

IMAGE AND MOOD

Recent Poems by Michael Bullock

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THREE RECENT COLLECTIONS attest to the current creative efflorescence of Michael Bullock, who has been called “one of the most vivid, mysterious, and technically proficient poets writing in English today.”¹ His poems have an enigmatic clarity that does not yield up their secrets to casual reading; they delight and puzzle.

It may be helpful to divide Bullock’s long career as a poet into four phases, beginning with (1) *Transmutations* (1938); resuming with (2) *Sunday is a Day of Incest* (1961), *Poems of Solitude*, translated from the Chinese with Jerome Ch’ên (1961), *World Without Beginning Amen!* (1963), and *Zwei Stimmen in meinem Mund/Two Voices in my Mouth*, a two-language selection with German translations by Hedwig Rhode (1967); continuing with (3) *A Savage Darkness* (1969) and *Black Wings White Dead* (1978); and culminating with (4) *Lines in the Dark Wood* (1981), *Quadriga for Judy* (1982), *Prisoner of the Rain: Poems in Prose* (1983), *Brambled Heart* (1986), *Vancouver Moods* (1986), and *Poems on Green Paper* (1987).² Many of the images and symbols that grow and spread throughout his work first appear in *Transmutations*, in which a *TLS* reviewer found “the secret intensity of life and the strangeness of beauty.” This prelude is marked by eclectic experimentation, especially with Imagism, Surrealism, and Orientalism. At this stage, the nineteen-year-old poet had read one poem by Ezra Pound (“The Garden”), plus one number of the *Imagist Anthology*, in which he discovered affinities with Pound, Aldington, and Lawrence. He had responded enthusiastically to the Surrealist Exhibition of 1936 (organized by Sir Herbert Read, whom he was later to meet), and this was the start of a lifelong involvement with Surrealism. Finally, he had made a voyage to India (where he had fallen in love with Maya), and he had read Chinese, Japanese, and Sanskrit poetry in *An Anthology of World Poetry*.³

The style of Bullock’s second phase (published in England and Germany in the sixties) is a personal amalgam of Expressionism and Surrealism. In this period, however, he also encountered the eighth-century poet Wang Wei’s “Forty Poems of the River Wang,” which led to his *Poems of Solitude*, a significant exercise in the art of conveying a mood through natural images. The freshness

of Bullock's style stems from a deep immersion in nature, an aptitude for meditation, and a craftsman's precision in handling words. He once maintained that a single word, "Green" for instance, could be a poem. This would require a creative reader, who could release the potential that lies locked up in a word, and harmonize its radiating associations. Poetry would thus become a form of subliminal stimulation, inducing the reader to pass beyond the mirror of the text in a "free and deliberate exercise of the imaginative *Book* that is in all of us."⁴ The third phase of the poet's development (and the first in Canada) is the most strongly surrealist, although Bullock eschews Breton's automatist dogma in favour of a flexible approach to conscious and unconscious creativity.⁵ The fourth phase (consisting of six books artistically produced by Third Eye Press) involves considerable stylistic diversity. Here Surrealism may serve as a technique for expressionist ends, as in *Lines* and *Quadriga*, or appear unalloyed as in the brilliant prose poems of *Prisoner*.⁶

The present essay is an investigation of image and mood in the latest trio of texts, whose predominant styles may be characterized as Imagism fused with Symbolism in *Brambled Heart*, and Imagism with surrealist overtones in *Vancouver Moods* and *Poems on Green Paper*. This mature poetic vein shows a return to, and refinement of, original techniques and themes. As a young man, Michael Bullock was influenced by the Symbolist theory of "Pure Poetry." Poetry, he felt (with Mallarmé), aspires to the condition of music; it is nonreferential — it gives no message, makes no point. It deals in images and is nonexpository. It can't be presented in any other way; it is essentially *these* words in *this* order. Indeed, theorizing is a paradoxical activity, for pure poetry doesn't stem from a concept or have a purpose. Bullock was later to quote to his students McLeish's maxim, "A poem should not mean but be." These ideas, which he has never repudiated, show how firmly rooted his poetry is in the aesthetic soil of Imagism and Symbolism.

Yet Bullock's chief orientation is to Surrealism, and his own fiction and painting are "unequivocally surrealist." What then is the role of Surrealism in his poetry? Surrealist philosophy aims at a conjunction of opposites, including "the real and the imagined" (*M*, 123), while surrealist technique involves startling concatenations of disparate images to form previously unimagined entities. As Lautréamont observes, "One does not often see a lamp and an angel united in one body."⁷ J. H. Matthews has pointed out that "the key to the surreal is to be sought in the image," and Bullock also "believe[s] in the overriding importance of the visual image as the embodiment of the imagination at work."⁸ Thus the cult of *the image*, which Pound describes as "an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time," provides a legitimate link between Bullock's Imagism and his Surrealism, which often shade into each other. A statement by the author best clarifies the issue:

My poetry is made up of images; therefore it is *imagist*. The images are surreal in that they follow their own laws and not those of everyday reality; therefore my poetry is *surrealist*. The images are drawn from the natural world but shown in the distorting mirror of a personality and used as a means of expressing this personality; therefore my poetry is *expressionist*. Let critics make of this what they will. For my part I feel that the designation surrealist is the most all-embracing and affords the highest degree of freedom; therefore I embrace it. But if ever I felt that surrealism had assumed the significance of a dogma, I should at once discard it. (Journal 4/5/86; italics added.)

At the heart of Bullock's eclectic, but original, style stands the visual image.

Brambled Heart is divided into six parts, in which short poems cluster around a nuclear image. Whereas his prose-poems allow for a fluid form of surrealist automatism, Bullock's linear poems are more consciously composed and tend towards a crystalline art of the image. But these poems are far more than imagist decorations. An explicit key to Bullock's underlying motif of abandonment and loss is to be found in "Complaint of the Poet's Foetus" (the title of which is taken from a poem by Jules Laforgue):

Curled in this liquid warmth
I cling
tight to the paradisal rope

Expulsion looms
the open gate
will close against my backward gaze

Ahead a long road stretches
cold and grey
with sharp stones strewn along the way

The journey's end
I see it in the gloom
the hard walls of a wooden womb

Curled in this liquid warmth
I cling
tight to the paradisal rope

Here the paradisal state is suspension in the inner sea of the mother's womb, and birth (expulsion from the womb) is the fall. The world is a stony road leading east of Eden to the tomb. Active fantasy strives to recapture that paradisal state of oneness. The trauma of severance is sometimes linked with a mysterious voice, a whispered but aborted communication. The desire to conjure with words, to share a secret language with nature — a motivating force in Bullock's art — seems to go back to the pre-speech phase of infancy, when the poet lost his mother. The significantly titled "Word" (which first appeared in *The Double Ego: An Auto-collage* [1985]) reveals this pattern:

The song streams skyward
 a fluttering ribbon of sound
 spun from the poet's navel
 to the placenta of a cloud

The umbilical imagery is explicit, and one notes that it is poetic language ("song") that links the poet to cloudy space, a sublimated image of the Mother. Reciprocally, a voice flies toward the poet from this remote abyss, only to die as "it whispers / a word I cannot grasp." This elusive word, assuming the angelic attributes of the voice that delivered it, then plunges back into the cosmic womb. The poet remains bereft, like "a tree with a severed root": an image that relates to the broken umbilical bond. The mother's early removal from the poet's life obviously left a traumatic wound, which the act of art-speech strives to anneal. Another version of the umbilical image appears in "Bird," where the sense of being cut off from the life-source causes emotional erosion. "Without its feeding stream / my heart has dried / and shrivelled in the heat. . . ."

Water is an archetypal symbol of birth, death, or regeneration and streams, pools, and subaqueous imagery occur with almost obsessional frequency in Bullock's work. In "Voice," "the pale light from a drowned sun / runs like water-colour behind the roofs," and "The silence is deep water / in which I drown. . . ." Many of the images in "Voice," if read against those in "Word," relate obliquely to intra-uterine experience. Drowning, which has the dream significance of re-immersion in the womb, is a key trope; in "Drowned Poem" it is compounded with the act of writing, seen as a form of suicide.

The razor edge of the paper
 slashes my hand
 releasing a stream of blood

 The ink runs
 in turbulent waves

 Words drown
 their faint cries
 rise from the black flood

 The poem
 is swept away on the flow

 Silence returns
 the page is once more white

Such poems, which at first sight seem mere fantasies, are actually microcosms of the poet's preoccupations. For one thing, poetic imagination is immersed in a trancelike state — the genesis of such writing lies in images long nurtured in the unconscious — and the will to verbal expression is linked with its double, the will to purgation (or voiding) of consciousness. There are subtle transactions here between what lies inside and outside of language.

ONE SIGN OF THE TRUE POET is his aliveness to the infantile sources of his imagery. The key poems discussed above reveal unconscious underpinnings of many others that deal with natural objects in a Symbolist fashion. (The references to Jules Laforgue and the romantic poet Gérard de Nerval are surely indicative.) Consider, for instance, the Rose that floats, sinks, falls, is “consumed in the flames,” then rises as perfume to the sky — “Only its thoughts / still drift about the room.” Surely this spiritual icon is correlative of the Mother, who appears in so many guises — consoling, menacing, or seductive. But once the psycho-symbolist nexus is established, one does not need to labour the manifest content of these poems, for each exists, irreducibly, as a work of art.

“Leaves” is a dendromorphic folio, the key to which is “Tree 1,” where empathy leads to metamorphosis:

Sap runs through my veins
 leaves sprout from my fingers
 by morning
 birds will nest in my hair

My roots seek water
 deep down in the soil
 as each cell swells
 filled with green soul

The exchange of human and arboreal attributes is complete when “*sap* runs through my veins” and the new tree is “filled with green *soul*.” Here is “the motive for metaphor” in extreme form: desire to close the gap between the mind that observes and the vitality that simply *is*. If the trend of “Tree 1” is dendromorphic, that of “Tree 2” is correspondingly anthropomorphic, with the tree yearning to burst into human life. Incidentally, a photograph on the back cover of *Brambled Heart* shows the author’s face half-lit, with a female mask, sprouting antlerlike branches from its head, peering blankly over his shoulder. This mask-like apparition is a detail of a painting by Joe Rose, based on Bullock’s poem “Black Wings White Dead,” which contains the lines:

I am here hiding
 behind dark trees
 growing from a soil
 nourished by the white dead.⁹

The humus of the white dead has produced an Anima-figure, a catalyst of ramifying transmutations, who seems to stare back at us from the heart of a black mirror. Moreover, the title which appears on the cover design in red lettering against an expressionist background of black and white shapes, suggests entanglement in nature — a motif amplified by the Shakespeare epigraph which links

everyday sufferings with the Forest of Arden. The theme of metamorphosis is further enhanced by greenish art-paper, with muted tree, sun, stone, and sea designs.

The last three sections are linked by the central "Mirror" image, for "Moons" are shining spheres and "Rivers" reflect. The first four texts in "Mirrors" are prose-poems, which give more scope for surrealist expression. "Moons" also begins with a surreal image. "Greenly the dark-haired moon / floats above the water of the lake." Then a "Skull Moon" "mirrors [the poet's] face in [its] midnight glass." "Moon smeared with red" provides a Heraclitean image of duality: it is

a broken mirror
reflecting the sky
reborn above
still floating below
twin moons yearning
one for the other

"Moons" are mirrors of creation in all its aspects — eroticism, grief, exhaustion, death, frustration, violence, fruition, decay. The most minimal are "Japanese Moons," a series of brief illuminations that approximate *haiku* form, ranging from a classical seventeen to a mere eleven syllables.

Mirrors, symbolic of imagination or self-perception, have complex associations in literature. As J. E. Cirlot points out, "mirror-symbolism [is linked] with water as a reflector and with the Narcissus myth: the cosmos appears as a huge Narcissus regarding his own reflections in the human consciousness."¹⁰ This mythic image consorts well with Bullock's pervasive animism, that marries the mind to nature and the perceiver to the world he perceives. It is the flux of phenomena that "projects this quasi-negative, kaleidoscopic image of appearance and disappearance reflected in the mirror. . . . It is a surface which reproduces images and in a way contains and absorbs them." In folklore, it is a source of potent magic, "serv[ing] to invoke apparitions by conjuring up again the images which it has received at some time in the past, or by . . . reflect[ing] what was once an object facing it and now is far removed. This fluctuation between the 'absent' mirror and the 'peopled' mirror lends it a kind of phasing, feminine in application, and hence . . . it is related to moon-symbolism" (*ibid.*).

Bullock's "Clear Mirror" is psycho-metaphysical. It illuminates "a room where everything hovers as though floating beneath water" — the poet's subaqueous world of memory and reflection. Here the drowning image becomes transparent: "the face in the mirror is drowning in light. The deep water behind it will soon wash it away. It is marked by the transience of tidal things. No rocks of darkness halt the flow of light in this evanescent, mirrored world, and the mirror-gazer has nothing fixed to hold." "Black Mirror" reflects its own opposite — a proces-

sion of childhood memories centred on white robes, snow, and silver tints. There are signs of a ritual sacrifice. As the memories fade, leaving only a few “shimmers of white,” the black mirror reveals a gaping void. If “Black Mirror” relates to memories and the unconscious, “Cloudy Mirror” relates to fantasies and the subconscious. In a mirror-within-the-mirror, “a myriad hazy figures drift . . . caught in an aimless and unending saraband.” This rapturous dance, suggesting the Veil of Maya, is very different from the solemn processional in “Black Mirror.”

The aim of Bullock’s surrealizing imagination is to move “Beyond the Mirror,” the title of his next prose-poem. But even in this “landscape of the soul,” there are hidden mirrors, for “trees lean towards the mirror’s light reflected in scattered pools. . . .” This is the realm (or source) of art, an exotic jungle where things move swiftly and grow freely, where “huge flowers” festoon the trees “with badges of defiant colour.” A coda well exemplifies the enigmatic quality of Bullock’s art: “But the mirror offers only the smooth perfection of its surface and the mocking reflection of whoever looks into it in a vain attempt to see beyond its veil.” “Watery Mirror” deals with flux and dissolution, and with the duality of the self — a Double Ego that can never quite close the gap between conscious and unconscious being. Here the mirror is a pool shadowed with reeds. Lack of punctuation (as in all the poems) affords an interesting ambiguity, or moment of doubleness, in the second line of the last stanza:

The face looks down
behind the bars
it gazes up with empty eyes
that close as the mirror-watcher turns away

The face that looks down for a moment converges with the face that looks up. The last poem in this sequence, “Blue Mirror,” seems genuinely mystical. Its theme is the yearning of the creative soul to pass through the mirror and reach that point of surreality where opposing modes of dream and reality fuse in a visionary state of being. Blue is the spiritual colour, but who will presume to interpret the image of “the blue star burning / in the arching night”?

“Rivers” involve movement as well as reflection, and traditionally symbolize passage through life. The poem “River” is divided into twelve short sections, that reflect this notion without imposing any pattern of progression. In the opening piece the river is a Mother, “carrying on its bosom / a child with closed eyes / clutching at the moon” — possibly an image of the poet’s role as blind seer (cf. Rimbaud). The idea of vital momentum is underscored in this sequence by verbs and participles. But the life of the river “that flows on wedded / to an empty boat” is motion that knows no purpose other than to mingle with the ocean — even if, along the way, it “seeks its soul beneath the soil.” Surreal animism flourishes as sun and moon make love to the passing river:

The river lets down its long green hair
 catching the eye of the sun
 the sun comes down and with brazen fingers
 strokes its silky skin

The “rose on the river,” a symbolic extension of the Mother image, takes on negative overtones. It “sends out waves of scent” that form a net which pulls the observer into the river and drowns him. The lost enchantress has become a “devouring mother.” In the next piece, the serpentlike river seems bent on annihilation of the island-self it encircles. However, passing on towards the sea, it “scribbl[es] a winding path / white on the green earth.” Thus the flow of life merges with the flow of writing.

The last poem, “River and Raven,” involves an aborted communication between the river that writes and the raven that reads, between earthly depth and cosmic height. “The willows bend lower / scribble on the water / mysterious words / risen from their roots,” terrifying the raven that “soars / back into the fathomless sky / pursued by its vengeful stars.” This poem seems to contain an apocalyptic myth of writing — the spirit above provokes the dark place beneath into ritual acts of language that spring from the unconscious.

THE CLEAR BUT ELUSIVE POEMS in Bullock’s *Vancouver Moods* are arranged according to the four seasons and are essentially imagist, giving an “emotional complex in an instant of time.” In a sense they are empty; they provide no grist for the mills of thought. Rather they attune the mind to silence or “unheard melodies.” A faint enigmatic aura clings to each piece. This is a minimalist art that smoothes out ripples on the surface of the pool. Yet the blank spaces around the texts seem to open into wider mental and spiritual expanses. Bullock’s transparent images enable one to look at nature through a poet’s eyes. Reading them suspends the mind in a state of contemplation. There is a lingering sense of something just out of reach that adds to the enchantment. Rather than stirring up ideas, these poems co-opt the reader’s sensibility and encourage it to perform in new ways. This is the function of an oriental as well as a minimalist aesthetic.

Metaphors in *Moods* spring from a series of binary oppositions between nature and culture, nature and language, sound and silence, artifice and being. Animism prevails, for the life of the perceiver mingles with that of the visual scene, while objects mirror moods. Language is a metaphoric key; the writer reads nature as a palimpsest of signs. Thus the surface of Beaver Lake is “mapped by waterlilies / scribbled by the beaks of gulls”; in Jericho Park, “sparkling water . . . flashes messages,” and a tree points “a gaunt finger . . . at the unwritten sky.” All the

world's an illustrated book: as scenes and seasons change, one turns the leaves.
But it is a gnostic script, a secret code:

On the leaf I see written
in the thickened veins
a message indecipherable
as the sand
after the sea has left it

Often the message is reduced to a single word cut free of context, or to a wordless word, a hieratic gesture toward language. Where the "pointed nails" of the bamboos "scratch the porcelain sky / white letters write a word / that crackles with a sound of breaking ice. . . ." Aware of the "ineluctable modality of the visible," the poet of Spanish Banks might echo Stephen Dedalus's "Signs of all things I am here to read."

The beach is covered in signs —
crab's claws
footprints

shells upon shells
twigs and leaves
a gull half buried in the sand —
that tell an indecipherable tale.

All such objects bear the marks of complex individual histories and of the obscure forces that shape organic matter into protean forms.

But the sign language of *Vancouver Moods* does not lack emotive overtones. A pervasive melancholy, a cool sense of solitude flows through these poems. "An absence casts an endless shadow the sun has no power to banish." Delicate scenes are sketched upon a void. The sense of abandonment has psychological and metaphysical dimensions. These poems, with their repeated, almost hypnotic, natural images, do not offer the kind of meaning that Western readers are conditioned to expect. Instead, they point beyond objects to a meditation without content. Here the sound of water blends with silence, emptiness, space. For all their visual precision, these images remain *images*, that open up luminous spaces. The secret of Bullock's transparent poems is an act of the mind that transmutes scene into sign, and generates a corresponding act in the mind of the reader.

The earth is alive, and if we still our hurrying thoughts we can learn to read its silent language. Some of these poems are so stark in their expression of nothingness ("the birds are black notes on a lineless page") as to express an erasure of personality and its persistent inner monologues. As an aesthetic sequence, "Winter" displays an austere black-and-white abstraction that surpasses the art of photography. Meditations like "Winter Pond — UBC Asian Garden" are acts of clearing the mind: there is no attempt to make the image function as a symbol. Bullock shows that, like Wallace Stevens's Snow Man, he can cultivate "a mind

of winter,” and “nothing himself, [behold] / Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.” This does not preclude an amorous play of fantasy around the visual image. The secret of these poems is that dual sense of fullness and emptiness that lies at the heart of Zen. There is an oriental precision, like that of a Japanese garden, in Bullock’s articulation of space. In the economy of his art, scene is mood, and perception Being. As with Roland Barthes’s perceptual Japan, “the place has no other limit than its carpet of living sensations, of brilliant signs . . . it is no longer the great continuous wall which defines space, but the very abstraction of the fragments of view . . . the garden is a mineral tapestry of tiny volumes . . . the public place is a series of instantaneous events which accede to the notable in a flash so vivid, so tenuous that the sign does away with itself before any particular signified has had the time to ‘take.’”¹¹

Similarly, Bullock’s poems are acts of attention that illuminate, even while they frustrate the reader’s greed to “know.” These miniatures point to nothing beyond the visual/verbal image as a momentary conjunction of mind with nature. Although the same images recur and interweave, they do not “add up” syntagmatically: they are discrete units in a succession of timeless moments. They may glow or fade, but they can never be arrested in a fixed idea. Indeed, their effect is that “suspension of meaning which to us is the strangest thing of all . . .” (Barthes, 81). As in Japanese calligraphy, executed with a soft brush, “everything, in the instrumentation, is directed toward the paradox of an irreversible and fragile writing, which is simultaneously, contradictorily, incision and glissade . . .” (Barthes, 86). Briefly, Bullock’s art of casual precision marries surface and depth.

The minimalist surface of Bullock’s texts should not blind one to the intricacies of his imagery. As in “Winter Pond,” there is a level of implication that invites reverie, and ultimately “teases one out of thought.” The restraint of Bullock’s language allows images of things themselves (such as raindrops on dark water) to spread through the poem and flow over the reader’s mind, dissolving its habitual structures. There is a suggestive magic here that invites the reader to exercise his own creativity. Poems such as “Rainy Day” seem sinister, because the synaptic link between image and mood is concealed. The metaphoric image of “dagger-pointed / bamboo leaves / . . . serpent’s fangs / seeking / a vein to pierce” is visually clear, but its metonymic symbolism is more enigmatic.

Ponds, in all their seasonal trappings including ice, have a special fascination, for Bullock’s key motif is water, dark or dazzling element of constant transmutation. These poems range from limpid transparency to obsidian opacity: extremes that are not ultimately remote from each other, except in mood. Their visual concentration does not lend itself to elaboration, but there are some surreal touches, as in “December Snow,” where “The world is suffocating / beneath white roses / fallen from a black hearse / on its way across the sky.” Bullock’s

imagery is pervasively animistic, and self-reflexive metaphors of art fall naturally into this poetic context: "Very softly / the melting ice / is singing to itself / The cold sun / paints everything / diamond bright."

Poems on Green Paper is divided into three sections: "In the Woods," "Gardens," and "Beyond." A basic trope is inversion of above and below, taking a subaqueous form: "*In the deep water of the wood / I fish for poems.*" The enchanted forest is that of the U.B.C. Endowment Lands, but more significantly it is a Baudelairean "forest of symbols" where one looks for "Correspondences." ("La Nature est un temple ou de vivants piliers / Laissent parfois sortir de confuses paroles. . .") Indeed, the opening poem, "Lure of the Forest," speaks of a "wealth of manifold images," then lists eight nouns in a single line, each of which will proliferate into a cluster of images. If Gardens represent art and civilization, Woods represent the archetypal unconscious. Fantasies of submersion in the forest lead to a series of transformational images in the succinctly titled "Wood Water." Water is a polyvalent symbol in Bullock's work, that permeates the structure of his imagination dissolving the solid world into a dream, and it can stand for the flow of imagination itself. It is also associated with the waters of birth and with the shadowy figure of the Mother: "Leaving behind the hot sun / I swim / into the cool womb of the wood." Transformation is again the poetic strategy in "Drowned in a Dream," the undercurrents of which can be clarified by reference to the "drowning" poems in *Brambled Heart*. The poet's fertile fantasy springs from a psychic source to transmute images drawn directly from nature. In this poetry of "Correspondences," outward impressions set off inner echoes.

In "Sunlight and Shadow," there is a rhythmic interplay of opposites, like a dance of nymphs and dryads, leading to their joint immersion in running water. Streaming sunshine and sunny streams unite, as nature takes on magic. This alchemical process is treated with a classical lightness and grace. Nature speaks in sign language, encoded in animistic metaphors:

Bare trunks tower skyward
waving green flags
to semaphore the sun
excited birds
add their messages in Morse

In some unstatable sense, the key to existence lies in such signs. The "Voice" of the wood, made up of multiple animate and inanimate sounds, "speak[s] an unknown language." The seeker's "footsteps / echo sadly / among the trees / periods marking the end / of these despairing sentences. . ." There is a semantic gap, for the language of nature does not cohere without consciousness, and consciousness cannot quite formulate its syntax. Many poems engage with this problem,

and in "Voice" it is suggested that the signs of nature hold some clue to the labyrinth of self. The final poem of this sequence, "Today," negates a whole series of metaphoric fantasies, affirming that "everything is serenely itself / The trees are simply trees," only to conclude that "the root-snakes," earlier seen as obsessive, "still crawl across the path." Not all the symbols of this Pandora's box can be exorcised, for some objects persistently give rise to unconscious fears and memories. Visible impressions strike chords with invisible moods and memories, and out of such identifications poetry is made. The forest darkness contains an "array of mysteries," and in reading them the poet explores hidden strata of the self.

The darkness of "Woods" contrasts with the brightness of "Gardens," where the quest is for aesthetic essence, a music distilled from flowers. A surreal animism enlivens these scenes ("The grass combs its tangled hair") and subaqueous imagery recurs ("In pools of shadow / fallen leaf-fish swim"). "The upward and the downward way are one and the same," according to Heraclitus, and here above and below are formally interwoven in arabesque units —

Blue hydrangeas
speckles of sky
caught on green prongs
amid green leaf-birds

My garden
is sky-invaded

— where the "green leaf-birds" suggest René Magritte's or Max Ernst's hybrid forms.¹² Surrealist imagination assimilates the world by seeking points of junction between contraries. Thus cyclamens become "Greyhounds / with their purple ears laid back," a *trouvaille* in Pierre Reverdy's sense whereby the sheer distance between objects increases the power of the image (see *M*, 20).

Ponds are microcosms in which universal patterns can be read. The idly stirring "green scum" becomes "a vegetal galaxy / spinning / in the cosmos of a pond." Similarly, the genesis of the earth can be read in "Crater Garden," where "flowers bloom / multicoloured sparks / spurting from the magma / far beneath." Inside and outside enfold one another in harmony:

the spraying of a fountain
closes the watchful eye
and with its sound
makes the mind
another silent pool

This microcosmic image reminds one of Andrew Marvell's metaphor of "The mind, that Ocean where each kind / Does streight its own resemblance find" ("The Garden"). In "Meditation Garden," the affinity of *Poems on Green Paper* with Marvell's cult of greenery grows to the verge of allusion —

Pines and palms
 hold the sun at bay
 leaving a shade
 in which the mind can fade
 dissolve in a penumbra

....
 my mind is filled
 with dark green thoughts

— as if “Annihilating all that’s made / To a green Thought in a green Shade.” Marvell’s neoplatonic meditation is closely allied with Bullock’s Buddhist or Zen meditations, as in “Japanese Garden,” where the multiple forms of nature seem to merge with the empty sound of “falling water.”

The affinity with Marvell is one of sensibility rather than form: Bullock’s poetry is formally closer to the translations he made from the Chinese of Wang Wei, in *Poems of Solitude*. A mood of solitude is also the keynote of these poems. Walking in the gardens clears a space in the mind, so that past and present meet in a moment, and “a sunlit emptiness / walks beside me.” Memories merely enhance the sense of solitude that is strong in all these communings with nature. Absent voices (ghosts) speak more clearly in the silence “than the voices / of all the invading strangers.”

As its title implies, the third section, “Beyond,” has symbolist overtones. The “Dark Rose,” whose “reflection on the still dark water / remains unmoved / impassive and untouched / fixed and eternal / in a different world,” can again be seen as a symbol of the departed Mother, while a “Black Bird,” “[flying] between me and the sun,” has the effect of “cutting the cord of warmth” that tied the poet to his life-source. The motifs of “Grey Morning” suggest entrapment or paralysis: a struggle between the desire to relapse and the desire to fight on is projected into the scene. In an atmosphere of saturated stillness, only the creative impulse motivates existence:

This world grows shadowy
 everything moves farther away
 or turns its back
 only my writing hand seems real
 at the centre
 of this phantasmal universe

Writing authenticates inner life and bestows significance on the shadowy world of phenomena. As Wittgenstein says, “There is no reality in the world”; reality is only to be found in acts of consciousness that construct a subjective or aesthetic order.

Poems on Green Paper represents one such virtual order, in which the life of the mind overlaps with, and transfuses, vegetal existence. The hieroglyphic script of nature, that parallels the meanderings of verbal art, is ultimately a system

of “empty signs” in (Barthes’s sense) signifying nothing beyond its own vital process:

On the blue-black water
of the midnight river
a single golden thread
is lazily floating

Curled and coiled by the swirls of water
it writes its moving message as it passes
the banks of dream gardens
planted with flickering flowers

There is no eye to read the message
that is washed away by the flowing water
Blinded by their own light the flowers
see nothing and vanish when the dark river

is lost in a pale-blue lake
The golden thread has made its voyage in vain

Here basic homologues link nature and language, life and art. The poet is a seer who studies signs in a gnostic script:

A solitary bird
haunts the lonely sky
black ink
marking blue parchment

When the bird has gone
the palimpsest sky
bears an invisible text
that taunts the hungry eye

To a mystic like Jakob Boehme nature is a repository of layer upon layer of occult significance, inscribed in a language that reason cannot fathom. It is here that poetic imagination comes into play, and it seems indicative that Bullock’s final emphasis should fall on an appetency not of the mind but of the eye, a visionary hunger.

NOTES

¹ *Brambled Heart: Poems* (London, Canada: Third Eye, 1986); *Vancouver Moods: Poems* (London, Canada: Third Eye, 1986); *Poems on Green Paper* (London, Canada, Third Eye, 1987). The quotation is from Andrew Parkin, *Issue 2* (March/April 1985): 60.

² These phases have been abstracted from a prolific career in other genres (eight fictional works and numerous translations), not to mention parallel activities as a painter and graphic artist.

³ See *Randolph Cranstone and the Veil of Maya: A Parabolic Fiction* (London, Canada: Third Eye, 1987), where Maya, the “goddess of illusion,” is based on a

real girl. *An Anthology of World Poetry*, ed. Mark Van Doren (New York: Harcourt, 1936), was the greatest influence on Bullock's early style. Other important influences were Symbolism (Baudelaire, Valéry, Verlaine) and Expressionism (Peter Baum, Else Lasker-Schüler, Richard Schaukal, Kurt Heynicke, and Georg Heym).

- ⁴ Jean-Jacques Auquier and Alain-Valery Aelberts, quoted in J. H. Matthews, *Toward the Poetics of Surrealism* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse Univ. Press, 1976), 190.
- ⁵ See André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1982). (Subsequent references in my text are based on this edition, abbreviated as *M.*) In the first *Manifesto* (1924), Breton defined Surrealism as "Psychic automatism in its pure state . . . dictated . . . in the absence of any control exercised by reason . . ."; in the *Second Manifesto* (1930) he spoke of liberating the imagination through an "alchemy of the word" (*M* 26, 173). In his *Journal* (18/5/86), Bullock amends Breton's views with a clearcut distinction: "Not 'automatic writing' but *free association* is the essential characteristic of Surrealism. Automatic writing implies a true state of trance; free association, on the other hand, is practised in a state of full consciousness but with the minimum of conscious control, which is *voluntarily* relinquished." See also Bullock, "Some Thoughts on Writing," *Canadian Fiction Magazine* 50/51 (1985): 137-40.
- ⁶ See my essay, "The Surrealist Art of Michael Bullock," *Canadian Fiction Magazine*, in press.
- ⁷ *Maldoror*, trans. Guy Wernham (N.p.: N.p., 1934), 94.
- ⁸ Matthews, *Poetics* 161; Bullock, featured in *Canadian Author and Bookman* 61 (1985): 22. See also Mary Ann Caws, *Surrealism and the Literary Imagination* (The Hague: Mouton, 1966), 21.
- ⁹ *Black Wings White Dead: Poems* (Fredericton, N.B.: Fiddlehead, 1978), 49.
- ¹⁰ *A Dictionary of Symbols*, trans. Jack Sage (New York: Philosophical Library, 1962), 201.
- ¹¹ Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill, 1984), 108. Subsequent references in my text are based on this edition.
- ¹² See Magritte's *The Natural Graces* (1962) and *Treasure Island* (1942), in Harry Torczyner, *Magritte: The True Art of Painting*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Abrams, 1979), 32: Figs. 36, 37; Ernst's *The Joy of Living* (1936), in Uwe M. Schneede, *Surrealism*, trans. Maria Pelikan (New York: Abrams, 1973), 71: Pl. 8.

