

"MIDDLEWATCH" AS MAGIC REALISM

Keith Maillard

I READ SUSAN KERSLAKE'S first novel, *Middlewatch*,¹ in the spring of 1977. I found it a book not without minor flaws. Kerslake's fragile style, depending for effect upon juxtaposition of intense lyricism with a simple, folkloric narrative line, was a difficult one to control, and she faltered occasionally. But, after finishing the book, I was ready to forgive her anything. Wisps of *Middlewatch* persisted at the back of my mind for years — the magical shimmer of the writing, the resonance, the sheer importance of what was being said in such a quiet way. For me Kerslake had "that voice," as Michael Ondaatje wrote of Márquez, "whose greatest power is that we trust it."²

Shortly after I read *Middlewatch*, I discovered that I had been labelled, for the second time, a "magic realist." My publisher, Dave Godfrey, had done it first in the dust jacket blurb of *Two Strand River*; he had meant it as more than merely a catch phrase to help sell books. My work, he told me, reminded him of the painting of Alex Colville and Ken Danby: the meticulous detailing so realistic it reverses into dream. But then Geoff Hancock, in the *Canadian Fiction Magazine*, was claiming the existence of a full-blown literary genre called "magic realism" with Canadian practitioners who included Robert Kroetsch, Jack Hodgins, and myself. He assigned us precursors in the South American writers — Borges, Cortazar, Llosa, Asturias, and Márquez — and attempted a definition:

Magic realism is not surrealism or fantasy writing. Surrealist writers . . . use a linear association of ideas which often dispenses with logic and the laws of the physical world. Fantasy writers, by comparison, are often dependent upon the supernatural and the absurd, and very commonly place their stories on Mars or Jupiter. Magic realists place their extraordinary feats and mysterious characters in an ordinary place, and the magic occurs from the sparks generated between the possibilities of language and the limitations of physical nature.³

Although pleased to find myself placed in such august company, I was irritated at Hancock's article for raising more questions than it answered; that summer I badly needed answers. I was working on my fifth novel, *Motet*, and having a hard time of it; I felt that in writing this book I needed to *know*, in every sense of the word, what I was doing, and I was driven into the analysis of other people's fiction — and later into literary criticism — as a way of maintaining my

own ability to write. By the time I finished *Motet* two years later, I had also evolved my own definition of magic realism which was both broader than Hancock's and more precise. Most useful was Robert Scholes' notion of "fabulation" which, he said, "means a return to a more verbal kind of fiction. It also means a return to a more fictional kind. By this I mean a less realistic and more artistic kind of narrative: more shapely, more evocative; more concerned with ideas and ideals, less concerned with things."⁴ From his analysis of the work of Durrell, Vonnegut, Southern, Hawkes, Murdoch, and Barth, the outline of what he meant by fabulation gradually emerged, something not far off the old "art for art's sake" — fiction as the playing of games with structure. What Hancock said of magic realism could apply equally to fabulation: "Language and formal structure are now part of a story, as important as plot and character. When language and structures are used as an end in themselves, new dimensions are open for the writer of fiction." Could magic realism then be simply a style of fabulation? I didn't believe it; I felt, at the heart of the work, a difference in kind from *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and *Giles Goat-Boy*.

It appeared to me essential to distinguish varieties of post-realist fiction, not as an exercise in literary pedantry, but as a way of deepening my understanding of particular works and the connections between them. Scholes discussed the difficulties readers and reviewers were having with the books he called fabulations. "Much of the trouble comes from inadequate understanding of this new literary mode," he wrote.

The trouble is aggravated by the absence of terminology in which to discuss it. Evaluation and appreciation depend helplessly on recognition of kind, and recognition requires appropriate linguistic categories. As long as we expect a nectarine to taste like either a peach or a plum we are bound to be disappointed. But once we assimilate this new category — nectarine — we begin to know what we are dealing with and how to react to it. We can judge and appreciate.⁴

Here, then, is my attempt to define a new category, that nectarine called magic realism. Throughout the long development of the novel as a form, writers have worked out a set of narrative conventions designed to create the illusion that the story on the page is "real" or "true" and corresponds in some direct and substantial way to the ordinary world of day-to-day life. Any working novelist knows just how arbitrary and artificial these conventions are, but they have been so long and deeply established that they are accepted easily by readers as "realistic." Writing that does nothing more than work inside these conventions is, simply, realism, as in most of the work, for example, of Margaret Laurence or John Updike. Fantasy writing accepts these conventions but shifts the location, not merely (as Hancock says) to Mars or Jupiter, but to Middle Earth or Narnia, and attempts to create what Tolkien calls "a secondary reality": that is, a world different from the ordinary one we see around us but which, nonetheless,

must be perceived as "real." Surrealism, not the specific movement associated with André Breton, but, as Susan Sontag says, "a mode of sensibility which cuts across all the arts in the 20th century," attacks realistic conventions at the root, not merely, as Hancock says, by "a linear association of ideas," but more usually by what Sontag calls radical juxtaposition — the collage principle. "The Surrealist sensibility," she says, "aims to shock,"⁵ as in the work, say, of William Burroughs.

Three characteristics appear to me necessary for magic realism. The first is the acceptance of most or all of the realistic conventions of fiction. The second is the introduction of a "something else" which is not realistic — the "magic" of the genre — which may be at the level of plot (the magic carpets and ascensions to heaven of Márquez, the Doppelgänger and resurrections of Hodgins) or at the level of the narrative itself (O'Hagan's direct introduction of myth into the text, Harlow's bomb-like author intrusion in *Scann*, Márquez's complex structure that destroys itself on the last page). The magic element is not juxtaposed with the realistic for shock value, as in surrealism, but woven in seamlessly. The third characteristic is that the impulse for the writing of magic realism arises out of the desire to transcend the form of the realistic novel not *as form* but as expression. This statement obviously requires clarification.

Fabulation, as I understand it, arises from a delight in play with all the accumulated baggage of literature itself, Hancock's "language and structures used as an end in themselves" — Barth's elaborate allegory, Nabokov's self-referring index. The spirit of fabulation is something like this: Nothing important can be said, so why not have fun? The spirit of magic realism, in contrast, is: Something tremendously important *must be* said, something that doesn't fit easily into traditional structures, so how can I find a way to say it? Eli Mandel's comments on the "Child figure" in regional literature are useful here: "the child's vision . . . is of home; and that surely is the essence of what we mean by region, the overpowering feeling of nostalgia associated with the place we know as the *first* place, the *first* vision of things, the *first* clarity of things. Not realism, then, but rather what in painting is called magic realism. . . ."⁶ This nostalgia for a lost Eden is nearly identical to "a suffering native to human beings," that Ruth Nichols writes about: "the conviction that we *belong somewhere else*: homesickness."⁷ And, as the attempt to say the inexpressible about childhood generates (Mandel tells us) "magical clarity, mistaken for accuracy," so Nichols' homesickness generates a style of fantasy which she has the singular courage to claim is more "realistic" than realism because it is more true to the way things are. I would argue that the impulse for magic realist writing stems from the need to convey a living experience, that the interweaving of realistic convention with magical elements is not done for its own sake but to produce that symptomatic eerie shimmer which must be seen as an attempt to express what is nearly inexpressible.

MIDDLEWATCH now appears to me to be a work of magic realism. That this genre is not yet fully understood would account for much of the difficulty reviewers had with the book. The surface narrative is relatively simple. Eleven chapters alternate between a present time and a past time sequence. In the present time sequence, Morgan, the school teacher in a remote village by the sea, finds a young girl, Sibbi, abandoned in her brother's cabin. Her hair has been cut off; she's been beaten and left tied to the bed. The experience has left her mute and crazy. Morgan takes her home with him and tries to heal her. The past time sequence follows Sibbi from birth to the point she's found by Morgan. After giving birth to her, Sibbi's mother dies. When Sibbi is five, her older brother, Jason, takes her away from her foster parents and leads her out into the wilderness. Jason builds a cabin and carves out an existence as a sheep farmer. He regards Sibbi as a tool to help him in his rigorous pioneer life and disapproves of her desire to go to school. Jason is hurt in an accident and brought back to his cabin by gypsies who live in the hills. Sibbi later goes back to the caravan with a gypsy boy and makes love with him. Jason finds out about it, goes mad, and destroys everything. It is not until the end of the past time sequence that we understand the full implication of the opening chapter: Jason left Sibbi tied to the bed to die.

In the twenty-three reviews of *Middlewatch* I read, an inordinate amount of ink is wasted in speculations on the time and location of the story. The only details that indicate a modern time are the presence of electric lights, trains, and buses; we are told nothing of life in the cities far from the village. Kerslake's setting corresponds to the Maritimes in much the way Sheila Watson's *Double Hook* country corresponds to the Cariboo in British Columbia and for similar reasons: no effort is made to establish an exact locale or time because such specificity would limit the possibilities of mythic resonance. Kerslake does, however, go to great pains to build us a real world, describing the school and the objects in Morgan's teacherage, pointing out such mundane details as Sibbi's chapped lips; she observes all the standard narrative devices of realism, so much so that, given the romantic clichés — a lonely man in a remote village, a hurt young girl, gypsies in the hills, the sea, a storm — a superficial reader could easily label the book a gothic or romance (as, indeed, many of her reviewers did). Beneath the surface narrative, however, are additional levels which Kerslake has taken some pains to conceal — or at least to render as unobtrusive as possible. The tension between the realistic surface narrative and the deeper levels creates the shimmering, multi-dimensional effect symptomatic of magic realism.

Most of the reviewers did, to their credit, notice that "something else" was going on in *Middlewatch*, but few of them had much of an idea what that something else might be beyond noting that it was "mythic." Ironically, both the

highest praise and most vigorous condemnation of the book came from writers who never saw beneath the surface. Much of the difficulty the reviewers had with *Middlewatch* arises from Kerslake's elliptical presentation so necessary for her magic realist effect. She does, however, supply plenty of sign posts pointing in toward the first level beneath the surface narrative, that of archetypes from myth and folklore. Sibbi is a sibyl; indeed Sibyl is her given name. Jason with his sheep is seeking the golden fleece of crude capital accumulation. Morgan, as a young man on a quest, has "come to the ends of the earth"; his name in Welsh means "a dweller by the sea."

"When Sibbi was born under a bush, her mother died in the effort," Kerslake begins the story of Sibbi's origins, and continues in the same matter-of-fact tone, telling us how the children leave their foster parents to go off into the wilderness together. The tone is that of a folk tale. Compare one of Grimm's tales:

Brother took his little sister by the hand and said, "Since our mother died we have not had one happy hour. . . . Come, we will go out into the wide world together." All day they walked over meadows, fields, and stony paths. . . .⁸

The motif of a brother-sister pair wandering alone in the wild is an ancient one and occurs in many folk tales. As soon as Kerslake has established the reference, she gradually shifts the tone away from folk narrative into that of realistic convention until we are being given again the careful detailing of day-to-day life which recreates the illusion that we are reading a realistic novel.

An example of Kerslake's elliptical presentation is found in the opening pages of the book. "The crimson geranium," she begins. "Fretted edges casting shadow pools on the softer colour of petals beneath. Dew-fed in the window-box." Ildikó de Papp Carrington objects: "This doesn't seem to have any discernible narrative function. It is an image described for its own sake, as in imagist poetry."⁹ In the face of such wrong-headed criticism, I hope I can be forgiven for attempting an elucidation. The crimson geranium is *not* an image like something William Carlos Williams would use; it is a symbolist device and, as such is not by now exactly a novelty. It does require close attention. Sibbi is tied to the bed; the geranium is what she is seeing. Morgan calls her name, and she shuts her eyes. "The name is. The crimson asserts itself under her eyelids . . . as if someone were calling her name, gently, and it turned into colour." Now Sibbi *is* the geranium (just as she is associated with growing plants throughout the book). Then the colour, which is her name, her self, turns to the colour of blood: "She is fleeing the ravages of blood, her blood." Sibbi is the blood sacrifice (like Jason's lambs) who must be slaughtered to be reborn. At the end of the book she returns to Jason's cabin and finds the geranium dead: "She took the dirt and dry roots and crumbled them in her hands. To dust." Only by the full recognition of the death of her old self can she begin to live again.

Nearly all of the crucial turning points of the book are as carefully hidden; indeed the references to "hide and seek" and "lost and found" recur throughout, as when Sibbi and Morgan first meet and he tells her, "It's okay to come here, I came too, just now, and found you." To which Sibbi replies simply: "Found." Eventually, as I followed out thematic connections, I began to feel as though the author herself were playing hide and seek with the reader and to hear at the back of my mind (although it is never mentioned) that grand old chestnut hymn: "For I was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see."

Sibbi's name, Sibyl, is given to her by "a cold white woman." When, as a small child, she begins to tan, her brother wants "her winter-white skin, pale, elusive, able to evoke spirits." She sees Morgan "in the grey-white second-hand light of the moon." She seeks "the moon . . . cold and blue." Wounded by his axe, Jason sees Sibbi "pale, as if she belonged back in night." Morgan sees her as "a pale skimpy girl" with "sunless skin." In all cases, Kerslake's emblematic labelling of her characters is as insistent. Sibbi, then, is the moon, associated with women's mysteries and blood. Her mother dies bearing her, in a flow of blood; Sibbi, too, will die and be reborn like the moon. Jason is the sun, associated with gold and with predatory birds — hawks and eagles. Morgan, the nutritive teacher, is associated with water (the sea) and growing things; like Sibbi, he is rooted to the earth. The gypsy boy, as Chaviva Hosek points out, "stands for uncomplicated sexuality. . . . The girl's movement from one male figure to another shows the transformation of the child to an adult and symbolizes the process of coming to wholeness."¹⁰

ONCE WE'VE BEEN ALERTED to the mythic level, we can begin to understand how, in the interplay between characters as people in a realistic novel and characters as archetypes, Kerslake's magic realist style works. Jason, as David Helwig points out, "is a Canadian archetype . . . and he can attain the discipline he needs to dominate the world only by destroying things in himself."¹¹ (He is also an archetype older than Canadian, echoing Osiris who would domesticate wild nature and take his sister to wife.) He regards Sibbi as a chattel, a domestic servant to aid him in carving out property from the land; in the first image we're given of him, he is standing in the doorway to the cabin, blocking, with his outstretched arm, Sibbi's way out to the world. As long as she remains confined, tied — the tied image recurs: Sibbi is tied to the bed; Morgan ties her to him when they enter the storm; Jason not only ties Sibbi, he's tied to her — she has no existence; as moon, she shines by reflected light. Like O'Hagan's Tay John at his birth, she doesn't even cast a shadow. Tay John is given a shadow to make him human; similarly, Sibbi, after her sexual

encounter with the gypsy boy, is forced uncomfortably into the human world: "They" (the other school children) "could see her shadow, a betrayal." To Morgan, Sibbi first appears as an elusive wild girl, cousin to Rima in *Green Mansions*. (In this context it is interesting that O'Hagan, perhaps Canada's first magic realist, mentions W. H. Hudson as one of the influences on his work.¹²) After she "dies" in the explosion of Jason's inner fire, Sibbi is reborn as the mute Sibyl, and, as Hosek writes, her "silence is a constant temptation to the reader and to Morgan. It teases us into reading her through our own wishes," which is as good a definition as any of Jung's "Anima." She is also Morgan's muse, his child, and his potential lover. The sexual attraction between Morgan and Sibbi is given in typically elliptical fashion. After her sexual initiation with the gypsy boy, "She considered the teacher who was also a man, now that she knew something concerning men."

By now we have enough information to make clear sense of an elusive but crucial passage near the opening of the book. Morgan has just rescued Sibbi. The black horse mentioned belongs to the gypsy boy.

He [Morgan] saw her in the snow that winter, in a gypsy shawl of warm wool. He saw her riding a horse, black as pitch in the white hills, but Jason still came down with the old dun pony. When she wandered into school in the rising of the year, he saw in the set of her lips a different kind of knowledge and she seemed to sit more surely in her seat. As if her centre of gravity had shifted; as if her pit was no longer where her quick heart beat, but had sunk to her womb. Her body flowed now, was no longer driven about like the weeds.

Morgan held that body now. It was as if something had to kill her before she could be either captured or saved. He had found her, but only after she had been trapped and tied.

Morgan takes on the project of curing Sibbi both out of hubris — his sense of self as a teacher — and out of his own loneliness which, initially, he can't admit to himself. He returns from the busyness of the village with his head full of plans:

His instinct was to force her, to shake that covering off, to squeeze some sound out of her. She had cried once; she had touched him once, she could do it again. . . . As he walked home . . . , the wind matched his own energy. . . . The fascination of order, pattern and symmetry. His perseverance, his will to endure fire and survive.

But when he tries to force her back to the world, she smashes the window with her elbows; later he finds her beating her thighs with her fists. Despite his good intentions, he is getting nowhere. And, as Hosek notes, the narrative style matches the story: "The lyricism, the lingering over detail for its own sake, is like Sibyl's holding back in order to be healed in her own time." Morgan's next attempt to break through has an air of desperation about it. A hurricane is approaching;

he feels “the peculiar tension and pressure of calm,” and says to the girl: “This is what it’s like in your head, isn’t it, Sibbi, this deadly grey, the weight of silence . . .?” He ropes Sibbi to him and takes her out to watch the storm come in; it is an act of sympathetic magic. They’re nearly blown away but manage to crawl back to the house. Morgan realizes that he’s overreached himself; his reflection is one of the few moments of humour in the book: “Morgan was momentarily glad she was still mute; she wouldn’t tell tales of his foolishness.” And he has learned “a secret” from the storm. For the first time he reaches out to Sibbi, not to help her, but needing her help:

“Oh, Sibbi, Sibbi,” he said sadly.

“What?”

“Sibbi?”

“What is it? What’s the matter?” Her voice held real concern. . . .

It’s the first time she’s spoken since he found her, and, as soon as she does so, she’s swept away by a seizure. “Her voice,” just as one would expect the sibyl’s to be, “had been deeper than he had imagined. It wasn’t a child’s voice; . . . It was unnerving, the way she spoke; so organized.”

Chapter 9 is the emotional heart of the book and contains the most dense, elliptical, compact, and difficult imagery, but also passages of Kerslake’s most beautiful writing:

The uneasy months when the sickly and old were watched closely. . . . The months when the latitudes were surely northern, when the sun appeared now and again, far away, like the pale flag of a foreign country on the horizon. . . .

As Hosek notes: “The watch between midnight and four in the morning is called ‘middlewatch’; the novel exploits the suggestion of watchfulness, waking and waiting for light implicit in the title.” It is: “The lean lull at the edge of the new year. The time of the year when the Norsemen had rolled the wheel of fire, twined with straw, from hilltop to the winter sea,” and, in this frozen darkness, Morgan sinks to his psychic nadir; all he can do is wait and watch. “What happens when one lives so close to the sea . . .?” he wonders — so close to the dark waters of the psyche — “right there, at the edge, you’re lulled, stunned.” He can’t connect with the people in the village; even in the “warm, brown, rowdy” tavern, he’s a lone watcher. After learning the secret from the storm, he now knows what he fears most: that, when he reaches down inside himself “there could be emptiness beneath the cold smooth stone.” He sleeps and dreams that he hears a voice: “Don’t please don’t, no, no, please don’t, no, no, no, please. . . .” The voice is Sibbi’s, re-enacting the terrible moment of Jason’s attack on her, but Morgan claims the voice as his own: “And his despair, to which . . . he felt a right. He wasn’t one of those who are betrayed from outside. If he was to be destroyed, it would be from within.” Sibbi gets up. Morgan sees her “sun-

less skin" and "the two points of her breasts." Here is Morgan's temptation, and, like Saint Anthony's, it comes accompanied by demons. Sibbi, connected to the underground world, is directly aware of them: "They were trying to follow and find Morgan." But his perception is more distanced: "There were voices, or perhaps it was the last whispering of the fire."

Where had she gone; why couldn't he follow? He was lonely and afraid.

He took her straw-blond head in his hands, caressed her cheeks with his thumbs. Each time it began as if he were touching a stranger and the stranger in himself.

Morgan's spiritual task is enormous. To save Sibbi, he can no longer keep himself distanced and safe; he must find a way to experience her directly, as in his dream. But he can ask for nothing in return, and he can't allow himself to be dragged down into emptiness with her. "Turning her round, she lay in his arms," Kerslake writes, and, in fracturing the grammar of the sentence, merges the characters as nurse and patient merge in Bergman's *Persona*. And throughout this dark night of the soul, Morgan "held more tightly to the only living thing in his world."

As the present time narrative has been unfolding, so has the past. Morgan resists the temptation of hubris, but Jason does not. He sees the natural world only as something to be exploited. His sister is a tool for him to use quite as much as his sheep dog or pony: "That she should want anything, be separate in any way, was as foreign to him now as it ever had been." His struggle is turning him to ice: "For Jason the shape of everything had become deadly serious. Sibbi watched his hands holding a knife-blade against the grinding stone. . . . Bears stood in his eyes. . . ." But, as we all know by now, those whom the gods would destroy, they first make mad. Jason accidentally strikes himself on the forehead with his axe ("labrys," the two-headed axe, may be the root of "labyrinth"). While Jason is recovering, confined to the cabin, Sibbi is freed to form her liaison with the gypsy boy and grow into sexual knowledge. She is separating herself from Jason; he can regard such separation only as a betrayal.

One night in midsummer when all the forces of the earth and sky were pulling against each other, Jason broke apart. The hawk slanted out of the sky and struck its talons through his head and heart. There was no escape; he was almost relieved. He would fight but he would lose. The hawk would carry him off. But he fought, he fought by destroying everything he would have to leave behind.

B

UT WE ARE NOT FINISHED. The heart of *Middlewatch* cannot be reached without an exploration of what might be called Kerslake's mediævalism. Hosek points out that the novel appears to demand treatment as an allegory, that it is possible to read it "in very schematic terms," but her statement

that "It is not clear what point Kerslake is trying to make by putting all these figures at the fringe of the community," is symptomatic of her unwillingness to attempt such a reading. "Story-tellers," Michael Ondaatje says, writing of O'Hagan's *Tay John*, "are separate from the source of power. . . . In the superb scene in which Tay John fights the bear, Jack Denham, who witnesses it, is separated by a raging river he cannot cross but which is only two yards wide. He is unable to cross over into the arena of pure myth."¹³ Similarly, Jason and Sibbi must be separated from the mundane, civilized order of the village; they are described as living "on the horizon, in a bank of fog" — that is, at the very edge of consciousness where myth repeats itself forever. Morgan, who is drawn both outward into the mythic story and inward to the life of the village, is a bridge across which myth may pass safely back into ordinary life. In this role, he is a priest who must transfer the numina without being destroyed by it. And the myth retelling itself behind the veil of fog is Kerslake's version of Eden.

The Edenic motif is established early in the book when Morgan remembers Sibbi coming in "a golden Indian summer's day before school was open," that is, in the golden dawn of time before the creation. She writes in a scribbler: "Jason. Dog. Sheep. Tree. Hill," and creates the world, then, "Sibbi. I am Sibbi. Sibbi. Sibbi," and defines herself in the created world. Later the Edenic motif is made fully explicit in the Hopkins poem Morgan reads to Sibbi:

What is all this juice and joy?
A strain of the earth's sweet being in the beginning
In Eden garden. Have, get, before it cloy,
Before it cloud, Christ, lord, and sour with sinning. . . .

To read Kerslake's Eden myth, we must see a third level beneath those of realism and symbolism, that of allegory. If here I appear driven to an exegesis that is nearly Kabbalistic, I can only argue that it is clearly demanded by the text: allegory is didactic, religious. To understand it, we must treat the characters as personifications.

In Kerslake's version, the fall occurs with the death of Jason's mother, The Great Mother who bears Sibbi on the earth and dies in a wash of blood. From the death of The Great Mother, consciousness arises and the division into male and female, the sun and the moon. Sibbi is the female principle in its tender and undeveloped form, Jason the male principle in its acquisitive, questing form. Separated from the primal union with The Great Mother, The Male Principle strikes out against the natural world (*natura*), which is the body of the Mother, and enslaves The Female Principle (the shift from the goddess religions to patriarchy at the basis of Western civilization). Separated from each other, the Male cannot love, the Female cannot act (shine with her own light). When the Female meets Innocent Delight (the gypsy boy) and learns knowledge, the dominant position of the Male is threatened and he is driven mad. The acquisitive, con-

trolling force in him is turned back on itself, and he must destroy the world because he cannot love it. The Male kills the Female, and when she is reborn again, she is mute and helpless. The only way out of this dead-end is for the Male Principle to appear in another form, as Morgan, the Nutritive Male. He must give up the attempt to conquer or dominate the Female, allow her to grow in her own time; he must be able to stare into the storm (Untamed Nature), risk being destroyed by it, without attempting to own it or use it. He must continue with infinite patience, expecting nothing; in short, he must become a saint — which, in this context, can be read as “feminine.” Then the Female can be reborn as a whole person with the possibility that the Male and Female can be reunited and the world redeemed.

As Borges claimed, “the solution to the mystery is always inferior to the mystery.”¹⁴ But the book still stands intact. Of all the symbols in *Middlewatch*, only one, the storm, cannot be transformed into anything else. After the storm, Morgan “shared a secret with the earth that he wasn’t sure he wanted. He didn’t know what to do with this new experience. Almost everything he had learned before had a purpose, practical or intellectual. Here was an immaculate knowledge, an awe that had involved bone, blood and brain. Yet when he consciously called upon his brain, the knowing evaporated into the translucent sky. . . .” And, as Gershom Scholem, writing of the Kabbalists, tells us:

The thing which becomes a symbol retains its original form and its original content. It does not become, so to speak, an empty shell into which another content is poured; in itself, through its own existence, it makes another reality transparent which cannot appear in any other form. If allegory can be defined as the representation of an expressible something by another expressible something, the mystical symbol is an expressible representation of something which lies beyond the sphere of expression and communication, something which comes from a sphere whose face is, as it were, turned inward and away from us.¹⁵

Sibbi walks out into the psychic waters of the sea. Morgan follows. “She mustn’t drown,” he thinks. She’s crying. She reaches out to him. He touches her, but she pulls away. Then she takes his hand. “When you’re ready,” he tells her. But “perhaps he’d been too sure she was looking at him.” *Middlewatch* has eleven chapters. In a book so carefully linked to the seasons of the year, we would expect twelve. We put the book away on the shelf but continue to read it. Will the sibyl speak? In the silence left behind is Kerslake’s twelfth chapter. Such resonance is the way, at best, that magic realism works.

NOTES

¹ (Ottawa: Oberon, 1976.)

² Michael Ondaatje, “Gacía Márquez and the Bus to Aracataca,” *Figures in a Ground*, ed. Diane Bessai and David Jackel (Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1978), p. 25.

- ³ Geoffrey Hancock, "Magic Realism, or, the Future of Fiction," *Canadian Fiction Magazine*, No. 24/25 (Spring/Summer 1977), pp. 4-6.
- ⁴ Robert Scholes, *The Fabulators* (New York: Oxford, 1967), p. 12.
- ⁵ Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation* (New York: Dell, 1969), p. 271.
- ⁶ Eli Mandel, *Another Time* (Erin, Ont.: Press Porcépic, 1977), p. 50.
- ⁷ Ruth Nichols, "Fantasy and Escapism" (*Canadian Children's Literature*, No. 4, 1976), p. 26 and passim.
- ⁸ *The Juniper Tree and Other Tales from Grimm*, Vol. 1 (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973), p. 42.
- ⁹ Ildikó de Papp Carrington, "Amor Vincit Omnia," *Essays on Canadian Writing*, No. 6 (Spring 1977), pp. 134-36.
- ¹⁰ Chaviva Hosek, "Middlewatch," *Fiddlehead* (Summer 1977), pp. 134-36.
- ¹¹ "First Impressions," *Books in Canada* (November 1976), p. 38.
- ¹² Howard O'Hagan mentioned the influence of W. H. Hudson on his work in my interview with him of July 17, 1979.
- ¹³ Michael Ondaatje, "O'Hagan's Rough-Edged Chronicle," *Canadian Literature*, No. 61 (Summer 1974), p. 28.
- ¹⁴ Quoted in Luis Harss and Barbara Dohmann, *Into the Mainstream* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), p. 121.
- ¹⁵ *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken, 1961), p. 27.

GRANDMOTHER'S DEATH ROOM

Christopher Wiseman

High summer with its sun and voices
and you withering quickly now,
dissolving in the great tree's shadow,
in the moving shadow of that chestnut
roaring its leaves outside your window.

Never friends, we were forced together
at the end and you had no choice
but to let me care for you.
It was the closest we had ever been
in that room cooled by the tree and the years.

I thought you would admit at last
that you needed me, speak words of gratitude,
confess a long misjudgment.
But I was wrong, should have known you better.
Your body failed before your pride.