

The Nature of Modernism in *Deep Hollow Creek*

I.

There may be little doubt that Sheila Watson's 1959 novel, *The Double Hook*, belongs to a cosmopolitan modernism; that it is an ideogrammic, elliptical, distilled and compressed arrangement of luminous details, shy of abstraction and commentary. But if the "cold fat" of modes of conventional representation has been trimmed from this writing, it is not so clear what remains, and whether this remainder is consistent with the objectives and values typical to this modernist tradition. Certainly Stephen Scobie, who has thought most inclusively about Watson's modes of expression in relation to modern and postmodern literary contexts, sees her work as "paradoxical" in its combination of a modernist assertion of conservative social norms and values with a postmodernist deconstruction of such norms and values in the self-reflexivity of language: "The 'traditional' elements in Watson's vision, such as her Roman Catholicism, or her scholarly devotion to Wyndham Lewis, T. S. Eliot, and the writings of 'high modernism,' have to be balanced on the one hook, against, on the other hook, the 'revolutionary' concern with self-reflexive language poised on the knife-edge of silence" (12). And upon this double hook the criticism of Watson continues to be caught—with the result that the *meaning* of her work is usually either abstracted to general conservative values (Christian redemption, for example, or subjection to family and community) or it is divorced from specific meaning altogether (in the deconstructive movement of the text, or in the aestheticist "balance" of Scobie's double hook). At its deepest level, does

The Double Hook depend on the line of a metaphysical ideal, or that of a material language?

These choices, ironically, seem far from modernism itself, which reacted against metaphysical abstraction and conventional wisdom while attempting to project alternative social forms modelled on objective correlatives of critical consciousness, rather than on the play of language or material forces. Modernism was, as Scobie says, “obsessed by the impulse to order and by the desire, in Ezra Pound’s phrase, to ‘make it new’” (4-5). Its stripping away of abstraction and common sense is directed toward the production of an ideological remainder that is neither abstract nor aleatory, that represents an order, but an order which is new and particular to the age, to modernity. Nowhere has such a remainder been more elusive to criticism than in *The Double Hook*.

The problem reveals itself, for example, in F. T. Flahiff’s observations on the revision process applied to the *Double Hook* manuscript which Frederick M. Salter of the University of Alberta, who promoted the novel’s first publication and later wrote its Foreword, had commented upon: “Watson’s achievement,” Flahiff relates, “put [Salter] in mind of Lear’s reflections on ‘unaccommodated man’: she ‘disaccommodates man,’ he wrote in his Foreword, ‘and studies him.’ She had done this by withholding from her characters those resources or ‘garments’ that, in Salter’s words, ‘shelter us from the dark and the void of the universe’” (123). This Learesque nakedness before the human order, which Salter perceives at the limit of Watson’s modernist compression and reduction, is an existentialist revelation—typical of the modern, post-Kantian aesthetic for which all orders of sense and of sense-making serve only to shore a wall of necessary fictions against “the dark and the void,” a chaotic, indifferent, and inscrutable reality. But the modernist reduction process goes beyond even this revelation in Watson’s subsequent revisions, Flahiff tells us, as these revisions withdraw yet more of the social conventions and institutions and laws, the “personal and family history and the details of national and racial origin by means of which characters sought to locate and to understand themselves and others.” Most significantly withdrawn are such abstract contexts “as are suggested by ‘the spaceless fields of being,’ the ‘abyss,’ and ‘nature’”—for this last reduction, ironically, cuts away even Salter’s existentialist vision of “the dark and the void of the universe,” supposed to be beneath the veils of fictive sense-making, as merely another projection, another mediating veil.

And if Salter's imagination, the imagination figured for modernity in the archetype of the emptied or abysmal Waste Land, is also a garment to be stripped away from this naked text, what then remains? What other, more final nakedness can there be?

II.

The answer to this, I wish to demonstrate, is most explicit in Watson's earlier—and on first approach less modernistic—*Deep Hollow Creek*, for here physical reduction at once presents itself so literally and so subtly, under the cover of realism, as to obscure its labyrinthine symbolic organization of the novel. For it is precisely a mere physical *being* indicated by nakedness, or an elemental property of existence as such—which finds its figuration in nature, the body, and particularly the native conditionality of a place—that is taken as the base sign of value, the original ideologeme of this text.¹ There is no more provocative starting point than the narrator Stella's own *credo*, which we find placed at the midpoint of her twelve-part narrative:

I believe in the body, the creator of other bodies, and in the body's body conceived by the body, born of the body, and suffering under the body—the body crucified, the body dead, the body buried—the body rising in the grass and blossoming in the hedgerow. No ghost. No church. No communion [sic] except the communion of the body to protect the body against the body. (VI, 76)

This mortal, creative, yet dependent body is the stage upon which the symbols and events of *Deep Hollow Creek* take meaning and place. Abstracted as such from the narrative, this *credo* might appear to share the idealism of postmodern investments in “the body” as a utopian site of values and desires eccentric to—or at least, always supplemental to or insistently more-than—forms of being and identity inscribed upon us with metaphysical authority by dominant social ideologies and their institutions. For in Stella's statement, the “body” also becomes a sign representing critical distance from existing social values and practices. It is voiced in anticipation of her brief return home to the city at the midpoint of her sojourn out in the near-wilderness of the frontier community. She has come from the city as that archetype of the Western genre, the civilized school-marm, and her expression of rebellion against this origin and identity is figured elsewhere in the same passage by two juxtaposed images—both of determination by a world of the mind, being fixed, essential, and abstract: first, the homophonic “bee” (an existentialist pun) which is preserved cut-off from, and so

without identity with the more transient grounds of its existence or becoming, its honey and comb; and second, the school compass which, echoing Blake, figures a similar, essentialist world of the mind, but grounds it in a social institution (which Stella here represents) rather than a metaphysical order:

She had supposed that she could measure out life with a school compass. The universe pinned flat on a drawing-board.

For two weeks now life would be centred again in the abstract point which had determined motion in the past. Once that past was present. But the present dies every minute, if it exists at all. It is and it is not. The mind preserves in amber the body of the bee. The honey, the comb itself, is wasted and spent.

When I go home, she thought, perhaps they will still be sitting by the fire and the shadow will be reflected from the shadow on the brass scuttle. The theme unaltered. *Dies Ira* [sic]. The mind has failed, failed with first-class honours, with second, failed in the departments of pure and applied science *cum laude*. (VI, 76)

The mind, rational science, a *Dies Irae*, identity with one's past, one's home: all these external frames of reference have failed her, and it is in this context that her *credo* asserts an alternative investment in some bare order in existence represented by the "body."

But if this last image may be assimilable to the postmodern critical figure, it is yet incomplete without the narrative in which it is, like the bee, embedded, and which interprets it. This narrative invests the "body" with values and a logic resistant to the deconstructive order of a postmodernist aesthetic. This rather modernist sense of the "body" is best grasped, not in its epistemological aspect as a topos for critical distance, which it shares with postmodernism, but in its existential aspect as a *condition*, nearly an authority, requiring humility. For the body, too, fails. When Stella feels challenged by the men around her to mount her stray horse bareback, and is thrown painfully to the ground, a sense of mingled vanity and shame prompts her to reflect:

There is a courage deep-rooted in fear—the fear of being thought less able in body than those who live by the body.

The doctrine of equality, thought Stella, is rooted in unchristian pride and in unchristian fear. The weak pray for strength not to bear their infirmity but to cancel it—not to conquer their pride but to be equal to it. (X, 118)

On the surface, the reflection seems conservative and anti-feminist, suggesting that women are essentially weak and must conquer their pride. But Stella's challenge to the "doctrine of equality" is not to its value or practice, which is not disputed here and which, moreover, seems inextricable from

any account of the mettle and virtue of the novel's heroine. Rather it appears to be a challenge to forces which seem to her to be driving this doctrine—forces of individual fear and pride at variance, not with men, but with a larger, physical environment only partly dominated by men.

For the decision or necessity to “live by the body” carries the body's failure, its subjection to a body of existence larger and more powerful than itself, within its system of values. Thus we are told that while Stella felt pressured to prove that she could master her stray horse by jumping it rather than leading it walking across the field, her neighbour Bill “could have done either indifferently,” while her neighbour Mockett, who of all the characters has the least sympathetic, most condescending relationship to Stella, would nevertheless, poignantly, in the same situation “have led the horse without shame” (X, 119). To live by the body does not, then, imply a new or old, a radically feminized or traditionally masculine mastery, but a transcending humility, a recognition of limits within physical existence. It is not only invested with the ideal of a transgressive power of resistance and creativity—always supplementary, always differing or deferring from expressions of power inscribed upon it—which is the radical ideal of a postmodernist valuation of the body. While Watson's image of the body stands for a certain critical distance from modern social life, and from the masculinist order and abstract-rationalist ideology behind it, it also stands for some other order, some other form of limitation and subjection, which resists such deconstruction in the expression of its conservative value. To believe in the body, and to live by the body, is to insist not only upon a stripping away of abstract determining logics of identity and society, of the projected gods within whose compasses the modern young woman, Stella, finds herself, but to insist also upon another existing order, with freedoms and limitations of its own.

This other order appears everywhere in *Deep Hollow Creek* under the broad rubric of Nature, as if the whole story grew out of the “mute recognition” given to Mockett that “when all was said and done nature still had the last word to say” (68). The transcendent value of Nature in Watson's text is revealed in the profound, fabular description Rose gives to the mystical place which Nicholas Farish only, of the settlers, has discovered and seen:

He was out looking for a white stallion. They'd all seen it but no man had branded it. He got off to have a sleep and when he got off he left the bay he rode standing on the lines. When he woke up, the horse had moved off and going to

look for him he came plumb on it—a great black lake. You couldn't see the lake, he said, only the edge falling off. And when he went to look he lay flat, for the edge went down and down to the black water. There was ledges and on the ledges there was bushes and flying over the water down in the cleft was birds and the land about him was dry and hard and there was nothing coming into the lake and nothing going out.... He says he never could find that lake again. (24-25)

The lake is removed, hidden and inscrutable, yet also present and, by virtue of its very envelopment in the land around Deep Hollow Creek, at the heart of the place; it *belongs* there. Its isolation figures it as a form of pure Nature, the particularity and priority of this landscape before those who come to it, its *life before man*. What meaning, what value it represents—for it is clearly symbolic, approached nearly in a dream or a vision—seems bound to this isolation, which is not from the place itself or even existence in that place, but only from a certain human perception.

It is not from all human perception that this mystical topos is removed: “The Indians know it... and talk about it in their own houses,” says Farish to Rose (25). And the Indians are nearly as obscure to the perception of the settlers as is this secret feature of its landscape. They are another hidden part of the same topos in Nature to which the settlers are blind: “It’s not as if there weren’t people here,” complains Mamie of Myrtle Farish, whose “man rides about the country making friends of the Indians” (37). The community of Deep Hollow Creek sees itself as a kind of isolate point, a center of human civilization surrounded by nothing:

In the valley all things moved to a point. The road ran into the creek both ways to the stopping house—though, if one stood on the hill where the water broke in the spring, one could see the road winding like a thread the whole length of the valley. No one stood on the hill. In the valley one spoke of the road running up or down, into or out of the centre. The private parlour, and the public parlour where the Indians stood shuffling their feet waiting patiently for Mockett to take off his apron, to come from his cow, to fold up his copy of the Manchester Guardian and to unlock the store, weighing out tea, weighing out flour, pouring out coal-oil, sorting out mail—here was the centre. (19)

But, we are immediately corrected, “no one” forgets to include Rose, the outsider of the community, who knows and speaks to Stella of the view from the hill. Nor does it include the Indians, who live in the hills “crowded” round this “centre.” The hills are alive with the displaced natives of the place: “Rà’ttem the Shuswaps had called their village there; they were the people of the deep hollow” (18). Nicholas Farish is the one to have seen

the mystic lake, perhaps, because he is like Rose an outsider, and a man that has befriended the Indians rather than the settlers.

Around this centre, then, as around Wallace Stevens' jar in Tennessee, is arranged an entire existential paradigm, that physis imaged in nature as wilderness, in nature as the mortal and gendered body, in nature as the animal, in nature as the people belonging to their land—in short to Nature as all that remains lacking or stripped of the properties of an expanding and modernizing Western world. The tension of the novel, and its narrative logic, is suspended between this centre and periphery. “Throw off the bands of custom,” Stella imagines an “undulating voice crying” out of the wilderness: “break down the barriers. Nature stirs deep within you. I am the primitive urge, out of the blastoderm endlessly calling” (124).

The undulating voice is certainly that of Coyote, the literal and mythical animal who represents in the landscape of Deep Hollow Creek whatever conditionality and order belongs to Nature, to living by the body, and who appears and reappears intertwined with the all the motifs belonging to the paradigm of peripheral or liminal *physis*. As the animal who lends voice and image to this paradigmatic landscape, Coyote will serve in what follows as its guide.² Indeed according to Rose, Farish had explained of the mystic lake, the hidden sign of the existential landscape in which the settlement has situated itself, that “the Indians know it... and talk about it in their houses. They have a god, he says—one called Coyote. But I can't, he said, say more” (25). Coyote is the name of whatever order and authority allows the Nature of the place to be found, to be recognized, to be talked about; not by its settlers, but by its natives, whose houses are co-extensive with rather than a frontier asserted against its landscape. Coyote is the Logos of the condition of living that landscape, the name given to the fate, chance, and conditionality of existence precisely there:

Coyote the god—the great god Coyote, coming in the night—coming in the hunting season—tumbling men off ledges and women in their beds—lighting his torch of bullrush at the household fire—unstopping the corroding liniment of midnight flame—playing his tricks so that only the dark shadows spied him—dipping into other men's buckets—spitting in the lake until he made it green with poison, salt forming round the edge where the cattle drank—flesh drying on the bone which he had touched—babies dying in their baskets—the whole world turned to a Sodom of salt. (131-32)

This passage is drawn from the scene in which Stella visits an Indian

community, and a coyote is barely visible (like the mystic lake), an overseer at the margin, sitting “silent on [a] ledge like a shadow on the rock” (131). Coyote’s existential power, a power over the body, is juxtaposed with the imported powers of the central settlement:

I saw a mist rising in the valley, Annunciata told Farish. It came creeping on the ground to the door. Mockett gave me a charm in a bottle, a charm of oil, and I gave the baby the oil in a wooden spoon. Mockett is no Shaman. He is only hide and bones and thin grey hair against Coyote’s mist. (91-92)

Coyote is always in the background, a momentary coalescence of nature, a barely perceivable mist or shadow. This environmental god is held responsible for things going wrong, which is not to say for mortality or evil in general, but for the ineluctable subjection of human life to mortality, evil, or mere vanity. As such the god represents an authority more of a natural than a divine order of things, and more of an existential becoming, a turning, twisting or “trickiness,” than of a metaphysical being, an essence, or a centre in life.

As a scapegoat figure for all that can go wrong in life, it is appropriate that Coyote should appear at the margins, a figure blended into the background, a cry or bark from beyond the trees, for the reason that Coyote exists at the threshold of existence itself, weaving back and forth between the living and the dead, a fickle reminder of the limitations to mere physical survival in Nature. Death, or the limen where life meets death, reveals to life its own minimal conditions in a given environment, its basic needs in human and animal nature, and taking on surprising forms, like the body which demands an Indian burial: “A dead body’s an awful thing in this country now, said George, Sam’s boy. Summer the ground’s baked hard as nails. Winters she’s froze. When old McIntosh died they had to put him in a tree out of the coyotes’ way until the ground thawed in the spring” (29).

Coyote, at this threshold of existence, demands an order, a pattern. Life reduced or stripped away to a minimum, a nakedness belonging to life itself, is not without order and meaning in Deep Hollow Creek. The novel begins with a description of Rose, the outsider’s eyes, and in so doing states the motive in the narrative: “Her eyes, Stella thought, were the colour of Spanish mahogany, but they lacked the lustre of organic fibre. The soul had gone out of the wood, had dissipated. What was life, she asked herself, that the soul could escape so. She had come into the valley to find life for herself” (7). The liminal quality, and so the hiddenness, of Rose’s ground in human life is an occulted mystery to Stella: “No animating fire within, no

reflection of the sun outside... yet somewhere there is life—somewhere there must be fire burning inward, letting the ash drop on the source of fire itself. But still, she thought, what is this fire. And again—by what refraction can one know the flame” (21). And: “Once there must have been sap, she thought,” gazing at a stem of dead grass, “pondering the paradox of Rose’s eyes” (106). But this mystery, this hiddenness, belongs to Stella as well, as she also becomes an outsider to the community, choosing to live on its margin, to befriend Indians and their friends, the Farishes, and preferring to live alone. Later she tells herself, in a meditation which mirrors her image of Rose, “I have grown like a plant and leafed after my kind—but here is the end. I live—she said, looking at [her dog] Juno—like a stone” (113).

But life thus reduced, the life of a stone, which is the minimal life belonging to Nature, or the life of the body, which is its minimal human form—just as Rose is an imposing body, a physical existent without any expression or “life” visible, or legible on the surface—is also a life cut off from other lives, from others. Like Rose, Stella is alienated by her independent character, a figure of tragic, self-revelation and isolation. As Stella seeks “life for herself” throughout the novel, and tests the life of the body, of the animal, of the wilderness, of physical existence at its most fundamental, she also approaches the “paradox” of Rose’s inanimate, inorganic, petrified image of life-in-death.³ It is only at the end of the novel, when Stella absently offers her dog a light for a presumed cigarette, that her independence is revealed as a fantasy, or an impossibility, and she knows she must return to the world of others, to the centre. Revealed in naked existence, then, is our ineluctable relationship with others, and this is manifested before all else in the form of language.

“After hours by herself,” Stella, near the end her story, “felt the need to talk as she felt other primitive and essential desires. She would have waged battle in defence of the idea which she had come to hold with mute intensity—that man was beyond all else *animal loquens*” (113). Even at the animal minimum, Watson suggests, in our naked, physical nature, there is the need for speech, and so for others—animal, vegetable, or mineral—to listen and be listened to. This is the revelation of the “undulating voice” of Coyote, met riding on the road at dusk. She has just encountered a pair of bulls who represent to her “sheer physical strength,” nothing else: “One of the bulls battered against the bank, dust spraying like a halo round his dehorned head. The other looked out from under a bang of rank hair suspiciously...”

(121). The bulls are important because they represent that minimal level of natural existence—pure physical survival—which collapses into pure individualism, expressed either in its solitary aggressivity (giving the battered, self-absorbed head a parodic halo), or in its suspicious view of the outside world. Stella respects their strength, but does not see in them an ironic mirror of her own individualistic ideal, her “life for herself.” After noticing the bulls turn on each other, and shivering at Coyote’s mist, moving across the ground, she hears the “undulating voice crying” for the “primitive urge” of “Nature”—and then comes a vision, too extraordinary to summarize:

There to the left was a pile of stones, heaped from the last great road clearing.
Slowly they manoeuvred into place, each a face—face rolling on face—each face a
wheel, each wheel a face. Then from the cairn came a voice—thin, precise, dry —
Taurus, tauri.
And a stone rolling from the pile echoed —
Lapis, lapidis.
And the mist rose higher and the gentians burned from blue to the red of Indian
paint-brush —
Flamen, flaminis.
And out of the bosom of the hill came a soft groan —
Man, man.

If the mist is not enough to mark Coyote’s presence, we are reminded that among these other echoes, “high up, bark echoed bark as a pair of coyotes crossed the ridge” (125). Here the *stone*, the merely physical *animal*, the *fire* of life hidden in Rose, in Stella, in all the inhabitants of Deep Hollow Creek—these reductions of existence yet have *words*. Human life cannot be reduced beyond that of a talking animal, a talking stone, or a talking light. So that even at the threshold of freedom from others or of death, there remains talking-to-oneself, as in the muteness of Rose and later of Stella, the existence of words for others even as they fail to cross the margin between silence and speech: “So Mamie talked, so Miriam wrote endless letters, and Rose lived only in the scattered moment of self-revelation” (113).

These words, in the vision nothing more than names—names “rolling” together into plurals or genitives—are not impositions of ideas of order upon an anterior dark or void of the universe, an existential chaos, but rather emanations of an order of interconnectedness in existential reality, of essential patterns of desire and need which call across the boundaries between selves and other living things.⁴ It is the call of Coyote, the voice from the margins, whose appearance is always a reminder of the nearness of

life to death, and of the dependence, the subjection, the humility of the self before its own mere survival in a place, its nakedness before where and with whom it lives. The vision resonates with Northrop Frye's own idealistic assertion in his "Conclusion to a *Literary History of Canada*," that the modern Canadian utopia is a "peaceable kingdom" in which nature and history—or the welfare of existence and its transformation by power and progress in civilization—are united rather than conflicted (247). In Stella's vision, it is a matter of having eyes to see, and ears to hear, the natural existence—human, animal, vegetable, mineral, or energetic—which lies visibly or invisibly within human being, and our utter subjection to it, as victim and dependent, as thinker and interlocutor.

And if there is no utopia in *Deep Hollow Creek*, there is nonetheless a desire for the utopian ideology proper to a peaceable kingdom. This we see in the patterns of life Watson describes as native to the place—native, though ironically displaced to its peripheries by patterns of life instituted there by the expansion of a modernizing civilization to which it stands in contrast. One pattern of interconnectedness is the economy of the place, the pattern of exchange between people of people, animals, words and things. The scene in which Stella buys her second horse is exemplary for the contrast it draws between a native and a modern ideology of exchange. It begins with some apparently irrelevant background concerning the young seller, George, of whom we are told that when he was not working full-time on his father's ranch in the hills up out of town, he went into the centre and "down to the store and sat with the men round the stove and heard Mockett talk to Hawkins's partner about freedom, equality, and the pursuit of happiness. No one paid much attention to Mockett and his talk of Tom Paine and others of his kind. It seemed doubtful whether Mockett paid much attention himself" (57). Then the initial transaction is described: "He asked twenty-five dollars for the horse and Stella paid it. He had told [his father] Sam what he was going to do because, despite Mockett's talk, he wasn't quite convinced that he had any rights at all." Compared to the stereotypically American values displayed by Mockett, George evinces a subjection of individual rights to a sustaining social order which is stereotypically Canadian. George, not yet in the world on his own, is not sure whether he is free as an individual to make the exchange of property—to own, to transact. And he is not, apparently, for Sam soon sends George back to Stella to demand the horse back, or five extra dollars. (Sam claims the horse as his

own, since he gave it to his son “for wages,” and presumably those wages will not be fulfilled until George leaves the ranch.) Sam’s belated demand is petty, but one must perceive that it arises from the substitution of one kind of exchange for another: An original exchange is revealed which was of work done within and for a family, for a horse considered to be an extension of the family business. “He said, If you stay with me you will have a big herd of horses and do better than them who work for the day” (58). For this exchange among dependents living off their land, George innocently substitutes another kind of exchange belonging rather to those who “work for the day,” the mercantile exchange of goods. George is a horse-dealer. Sam’s raising the price merely emphasizes the new being and value of the horse as a commodity. Thus he insists upon what George can only see as an unfair profit, where such profit was not supposed to be part of the trade to begin with. Though Stella is indifferent, George resents Sam’s action. “He’s broke his word... It was my sweat got the colt off the range. I worked for him like he said.” It becomes ambiguous whether George really has not absorbed something of Mockett’s talk about individual rights after all. However, George adds a final twist to the story by substituting yet a third transaction—a restitution for the five dollars which to Stella mean nothing, but which to George mean a reassertion of his right to transact business, if not his right to the original property:

He held a braided halter for Stella’s inspection.

It takes a lot of careful cutting and oiling and plaiting until it’s just right. You couldn’t get it [mail-order] from Eaton’s for five dollars, he said, not like this. It’s work like the Indians do.

There are ways, he said, if a person sits down and thinks a little. There are ways which just about set a man right with things. (59)

Under this restitution, the five dollars have become meaningless except as a symbol of George’s and Sam’s competition for power over this transaction. The simplest thing would have been for George to have paid Stella back the five dollars, and to have kept twenty for his own. But this gesture would have been a defeat; it would not reassert any symbolic value in the mode of exchange held between George and his father. Instead, George gives Stella what he had originally given Sam, the value of his work. His reformulation of his exchange with Stella in terms of *work* reengages Sam in his own game, so that George has now gained mastery over his own value in Sam’s economy of things on the hill, not in that of the trade characterizing the centre. And

he is explicit about the native, local, and “priceless” character of his halter, in contrast to the halter which could be ordered for the same dollar figure from somewhere else, a place which is not a place but a modern business, through the system of commodity production and exchange which is regulated and represented by the centre of Deep Hollow Creek. It is this system, along with its ideology of transcending individualism, that is ultimately renounced in George’s recourse to restitution through “work like the Indians do.”⁵

The episode is nearly a moral tale, so clearly does it distinguish between a wrong and a right relationship to things, in this case the exchanges between people deeply dependent upon each other in a frontier settlement. Right is the exchange of words or things in an ecology of needs or wants proper to the place, according to a synaesthetic ideal of fair trade; wrong is the exchange of words or things in an individualistic economy driven by differentials of profit and power, where needs and wants arrive from an abstract elsewhere—the elsewhere of the system of modern production, distribution and consumption—whose values are abstract in relation to any given place. The abstraction of modern words and things supports the abstraction of the modern individual, the fantasy of a free self transcending its natural and social needs, the laws of its environment. The abstraction of the modern place as an “elsewhere” is suggested in the image of the centre of Deep Hollow Creek as a sort of empty centre, a place of passage only, whose element is the commodity: “the stopping house—the inn at which, after the fashion of the country, one may stop for the payment of a fee—one may stop, she thought, if one is merely a traveller or a salesman with his commodity and not, in the nature of the now and here, more than a momentary commodity himself” (13). Against the abstraction of the commodity as pure movement, as transcendental value, is posed the word or object which, while exchanged, always belongs to its place, and which in the synaesthetic reality of that place, remains part of its physical nature. When Stella completes a deal with a native woman who has worked for her, which comprises various goods and a closing demand for thirty-five cents, Stella thinks of the added currency only for its modern, abstract value—but the native woman thinks otherwise:

With the money, thought Stella, she is in possession of an undertermined [sic] joy. It is power over Mockett.

Why hadn’t she asked for more, she wondered.

Forty-five cents, she suggested, prying to know, indifferently curious.
Elizabeth's eyes turned full on her. One hand reached out for the moccasins.
The other arm circled the flour, the oil, the thread.
Thirty-five cents, she insisted.
What do you want to get? Stella asked.
Thirty-five cents, she intoned again.
Stella counted the money out on the table—a quarter and a dime.
She shook her head. Three dimes and a nickel.
She caught them up. (134-35)

Whatever the coins might be exchanged for, whatever it is they might come to stand for, they first of all stand for themselves. The coins are physical; their mere physical being matters. Their amount is calculated under a law of material reciprocity, not of abstract gain and its balances of "power." The episode is preceded by a meditation on such native and natural exchanges:

To those who gave, nature made return—a deer for a bullet, spuds for the planting and digging. Sometimes a grouse winged by another and fell on the doorstep. Then one gave thanks to Coyote as one gave thanks if Mockett passed a sweet across the counter to a reaching hand, slipping on the stained wood, nail following the groove back and forth—while those who had, bartered. (134)

Coyote is again the figure who symbolizes this native understanding, this hidden pattern of interdependency in the order of things belonging to existence in a place.

It is to this fundamental order that Stella strips herself down, in a modernistic reduction of past history, normative values, social and economic forms, and conventional signification—to a morbid isolation and silence. Hers must begin as an individualistic project, a stripping away of the orders and values of modern existence, as the narrative moves her further from others and from the centre of Deep Hollow Creek, isolating her in the wilderness, and at the threshold of that other, native life belonging to the hills. But this individualistic project is itself, finally, revealed to be a projection of the abstract fantasies of the world from which she wishes to escape. For at the limit of this escape comes the perception of the ineluctable life of a place—echoing names, words, work, and things back to the individual, interpellating her, implicating her in the existence and sensorium of its dependencies.

This revelation belongs to the closing image of the novel, in which we find Stella sitting alone in the evening with her dog, Juno:

When Stella finished supper she poured the coffee. She reached for the matches to light her cigarette. She lit the cigarette absently then, bending, offered the light to Juno.

When the match burned her finger she became a spectator of the scene—Juno by the chair—herself—Browne open at her elbow—the match extended—the twinge of seared flesh.

I don't know, she said to Juno, I really don't know who is mad. It is time for us to get out of here, she said. Juno sat. (141)

The body is again reminded of its fragility, its transience, at the moment that its language—reduced to the mute, giving gesture of a light—comes forth to belie its dependence on others, physical and affective. Stella's *credo*, her belief in living by the body, at some existential threshold at which her modern social order has been stripped away, leads not finally to the modernist authenticity of individualism and social alienation which is the teleology of the physical Hemingway, or the affective Fitzgerald, but to the realization that such as these last are also fantasies of a modernized identity, to be stripped away from the hidden economies of mere being, within which we must render to Coyote that which is Coyote's—subjecting ourselves, and our image of ourselves, to the existence of a place.

The characters of *Deep Hollow Creek* are figures in a ground, and the ground of grounds is not an existential darkness, void, or chaos, within which a Cartesian subject begins *ex nihilo*, making values, choices, decisions—making herself, making history. The ground is a living place, an environment which demands expression in a linguistic and material economy of exchange. As such it exists no less in the wilderness than in the city; and when Stella returns to the city, she of course takes Juno, the double of Coyote, with her. It is not a new set of values merely—not a dissenting, Romantic “model” of Being drawn from the natural world—which Stella attains at the end of the narrative; rather it is a perception, a sense of contact, and subsequent contract, with an existential order of conditions between herself and what *is* immediately around her. The modernist reduction is complete when it hits this rock bottom of hidden reciprocities in mere being. “I live... like a stone,” she says, but even these words depend upon the stones, and the stones call back, inescapable—the ground returning physical Echoes to a Narcissan mind.

I believe this account of *Deep Hollow Creek* sheds light on what is unique to the modernism of *The Double Hook*. For the latter is only the logical sequel to the former, in which the individualistic narrator has herself now

disappeared into the fabric of interdependent lives of a place—so that the narrative no longer belongs to the romance of an individual *subjectivity* but to the interdependent conditionality, or fate, of a fixed, physical *existence*. This is why it is possible for Flahiff to suggest that in Watson’s “final, extensive revision of *The Double Hook* she moved against such guarantees as are provided by *possibility* and *causality* and *memory* in order more fully to realize that spareness and immediacy that come to characters when they have no alternative but to *be* in their time and place—when they are characters who have no history apart from the experience of their readers” (125). To believe in the *body*, and in the inescapably “naked” nature of words and things, is also to believe in the reader—he or she that, in taking the position of Juno, but as *animal loquens*, might accept the offered match, the light.⁶

III.

The “double hook” of modernism and postmodernism, upon one side of which nearly every reading of Watson’s work hangs, reveals either a mythopoeic romance with conservative values (in which Coyote is usually a negative figure), or a deconstructive comedy with radical values (in which Coyote is a positive figure). *Deep Hollow Creek* should serve to disabuse us of these alternatives in regard to Watson’s work, since the earlier narrative rejects and surpasses both. With this earlier model, it is more easily seen that a conservative interpretation⁷ ignores the violence and inadequacy of represented traditional social forms to bring about the *communitas* which is the supposed *telos* of *The Double Hook* (I think it is rather a momentary still point). Far from nostalgic for any social or signifying forms which might be recalled, as pre-existing representations or orders, from the past, these forms remain barely representable ideals—utopian. However, perhaps because these critiques always posit community in the singular, as an eternal category rather than historical form, they find their contrast not in any *other* community but in nature—and so undervalue or anathematize forms of nature and landscape, and the native and the “regional,” along with their symbol in Coyote.

Conservative interpretation also has difficulty with the self-reflexive ironies of Watson’s use of language as language belongs to and is judged by its “regional” ground. Radical interpretations (such as the essays by Godard and George Bowering in the latter’s collection) while attending to the trickster ironies of Watson’s language, which deconstructs its represented values

and ideals back into an unsettling texture of clichés and contrasts, cannot thereby account for the insistent social vision which this “trickster” language draws from its region—its realist and referential ground. “I wanted to do something,” Watson has said,

about the West, which wasn't a Western; and about Indians which wasn't about... Indians. No, not “about Indians,” because I don't even want to put it that way, I'm putting it badly now... But I wanted to take this place where I'd been put down as a stranger...

The pun on “put down” is significant—to be placed, to be humbled. As is Watson's explicit desire to write about the people *native* to that place, no matter where they have come from, and the difficulty of *being* native there, of being subjected to a place rather than being abstracted from it: “I would say that what I was concerned with was figures in a ground, from which they could not be separated.... So that people are entwined in, they're interacting with the landscape, and the landscape is interacting with them... not the landscape, the things about them, the other things which exist.” This native existence must yet find representation within the displacing and replacing, abstracting movement of modern existence. That is Watson's minimal ideal, the naked form remaining after the modernist stripping away of encrusted forms of language, convention, and abstraction.⁸ To *see* the nature of merely being in a place, to represent it, is to transgress, to be a trickster, to point foolishly at the *physical* shadow of the modern here and now. But this vision comes neither with faith in God nor in language: it belongs to individual perception, and like art or ritual, must be learned. “Only the practised eye,” it is said of Coyote, can “see the substance in the shadow” (131).

NOTES

- 1 Why this ideologeme, that of a liminal *physis* under which the natural body and the body of nature produce an *a priori* threshold to social life and its meaning, should belong to Canadian Modernism more generally, is the matter of a larger study in progress; it is from this study that the present reading is drawn.
- 2 Criticism of *The Double Hook* is riven with debate over the positive or negative meaning of Coyote in the novel. One tradition of interpretation has viewed Coyote negatively, as a symbol of self-deception, self-centeredness, and anti-social fear and merger with an inhuman landscape (see Leslie Monkman, “Coyote as Trickster in *The Double Hook*,” D. G. Jones, *Butterfly on Rock*, Margot Northey, “Symbolic Grotesque,” Margaret Morris, “The Elements Transcended,” Nancy J. Corbett, “Closed Circle,” John Moss, “*The Double*

Hook and *The Channel Shore*,” and Dawn Rae Downton, “Message and Messengers in *The Double Hook*” (all reprinted or selected in George Bowering, 1985), and Scobie and Neuman. Another views Coyote positively, either as a local type or prophet of God (see Beverly Mitchell, S. S. A, “Association and Allusion in *The Double Hook*,” John Watt Lennox, “The Past: Themes and Symbols of Confrontation in *The Double Hook* and ‘Le Torrent,’” and John Grube, “Introduction” to *The Double Hook* [Toronto: NCL, 1966] (all reprinted op. cit.) or as a transgressive, liberating trickster figure of the writer (see Barbara Godard, “‘Between One Cliché and Another’: Language in *The Double Hook*,” and George Bowering, “Sheila Watson, Trickster” (also reprinted op. cit.), and Angela Bowering). A consideration of Coyote which hangs on neither of these hooks but combines them in historicist juxtaposition is offered by Steven Putzel, whose anthropological study concludes that “Watson has created a voice which resonates with the Indians’ past, the settlers’ present, and with prophecies of their future” (15).

- 3 Stella at first takes a little portion of Nature for her own, thinking it will free her: “At the moment a horse which she could ride when she chose stood for all the things implicit in Mockett’s (American) murmurings about freedom, equality, and the pursuit of happiness. With a horse she could come and go without depending on others” (65). However, she and her horse are not so abstracted from each other or others, and when Stella leaves Deep Hollow Creek, the horse must be reclaimed by Rose’s husband: “I’ll take the palomino back, he said, any time you say—and keep him till you come again. Rose looked up and the light fell across her eyes” (138). Not only are natural and human existence unexpectedly affirmed here, the moment is emphasized symbolically by the sudden light in Rose’s eyes—which, significantly, is seen to come from without, a life dependent on lives shared in their common existential environment.
- 4 Watson once told Stephen Scobie in conversation: “To be self-centred is an oblivion” (35). And similarly, she advised him that what he should “really be paying attention to [in *The Double Hook*] was Felix’s coffee cup” (32). When Heinrich observes that Felix “sits there like a round world all centred in on himself”—recalling Stevens’ jar in Tennessee—William corrects Heinrich: “He drinks coffee like the rest of us... If you think of it, he said, this case of Felix is a standing lesson for someone to think twice. A man who drinks coffee is dependent on something outside himself” (114). The cup, an image of simultaneity of present and past, of self and other, introduced earlier in the novel (29), makes of Stevens’ jar, and view of art imposed upon and mastering nature, a solipsistic or “oblivious” one.
- 5 The five dollars is also meaningless to Sam. Later on, when Stella is preparing to leave the community, he offers to take care of the same horse for her for an indefinite period, in case she returns—a gift far transcending the added exchange value of the horse.
- 6 The nakedness of this position is reflected in Watson’s own essay on Learesque nakedness, entitled “Unaccommodated Man,” which explores Wyndham Lewis’ Modernist valuation of the *wild body*: “the supreme survival that is us, the stark apparatus with its mysterious set of spasms; the most profound of which is laughter,” since laughter represents “all that remains physical in a flash of thought.” That this “stark” physicality is a minimal *physis* is insisted upon by Watson’s further evidence from Lewis that the *wild body* “is the chasm lying between non-being, over which it is impossible for logic to throw a bridge, that in certain forms of laughter, we leap.” Watson considers this *body* the “irreducible” ground of Lewis’s modernism, as opposed to the metaphysically imag-

ined grounds of others such as Artaud. Lewis's interest, she argues in conclusion, is "in the present," in order "to provide a rallying ground it needs to survive" (103, 108, 114). Watson's last words already suggest the social dimension, less evident in Lewis's more individualistic figure, of an existential "present" and "body" articulated in her own work.

- 7 Traditional humanist or Christian values are asserted as central to Watson's texts in John Watt Lennox, "The Past: Themes and Symbols of Confrontation in *The Double Hook* and 'Le Torrent,'" Margot Northey, "Symbolic Grotesque," Leslie Monkman, "Coyote as Trickster in *The Double Hook*," John Grube, "Introduction" to *The Double Hook* (Toronto: NCL, 1966), Margaret Morris, "The Elements Transcended," and Beverley Mitchell, S. S. A., "Association and Allusion in *The Double Hook*" (all reprinted in George Bowering, 1985), and in Shirley Neuman, "Sheila Watson."
- 8 This thesis brings me in line, though in the terms of *Deep Hollow Creek*, with Angela Bowering's more extensive literary and anthropological study of *The Double Hook*, in which the "native" as opposed to "modern perception" of which I speak is figured as an occulted female symbolic tradition, in which a female modality of existential ground and origin transhistorically subtends and deconstructs an exfoliation of more or less masculinised (to the extent they are taken for complete or essential) mythologies and metaphysics; and for Bowering this female symbolic, associated with the native symbol of Coyote, indicates a hidden ground of form and value in *The Double Hook*.

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