

ORIENTALISM RECONFIRMED?

Stereotypes of East-West Encounter in Janette Turner Hospital's "The Ivory Swing" and Yvon Rivard's "Les Silences du corbeau"

Graham Huggan

Orient: Pour que ce nom produise à l'esprit de quelqu'un son plein et entier effet, il faut, sur toute chose, n'avoir jamais été dans la contrée mal déterminée qu'il désigne. Il ne faut la connaître par l'image, le récit, la lecture, et quelques objets, que de la sorte la moins érudite, la plus inexacte, et même la plus confuse. C'est ainsi que l'on se compose un bon matière de songe.

Paul Valéry

Orientalism is premised upon exteriority, that is, on the fact that the Orientalist, poet or scholar, makes the Orient speak, describes the Orient, renders its mysteries plain for and to the West. He is never concerned with the Orient except as the first cause of what he says.

Edward Said

IN A SPECIAL ISSUE of the Montréal-based review *Liberté*, a group of Québécois writers take as their subject Valéry's celebrated description of the "fabulous Orient," whose untold mysteries provide the poet with "un bon matière de songe." The topic is a promising one, but unfortunately the contributions are largely remarkable for their tired reiteration of Romantic clichés. Here, for example, is an excerpt from a piece by Guy Gervais:

L'Orient et L'Occident s'affrontent à tout instant dans notre chair. Est-ce le corps qui exaspère la vision ou la vision que relance le corps? Nuit dans la nuit. J'attends entre deux ombres l'ouverture sur le royaume où l'homme ne pénètre que dans la solitude originelle. (65)

And here is Jean-Pierre Petits:

L'Orient [est une] mystérieuse et féconde boulangerie où fermentent les levains et cuisent les religions qui toutes finissent par nourrir l'imaginaire de l'univers. Au-

delà de toutes catégories de pensées, de comportements, de sociétés, nous devenons, tous tant que nous sommes, L'Orient, l'exotique, le mystérieux côté d'autres sociétés comme les rêves d'autres humains. (91)

Soaring flights of fancy such as these are brought rudely to earth, however, by Francois Ricard's more considered critique of Western writers' *recourse* to the Orient, which consists "à se donner l'Orient comme référence, comme mythe ou comme modèle, et à se prononcer ainsi non pas tant sur l'Orient, qui n'en a que faire, que sur l'Occident même auquel il appartient" (37). The attraction of these writers toward the Orient, claims Ricard, is not so much a mark of intellectual curiosity as one of intellectual pusillanimity which, at worst, involves "la négation de tout esprit d'examen, ce qui amène l'adepte à ajouter foi aux moindres fables susceptibles, comme il [l'écrivain] l'explique volontiers, 'd'élargir son champs de vision'" (41). Ricard's withering critique of an Orientalism characterised by the half-truths and pseudo-mystical visions of its feeble-minded disciples is mitigated, however, by his assertion of a deeper motive behind many contemporary manifestations of Orientalism, namely the *anti-Occidentalism* which inspires (often un-subtle) attacks on European privilege or on the self-serving mythology of the American Dream. The former, in particular, says Ricard, are prevalent in the intellectual tradition of Québec, whose separation from the Western (European) cultural mainstream makes it better disposed to an understanding of the East. Wisely, Ricard qualifies this last, highly debatable point. Perhaps, he concludes, the apparent predisposition of Québécois towards the Orient is better explained in terms of "la peur de la France, l'insécurité au sein de la culture, l'amour de la pauvreté, ou de la confusion . . . de l'intelligence avec le discours religieux" (43).

Ricard's argument is suggestive of the ambivalent attitude towards Europe which one finds so often in the history of both Québécois and Anglo-Canadian cultures, no less so in the history of their respective literatures. This attitude can also be found in two recent novels by Canadian writers which, although appearing initially to cross national boundaries in search of alternative cultural affiliations to those of (colonial) Europe, end up by charting the contradictions involved in a "recourse" to the Orient which paradoxically strengthens those traditional European ties. While both writers undertake a critique of stereotypical Western (European) attitudes towards the Orient, thereby implying their dissociation from the colonialist practices of Orientalism, the dissociation is by no means as complete as they might wish. Indeed, it is suggested that their apparent freedom to choose the nature and extent of their affiliation with the East is restricted, even conditioned, by their continuing dependence on the West. Furthermore, the postulation in their respective novels of alternative (non-European) forms of cross-cultural affiliation is shown to take second place to, and perhaps even to function as a pretext for, the articulation of a personal quest for freedom. The ironic treatment of this quest backfires: the real irony resides not in the two writers' critical exposure of Western

cultural suprematism but in their tacit acceptance of the intrinsic superiority of Western values. What sets out, in other words, as a *critique* of Orientalism eventually becomes its *reconfirmation*: the journey East is duly identified as the pretext for a specious rationalisation of Western anxieties.

THE TWO NOVELS I HAVE in mind here are Janette Turner Hospital's *The Ivory Swing* (1982) and Yvon Rivard's *Les silences du corbeau* (1986). Both received sufficient acclaim to win their respective writers prestigious literary awards (the Seal First Novel Award for Hospital, the Governor General's Award for Rivard). But as I shall demonstrate in this paper, both are seriously flawed, mismanaged to the extent that they end up by reinforcing the very prejudices they set out to undermine. Although dissimilar in design, the two novels are alike in being written both within and against the tradition of the Oriental quest novel. The formula is a familiar one: a restless Western writer takes temporary refuge in the East, hoping to find physical stimulation and/or spiritual enrichment there but discovering instead the limitations of his/her own culture, a culture to which he/she nonetheless returns, suitably "enlightened." In their own, self-consciously ironic adaptations of the formula, Hospital and Rivard employ similar motifs to underscore the central theme of cultural relativity. In Hospital's novel, the eponymous swing dramatizes the impossibility of choosing between two apparently exclusive, but actually interrelated, cultural systems, the East and the West; in Rivard's, the fateful crow periodically intervenes, disrupting the fluency of the protagonist Alexandre's thoughts, reminding him of the inefficacy of his philosophical quest, and implicitly ridiculing his attempt to understand (and apply to his own life) the concepts of a *non-dualist* world-view through the procedures of an habitually *dualist* analysis.¹ Both swing and crow operate at several different levels of discourse: in one sense, they represent the dilemma posed by aspiring to come to terms with the East without being able to renounce the standards of the West; in another, they embody the social and political conscience of a complacent bourgeois West exploiting an impoverished — if, in its way, equally class-conscious — East for the purposes of its own enrichment; in still another, they accentuate the interpersonal conflicts of the two protagonists, torn between alternative lifestyles and rival lovers, unable to choose which direction to take next.

More interesting, perhaps, than this tongue-in-cheek reprise of the standard fare of East-West encounter is the attempt in both novels to interrogate the cultural assumptions underlying Western (European) literary exoticism. Hospital's references to Maugham and Kipling, like Rivard's to Baudelaire and Valéry, belong to the ironic confession of a protagonist who is attracted towards India as an exotic "other"² but aware of the irresponsibilities of that attraction. In Hospital's

novel, the protagonist Juliet chides herself one moment for her susceptibility to exotic fantasy, only to find herself the next fantasizing once more. One example should suffice. Exhausted by the exertions of housework in the oppressive heat of southern India, Juliet drifts off into exotic reverie, imagining a scene in which her former lover Jeremy “came riding out of the West to cut his way through jungle walls and rescue her with a kiss from the drowsy tropics” (104). Juliet mocks her propensity to such ludicrous stereotypes of the “fabulous Orient,” but she finds it difficult, nonetheless, to distinguish between these childish fantasies and her actual experiences of an India which often seems just as unreal to her as the fictive “Orient” of popular romance. Her grandiose vision of Jeremy riding out of the West is ironically deflated by the more humble sighting which follows it, of

the mailman on his bicycle which bucked its way along the path between the coconut palms. He was a bizarre figure in his widely flared khaki “Bombay Bloomers.” He also wore a khaki shirt and knee-length khaki socks and a pith helmet, and seemed to have stepped out of a Somerset Maugham story or an old movie of the British Raj. (105)

One form of exoticism is supplanted by another: Juliet resorts, once more, to the stereotypes which effectively preclude her from seeing India in terms other than those provided by a hyperactive Romantic imagination nurtured on the condescendingly “bizarre” images of colonial fiction. Not surprisingly Juliet, brought up on Maugham, old movies of the British Raj and assorted clichés borne of what she herself admits to be the “jejune lure of travelers’ antique and brocaded tales . . . of tigers, elephants sandalwood and ivory” (17), is a thoroughly unreliable witness of and commentator on her new surroundings. Exasperated by her inability to reconcile two contradictory views of India, the one as a place of languid reverie and the other as a crucible of bitter political rivalries, Juliet is quick to project her failings onto others. The various one-dimensional Indian characters of the novel are largely the products of Juliet’s lopsided view of the “Orient”: pseudo-mythical or comic-strip inventions whose main purpose is to satisfy Juliet’s self-serving desire for cross-cultural understanding or to act as expedient targets for her self-righteous wrath. They are allowed little or no development within the narrow context of Juliet’s alternative views of India as paradisaical retreat or tyrannical autocracy. Both of these views have a great deal to do with popular misconceptions provided and reinforced by Juliet’s reading, but true to form, she projects these aesthetic limitations onto her husband David (in fact a much more careful “reader” of India than she is).³ Juliet’s dogmatic Western opinions are likewise projected onto others, so that cardboard characters such as Mr. Motilal find themselves “correctly designating” Westerners as “tourists, diplomats, hippies and university people” (21) — ironically, in the context of the novel, he is not far wrong — while the “villainous” landlord Shivaraman Nair frequently proffers such

opinions as "in the West . . . marriages are very bad because young people are choosing for themselves, isn't it?" (123) Far from being the broad-minded woman of the world she believes herself to be, Juliet is in fact a thoroughgoing Orientalist, a self-involved Westerner, convinced of the superiority of her "liberated" Western views, whose fictive version of the Orient is only temporarily demystified by the recognition that her persistent mythologization of others has contributed to the tragic deaths of her two imagined soul-mates, the put-upon servant Prabhakaran and the shackled widow Yashoda.

HOSPITAL'S IRONIC TREATMENT of her "liberated" protagonist in *The Ivory Swing* is matched by Rivard's wry exposure of the fallibilities of his soul-searching narrator in *Les silences du corbeau*. The novel is dominated by its narrator-protagonist Alexandre, both active participant in and supposedly "detached" observer of the excruciatingly self-indulgent activities of an ashram at Pondicherry, who permits himself the further self-indulgence of writing a journal about his experiences. Laced with sententious aphorisms and "deep" meditations into the meaning of Life (or, more often, Death), Alexandre's entertaining if irritatingly self-congratulatory journal represents a flagrant exercise in self-mythologization. As in *The Ivory Swing*, this self-mythologization is reinforced through the delineation of secondary characters whose main function is to shed light on the strengths and weaknesses of the protagonist. The Indian characters in Rivard's novel are of minor importance, with the possible exception of the "healer" Mère, whose tender ministrations in any case do little more than pander to the insecurities of her Western disciples. These latter, meanwhile, are superficial to the point of caricature, each a victim to his/her misty conception of the Orient as the panacea for a unanimous disaffection with Life. But the adoption in Alexandre's journal of an attitude of ironic detachment towards the antics of his spoilt Western colleagues does not prevent him from being one of them; indeed, Alexandre is well aware of the thin line separating the desire for self-annihilation from the license for self-indulgence. He is also aware of his own contribution to the absurd posturing of a group of affluent drifters whose encounter with the Orient, like their experiments with drugs and alcohol and their feeble attempts to "discover themselves" through the dubious media of astrology and "visionary" art, amounts to a reprehensible escape from their social responsibilities rather than a meaningful confrontation with their "inner selves."

Rivard's awareness that this contemporary instance of "East-West encounter" may be doing little more than recycling the stereotypical attitudes and perceptions of earlier literary manifestations of Orientalism is demonstrated in the intercalation into Alexandre's journal of a series of references to the exoticist poetry of Valéry,

Nerval and, particularly, Baudelaire. Alexandre's derision of the misguided attempts of his ashram colleagues to create "artificial paradises" explicitly recalls Baudelaire's eponymous collection, in which alcohol and drugs are described as having the capacity

d'augmenter outre mesure la personnalité de l'être pensant, et de créer, pour ainsi dire, une troisième personne, opération mystique, où l'homme naturel et le vin, le dieu animal et le dieu végétal, jouent le rôle du Père et du Fils dans la Trinité; ils engendrent un Saint-Esprit, qui est l'homme supérieur, lequel procède également des deux. (387)

But Alexandre's mockery rebounds back on himself, for his "meditations" are no more uplifting than the antics of his colleagues. Over them all hovers the derisive presence of the crow, whose interjections stress both the futility and the inherent falseness of each of their imagined "paths to beatitude." Indeed, the novel is full of false mediators, none more so than the divine healer Mère who, as the wary reader has suspected all along, is really an unsophisticated recruit manipulated by the scheming Chitkara for his own gratification.

Probably the most telling incident in Rivard's demystification of Baudelaire's "Orient" is Alexandre's traumatic encounter with the decomposed corpse of a dog, washed up by the tide as if to provide the mocking illustration for a typically vapid meditation on the Eternal Return. Shocked, Alexandre flees back to the safety of the ashram and the more familiar sight (and smell) of a Western breakfast of toast and coffee. The incident provides a further ironic reminder of the delicacy of Alexandre's Western sensibilities; but it also recalls Baudelaire's notorious poem "Une Charogne," in which the poet uses the decomposed body of a dog as the subject for a perverse comparison between the eternal purity of love and the short-lived but consuming passion of physical desire:

Alors, ô ma beauté! dites à la vermine
 Qui vous mangera de baisers,
 Que j'ai gardé la forme et l'essence divine
 De mes amours décomposés! (31)

Baudelaire's deliberately shocking contrast between the vileness of the symbol and the nobility of the idea it expresses is heavily ironic in the context of Rivard's novel, providing a reminder of the glibness of Alexandre's description of India (degeneration of outer forms, preservation of inner sanctity) and giving evidence through this description of his continued reliance on the polarizing rhetoric of European Orientalism. The unsolicited appearance of the dog alerts Alexandre's attention to the recycled Orientalist practices of his own writing, reminding him of the lingering cultural biases which contradict his pretensions to detachment and which vitiate his self-conscious play with the clichés and conventions of East-West encounter. These biases are all the more unfortunate in that they are brought to bear upon a

Québécois writer who is supposedly attuned to the self-privileging practices of French colonialism and to a European literary heritage in which his own country, like India, has frequently been designated in stereotypical terms.⁴

THIS LAST POINT IS worth pursuing further, for it demonstrates the ambivalent position of both Rivard and Hospital as post-colonial Canadian writers who incorporate the largely imaginary space of a non-Western “other” into works which not only question the principles upon which such — implicitly colonialist — representations are based, but which also challenge the ways in which these representations have historically been used to determine and maintain Canada’s status at the margins of a European cultural mainstream. The debate is taken up more directly in Rivard’s novel. An example is the argument between Alexandre and his English colleague Peter on the topic of the “sad demise” of the British Empire. Peter wistfully recalls “l’immense tristesse qui s’était abattue sur le pays [l’Angleterre]” but rallies that “si on leur avait laissé le temps, les Anglais auraient réussi l’impossible fusion de l’Orient et de l’Occident” (96). Alexandre scoffs at such starry-eyed idealism. Forster is singled out as a literary target: “comme toi,” Alexandre warns Peter, “[il] croyait que ‘c’est pour le bien de l’Inde que l’Angleterre la garde’; il rêvait, quoi qu’il en dise, d’élever l’Indien jusqu’à lui” (97). Alexandre’s conclusion is equally snide: “il est plus facile à un chameau de franchir le chas d’un aiguille qu’à un Britannique de se retirer du royaume qu’il a colonisé” (97). Alexandre’s display of self-righteous indignation is reinforced by the parallel between Forster’s paradoxically self-serving dream of cross-cultural synthesis and Hugh MacLennan’s attempt to reconcile the “two solitudes” of Canada and Québec.⁵ But while Alexandre leaves us in little doubt as to his separatist leanings, he is less candid when it comes to assessing his own indebtedness to France. In fact, like Juliet in *The Ivory Swing*, Alexandre is much happier when railing against the prejudices of others: the elderly Frenchwoman he meets in Pondicherry, who has taken it upon herself to “educate” her admiring Indian lodger, is typically dismissed with the wry observation that “les colonies dureront aussi longtemps que les illusions qu’elles exploitent” (64). But as I suggested previously, Alexandre cannot be considered exempt from, and is indeed complicit in, these selfsame illusions; a connection duly emerges between the “colonial” Frenchwoman, nurtured on comforting myths of cultural superiority, who shuttles between her first home in Paris and her holiday home in Pondicherry, and the “post-colonial” Québécois, whose perceptions of the Orient are filtered through French colonial stereotypes, and who returns abruptly to his own country once he has realized that India can no longer sustain his dreams.

Like Alexandre, Juliet is shocked to find herself adopting the same attitude of cultural arrogance she so deplors in others. Juliet eventually comes to understand the damaging effects of her engagement with a culture of which she knows little but in which she is ready, at the least given opportunity, to interfere. But it is less clear if Juliet comes to understand her ambivalent status as a Canadian; indeed, there is the disturbing implication that Juliet looks upon her nationality as a mark of ideological neutrality. Juliet's naïveté is surpassed, however, by that of her free-wheeling sister Annie. In a contrived debate between Annie and the typecast Marxist student Prem, Prem accuses Annie of being one of those "rich imperialists [who] take pleasure trips to India" (195). Annie's response is trite, to say the least: "Prem, I care about these things. You should not hate me because I am a Canadian" (195). One wonders whether it would be permissible for Prem to hate her if she were, say, British or American; but whatever the case, Annie's nationality neither grants her immunity nor disguises the fact that she *is* on "a pleasure trip to India." Annie's introduction of Prem to the liberated ways of Western women results in a frivolous and irresponsibly "apolitical" encounter in which, while a full scale riot is going on around them in the city of Kerala, the two new lovers, "oblivious to the tempo of history, moved to rhythms of their own until daybreak" (204). As Matthew Zacariah has pointed out:

Hospital is so taken up by the promise inherent in sexual liberation that she has completely missed seeing in Kerala the serious attempt of previously powerless groups of people actually achieving both political and economic power. Instead, she arranges for Prem, the student Marxist, to be cured of his radicalism with sex. (60)

I do not think that Hospital is as unaware of this contradiction as Zacariah implies, but there remains in the incident a disturbingly specious transcendence of material conflict which lends support to the view that Hospital has allowed an excessively narrow feminist agenda to cloud her political judgment. The most worrying aspect here is not Hospital's critique of the absolutist tendencies inherent in Marxist doctrine (however clumsily her point is made) but the implication that the liberation of women is an issue which can somehow be removed from the day-to-day operations of political and economic power. That different modes of cultural production (operating in specific political and/or economic interests) have served to justify and reinforce patriarchal ascendancy is surely not a point that Hospital would wish to dispute; why is it then that she chooses through her protagonist Juliet to address the question of women's liberation, not in terms of the uneven relations of power which maintain social and cultural hierarchies in both India and North America, but in the suspiciously ethnocentric terms of "basic freedom" (146)?

Like Hospital, Rivard addresses in his novel the problematic relation between sexual and political liberation. But his position, like hers, appears ambivalent. On

the one hand, the exposure in Alexandre's third (and final) notebook of the complicit activities of Mère and Chitkara reveals a connection between the fraudulent marketing of spiritual "guidance" and the commercial exploitation of women. Alexandre's recognition of the circumstances behind this particular instance of female exploitation does not prevent him, however, from falling back at the end of the novel on a stereotypical view of women. In escorting the abandoned, tearful Mère back to her village before himself returning to Montréal (presumably to confront his estranged wife Françoise) Alexandre appears finally to have awakened to his responsibilities. But has he really? The final image of Mère is as clichéd as the image which preceded it: the myth of the "divine mother" is supplanted by that of the "simple country girl." Mère seems to have been released from one form of servitude only to be delivered into another: her pledge of obedience to Chitkara is exchanged for the dubious promise of a scarcely less subservient lifestyle in her own village. Alexandre demonstrates once again his misunderstanding, or wilful ignorance, of the material conditions governing personal and social relationships in contemporary India. For it is by no means clear that Alexandre has managed to disabuse himself of his Romantic notions of the Orient, notions which allow him to gloss over the material context of social struggle and which culminate in the foolish justification of his indifference towards the cripples and beggars he frequently encounters in the streets of Pondicherry:

Comment expliquer . . . mon indifférence à l'égard des nombreux infirmes et lépreux que je croise tous les jours, sinon par le fait qu'eux-mêmes semblent indifférents à leur propre malheur! Moi qui, à Montréal, ne peux voir un simple clochard sans aussitôt m'apitoyer sur son sort, je ne donne aux mendiants assemblés au temple de Ganesh qu'un regard plus ou moins distrait et parfois quelques roupies. J'ai beau me dire qu'il s'agit d'un mécanisme d'autodéfense (plus la misère est insupportable, plus on l'ignore), j'ai néanmoins l'étrange impression que personne ici, y compris les mendiants, ne désire quoi que ce soit. (91)

Alexandre's acceptance of, even admiration for, this "undesiring" state, which he assumes to emanate from a fatalistic Hindu outlook on life, no doubt makes it easier for him to return to his own country with a clear conscience. The hypocrisy is remarkable: surely Alexandre is not so blinded by his own self-importance that he cannot see that

the overwhelming majority of Indians are poor because their ruling elites—Indians and their erstwhile as well as extant non-Indian associates—have perpetuated on them an enslaving economic relationship accompanied by a mythology which has rationalised that enslavement with concepts such as "dharma" and "karma."

(Zacariah SC 138)

Using India as a temporary refuge from responsibilities "back home" is bad enough; marvelling at the "indifference" of the Indian poor is still worse. Having spent much of his time at the ashram scorning the complacent bourgeois attitudes

of his colleagues, Alexandre turns out to be just as complacent as, if not more complacent than, the rest.

I HAVE SUGGESTED THROUGHOUT this essay that Rivard and Hospital use varying degrees of irony to distance themselves from their respective protagonists. For both novelists, the stereotypes of previous fictions of East-West encounter are recycled as a means of exposing continuing Western biases and misconceptions and of revealing not only the intellectual pusillanimity, but also the social and cultural irresponsibility, of a "recourse to the Orient" in which India becomes a panacea for Western disaffection or a collective symbol for the contradictory aspirations of a divided Western self. Using India as a test to expose such insecurities and contradictions is not without its perils, however, and although both Rivard and Hospital are sensitive to a stylized representation of the Orient which ironically reflects the prejudices of their respective protagonists, neither writer succeeds in providing alternatives to the prejudices they so enthusiastically decry. The ironic treatment of Juliet in *The Ivory Swing*, and of Alexandre in *Les silences du corbeau*, can by no means be considered as a guarantee of authorial immunity. The inconsistency of Hospital's irony, and the lack of a clearly defined context against which her protagonist's fantasies might be offset, ultimately does little to dissuade her readers from viewing the novel's one-dimensional "Indians" in their pseudo-Indian context as merely latter-day variations on Conrad's "Africans": projections of European stereotypes, but also perpetuations of them. In Rivard's novel, a similar recycling of stereotypes implicates Alexandre in the self-privileging practices of European Orientalism without ever clearly dissociating Rivard from those selfsame practices. The ambivalent, rather than unreservedly ironic, treatment of Alexandre in the novel cannot help but suggest that Rivard has some sympathy for the plight of his narrator-protagonist: a sympathy which Alexandre's objectionable views on poverty and women, and his self-righteous belief in the inviolability of Québec, make extremely difficult to share. It is true, as Edward Said has pointed out, that the dilemma of abiding Western prejudices and misconceptions about the Orient is not "resolved" by issuing partisan decrees such as "only Orientals can write about the Orient," "only literature that treats Orientals well is good literature," or "only anti-Orientalists can write about Orientalism" (229). It is also true that neither Rivard nor Hospital is unaware of the difficulties involved in writing about the Orient as both "outsiders" to that culture and as "insiders" to the prejudices bound up in its European literary representation.⁶ One of the risks they run, of course, is that, like their respective protagonists, they may end up by reinforcing the very prejudices they set out to attack. But this, I am tempted to conclude, is precisely what happens; for the combined

effect of their own (overt or hidden) agendas, however viable those agendas may be, and of their self-conscious delight in the depiction of Oriental stereotypes, however ironic that depiction may be, is to blur the intended operations of cultural critique to the extent that what emerges is not the vindication of an attitude of cultural relativism, or the advocacy of a need for cross-cultural understanding, but the paradoxical reconfirmation of cultural bias.

NOTES

- ¹ The failed attempt to transcend these obsessive dualisms is brought out in an ironic recurrence throughout the novel of the figure three (three notebooks, the three women in Alexandre's life, the three girls/men encountered by Alexandre/Peter in the streets of Pondicherry, etc.). The ironic use of Baudelairean symbolism provides another example of this failure, as does the ineffectual dialectic employed in Alexandre's internal monologues and in his — often hilarious — “discussions” with his colleagues at the ashram. The most obvious example, however, is provided by the crow, whose inopportune interruptions and querulous silences do not so much disrupt the various “dialogues” of the novel (between “East” and “West,” Alexandre and Mère, Alexandre and his alter-ego, etc.) as illustrate their fundamental mendacity.
- ² The “othering” process involved in the colonial subjectification of India has been well described by Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak. A tenuous “self-other” dichotomy is seen by Homi Bhabha as a basis for the operation of colonial discourse, and by Helen Tiffin as a springboard for the cultural critique implicit (or explicit) in post-colonial writing. Although both Hospital and Rivard are post-colonial writers, they employ in their respective texts an implicitly colonialist rhetoric founded on binary opposition and essentialist categorization. Their purpose, of course, is ironic, but the result is unfortunately even more ironic than the intended effect, for both texts indicate a self-contradictory allegiance to the very rhetoric they ironize.
- ³ David repeatedly warns Juliet of the dangers of cultural arrogance, although he is by no means exempt from it himself. But at least his knowledge of India, curatorial and unproductive though it may be, is genuine, unlike Juliet's, which is based on wild assumptions and on contrived evidence which “proves” the integrity of her own opinions.
- ⁴ Alexandre's reference to Hémon's *Maria Chapdelaine* (200) is hardly gratuitous. Hémon's novel reinforced patronizing European stereotypes of Québec which had persisted since Voltaire's notorious description of the colony as “quelques arpents de neige.” Ironically, initial opposition to the novel in Québec weakened, and *Maria Chapdelaine* is widely regarded today as one of the major works of Québec literature. The irony, of course, is not lost on Rivard, whose protagonist's self-righteous denunciation of European cultural imperialism does not disguise his own partiality to the stereotypes of European (more specifically, French) exoticism.
- ⁵ Hugh MacLennan, *Two Solitudes* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1945). Alexandre probably has in mind the homiletic conclusion to MacLennan's novel in which “even as the two race-legends [of Canada and Québec] woke again remembering enmities, there woke with them also the felt knowledge that together they had fought and survived one great war they had never made and that now they had entered another; that for nearly a hundred years the nation had been spread out on the top half of

the continent over the powerhouse of the United States and was still there; that even if the legends were like oil and alcohol in the same bottle, the bottle had not been broken yet" (411-12).

- ⁶ More subtle approaches are provided here by writers such as Bharati Mukherjee and Michael Ondaatje, whose cross-cultural perspectives are enhanced by their experiences of living at an intersection *between* cultures rather than within a single, distinctive culture. Blaise and Mukherjee's collaborative memoir of India in *Days and Nights in Calcutta* and Ondaatje's hyperbolic account of his childhood in Sri Lanka in *Running in the Family* provide two examples of contemporary Canadian writing about South Asia which acknowledge the inevitability of cultural bias while seeking to counteract monolithic and/or onesided views of culture. In both cases, the choice of form is significant. *Days and Nights in Calcutta* employs juxtaposed — but often divergent or conflicting — memoirs to support its authors' shared belief in the relativity of cultural perception, while in *Running in the Family* an ill-fitting collage of tall tale and pseudo-scientific "record" conspires to provide a quirky celebration of Canadian, as well as Sri Lankan, multiculturalism. The alternating structure of Blaise and Mukherjee's text, like the polyphony of Ondaatje's, guards against uniformity of voice or perspective, countering the all too frequent tendency to treat "foreign" cultures as if they were pure, unchanging entities and eventually demonstrating the attempt to define the West to be as contingent as the desire to unravel the supposed mysteries of the East. So while the "real" Canada is shown in one sense to just be as illusory as the "real" India, its "reality" is also constituted within the multiple configurations of a plural society which, like India's, remains susceptible to the possibilities of change.

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three excerpts from

THUMBS

a poemnovel-in-progress

Ashok Mathur

● ONE breakdown in a dusky basement fearing holding
shivered in pain and the statement, my statement, through tears past
tears, looking down at brown hands and brown thumbs, hands and
thumbs on untouchable whitenesses, brown miscegenating white,
becoming a lesser(?) shade of brown, less brown, but still always
brown, my statement, transcending this colour bar, fighting the
impulse to discolour the self, coming at/from me in surprise, a
wealth of new knowledge and feartalk, striking at me from my larynx,
thoughtbreaths gushing out in unmediated fury

say
ing

I wish I was
white