

"GENERAL LUDD":

A Satire on Decadence

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IN THE FIFTEENTH CHAPTER OF *General Ludd*, a satire on a writer's solitary, somewhat crazy battle against the forces of cultural destruction, Metcalf's protagonist turns increasingly vehement. Jim Wells, a middle-aged poet who is writer-in-residence at St. Xavier's, a Jesuit university in Montreal, upbraids one of his creative writing students, Itzic Zemermann, a paraplegic Holocaust survivor who has exploited his Jewishness with nauseatingly bad taste. Zemermann has used liberal guilt expertly in the cause of his own sanctification as a Holocaust poet, but his dactylic doggerel, replete with outmoded diction and bathetic imagery, finally acts as a detonator to Wells' angry irony. After quoting Wordsworth and Yeats on the character of poetry as "the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge," and "the chief voice of the conscience,"¹ Wells recites two quatrains from Auden's elegy for Yeats, in which time is bestowed with a godly power to forgive every human weakness except one — bad literary style:

Time that is intolerant
Of the brave and innocent
And indifferent in a week
To a beautiful physique

Worships language and forgives
Everyone by whom it lives;
Pardons cowardice, conceit,
Lays its honours at their feet.

George Steiner has found "something strangely disturbing, even distasteful in the fact" that Time worships language and while not caring about the poet's content, pays great care to the manner in which this content is expressed.² But Auden's broad concern was with weapons against frustrating and passionately stupid destructiveness of human seriousness, and it is this concern that so enflames Wells with radical fervour that he goes on to discourse on the terrible incongruity between matter and form that is at the heart of bad writing. Wells

particularizes his argument by citing the fraudulence of Zemer mann's poetry, which in betraying language to gibberish, also betrays the honourable subjects of poetry. So vehement is Wells' vituperative criticism that Zemer mann, who had previously merely feigned a heart attack in Chapter 11, is eventually killed by the passionate attack.

It is a climactic moment of black comedy for several reasons. Coming as it does in the second half of an ever-deepening and darkening fiction, it has the cumulative effect of a volcanic eruption although it is set in a banal environment in which degrees of reality are continually at odds with one another, and in which the mundane indecorously penetrates even the most solemn of events, as in the case Wells later calls to mind of the Queen's horse staling at the Trooping of the Colour. As Wells and Zemer mann are engaged in their struggle-to-the-death in Wells' office next to a frequently flushing urinal, "a gross chorus-line" of "puffing professors in their coloured suits" perform clumsy exercises in the field below. This conjunction of the vulgarly profane and the artistically rarefied points up the refreshingly irreverent nature of Metcalf's humour, which sharpens itself at the expense of existential confusion about the real. The two ideological battlers are relatively cocooned in the office, where they indulge in their duel of words as the external world continues to unfold with cheap, sleazy, or banal indifference to their intense clash. Moreover, the intersection of the absurd fringes of Wells' consciousness with his core of passionate but rational rhetoric heightens the credibility of Wells as a character in Metcalf's fiction. But the greatest comedy of the moment is also its bleakest, because in projecting himself as a latter-day Ned Ludd, the prankster-quipster Wells kills with words and becomes an ironic fulfilment of his own desire to be like his anarchic hero, vehemently against the currents of the modern technological age.

As this scene makes eminently clear, Metcalf deploys parody to great effect, provoking us into a recognition of literary codes, destroying his *bêtes noires* by ridicule or abuse, and forcing his way to a new accommodation with reality. That this reality is, in truth, a parody of the real is itself a wonderful final comic irony, and Metcalf uses fiction's mirrors like an expert, showing an age its own grimaces, japes, and follies with witty grace. As satire, *General Ludd* flourishes with a self-conscious moral impulse, and battens itself on an ultimately cheerful pessimism that Céline might have envied.

Once again using a teacher as his protagonist — as he had done in his first novel, *Going Down Slow* (1972) — Metcalf aims his barbs against a general cultural movement or condition of life that has deteriorated into middle-class vulgarity, smugness, fraudulence, and corruption. Metcalf is not aiming only at behemoths of technological progress — his analogues for Ned Ludd's forces of industrialization — but at an entire tainted and paralyzed aspect of civilization. His work is a satire on decadence — not in the hieratic sense that came into

fashion with Baudelaire, Gautier, and Huysmans, and was later turned into a dandified style by Wilde and Pater — but in the sense of a falling down, or a falling into an inferior condition, which would be the root Latin denotation of the word (*decadere*). The modern world, against which Wells often tilts like a drunken Don Quixote, is not a victim of an inexorable process of decay (if it were, nothing would make any difference — not even parody or irony), but an agent of its own calamity. “Decadence” here is a suitable word to describe a malady that has several manifestations: a gross insensitivity to the spirit of language; the pursuit of technological advancement at the cost of taste; the exploitation of facile sentiment at the price of truth and sincerity; a capitulation to the mass will of dunces; the democratization and, hence, the dilution of culture. It is a decadence that Voltaire had in mind in the eighteenth century when he lamented the erosion of good taste, and it is the type Proudhon spoke of a hundred years later when he marked its accelerated pace: “Conscience, intelligence, character, all perish within it.”³ But it is not a decadence posited in the light of an ideal fiction — say, that of classical culture in an image of purity or pristine vigour — for although Wells alludes to eminent writers, musicians, and painters from the past, he does not sanctify time, except in its capacity to enoble the living present.

THE MYTH OF PROGRESS is what fuels Wells’ pessimistic fury, because he equates this progress with a cultural decline. The very first chapter strikes the keynote of cultural criticism for its opening sentence is a clichéd motto, the scene of a reception in Wells’ honour is a social and cultural set-piece, and the setting and characters in this induction establish Wells as an outsider being patronized unwillingly by those who appear to be a parody of a cultural élite. The theme of decadence is established from the narrator’s opening words in the Faculty Club: “They are, I thought sadly, what they eat.” A cliché from an age of rock poetry, health food, and consciousness-raising by drugs. Yet note the fare: “sullen coleslaw,” “the usual unripe Brie and Camembert and goaty stuff past its prime and stuff wrapped in withered leaves and stuff tainted with nasty herbs.” The plates are paper, the knives and forks plastic. The wine is Canadian — all of it — and all of it has reached room temperature: “Warm duck.” The punch-line appears as a separate two-word paragraph — an instance of Metcalf’s strategic use of paragraphing for comic effect. But jokes aside, the didactic intent is serious: nothing in this induction ceremony shows a concern for integrity. The very setting has fallen into a low standard. A once small Catholic liberal arts college (obviously a version of the Loyola campus of Concordia University) has grown big, and on its once gracious grounds now squat

“the concrete bunkers of new disciplines.” The miscellaneous characters are all academics of diverse eccentricities and failings. The Reverend Father who makes the welcoming speech in honour of Wells obviously has not read any of the guest’s poetry. The Chairman can’t find a desk for Wells’ office. There is a “zoo aspect” to the entire proceedings, but while Wells feels that he is the one on view, he has his satiric revenge by caricaturing his audience with pornographic relish, especially as he directs his piercing gaze at Julia Hetherington, who wears a Chrysler hub-cap as a pin for her shawl, or at Dr. Gamahuche, the Renaissance man, whose name is an obscure sexual joke, or at the feminist Mary Merton, and the pederastic Professor Malcolm. The atmosphere is slightly raw as Frederick Lindseer, assistant professor, becomes “pissed to the gills” and decries the prospect of “thirty-fucking-eight” more years talking about “Thomas fucking Wolfe.” The collection of characters is a motley of manners, generally devoid of dignity, often petty or malicious, fluctuating according to the feelings and notions of each individual. The teaching faculty have nothing much in common, except, perhaps, a sour attitude towards one another. Caught in this mixed collection and disgusted at having to be patronized by people who barely tolerate him, Wells becomes increasingly vulgar in diction and thought, parodying his hosts, ridiculing them by clichés and vacuous platitudes, and nipping slyly at the hands that feed him. He relishes the joke on the initials of the Communication Arts Complex — utter CAC in his eyes! — and Fred Lindseer’s befuddled parody of scholastic syllogistic argument, and when he is told of the dynamics of the system — marking procedures, the Women’s Drop-In Centre, Cosimo O’Gorman’s gospel of Communication Arts — he subtly implies the Luddite motif, for the question that formulates itself by the end of this chapter is how to have standards of excellence and integrity in an age of machines that turn us all into cogs of one great combine. All machinery affects Wells with “glazed boredom,” and when people explain machinery to him, the boredom changes to hysteria and physical pain.

The Luddite motif grows explicit in the next chapter, set a week after the opening scene, where Wells takes us into his private life and his seedy living-quarters near old buildings in the process of being demolished in preparation for high-rises. Wells has to share a “leprous bathroom” and his wardrobe reminds him of “an upended coffin or sarcophagus.” The associations of decay, demolition, and death are all united to the Luddite theme, for it is machines, after all, that smash down old buildings and reduce the landscape to a diseased spectacle. It isn’t long before Wells begins to read a history of the Luddite movement, and although he expresses a faint disappointment with the Luddites for their interest in higher wages, he admires the general tenor and thrust of General Ludd, who becomes his model of rebellion.

Yet Metcalf does not give us a grimly serious cacotopian satire. His penchant for parody pushes him into absurd comedy where his narrator jokes about his own decadent writing. At work on a thriller set in Ottawa, he dreams up a ridiculous plot and set of characters, wierdly mixing Proust with Canadian writers such as Purdy and Hood, the KGB and the Bolshoi Ballet, the RCMP and the Canada Council. The central character is an Englishman, Commander Swann, who runs the Canada Council as a front for Canadian Counter-Intelligence. He is the Third Man in the Burgess and Maclean Affair — not Kim Philby, as many believe — and is actually a top Soviet Agent, a ferocious homosexual, and drinks after-shave lotion. In a stirring dénouement, Swann is trampled to death during the RCMP Musical Ride at the Calgary Stampede.

THOSE WHO WOULD OBJECT to the apparently nonchalant way in which Wells concocts this absurd story while at the same time mocking the thinness of Canadian culture, lose sight of an important point. Wells is a struggling writer, at the sour end of a failed marriage, and his financial problems spur him into a venture that, if successful, would guarantee his literary and economic survival. Besides, Wells' irony is often turned in on himself, and Wells becomes disgusted at his own failures and his dependence on the patronage of society. At the public reading in Chapter 3, where he is exposed to the gadgetry, gimmickry, and tomfoolery of the Communication Arts students, he shows us not only his disgust at his audience, but also a mordant self-disgust. Sick at having had to become a media personality, he is carried to a pitch of angry frustration which culminates in his impatient insulting of the female "Hardy of the Remedial Team" whose awful jargon ("Mod Coms in Listening Skills"; "a *natural* interpersonal interchange") causes him to lose his temper. The decadence of language here is especially ironic because it works within the university, supposedly the bastion and guardian of cultural standards.

Although possessed of gaiety, impudence, wit, and spirit, Wells suffers as much from his own conscience as he does from the impurities of Canadian society. At first he certainly appears to protest the world too much. Nothing he sees in Canadian culture generates his praise. Everything is deprecated as rubbish or paralysis — right from souvenirs (toy mounties, toy seals, key-rings, vibrators, and dildoes embossed with scarlet maple leaves) to the habits of the general populace: "I wasn't ready to admit once more that I lived in a country in which there was not one good book store, a country in which every half hour millions of radios informed the inhabitants whether it was hot or raining, a country where the unconscious desire of most citizens is to see from coast to shining coast one uninterrupted shopping mall." He is that typical paradox — a middle-class per-

son who is hostile to the middle-class, for although he says, "I love the middle class," the phrase is offered as an ironic counterpoint to his true feeling. We infer that this aversion accounted in large measure for the failure of his marriage to Marjorie, a former art student who had succumbed to "some atavistic demand for chintz furniture and life-insurance." Indeed, his Luddism first erupted during this marriage when he once smashed the television because she refused to turn it off while he was reading Robert Graves. As Kathy, his present girlfriend, remarks to him later, although his writing can be sensitive, he himself sometimes isn't.

Wells has an underlying sadness to his anger and recrimination. The memory of his deceased friend, the suicidal poet John Caverly, whose business papers, credit cards, and final handwritten poem he carries around as relics, turns his thoughts to decline and death. As his mood dips and he broods on "mutability, the infinite variety of life's rich pageant, the sadness of the young in one another's arms," he checks his own "mawkish maundering," and steps out into "startling sunshine." This controlled modulation maintains a psychological balance in his character and deepens his credibility, for Wells is evidently aware of his own foibles and failings, although he is sometimes too drunk to help himself. Yet his "Floating World" of drunkenness gives him images, settings, and characters he would never experience when sober, and when drunk, he's not maudlin but bitterly disgusted and parodic. As a writer he has a tough problem: how to obtain a genuine literary identity when his country has no cultural identity. A meditation on this problem yields a series of jokes and a parody of Canadian-ness:

We're invisible to ourselves and to the larger world because we have no stereotypes.

Even Australians have the distinction of being universally deplored.

The whole world knows what happens when a beautiful woman is shipwrecked on a desert island with an Englishman, a Frenchman, and an American. The only activity credible for a Canadian in their company would be standing on guard as a one-man peace-keeping force.

There is, of course, intense cynicism at the heart of his humour, as indicated by his later explanation to two visiting Russian writers of the dynamics of Canadian literary culture.

Even within the broad comic terms of the first half of the book, which is much lighter than the second half, Wells is a fully fleshed character. We are informed of his history of pranks, the physical scar left as a relic of his heavy drinking, and the ever-present threat of writer's block. Although he has acquired a literary reputation for "ironic grace," he suffers from real pain and nausea, and though he is a man of ingeniously witty similes, limericks, and quips by which he is able to juxtapose his critical sense against the object of his scorn and condemnation, he is a slightly mad Jeremiah, full of biblical analogies, who, in his quasi-madness is suitably aligned with Ned Ludd, in Chapter 8 with Sir Edwin Landseer (who

was deranged for the last four years of his life), and in Chapter 9 with Christopher Smart (who was incarcerated in the bin for two years). The big lump of quartz glittering with iron pyrites in Kathy's apartment is his emblem of delusion. It is "fool's gold" that only a fool would put trust in. The significance is not lost on him. The three consuming passions of his life appear to be writing, drinking, and loving — though not necessarily in that order. Each of the three gets in the way of the others, and while Kathy is confused by his behaviour and upset by his tendency towards violence, he is confused about her. The irony is that the "Department Bicycle," as she is snidely called by Fred Lindseer, is the one responsible for his positive change in attitude toward women in general.

Wells changes in love as he grows in wisdom, and so he is hardly a stereotypical neo-Luddite. In fact, he stands in direct opposition to people such as Hans Gruber who sneers at the past (represented by the nineteenth-century Landseer steel engraving, "Stag at Bay"); Wells likes the engraving which Gruber dismisses as the sign of a dead century. Wells' sympathy is with the Robinsons of the world — the librarians who struggle to preserve books. Yet he is not like Henry Benson, a diehard traditionalist, for whom culture and teaching end with the previous century. Rather, he is calibrated to time and is distanced from his public and society by his special vocation.

Wells' flourishing consciousness of his culture is a serious act, but it is given a diverting mode of parody which, in addition to being hugely entertaining in its games with diction and caricature, is a narrative strategy aimed at providing a sense of life and contingency. The parody touches a wide range of subjects — pop rock (the Blue Men at The Show Bar), nightclub cabaret (Ora Felony and Kingo), academic jargon (the Communication Arts curriculum guide), and semi-aphasic journalistic utterance (the Montreal *Herald's* Entertainments man) — and it demonstrates the energetic, mimetic power of Wells, whose very daydreams often fabricate fanciful allegorical parodies of aspects of reality. Such is the case with his daydream of *The Slaughter of the Prepuce*, an imagined painting in "a stiff, neo-classical style like the worst of David," where a larger-than-life Centurion is poised to slice the end of the Naked Babe's "winkie" to the great distress of Weeping Mother and beseeching Father. Such is also the case with his parody of private life in a Jesuit residence, where his animosity bubbles.

THE CORNERSTONE OF METCALF'S PARODY, however, lies in the representations of Cosimo O'Gorman and Itzic Zemer mann, two exemplars of cultural debasement. I have already discussed Zemer mann's case, but what remains to be said is that his visits to Wells harden into a ritual that is unsettling for the protagonist but uproarious to the reader. Zemer mann, who comes out

of an overwhelming Jewish background, writes excruciating rhymes that sentimentalize his suffering as a Holocaust survivor, and no matter what patient or diplomatic criticism Wells offers, he always manages to make his instructor feel like “a latter-day member of an *Einsatzgruppe*.” He arouses in Wells “exasperation and rampant guilt.” Wells’ sympathy and shame struggle with anger and reason, and the genuine horror of Zemer mann’s life makes Wells feel more and more dishonoured by weakness. Metcalf takes pains to establish his satirical sincerity about the subject. He does not make inordinately cruel fun of Zemer mann, but satirizes and isolates the facile trick this injustice-collector plays on weak-kneed, guilt-ridden liberals. Wells’ ultimate justification for rage at Zemer mann’s expense is, of course, both literary and moral, for as he declares to Zemer mann prior to the latter’s feigned heart attack: “I care about what happened too. I care very much. And because I care, I care about the way people write about it. . . . these horrors *demand* the best writing possible. Not ‘songs.’ Not ‘shepherds.’ Anything less than your best betrays the truth of what happened. You can’t approach mass murder carried out by the state with the language of Palgrave’s Golden Treasury.” Metcalf never takes Wells too seriously not to laugh at his occasional fumbling, stumbling inability to engage in lucid logical arguments, but he invests his conviction about the worst aspects of the modern world in Wells’ character and allows his hero to develop the view of Zemer mann’s unreal photo world or paraworld.

However, Zemer mann is not the only great target. Cosimo O’Gorman, the Vidigoth, also exemplifies the forces of cultural barbarism because his gospel of progress dishonours tradition and the past, anticipates a paradisaical future, and makes of the present a tangible expression of bourgeois smugness and complacency. For the Luddites, progress in its most fundamental or material sense was the legatee of the industrial revolution. For O’Gorman, progress is synonymous with sophisticated innovations in audio-visual equipment. His Dome has the name, mass, and splendour that put us in mind of an ultra-modern Xanadu, and Control Centre is “something of a Holy of Holies,” to which students are permitted only in their final year of study. O’Gorman, whose names suggest two ethnic mafias (Irish and Italian), propagandizes an aesthetic that sounds like a blatant parody of McLuhan:

“TV and video are, of course, the offspring of the film but the parent form has nothing now to teach us. One might, quite properly I think, describe the offspring less as offspring than as *mutants*. The editing techniques of film are not applicable to the video world. We edit in camera. We live in the spontaneous moment. What *is* and our apprehension of it are a single and simultaneous act. . . . The overriding virtue of video is that it has *no aesthetic value whatsoever*.”

Yet, he also sounds at times like a mixture of Eliot and the Bible:

'The progress of the medium is irreversible, unimaginable. We are at a new birth! A cold coming we had of it, umm? umm? Cable!'

.....

'Everything in this building, everything you've so far seen,' he said, his voice fallen almost to a whisper, 'is an irrelevance. A political expedience. Chaff which the wind driveth away. An expedience necessary to attain that vision. Only here. Only here within the Dome...'

His voice trailed away.

He sat in silence for a few moments.

I heard him sigh.

Suddenly he said in a strong voice,

'O sing unto the Lord a new song.'

Although O'Gorman is sometimes as tedious as Shakespeare's Polonius in his enthusiastic catalogue of delights ("We're equipped to record studio-live, off-air, film sync, cassette-to-cassette, cassette-to-reel, reel-to-cassette, reel-to-reel, video-cassette-to-cassette, video-reel-to-video-cassette, video-reel-to-video-reel, reel-to-video-to-video"), he is more dangerously a Vidigoth with scorn for the "high arts" and the past:

'What are the "high arts,"' he said quietly, 'what are literature, opera, painting, orchestras, ballet — what are they but the vestigial traces of another world? Rituals still performed whose significance has been long forgotten. There is a gulf between us and that world, and a grief between that world and what we *shall* become, a gulf as wide as that which now separates us from prehistoric man.'

In his visionary fervour that breeds a utopian world "in instant communication each part with another, a world of linguistic barriers overturned, a visual world accessible to all men, a world wired to God's Eternal Will," O'Gorman recognizes his Dome as a second apocalyptic tower — a "Babel rebuilt." However, he is totally blind to the ironic implications of his own symbolism. In *Genesis*: 11, Babel is the catalytic cause of human confusion and dispersion, for when Yahweh punishes its builders, He sends linguistic confusion into their lives, which causes them to split up and be scattered widely about the earth. Yet O'Gorman believes that his Dome/Babel will produce a unified language, race, and will. He obviously does not recognize the extent to which his narcissistic technical jargon has already divided him from others who are outside a comprehension of modern technology.

O'Gorman tries to build a new world with machines and heavy words, and he is parodied in the process. But Wells is himself a semanticist who uses language in its sophisticated and vulgar modes in order to control his attack on the forces that destroy culture. Yet his word-play is not narcissistic, for it is directed outwardly with a moral impulsion towards a new way of life and language, just as serious and valid a synthesis as the forms it mockingly attempts to surpass. His mixture of diction, colloquialism, and special sophistication ("pissed to the gills"

and “grunge” mixing with “alembic,” “steatopygic,” and “faience”) shows his involvement in an impure world of which he is a perennial cultural critic. When he is offended by pompousness or circumlocution (as in the case of the tortuously polite Hetherington or the jargon-clogged Vidigoths), Wells resorts to direct bluntness. But even when he indulges in spurts of locker-room humour or well-timed quips, he is never far from a serious meditation on the valid and invalid assumptions of language. In the bygone company of John Caverly, he had mused on the deterioration of meaning in words such as “royalties” and “free-lance” but only as a melancholy counterpoint to the mundane facts of his existence as a writer:

‘Royalties.’

‘Free-lance.’

Wonderful words. A knight riding out on a white steed gaily caparisoned. A May morning. An illumination from a Book of Hours. But the hours and years don’t work out that way. There’s little of nobility in hack editing, newspaper work, reviewing, ghostwriting the autobiography of an insane Alberta meat-packer as I did. That illuminated pathway of red and white roses intertwined leads inexorably to Grub Street.

Wells’ lively literary sensibility always makes us aware of his power to use varied textures, but these are not self-indulgent displays of empty virtuosity; they are immanent and functional within the text, and come close to equating language with active life. He captures perfectly the muted tone and coarse texture of rural life with Kathy in a stone-house (Chapter 12), and his sketch of an average Canadian town (restaurants, cinema, main street, and beyond that the bush) is devastatingly accurate. But all this detail is neither a pastoral interlude, nor a satiric diversion; it is Wells’ apologia for his self-righteous fury, irony, and inebriation, which often bewilder and embarrass Kathy in public. Aware of his image as a poet who observes “a bleak and desolate landscape” with “ironic grace,” he parodies this image for Kathy, yet exercises an intensely poetic self while humouring her with gentle self-mockery. His sense of parody is then given full play at the Show Bar and the orgasmic act of Kingo the black drummer, Miss Ora Felony, and her snake. His mind hums with rational associations and even so banal a thing as frozen french fries generates a fanciful symbolic elaboration because they are McCain’s or “the Mark of Cain. And I think fig trees being blasted down came into it somewhere.”

The Pleasure Dome scene with Cosimo O’Gorman creates a symphony of sly disapproval by strategic grunts and sighs. Wells’ allusions to writers from Shakespeare, Faulkner, and Firbank to Auden, Yeats, Milton, and Cervantes, make a strong, if oblique, case for what we have lost in “dignity, clarity, cadences.” His senses of parody and satire, which sometimes break out violently, are, as Kathy realizes, not just ideas or intellectual positions; they are things he really

feels. Like de Tocqueville, whom he invokes for having been the first reputable critic of the North American blunting of discriminating mind, his verbal and non-verbal violences are a dangerous feeling or conviction about real and imagined threats to his society in particular and to civilization in general. So when he engages in a lampoon of Cosimo the Vidigoth or of Canada as “a spiritual K-Mart,” it is because he senses the Second Coming in Yeats’ portentous vision and hears with hypersensitive antennae the vague beast slouching towards Bethlehem.

THE SECOND HALF OF THE NOVEL has two intertwined spirals — one moving downward for Wells, as the other carries the plot to its upshot. Amid the minor comedy of eccentricity — Professor Malcolm and his catamites, Professor Niddling’s talks to his filing cabinets — the small irritants still remain and grow worse: an old hymn degenerated into vulgar commercial lyrics; an unintelligible traffic signal; Hetherington’s spastic politeness; the hauntingly bland presence of *Reader’s Digest*. But the inner tensions build for him. In a trough of disillusionment over O’Gorman’s Babel and the New Jerusalem, which are really Valhalla to Wells, his thoughts turn to death and destructive madness. Kathy’s inability to understand the deep-seated reasons for his rage combines with his self-disgust at having to play a public Court Jester for the university and an incredulous host to two visiting Russian writers. Wells experiences the abyss of despair. He determines to smash the Dome, but first steals an IBM Selectric from the English department as his memorial to Caverly, proving in the bargain that his anarchy is never purposeless or irrational. His “madness” is anticipated by delirium tremens in Chapter 10. Lamenting the historical and cultural poverty of Canada, and aware that he is irremediably aging just as time is catching up with his creativity, Wells becomes the very incarnation of Ned Ludd, especially when his hysteria mounts at Alexis Nihon Plaza, where he fantasizes how joyous it would be “to see grim men in fatigues advancing down the walks smashing in the glass, herding out the dazed consumers, tossing grenades into the boutiques of embroidered jeans, into the Krazy Kitchen Korner with its electric knives, gas-powered-wine-cork-removers, microwave hot-dog-warmers, and digital-egg-timers, how joyous the raging of molotov cocktails amongst the Gucci and Pucci.” This fantasy is converted into a different reality when, after his ritualistic homage to Caverly via the purchase of all the remaindered copies of *Collected Poems*, a communion rite with wine, and a pyre for his dead friend’s final poem, he decides that General Ludd will launch Operation Plumbicon, by an infiltration of the Communication Arts Centre, in order to “smash the buggery out of all of Cosimo’s little toys.”

As the beast slouches nearer, in a shape that is no longer difficult to guess,

Wells reiterates, tongue-in-cheek, the melancholy of decadence: "What a falling off there's been! When Byron published *Childe Harold*, Lady Caroline Lamb sent him a letter with clippings of her pubic hair. What do I get? Letters from Mr. Archambault of the Taxation Data Centre. That's what I get. And threats from his bully-boy — a Ms. Thing of the Civil Litigation Section of the Department of Justice."

Worse than this pessimism, however, is a nagging doubt about the ultimate value of his devotion to language and literature. The lines he had once quoted from Auden's elegy for Yeats resurface during his funereal ritual for Caverly, and he wonders why Auden cut some verses out in his revised *Collected Shorter Poems* in 1965. Did Auden think they were a bit doggerel, or that the syntax was scrambled, or that there was an awkward near-rhyme in one stanza? Or, more achingly, that by 1965 did he no longer believe in what he'd written about time's forgiveness of everything except bad style? The same agonizing doubt lives at the end of Wells' story. He never achieves his violent goal of destroying the Dome, for Kathy, after informing on him to the authorities, hits him on the head with the lump of quartz. The resulting blackout, his straitjacketed convalescence in hospital, and Kathy's tearful confession convince him that he's suffering from "a head full of fool's gold."

The ending is subtly comic. There are broad touches, of course, in the doctors' recklessly technical language — decadence again! — and in the medical and psychological tests, magazines with graffiti, and his backfiring frivolity. But there are dark notes as well, when Wells discovers to his chagrin that he is in a no-win situation. The mood seems to repeat Ken Kesey's paranoid frustration from *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest*, but Metcalf does not deliver anything as supremely melodramatic as Chief Bromden's Herculean escape feat. Instead he uncovers Wells' deliberate delusiveness, showing that his hero fears a cure, preferring to remain somewhat deluded in order to better fight his chivalrous battle against civilization's real or imagined enemies. This ending, which significantly comes shortly before a new spring, is, perhaps, a twist of our assumptions about madness and sanity. In some ways, Metcalf implies as Wells had done in an earlier chapter, that "Don Quixote was not only a nobler character than Sancho Panza but, in the ways that matter, saner." Although there is much that is impure about Wells' reactionism, there is also an irreproachable core in his soul, and it is a core that he allows us to see repeatedly in the book, especially when he thinks of Faulkner's remark about the "Ode on a Grecian Urn" being worth any number of old ladies. The quotation is also his opportunity to declare: "I'm sorry if I sound pompous to you, Kathy, but language matters more than most things. And poetry just happens to matter one hell of a lot to me." It matters enough to turn him into a killer of Zerneremann, a fantastic Luddite, a drunken Don Quixote tilting at the whole world wired to decadence.

NOTES

- ¹ John Metcalf, *General Ludd* (Downsview, Ontario: ECW Press, 1980), p. 236. All subsequent references are to this edition.
- ² George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 451.
- ³ Richard Gilman, *Decadence: The Strange Life of an Epithet* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1979), p. 75.

UNCHOSEN

Phil Hall

The back townships acquiesce in the rain,

Verulam, Somerville, Blythe,

Devitt's Settlement, Lamb's School,
Bury's Green,

the stone-piles obscured in nets of downpour,

each rock in a net-hole the water defines
as it filters around it to the ground,

each rock hand-picked,
called a dead star.

In one farmhouse a child screams
at the rain because it will not stop
distinguishing his family from Noah's,

screams, unchosen, at the chosen stones
no one will get through.

Halted —
the net-strands muddle
sure dust,

the child listens to himself breathe.

He will never come back here,
no matter what.