹ Fiction writing is a *techne*, or as Raddall often emphasized, a “craft” above all. In a wartime address to the Canadian Authors’ Association, he speaks of the importance of craft above subject matter or saleability, and blames the commercialization of fiction for the surplus of writing “lacking in honest workmanship” (2-3). The ideal reflects the modernist desire for the return of art to the formal values of a pre-modern *techne*, often nostalgically attributed to artisanal guilds, expressed by such influential writers as G.K. Chesterton, F.R. Leavis, Ezra Pound and W.B. Yeats. Raddall articulates this ideal more fully in his essay on “The Literary Art” several years later, in which he defends realism from moralism and censorship by defining it in terms of craft rather than content. Like the guns in the Western or the radio telegraphy in Raddall’s own antimodernist imagination, such writing is a kind of existential technology, for it is a craft that has no fixed method or theory, no idea of “Art in the abstract,” only the fidelity to inclusive reflection exemplified by Stendhal and Joseph Conrad (140). It is a realist ideal that distrusts, just as antimodernist technology and language generally distrust, its own engagement in transparent value and meaning, even as it capitalizes upon it.

The value of this realist ideal to Raddall is evident when we turn from the imagery of *The Nymph and the Lamp* to its narrative structure and style, which disfigure the realist novel’s own generic transparency in two fundamental ways: (1) the narrative structure introduces as the ostensible protagonist and perspective of narrative focalization a character who later recedes into the background, giving way to a protagonist who was initially introduced, from that perspective, as a mere type; and (2) the narrative style encodes a wealth of realist detail with values that initially signify alternatives—good vs. bad, tradition vs. progress, nature vs. city, masculine vs. feminine—but in the end merge together, rendering the closure ambiguous and its narrative realism, ultimately, illegible. The novel is able to do so because it violates the antimodernism of the formulaic Western in ways specific, I will suggest, not to the geography of the Eastern setting, but to the particularity of its Canadian historical experience. Of the instability of the plot, we get an ironic prefiguration at the beginning of the novel when Carney and Isabel first meet in the city, and end up discussing movie Westerns. Carney doesn’t like Westerns because they seem to him like “Marina in a nightmare”—the nightmare being the hero-heroine-villain plot which is ironically to

become his own. "You'd be surprised," he tells Isabel:

When you step off the beach at Marina on a summer's day you might be in the heart of Arizona, or wherever they film those things. The biggest dunes are by the shore and they shut off the view of the sea in good many places. . . . And there you are, riding a half-wild pony amongst the dunes, with nothing in sight but grass and sand, just like those movie chaps. We even use Western saddles and stirrups, brought all the way from the prairie. You can stick on the ponies better in the kind of going you find out there. In fact, all we lack is the fancy clothes and the pistols—and a villain after the girl, of course. (50-51)

But Marina turns out to lack neither the guns nor the villain. It rather confirms Isabel's ironic observation in reply, that in real life, "the man who looks like a hero usually turns out to be the villain"—for this is exactly what happens. The plot is easily summarized. Carney and Isabel meet in the city, fall in love, and return to live at Carney's radio station on Marina. Unexpectedly, Carney gradually and silently estranges himself from Isabel. Meanwhile Isabel falls in love with Carney's friend and colleague, Skane. Her affair with Skane progresses until she and Skane are one day confronted in their dalliance in the dunes by a minor character, a rifle-toting, jealous girl who ends up shooting Isabel. Surviving, Isabel leaves Marina to recuperate in the city; but instead of returning to Marina, she goes back to her hometown in Nova Scotian farm country, where she discovers a businessified and modernized country life to which she brings her city experience, and in which she prospers. At the end of the novel, Skane searches her out and proposes to her, offering to take her to Montreal where he has found work in the new commercial radio industry. At this meeting, Isabel realizes both that Skane has now embraced the modern civilization which he had once rejected—if only for Nietzschean reasons consistent with his skeptical individualism—and that he has betrayed his bond to Carney, for it turns out that Carney has not been losing his love for Isabel, but has been trying to protect her from the disappointment that he has been going steadily blind. Isabel spurns Skane and returns to Carney on Marina, where the lovers happily re-unite.

From this summary three points should be noted. Firstly, the whole narrative episode in the countryside serves to undermine any kind of pastoral ideal of the return to a simpler community or more sympathetic natural order. The critique of modernity and the city is extended to the country which, again since after the war, is only a kind of invisible city in its social problems and changes, and is shown to be dangerously dependent upon a barely understood, capitalist world economy (256-57, 263, 269-70).¹⁰ This

narrative development serves to eradicate any hint of simple nature-romanticism that might have attached to the Marina setting, and rather to strengthen the sense of Marina's authenticity as liminal to geography and cultivation, truly east of everything. Secondly, Skane, at first offered as a double of Carney (21, 121), turns out to be his antagonist.¹¹ He becomes the villain in this antimodernist romance when he attempts to seduce Isabel by becoming citified—abandoning Carney as friend and colleague to bond instead, on a pure business footing, with Mr. Hurd. In leaving Marina for the depths of the continent—that is, for Montreal, the cosmopolitan and financial centre of the nation—Skane betrays both the man and the nature which signify his masculine authenticity at the outer limits of a trivialized, feminized world (287, 296, 303, 308-09). Thirdly, and most importantly, Isabel, rather than either of the two men, is the protagonist of the story. It is her rejection of the city, her encounter with Marina, her rejection of the country, and her return to Marina which structures the plot and the development of its meanings. Her significance at the centre of the novel is marked symbolically too, for Marina shares its name with the Shakespearean heroine recalled in T.S. Eliot's eponymous poem of 1930.¹² Isabel's escape from a depraved city, her wandering and return to Carney and the sea, and her identification in the novel's title with an underwater "nymph" all mark her as a figure of this other Marina, the woman who is born at sea (hence her name) and lost at sea, and who wanders through misfortune until she is united with her father and a husband at the end of *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*.

While in the play, Marina represents the endurance of conventional feminine virtues of chastity, grace and sympathy, in Eliot's "Marina" she represents a metaphysical object of desire beyond such practical values, and beyond even physical place or verbal representation. In the poem, transcendence is sought from the familiar world of pleasure and hostility—one that has, like Raddall's depraved city, "become unsubstantial" from the perspective of the sea—and the transcendence is sought in a fragmentary imagery of elemental nature and the "daughter," Marina, who represents it. Here the feminine figure fuses with a marine imagery to produce the sense of a place beyond place, a place "calling through the fog," which alone is authentic to the lyric angst of the poem's speaker, the lost patriarch, Marina's father (103-04). Eliot's contrast of an actual and mortal being on terra firma with a metaphysical being in Marina—representable only in the broken syntax of

memory and sensory fragments of a nautical ascesis—resonates not only with the antimodernist geography of Raddall's novel, but with the darker symbolism of his title, which figures Isabel as a beautiful spirit at the bottom of the sea who offers drowned sailors a paradisaical, if ambivalently watery, afterlife. Isabel, like the nymph, does not signify men's struggle with modernity but their defeat by it. As Carney explains: "When the ship went down or the fight was lost, when there was no hope left, a man could let himself sink and feel that all would be well" (327). And in his blindness and isolation from modern life and work, relieved only by the invisible presence of the woman working in his place, this is what happens to him.

To be sure, the central figure of Isabel as a modern woman significantly reverses the gender paradigm of antimodernism and its generic Western—especially together with the development of Skane's narrative and symbolic betrayal, for while the heterosexual bond brings closure to the generic romance, the corresponding male bond is never restored. But this reversal also curiously reframes the very same paradigm. Isabel's position within the dichotomized existences delineated in the novel is problematic because unfixed—developing itself but ultimately developing and transforming them as well. She begins as a disillusioned typist in the city. Though she is marked as modern in her business activities and values (18, 20, 35) and her over-civilized softness (36, 111), she is also ironic about these activities, as she is about modern city life, sexuality, and materialism (29, 32, 35, 85). She too, like the men, is characterized as taciturn (38). When she moves to Marina she is a cook to the men—for "something to do"—but she also learns, and for the same apparently arbitrary reasons—to ride horses and to operate the radio until she achieves official proficiency. In the latter accomplishments she discovers a kind of masculinity within—and this is guided by Skane, whose masculinity asserts itself as a pleasure principle indifferent to social forms and conventions. This masculinity, antisocial in Skane, rather conforms in Isabel to her subsequent development as a modern, independent woman. When she leaves Marina, she becomes not a servile typist again, but a considerable businesswoman. Her final return to Marina is based upon her rejection of both modern male and modern female gender roles, for with the blind Carney she plans to share the still conventionally masculine work of the radio at the same time that she plans to begin the still conventionally feminine work of caring for Carney, raising a family, and schoolteaching the Marina children. In this closure, with its new and

happy conflation of domestic and public labours, the gender of modernization is again feminized, and the thematic development of the narrative seems to come full circle, rendering moot rather than vindicating its own antimodernist critique.

The narrative focus upon the woman protagonist, and its closure as romance, decentre the generic Western away from its masculine, individualist or elitist topos and force it to integrate a fuller social space, domestic as well as public, into its abiding concerns and its closure. I think this ambivalent feminism arises in part from a kind of antimodernism which is Canadian rather than American, and which implies a different idealism or nostalgia about the frontier. For in modern Canadian culture, antimodernism is intersected with the still powerful ideology of imperialism—an ideology that in its postcolonial afterlife is abstract from its British centre and has been translated into a more geographically and linguistically flexible form congenial to a new nationalism, and one typically projected in a myth—unified by a broad notion of race if not by ethnicity, language or European political history—of the North. The archetypal literary statement of such abstracted imperialism is Salverson's *The Viking Heart*, in which the archaic, wandering and warring spirit of the Vikings is unified with a Canadian spirit which crosses racial and linguistic boundaries, and expresses itself in the quotidian triumphs of small businessmen and popular artists. It is an abstract imperialism expressed by Raddall himself in historical novels, like *Roger Sudden*, which see the origins of a modern, liberal individualism—one, by the way, available to women—in the racial superiority and imperialist economic structure of the British conquest of North America. He expresses it in the very title of *The Nymph and the Lamp*, which applies a Scandinavian myth (and if Peter Friesen is right, an English intertext) to a Nova Scotian topos, as well as in the novel's discourse—in the Nordic pastiche which characterizes, for example, the central male character, a blond giant who reads nothing but English Romantic poets and Old Norse myths and sagas (109).

But the North is not a new unifying myth for Raddall; it is only another ingredient of the more abstract imperialism his pastiche style implies. It is this abstract imperialism that allows Raddall to valorize British imperialist conquest in the trilogy of which *Roger Sudden* is a part, at the same time that he affirms his vision as “anti-British,” and regarding his literary influences,

is able to claim that he “always admired Kipling . . . but never thought much of his imperialism” (qtd in Austin 123, 118).¹³ The Canadian writer here rejects imperialism as patriotism, that is, as a political allegiance to England, for king and country. It is internalized instead as metaphysical frontier of imperialist values—a paradoxically liberal code for the individual, which promises that conservative and hierarchical social values will spring from the heart, not from history.¹⁴ In this context, Isabel’s activities as a relatively independent businesswoman are not to be devalued for their part in an overcivilized modernity, but valorized just as are the entrepreneurship and industry of the Folk heroes in his other novels—as authentic expressions of an individual autonomy unanswerable to society’s myriad political and ideological demands, be they colonial or modern, but in a moment of crisis and revelation, responsive to its inner, hierarchical and paternalistic nature.¹⁵ From such an autonomous *bildung*, his narratives paradoxically imply, one’s fate to live for others, or for another, must be learned and affirmed.

What I have here called an abstract imperialism contributes to a Canadian difference from the antimodernism of the American Western, because it continues to valorize a conservative and hierarchical notion of individual subjection to a community. This is a subjection easily represented to the individual in the domestic paradigm of a traditional family, and is indeed centrally encoded in the archetypal discourse of empire as a global family comprising a mature and paternal or mother country with immature and subservient daughter colonies abroad—thus mediating social and political values through individual and domestic ones. This is important because imperialism depends upon a subordinate form of modernization which is colonial, and which develops its social space according to more conservative, communal models in tune with economic production for an external and metropolitan centre of power rather than a regional and self-defining one. It is why some form of conservative community is always implied in the imperialist ideal, whose hierarchy is applicable to both colonists and aboriginal peoples. When this form of imperialism is abstracted into the everyday and self-serving modernity which is the fate of the new nation, it must find a new image of the frontier—one which continues to justify modernity as a periphery at which individual freedom finds its meaning and power in ostensible subjection to values transcending individual authority. Hence the paradoxical attempt by Raddall to masculinize for the rugged individualism of his antimodernist genre, the sentimental

and civilizing mission of his novel's closure—an attempt effected on the one hand by generic paradigms which undercut the value of the realist world of the closure, and on the other by a morbid romance allegory attached to the closure itself, which implies a meaningful resolution only beyond history and existential life. Isabel is confirmed in her domesticity, but only once she is removed from the marriage laws and private property which underwrite the degraded escapism of tending the private sphere of one's own garden—the fantasy that initially soothed Isabel's and Carney's needs for “protection from the world,” but which they quickly both rejected (74).¹⁶ Hence, also but conversely, Isabel is allowed to work, but only once she is removed from the defining scene of work—the production and consumption economy of the city and the land she finally leaves behind.

The same can be said for the abstracted affirmation of regionalism, which finds its authentic locus paradoxically bound to, but only in the watery margin of, the land of an authentic, frontier Folk. From the turn of this century forward, the Maritimes had a retarded postcolonial development in Canada, and a more persistent social ideology of traditional community. Uneven development on this postcolonial frontier has meant that community life and its values have not been effectively replaced by modern society—only limited, contested, and increasingly, by Raddall's time, rendered dysfunctional.¹⁷ This may be the reason, as Janice Kulyk Keefer suggests, that Maritime writers, however ironic they may be in expressing the alienations of modern society, have tended to affirm the haunting presence and value of community for the individual seeking meaning, good or bad, in the modern world (34, 36). In this context, the narrative encoded in gender relations might well reflect the anxiety of a larger paradox belonging to the frontiers of Canadian modernity itself, as this modernity is shown to need a regional and historical mythopoesis to reconcile its dependence upon both postcolonial imperialist and national individualist dimensions of its economic and social life.¹⁸

The different kind of postcolonial frontier implied by this regional history is consistent with the different kind of frontier mythologized by anti-modernist imperialism in general. The different masculinist ambivalence that attaches to the latter is determined by an ethos which aims not merely towards a renewal of the self but of community, towards the restoration of strong social order to a degraded civilization. The modern imperialist frontier was understood, symbolically and in practice, to impose good society

not only on others, but—from without—on its own. It is caught in a constitutive tension between the adventurous and escapist rejection of contemporary society, and the moralistic affirmation of its values of domesticity, community and citizenship. This tension is evident, for example, in Pauline Johnson's *The Shagganappi*, a collection of juvenile stories which valorize the rugged, daring, wise otherness of their First Nations or Métis heroes against the relative complacency or softness of their White friends, but which assimilate this otherness to an ideal of masculine youth and liberal-individualist morality consistent with the self-justifying power of the conquering and settling society.¹⁹ The same tension is expressed by Raddall autobiographically, in his remembered distaste for the simple-minded injustice of American Westerns, and fictively, in his ambivalent use of women and Indian characters.²⁰ The latter, like the treacherous *femmes fatales*, wilderness guides and informers in Raddall's *Roger Sudden*, become models of a primitive vitality subjected to a paternalistic reality principle in the work of civilization—assimilated, as imaginary margins, to the symbolic needs of modern development.²¹ Imperialism posits an antimodernist frontier which frees the individual from the determining form and power of his or her modern society, not as the freedom of a manly individualism, but as the freedom of a restored paternalism in individual experience. It is this masculine experience that in *The Nymph and the Lamp* can be projected in the figure of a woman searching for purpose and place—searching both for power over and empowerment by something beyond her.

Raddall's novel constructs a generic American Western world in an Eastern Canadian setting, particularly as it valorizes a masculine frontier against an ostensibly feminine civilization. However, as with the Western Canadian appropriation of this genre surveyed by Davidson, Raddall's appropriation of it is playful, and ultimately transgressive. Raddall's narrative diverges from the generic Western because it sends a female protagonist on an iconoclastic path through both these alternatives, and because it sees both collapse for want of individual self-sacrifice to higher ideals which belong to the values of love and community (e.g. the self-seeking degradations of Mr. Hurd, Miss Benson, Mrs. Paradee, and finally Skane). However, the community beyond the couple, barely noticed by the plot so far, remains an abstract value, and the closure founders upon them. This is partly because the union of lovers in the romance closure, with its resolution in the heterosexual bond as opposed to the homosocial bond of its

generic Western discourse, figures this bond in the symbolic escape from civilization and allegorical escape from life, and so figures love more as an aesthetic than a social value. The return to Marina which closes the romance, with its allegorical death by drowning (Carney entering darkness, purposelessness, and reunion with his “nymph”), affirms rather what Bruce MacDonald has identified as the novel’s nihilistic “rejection of the world,” which is tempered, if at all, more by an indeterminate sense of the value of everyday intimacies in the face of mortality, than by any consistent idealism (168). But such nihilism in the novel’s closure has clear literary antecedents in the genealogy of modernism suggested by Edmund Wilson: the double suicide that marks an aestheticist transcendence of historical life at the end of Villiers de l’Isle-Adam’s *Axël* (1890), which E.D. Blodgett has traced, in the Canadian context, to such modernist fiction as Frederick Philip Grove’s *The Yoke of Life* (1930)—in which a degraded civilization is spurned and an alternative social bond affirmed in a love outside life itself, that is, in a representative death.

The transcendental value of this romance resolution is underscored by the irony of its realist elaboration, in which the heterosexual union signifies not the transformation or transcendence of the historical world but its reproduction, specifically in a family and a larger communal change for Marina, for whose children Isabel intends to provide an elementary education, giving them a chance to read and to learn about life possibilities beyond Marina (317-18). Indeed, her mission is to “civilize” Marina away from its primitive, violent way of life (320). Thus the assimilation of modern feminism to an antimodernist nostalgia for a man’s world, or a man’s modernity, turns out to express a paradoxical desire and produce a paradoxical narrative, for its closure is forced to identify its antimodernist critique with the projection of a softened femininity (in Isabel) and a softened modernity (in Marina) which merely set the clock ticking again toward that over-civilization which was its ostensible antithesis. Hence realism defeats all but the moment of desire implicit in the romance ending; it defeats itself, affirming its abstraction into the nihilistic allegory of death by drowning. Either way, in the bond of love or the reproduction of life, the frontier distinct from modern civilization vanishes, and so does the feminist *bildung* which discovered it.

Thus the novel’s closure circles back to modify its own, antimodernist reaction against women’s words by affirming them, if ambivalently and

paradoxically, as a self-consuming medium through which to express a masculinist critique of a feminized modernity. While such an affirmation is not, obviously, a radically feminist one, it does reflect the dominant feminism of the pre-modern, pre-war period rendered nostalgically by Raddall: the “maternal feminism” described by Davies, which wanted not to transgress the feminine values of the domestic sphere, but transgressively to extend its boundaries into public life (234).²² Michèle Lacombe has discussed the transgressive function of feminine and domestic space in Raddall’s fiction, and noted its powerlessness to effect actual change in its realist worlds (91). For Isabel, the liberal feminist assertion of herself in the public sphere throughout the narrative certainly does change her, but it also negates the possibility or even meaning of change for her society. Hence this discourse of a historical feminism—in which the power and freedom of women is mediated by rather than opposed to patriarchal definitions of femininity and its limits—functions, as does Raddall’s historical realism to the end of romance more generally, as a means rather than an end. This is consistent with what I above called an abstract imperialist value of community, in which the lost paternalistic identity of manhood must rediscover the love inscribed in women and women’s words, not sentimentally for love in itself, but for the patriarchal purpose it imposes on, thereby reinstating the value of, male power.²³

To this end, then, Isabel merely learns what the innocent Carney knew all along. *Something to do* is as meaningless to the solipsist as it is illusory to the sentimentalist. Isabel, in her feminist role as what Helen Buss calls “the Canadian heroine of consciousness,” will give “blind patriarchy” a “guiding hand” (55). But the reader’s hope that this might lead to a “new order” beyond patriarchal discourse is kept in suspense, Buss tells us, by the antithesis which defines the generic heroine of the realist romance: her role in romance as a spiritual absolute, versus her role in the realist novel in the critical inquiry into absolutes (44). And here indeed, it is only by valorizing, not a realistically represented nostalgic past or feminist movement, but a transcending moment of desire at the origin of these, free of history itself—in which Isabel’s industry, public and private, might lead to better things than, under the constraints of historical fiction, we know it can—that this novel can express a fixed value, an ideal. This moment of desire and its realist elaboration is feminized—why? Perhaps one must imagine the feminine part of oneself—as Raddall claims he does, to be able to write with intuition

about others, male and female (Austin 113)—in order to call into being that masculinity which is the object of desire. Unfortunately, we are again reminded of Eliot's "Marina," which conflates the drama of Pericles' reunion with his daughter and the drama of Hercules' separation from his daughter in her death, and leaves the contradictory imagery—with the soul of the man, and with the very existence of the woman—in indeterminate, sensual suspense. It is the psychodrama of a lost father in search of a lost daughter in search of him/herself: where imperialism has ceased to correspond to regional or national identity, but continues to haunt the memory and morality of modernization, it is antimodernism seeking not to escape the world of sentiment, but fatally to master it all, once again.

NOTES

- 1 The discourse of "sentiment" in American culture is illuminated by Ann Douglas. My own application of this term to Raddall's text will not be entirely consistent with the actual historical culture of this discourse to which his antimodernism reacts—but refers to the values of affective community and of religious transcendence by which it is typically recognized.
- 2 This has been illuminated by cultural historians Jackson Lears and Peter Filene (see Filene, 74, 93, 138).
- 3 The antimodernist "feminization" of modern culture in canonical modernism has been the focus of influential feminist reinterpretations of European modernism by Huyssen (44-47) and of Anglo-American modernism by Gilbert and Gubar (3-46).
- 4 Woman writers of the social-problem genre were central to Canadian fiction at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. By the twenties and thirties, as Carole Gerson has shown, a nation-wide "story club" was evident in women's literary activities, which a male cultural hierarchy wished to devalue and suppress from a canon supposed to transcend sentimental, popular culture. The Maritimes, while contributing fewer woman writers than other national regions, were no exception to this transformation in the gender of cultural production and consumption, and its tensions (see Gerson; Conrad et al).
- 5 Raddall has expressed his belief in this topos as an actual regional identity, outside his fiction. Of Nova Scotia he averred: "Life here is not easy, it is a struggle that demands a man's utmost and will take no less; we live on a rocky shore in the cold embrace of Mother Sea, whose whims are sometimes kind but often cruel; but we Nova Scotians do not take our pleasures sadly for all that" ("The Literary Tradition in Nova Scotia," 6-7).
- 6 Raddall estimated that by 1972 he had sold nearly two and a half million books, of which over six hundred thousand were *The Nymph and the Lamp*, in Canada, Britain and the United States (McKay, "The Tourist Gaze," 116).
- 7 McKay, "The Tourist Gaze," 121. See also his discussion in *The Quest of the Folk*, 223-24.
- 8 See McKay, *The Quest of the Folk*, 255.
- 9 On interpellation, see Althusser, 170ff.

- 10 On Maritime modernization similarly reflected in other writers, see Erik Kristiansen's contribution to *Samson*, 225-56, and Willmott.
- 11 There are hints of this reversal in the generic Western and romance sign that he is dark, as opposed to Carney's blond (103, 12), and in the antimodernist sign that his voice is a more feminine tenor as opposed to Carney's baritone (139).
- 12 Despite the conservatism of Raddall's own literary style, it is not unlikely that he knew Eliot's poetry. His published remarks on modernist writing (see Austin, and "The Literary Art," 142) and the contents of his personal library (Archives, Dalhousie University) testify to a serious interest in the experimental styles of writers such as James Joyce, William Faulkner, Joseph Conrad, and Ernest Hemingway.
- 13 For a persuasive description of the "monologic" discourse of British imperialist history, as against that of its "losers," in Raddall's historical fiction, see Ferns, 65.
- 14 This internalization or abstraction of imperialism from an objective correlative in past or present history is powerfully suggested by David Creelman's reading of the ideological tensions and historical horizons of Raddall's fiction. Creelman sees a "defining tension" in Maritime modernity reflected in *Roger Sudden* by "the celebration of a conservative value system . . . fused with a modernist anxiety about the failure of conventional signifying practises and the instability of traditional social structures" (147). The principle of liberal abstraction which I suggest translates this imperialist discourse into a compromise form with such modern conditions, is so powerful that in 1942, despite Raddall's explicit racial prejudices, Malcolm Ross could see in his historical fiction the "discovery of ourselves as a nation, as a people, as Canadian, British, French, American, Semitic, Nordic, Asian, African, Slavic—we were each of these, and yet more than any one of these. We were—or at least we were becoming—ourselves" (qtd in Young 36).
- 15 On the characteristic tension between loyalist values and self-interested entrepreneurial values in Raddall's historical fiction, see Waterston, 16-19.
- 16 "You thought—we both thought that love in a bungalow by the Arm [in Halifax] or even a flat in Montreal would be nothing less than heaven. But all the time I knew it couldn't work. It simply couldn't. You'd never be happy . . . in what you called a madhouse that day I first talked to you. For it is mad, all of it.' She gave her head a backward toss, a gesture that rejected not merely Halifax but the whole frenzied continent" (85).
- 17 On the continuing and complex relationships between traditionally communal and modernizing capitalist social forms in the Maritime region, see Daniel Samson's Afterword, 257-72.
- 18 A historical account of the Canadian "frontier" as a combination of these elements is given by McRae.
- 19 Significantly, the book is dedicated to the Boy Scouts and prefaced by Ernest Thompson Seton, the Boy Scout schismatic who idealized an Indian rather than a Colonist model hero. The international Boy Scout movement, in its British and Colonial forms, was also defined by the constitutive tension of antimodernist imperialism discussed above (see Robert MacDonald, 6, 17ff).
- 20 Raddall recalls his formative but ambivalent response to movie and magazine Westerns, and his subsequent preference for popular imperialist literature, in "The Literary Tradition in Nova Scotia," 3, and "A Boy's Reading and a Man's Writing," 2-4.
- 21 For descriptions of this symbolic function of the "Indian" in Raddall, see Waterston, 14-15 and Moody, 143-44.
- 22 Perhaps it does so, in part, in the image of the Folk, which I have suggested assumes

- similar values of an abstracted or internalized imperialism in the figure of a postcolonial common man. For as Michèle Lacombe has observed, Raddall's representation of the domestic and private spheres of women can serve a social-critical function consistent with his populist representation of Folk in the public sphere (91).
- 23 Bruce MacDonald has illuminated the absence of the father, and the desire to belong and to be given purpose, as central to Raddall's fiction (172).

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Sage Man

Sage man hurches in the dust.
Sorro'ful worm
Once ferked into the air
Winnowed miles to the crofter's nose,
Now, slime beaten, squelches with the bootless ones.
Grave sage bowed with black rime frost
Remembers days of burning sun
When his leaves blew scent
Firing the hearts of all.
Now, fallen to the rank swell,
Caught in the cold wash across the plain
Slammed by the hungry magpie
Crammed excursus of a ground hog
Sage man left, a shitling of knowledge
Railed by gravel throated, pestilential winds.

Shifting Form

An Interview with Aritha van Herk¹

BEELER You've written quite a variety of texts in terms of subject matter and form. Your publications include novels, short stories and ficto-criticism. Do you feel that your writing has become more experimental over the years?

VAN HERK I think it has for various reasons, one of them being that when you begin as a writer you usually try to emulate form or fit into the parameters of genre more carefully. Once you become comfortable with genre and you recognize the extent to which you can stretch it or the extent to which you can push the envelope, then I think you're willing to play with it more. And you feel more confident about playing with it because you know it as well as you do. So, yes, I would say that I've become quite a bit more experimental, even though I haven't lost sight of the temptation of the traditional narrative, but if you know that temptation is there, you can always subvert it.

BEELER How do you feel about the categorization of works according to specific genres such as the novel, the short story, or poetry? Does this categorization still have a place within the study of "writing" or should one not attempt to make distinctions between forms?

VAN HERK Well, the distinctions will always be there, because people want to be able to fit a text into some kind of category in order to look at it. This is the critical inheritance that we have, that we need a version of apparatus as a definition. But I think that more and more we have to negotiate the question of writing as writing because so many forms are