

# WHEELS ON FIRE

## *The Train of Thought in George Ryga's "The Ecstasy of Rita Joe"*

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**F**ROM CASEY JONES TO SIGMUND FREUD the train is an ambiguous and powerful icon. It has been used to suggest ideas and concepts as diverse (and contradictory) as freedom and mobility, imprisonment and enclosure, industrialization, mechanization, art, the fear of death, or the subconscious. Canadian artists and writers use the image in all of its varied guises; J. E. H. MacDonald's "Tracks and Traffic" (1912), for example, blends opposing extremities so that the train appears as an emblem of mixed industrial blessings: both urban-industrial energy *and* unnatural mechanical presence. Within popular literature, perhaps because of the middle-class's enjoyment of entrepreneurial triumph (and perhaps also because of Canada's pioneering colonial past), the train has remained for the most part a positive symbol of capitalist, industrial nation building. Obvious examples include Pierre Berton's *The National Dream* and *The Last Spike*, as well as Hurtig's 1985 condensation of all things Canadian. Writing in *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, James Marsh enthuses, "the development of steam-powered railways . . . revolutionized transportation in Canada and was integral to the very act of nation building."<sup>1</sup>

Academic study of the train (and its iconography) has been marginally more critical, exploring some of the complexities of the iron horse in Canadian history and literary expression. *Canadian Literature*, No. 77, published two brief essays on the topic, but both lapse finally into banal, simplistic classifications.<sup>2</sup> The more inclusive of the two, Wayne Cole's "The Railroad in Canadian Literature," gives attention, predictably and rightly enough, to Pratt's *Towards the Last Spike*, following with a description of various train images in several Canadian writers. Arguing that the railroad is not *only* "a symbol of industrial progress; it is undoubtedly the symbol of modern Canada, embodying within it the many elusive dimensions of the modern Canadian identity," the author goes on to explore the polarities of good and bad trains. On the one hand the railroad is "a romantic symbol of adventure and progress" (i.e., nation/capital building); on the other hand, it can also be "a symbol of corruption, dehumanization, and intrusion" (i.e., a kind of Frankenstein monster that turns back destructively on its creator).

What interests me most in this last survey is a curious derailment — a gap, an exclusion of one particularly iconic train which not only, in itself, calls into question Cole's binary divisions, but which also — by means of its very invisibility — suggests the ideological workings of the survey itself. And by extension, the ideological workings of the survey itself. And by extension, the ideological workings of much academic writing, thinking, and teaching that is practised in Canada and elsewhere.<sup>3</sup> I am referring to the train that runs through George Ryga's *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*, perhaps one of the most scathing attacks yet written against Canadian cultural imperialism. Ryga's play was first performed in 1967 as an ironic "celebration" of Canada's centennial. Yet in both these 1978 essays Ryga's train is invisible. Like Ryga's own character, Jaimie Paul, it might well complain, "They don't know what it's like . . . to stand in line an' nobody sees you!"<sup>4</sup> Why this erasure, this peculiar tunnel vision?

One possible reason is that Ryga is an academic and political nuisance. When subjected to conventional thematic descriptions his works appear flat, heavy-handed, or both. His ideas run counter to an establishment insistence that this is the best of all possible worlds. In much the same manner as other Commonwealth leftist dramatists — Australia's John Romeril, New Zealand's Mervyn Thompson, South Africa's Athol Fugard, (even Italy's Dario Fo) — Ryga exposes that which has hitherto remained comfortably invisible. He continually undercuts the 1984 nightmare, the ideological process by which a state can (and has) removed from popular view the records of its own historical atrocities. And in Canada, as in so much of the old Commonwealth, these are the records of colonization, deracination, and economic oppression of pre-colonial indigenous peoples. Like his Commonwealth counterparts Ryga complains not only about colonial exploitation, but more importantly about its historical and ideological erasure. He complains about how a history of class struggle has been rendered invisible to generations of post-colonial Canadians. And he tries dramatically to illustrate the structures of a "false consciousness," the principles of self-deception which most of us have internalized unwittingly since Day One. Like the historian, Robin Fisher, he returns the indigenous peoples to the centre of their own history; and like the dramatist, Peter Weiss, he uses the theatre to dissolve "the artificial fog behind which the world's rulers hide their manipulations."<sup>5</sup> To do so, Ryga uses irony, melodrama, and above all else, parody; he explodes many of our most cherished national symbols. Consider, for example, his treatment of the train that puffs its way across both the land and those narratives of Canadian nation building.

THROUGHOUT *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* Ryga uses the image of the train in a complex, ironic way. References are not especially profuse, but are

so consistently and parodically placed as to maximize their theatrical (and in Ryga's terms, political) significance. His techniques, in fact, bear out in striking detail Linda Hutcheon's recent theoretical comments on parody. In both her *A Theory of Parody* (1985) and her forthcoming chapter in volume 4 of the *Literary History of Canada*, she points out the ambiguous aspects of parodic play. Parody can posit both difference *and* distance within its similarity to the chosen target. A subversive "copy," the parodic text can fight against marginalization by incorporating within itself that which it ironically duplicates. As such, the parodic image or text operates as a kind of artistic "red mole": it can address its own culture from *within*, yet can remain *without* in its ideological allegiance.<sup>6</sup> Ultimately Ryga's train is developed into a "symbol . . . of the modern Canadian identity" — but a symbol, a Canada, and an identity decidedly different from the popular images of Van Horne chugging heroically across the true North strong and free. The odd explicit mention, lighting and sound effects, setting, the refrain of "wheels on fire," all culminate in the horrific, yet profoundly logical climax which closes the performance.<sup>7</sup> Given the subtlety and ambiguities which surround Ryga's train, it's worth looking at these examples in some detail.

Initially the train appears as a relatively blunt ironic commodity. The Magistrate early on groups it within a series of social benefits. Looking *down* at Rita from the heights of administerial justice, he remarks:

Your home and well being were protected. The roads of the city are open to us. So are the galleries, libraries, the administrative and public buildings. There are buses, trains . . . going in and coming out. Nobody is a prisoner here.

The irony here is simple. The Magistrate unconsciously idealizes something which kills Jaimie and forms a grotesque, phallic background to the rape and murder of Rita herself. Moreover, his position uncannily recalls Marx's descriptions of the happy bourgeois:

The respectable conscience refuses to see this obvious fact [that there is no individual exchange without the antagonism of classes]. So long as one is a bourgeois, one cannot but see in this relation of antagonism a relation of harmony and eternal justice, which allows no one to gain at the expense of another. For the bourgeois, individual exchange can exist without any antagonism of classes. For him, these are two quite unconnected things. Individual exchange, as the bourgeois conceives it, is far from resembling individual exchange as it actually exists in practice.<sup>8</sup>

More complex is the Magistrate's associating the train with institutional edifices, an association which develops as the train comes to embody an industrialized colonial Canadian energy. Ironically, the Magistrate uses the train as an image of mobility and openness, counterpointing the recurrent enclosures and inertia which ideologically paralyze the Indian community. As Rita — a prisoner in the dock — remarks a few moments later, "A train whistle is white, with black lines." Here we

seem to have Wayne Cole's binary division: the Magistrate values the train as "a symbol of adventure and progress"; Rita's prison-like image ironizes it into "a symbol of corruption, dehumanization and intrusion." The submerged "textuality" of that image — "white, with black lines" — implicitly corroborates, moreover, one of Ryga's many ancillary dramatic threads: the contrast of abstract white inscription with the orality of the indigenous peoples. Interestingly, virtually every ideological figurehead in the play is associated with some form of writing, while Rita, her father especially, and her people as a whole are characterized by the spoken words of song, speech, and chant.

As Rita speaks, her words begin to qualify the *direction* of that much touted notion of "dehumanization." Her comments expose that kind of colonial self-centredness which identifies dehumanization as a rebound effect, as something that happens to a creator who loses control of his or her creation. The train is definitely a monstrosity, but one which turns not *against* its creators, but *with* them in a consolidated oppression of yet another scapegoat: Rita and her people. At this point Cole's romantic assertion that "the Canadian nation was literally built on rails" begins to sour, as Ryga questions on whose bodies and on whose lands those rails were and are being laid.

This kind of parodic inversion is most evident in Ryga's portrayal of the feckless folksinger who trills throughout the performance. Terry Goldie, who concedes that "for all its superficiality, *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* addresses some very real problems of racism in Canadian society," complains that she "seems like a rather unsubtle parody of Joan Baez."<sup>9</sup> The comment both fails to consider the complex uses to which Ryga puts his choric folksinger (and her songs), and further confuses the problem of racism with the play's larger concern, ideology, which contains this subsidiary issue. Ryga is explicit in his initial directions: "*She has all the reactions of a white liberal folklorist with a limited concern and understanding of an ethnic dilemma which she touches in the course of her research and work in compiling and writing folksongs.*" An academic colonizer herself, the Singer has appropriated in her two specific train songs traditional "liberation train" ballads which memorialized the flight from Southern slavery towards strength and freedom in the North.<sup>10</sup> (This connection is developed in the railway station scene where the railroad is viewed ambivalently by the younger generation: hopefully, as an escape route from the reservation to the city [which ironically imprisons them]; and hopelessly, as the return route from these jails [or poorly paying jobs] back to the reservation.) Ryga places all her songs in strategic positions and appropriately the first "train song" occurs just after Jaimie's stereotypical performance as the drunken Indian:

*The YOUNG INDIAN MEN and JAIMIE PAUL exit. RITA JOE follows after*

*JAIMIE PAUL, reaching out to touch him, but the SINGER stands in her way and drives her back, singing.*

SINGER:

Oh, can't you see that train roll on,  
 Its hot black wheels keep comin' on?  
 A Kamloops Indian died today.  
 Train didn't hit him, he just fell.  
 Busy train with wheels on fire!

*The Music dies. A POLICEMAN enters.*

On one hand the song functions merely proleptically for the audience, building suspense, interweaving with the time shift, and adding retrospective poignancy to Rita's memories. On one level the image of "wheels on fire" is another simple irony: the wheels of progress promise only death and conflagration rather than improvement or liberation. However, the ambiguity surrounding the Singer — she is both a "*white liberal*" and "*alter ego to Rita Joe*" — leads to a further irony within an irony. The Singer assimilates and uses a traditional image of industrial progress as oppression. But as E. P. Thompson has argued, where there is oppression there is always its contained opposite: resistance.<sup>11</sup> In this sense the image of those "hot black wheels" can also be seen in a way that struggles heartily against the Singer's overt text. Those "hot black wheels," which later support the "silver train," contain an implicit hint at the fiery resistance embodied in Jaimie Paul whose voice, significantly, later "*becomes the sound of the train horn.*" Resistance, in other words, is an intrinsic part of oppression, just as all citizens, whether repressed or repressing, share in the same ideologically formed consciousness of society.

The Singer and her songs, then, do intrude (interrupting our perceptions of Rita's memories, blocking human contact within the community, and heralding the arrival of a more humanoid embodiment of ideological values: the policeman). But the song, just as inept as the white liberal singer who affects sympathy and understanding, is also propagandistic. It lies; despite the implications of its own "sub-text," it erases the fact of struggle, that Jaimie did not "just fall," but was beaten and left to die by Murderers.

**M**OST INTERESTINGLY, Ryga places the train songs so that the train is gradually associated with frustrated desire; an intrusive rapacious sexuality; and death. Later in Act One, for example, the train whistle (recall Rita has said that it is "white") forms an ominous soundtrack, intruding upon Jaimie's proposals for a local co-op, an attempt to transform Indian labour from a com-

modity bought by white employers into a creative, self-determining activity. Much more powerful and explicit is the scene surrounding the Singer's second attempt at "wheels on fire." At this point we have just heard the Witness recount his rape of Rita; another "sexual" memory follows, this time a warm, pleasant one involving Rita and Jaimie:

*The light dies out on the WITNESS. JAIMIE PAUL enters and crosses to RITA JOE. They lie down and embrace.*

RITA:

You always came to see me, Jaimie Paul . . . The night we were in the cemetery . . . You remember, Jaimie Paul? I turned my face from yours until I saw the ground . . . an' I knew that below . . . they were like us once, and now they lie below the ground, their eyes gone, the bones showin' . . . They must've spoke and touched each other here . . . like you're touching me, Jaimie Paul . . . an' now there was nothing over them, except us . . . an' wind in the grass an' a barbwire fence creaking. An' behind that, a hundred acres of barley.

*JAIMIE PAUL stands.*

That's something to remember, when you're lovin', eh?

*The sound of a train whistle is heard. JAIMIE PAUL goes and the lights onstage fade.*

*The music comes up and the SINGER sings. As JAIMIE PAUL passes her, the SINGER pursues him up the ramp, and RITA JOE runs after them.*

SINGER:

Oh, can't you see that train roll on,  
Gonna kill a man, before it's gone?  
Jaimie Paul fell and died.  
He had it comin', so it's alright.  
Silver train with wheels on fire!

Initially the scene continues the presentation of the Singer (and her train songs) as intruders, as liars, and as foreshadowers of the death which will thwart all desire. (Not to mention that it illustrates the uncommitted aspects of white liberalism: "so it's alright.") The song also contains a submerged reversal of Rita's earlier imagery of a grim freedom. Rita observes that only in death do people escape hierarchy: only the dead have "nothing over them" ("except us"). Yet immediately the Singer intrudes with her "wheels on fire": an image of an object which will run *over* the dying Jaimie. The train whistle, moreover, interrupts the fragility of human contact and the audience is left to make the connection between the interrupted fragility, the memories of dead ancestors, and the emblem of a white capitalist industry. This point of contact between play and spectator is reinforced by the haunting image of their "eyes gone"; are we, like the dead, blind to what is before (and over) us? Significantly, the whistle is heard at a moment of remembering and loving — two values which the audience is invited to internalize

throughout the play. At this point, then, the train whistle (and song) tends to subvert white, middle-class memories of that romantic symbol. Here the train does not puff heroically towards the last spike, but deterministically towards the obliteration of both eroticism and the remembering of an indigenous history.

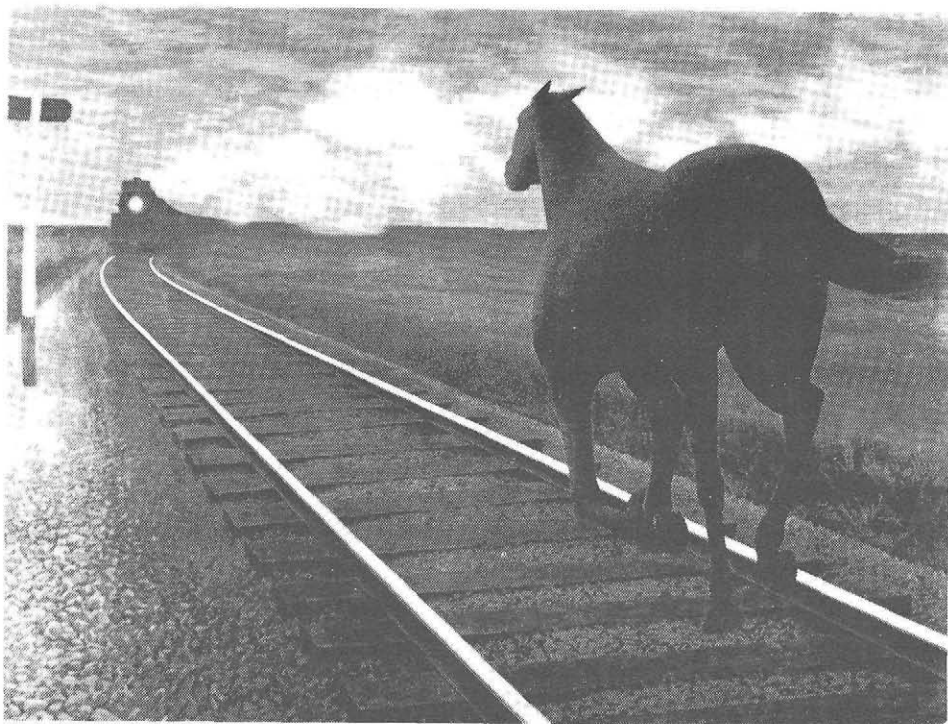
Implicit in this association of train/frustrated desire/sexuality/and remembering is a curious, quasi-Freudian phallicization of the rain. In itself the image is relatively conventional; throughout post-colonial writing — in works like Gordimer's *The Conservationist*, Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*, and Wendt's *Leaves of the Banyan Tree* — colonization is often presented as a phallic intrusion, a male penetration of a female space which appropriates property, injures identity, and interrupts the genetic continuation of the colonized. But in the true spirit of Freud (and Marx), the mechanical, unthinking train, whatever else it may suggest at this point, also stands for the essentially *unconscious* nature of intrusion: a colonizing, exploiting dehumanization to be sure, but one which is effected unconsciously, unmaliciously, even naively.

Ryga continues to adapt his metaphor of the train in what is the most horrifying image of dehumanization in *Rita Joe*: the climactic rape-murder of Rita and Jaimie. In one sense we have simply a build-up of atmospheric suspense. As the Murderers hover more threateningly, the train whistle is heard three times before Jaimie's death (when his voice intermingles with the train horn). The industrial machine, the "symbol . . . of the modern Canadian identity," has completely assimilated the articulations, the utterance, the resistance of the indigenous man who dies in the process. Ryga's set already emphasizes this notion of an all-pervasive ideological entrapment: the ramp, at once both walkway *and* railway line, "dominates the stage by wrapping the central and forward playing area . . . The MAGISTRATE's chair and representation of court desk are situated at stage right, *enclosed within the sweep of the ramp*" (my italics). The Singer is also enclosed: "*she sits [at the foot of the desk], turned away from the focus of the play.*" This entire drama which has been an externalization of an internal process is in turn contained *within* this ideological ramp.

But again, Ryga is interested in more than sentimentalism, and Jaimie's death is placed strategically, thereby intensifying the image and role of the train. Just prior to the appearance of the dream-like Murderers, and just after the audience has heard the first blast of the horn, Rita remarks of her imprisonment to Jaimie:

It was different to be a woman . . . Some women was wild . . . and they shouted they were riding black horses into a fire I couldn't see . . . There was no fire there, Jaimie.

Rita's words subtly recall the appearance of the train established by the singer — "wheels on fire" — and the resultant image is that of collision: horse and train furiously veering each towards the other. In itself this is a powerful icon of an



ALEXANDER DAVID COLVILLE. *Horse and Train*, tempera on masonite, 1954.  
ART GALLERY OF HAMILTON, HAMILTON, ONTARIO,  
GIFT OF DOMINION FOUNDRIES AND STEEL LTD., 1957

indigenous, “natural” community confronting a mechanical parody of itself: the iron horse of capitalist industry. But the scene also recalls indirectly, perhaps, one of Canada’s most famous paintings, Alex Colville’s “Horse and Train” (1954) — a painting which hangs in one of those galleries mentioned earlier by the Magistrate. Here Colville’s painting of the black horse pounding towards the train’s fiery nimbus blends with Ryga’s text, intensifying the implicit ironies of the “ethnic dilemma” under scrutiny. As “parodic play” the allusion suggests a multivalent ironic distance and difference within similarity. By incorporating a Canadian icon (the train) which exists within yet another Canadian icon (Colville’s painting) — which is, ironically, also a “subversive” comment on industrial society — the parody can speak satirically *to* its culture from *within* that culture yet remain ideologically without. Given Ryga’s political concerns, it is worth recalling Linda Hutcheon’s remark mentioned earlier: parody can fight against marginalization by incorporating within itself that which it ironically targets.



Rita's remarks, incidentally, do not occur in a vacuum; Ryga here echoes an earlier memory where Rita has recounted a childhood experience with horses. Significantly the memory involves a typological anticipation of Jaimie's fate: "I was riding a horse to school an' some of the boys shot a rifle an' my horse bucked an' I fell off. I fell in the bush an' got scratched . . . The boys caught the horse by the school and tried to ride him, but the horse bucked an' pinned a boy against a tree, breaking his leg in two places."

What is most difficult about Rita's former comment, however ("It's different to be a woman"), is that it directly contradicts Jaimie's earlier remark, "There's no difference between men and women" — a remark acted out when Jaimie dons a brassiere and "enticingly" offers himself to Mr. Homer. Why this confusion of gender? Why does Ryga recall now, just before Jaimie's death, this peculiar blurring?

The confusion vanishes, I think, if we watch that final scene as an elaborate *double entendre*. What we have is a double murder, certainly, but also a double rape. The death of Jaimie under this phallic train functions as a grotesque symbol which is then specified in the particular penetration of Rita herself. His murder implies the "rape of the land"; her rape contains the murder of those people on the land. Both man and woman — an androgynous combination to suggest all Indian people — have been genitally assaulted in the play. ("*knees him viciously in the groin*"; "*the Murderer hesitates in his necrophillic rape.*") The "rape of the land" which can and has been used as a fuzzy liberal catch-phrase is here particularized and humanized in a gruelling theatrical spectacle. The Murderer's final remark, "We hardly touched her," is stinging double-edged. On one hand the comment contrasts with the need to touch, to love, and recalls piteously Jaimie's touch in the cemetery scene. But Ryga has also given us a play about the "Wilderness," the "Frontier," and most importantly he has *peopled* these geographical areas, areas rapaciously "touched" by an "untouchable" state called Canada. Rita's ecstasy is quite literal: she and her people have been put out of their senses. And unfortunately, out of the senses of most white, middle-class Canadians. Invisibility, Ryga argues, does not prove non-existence, only political blindness on the part of the audience.

CANADA MAY WELL BE "a nation . . . built on rails." But Ryga is still a nuisance. He asks disquieting questions about the nature of those rails which many Canadians (and by analogy, many Australians, New Zealanders, and South Africans) rather dislike. Not to mention academics. A 1971 review of

the published script is indicative of this negative response to the play; and it's also a response that betrays a cynicism not only about "political art," but also about the basis of teaching and the communication of ideas:

Ryga, like Brecht, believes that you can change people by talking to them; thus, like Brecht, Ryga makes his stage a pulpit for lecturing the audience. Fine. If the lecture is well-deserved, then perhaps the play will be good. However, in 1971, how many people want to sit and hear a lecture?<sup>23</sup>

As Ryga once remarked, "I have my problems with establishment, not unlike problems I have with God; namely — with such credentials, why are they so prone to mistakes?"<sup>24</sup> The questions, of course, are rhetorical; the audience is left in little doubt as to the expected answers. The point is that the quasi-Brechtian synthesis is left to us. (A synthesis which to Ryga and Brecht is yet another antithetical part of an ongoing dialectic.) This sense of an "alienation effect" which implicates the audience is evident throughout the play as Ryga emphasizes the theatricality of what we watch.

Ryga pays attention to the set and house lights: "*No curtain is used during the play. At the opening, intermissions, and conclusion of the play, the curtain remains up . . . the house lights and stage work lights remain on. Backstage, cyclorama, and maze curtains are up, revealing wall back of stage, exit doors, etc.*"; the use of recorded voice overs, and so on — all distance the spectator, asserting that what we watch is NOT real. In this sense Ryga attempts to effect in the spectator a process analogous to those outlined in the play, processes which to Ryga are morally and politically imperative. While watching a play about a trial, we are implicated to the point that we are ourselves being tried. It is we who are asked to consider whether or not we ourselves, our class, our race, our nation are guilty of some horribly invisible, yet painfully obvious crime. And the crime, initially, Ryga suggests, is the continuing ideological exploitation of women, indigenous peoples, land rights, and natural justice.

But it also may be our crime; the audience who commits trespass in its failure to become alienated sufficiently by the play, its failure to provide a personal and labour-oriented synthesis of the play's central dialectic. Ryga asks each individual member of his audience to explore, to internalize the play's questions in his or her own life. So, more specifically, given the work and interests of ourselves, as academics, the questions come uncomfortably close to the bone. What are the impulses that underlie our formation of a Canadian "canon," our choices and teaching of particular examples of Canadian writing? Canadian poetry, fiction, and theatre (and historiography) contain many obvious examples of a "political *fanshen*," a turning of the political and intellectual body. Rudy Wiebe, Matt Cohen, George Bowering, Yves Thériault, Rick Salutin, Ryga himself, come immediately to mind.

But how well has literary academic writing fared? Have we tried to remember, or do we still write and read “histories” from the point of view of the colonizer? How often do we acquiesce in the image of pre-colonial Canada as a blank page in need of inscription; how often do we encounter liberal sentiments like the following: “But Cohen [in *Wooden Hunters*] goes beyond the relatively simple level of social criticism”; “Reading [*Two Solitudes*] as an historical or political document, not as a work of art”; [Callaghan’s] fiction transcends the merely topical and dwells within the realm of the universal.”<sup>15</sup> Are these invocations of the universal organic symbol, the transcendence of literature, merely one more foggy cloud by which we attempt unconsciously to cover up the rulers of this world? Why mustn’t we taint the holy “realm of art” — itself an interesting image — with the grubbiness of social reality, history, or politics? As Terry Eagleton mischievously remarks of this humanistic liberalism :

The symbol fused together motion and stillness, turbulent content and organic form, mind and world. Its material body was the medium of an absolute spiritual truth, once perceived by direct intuition rather than by any laborious process of critical analysis. In this sense the symbol brought such truths to bear upon the mind in a way which brooked no question: either you saw it or you didn’t. It was the keystone of an irrationalism, a forestalling of reasoned critical enquiry, which has been rampant in literary theory ever since. It was a *unitary* thing, and to dissect it — to take it apart to see how it worked — was almost as blasphemous as seeking to analyze the Holy Trinity. All of its various parts worked spontaneously together for the common good, each in its subordinate place; and it is therefore hardly surprising to find the symbol, or the literary artefact as such, being regularly offered throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as an ideal model of human society itself. If only the lower orders were to forget their grievances and pull together for the good of all, much tedious turmoil could be avoided.<sup>16</sup>

If we fail to listen to Ryga’s directives, he complains, then we are doomed to continue to think, speak, write, and teach in the same ways as the “transcending” Singer. As sympathetic as we may be to the Haida, the Maori, the Aborigines, or the Azanians, we will continue to perpetuate and perpetuate a process of erasure, of rendering invisible a history largely uncongenial to our own national self-opinions. Our “research and writing of folk-songs” will dwindle (or stay) within an apolitical goo of ineffective and useless liberal sentiment. And this essentially involves an elitist, dematerialized concept of what constitutes “history” and what constitutes “literature.”

Chief Dan George remarks in his Preface to the play: “It is useless for people to hear if they do not listen with their hearts. Rita Joe helps them listen with their hearts — and when hearts are open, ears can hear.” And when ears can hear uncomfortable things like the train of thought in *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* then, George Ryga urges, minds can think and bodies act.<sup>17</sup>

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> James Marsh, "Early Railways," in *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, vol. 3 (Edmonton: Hurtig, 1985), p. 1541.
- <sup>2</sup> See Wayne H. Cole, "The Railroad in Canadian Literature," *Canadian Literature*, No. 77 (Summer 1978), 124-30, and Elizabeth Marsland, "La Chaine Tenue: Roads and Railways in the Prairie Novel," *Canadian Literature*, No. 77 (Summer 1978), 64-72. Cf. also R. Surette, "Railways: ikons of a mystic past?" *Atlantic Insight*, 6 (July 1984), 21.
- <sup>3</sup> In my use of "ideology" I accept Terry Eagleton's definition as a "lived system of values." See his *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1976), pp. 16-17: "Ideology is not in the first place a set of doctrines; it signifies the way men live out their roles in class-society, the values, ideas and images which tie them to their social function and so prevent them from a true knowledge of society as a whole." Cf. also Eagleton, *Literary Theory* (Oxford: Blackwells, 1983), pp. 194-217; Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977), pp. 57-71.
- <sup>4</sup> George Ryga, *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1970), p. 106. Quotations in my text are taken from this edition.
- <sup>5</sup> See Robin Fisher, *Contact and Conflict: Indian-European Relations in British Columbia, 1774-1890* (Vancouver: Univ. of British Columbia Press, 1977), especially his introduction: "In Canada the relationship between the native Indians and the immigrant Europeans has not, until recently, been a major concern of historians . . . the aboriginal people have been seen as a peripheral rather than a central concern in the study of Canada's past . . . the Indian provides a 'background' for Canadian history" (p. xi). And: Peter Weiss, "The Material and the Models. Notes toward a Definition of Documentary Theatre," trans. Heinz Bernard, *Theatre Quarterly*, 1 (January-March), 41.
- <sup>6</sup> Linda Hutcheon, "The Novel [in Canada, 1972-1984]," unpublished typescript. I wish to thank Professor Hutcheon for her generosity in allowing me to read and paraphrase from this forthcoming section of the *Literary History of Canada*, vol. iv. Cf. also her *A Theory of Parody* (New York and London: Methuen, 1985), pp. 32-373.
- <sup>7</sup> I disagree with Lawrence Russell's superficial review in *Canadian Literature*, No. 50 (Autumn 1971), 82: "I find it a weak play for several reasons. Technically, it is pre-historic. It is set in a court-room (turn on your television any night of the week and what do you see?) and indulges in a series of meanderings through time and space. . . . On stage this is accomplished by a gruesome split-focus technique of shifting spotlights and playing areas; the clumsiness of this method is particularly acute at the climax of the play where an awkward flux of melodramatics . . . develops. [Ryga's] romanticism has driven him into outright sentimentality." As I hope to show, Russell's remarks fail to recognize Ryga's parodic use of the melodrama, as well as the deliberate "alienation" effect of stylized presentation.
- <sup>8</sup> Karl Marx, "The Poverty of Philosophy," in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977), p. 198.
- <sup>9</sup> Terry Goldie, "Theatre in English Canada since 1967," *New Literature Review*, No. 13 [not dated], 39.
- <sup>10</sup> Examples of traditional train ballads would fill a book in themselves. An indicative example is Rosetta Tharpe's "This Train (is bound for glory)," recorded by Big

Bill Broonzy (amongst others). I am grateful to my colleagues, Michael Neill and Michael Wright at the University of Auckland, for pointing out similarities here to yet another famous liberal folklorist: Bob Dylan. The Singer's "Wheels on Fire" echoes Dylan's "Wheel on Fire" which was recorded during the mid-sixties and was available then on various bootleg tapes. Dylan's refrain is "Wheel on fire, rollin' down the road / Notify my next of kin, this wheel shall explode."

- <sup>11</sup> E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), *passim.*, but see especially pp. 781-915.
- <sup>12</sup> Yet another irony can be identified: Helen J. Dow points out that Colville was directly inspired by two lines written by the South African poet, Roy Campbell: "Against a regiment I oppose a brain / And a dark horse against an armoured train." See Dow, *The Art of Alex Colville* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1972), p. 41. Cf. also Rita's dream of her dead grandfather where horses are again associated with death and remembering: "just for a moment . . . an' before I got used to the night . . . I saw animals, moving across the sky . . . two white horses . . . A man was takin' them by the halters, and I knew the man was my grandfather. . . ."
- <sup>13</sup> Russell, *op. cit.*, 83.
- <sup>14</sup> George Ryga, "The Village of Melons," *Canadian Literature*, No. 95 (Winter 1982), 108.
- <sup>15</sup> Respectively: Herbert Rosengarten, "Violation of the Burial Places," rev. Matt Cohen, *Wooden Hunters*, *Canadian Literature*, No. 67 (Winter 1976), 90; Elspeth Cameron, *Hugh MacLennan: A Writer's Life* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1981), p. 188; Gary Boire, "The Parable and the Priest," *Canadian Literature*, No. 81 (Summer 1979), 154. Cf. also Josef Skvorecky, "Are Canadians Politically Naive?" *Canadian Literature*, No. 100 (Spring 1984), 287-97.
- <sup>16</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, p. 22.
- <sup>17</sup> This discussion grew out of the interesting experience of teaching Canadian Literature to Australasian students at the University of Auckland, New Zealand. The course, 18.422: "Literature of the Old and New Commonwealth," was team-taught by myself, Sebastian Black, and Michael Neill. We attempted to explore the proposition that geographical peripheries were now the "centre," and that issues raised in all post-colonial writing had special relevance to citizens of New Zealand in 1985. In addition to reading works from Nigeria, Kenya, Trinidad, South Africa, and Canada, we also explored the political implications of methodologies used in our reading. I wish to thank the students of that class for their stimulating and challenging responses to Canadian literature in general, and to *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* in particular: Paul Brewer, Rochelle Dewdney, Lynn Hall, Terry Lane, Judith Laube, Heather McCaskill, Cushla Parekowhai, Chris Price, Cathy Spencer, and Roberta Whelan.

