

# “OTHER TIMES, OTHER PLACES”

## *Narrative Displacement in Ray Smith’s Writing*

Colin Nicholson

[R.S.] “Scratch a Nova Scotian and within three sentences you’re back to The Clearances; one more sentence and you’re back to Bonnie Prince Charlie, The Covenanters and Mary Queen of Scots. The Campbells and the Macdonalds still don’t speak to one another. The grievances of the past live on, as well as the glories and the memories.”\*

**I**N RAY SMITH’S FICTION, senses of the past are problematized. In a body of writing seemingly concerned to abolish traditional historical time-frames and collapse conventional apprehensions of narrative temporality, we encounter gaps rather than sequences. Wary of predetermined connections, Smith is a writer who might initially appear to be in flight from his origins. His fluent, disconcerting prose engages the reader in an exploration of linkage rather than in its traditional, realist embodiment. His apparently discrete collocations suggest subterranean, tangential, or implied kinships and correlations. And in this process history, inevitably, returns to play its part. History, it could be argued, together with stories of origination, were never absent from Ray Smith’s writing project, but as he considers the story of his place of origin, Smith, who now lives in Montreal and first came to prominence as one of the Montreal Story Tellers Group, recognizes elements of difficulty for his own writing.

[R.S.] “First of all, Nova Scotians carry around their history as if it were a big knap-sack, and I always had the sense that others were aware of certain things about Nova Scotia. One was that in the year of Confederation, 1867, Nova Scotia was a great and prosperous place. I have heard it said that Nova Scotia was the third or fourth largest shipping power in the world — just after

\* This article incorporates an interview conducted with Ray Smith during his visit to Edinburgh on the writer-exchange scheme jointly funded by the Canada Council and the Scottish Arts Council. Smith’s responses are signalled thus: [R.S.]

Britain and America. But although conditions at present are not too bad, all during the years that I was growing up there it was a depressed place. What happened, I guess, was that at Confederation all the money, all the manufacturing went to Ontario.

“So. Nova Scotians live with that ‘glory of the past’ — also a very Scottish thing. We also live with the fact that we came there from The Clearances: so whenever you run into a Nova Scotian, you immediately have this background of economic greatness, of glory, of a possible future that never came. And, of course, you have Scotland. Now. I couldn’t deal with that in my writing, and in fact I left Nova Scotia the morning after I graduated. I’ve always found the ‘Nova Scotianness’ in me a very difficult thing to write about. I can write about Venice, France, Germany; But I haven’t been able to write about Scotland. And I may not be able to, because it’s too personal. I may be coming round to it, but I still haven’t dealt with my own history. I have to displace it all the time.”

Displacement becomes a significant feature in Smith’s fiction; living in the interstices of a history either perceived as effectively over, or felt as happening elsewhere, in his writing Ray Smith might, paradoxically, be producing aspects of an identity and relationship with and for a region of origin, the Maritimes, that has been characterized as “everyone’s half-forgotten past and no-one’s future.”<sup>1</sup> Though it may appear to be the most arcane of reversals, the very absence of beginnings, the lack of direct treatment of Nova Scotian experience, the paucity of Canadian reference inscribes a return of the repressed, providing for his fictions an historical base and cultural definition against all surface appearances.

RAY SMITH’S FIRST COLLECTION of stories, *Cape Breton is the Thought Control Centre of Canada*,<sup>2</sup> quite apart from its jesting, titular announcement of the revenge of the geographically remote and the economically peripheral, explores in its first piece “Colours” a displacement of narrative continuity within a ‘*reductio ad absurdum*’ of the questing hero, which already heralds an antic disposition towards causal effect. “Ah well,” this first story ends, “the details did not matter. In the end there was only the search and, with luck, the pattern. It made you think. Gerald yawned” (17). On the way, “Colours” post-modernistically encodes its own fictive procedures:

Why should the subject be resumed? If the episode arises naturally out of the main subject, then the main subject is . . . in (let us say), is in the episode. Or, say, let us examine the pearls one by one and surely we shall know of the string? Pearls are more interesting than string. (3)

Perhaps so. But there are other ways of looking at linkage, ways that may take us closer to the infrastructure of Smith’s literary techniques. And in his ironic *Author’s Commentary*<sup>3</sup> on “Colours” he uses the same image to point the way:

When a woman wears a necklace we do not see the string though we know it must be there. So I have tried to write a story composed of five "pearls". . . . The reader cannot see the string or plot, but he should be able to deduce it as a line through from the way the incidents hang together. (220)

[R.S.] "It seemed to me that the way of getting to a little bit of the truth was to take one thing and say it as clearly as you possibly can, and its own little truth would hold there. Give that to the reader. Then you take another thing which seems to be true, which may or may not contradict the first — they may even have no apparent relationship. And the connection between them, well, that's where the truth happens. The lightning between the places is the real meaning. It's by no means a new idea. It's at least back to imagism, at the turn of the century, and heaven knows it goes back further than that."

It goes forward, in Smith's fiction, to the last section of *Century*<sup>4</sup> and the historical Harry Kessler's reply to the fictional Kenniston Thorson:

"You know perfectly well epigrams are amusing and useful as glimpses; you also know they are not the whole story. The truth is to be found in the way many different things fit together in relation to one another. In a sense, because the relationship, not the parts, has the truth, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts." (145)

One way of approaching Smith's juxtaposings is through a phrase he introduces in the title story of his first collection: "Recently a friend conned me into explaining my interest in compiled fiction, an example of which you are now reading" (121). In his essay "Dinosaur"<sup>5</sup> Smith describes two of these stories as

part of a body of work called 'speculative fiction.' Generally ironic in tone. Aesthetic in approach; which means, I suppose, an indirect approach to the many social and political problems of the world around us. . . . I should emphasise, or repeat, that spec fic doesn't ignore the world, but approaches it somewhat indirectly. (206)

At any rate, compilations is what some of these fictions are, and in the "Cape Breton" story itself, the technique produces a witty interrogation of the nature of Canada's cultural identity in the year of its centennial celebrations.<sup>6</sup> In a deft series of concatenations, the depredations suffered by Poland at the hands of any number of invaders, and Canada's economic penetration by the monetary mammoth to its south spark a set of voiced and unvoiced connections both comic and unsettling:

Consider the Poles. They have built a nation which, if not great and powerful, is at least distinct. . . . Analogies are never perfect, but the Poles do have what we want. Consider the Poles; consider the price they have paid and paid and paid. (21)

As he shores fragments against various ruin, Ray Smith habitually has recourse to a history not his own. Time and place become the subject of his fiction, often in ways that signify uncertainty, jeopardy. It can only be the accident of design that the story called "Peril" curves around the doings of three characters called Passquick, Period, and Purlieu; motion, time, and place.

**L**ORD NELSON TAVERN<sup>7</sup> traces the permutations and cross-pollinations of a group of Haligonians from undergraduate excess to various stages of age and maturity. But the first sleight-of-hand, conjuring cross-textual definition and intra-textual uncertainty is the fact that nowhere in *Lord Nelson Tavern* is the tavern named, nor its location near Dalhousie University in Halifax given. This information is contained in “The Galoshes” from *Cape Breton*, and its absence from Smith’s second book creates conditions of spatial uncertainty in keeping with a blurred chronology. Time-frame in any conventionally accepted narrative sense is abolished, so temporal connections are anyway attenuated. Smith had realized early that he was faced with the problem in writing *Lord Nelson Tavern* that the book looked like going on for a fair while, but he had already set the beginning in the late fifties, with characters who were his contemporaries.

[R.S.] “They graduated in about 1963 or ’64. So forty years on, what time is it? And to write a futuristic novel was crazy: after all, this was something of a social novel — a comedy of manners. Conversely, if they were going to be 65 years old in 1970, then when did they go to university — in 1920? So I said to myself, basically, I’ll leave out time-references as much as possible — no specific dates — and I’ll just assume, for my convenience at least, that it’s all happening in the 1960’s. Well, that’s the way I did it. To me it was a casual decision. It was simply the convenience you can have in a world of Borges and writers of that kind, who have broken enough rules to be able to say if you want to do it, do it.”

There is, of course, a more immediate sense in which Smith is doing nothing more than compelling attention towards aspects of narrative which challenge many of our more comfortable and unthinking assumptions. Towards the end of *Lord Nelson Tavern*, Gussie remarks to Paleologue (whose own name recuperates the ancient), “I was reading Herodotus again; I had forgotten how chaotic life can be” (154). Since modernist writing has long since shown us that conceptions of story-time as a linear succession of events are themselves only conventions, conveniences, Ray Smith’s usage has established precedents. Rimmon-Kenan makes the point:

Text-time . . . strictly speaking, is a spatial not a temporal dimension. The narrative text as text has no other temporality than the one it metonymically derives from the process of reading. What discussions of text-time actually refer to is the linear (spatial) disposition of linguistic segments in the continuum of the text. Thus both story-time and text-time may in fact be no more than temporal.<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps in keeping with this, *Lord Nelson Tavern* keeps us constantly aware of its own provisionality. Its penultimate paragraph explicitly registers different possibilities, foregrounding its fictionality and deconstructing any finality in its turn towards closure:

Get up in the morning, pull on yesterday's clothes, instant coffee in a dirty cup, smoke a cigarette. In other times, other places, Gussies acting, his poetry failed: she became a whore, a druggie, he died of disease and failure. But those were other places other times. (160)

It may, then, be a hazard of hindsight that there seems to be an inevitable sense of progression towards Ray Smith's latest book. *Century* is a novel of sorts about members of the Seymour family. The novel is divided into two novellas — "Family" and "The Continental." "Family" is itself composed of four stories, and "The Continental" of two. While a carefully disordered genealogical chronology connects characters, a more congruous sense of thematic relationship is suggested by the fact that, from its title onwards, *Century* figures history itself as a central concern. Displaced from Nova Scotia, but not from Canada, the spirit of history which pervades this text is, with one crucial and defining exception, uncompromisingly European, lending point and definition, perhaps, to a remark made by one of the characters. "At work abroad, I was always pleased to say: I am a Canadian; I am nobody; I am everybody" (46). The ease of passage and transferral thus facilitated is eminently preferable to the militarizing nationalisms adumbrated in the narrative.

Running beneath a newly discovered suppleness and lyrical fluency in the writing, is a ghostly sub-text of horror and violence as Europe reaches decisive turning-points in its historical development. What we conventionally call text-time, unfolding a linear presentation of information about things, and necessarily progressing from line to line and page to page, is subverted by a march in time which, from 1983 in the opening story about the suicide of Jane Seymour, and after a sideways step to her brother Ian in the next story, moves backwards to explore first her father in "The Garden of the Hesperides," then her mother Gwen, in "Serenissima." In the book's second half, we move firstly to the France of the Belle Epoque before closing with Weimar Germany.

The first story, "In the Night Heinrich Himmler . . ." emblemizes some of Smith's concerns, in a study of his contemporary character Jane Seymour haunted (in nightmare? — in fantasy? — in historical memory?) by the erotic attentions of Hitler's henchman. And if, as figure, Jane is historicized by Tudor associations, then past and present flow in Heraclitean flux. Characteristically, Smith foregrounds his authorial role and focuses uncompromisingly on the fictionality of his creation, though again with the teasing resonance of Tudor precedent: "Does it matter that there was not a real Jane Seymour? I don't think so, but I hope you found her convincing. And I'm afraid you almost certainly know one woman like her" (25). When Jane's father Bill later reflects upon his dead wife, "and that is why I wept" (54), he links back to Smith's authorial presence here: "When I think of their sufferings, their struggles, and for some, their suicides, I weep, as I weep now for Jane" (25). Similarly, when Bill remembers his wife "as perhaps serene or self-

absorbed" (52), he looks forward to her lyrical, if elegizing resurrection in Gwen Seymour's own story, the heart of the writing in *Century*, "Serenissima."

Having decided that Venice was the appropriate setting for her impending death, Smith proceeded to steep himself in reading about the city before arranging for a visit to look at the place for himself.

[r.s.] "I got back toward the end of January and I started to write. I wanted to get right into the story. Gwen's having a bath. O.K., we'll start the thing by sending her to a hotel reception on the first night, and something's going to happen to her there. So she gets out of the bath, 'serene was she as she stepped' — and I could hear it happening with those repeated 's' sounds: this is a sensuous story. I looked at the bath-tub, and what was it — 'from the foam of her bath onto' — what did the floor look like when we were in Venice? — 'sea-shell patterned tiles.' Well, 'but then Gwen felt again' — and I wondered where the syllables and cadencing were coming from. She steps out of the bath and there's a stitch in her side. First of all it was just a stitch, for about two seconds, that is, that she 'took as a threat, a foreboding.' And then the whole damn story was there. Gwen started to walk, and all I had to was follow."

Gwen's voracious sexual appetite is in part an inheritance from her mother Constance whose secret name Gwen couldn't remember. That sexuality forms part of the libertine make-up Gwen passes on to Jane who opens the book; and Constance, in the opening lines of the book's last chapter, changes her name to Lulu. The brothel in which we first meet Kenniston Thorson, consort of Constance/Lulu and as such Gwen's putative father, seems the natural terminus ad quem for such habits and attitudes, though again chronologically pre-dating them. Smith is at further pains to lend fibre and linkage to his attenuated chronology. When Toulouse-Lautrec, in "Red Velvet, Black Lace" says "France is a mother to us all, but Paris is as much a harlot as the girls at Madame Eugenie's" (112), the echo takes us back in the text and forward in time to Gwen Seymour (whose own mother, Constance/Lulu has already been described as "a whore" [77]) listening to her husband discuss with a Frenchman and an Englishman sexual perceptions of "La Serenissima Repubblica di Venezia":

"You see," began her husband, "if Venice really is feminine . . ."

"Then," continued the Frenchman, "the Venetians have never been better than pimps . . ."

The Englishman concluded softly: "And Venice is their whore." (81)

Thorson tousles Lulu's "Titian-red hair" (130), and the resonance returns us to Gwen's Venetian rising from her bath onto "sea-shell patterned tiles" (71). And when Lulu concocts a tale about an Easter egg that "was of red enamel and had a portrait of me and one of cousin Nicky and there were tiny pearls that were his eyes . . ." (132), the phrase from *The Tempest* evokes the moment before Gwen's

crushing humiliation in Jean-Claude's hotel room: "Yes, the isle was full of noises, sweet sounds and airs that gave delight and hurt not. Was it not so?" (86).

**T**HIS CROSS-WEAVING of interior designs produces some spectacular effects. As the book ends, Thorson and Lulu, about to board a train at Munich station, meet the composer Alban Berg, one of several historical figures who wander in and out of this fictional world, who shows them a copy of his opera *Wozzeck*. Berg, then, whose next opera is to be *Lulu*, meets her textual incarnation, and as they part addresses a remark to her in German. She asks for a translation, and Thorson obliges:

He said: A soul on the other side . . . in Paradise, I think we'd say . . . who rubs the sleep from her eyes. I expect it's a quotation. (159)

Indeed it is: a quotation not only from the Wedekind play which Berg adapted into operatic form, but something else too. When Gwen, wandering around Venice eighty pages earlier, comes upon the sea for which she has been searching, we read: "She stepped slowly through the frame, into the light, a soul in Paradise, rubbing the sleep from her eyes" (79).

The phrase "in Paradise" carries us further back again, to the textual presentation of *Century's* main Canadian figure. Gwen's husband, Bill Seymour, after a lifetime's dedication to international altruism, retires Candide-like to cultivate his own garden. If the text as a whole proposes possible correlations between person and place: Gwen and Venice, Lulu and Weimar Germany; then in the figure of Bill Seymour a partial element of Canadian identity finds purpose in location, a place to stand on, "here on the coast of British Columbia" (43). Having witnessed something less than success in the effects of international aid, particularly in Africa, he seeks consolation in smaller compass: "A failure as an angel in the great world, I shall try my hand as a god in this little one" (43). Bill muses upon etymological relationships: "Our word *paradise* can be traced back to the old Persian *pairidaeza* meaning an area walled around or enclosed" (49). But other realms, beyond the safely circumscribed, keep intruding: "now when I contemplate living in my paradise, I am tormented by the spectre of those degraded multitudes, and all delight is gone from my garden" (51).

Counterpointing its gaps and elisions, these intratextual motifs of doublings, echoes, and repetitions lend depth and bonding to the writing. And as part of this connecting fibre, in a text suffused with threat, exploitation, and global violence, *Century* encloses historical event within its realia of discourse. Or, the reader's safe confinement within the realm of fictive narration, inside its walled garden so to speak, is threatened, jeopardized by intrusions into that world of elements from

other realms. In its progressive imbrication of the real with the unreal, *Century* composes a Canadian textuality out of the displacements and indirections which are everywhere its characteristic devices.

For it is a marked feature of the second part of the novel, "The Continental," that its historical detail strives for verifiable accuracy. The brothel upon which "Red Velvet, Black Lace" opens is an apt setting for the prostitution of diplomacy and for private avarice, as World War I looms:

Recently for example, a most obliging gentleman friend from the Quai d'Orsay had given Fifi warning of an impending "incident" in North Africa which together with hints Madame had gathered about adjustments in Austro-Hungarian naval policy had enabled the ladies to make a tidy profit in German armaments shares. (98)

Into this house of pleasure step Arthur Balfour and George Wyndham, gleaning whatever information they might, along the way.

Earlier, Kenniston Thorson absent-mindedly watches opera-goers milling about in front of the Café de la Paix:

Through this chattering, gesticulating crowd strode three army officers, artillery by their insignia. They sounded a jarring note, the cocky tilt of their Kepis, their nonchalant shrugs suggesting an impatience with these aimless civilians: Sedan would never be far from their thoughts. (111)

Inevitably linking forward to the young A. J. P. Taylor's question addressed to Kenniston Thorson, "would France ever forgive Verdun?" (136), the incident of the three officers has a different significance. One of them, although not named as such, was in Smith's creating imagination the young Alfred Dreyfus: an intriguing example of historical detail absolutely denied to the reader.

**A**S RAY SMITH ELIDES THE BOUNDARIES between historical personality and fictional character, "The Continental" section of *Century* incorporates a debate upon aspects and functions of art. Toulouse-Lautrec proposes while Frank Harris disagrees, and the famed of Parisian cultural life in the 1890s flit across the page. In a conjunction at once glittering and disturbing, the production of art and the gathering clouds of war merge in uneasy coalescence. Lautrec, pronouncing upon balancing and unbalancing in art (115-16) seems to speak directly to A. J. P. Taylor's remarks upon "the balance of power" (136) in international relations. Either way, the boundaries of fiction are blurred. Far from being well defined and sealed off, fictional borders appear to be variously accessible, sometimes easy to trespass, obeying different sorts of constraints in different contexts. American intertexts with an international ambience locate and connect *Century* in a variety of ways. When we read that "[Comtesse Amalie's] voice



stuttered into silence in the violet twilight" (*Century* 110), lines from *The Wasteland* are conjured:

What is the city over the mountains  
Cracks and reforms and bursts in the violet air  
Falling towers  
Jerusalem Athens Alexandria  
Vienna London  
Unreal.<sup>9</sup>

Both texts refer back to an earlier North American visitor to Europe, himself re-composing an identity from many recognitions dim and faint:

Two or three of the windows stood open to the violet air; and, before Strether had cut the knot by crossing, a young man had come out and looked about him. . . .<sup>10</sup>

In *The Ambassadors*, too, in a remark made by Miss Barrace, we find a measure of the purpose behind this kind of allusive web:

"We're all looking at each other — and in the light of Paris one sees what things resemble. That's what the light of Paris always seems to show." (128)

The last chapter of *Century* precipitates a series of intertextual relations which correlates Smith's fiction with a range of relevant discourses. Apart from the obligatory "if April is cruel" (152), among the travellers are E. M. Forster's Miss Schlegel, "only connecting" (131) and Isherwood's Arthur Norris "changing trains" (142). We meet Harry Kessler and a seventeen-year-old Alan Taylor. From Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* echo a "Princess of Thurn & Taxis" (herself a historical figure incorporated into fiction) and "Countess Tristero" (134); then, three pages later, "Richard Wharfinger."

In *Century*, Ray Smith constructs an intertextual zone where only a Canadian character — Bill Seymour — is at home. In keeping with his string-of-pearls image, Smith invites the reader to recognize the relations between two or more texts, or between specific texts and particular historical periods. As part of this process, he incorporates characters from another text or from the historical record. The transmigration of characters from one fictional universe to another enables the producing text to claim for them, in Umberto Eco's phrase, "transworld identity."<sup>11</sup> It is an identity given concrete definition in the episode when Thorson is telling the young Taylor a story he had heard from Percy Grainger — another historical figure — "an Australian, studied in Germany, has collected a great deal of English folk music, but . . . [whose] passion is for the North" (136). The textual indirection of a story told and retold combines with the geographical displacement of one of its tellers. But this is then compounded and resolved when Thorson tells Taylor how the Norwegian composer Edvard Grieg had complimented Grainger on one of Grainger's Norwegian suites. "Now you will notice," Thorson continues to

Taylor, "the essential generosity of that story: a native of country A generously composes something for country B and the greatest native composer of country B generously praises him for it" (137). Contrasted with this internationalism is the small-minded enclosure of Thorson's home in Indiana, where domestic ignorance and prejudice bloodily inhibits even local relationships. Thorson's story concludes, though, with an allusion to *The Crying of Lot 49*: "when that matter was settled to the satisfaction of all concerned, it reminded one of a curtain scene from Thomas Kyd or Richard Wharfinger" (137).

We are, then, perhaps justified in attending to the series of verbal echoes from Pynchon's second novel contained in the closing pages of *Century*. In both texts railways figure as communications system and as metaphor. Oedipa Maas feels the network of relationships she thinks she has discovered to be a threat to her stability:

She stopped a minute between the steel rails, raising her head as if to sniff the air. Becoming conscious of the hard, strung presence she stood on — knowing . . . how these tracks ran on into others, others, knowing they laced, deepened, authenticated the great night around her.<sup>12</sup>

Moving in darkness, Oedipa's paranoia increases the more she considers the scope and range of the interconnections in which she feels enmeshed. All of which is distinctively different from the perspective of Ray Smith's American, Kenniston Thorson. With a clear-eyed awareness that the alternatives are random contingency, chance and brute process, and moreover, in an episode which is followed by a compelling and memorable evocation of human cruelty in Eliot's wasteland, Thorson considers "the switchman for the small branch line who must remember to pull that lever . . . for forty-five years without a mistake. . . .

Is it enough that he is part of something, part of the network, the system, the idea that is bigger than him and his little hut, but encloses them, the idea which comes on silvered rails that stretch to Munich, to Vienna, to Istanbul, to Baghdad? (152)

The questions continue, and in terms of novelistic resolution, *Century* proposes no answer. But its technical attributes, inscribing many varieties of relatedness, and foreshadowing the possibilities of many more, suggest a knowing, if partial, assent.

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> W. H. New, "Maritime Cadences," *Canadian Literature: Special Issue on the Maritimes* No. 68-69 (Spring/Summer 1976), 3.
- <sup>2</sup> Ray Smith, *Cape Breton is the Thought Control Centre of Canada* (Toronto: Anansi, 1969).
- <sup>3</sup> Smith, "Author's Commentary," in *Sixteen by Twelve: Short Stories by Canadian Writers*, ed. John Metcalf (Toronto: Ryerson, 1970).
- <sup>4</sup> Smith, *Century* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1986).
- <sup>5</sup> Smith, "Dinosaur," in *The Narrative Voice: Short Stories and Reflections by Canadian Authors*, ed. John Metcalf (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1972).

- <sup>6</sup> The story first appeared in 1967 and is subtitled "A Centennial Project."  
<sup>7</sup> Smith, *Lord Nelson Tavern* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1974).  
<sup>8</sup> Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (London: Methuen, 1983), 44.  
<sup>9</sup> T. S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems & Plays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), 73.  
<sup>10</sup> Henry James, *The Ambassadors* (New York: Signet, 1960), 62.  
<sup>11</sup> Umberto Eco, "Lector in Fabula: Pragmatic Strategy in a Metanarrative text," in *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of the Text* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1979), 223.  
<sup>12</sup> Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (London: Picador, 1966), 124.

## LANDSCAPE WITH SNOW

*George Amabile*

It came again in the night, just when we thought  
we couldn't live any more with the view, the shack  
and its broken dock, the bleached-out driftwood caught  
like snapped bone in the rocks, and it softens the shock  
of day, this immaculate poultice of cold scum  
crystallized from clouds infected with chem-smoke  
where the sea breaks down each radioactive drum  
like a large mind probing a dense joke.

And we're free again to clothe ourselves in slogans.  
We remember why we are here. We rummage for bargains  
like tireless mice in fifty acre malls  
where the young lounge and wander, safely adrift,  
dreaming of power and stealth, believing in kraft  
food stuffs, video rock and lottery windfalls.