

THE WAXING AND WANING OF SUSANNA MOODIE'S "ENTHUSIASM"

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AT MY HEART'S CORE" by Robertson Davies is a Shavian discussion play starring the three Otonabee pioneers who are best known to posterity through their writings: Frances Stewart, Catharine Parr Traill and Susanna Moodie. The play is set at the time of the Upper Canada Rebellion and Susanna Moodie, whom the stage directions describe as having "a ladylike hint of the drill-sergeant in her demeanour," persistently blames the Methodists for stirring up revolution.¹ "When you say Methodist, you say Radical. They all think that the world can be improved by rebellion against authority. It can't," she declares. At the same time, she refuses to make the usual nineteenth-century association between revolution and poetry, for when her sister Catharine teases her about leaving the Dissenters out of her rousing "Oath of the Canadian Volunteers," Susanna replies stiffly "I do not consider Methodists, even in a time of crisis, to be the stuff of which poetry is made."²

Although she was born at the turn of the century, Susanna Moodie does give little evidence of having been moved by the revolutionary and millennial side of the Romantic movement. However, for a brief period just prior to her emigration to Canada, "the stuff of which poetry is made" had in fact been her *own* religious dissent. The title work of her only independent collection of poetry, *Enthusiasm* (1831), is a defense of spiritual ardour, and many other poems in the book draw on Biblical stories or pious commonplaces for evangelical purposes.

Enthusiasm, never having been reprinted, has been little known to students of Canadian literature.³ Probably Robertson Davies was unaware of it when he wrote his play in 1950; nor would he have known about Moodie's brief conversion to Congregationalism, made public only with the publication of her letters in 1985.⁴ But the spiritual turmoil revealed by both book and letters reminds us that Davies' portrayal of Moodie, however entertaining, is fictitious. His humorously self-righteous martinet is no closer to the "real" Susanna Strickland Moodie than is the terrified creature, pathologically alienated from both nature and her own passions, of Margaret Atwood's *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*. Both authors take

considerable liberty with the material available to them and project an emblematic character as a focus for their satire. It is unlikely, however, that either Davies or Atwood would have felt so free to exaggerate if the intimate self-revelations of their protagonist's letters had been available to them.

These letters, supplemented by the editors' thorough biographical notes, trace Moodie's increasing interest in and defense of religious non-conformity from about 1828 on, through her conversion in April of 1830, to her return to the Anglican fold with her marriage a year later. In fact, her spiritual, literary, and marital experiments appear to have been curiously interdependent. For example, on April 2nd of 1830 she was admitted to the congregation of Pastor Andrew Ritchie of Wrentham, and on the 3rd, the following note appeared in the *Athenaeum*:

Shortly will appear, 'Enthusiasm, and other Poems,' by Susanna Strickland, a young lady already favourably known to the public by several compositions of much merit and more promise, in the *Annuals*, etc.⁵

Then on April 4th this young lady took communion for the first time with her new congregation. Her conversion is movingly described in a letter of April 15th to her confidant James Bird which concludes "I dare not indulge myself dear friend by entering more fully into this subject lest you should think me a mere visionary *enthusiast* [my emphasis]."⁶

That she should write a poem in defense of religious enthusiasm while fearing to be characterized as an enthusiast herself indicates not only self-consciousness but class consciousness; historically, the educated upper classes had resisted the evangelical movement, disdaining religious fervour as "mere" vulgar display. Hoxie Neale Fairchild notes that from the mid-eighteenth century on, "with rare exceptions, 'literary' folk will continue to sing of universal harmony and the social glow . . . the Gospels will be for the believing lowbrow, the religion of sentiment for the believing highbrow."⁷ One of those rare exceptions, Susanna elects to stand out from her "highbrow" community by calling her book *Enthusiasm*, and transforming the requisite literary offerings of a young lady — gothic tales of jealousy, revenge, abandoned maidens and heroic battles; sentimental flower-and-love-songs — into illustrations of the illusory joys of this world as compared with the certainty of heavenly bliss.

Moodie is particularly unusual in that she is never content to leave the moral implicit, but insists on articulating the Christian doctrine of sin and redemption. Though her aesthetics owe much to the influence of the genteel Felicia Hemans, whom she considers "a complete mistress of the lyre," her ethics more closely resemble those of William Cowper, of whom she remarks:

I think his works have little poetic merit. But his sentiments are noble, excellent, sublime! . . . I consider him as a Reformer of the Vices of mankind to stand unrivalled.⁸

A didactic soul, she opens the letter from which this last comment is taken by saying of a story she is working on, "I hope it may do some good among the young folks of the rising generation," and goes on to note that she prefers to Cowper's expansive and semi-idyllic meditation, "The Task" (1785), his vitriolic "Satires" (1782). Of these, her favourite is "The Progress of Error," an attack on the undermining of faith by scientific rationalism which she feels "must strike home to every heart."⁹

Throughout his work, Cowper defends Christian doctrine against the Deists, but he also inveighs against Dissenters as enemies of "revealed" religion. In "The Progress of Error," for example, he declares that

No wild enthusiast ever yet could rest
Till half mankind were like himself possess'd.
Philosophers, who darken and put out
Eternal truth by everlasting doubt;
Church quacks, with passions under no command,
Who fill the world with doctrines contraband
Discov'ers of they know not what, confin'd
Within no bounds — the blind that lead the blind. (ll. 470-77)¹⁰

Nonetheless, he insists on the necessity for emotional commitment in religion, and argues that intellectual criticism alone will never save souls. Indeed, in "The Task" he asks of satire, "What vice has it subdu'd? whose heart reclaim'd / By rigour, or whom laugh'd into reform" (Book II, ll.316-23). And on the other hand, he inquires in "Conversation":

What is fanatic frenzy, scorn'd so much,
And dreaded more than a contagious touch?
I grant it dang'rous, and approve your fear,
That fire is catching if you draw too near;
But sage observers oft mistake the flame,
And give true piety that odious name (ll. 651-56).

For after all, Cowper was the co-author (with the methodist John Newton) of "The Olney Hymns." So his criticism of "wild enthusiasts" must be seen as a contribution to the historical debate about the difference between faith and fanaticism which also engages Susanna Moodie.

IN COWPER'S DAY, popular opinion was still virulently anti-puritan and complacently utilitarian. But that Moodie, writing fifty years later, should feel herself to be a religious martyr may well indicate more "sensibility" on her part than obtuseness in or persecution by others. Certainly she became distracted from her spiritual quest less than four months after her conversion; in the next surviving letter to Bird, dated August 3rd, her concerns have shifted from the sacred to the profane:

I send you some prospectuses of my book. I know you will distribute and do the best you can with them for me. I must depend upon my wits to buy my wedding clothes, rather a hard alternative for a smart damsel like me, but I hope Apollo and the Muse will befriend me and if they will not, why then Cupid must.¹¹

Her letters of August 12th to the author Mary Russell Mitford and of October 9th to James Bird also enclose prospectuses for them to distribute, but in November she writes Bird "I heartily wish the book was not to be published at all. You will say why? But I have my own reasons for this strange wish."¹² Equally abruptly, in January of 1831, she confesses that she has broken off with her fiancé, John Wedderburn Dunbar Moodie.

Ah! friend Bird our engagement was too hasty. I have changed my mind. You may call me a jilt a flirt or what you please, I care not. I will neither marry a soldier nor leave my country for ever and feel happy that I am once more my own mistress.¹³

However, on April 4th, 1831 she consents to become the mistress of a household instead; exactly one year after her first service as a member of the non-conforming Wrentham congregation, Susanna Strickland married John Moodie in an *Anglican* ceremony at St. Pancras Church, London.

One can not help wondering if, in retrospect, she thought her commitment to the Congregationalists had been a mere flirtation, a "too hasty" engagement. For in the same letter of April 9th which tells James Bird about her wedding she writes:

As to my *Enthusiasm*, it begins to cool, and if the printers and editors, who have dawdled so long over it, do not quicken their movements, it will soon be extinguished altogether. Like a glass of evaporated soda water.¹⁴

Although the book finally came out that spring, its author, acknowledged on the title page as "Susanna Strickland (now Mrs. Moodie)," did not have much opportunity to promote it, since, as she later put it, she "published the book . . . just as I was leaving for Canada, leaving my poor literary babe, like an orphan to its fate."¹⁵ But her *Enthusiasm* never entirely evaporated. The letter from which I have just quoted was written to the (retired) publisher of her prose works, Richard Bentley, on April 24th, 1865, asking him to offer the Nelson publishing house copyright to her poetry book thirty-four years after its original publication — and eleven after she had tried to interest Bentley himself in the *same* proposition!

Moodie's description of *Enthusiasm* in her earlier proposal to Bentley (January 30, 1854) is of great interest. She claims that

This little work, contains most of the poems written by me between the ages of 14 and 20. It was put to press by the particular request of some kind friends, who loved me well, and through whose influence, the edition of 500 copies, sold, paying its own expenses, and leaving me a profit of some 25 or 30 pounds. It was well reviewed by many of the best papers and magazines and I might have been tempted to try it again, had I not left England, and fallen into the troubles and trials which subsequently beset us. After my death these little poems may have an interest which at

present they do *not possess*. They were the overflowing of a young warm heart, keenly alive to the beauties of creation, and to the sorrows of a very unhappy home. The latter influence, will account for the deep tone of melancholy that pervades most of them, for I wrote exactly as the spirit prompted me — as I felt.¹⁶

Doubtless *Enthusiasm* includes some juvenalia, but it seems unlikely that many of the poems included in the volume were written when the author was a child; she was twenty-six and had been writing seriously for several years when the collection was put together. But Moodie's exaggeration of her youthful accomplishments reveals more than simple vanity; it shows insight into the book's immaturity of conception and execution. Indeed, her suggestion that these "little poems" will be of interest only after her death is a realistic assessment of their value and, by contrast, of the fame that would, some day, accrue to her prose.

Nor could one argue with her description of the tone of the book as "melancholy," but her attribution of that melancholy to an unhappy childhood is revealing. Her father died when Susanna was only fourteen, after several years of failing health and financial difficulty. Possibly this experience lies behind the preoccupation in *Enthusiasm* with grief, loss, disaster, graves, ruins, and the exemplary deaths of Christians. Mr. Strickland's survivors struggled to maintain the facade of gentility, and of family harmony, despite intense rivalry between the two oldest and two youngest daughters, all aspiring writers.¹⁷ This rivalry may be the source of Susanna's repeated — and clearly ambivalent — admonitions against striving for "earthly" fame, which provide a little spice amidst the homilies. The second poem in the book, entitled "Fame," explores this theme most fully, warning us, in heroic couplets whose prosody emphasizes the young author's seriousness, that we ought never to expect congratulations for our accomplishments:

Ambition's laurel, purchased with a flood
Of human tears and stained with kindred blood,
Once gained, converted to a crown of thorns,
Pierces the aching temples it adorns —
Not Sappho's lyre, nor Raphael's deathless art
Can twine the olive round the bleeding heart;
In heaven alone the promised blessing lies,
And those who seek — must seek it in the skies! (28)

The phrase "kindred blood" is certainly suggestive. Of course, even had Susanna experienced an untroubled childhood, melancholy was so fashionable a literary theme at that period she could hardly have resisted its influence. As Eleanor Sickels notes in her study *The Gloomy Egoist*,

the artificial nature of this whole tradition is . . . pointed by the extreme youth of many of the writers involved. . . . It is not meant to imply that youth is never melancholy, a statement which would be an obvious absurdity; but that young poets, being imitative, will express their melancholy in the orthodox manner, or, if it be fashionable, will imagine that they are melancholy whether they are or not.¹⁸

Melancholy was cultivated as the state most appropriate to an exquisitely sensitive soul. Moodie's girlhood letters provide many examples of this tiresome affectation of "sensibility," particularly around the time of her conversion. One need only observe her observing herself in the third person, in a letter from June 1829, to agree with Sickels that there is something artificial about the posture of melancholy. After claiming to fear Bird's disapproval of her new religious affiliation, Moodie writes:

I shall apply to some friends to procure me a place in a mission abroad I care not where and then poor Susy will be alike unregretted and forgotten and those who once knew me and loved me will know me no more. Yet wherever may be my destination I shall bear with me across the foaming waters a heart too true to its human feelings too faithful to the objects of its earthly idolatry. Oh! when will these mental struggles be over. When holy Father will you call hence your erring child. I sometimes glance on the spot I once chose in our quiet churchyard for my grave. How peacefully the sunbeams sleep upon it and I sigh and think how calmly and sweetly I could lie down in the dust beneath that dear old tree — but this is wrong.¹⁸

WE ALSO FIND Moodie glancing at graves in the following poem, published in *Enthusiasm*; perhaps it originates in the same period as the letter just quoted.

THE NAMELESS GRAVE

*Written in Cove Church-Yard; And Occasioned By Observing
My Own Shadow Thrown Across A Grave*

"Tell me, thou grassy mound,
What dost thou cover?
In thy folds hast thou bound
Soldier or lover?
Time o'er the turf no memorial is keeping
Who in this lone grave forgotten is sleeping?" —

"The sun's westward ray
A dark shadow has thrown
On this dwelling of clay,
And the shade is thine own!
From dust and oblivion this stern lesson borrow —
Thou art living to-day and forgotten to-morrow!"

"The Nameless Grave" is typical of the poems in *Enthusiasm* in its prosodic awkwardness. It is very difficult to scan Moodie's poems, because she has an unfortunate predilection for triple metres, which invade even those poems nominally in pentameter or hexameter. The effect of this pull towards triple measure can be ludicrous when the tone of the poem is meant to be Biblical solemnity, as in "The Vision of

Dry Bones" ("Son of man! can these dry bones, long bleached in decay / Ever feel in their flesh the warm beams of the day" ll. 9-10).

On the other hand, "The Nameless Grave" stands out from most of Moodie's other pieces on the vanity of human life because of its wit and brevity. The theme of mortality is explored in many different ways in *Enthusiasm*, but usually Moodie recycles tired imagery to prop up an equally banal moral. In "The Nameless Grave," both vehicle and tenor have the impact of being unexpected.

Although there are a few other poems about ruins and graveyards in *Enthusiasm*, usually Moodie pursues her theme amid scenes of wild nature. Her nature poems fall into two general categories. In the first, the beauties of the earth are evoked only to remind us that Nature has fallen if not from a state of grace into a state of sinfulness, at least, in the classic Platonic declension, from the perfection of the Divine Idea to lovely but ephemeral shadows. In the second group Nature is not beautiful but sublime and terrifying; it provides the means by which sinful man must be punished. In all Moodie's poems, Nature educates the human spirit by revealing God's will. But the God revealed here is the Calvinist Lord of Judgement — not the benevolent patriarch appealed to by sentimentalists, or by Moodie herself in softer moods.

The wistful conclusion of "The Water Lillies" is typical of the softer mood:

Beautiful flowers! our youth is as brief
 As the short-lived date of your golden leaf.
 The summer will come, and each amber urn,
 Like a love-lighted torch, on the waves shall burn;
 But when the first bloom of our life is o'er
 No after spring can its freshness restore,
 But faith can twine round the hoary head
 A garland of beauty when youth is fled! (ll. 31-38)

And similarly, "Autumn" reminds us that

Though all things perish here,
 The spirit cannot die,
 It owns a brighter sphere,
 A home in yon fair sky.
 The soul will flee away,
 And when the silent clod
 Enfolds my mouldering clay,
 Shall live again with God (ll. 33-40).

In the first group of poems nature is pretty; it reminds the speaker of the gentleness of divine comfort. However, in "The Old Ash Tree," in which the speaker discovers that the "favourite seat" of her youthful daydreams has been knocked down by a windstorm, nature is no longer simply God's book, but also his scourge and minister. Again the natural becomes emblematic, but stanza two goes beyond

pat moralizing; it is insistently *tragic*, the death of the tree disrupting the ordinary cycle of nature.

The storm-demon sent up his loudest shout
 When he levelled his bolt at thee,
 When thy massy trunk and thy branches stout
 Were riven by the blast, old tree!
 It has bowed to the dust thy stately form,
 Which for many an age defied
 The rush and the roar of the midnight storm,
 When it swept through thy branches wide (ll. 9-16).

The personification of the storm as a “demonic” power makes “The Old Ash Tree” a good transition to the second group of Moodie’s nature poems, which includes such works as “The Deluge” and “The Earthquake,” and in which natural catastrophe symbolizes the final apocalypse evoked more directly by overtly eschatological poems such as “The Vision of Dry Bones” and “The Destruction of Babylon.” In this last poem, the prophetic voice not only foretells divine vengeance but insists on its inevitability; in Moodie’s Biblical narratives, human history is repetitive and the past prefigures the future. She hopes to be heard as a prophet herself — and not simply as the writer of a dramatic monologue — when she writes:

An awful vision floats before my sight,
 Black as the storm and fearful as the night:
 Thy fall, oh Babylon! — the awful doom
 Pronounced by Heaven to hurl thee to the tomb,
 Peals in prophetic thunder in mine ear —
 The voice of God foretelling ruin near!
 (“The Destruction of Babylon,” ll. 1-6)

Moodie’s interest in such topics was by no means original; indeed, the Biblical passages she chooses to paraphrase were *typical* exercises for protestant poets wishing to be thought “sublime.” In his book *The Religious Sublime*, David Morris quotes an anonymous writer in *The Critical Review* (1761) as asserting that

To adopt the beautiful sublime of the sacred writings, particularly of the prophecies, which breathe all the wildness of an irregular genius, requires an imagination rather warm than correct, the bold and extravagant flights of genius more than the unaffected cold accuracy of art.²⁰

And as early as 1704 John Dennis, in *The Grounds of Criticism in Poetry*, had called for a return to religious themes in literature, complaining that “modern Poetry being for the most part profane, has . . . very little Spirit.”²¹

Moodie first confesses her aspiration to write religious poetry in a letter dated January 14th, 1829, when she says she is thinking of undertaking a small volume of psalms and hymns.²² (*Enthusiasm* includes translations of Psalms forty and

forty-four, and concludes with a "Morning Hymn" and an "Evening Hymn"; perhaps these were part of the projected work.) And the argument of "Enthusiasm," which not only lends its title to her book but, in coming first, provides an introduction to the whole, is that religion provides the greatest inspiration for art as well as for daily life. The poem's invocation provides an etymologically correct definition of enthusiasm as divine presence:

OH for the spirit which inspired of old
 The seer's prophetic song — the voice that spake
 Through Israel's warrior king. ("Enthusiasm," ll. 1-3)

IN ANCIENT GREECE, *enthusiasmos* referred to the trance-like state of an oracle possessed by Apollo or Dionysios; the term entered the English language in the seventeenth century to describe Anabaptists and other religious sects whose members claimed to experience personal revelation.²³ The word was usually used to imply that this claim was false, or, at best, that its professors were deluded; Robert Burton, in the section of *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621) dealing with "Religious Melancholy," was the first in a long line of theoreticians to propose that religious enthusiasm was a form of hysteria, possibly sexual in origin.²⁴ He influenced later writers such as the Cambridge Platonist Henry More whose *Enthusiasmus Triumphatus* came out in 1656, a year after a volume by Meric Casaubon, the title of which spells out the "scientific" attitude to religious dissent: *A Treatise concerning Enthusiasme as it is an Effect of Nature; but is mistaken by many for either Divine Inspiration or Diabolical Possession.*²⁵

Casaubon analyses many types of enthusiasm, including the "Divinatory," "Contemplative," "Rhetorical," and "Poetical"; as the last two categories suggest, the Classical association between religious transcendence and the muse is also conventional in English thought. Thus Blount's *Glossographia* of 1656 defines "enthusiasm" as "an inspiration, a ravishment of the spirit, divine motion, Poetical fury," a more generous entry than we find a century later in Dr. Johnson's dictionary, where enthusiasm is defined *first* as "a vain belief of private revelation; a vain confidence of divine favour or communication" before also being described as "Heat of imagination" and, finally, as "elevation of fancy."²⁶

Dr. Johnson cites Locke as his authority for the contention that "*Enthusiasm* is founded neither on reason nor divine revelation, but rises from the conceits of a warmed or overheated braine." Throughout the eighteenth century, the debate about the nature of enthusiasm engaged many other philosophers, such as Lord Shaftesbury in his "Letter Concerning Enthusiasm" (1707) and David Hume in his essay "Of Superstition and Enthusiasm" (1741). Even John Wesley found himself drawn into it; although a tireless advocate of the necessity for faith, he none-

theless cautions his followers, in his *Advice to the People called Methodists* (1745), that they should “carefully avoid enthusiasm” and “impute not the dreams of men to the all-wise God.”²⁷

Strangely enough, Wesley’s attitude towards enthusiasm resembles that of Shaftesbury, otherwise his philosophical opposite in the period! Both are concerned to distinguish between true and false inspiration, and Shaftesbury even evokes the authority of the prophet Jeremiah on the subject: “Hearken not unto the words of the prophets that prophesy unto you: they speak a vision of their own heart and not out of the mouth of the Lord.” (Jer. XXX.16)²⁸ Moreover, despite his urbane mockery of religious fanaticism in the “Letter Concerning Enthusiasm,” he concedes that

ENTHUSIASM is wonderfully powerful and extensive; that it is a matter of nice judgement, and the hardest thing in the world to know fully and distinctly, since even Atheism is not exempt from it; for, as some have well remarked, there have been *enthusiastical atheists*. Nor can divine inspiration, by its outward marks, be easily distinguished from it. For inspiration is a real feeling of the divine presence, and enthusiasm a false one.²⁹

Two years later, Shaftesbury rehabilitates the term “enthusiasm,” broadening it to mean any and all passionate commitments — but most particularly, the ecstatic worship of nature. In “The Moralists” (1709), when the rhapsodies of Theocles convert him to nature-worship, the gentlemanly Philocles is embarrassed, for “all those who are deep in this *Romantick* way, are look’d upon, you know, as a People either plainly out of their Wits, or over-run with *Melancholy* and ENTHUSIASM.”³⁰ But he quickly recovers his equilibrium, concluding that

all sound *Love* and *Admiration* is ENTHUSIASM: The transports of *Poets*, the Sublime of *Orators*, the Rapture of *Musicians*, the high Strains of the *Virtuosi*; all mere ENTHUSIASM! Even *Learning* it-self, the *Love of Arts* and *Curiosities*, the Spirit of *Travellers* and *Adventurers*; *Gallantry*, *War*, *Heroism*; All, all ENTHUSIASM! — ’tis enough: I am content to be this *new Enthusiast*, in a way unknown to me before.³¹

This “new enthusiast” quickly became a fashionable type in literature and life, celebrated by such poets as the eighteen-year-old Joseph Warton in “The Enthusiast, or the Lover of Nature.” The 252 blank verse lines of the revised version of 1748 make only tangential reference to established religion; God here is primarily the “architect supreme” (l. 137) whose works cannot be rivalled by “art’s vain pomps” (l. 4).³² The poem opens with an invocation to “green-rob’d Dryads” (l. 1) and then appeals to the authority of “the bards of old” (l. 15) who retreated to Nature in order to learn “the moral strains she taught to mend mankind” (l. 20). Following Shaftesbury, Warton’s enthusiast seeks salvation in admiring the wilderness, finding evidence in the unspoiled places of the earth not only of the sublimity of the universe, but also of the benevolent character of its creator. Indeed, he is so

intoxicated with this new faith that he closes his poem wishing to escape to “western climes” (l. 233), which he fantasizes as “isles of Innocence . . . Where Happiness and Quiet sit enthron’d, / With simple Indian swains” (ll. 236-39).

Moodie herself inconsistently subscribes to this cult of primitivism; once she is actually living in Canada it becomes increasingly difficult to maintain such pastoral illusions, as *Roughing It in the Bush* and *Life in the Clearings* make clear. Nonetheless, even towards the end of her life she claims to prefer the Belleville of thirty years earlier to the bustling town she now inhabits, writing to her friend Allen Ransome

Allen, the poetic spirit, the love of dear Mother Nature will never die out of my heart. I am just the same enthusiast I ever was and often forget white hairs and wrinkles when my heart swells and my eyes fill with tears at the beauty of some lovely spot that glows from the hand of the great Master.³³

Here she uses the term “enthusiast” as Warton does, to mean one who adores nature. But, as we have seen, in her earlier letters the term had a purely religious connotation. In her poem, she seeks to bridge the gap between the sacred and profane uses of the term by defining “enthusiasm” as the “Parent of genius” to whose “soul-awakening power we owe / The preacher’s eloquence, the painter’s skill / The poet’s lay, the patriot’s noble zeal” and so on (“Enthusiasm,” ll. 30-35). Indeed, most of “Enthusiasm” — from line 70 to line 351 of a total of 449 lines — portrays *non-religious* enthusiasts: the poet, the painter, the nature-lover and the warrior.

The poet is described in terms familiar to Moodie’s public from Beattie’s *The Minstrel*, and Shelley’s *Alastor*:

. . . He walks this earth
Like an enfranchised spirit; and the storms,
That darken and convulse a guilty world,
Come like faint peals of thunder on his ear,
Or hoarse murmurs of the mighty deep,
Which heard in some dark forest’s leafy shade
But add a solemn grandeur to the scene. (“Enthusiasm,” ll. 105-11)

But despite his youthful rapture, “penury and dire disease, / Neglect, a broken heart, an early grave” are all predicted for him, because he has not “tuned his harp to truths divine” (ll. 118-20). The painter, on the other hand, is reproached for being “unsatisfied with all that Nature gives” and attempting to “portray Omnipotence” (ll. 135-37), since even the effect of sunlight on leaves “is beyond thy art. / All thy enthusiasm, all thy boasted skill, / But poorly imitates a forest tree (ll. 173-75).

Moodie appears to be unaware of the aesthetic contradiction she sets up here: the poet is to be saved by abandoning nature for sacred topics — the painter by the reverse procedure! Or perhaps she is vaguely aware of some philosophical muddiness at this point, for she drops the topic of artistic enthusiasm and starts to examine

the nature-lover instead. He is told in his turn that he will be unable to “read” the natural scene around him properly until he explores the Bible (ll. 192-207), but she seems to hold out more hope for his salvation than for the others — maybe because he is not trying to rival the Creator, but simply to appreciate the Creation. At least, this is what is suggested by Moodie’s statement that

Faith gives a grandeur to created things,
Beyond the poet’s lay or painter’s art,
Or upward flight of Fancy’s eagle wing (ll. 222-25).

We then move out of the natural setting for the only time in the poem to visit “Glory’s intrepid champion” (l. 259), who seems to stand for all those with *worldly* passions, for

He too is an enthusiast! — his zeal
Impels him onward with resistless force,
Severs his heart from nature’s kindred ties,
And feeds the wild ambition which consumes
All that is good and lovely in his path (ll. 265-69).

Perhaps because his ambitions are even farther from the true “path” than those of the poet or painter, twice as much space is devoted to the soldier’s portrait: 105 lines to their 53. It is interesting that Moodie was married to a soldier herself by the time “Enthusiasm” was published, (though she had not met him yet when it was written), for she becomes absorbed in imagining a fictional childhood for her hypothetical man-of-war, trying to figure out what would turn an ardent soul towards such a brutal vocation. One is also reminded that her first publication was an inspirational tale for young readers, *Spartacus: A Roman Story*, published in 1822; clearly she was drawn towards military heroes in spite of herself.

BUT DESPITE HER sympathy for all the enthusiasts she describes, Moodie argues that their secular interests are just “base and joyless vanities which man / Madly prefers to everlasting bliss!” (“Enthusiasm,” ll. 67-69). Coming as she did not only after Shaftesbury and Warton but after the great Romantic poets, she had no need to defend the spirit’s hunger for passionate commitment. What she took as her mandate was to prove the superiority of *religious* enthusiasm to other varieties, and to defend traditional Christian belief in sin and redemption.

In this regard, her poem has close affinities with another poem called “Enthusiasm” that published by John Byrom in 1757.³⁴ In this work, after reminding the genteel reader who scorns religious fervour that everyone has obsessions, Byrom suggests “That which concerns us therefore is to see / What Species of Enthusiasts we be” (ll. 250-51).³⁵ He enumerates several such “species,” beginning with clas-

sicists, Egyptologists and Biblical scholars who, because their erudition is misdirected, are criticised more severely than the frivolous habitués of coffee-houses and ball-rooms. All these folk share one attribute however; “in one Absurdity they chime, / To make religious Enthusiasm a Crime” (ll. 196-97).³⁶

Byrom’s complaint is reiterated by Moodie; two generations later, she still bemoans the fact that:

The world allows its votaries to feel
 A glowing ardour, an intense delight,
 On every subject but the one that lifts
 The soul above its sensual, vain pursuits,
 And elevates the mind and thoughts to God!
 Zeal in a sacred cause alone is deemed
 An aberration of our mental powers. (“Enthusiasm,” ll. 45-51)

Of course, despite the similarity of Moodie’s argument to Byrom’s, the two poets have totally different styles, he writing satirical and didactic couplets, she rather Romantic blank verse. His tone is urbane; hers, passionate. Byrom never succumbs to enthusiasm himself, but Moodie is unable to resist it, even when describing enthusiasms she claims to deplore.

Moreover, Byrom’s main focus in his poem is theology, while Moodie is preoccupied with character and setting. Herein lies the paradoxical failure of her poem. Her strengths as a writer — even in these early years — clearly lie in the dramatic portrayal of character, and in vivid description, and not in philosophical analysis.³⁷ And these very strengths undermine her stated purpose in “Enthusiasm,” where the lengthy and persuasive rendering of the allegedly “joyless vanities” of earthly life is followed by 35 lines on the vague but “everlasting bliss” to be anticipated in the New Jerusalem: 35 lines which emphasize, by contrast, the genuine seductiveness of those worldly passions she argues we ought to renounce!

To solve this predicament she proposes that experiences which cannot be described by language must be more powerful than anything which can be spoken, a hypothesis which leads her to relinquish the word “enthusiasm” itself as inadequate to convey

That deep devotion of the heart which men
 Miscalc enthusiasm! — Zeal alone deserves
 The name of madness in a worldly cause.
 Light misdirected ever leads astray;
 But hope inspired by faith will guide to heaven! (ll. 411-15)³⁸

But given that she herself has elected to call such devotion “enthusiasm” in the poem’s opening, this conclusion is rather perverse. We are left with a poem framed by rhetorical, and filled with lyrical and dramatic, self-contradiction. She even goes on to affirm *exactly* those analogies between religious and worldly enthusiasts which she has just rejected, declaring that:

To win the laurel wreath the soldier fights;
 To free his native land the patriot bleeds;
 And to secure his crown the martyr dies! (ll. 416-18)

Clearly she has not overcome her admiration for martial pursuits despite her condemnation of war as an ignoble subject for enthusiasm. Similarly, though she deplores the inadequacy of poetry and painting to represent spiritual truths, she is very drawn to artistic expression. She is ambivalent about almost everything she says; on the one hand she wants to concede, like Byrom, that it is human nature to be enthusiastic, but on the other, she wants to insist that religious enthusiasm is different in kind, not simply in degree. At the same time, even as she is writing "Enthusiasm," she worries about being considered "a mere visionary enthusiast" by her friends.

WE ARE ALREADY ACCUSTOMED to thinking of Susanna Moodie as ambivalent. Indeed, ambivalence and self-contradiction pervade *Roughing It in the Bush* to such an extent that many critics have followed Margaret Atwood's lead in seeing her behaviour as pathological; Atwood calls it "paranoid schizophrenia." She came up with this label in her afterword to *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, a work published in 1970 and full of post-Centennial fervour about the way "we" live in Canada. Atwood makes it very clear that Moodie is a *symbol* for her of a problem in contemporary Canadian identity when she goes on to say that

We are all immigrants to this place even if we were born here: the country is too big for anyone to inhabit completely, and in the parts unknown to us we move in fear, exiles and invaders. This country is something that must be chosen — it is so easy to leave — and if we do choose it we are still choosing a violent duality.³⁹

Disregarding the political context of this rhetoric, too many critics continue to interpret Moodie's ambivalent response to life in the bush as representative of some hypothetical national predicament — Gaile McGregor, for example, states solemnly that "the question arises as to what Susanna Moodie's experience implies for the Canadian experience as a whole."⁴⁰ At its most glib and reductive, this analysis sees Susanna not only as sick herself, but symbolic of the sickness that is in others.

What is bizarre about such an interpretation — quite apart from the self-loathing evident in a couple of generations of Canlit critics — is the ignorance of human nature implied by the expectation that any writer, any person, should be perpetually optimistic, confident, resolved, and philosophically consistent. As another poet wrote, a few years after Moodie,

Do I contradict myself?
 Very well then. . . . I contradict myself;
 I am large. . . . I contain multitudes.⁴¹

Of course, Walt Whitman is exceptional not only in tolerating self-contradiction but in boasting about it; most writers try to schematize their works and suppress any evidence of hesitancy or second thoughts. They feel the literary imperatives of “unity,” “coherence” and “closure” as strongly as their critics; anticipating these critics, they banish discontinuity from their works.

That Moodie does not, either in an early work like “Enthusiasm” or in her later Canadian memoirs is, I believe, one reason literary critics have been so frustrated with her. Her opinions are robustly inconsistent — a sentimentalist, she is a defender of the class system; an advocate of progress, she is nostalgic for primitive simplicity; a Romantic nature-worshipper, she is terrified of wild animals. And not only does she not have a consistent point of view, her writing does not conform to the conventions of any given genre. Atwood makes the connection between the character’s self-contradictions and the discontinuities of the text in her “Afterword” to *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* when she describes *Roughing It* as a “collection of disconnected anecdotes” held together only by “the personality of Mrs Moodie.”⁴²

As Michael Peterman notes of *Roughing It in the Bush*, “containing elements of poetry, fiction, travel writing, autobiography, and social analysis, it eludes definition.”⁴³ The most recent attempt to come to terms with the book’s resistance to categorization is that of John Thurston who, reminding us of its publication history, argues flatly that

Susanna Moodie did not write *Roughing It in the Bush*. In fact, *Roughing It in the Bush* was never written. Susanna Moodie and *Roughing It in the Bush* are interchangeable titles given to a collaborative act of textual production whose origin cannot be limited to one person or one point in time.⁴⁴

Thurston is only taking to its logical extreme the policy of Carl Klinck, who argued in the introduction to his 1962 New Canadian Library edition of *Roughing It* that each generation of readers deserved a new version of the book. Following his own principles, he cut out not only all of Mr. Moodie’s contributions and Susanna’s poems, but also a great many “reports of pleasant excursions, and others of pathetic experiences;” what goes unacknowledged, however, is the paradox implied by the contention that “care has been taken to maintain the balance of the original, and to enhance the unique effect by concentration.”⁴⁵

One cannot maintain balance by increasing concentration. Nor does this edition truly maintain the balance of the original: almost all the cuts come from the second volume of *Roughing It*, the “pleasant excursions” showing Moodie enjoying her surroundings and the “pathetic experiences” showing her not only more resourceful

herself but better able to assist others. The result of Klinck's abridgement, therefore, is to emphasize her early difficulties and to underplay her later development; we do not see the protagonist learning from experience. She becomes a more static character, locked in her ambivalence, unable to progress. Curiously, she becomes more consistent in her inconsistency.

The editions of the 1980s have restored the original *Roughing It in the Bush*; contemporary editors have more patience with Moodie's story, and more respect for her text. The tide also seems to be turning in literary criticism — we have more tolerance these days for uncategorizable works; indeed, the greatest praise now goes to texts which break conventions and rupture forms. But Moodie is clearly *not* a literary iconoclast; we must resist the impulse to project backwards and make her a prophet of post-modernism. The present paper, exploring Moodie's early literary experiments in the context of her English adolescence, suggests more appropriate origin for her unconventionality: religious experience.

The Congregationalists, like other Dissenting sects, believed in confession, in self-examination, in the writing of memoirs detailing one's spiritual development. This model of discourse subscribes to an extra-literary notion of unity: it points beyond the text to the author's life for authentication — exactly what Atwood complains of in *Roughing It in the Bush*. The spiritual memoir does not require unity of mood, or tone, or style, or theme; as an unfinished journey its progress is not always linear, since the author constantly remakes old errors, and relearns old lessons.

No one has yet explored the relationship of this tradition to Moodie's Canadian writings, although the contributions of autobiography to English literature are well established.⁴⁶ All autobiography asserts the meaningfulness of the self and plots its adventures over a lifetime. Spiritual autobiography differs only in emphasizing the superior interest of the *inner* life of the individual to such facts as might catch the eye of conventional historians. Self and world necessarily interact: as the individual grows wise in the ways of the world she also starts to understand herself. As Martin Priestman notes of Cowper's memoir in verse, *The Task*, "the theoretical justification for such an experiment on such a scale rested on the Evangelical assumption that the private experience of 'religious persons' ought to be opened to the public in the name of morality and religion."⁴⁷

Of course, Cowper's poem, like *Roughing It in the Bush*, offers little sustained self-analysis — rather, the autobiography is constantly interrupted by satire, didacticism and natural description. It too is a miscegenous work, resisting generic classification. Cowper does not have Moodie's gift for characterization; on the other hand, he is a much better poet than she could ever have been. Perhaps if Moodie had stayed in England instead of emigrating to Canada she might have attempted a long poem along the lines of *The Task*: on the evidence of "Enthusiasm," and in accordance with her own estimation of her work, we ought to be glad that she did

not. Nonetheless, we ought not to ignore *Enthusiasm* as we have done for so long. The young woman who tried so hard to explain what she felt to her English family and friends continued to cross-examine herself once she crossed the Atlantic. That same resistance to oversimplification which pervades "Enthusiasm," filling it with self-contradiction, enabled her to be the most complete chronicler of the settlement experience in English Canada.

NOTES

- ¹ Robertson Davies, "At My Heart's Core," in *An Anthology of Canadian Literature in English*, Vol. I, eds. Russell Brown & Donna Bennett (Toronto: Oxford Univ. Press, 1982), 597.
- ² "At My Heart's Core," 599; 600.
- ³ *Enthusiasm* is now available on microtext, courtesy of the Canadian Institute for Historical Microreproductions (Ottawa, 1985). The CIHM number for the book is 38892. All quotations are from this, the first and only edition.
- ⁴ Susanna Moodie, *Letters of a Lifetime*, eds. Carl Ballstadt, Elizabeth Hopkins, & Michael Peterman (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1985). All quotations from Moodie's letters are from this edition, as are biographical facts.
- ⁵ *Letters of a Lifetime*, 48, n.7.
- ⁶ *Letters of a Lifetime*, 45; see pages 43-48 for the details of this eventful week.
- ⁷ Hoxie Neale Fairchild, *Religious Trends in English Poetry. Volume II: 1740-1780, Religious Sentimentalism in the Age of Johnson* (NY: Columbia Univ. Press, 1942), 370.
- ⁸ For her comments on Hemans see the letter of July 31, 1829 to Mary Russell Mitford; *Letters of a Lifetime*, 39. She wrote to James Bird about Cowper on September 5, 1828; see 25.
- ⁹ *Letters of a Lifetime*, 25.
- ¹⁰ William Cowper, *Poetical Works*, ed. H. S. Milford (rev. 4th ed. London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1967). All Cowper quotations are from this edition.
- ¹¹ *Letters of a Lifetime*, 49.
- ¹² *Letters of a Lifetime*, 53.
- ¹³ *Letters of a Lifetime*, 55.
- ¹⁴ *Letters of a Lifetime*, 60.
- ¹⁵ *Letters of a Lifetime*, 216.
- ¹⁶ *Letters of a Lifetime*, 147. Apparently the subscription was taken up by Pastor Ritchie himself, since in her letter of October 9th, 1830, Susanna writes to James Bird that "Mr. Ritchie will begin to print when we have got 150 names" (52). And though it was ultimately published by Smith, Elder and Company of Cornhill, the text of *Enthusiasm* was prepared at the Bungay Printing Press, owned by a family friend who was a leading Methodist, Robert Childs. (See *Letters of a Lifetime*, 14-15; 49 n.3) So the book really was the work of "kind friends."
- ¹⁷ For details of Susanna Moodie's early life, see the editorial notes to *Letters of a Lifetime*, 1-5.
- ¹⁸ Eleanor M. Sickels, *The Gloomy Egoist: Moods and Themes of Melancholy from*

Gray to Keats (NY: Columbia Univ. Press, 1932), 83. Sickels quotes these opening lines from an anonymous "Ode to Melancholy" published in the *Scots Magazine*, Feb. 1756:

Come, sweet enthusiast, from the holy vale,
Whence streams o'er all thy sadly-soothing lay;
While Night sits list'ning to thy tender tale,
That melts the heart, and steals the soul away (49).

The association of melancholy with enthusiasm suggested by this example was common, the enthusiast being typically a solitary contemplative. And the Warton brothers made this pairing of terms irresistible: Joseph wrote "The Enthusiast" in 1740; Thomas, "The Pleasures of Melancholy" in 1747.

¹⁹ *Letters of a Lifetime*, p. 37.

²⁰ David B. Morris, *The Religious Sublime: Christian Poetry and Critical Tradition in 18th-Century England* (Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 1972), 108.

²¹ Quoted by Hoxie Neale Fairchild in *Religious Trends in English Poetry. Volume I: 1700-1740, Protestantism and the Cult of Sentiment* (NY: Columbia Univ. Press, 1939), 187.

²² *Letters of a Lifetime*, 29.

²³ For the history of the word "Enthusiasm," see Susie I. Tucker, *Enthusiasm: A Study in Semantic Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), and Sister M. Kevin Whelan, *Enthusiasm in English Poetry of the Eighteenth Century* (Washington: Catholic Univ. of America Press, 1935).

²⁴ Clarence M. Webster, "Swift and Some Earlier Satirists of Puritan Enthusiasm," *PMLA* 48 (1933), 1142-43. Molière proposed a similar theory, satirically, in *Tartuffe*.

²⁵ For Casaubon's *A Treatise concerning Enthusiasme* see "A Facsimile Reproduction of the second edition of 1656," intro. Paul J. Korshin (Gainesville, Florida: Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, 1970); for More's *Enthusiasmus Triumphatus*, see publication 118 of the Augustan Reprint Society, intro. M. V. DePorte (Los Angeles: Williams Andrews Clark Memorial Library, 1966).

²⁶ Blount is quoted by George Williamson in "The Restoration Revolt against Enthusiasm," *Studies in Philology* 30 (1933), 583. For Johnson's definition see *Johnson's Dictionary: A Modern Selection* ed. E. L. McAdam, Jr. and George Milne (NY: Random House, 1963), 166.

²⁷ Quoted by Frederick C. Gill in *The Romantic Movement and Methodism* (London: The Epworth Press, 1937), 22. See also Clarke Garrett, *Spirit Possession and Popular Religion: From the Camisards to the Shakers* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1987), 79.

²⁸ Anthony Ashley Cooper, Earl of Shaftesbury, "A Letter Concerning Enthusiasm to My Lord Sommers," in *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, ed. Walter M. Hatch (3 vols., London: Longmans, Green, 1870), vol. 1, 58, n.2.

²⁹ "A Letter Concerning Enthusiasm," 67.

³⁰ "The Moralists, A Philosophical Rhapsody. Being a Recital of certain conversations or Natural and Moral Subjects," in *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* 3 vols. (2nd ed., corr. 1714), vol. 2, 400. At the beginning of the piece, Philocles describes Theocles to a third party, Palamon, as having "nothing of that savage Air of the vulgar Enthusiastick Kind. All was serene, soft and harmonious" (218).

Shaftesbury takes great care to ensure that his refined enthusiasm for natural beauty should be properly distinguished from lower-class religious frenzy.

- ³¹ "The Moralists," 400.
- ³² Joseph Warton, "The Enthusiast, or the Lover of Nature," in *The Three Wartons: A Choice of their Verse* ed. Eric Partridge (London: The Scholartis Press, 1927).
- ³³ *Letters of a Lifetime*, 299.
- ³⁴ Fairchild notes that this poem is "a faithful paraphrase of [William] Law's *Some Animadversions upon Dr. Trapp's Reply*, a polemic appended to his famous *Appeal to All that Doubt*" (1740); see *Religious Trends in English Poetry, Vol. II*, 160.
- ³⁵ John Byrom, "Enthusiasm. A Poetical Essay," in *Miscellaneous Poems* 2 vols. (Manchester: J. Harrop, 1773), vol. 2, 22-41.
- ³⁶ The text actually reads "to make *Entheasm* a Crime," [my emphasis] but I believe this to be a misprint.
- ³⁷ A letter to Richard Bentley dated January 22, 1856, poignantly reminds us that Moodie was well aware of her particular talents. She confides that all her early works had been dramatic, but that she "was persuaded by foolish fanaticks, with whom I got entangled, to burn these MSS, it being they said unworthy of a christian to write for the stage. . . . The little headings in blank verse, that often occur in my books are snatches that memory retains of these tragedies. Nature certainly meant me for a dramatic writer, and having outlived my folly, I really regret the martyrdom of these vigourous children of my young brain. Don't *laugh at me*. That portion of my life, would make a strange revelation of sectarianism. But it may rest with my poor tragedies in oblivion. I do not wish it to meet with their firey dooms or the ridicule of the world." *Letters of a Lifetime*, 164-65.
- ³⁸ This distinction itself was fairly conventional. We have seen it in Shaftesbury, Wesley and Byrom; even closer to Moodie, perhaps, is the comment of George Nott in 1802 that:
- What we admire in the soldier, or the scholar ... as Enthusiasm, is something quite distinct from [the religious variety of which he is treating]. . . . This enthusiasm consequently means no more than a laudable warmth of zeal in their several pursuits; in this case the use of the word is improper and may be dangerous. At all events, if it be tolerated in this sense in familiar conversation, it ought never to be so employed in writing.
- See Tucker, *Enthusiasm*, 131.
- ³⁹ "Afterword," *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (Toronto: Oxford, 1970), 62.
- ⁴⁰ Gaile McGregor, *The Wacousta Syndrome: Explorations in the Canadian Landscape* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1985), 38.
- ⁴¹ Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself," *Leaves of Grass* (1855) ed. Malcolm Cowley (New York: Viking, 1959), ll.1314-16.
- ⁴² "Afterword" to *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, 62.
- ⁴³ "Susanna Moodie (1803-1885)," *Canadian Writers and Their Works: Fiction Series 1* eds. Robert Lecker, Jack David & Ellen Quigley (Downsview, Ontario: ECW, 1983), 80-81.
- ⁴⁴ John Thurston, "Rewriting *Roughing It*" in *Future Indicative: Literary Theory and Canadian Literature*, ed. John Moss (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1987), 195.

- ⁴⁵ Klinck, Intro. to *Roughing It in the Bush*, New Canadian Library (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1962), x.
- ⁴⁶ See, for example, Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Imagining a Self: Autobiography and Novel in Eighteenth Century England* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1976); Huntington Williams, *Rousseau and Romantic Autobiography* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1983); and Ernest Zimmerman, *Defoe and the Novel* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1975).
- ⁴⁷ Martin Priestman, *Cowper's Task: Structure and Influence* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1983), 26.

NIGHT WALTZ

Harold Rhenisch

The pear trees waltz
out with the angels
under the moon,
the hard green pears
swaying like earrings
on their limbs,
their skirts brushing through the grass,
their eyes closed in rapture,
their hair thrown back.

Suddenly they open their eyes,
and they are so happy!

They dance effortlessly
even though their roots are torn out
and bleeding,

they dance as if they've always
danced like this,

gliding through the night
with the stars glistening like jewels,

and the grass laughing
and clapping its hands.