

JACK HODGINS' "THE INVENTION OF THE WORLD" & ROBERT BROWNING'S "ABT VOGLER"

Laurence Steven

IN HIS REVIEW-ARTICLE OF *The Invention of the World* J. R. (Tim) Struthers comments briefly on the relationship between "Abt Vogler" and the novel:

By allusion, the piano player [in the climactic wedding scene] hammering on middle 'C' until he has everyone's attention returns us to "The C Major of this life" in Robert Browning's poem "Abt Vogler". Hodgins' quotation of a two-line passage from "Abt Vogler" in the conclusion to *The Invention of the World* is very appropriate, since Browning and his musician also knew that revelation is achieved in the moment of artistic invention.¹

Though Struthers' comment is perceptive, it falls far short of the actual significance that Browning's poem carries for Hodgins. The two line borrowing that Struthers neglects to quote in the body of his paper — "What was good shall be good, with, for evil, so much good more: On the earth the broken arcs; in heaven, a perfect round" — reflects a central element of Hodgins' vision. For Hodgins, as for Browning, our world is not *the* world. In an interview with Geoff Hancock, editor of the *Canadian Fiction Magazine*, Hodgins defined his view of reality as "The Reality that exists beyond this imitation reality that we are too often contented with. The created rather than the invented world."²

The duality at the heart of this vision — creation versus invention, broken arcs versus perfect round — is embodied in the novel in Hodgins' use of the dual creation myth from Genesis. Significantly, the introduction of this myth coincides with the novel's single mention of Robert Browning's name. Strabo Becker is pacing around old Lily Hayworth's bedroom, trying to convince her to consign her life memories to tape:

He'd fingered her books, her Robert Browning, he'd picked up the little black leather Bible. "A Bible, Lily?" he said. "You've been reading this?" No, she'd never read it, not through, she said. . . . A strange story, he said, if you'd read it. It has two beginnings. The first, a single chapter, would have us all made in the image of God, perfect spiritual creatures. Then someone else came along, started

it all over again, and had us all made out of clay. The rest of the story shows a lot of people trying to get back to that first beginning, back before the mist and the clay. You get all the way up to nearly the end of the book before you meet the man who knows how to manage it.³

Lily wonders if this feat is accomplished by magic, because she knows that magic is what people are looking for to help them overcome, in her words, "the limits that are put on us by this sack of bones we call ourselves." Becker tells her there was no magic involved, and then continues:

magic is what seems to defy the laws, or suspend them. There's nothing magic about something that was there all along, though hidden, like the underground roots of frozen grass.

The relation of the constant to the transitory — the root to the frozen grass — is elaborated in the two major movements of Browning's poem. The first movement, Abt Vogler's ecstatic moment of musical extemporization, is analogous to Hodgins' first creation. Where Becker says we were all once perfect spiritual creatures, Vogler, in the transcendent moment, when past and future, earth and heaven, life and death are one, says the following: "What never had been, was now; what was, as it shall be anon: / And what is, — shall I say, matched both? for I was made perfect too" (ll. 39-40). This moment of perfection is, however, fleeting — our earth is only a broken arc. Consequently doubt creeps in:

Well, it is gone at last, the palace of music I reared;
Gone! and the good tears start, the praises that come too slow;
For one is assured at first, one scarce can say that he feared,
That he even gave it a thought, the gone thing was to go.
Never to be again! (ll. 57-61)

The second major movement of the poem deals with Vogler's response to this loss of truth. In the lines of central importance he says he "must be saved because I cling with my mind / To the same, same self, same love, same God: ay, what was, shall be" (ll. 63-64). William Whitla comments usefully here:

Perfection is gone. It cannot constantly be experienced . . . but must be replaced, argues Vogler, with the definite act of mind, the willing choice which holds on to the memory of perfection once experienced. The choice is also made to hold on to the self that was the medium of the experience. . . . The artist also chooses to cherish the love that brought it to be . . . and the love of God who is himself that love.⁴

Falling away from perfection means assuming, inevitably, a false, or at least imperfect self. For sustenance Vogler must cling to the point at which he was made perfect. But as Whitla says, this takes a "definite act of mind," an act which most of us, for whatever reasons, do not make. Old Lily Hayworth in Hodgins' novel intuitively recognizes this:

Maybe that's what life is, forgetting what's natural, or maybe that's what life *isn't*. Maybe our natural life goes on without us while we slap on layer after layer of what we think is life but is only pretense.

Rather than responding to our true natures as perfect spiritual creatures by striving to manifest that nature, we believe only in our all-too-apparent limitations. Though these are real they belong only to the realm of the broken arcs. The other reality, however, of the perfect round, is always part of us — like the underground root —, dwelling in us as a spiritual sense, or conscience, or, as Strabo Becker terms it in his notebook, an instinct:

Maybe all our lives that instinct is in us, trying to translate the fake material world we seem to experience back into pre-Eden truth, but we learn early not to listen. Instead we accept the swindle, eat it whole.

Hodgins' vision of man's dual existence — the perfect spiritual being hidden within the flawed, materially-tied surface personality — gets a most effective dramatization in the relationship of Wade Powers and his double Horseman. Horseman *is* the true, the real, Wade Powers. He is Wade Powers as Wade would appear in the first creation — a perfect spiritual creature. He inhabits the perfect round of heaven as opposed to the broken arcs of earth. When Wade questions him about his occupation Horseman responds:

"A man of God is a busy man," he said. "I'm on the road a lot, it's not very often I get the time to lie around like this."

"What?"

He sat up, shaking his head. "Oh, I don't mean preacher, not a minister. It was a silly thing to say, I suppose, but you see that's the way I think of myself, of us all."

PRIOR TO HIS MEETING with Horseman, Wade has carefully suppressed the spiritual component in his life. He is one of those who are tied, in Horseman's words, "To earth. To things. To themselves, to their own bodies." He has cultivated a hedonistic lifestyle, finally attaining what he believes is an ideal existence: "the thing he'd waited for all his life had happened. He had the Fort. He had those tourists so eager to part with their money. He had Virginia. Things were perfect." But this perfection, such as it is, comes at the expense of the tourists Wade dupes and then holds in contempt. As he says to Virginia Kerr:

the sight of tourists disgusted him. A bunch of fools was what they were, he told her, to part with their money so easily. They came into the place looking as if there was a real treat in store for them, and went out again looking as if something had just been added to their lives. They thought they were stepping back in

time, living their own ancestors' lives for a moment, and didn't even suspect what idiots they were. . . . It probably wouldn't even bother them to be told what they'd paid for was only a rough counterfeit of the real thing.

Whether the fort is real or not, the tourists find it a meaningful experience. The important point is the motive behind the offering, whether it is offered with love or contempt. This is brought out fully in the exchange following Horseman's discovery that the fort is counterfeit:

"Nevertheless," the man said, his head tilted in thought. "If you've offered it to them with love, if you're giving them this because it's the closest you can come to the real thing, and if the real thing is something you want them to have, then you're not really cheating them at all. They spend their lives being satisfied with reasonable facsimiles. This is no different. The important thing of course is motive. Any gift, offered with love, has some value."

"It's a business," Wade said. "It's my business."

"Then it's offered with contempt."

Even if only a reasonable facsimile of the real thing, the gift offered with love has value because love is the precondition of reality, of the created world as against the invented one, the first creation as against the second, the perfect round as against the broken arcs. Just as Abt Vogler had to cling to his "same self," the perfect being he had been in the ecstatic moment, so he has to cling to the "same love" which was the condition which allowed that moment its existence. As Jacques Maritain says:

To produce in beauty the artist must be in love with beauty. Such undeviating love is a supra-artistic rule — a precondition, not sufficient as to the ways of making, yet necessary as to the vital animation of art — which is presupposed by all rules of art.⁵

For Wade to offer his fort in a spirit of love would mean he was clinging to his "same self" — his perfect spiritual nature — as it is embodied in Horseman. This, however, is not what he does. His contempt constitutes a denial of reality and a perpetration of a fraudulent, invented world. Horseman regrets the lack of contact between them in a passage employing variations on the imagery of circle and arc from Browning's poem:

The man sat down on the little bench where the curved outside wall and the straight inside wall met. "We're further apart than I imagined." He looked as if he truly regretted it. "I thought yesterday for a moment or two when we talked that it wouldn't be hard to find at least one point at which we touched. Tangent line and circle. But evidently I was wrong.

The appearance of Horseman in the story at all, however, indicates that a core of loving reality, hitherto deeply buried, is beginning to emerge from within Wade. Hodgins includes a significant juxtaposition in the following statement:

“And the next day, which was the day the stranger arrived on the beach, [Virginia] wanted to know if Wade had ever been in love with Maggie Kyle.” Horseman’s arrival corresponds to the reawakening of Wade’s dormant love for Maggie, a love whose seeds had been sown in the childhood pact they had made to always count on each other. Maggie is the one person Wade is willing to *really* give of himself for:

If she’d call him, if she’d telephoned from Hed and told him something terrible was going to happen to her, he would be on the road in minutes, heading back to the mountains. He didn’t feel sorry for her, he grew more and more fascinated. . . .

The gift is genuine, offered with love. It is this loving nature Wade has to acknowledge, rather than stifle by, symbolically, locking it up in his bastion cell. As Horseman says in their final confrontation: “Don’t you think, Powers, that it’s time you took responsibility for what you really are?” Wade has to dare — as Abt Vogler has “dared and done” (l. 95) — has to dare to let his spiritual instinct guide him.

The first direct quoting from Browning’s poem occurs in the section entitled “The Wolves of Lycaon,” in which old Lily Hayworth, at the prompting of Becker with his tape-recorder, plunges into memories of her time as third and last wife of Donal Keneally — founder and self-styled lord of The Revelations Colony of Truth. She is a witness to his self-destruction, when, as a broken and frightened old man, he obsessively tunnels his way into the earth beneath the floorboards of their home and dies in the ensuing cave-in. The first of two identical quotations from “Abt Vogler” comes as Lily and Keneally sit in the kitchen during one of his occasional respites from tunnelling. She ponders the situation as follows: “Who was there left to do anything for anybody? There was only this dark, and the two of them eyeing each other dully. *On earth the broken arcs, in heaven the perfect rounds.*”

The line of poetry is printed in italic type, possibly indicating that Lily recites it at the subconscious level; certainly indicating that she is, in some sense, in touch with a spiritual dimension that Keneally has consistently denied and gone to great lengths to discredit in the eyes of those whom he would have follow him unquestioningly. Lily is certainly no dogged follower. When Keneally explains the circular structure of the colony buildings by saying, “In some cultures . . . the circle represents enlightenment. And perfection” she responds: “Well what happened to your perfection when you got past the shacks? All the fields are squares, all the fences are straight lines.”

Lily’s sarcasm reveals the inevitable limitations of any material perfection. Like Wade Powers and his ideal material existence, Keneally has attempted to establish paradise on earth, and set himself up as God. The tools he uses are all, finally, superficial: charisma, magic, humiliation, brute force; the one element

that could begin to effect a change — love — is absent. Lily, however, for all her coarse exterior, does have a loving nature, and it is this that gives the lie to her bleak question, already quoted: “Who was there left to do anything for anybody?” Lily herself is doing something for somebody, she is remaining with Keneally to the end, protecting him from those who would take advantage of his weakness. The love is apparent in the following:

My first concern was for him. Let those others wallow in their dirt, they were used to it, they'd forgotten anything else, time and Keneally's brain-washing had convinced them of their limitations and I wasn't going to change that overnight. No, my first concern was him. Villain, god, demon, magician, con-man, call him what you want he was my husband and I could see what was happening to him, besides being human after all and getting old he was catching whatever disease he had set loose on the others, it was coming back on him now and he probably didn't even recognize it. I saw it sitting in there in his eyes the same way I had seen it sitting in the eyes of the others, and my only thought at first was to keep them from finding out or even suspecting.

Though this love motivates Lily to genuinely offer herself to Keneally, she also has the intuitive awareness that nothing materially can be done to save him. His sickness is of the soul; the determination not to acknowledge anything beyond himself can only lead to self-immolation:

Should a doctor, or a psychiatrist, be permitted to put patches and Band-Aids on a life that had been plummeting like this from near the beginning? It was only natural that he should screw himself into the ground, after the fall.

The material, humanly limited element in Lily balks at this conclusion but her spiritual sense finally overcomes the objections as the line from “Abt Vogler” is quoted again:

But natural was never taken as an excuse and wouldn't be for her. There was nothing natural in the way she only sat at that table listening. Wives did not do that, even when they knew it was the only sensible thing. Yet there were some things that mustn't be tampered with, you only had to shift the angle of your vision. *On earth the broken arcs, in heaven the perfect rounds.*

From the perspective of the perfect round — the reality of the first creation, informed by love — Keneally's life has been a denial of its very foundation; from this view he *has* no reality, in effect he doesn't exist. As Abt Vogler says, “The evil is null, is sought, is silence implying sound” (l. 70). Consequently, for Lily to attempt to heal Keneally physically is pointless; the most she can do is stand by him as an example of the loving sound his evil silence implies. The constancy of love, its *reality*, finally encompasses evil. This is the significance of the Browning line: “What was good shall be good, with, for evil, so much good more” (l. 71). And this is also the significance of the gesture Lily makes from beyond the grave. Through her will she has Maggie Kyle carry Keneally's ashes back to his birth-

place: the circle of stones on the Irish mountain. Symbolically Lily's love has moved Keneally from hell to heaven, from the broken arcs to the perfect round; it has redeemed him.

For Maggie Becker, and finally for Wade Powers as well, the journey to the Irish mountain is more than just a favour for Lily Hayworth. Each of them is on a spiritual pilgrimage, searching for the created as opposed to the invented world. As they stand among the ancient stones and Maggie gets the view she has been craving throughout the novel we realize, through allusions to both the Bible and "Abt Vogler," that they have momentarily re-entered the first creation; have transcended the broken arcs:

if there was magic here it wasn't in the stones, it was in the command they had of the earth, which fell away below them and ringed them round as far as she could see. *Dominion* was the word that nagged to be said. Dominion over the sun, even, whose fire had already sunk beneath the hills but whose rays like horizontal bands of light streaked out of cloud to cross the valley and find themselves absorbed in stone. Absorbed and then thrown out again, against themselves.

"Dominion," of course, is what God gave man in chapter one of Genesis — the first creation:

And God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth." (Gen. 1:26)

This is no worldly power that one man can hold over another, as with Keneally and his slaves, or Wade and his tourists; it is the power that comes from recognizing the entire created world as spiritually alive and from seeing yourself as part of it. The creation "rings them round" as far as they can see; briefly the impediments to vision are overcome.

To underline just to what extent this mountaintop episode inhabits "the perfect round" Hodgins deftly includes a scene which embodies within it a dramatization of Abt Vogler's "broken arc":

Somewhere behind them, on the wind, there was a new sound. Turning, they saw far, far back across the lumpy plateau, the small black speck of a car coming towards them. . . . it rounded the final curve, came up the final slope, going fifty or sixty miles an hour, came yelling and screaming, waving bottles and papers, spouting steam from the grill, belching blue coiling clouds of smoke behind, slowing suddenly, screeching, at the every edge of the drop. A bottle, arching high in the air and then down, smashed exploding against the tallest stone at the same moment the car went over suddenly, dropped over the edge, and turning, roared shooting down the first steep broken section of the road.

"My God, look," Maggie said. "Look at them go down, look how high we've come, look how high we've come."

The smoke-belching car and its disrespectful occupants, symbols of the worst aspects of our invented world, are on a downward path similar to the invented patterns that society has provided and can't see the reality in front of them. Hodgins has skilfully brought us from the outside to the inside of his vision. As we read this scene we share Maggie's perspective; we stand in reality, look out at invention, and see how phoney it is.

THE FINAL SECTION of the novel, entitled "Second Growth," is a mythic rendering of Maggie and Wade's wedding celebration. In its extended exaggeration this episode is analogous to Abt Vogler's ecstatic moment as he extemporizes on his orchestrion. For Vogler, extemporization is the only artistic endeavour in which "the finger of God" (l. 49) can be experienced directly because inspiration and expression are simultaneous, there is no subjection to artistic laws. Hodgins' use of exaggeration is a symbolic attempt to approach the state of extemporization by transcending the restricting limits of traditional literary realism. And this use is not purely symbolic, either. As Hodgins says, in an interview with Alan Twigg,

Sometimes I just fly by the seat of my pants. That is, I want to turn the page to find out what happens next. I don't always know. I'm never happy if my writing seems simply beautiful or practical.⁶

In terms of the Browning imagery predominant in the novel, traditional realism, in its adherence to the limits imposed by material reality, manifests a broken arc, while the extended exaggeration, by breaking the rules, moves toward the perfect round.

The wedding is an appropriate occasion for this move toward transcendence because it is a celebration of love, and love, as I said earlier, is the precondition of reality. The creative, ordering power of love — its ability to show us what we really are — is seen clearly in the way it stops the battle which erupts between loggers and townspeople at the reception:

it was Maggie and Wade who stopped the battle in the end, before anyone got seriously hurt, by expressing their feelings for each other so vehemently in word and deed under the flower-bedecked arch that a pale warm eerie glow radiated from them all over the crowd and stopped them dead in their tracks, full of awe, to contemplate the nature of their own actions. People fell, where they'd stood, in heaps on the floor. Both horrified and amazed at their own behaviour, they either escaped into sleep or hid their faces in shame.

Just as Lily Hayworth knew there was finally nothing *materially* that she could do for Keneally's disease, so Maggie and Wade don't attempt to physically break up the battle — this would only add fuel to the fire. It is their love, remaining

calm and consistent in the midst of the chaos around it, that encompasses, and so quells, the uproar.

When calm is restored Wade gives his speech and unconsciously points the moral by quoting the two Browning lines I opened with: "What was good shall be good, with, for evil, so much good more: On the earth the broken arcs; in heaven, a perfect round." He then suggests it is time to open the gifts, and as Cora Manson tears the paper from parcel after parcel at an increasingly frenzied pace the episode moves to its transcendent crescendo. Beginning with conventional enough wedding gifts — pillows, sheets and appliances — the list is soon exaggerated beyond any semblance of realism, finally leaving the concrete material realm in order to confer on the couple the entire range of human experience and emotion: "Hope. The bomb. Crime. Ecology. Faith. Charity. Life. Truth. Grief. Despair." The list concludes, in total appropriateness to the vision discussed in this paper, with love.

In the final stanza of the Browning poem, Abt Vogler leaves off meditating on the implications of his ecstatic moment and resumes earthly life: "Well, it is earth with me; silence resumes her reign: / I will be patient and proud, and soberly acquiesce" (ll. 89-90). He feels for "the common chord again" (l. 91), assuming his resting place in "The C Major of this life" (l. 96). In doing so, however, his perspective is not completely that of other men: he stands "on alien ground" (l. 93). As William Whitla comments: "Just so is earth alien to the man who has his citizenship in the heaven which he has glimpsed."⁷

Similarly, as the wedding guests are "Reeling from the shock of such an incredible display of wedding gifts," Hodgins brings them back to earth: "It was the piano player who saw the stranger first, and hammered on middle 'C' until he had everyone's attention." The stranger turns out to be Horseman, the symbolic projection of Wade's perfect spiritual nature. It is he who leads the bride and groom back to their home at the House of Revelations. Symbolically, Horseman's appearance at this time indicates that the reality glimpsed by the couple on the mountaintop will remain with them in their earthly life as a guiding love. Significantly, as they leave the marriage celebration Hodgins calls his couple "the new man and new woman."

For both Browning and Hodgins the work of the truly creative artist is an attempt to present the perfect round within the broken arcs. Browning's "whole poet" is able to behold "with an understanding keenness the universe, nature and man, in their actual state of perfection in imperfection."⁸ Similarly, in the Hancock interview, Hodgins says

What you and I call the ocean is to me only a metaphor. All those trees, for instance, are metaphors; the reality lies beyond them. The act of writing to me is an attempt to shine a light on that ocean and those trees so bright that we can see right through them to the reality that is constant.⁹

For both writers, then, art, as displayed in "Abt Vogler" and *The Invention of the World*, becomes a means of revelation.

NOTES

- ¹ "Fantasy in a Mythless Age," *Essays in Canadian Writing*, 9, pp. 145-46.
- ² "An Interview with Jack Hodgins," *Canadian Fiction Magazine*, No. 32-33 (1979-80), p. 47. This quotation from Hodgins provides the necessary corrective to Robert Lecker's gloss (in "Haunted by a Glut of Ghosts: Jack Hodgins' *The Invention of the World*," *Essays in Canadian Writing*, 20, pp. 86-105) of the two Browning lines that Wade Powers quotes: "The metaphor is quite apparent: contentment and meaning must be found in 'the broken arcs' of this world, and in 'The C Major of this life,' as Abt Vogler says." Though this gloss may support Lecker's contention that Hodgins is an "uninventor" of narrative worlds, it is not borne out by either the novel or the poem. Neither Browning nor Hodgins is concerned with finding "contentment," and, as for "meaning," both offer numerous indications, implicit and explicit, that our limited existence gains significance only to the degree in which it answers the pull from beyond.
- ³ This and all subsequent references are to Jack Hodgins, *The Invention of the World* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1977; rpt., Signet, 1978).
- ⁴ William Whitla, *The Central Truth* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1963), p. 86.
- ⁵ Jacques Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*; quoted in Whitla, p. 69 n.
- ⁶ "Western Horizon," *For Openers* (Madeira Park, B.C.: Harbour Publishing, 1981), p. 191.
- ⁷ Whitla, p. 88.
- ⁸ Robert Browning, "An Essay on Percy Bysshe Shelley," in Walter E. Houghton and G. Robert Stange, eds., *Victorian Poetry and Poetics* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968), p. 339.
- ⁹ "An Interview with Jack Hodgins," p. 47.

**SEVEN SPECIALIZED BOOKSHOPS UNDER
ONE ROOF AT THE NEW UBC BOOKSTORE**



6200 UNIVERSITY BLVD.
VANCOUVER, B.C. V5Y 1W9

UBC BOOKSTORE

- ARTS & HUMANITIES
- LANGUAGE & LITERATURE
- SOCIAL & BEHAVIOURAL SCIENCES
- PROFESSIONAL
- HEALTH SCIENCES
- GENERAL