TROPICAL TRAUMAS

Images of the Caribbean in Recent Canadian Fiction

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TRAVEL WRITERS NEVER GIVE US the straight goods about the places they visit, according to Annette, the protagonist of Margaret Atwood's short story, "A Travel Piece."[1] Persuaded that her own readers, "even the ones who would never go to the places she described . . . did not want to hear about danger or even unpleasantness," Annette filters out the reality of violent crime and the ever increasing examples of pollution — "small black beads of oil . . . appearing on the white sand beaches" — and substitutes clichéd fantasy: *A gem of an island almost undiscovered by tourists, with brilliant white sand beaches and blue-green lagoons complemented by the friendliness of the people.*

Writers of more serious fiction are expected to treat their readers differently, of course, and they usually do. Nonetheless, Canadian readers nurtured on popular northern notions of paradisal islands in the sun are likely to find recent Canadian writing set in the Caribbean increasingly disconcerting, for with few exceptions the tone of these works has been overwhelmingly dark. In most of them the idyllic dreamland of the travel pages has been replaced by a nightmare world of tropical traumas in which the lives of dislocated protagonists are circumscribed and defined by elements of confusion, fear, hatred, agonized introspection and physical and spiritual suffering. Almost always the central characters are outsiders. In Diane Giguère's *L'eau est Profonde* (translated as *Whirlpool*) (1965), in Juan Butler's *Canadian Healing Oil* (1974), and in the stories in Harold Horwood's *Only the Gods Speak* (1979), for example, the protagonists are mainly young or middle-aged Canadian tourists hoping to exchange the rigours of northern winters for adventure under the tropical sun.[2] In Margaret Atwood's *Bodily Harm* the central character is a Canadian journalist doing a travel article on a Caribbean island called St. Antoine; and in Timothy Findley's *Famous Last Words* the narrator is a writer and close associate of the Duke and Duchess of Windsor during their wartime exile in the Bahamas.[3]

The literary possibilities of using an outsider as protagonist are essentially ironic, for there is an inevitable discrepancy between the point of view subscribed to by

the visitor and that of the local residents, an inconsistency that may be recognized only occasionally by the visitor, but one which is clearly evident to the reader if the writer is any good at all. In Harold Horwood's *Only the Gods Speak*, a collection of seventeen stories of which ten are set in unspecified Caribbean locations, the protagonists encounter various local customs, attitudes, and intentions; and in their individual reactions to them move towards their personal salvation or damnation — usually the latter. Many of Horwood's protagonists are mis-shapen, emotionally and spiritually, and fail to find possibilities for redemption in the situations in which they find themselves. In one story, "The Sound of Thunder," a group of life's failures drinking in the garden bar of a "hilltop resort" dismiss the significance of a local religious celebration they can hear going on, but they have nothing to substitute for it, and their evening ends in meaningless orgiastic revelry. In another story, "Through Dreaming Towns," an insensitive young Canadian and his girlfriend spend Christmas Eve getting high on marijuana and daiquiris. They spend the rest of the night and part of Christmas morning wandering through the town, totally divorced from its life, unable to transcend their chemically induced sensual responses and to get beyond vulgar metaphors and their feeling that everything was "freaky" and "outside your head like."

The visitors' failure to touch local reality is echoed in a number of Horwood's other stories. Deaths of one sort or another — physical, emotional, spiritual — take place in most of them: in "Island of Innocents" the North American owner of a tropical island is killed when he flies his private plane into a hillside; in "Coming to an End" the protagonist commits suicide. In "Among the Snarks" Helen, the wife of an enthusiastic Canadian naturalist, enjoys "the continuous sunshine and the lush vegetation" of the tropics but becomes more and more paranoid about local attitudes and the possible dangers posed by local fauna. " 'Snarks' was her name for all the native monsters," people included. Watching one of the local boys, "she wondered about the mixture of Spanish and Indian blood that had produced such notable physical beauty . . . after all Spaniards were addicted to bullfights, and Indians of central America used to sacrifice people by the thousands, throwing them into wells or tearing out their hearts . . . and they'd punished their own children with thorns and stinging nettles; she'd seen pictures of it in the museums; the Spaniards, too — they'd been even worse, if possible. Helen was glad her ancestors had come from northern Europe with no taint of such darkness in their souls, and had settled in Canada, where people were self-righteous, perhaps, but neither cruel nor violent." When her husband picks up an iguana, "Helen covered her mouth to choke back a scream. Some lizards were poisonous. And this one certainly *looked* dangerous — beautiful, but dangerous, a deadly work of art by some heathen god who enjoyed black jokes." Inevitably there is a point at which Helen can no longer handle the pain caused by her failure to accept the world around her. That point comes when a fellow

Canadian tells her that the innocuous looking sea snake her husband has just handled is one of the world's most deadly reptiles. The resolution is tellingly understated in the final sentences of the story: "She looked at Ed. . . . then she went inside and picked up the telephone. She had trouble making the operator understand her, but at last she got through to the airport, and a friendly voice speaking in perfect English."

The protagonist of Diane Giguère's short novel, *Whirlpool*, a young Montreal woman named Nathalie, shares Helen's ambivalent reaction to the Caribbean milieu. Although the novel takes place primarily in Montreal, and concerns Nathalie's attempts to extricate herself from a rapidly souring affair with Yves, a married man several years her senior, the Montreal scenes are balanced by Nathalie's recollections of the beginning of her affair with Yves on the island of St. Croix the year before. "Down in St. Croix [she muses], that's the phrase that touches off the song which has oppressed me since I returned." The reminiscence is bittersweet — memories of the "whispering tropical night" and passionate lovemaking are tempered by Nathalie's continuing concern for lost innocence and the unforeseen consequences of her infatuation. At times she feels the island has cast a spell on her — the word and its variants recur a significant number of times in the novel — and that she acted under the influence of forces over which she had no control; at other times the Caribbean experience is "nothing but an evil dream in which I wept, cried out, and shuddered in a hell that never existed." For the most part, however, the memories lead to negative feelings, of being bruised and soiled by her St. Croix experience, and to the depressing recognition that "the woman Yves made of me [on the island] grows like a weed in my body." For Nathalie, the garden has been contaminated forever, and the reader is left with the overwhelming image of paradise lost, of dream turned into nightmare.

Juan Butler's *Canadian Healing Oil*, a curious work about a Montreal bookseller who sees himself as St. John, the Apostle whom Christ loved the most, also deals with distorted dreams. Early in the novel St. John is suddenly impelled to travel the world in search of the meaning of life. The narrative of his journey is surrealistic and disjointed, interspersed with photographs, labels, advertisements, sketches, poems in various languages, and epitaphs from statues and burial plaques, many of them of Caribbean origin. His initial stop is (appropriately or coincidentally) the island of St. John, and the first thing that draws his attention is a 1733 proclamation listing penalties of maiming, dismemberment, torture, and death for disobedient or rebellious slaves. This is followed by the history of a slave rebellion and its inevitable bloody suppression by the authorities. So begins a long

series of anecdotes and commentaries which deliberately negate the popular North American dream of edenic islands in the sun.

To disabuse his readers of the idea that the Caribbean is a paradise on earth, Butler (like Atwood) inserts mocking examples of tourist brochure prose: "over thirty jewel-hued bays and inlets await your pleasure. Beachcomb. Daydream. Or adventure your way along twisting trails, catching a glimpse now and then of abandoned eighteenth century sugar plantations." Against this lyrical illusion he sets a real world in which images of violence abound: what St. John notices about a Dominican carpenter is his "tarantula fingers"; women in a Puerto Rican slum are "slovenly," their men "slouchy and drunky" and the children tough and wild, "all looking as if they'd cut your throat just to see the blood rush out." In St. Thomas, young blacks are "warriors all," and random violence occurs without warning: "a car pulls up, machine gun poking out a rear window. Bullets spatter against pink and white masonry, whiz through trees and flowers"; it's "Chicago in the Caribbean."

Predictably St. John's travels in the Caribbean dystopia bring him no answers and no peace. Like many of the characters in Horwood's stories, he fails to connect with the life around him, and in the end he is murdered (near the grave of Sir Thomas Warner, colonizer of St. Kitts) by a crazed black man with "a crown of thorns rammed into a shaggy, bleeding Afro." The self-styled St. John, best loved disciple, dies at the hands of a posturing Christ figure — a fitting end to Butler's unremittingly bleak Caribbean vision.

Timothy Findley's latest novel, *Famous Last Words*, is not primarily a Caribbean novel, though some significant events which occupy about a quarter of the novel's 400 pages are set in Nassau.[4] The Bahamian sequence is essentially self-contained, linked to the rest of the novel mainly through the personalities of its principal fictional characters — the Duke and Duchess of Windsor and the brilliantly recreated Hugh Selwyn Mauberley (Ezra Pound's famous persona) as writer, bon vivant, and intimate of the Windsors. But the sequence may also be read emblematically, encapsulating the larger world the novel represents, a picture of hell on earth of which Hieronymous Bosch might be proud.

Almost all the characters in the novel are warped in some way, displaying a series of moral imperfections which range from the silly to the vicious. Elsa Maxwell, who takes the Windsors' underclothes to New York once a fortnight for laundering, rents out the Duchess's lingerie, offering her friends the chance to "dance in the slip that danced next the shirt that was worn by the Prince of Wales"! The brittle bitchiness of the Duchess, and her total insensitivity to anyone or anything that does not further her outrageous ambition, alienates her from nearly everyone in Nassau; the Duke, whom one acquaintance calls a "henpecked impotent twit," spends much of his time in spiritual self-abuse. Even at official functions "he could barely look . . . people in the eye or hear their names

without a gun going off that was loaded with accusations against himself." Hugh Selwyn Mauberley is a calculating, traitorous viper. Sir Harry Oakes, the immensely wealthy Canadian who has settled in the Bahamas to avoid death duties, is "a walking summary of all that is crude, contemptible and mean." His son-in-law Alfred de Marigny is a pederast. And Harry Reinhardt, an associate of Mauberley's, is a vicious murderer.

The two major events that take place in the Bahamian sequence are both horrific. The first is the deadly disruption of the garden party the Windsors hold, ostensibly to aid the war effort but really to celebrate and display their redecoration of the Governor's mansion. In the midst of the festivities a small plane drops a gasoline tank on the main lawn. As it descends it is shot at by a member of the Duke's bodyguard and it explodes in mid-air, loosing a holocaust of flames on the assembled guests.

> Everyone rose and ran. First they went one way. Then they went another. Then another. And then it struck them all at once. They were trapped. There would be no running anywhere. On every side they were blocked by marquees; by the Mansion; by the ambulance at the top of the drive and by the press of motorcars that filled every gap between the trees. Five hundred people and more were entirely hemmed in and there was not a hope of getting out. . . . By now the marquees were going up one by one in candy-stripe volcanoes causing an enormous, roaring updraught which lifted the remnants of the canvas and the bright green papers into the air like burning flags.
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> More and more people were rising from the ground. Fire was flooding out around them over the stones and shells and through the grass. There was a second conclusive movement, again *en masse*, towards the canvas enclosures that only moments before had offered shelter from the sun. Now, there was nothing but a wall of flame and a corps of struggling human torches flailing against the holocaust, drowning for lack of air in waves of fire and smoke.

This hellish set-piece is followed by the grisly murder of Sir Harry Oakes, who is bludgeoned to death in his own home at the instigation of Mauberley because he had discovered a German plot to spirit the Windsors away from the Bahamas by submarine.

A CAREFUL READING of these hellish events, the paradisal setting in which they are ironically placed, and the characters who figure largely in them, suggests that Findley's writing is essentially parabolic. That is to say, what we are offered in the Bahamian sequence of *Famous Last Words* is a cautionary moral tale. In this part of the novel at least, Findley is being as openly didactic as a serious novelist dare be these days, offering the reader an unambiguous portrait of evil in contemporary life, and a pointed reminder of its ubiquity.

Margaret Atwood's most recent novel, *Bodily Harm*, is also about evil, and particularly about the consequences of failing to recognize and come to grips with it. Arguably Atwood's most depressing work, the novel is an intense study of an individual's exposure to a set of conditions and actions which are totally alien to anything she has known before, and of her failure to profit in any significant way from the experience. The protagonist in *Bodily Harm* is Rennie Wilford, a Toronto freelance journalist in her late twenties who concentrates on trendy trivia called "lifestyles" and who is sent to the Caribbean island of St. Antoine (near Grenada) to do a Fun in the Sun travel piece. Almost at once and against her inclination, she is caught up in local politics — the island has only recently obtained its independence from Britain and is about to hold its first "democratic" elections — and very quickly she learns of the real island world that lies behind the tourist brochure illusion of sunny tranquility. With a seventy per cent unemployment rate and sixty per cent of the population under twenty, a predilection on the part of the police to use violence and on the part of everyone else to feel politically involved, the stage is set for dramatic confrontation. As Michael Dixon pointed out in a review of the novel, "given the opportunistic nature of the participants, the course of events is predictable: subverted democratic elections lead to assassination to abortive revolution to the tyrannous exercise of brute force in the name of order."[5]

As these events unfold, Rennie receives a series of shocks to her sense of what is "decent" — a term that echoes the prim respectability of her upbringing in the provincial Ontario town of Griswold. She is, for example, disagreeably surprised to learn that a supply of Maple Leaf tinned ham sent by the Canadian government to aid hurricane victims was used at the Independence Day banquet to feed "leading citizens," and that $500,000 from the same source for the same purpose was being used to bribe electors. She is appalled to see the police give a vicious beating to a man in the street. Everywhere around her there is violence, menace, and threat of further violence, yet she remains unconvinced that things are really dangerous *for her* until a politician with whom she has become acquainted is brutally murdered. She makes immediate plans to leave on the next flight out, but it is too late. The airport has been shut down.

Nothing that has happened so far, however, is adequate preparation for her arrest, "on suspicion," and her imprisonment under degrading conditions in the old British fort she had visited earlier as a tourist. The prison sequence which follows is clearly the heart of the novel, for it is here in her cell that Rennie ought to reflect on the meaning of her predicament and, if we are to hope for any kind of salvation for her, on the ways she understands and copes with reality. Unhappily there is little in her background to prepare her for the challenge. When her cell-mate Lora is beaten senseless by two guards, "Rennie wants to tell them to stop. She wants to be strong enough to do that but she isn't, she can't make a

sound, they'll see her. She doesn't want to see, she has to see, why isn't someone covering her eyes?" Instead of acting, Rennie fantasizes about her release; and when the beating is over she worries as much about a burnt-out light bulb in the corridor ("I should tell someone") as about Lora. Rennie does realize a limited capacity to respond, to reach out and hold the suffering Lora, but as a gesture of compassion and understanding it is too little and too late. Survival for Rennie Wilford lies in clinging to what is reasonably and "Canadianly" normal: even at the end of the novel she remains unwilling or unable to cope when confronted with the harsh realities that have invaded her world of comfortable illusions.

In *Bodily Harm* and in other novels and stories referred to in this essay, the Caribbean is anything but paradisal. One after another these works of fiction inform us that beyond our dream of the tropical garden and behind the tourist brochure illusion of idyllic islands in the sun lie the same harsh realities of life we know in a cold climate, or anywhere else for that matter. In recent years an increasing number of Canadian writers have established new perspectives and found fresh images and metaphors by locating their work in the Caribbean and other "exotic" places. In doing so, they are finding innovative means of achieving the traditional ends of all good art: to shake us up, to tell us more about ourselves, and to force us to exchange too-cherished myths about the nature of things for new insights and understanding into the dilemmas of existence we all share.

NOTES

[1] Margaret Atwood, *Dancing Girls and Other Stories* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1977), pp. 145-60.

[2] Juan Butler, *Canadian Healing Oil* (Toronto: Peter Martin Associates, 1974); Diane Giguère, *L'eau est profonde* (Ottawa: Le Cercle du Livre de France, 1965), transl. by Charles Fullman as *Whirlpool* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1966); Harold Horwood, *Only the Gods Speak* (St. John's: Breakwater Books, 1979).

[3] Margaret Atwood, *Bodily Harm* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1981); Timothy Findley, *Famous Last Words* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1981).

[4] The dust jacket of the original hardcover edition, which features a fiery explosion in a tranquil tropical setting, suggests the importance of the Bahamian sequence of events in the novel.

[5] Michael Dixon, untitled review, *Fiddlehead*, 132 (April 1982), 88.