

Passing Time and Present Absence

Looking to the Future in
In the Village of Viger

Formally arranged to accentuate the “simultaneous self-sufficiency and interdependence” (Mann 15) of the constituent stories, a story cycle is distinguished from a miscellany or collection by an emphasis on what Forrest L. Ingram suggests is the central dynamic of the cycle form, a “tension between the one and the many.”¹ Although the formal integrity of the individual stories allows for each to be read or published independently of the others, the recurrence and elaboration of characters, symbols, themes, and motifs throughout the stories of a cycle invite the attentive reader “to construct a network of associations that binds the stories together and lends them cumulative thematic impact” (Luscher 149). As these patterns of recurrence emerge, evolve, and interweave, the reading experience becomes one of progressive and perpetual (re)modification, an almost Iserian project that promotes both a reconsideration of those stories already read and a rereading of the complete cycle with the added knowledge of the patterns gained with the completion of each additional story. As Iser suggests, it is during the process of rereading that readers “tend to establish connections by referring to [their] awareness of what is to come, and so certain aspects of the text will assume a significance [they] did not attach to them on a first reading, while others will recede into the background” (Iser 286).

It is this formal tension between the need to attend to the present while remaining attentive to both the past and future that Duncan Campbell Scott mirrors at a thematic level in his *In the Village of Viger* (1896). “A revo-

lutionary accomplishment” (New 42) in the development of the Canadian story cycle, *In the Village of Viger* “stands at the head of a rich tradition indeed” (Lynch, *In the Meantime* 70), anticipating notable contemporary cycles like Stephen Leacock’s *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* (1912) and *Arcadian Adventures with the Idle Rich* (1914) as well later contributions to the cycle form including George Elliot’s *The Kissing Man* (1962), Margaret Laurence’s *A Bird in the House* (1970), and Alice Munro’s *Who Do You Think You Are?* (1978). In a recent discussion of the story cycle in the context of the development of literary forms in Canada, Gerald Lynch suggests that “[o]ver the past hundred years the short story cycle has become something of a sub-genre within the Canadian short story” (One and the Many, 91), a form that is geopolitically appropriate for the expression of the Canadian imagination.

More importantly, the cycle form, “with its hint of a formalistic challenge to unity and the master narrative of the nineteenth-century novel of social and psychological realism, provided Scott with a form ideally suited to the fictional depiction ... of what may be called Vigerian virtues and vices” (Lynch, *In the Meantime* 74). The issues explored by Scott are not entirely the result of material changes, but of a complex of external and internal forces that raise questions concerning the spiritual, psychological, and historical underpinnings of this fictional community on the periphery of the modern world. Challenged from without by modernity and the advancing industrialized urban sprawl from the south, Viger is a village coincidentally threatened from within by the degenerative effects of a past scarred by lack of care, decay, and the disintegration of the traditional foundations of community and communal spirit. Scott looks to the heart of the village, as it were, to examine the tension between the historical past and present as individuals and groups struggle for survival and to (re)define themselves in terms that will guarantee them a future.

Scott’s attention to the formal structure of the *Viger* cycle has been well documented. Eight of the ten stories were originally published individually in two contemporary literary periodicals — *Scribner’s* and *Two Tales* — between 1887 and 1893. Scott would later edit a number of these magazine versions and add two previously unpublished stories — “No. 68 Rue Alfred de Musset” and “Paul Farlotte” — for the initial publication of *In the Village of Viger* by Copeland and Day of Boston in 1896. As Carole Gerson details (Piper’s 138-43), the stories appeared in Viger in the following order, with

the year and source of original publication noted parenthetically:

1. The Little Milliner (1887, *Scribner's*)
2. The Desjardins (1887, *Scribner's*)
3. The Wooing of Monsieur Cuerrier (1891, *Scribner's*)
4. Sedan (1893, *Scribner's*)
5. No. 68 Rue Alfred de Musset (1896, *Viger*)
6. The Bobolink (1893, *Scribner's*)
7. The Tragedy of the Seignior (1892, *Two Tales*)
8. Josephine Labrosse (1887, *Scribner's*)
9. The Pedler (1893, *Scribner's*)
10. Paul Farlotte (1896, *Viger*)

Five decades later, in the 1940s, when Lorne Pierce of The Ryerson Press undertook the project of reissuing a Canadian edition of *In the Village of Viger*, Scott continued to emphasize and ask “for recognition of [the] textual integrity and formal arrangement” of his stories (New 178). He steadfastly refused to reduce the original ten stories to a sextet (Dragland 12), and, consistent with his belief that the stories “will require tender handling by an illustrator” (McDougall 76), retained right of refusal over Thoreau MacDonald’s accompanying illustrations (Bourinot 89-90). Scott frequently voiced his concerns over numerous details of publication, from the design of the jacket cover to the physical dimensions of the book itself, noting in July of 1944, for example, that he “was not particularly impressed by the size of the book sent as a sample” (Bourinot 89).² In a letter to E.K. Brown following the release of the Ryerson edition, Scott comments: “It was a bit of a struggle to get the book produced in its present form” (McDougall 142).

Although not all readers have appreciated the complexities of Scott’s story cycle,³ the thematic patterns that result from Scott’s insistence on the formal integrity of *In the Village of Viger* have not gone unnoticed by a number of contemporary and modern scholars and critics. In 1896 a book reviewer for *Massey’s Magazine*, commenting on the austerity of Scott’s style and complexities of the Viger stories, noted that “every word is made to count, and there is, consequently, no writing to cover space.... There is so much suggested in it, so much left to the imagination” (73). Writing in the *Canadian Magazine* in 1914, Bernard Muddiman observes that Scott’s style “suggests so much more than it actually performs,” (63) adding that the stories of Viger, in particular, “have a bewitching grace, that is, however, something deeper than mere prettiness” (70).⁴ In his introduction to *A Book of Canadian Stories* (1947), Desmond Pacey comments: “One feels in Scott’s work that every word has been first weighed and considered and finally

chosen with a full realization of all its connotations. All parts of the stories have been similarly deliberated upon: characters, setting, and events are blended and shaped into a satisfying artistic whole” (xxvi).

More recently, Stan Dragland’s introduction to the New Canadian Library edition of *In the Village of Viger* (1973) includes a discussion of Scott’s use of detailed repetition — notably, of bird imagery and the motif of city and swamp — which develops “a rhythm of structural links between the stories” (12). Gerson suggests that the stories establish a thematic balance, with “each instance of apparent defeat” offset by “a corresponding example of strength” and “human resilience” (139).⁵ New further uncovers the complex thematic patterns informing *Viger*, schematizing the ten stories according to what he identifies as “two internal cycles,” one of vertical/sequential repetition and the other a horizontal/structural variation; these sequences “are not mirror reversals of each other,” he continues, “but alternate variations [that] constitute a set within which alternatives have value and variation has meaning” (185). Lynch builds on these previous discussions with his dual focus on the formal qualities of the *Viger* cycle and “the primary thematic concern of this story cycle — the threat that the advance of metropolitan modernity poses to the traditional conception of family and, by extension, to the ideal of community itself” (In the Meantime 70).

Conservative in his private life and public politics, Scott was nonetheless aware of the inevitability of social, economic, and philosophical changes fueled by what he recognized as the “growing freedom in the commerce and exchange of ideas the world over” (*Circle* 145). But as Lynch suggests, Scott’s “attitude toward developments around the turn of the century — the whole ethos of positivism, materialism and progress — was complex and ambivalent” (In the Meantime 71). He remained apprehensive about the future of traditional communities like *Viger* in a modern society that he saw as becoming increasingly “casual, intermittent, fragmentary” (*Circle* 128).

Scott introduces his stories of *Viger* with a verse epigraph in which he paints a picture of a seemingly idyllic alternative to this pattern of social fragmentation, calling on those modern souls “wearied with the fume and strife, / The complex joys and ills of life,” to “staunch” their worries “In pleasant *Viger* by the Blanche” (*Viger* 8).⁶ He reinforces this picture in the opening lines of his first story, “The Little Milliner”:

It was too true that the city was growing rapidly. As yet its arms were not long enough to embrace the little village of Viger, but before long they would be, and it was not a time that the inhabitants looked forward to with any pleasure. It was not to be wondered at, for few places were more pleasant to live in. (13)

But Scott immediately subverts the notion of a distance, psychological or otherwise, separating the present version of the village from the unnamed city to the south. The arms of the urban centre have physically embraced the settlement, surrounding it with the new houses needed to accommodate “a large influx of the laboring population which overflows from large cities” (14). More importantly, the influence of the city on the lives of the villagers has extended well beyond the hint of “the rumble of the street-cars and the faint tinkle of their bells, and ... the reflection of thousands of gas-lamps” (13-14) in the night sky, developing what Dragland describes as “an urban undercurrent which surfaces several times in the volume” (12). Madame Viau’s main street house, for example, the village site central to the tale of “The Little Milliner,” is constructed by “men from the city” (14-15), and her personal and professional titles are announced to the people of the village when “a man came from the city with a small sign under his arm and nailed it above the door. It bore these words: ‘Mademoiselle Viau, Milliner’” (15). Later in the opening story a messenger arrives “from the city with a telegram” (26) that alters forever the little milliner’s life, drawing her to the south to witness the death of a close relative.

This pattern of urban influence and interaction continues in the historical present of other stories. Eloise Ruelle’s strategy in “No. 68 Rue Alfred de Musset” ensnares, not a village beau, but Pierre Pechito, the son of “one of the richest of the city merchants” (69). In “Josephine Labrosse,” the title character, a young girl, watches her mother go to work in the city to save the family from financial ruin, the economy of the village having been restructured by the presence of a larger market to the south. Venturing southward herself when her mother falls ill, Josephine meets and eventually falls in love with Victor, a clerk from the city who comes to Viger to court her.

The social, moral, and psychological effects on the village of this “urban undercurrent” or, more accurately, urban undertow are not recent developments. The city has a strong historical presence in Viger. The mill, once a landmark and a cornerstone of the traditional village economy, had shut down years earlier, due, in part, to the availability of cheaper flour from the

larger and more efficient markets to the south: “The miller had died; and who would trouble to grind what little grist came to the mill, when flour was so cheap?” (13). It is this same market economy that surfaces in the concluding story of the cycle, “Paul Farlotte,” as two generations of St. Denis women join the “hundreds of women in the village and the country around” making paper match-boxes for “the great match factory near Viger” (124). The history of “The Desjardins” is scarred by the stigma that the patriarch of the family, Isidore Desjardin, had gone to the city years before only to return in a coffin with rumours of madness circling his grave. In “The Wooing of Monsieur Cuerrier,” the title character recollects a past dispute over the width of the lane that separates his main street home from that of his neighbour, Madame Laroque. The dispute was settled when “they had got a surveyor from the city, who measured it with his chain” (47). It was also “An emissary of the devil, in the guise of a surveyor” who had “planted his theodolite, and ran a roadway which took off a corner” (88) of the Rioux family estate in “The Tragedy of the Seignior,” thereby “allowing the roadways of Viger to circumscribe and diminish it” (New 182).

While this continuing pattern of urban contact and circumscription reinforces the presence of an external challenge to the landscape and lifestyle of Viger, Scott interweaves complex thematic patterns that reveals Viger as a village as much threatened by a dramatic and ultimately destructive pattern of decay originating from within as it is from the challenge to its geographic and psychological borders from without. Past and present versions of the village are marked by the absence of any traditional “centre,” a focal point of community spirit and spirituality that would imbue the social fabric of the village with a sense of community and a collective identification with place, shared history, and common values that would allow the people of Viger to look to the future.

In a letter written to Thoreau MacDonald on 17 July 1944 in which he discusses the illustrations that would accompany the Ryerson edition of his stories, Scott expresses his desire for the artist to omit the most traditional communal centre — the Church — from all these designs (Bourinot 88). Yet in a number of the stories St. Joseph’s *seems* to be the institution around which Viger is organized. In “The Little Milliner” the Church is the physical presence that defines the landscape of the village: “The houses, half-hidden amid the trees, clustered around the slim steeple of St. Joseph’s, which

flashed like a naked poniard in the sun” (13). When Monsieur Cuerrier and Cesarine pause at the crest of a hill to reflect momentarily on the route they have just travelled in “The Wooing of Monsieur Cuerrier,” Cesarine thinks she sees “like a little silver point in the rosy light, the steeple of the far St. Joseph’s” (49-50). The Church marks the geographic location of the village of Viger, its position as place in relation to the surrounding landscape. In two stories — “The Desjardins” and “Paul Farlotte” — the resonance of the church bells replaces the visual marker of the steeple as a reminder of the presence of a traditional spiritual centre.

But the Church in Viger has become “like a naked poniard,” a symbol of the severing of the ties of community rather than the weaving of a supportive fabric of communal tradition, ritual, and common values. St. Joseph’s has lost the power to unite the people of the village, even briefly, in gatherings and rituals that reaffirm a belief in community spirit and shared future. When the inhabitants of Viger gather together in any of the stories, they do so in places and with results far removed from the spirit/spirituality of community traditionally associated with the presence of the Church. They gather in *The Turenne*, the Arbiques’ inn, where community disintegrates into an ally-enemy binary that precipitates mob violence; in Cuerrier’s grocery, where the Widow Laroque’s programme of malicious rumour, gossip, and innuendo reigns essentially unchallenged; and around the figure of “The Pedler,” a symbol, not only of demonic proportions, but of a capitalist/consumer impulse out of control:

Coming into the village, he stopped in the middle of the road, set his bandbox between his feet, and took the oiled cloth from the basket. He never went from house to house, his customers came to him. He stood there and sold, almost without a word, as calm as a sphinx, and as powerful. There was something compelling about him; the people bought things they did not want, but they had to buy. (114-15)

When the young women of the village gather, it is at the main street house of the little milliner, a building described as resembling “a square bandbox which some Titan had made for his wife” and which could hold “the gigantic bonnet, with its strings and ribbons, which the Titaness could wear to church on Sundays” (16). The Church as a main street place of communal gathering has been replaced, for at least one sector of the village population, by the hatbox of a pagan god. Even “The Bobolink,” a story in which the potential for a positive spiritual connection is at its strongest,

ends with the seemingly idyllic relationship between Etienne Garnaud and the blind child Blanche being tainted rather than reaffirmed by their shared act of charity: "From that day their friendship was not untinged by regret; some delicate mist of sorrow seemed to have blurred the glass of memory. Though he could not tell why, old Etienne that evening felt anew his loneliness" (84). In the village of Viger the Church is absent as anything other than a signpost of geographic midpoint, evident only as a marker of place and not as a symbol of community.

Emphasizing this lack of spiritual centre, Scott systematically locates the individual Viger stories in settings that are progressively distanced, physically and psychologically, from the traditionally unifying forces represented by the central presence of the church steeple; the traditional centre of this village can no longer hold. He uses his opening story, "The Little Milliner," to establish the *Viger* cycle in Mademoiselle Viau's "Titan's bandbox" on the main street across from Cuerrier's grocery and Post Office, the gathering place for the characters of the story. The primary settings of subsequent stories become increasingly isolated, radiating outwards from the main street and church steeple in a concentric pattern that moves readers, and stories, to the edge of the village. "[O]ne of the oldest houses in Viger," that of the Desjardin family, is built "Just at the foot of the hill, where the bridge crossed the Blanche" (30), and in "Sedan" the Arbique's inn is on "One of the pleasantest streets of Viger ... which led from the thoroughfare of the village to the common" (51). The setting for "Sedan" is ironically described as a wonderfully "contented spot," the location of the inn "seemed to be removed from the rest of the village, to be on the boundaries of Arcadia, the first inlet to its pleasant, dreamy fields" (51). Eloise Ruelle's strategy in "No. 68 Rue Alfred de Musset" unfolds in a house that "stood alone on the brow of a little cliff" (63), and "The Bobolink" is set in and around a cabin built in "the sunniest corner in Viger" (78). In "The Tragedy of the Seignior" the Rioux's estate home is on the outskirts of the village, "set upon a rise, having nothing to do with the street, or seemingly with any part of the town" (85). In the final story of the cycle, "Paul Farlotte," readers are located, and left, "Near the outskirts of Viger, to the west, far away from the Blanche" (118). The story cycle is completed far away from sight of the steeple that marks the geographic and traditional spiritual centre of the village, the symbol of the Church having lost its power to unite the villagers in a celebration of shared values and beliefs.

Although the absence of a spiritual centre informs both the past and present versions of the village, it is not the only significant absence that Scott recognizes as threatening its future. Equally dangerous to the future of the village is the absence of traditional family units that can initiate or facilitate the processes of communal myth-making, remembering, or tradition-building. As Scott reminds readers in a contribution to "At the Mermaid Inn" contemporaneous with the publication of the *Viger* stories, individuals and families "stand conservators of the past, pioneers of the future" (37). Positioned at the geographic centre of the village, the church bearing the name of St. Joseph, the protector of the Holy Family and patron saint of workers and fathers of families, is a physical reminder of the importance of family units and the ideal of community to the future of the village. As Lynch suggests, "the institution of family is the intermediary between the individual and society, and the relay between past and future ... [that] facilitates the transmission of values and cultural continuity itself" (In the Meantime 88). But there are few members of the current village population who recognize *Viger* as home and define themselves, at least in part, by their participation in the present or the past of the village. The villagers remain as disconnected from the myths and stories of village history as the "large influx of the laboring population" (14) who commute daily to the factories of the city, unwilling or unable to acknowledge that their own stories are intimately connected with those of the village in which they live.

The fundamental link between place as home and personal history is made explicit during Widow Laroque's "plot" to discover all she can about the newcomer to the village, Mademoiselle Viau. With her second cousin as an accomplice, the Widow's interrogation begins, and ends, with a futile attempt to define the little milliner in terms of a place other than that in which she now resides:

"Mademoiselle Viau, were you born in the city?"
 "I do not think, Mademoiselle, that green will become you."
 "No, perhaps not. Where did you live before you came here?"
 "Mademoiselle, this grey shape is very pretty." And so on.
 That plan would not work. (20)

In the same story, Scott introduces a number of other characters who have emigrated to *Viger* and continue to be defined or define themselves in relation to a place other than the village where they now live. Monsieur Villeblanc bases his personal history in terms of his past career in Paris;

Monsieur Cuerrier's "native place" (17) is identified specifically as the village of St. Therese and his professional place as simply the Postmaster. In "Sedan" the Arbiques "considered themselves very much superior to the village people, because they had come from old France" (52), also the home of Paul Farlotte in the final story, and Hans Blumenthal, defined by the village people in terms of his homeland, is known as "the German watchmaker" (55). Etienne Garnaud in "The Bobolink" came to Viger from St. Valerie, possibly along the same path used by the roaming pedler who "used to come up the road from St. Valerie, trudging heavily, bearing his packs" (113).

The few native characters in Viger, those who have family stories linked directly with the history of the village, have traditionally existed and continue to exist on the margins of the village scene, unwilling or unable to facilitate a unifying sense of community. When Isidore Desjardin, the patriarch of the one of the oldest families in the village, "died there was hardly a person in the whole parish who was sorry.... He was inhospitable, and became more taciturn and morose after his wife died. His pride was excessive and kept him from associating with his neighbors, although he was in no way above them" (31). Hugo Armand Theophile Rioux, the last of a long-time village family, "shook off the dust of Viger" and left with the promise to return a decade later "and redeem his ancient heritage" (87). And the history of the St. Denis family is one scarred by tragedy. The individuals or families of Viger who could facilitate the continuation of community — who could tell the stories of the mill, the gold mine, and the fields — either have no intimate personal history associated with the place or have been thrust into positions of isolation and silence on the margins of the village.

With the historical present of the stories marked by an absence of communal centre, and the historical past stripped of its mythic potential by the failure of villagers to identify place as home and themselves as an interdependent community, Scott's *Viger* cycle forces readers to look to the future of the village with a critical eye. It is a future on which the past and present patterns of absence weigh heavily. Juxtaposed against Scott's "unobtrusive but careful delineation of the season, with its natural phenomena, in which each story takes place" (Dragland 12)⁷ are the stories of family units whose members are unable to guarantee the future of the village in human terms and who are themselves the victims of their own pasts.

Because of an absence of one or both of the primary parental figures, the current families of Viger are frequently forced to redefine and reconfigure

themselves with surrogates or siblings in the primary parental roles. For the current generation of village women, notably Adele Desjardin and Marie St. Denis, “the tall girl who was mother to her orphan brothers and sisters” (123), this restructuring forces them to function in the complex dual roles of sister and surrogate mother or mother figure. The role is a village tradition established by two women of previous generations represented in the stories, Eloise Ruelle in “No. 68 Rue Alfred de Musset” and Diana Girourard in “The Wooing of Monsieur Cuerrier.” As admirable as is this resilience in the face of adversity, for these women it inevitably signals a future with few options. Marie St. Denis runs the risk of becoming the second St. Denis “mother” to be physically and emotionally overcome by a male family member’s obsession with the machinery in the attic, and Adele Desjardin is forced by her genetic heritage to accept a future of total isolation. Escaping the pattern of isolation that Diana, Adele, and Marie seem destined to continue means leaving the village behind and contributing to the future in another family and in another place. When Eloise Ruelle gains her freedom, she does so in a place other than Viger, moving away from the future of the village to the city of Pierre Pechito’s family. Even Felice Arbique, a village mother by choice, is anything but a model of maternal love. Limited by her sense of superiority from forming close friendships with the people of the village, she is also unable to nurture her immediate family, treating her stepdaughter Latulipe like “something between a servant and a poor relation working for her board” (54). Three generations of Labrosse women — Josephine, her mother, and grandmother — represent the continuation of a tradition of failure brought to the present of their story; they belong in, Josephine’s own words, “to the people who do not succeed” (101).

Whereas the present generation of mother figures either leave the village for futures elsewhere or are denied their own futures by present circumstances, father figures and past fathers are the disseminators of an especially dangerous heredity. They are the carriers of a genetic past scarred by traditions of degenerating mental health, obsessive fixations, and premature death. Isidore Desjardin’s posthumous return from the city in “The Desjardins,” for example, “gave rise to all sorts of rumour and gossip; but the generally accredited story was, that there was insanity in the family and that he had died crazy” (31). When his eldest son Charles rises from the table one evening and announces his madness to the remaining family members, it is not surprise that is articulated in his sister Adele’s cry that

“It has come!” (35), but an acknowledgement of the inevitability of the decline. “It” is the madness that leads Adele and her other sibling Philippe to isolate themselves for the rest of their lives in a dramatic effort to end the genetic transmission of the family tradition: “[Philippe] knew that Adele was in the dark somewhere beside him, for he could hear her breathe. ‘We must cut ourselves off; we must be the last of our race’” (35). Adele, whose striking physical and behavioral resemblance to her father hints of strong genetic links, and Philippe, whose “waking dreams” (33) suggest a mild form of madness already present, are left to wait for their time and the story of their family to end.

Paternal obsessions and patterns of genetic weakness inform the past and present of other Viger families. Paul Arbique’s obsessive behaviour in “Sedan” stems from his attachment to his birthplace and pride in his military past. When the realities of the Franco-Prussian War threaten both his beloved Sedan and his belief in French military prowess, the degenerative effects of his violent reactions are increasingly compounded by his chronic alcoholism, an obsessive legacy passed to him by his father: “He drank fiercely now, and even Latulipe could do nothing with him. Madame Arbique knew that he would drink himself to death, as his father had done” (59).

In “The Tragedy of the Seigniory” the surrogate father figure, Louis Bois, “who was old enough to be [Hugo Rioux’s] father, and loved him as such” (87), becomes obsessed with winning the local lottery. Although Bois’s entry into the pattern of mental deterioration is gradual, he too eventually loses control of his life in the present time of the story:

He began to venture small sums in the lottery, hoarding half his monthly allowance until he should have sufficient funds to purchase a ticket. Waiting for the moment when he could buy, and then waiting for the moment when he could receive news of the drawing, lent a feverish interest to his life. But he failed to win. With his failure grew a sort of exasperation — he would win, he said, if he spent every cent he owned. (89)

Ironically, he rationalizes his habit by calling on the images of two other victims of incomplete families: “He had moments when he suspected that he was being duped, but he was always reassured upon spelling out the lottery circular, where the drawing by the two orphan children was so touchingly described” (89). When he does eventually win his fortune, his victory sets in motion a sequence of events that culminate in a father figure’s knife murder of his returning son. St. Joseph’s poniard, which in the opening

story defines the village as place, reappears later in the cycle as a knife that ends the possibility that another village lineage might one day be perpetuated.

It is in “Paul Farlotte,” however, the concluding and frequently anthologized story of the *Viger* cycle, that Scott concisely draws together the patterns of past, present, and future absences developed through the previous nine stories. As Lynch emphasizes, “it is the concluding stories of cycles that present the most serious challenges to readers and critics. These stories bring to fulfillment the recurrent patterns of the cycle, frequently reintroducing many of the cycle’s major characters and central images, and restating in a refrain-like manner the thematic concerns of the preceding stories” (*The One and the Many* 98).

The story of Paul Farlotte unfolds “Near the outskirts of Viger, to the west, far away from the Blanche” (119) in two houses that are positioned in stark physical contrast to each other:

One was a low cottage, surrounded by a garden, and covered with roses, which formed jalousies for the encircling veranda. The garden was laid out with the care and completeness that told of a master hand.... The other was a large gaunt-looking house, narrow and high, with many windows, some of which were boarded up, as if there was no further use for the chambers into which they had once admitted light. Standing on a rough piece of ground it seemed given over to the rudeness of decay. (119)

Although the two residences differ dramatically in outward appearance and maintenance, the connection between their residents is an intimate one. Like the house in which they reside, the current version of the St. Denis family, like that of many who live in Viger, is characterized by a history of decay and lack of care. Their father’s “frantic passion” with his match-box-making invention had driven him to abdicate his responsibility for his young family, to devote “his whole time and energy to the invention of this machine ... with a perseverance which at last became a frantic passion” (124), and finally, unable to deal with his persistent failures, to suicide. Their mother, forced to toil long hours at menial labour in an attempt to keep the family together, died as a result of the relentless physical and emotional exhaustion brought upon by her husband’s obsessive behaviour. The orphaned children persevered, however, reforming themselves into a family unit parented by the eldest siblings — Marie, “who was mother to her orphan brothers and sisters” (123), and Guy, whose “likeness to his father

made him seem a man before his time.... and was like a father to his little brothers and sisters” (127).

Throughout their ordeals the St. Denis children are supported financially and emotionally by the neighbour in the garden cottage, Paul Farlotte, a man blessed with a gift: “[he] had been born a gardener, just as another man is born a musician or a poet. There was a superstition in the village that all he had to do was to put anything, even a dry stick, into the ground, and it would grow” (120-21). Like the other Paul of the stories — Paul Arbique — Farlotte is a character who defines himself, and his garden, in terms of his past connections with the Old World:

He had often described to Marie the little cottage where he was born, with the vine arbors and the long garden walks, the lilac-bushes, with their cool dark-green leaves, the white eaves where the swallows nested, and the poplar, sentinel over all. “You see,” he would say, “I have tried to make this little place like it; and my memory may have played me a trick, but I often fancy myself at home. That poplar and this long walk and the vines on the arbor, — sometimes when I see the tulips by the border I fancy it is all in France. (125)

His “parterres of old-fashioned flowers,” like his own biological parents and the philosophy that guides his life, are from distinctly Old World stock, “the seed of which came from France, and which in consequence seemed to blow with a rarer colour and more delicate perfume” (120) than the personal philosophies and gardens of the villagers around him. Farlotte’s attachment to Old World sensibilities is reflected as well in his passion for the author Montaigne.

Like Charles Desjardin’s pattern of imaginary campaigns, Farlotte’s dual passions — gardening and reading Montaigne — are all-consuming and linked with the inevitable passing of the seasons:

He delved in one in the summer, in the other in the winter. With his feet on his stove he would become so absorbed with his author that he would burn his slippers and come to himself disturbed by the smell of the singed leather. (122-23)

Remaining constant in Farlotte’s life regardless of the season, however, are the “visions of things that had been, or that would be” (122), mysterious voices, and apparitional visitors that accompany him. Unlike many of his male village counterparts, whose lives and stories are destroyed by their legacies of mental instability and obsessions, Farlotte finds his visions and passions a supportive, positive force in his life, providing “a sort of companionship” (122) for the bachelor living on the margins of village life.

Farlotte's sense of self and of community is of Old World stock as well, for when the paternal figure of Guy St. Denis inevitably reenters the vortex of obsessive behaviour and psychological deterioration that his father had begun, it is Farlotte who quits his lifelong ambition of returning "home" to France to visit his aged mother and the birthplace of his beloved Montaigne. Instead, he resolves to remain and resume his role as the fiscal and spiritual guardian of the St. Denis family, finding his reward in the "comfort that comes to those who give up some exceeding deep desire of the heart" (133).

It is the character and story of "Paul Farlotte" that a number of critics point to as the final figure of hope and redemption amid the decay and disintegration of the Viger cycle. Glenys Stow, for example, suggests that the stories in general, and "Paul Farlotte" in particular, depict characters who "tend to be martyrs through self-sacrifice," giving up their dreams for the sake of others (124),⁸ whereas New sees in Farlotte the positive results of learning to rely on the values that accompany knowledge in order to sustain oneself in times of personal crisis (184). But while Farlotte's personal philosophy of selflessness and social conscience is hopeful, it is important to recognize that the potential influence of his moral vision on the future of the village is inexorably linked with the environment in which his story occurs. The life stories of Farlotte and the St. Denis family, like the interdependent stories of the *Viger* cycle, are interconnected with the stories of disintegration that have unfolded. Although Farlotte's attention to the traditional responsibilities of community is a positive alternative to the absence of communal spirit and care predominant in the preceding nine stories, his potential influence on present and future generations of villagers is minimal. The Old World "gardener" collides in *Viger* with the barren soils of the modern New World.

Although gardening and Montaigne are Farlotte's passions, teaching is his profession, and it is in his position as the village school-master that he comes in direct contact with the future of the village — its children. In contrast to the effort expended and pride taken in the cultivation and care of his flowers, his teaching is unable to nurture the seeds of Viger's future: "he was born a gardener, not a teacher; and he made the best of the fate which compelled him to depend for his living on something he disliked" (121). As Madame Laroque spitefully comments: "if Monsieur Paul Farlotte had been as successful in planting knowledge in the heads of his scholars as he was in

planting roses in his garden Viger would have been celebrated the world over” (121). Unhappy within the enclosed space of his classroom and unable to instill the ideals by which he lives his own life into the future generations of Viger, Farlotte passes his hours anticipating his return to the confines of his garden and the words of his beloved author.

Significantly, Farlotte is equally ineffective in his attempts to transfer his knowledge of horticulture to members of the village. Such attempts to pass on to Guy St. Denis the techniques and philosophy of tending one’s garden for future growth prove futile: “‘See,’ he would say, ‘go deeper and turn it over so.’ And when Guy would dig in his own clumsy way, [Farlotte] would go off in despair, with the words, ‘God help us, nothing will grow there’” (126). His words reverberate through all the stories of the book, further underscoring the thematic connections among them. Physically demarcated by the boundaries set out in the design of the master gardener himself, Farlotte’s garden is an (en)closed system. There can be no successful cross-pollination between Farlotte’s admirable Old World paradise and the harsh horticultural and philosophical soils of Viger. Just as the seeds from France can germinate and blossom only within the narrowly defined boundaries of the cottage garden, the philosophy of the gardener himself fails to take root anywhere but in the heart of the man who “looked almost as dry as one of his own hyacinth bulbs” (121).

Located far from the steeple of St. Joseph’s and the main street, the bounty associated with Farlotte’s garden is an anomaly in the village. The garden motif or, more accurately, the motif of *failed* gardens is one that Scott returns to throughout his cycle. The Desjardins’s small garden is a sparse one in which “a few simple flowers grew” (30), and the images of gardening and flowers in “The Wooing of Monsieur Cuerrier” and “No. 68 Rue Alfred de Musset” bear only the bitter fruits of jealousy and calculated manipulation of others. The single geranium Mademoiselle Viau places in her window to signal her entry into the village dies soon after her departure, opening the cycle with an image that is repeated in the lore surrounding Farlotte’s horticultural skill: “It only had one blossom all the time it was alive, and it is dead now and looks like a dry stick” (29). But this dry stick, located on the main street of the village, is one that even Farlotte will be unable to bring back to life. Even the landscape of the St. Denis house, separated from the fertile soils that encircle Farlotte’s cottage by only a narrow roadway, is “the stony ground ... where only the commonest weeds grew unregarded” (120).

Unable to reach into the future of the village through the lives of its children, Farlotte is equally incapable of saving the present generation from the dangers of the past. When he enters the attic of the St. Denis house one evening before his scheduled voyage, it is not the results of his own tutoring that he sees, but the past and present of the village joined together in an activity that subverts any hope of a positive future for the St. Denis family:

There he saw Guy stretched along the work bench, his head in his hands, using the last light to ponder over a sketch he was making, and beside him, figured very clearly in the thick gold air of the sunset, the form of his father, bending over him, with the old eager, haggard look in his eyes. Monsieur Farlotte watched the two figures for a moment as they glowed in their rich atmosphere; then the apparition turned his head slowly, and warned him away with a motion of his hand. (132)⁹

Farlotte retreats silently, returning to the comforting confines of his garden to ponder his inevitable decision to delay indefinitely his voyage home. Guy is left to his work, destined to repeat the pattern of obsession and abdication of responsibility that almost destroyed his family years earlier. The story closes with Farlotte's vision of his mother's death, a sign of the final passing of his dreams of the Old World and his dedication to the victims of the modern world of the stories. It is important to note, however, that when Farlotte tells Marie St. Denis that his mother has died, "she wondered how he knew" (135). The son's vision of his mother, like his personal philosophy of responsibility and selflessness, cannot be understood by anyone but the man of the garden himself.

In *the Village of Viger* is not a celebration of the unqualified benefits of looking back, of claiming a romanticized past as the mythic foundation on which to construct the social ideals and personal philosophies of the present and future. There can be no safe return to the seemingly idyllic world of a nineteenth-century rural village either in memory or in reality. In *Viger* the genetic past is deadly, infecting the historical present with patterns of mental deterioration, fragmented and incomplete families, and premature death. The mythic past is equally flawed, marked by the absence of any traditional, unifying centre of community spirit/spirituality and the collective identification with place that are perpetually reaffirmed through legend and ritual. The Old World as the touchstone that supports Farlotte in his selfless decision to set aside his personal ambitions for the

sake of others dramatically fails another Paul of the village — Paul Arbique — whose blind attachment to his Old World home and past glories leads only to conflict, personal despair, and death. Undeniably a model of social conscience and responsibility, Farlotte, with his dedication to Old World social sensibilities, is of limited influence in the village, remaining unable to extend the seeds of his ideals outwards into the harsh soils of Viger.

Nor does *In the Village of Viger* reward looking away from the social implications of progress. The people of the village cannot dismiss change as something that will happen sometime in the future. The influence of the city — the urban and technological horizon — has already been felt on the main street of the village and in the houses that have begun to encircle it. As New concludes, the Viger cycle “rejects the idea that social naivete is equivalent to moral strength, and also that change is equivalent to moral degradation” (186).

What *In the Village of Viger* does stress, both thematically and formally, is the necessity of looking again. Characterized by a dynamic tension between “the individuality of each of the stories and the necessities of the larger unit” (Ingram 15), or what Mann suggests is “the tension between the separateness and interdependence of the stories” (18), the cycle form was especially appropriate for Scott to express his fears for the growing number of small communities and individuals forced to redefine themselves and their roles within an increasingly urban, industrial society. As Dieter Meindl suggests, these are concerns that the cycle form “appears predestined to treat,” with the sense of alienation and isolation that pervades Scott’s stories becoming “palpable through the confinement of individuals to self-contained stories which in their aggregate suggest the societal, communal or family context which fails to function” (19).

In the Village of Viger emphasizes the need for individuals and communities, like the readers of the story cycle itself, to engage in an ongoing critical reconsideration of the past, the present, and the future, and to attempt to strike a balance between the needs of the one and the necessities of the many. “As social ideals spring from individual beliefs,” Scott writes in the early 1890s,

it would be safe to have a reexamination of these last from time to time to find out whether they have not become tarnished with neglect, or whether, perchance, they were only pot-metal and not genuine bronze at all, and need to be cast out and broken to pieces under the wheels on the great roadway of life.
(*Mermaid Inn* 307-08)

In the Village of Viger shows that these processes of re-evaluation, like Paul Farlotte's spading of his garden, are necessary in order to guarantee that the future will find somewhere to grow and someone to nurture it.

NOTES

- ¹ The term "story cycle," used by both Ingram and Mann, is most appropriate for emphasizing the development of dynamic patterns of recurrence and complexity of interconnectedness characteristic of the story cycle. Alternative terms have been suggested, notably "story sequence" (Luscher 148) and "short story volume" (Eter).
- ² For Scott's comments on the jacket cover design see Bourinot (88-90) and McDougall (114): on the title page, McDougall (133). Scott was, in the end, apparently satisfied with the quality and appearance of the Ryerson product, commenting in July of 1945 that "as a bit of book-making it was worthy of praise" (McDougall 145).
- ³ A reviewer of the Copeland and Day edition of *In the Village of Viger* writes in *The Bookman* (June 1896) that "these little sketches of provincial types, pretty enough, are yet thin and amateurish," going on to suggest that rather than continue producing fiction "Mr. Scott keep to verse and continue to rejoice us" (366). One outspoken critic of the book, John Metcalf, argues in *What is a Canadian Literature?* that claims of Scott's importance to Canadian literature and the experiences of reading *In the Village of Viger* are nonsensical inventions arising "from the desire of various academics and cultural nationalists to be the possessors of a tradition" (85). Accordingly, he argues that "it is clear enough that Scott's intention is to offer the reader in 'pleasant Viger by the Blanche' an idyll of French-Canadian life" (50). To ignore the complexities of the cycle form and Scott's use of it in favour of foregrounding the local colour of the stories is, as Lynch summarizes, to "short-change the book's currency ... [and] render mute *Viger's* real ability to speak to present-day readers about their history and the formation of their values (or lack thereof)" (In the Meantime 72).
- ⁴ Elizabeth Waterston agrees with Muddiman's observation, suggesting that the *Viger* stories exhibit a "latent sombreness" underlying a volume "generally veiled in prettiness" (111). Although this "veil of prettiness" led some contemporary critics to consider the stories as a collection of local colour vignettes in the tradition of William Kirby and Gilbert Parker, I agree with New that "[b]y minimizing the presence of the Church, and by rejecting the label 'French-Canadian stories,' Scott signalled that he was doing something different — not portraying then and over there so much as he was finding an external design for the world now and right here, the otherness being recognized as part of 'here' and demanding to be recognized as self, not an exotic worthy only to be watched and excluded" (181).
- ⁵ See also Gerson, *A Purer Taste* 130-31.
- ⁶ All page references are to the Copeland and Day edition (1896).
- ⁷ Dragland, p. 12. For similar discussions of Scott's careful delineation of seasonal activity in his stories see also Stow (123-24), and Waterston (*The Missing Face* 223-29).

- ⁸ Similarly, Gerson considers the Viger stories “documentations of human resilience as small individuals wrestle with imagination, reality and the urge to self-fulfillment” (The Piper’s Forgotten Tune 139).
- ⁹ Scott’s attention to iconographical images and names is again evident in this final story. The name St. Denis clearly links the family with the Old World, St. Denys being the patron saint of France whose principal emblem is the head in hands. Significantly, when Farlotte discovers Guy in the attic hunched over a sketch he was making, it is with “his head in his hands” (132).

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