

VERNISSAGE

Ray Smith and the Fine Art of Glossing Over

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Get up in the morning, pull on yesterday's clothes, instant coffee in a dirty cup, smoke a cigarette. In other times, other places, Gussie's acting, his poetry, failed: she became a whore, a druggie, he died young of disease and failure. But those were other places, other times.¹

WE HAVE BEEN READING an unabashedly romantic chapter describing the older age and long-continued idyllic relationship of a renowned Canadian poet and his equally famous actress wife when Ray Smith, in the penultimate paragraph of *Lord Nelson Tavern*, interjects these sad words about what might have been. Then we are immediately returned to the same Gussie and Paleologue whose successes we have followed throughout most of the book, and the novel concludes with a characteristically playful, sensual, and irreverent scene. Yet other times, other places — the failed poet, the drug-addicted prostitute — exist in the universe of this comic novel, never fully articulated, but there, beneath the action, the characters, the dialogue, like the naggings of a nightmare during an otherwise perfect day.

Evil and failure are obviously important to this author, to any serious contemporary author. So Ray Smith does not present evil by mostly glossing it over. On the contrary, the book alludes to wars, murders, rapes; it portrays humiliations, hypocrisies, devastating defeats (especially in love), and different deaths. One main character, Naseby, is, as his name suggests (like Faulkner's more famous Snopes), as unsavoury as any villain in contemporary literature. But if the canvas has its dark corners, Smith nevertheless manages to paint upon it with a refreshing luminosity. Even Naseby, for all his nastiness, displays a certain brio. He enjoys his villainy. He throws himself wholeheartedly into any black task at hand, thereby avoiding the apathy, the *accidie*, which plague so many existential and post-existential anti-heroes. And herein lies, we would suggest, the distinguishing quality — possibly even the genius — of Smith's novel: his characters are vital and significant even as the darker shadings of his chiaroscuro seem to suggest that vitality and significance are impossible in *this* world.

Which is why Ray Smith has created another. In the universe of *Lord Nelson Tavern*, time does not rule all beneath the circle of the changing moon but is itself governed by the author's narrative perspective. Smith can dwell luxuriously on the moment or race pell mell through a decade. He consequently has the freedom to highlight what he chooses, to mute what he chooses. Set approximately in the middle sixties, the action reaches back, incongruously but plausibly, to World War II and ahead to the twenty-first century. The result is a temporally absurd world, and more important, Sisyphus in reverse. Through the prestidigitation of narrative and the selectivity of art (both of which depend on the mastery of time), Sisyphus can quickly achieve the top of his mountain. Or, conversely, his trip down, unencumbered by rock, can be sensuous and prolonged. Moreover, Sisyphus' joy should only be increased by his awareness that a flick of the author's pen and life again becomes the tedious, all-consuming ordeal up the mountain-side, painful, pointless, exasperating, and slow.

Neither should the reader forget that Ray Smith presides in this other world, ever able to turn good to ill, comedy to tragedy. The continual authorial intrusions give us intimations of what might, could, or did happen — what should or would be made clear — if only the author or even one of his characters chose to tell *that* story:

Paleologue turned on his heel and stomped off to sit on a rock in a field of daisies on a hill overlooking a village where he considered the problem of meaning in action. . . . He then considered the problem of whether or not Grilse had been in the drug trade and concluded he had been. *He was right.* (Italics added.)

"He was right." Obviously there is a sordid tale here — the ever taciturn Grilse, with his forged passports and faked deaths, involved in illicit drug traffic. But we hear no more of it. The Protean narrator of the novel, unstuck in time, assumes the omniscience allowed by his liberated state and almost parenthetically provides the reader with glimpses of other stories. Another grimmer world is there beyond the focus of the novel, out of sight of Paleologue idly contemplating the "problem of meaning in action" on his daisy-covered hillside. But except to be assured that it exists, we do not see this world: other times, other places.

Smith allows his characters some of the latitude that he claims for himself as author and narrator. Most of what we learn of the unusual Haligonians portrayed in *Lord Nelson Tavern* we hear firsthand, directly from them, as written in diaries or journals, as recited to friends or other auditors. These characters, recounting episodes from their lives, shape that tale to the situation in which it is told, to the interests of their listener, and to their own need to perceive their life as following a certain form. Each consequently has his or her own allotment of varnish. They can highlight what might otherwise seem dull; gloss over what might otherwise seem unflattering. They can also omit that which does not foster the impression they would make. In still other exchanges — other times and other

places — we may learn more of the story. So, briefly put, the novel is structured as a montage. Various narrations overlie one another to give the reader a larger view, although never the whole picture. It should also be noted that Smith does not employ conventional unreliable narrators who simply misestimate the significance of what they report thereby throwing the burden of interpretation entirely on the reader. Instead we have narrators who are themselves artificers used to shaping the materials of life: painter, poet, professor, actress, con man, crook.

The art of such narrators, deployed through the greater art of the author, produces a book that is subtly spacious despite its brevity. Indeed, even a listing of the main characters and *some* of their primary relationships can sound bewildering: Paleologue and his wife, Gussie; Ti-Paulo and his mistress, Odile Saulara (and then seven imitation Odiles in a row); the perfect lovers, Dimitri and Francesca; the less than perfect lovers, Gould and Rachel, with their daughter, Sarah (although Ti-Paulo is Sarah's biological father); Nora Noon, who is long posed between Grilse and her husband, Roger Portable; Lucy, who is first Paleologue's lover and later Ti-Paulo's father's wife; and, finally, Naseby, who never has relationships but who is seldom alone. But such a listing can hardly suggest the controlled complexity with which these characters are allowed to play out their stable and unstable pairings. Thus Ti-Paulo's father marries the first lover of Ti-Paulo's daughter's first lover — symmetrical conjunctions that the casual reader can easily overlook.

We first meet most of this cast of characters when they are college students gathered in the tavern that presumably provides the book with its title. From Ray Smith's earlier collection of short stories, *Cape Breton Is the Thought Control Center of Canada*, we know that Lord Nelson Tavern is located in Halifax, near Dalhousie University. Yet the novel, *Lord Nelson Tavern*, never names the eponymous tavern nor specifies where it is to be found. This spatial uncertainty, like the continual blurring and slurring of times past and present, is deliberate and with a point. The setting is Halifax and the setting is also everywhere. Thus Gussie and Paleologue can pursue their transatlantic careers without ever abandoning home base — their relationship, their work, and their conveniently isolated country retreat. In contrast, Grilse rushes from Tunisia, to Paris, to Rome, to Finland, to Sweden; "here and there," in his own phrase; every new place "the same only different," to again quote this indefinite man. Hopelessly parted from Nora Noon, he finds that his destiny is always diverted and his journeys are ever off centre.

But the novel itself has a centre, which is, simply, its beginning. The reader can keep all of the characters and their convoluted lives straight because we see them, originally, together, young, engaging in almost archetypal student-barroom talk, dreaming of future careers and ultimate successes while muddling their way through the business of the present mostly by falling hopelessly in love. Even as

we move away from Lord Nelson Tavern, in time and distance, we still retain a cohesive vision of the group, as do the characters themselves who mark time by how long it has been since they have seen each other.

LET US LOOK NOW AT ONE of these “reunions,” at, more precisely, the vernissage with which Ti-Paulo prepares to open a new art show and through which Smith fully develops a basic metaphor that governs the entire novel. This gathering is portrayed in the third chapter, “Breakup: From the Journals of Ti-Paulo,” and is attended by Grilse, by Paleologue and Gussie, by Naseby, and perhaps by Rachel and Gould (a brief comment later in the book suggests they may have been there too). Oblique time references, some made in this chapter, others scattered throughout the rest of the novel, indicate that the participants in the vernissage are in their mid- to late-thirties, almost two decades beyond their student days at Lord Nelson Tavern. Way stations on the road to death are being passed. Furthermore, in a rational world, Ti-Paulo points out, an artist’s shows should mark that passing; “one at the end of each period.” But as he also observes at the very beginning of this chapter, “painting periods are usually life periods. More specifically, woman periods.”¹ He soon finds out how right he was. The highlights shift, and the occasion designed to mark a professional triumph becomes, partly because of old acquaintances unforgotten who attend it, the beginning of a personal defeat, Ti-Paulo’s break-up with Odile.

Or perhaps that break-up is another victory. The two, victory and defeat, are not easily distinguished from one another. As Ti-Paulo notes in his journal, the entries of which constitute Chapter Three: “A show is an exhibition of the most painful failures, the ones closest to being successes.” And taken together, his journal entries attest that the love affair meant most as it was ending, even after it had ended. Chapter Three also illustrates how metaphors of life and art and love all intermingle. Indeed, the real “show,” in the chapter, the true vernissage, is not the art show, but the journal itself, self-consciously literary with its numerous references to Shakespeare, its exhibition of love’s labours lost.

Consistent with the vernissage which he sees as marking the end of an affair, Ti-Paulo will put a bright face on the mundane sorrow that he feels. He does so by becoming, in his journal, a smiling private man, ironically aware of the role he plays as philosophical abandonee, but not so aware of his older compensating role as ironic observer. Thus Smith, with this portrait of the artist portraying himself, shows how humans symbiotically shape both their lives and their fictions — the showing of their lives. Even in a most painful situation, the parting of lovers, there is some posing. Yet the posing is also real. It, too, becomes part of the experience, just as the applied varnish becomes part of the painting. More-

over, it is only through artful pose and honest pretense that Ti-Paulo can transcend his personal loss and paint again.

Chapter Three, one of the longest I-narratives in the novel, suggests that all of the characters — and thus all humans — create their lives, or partly create their lives, or — at least — *can* partly create their lives. Consider, for example, Odile Saulara, the former fashion model who leaves Ti-Paulo. Odile is a great beauty but she is also a woman with a tortured past. An orphan who was never adopted, she passed her childhood in a “couple of foster homes where the wives spent the agency allowance on gin and the husbands molested her.” But that is all we are told of this model’s unmodel childhood. Or equally obliquely, Ti-Paulo once notes that “Odile Saulara is not her real name. Probably Mary Smith or Betty Grable Jones or something.” As with Grilse and his drug trafficking, we have only the shadow of an otherwise hidden story. But it is Odile’s story and she does not choose to tell it. She insists on remaining aloof, distant, a mannequin turned editor whose polished surface is her own best work of art. Yet glimpses of the human woman beneath still shine through the carefully maintained façade that is itself a version of the woman shining through:

I love her for her entrances and exits. If she is sitting in here and wants an apple from the kitchen she gets up and strides toward the doorway, not long steps, but tall and straight, and with her head up, perhaps even turned around to ask if I want something. The very form of confidence, mmmmm-mmh. Then she trips on the door sill.

Her whole life is like that. Not appearance and reality because both the tall and the tripping are real.

Ti-Paulo sees in others what he does not so fully comprehend in himself — how substance and surface, the human assuming and the mask assumed, intricately combine to rule out easy dichotomies such as the hoary literary theme of appearance versus reality. Appearances have their reality too.

But even in the stumbling elegant Odile, what we might term “the seemingness of seems” is not seen completely. Ti-Paulo is too much an artist to make that mistake. As he observed, a painter’s work is generally divided into “woman periods.” His work at that “time is figure drawing, the woman is Odile Saulara.” He needs her seemingness. The mannequin turned editor must still serve as his model of what a beautiful female should be — even though he actually paints those who more Rubenesquely embody that ideal. Her thin beauty inspires him to draw beautiful figures of fat women. “Metaphysics again,” Ti-Paulo says in exasperation, well aware that even when the artist limits himself to shading and line, reality can still take on many guises.

Although Odile casts roles for herself, that does not prevent Ti-Paulo from casting her in other, different roles, as his model and his muse. Consider also the journal in which he anticipates her departure. Is Ti-Paulo here shaping the living

woman every bit as much as he shapes her figure in his drawings — and with as little attention to verisimilitude? He clearly expects and perhaps thereby precipitates Odile's every move: the special presents, the alternations between sullenness and fawning flirtation, the "business" that keeps her away in the evenings. And do these details attest to her defection mostly because Ti-Paulo sees them as "proof"? For example, when Naseby turns up at the vernissage and Odile declares that his glance is "like being handled by some obscene, slimy swamp creature," Ti-Paulo immediately decides that the two will become lovers: "Odile has a strong streak of masochism, self-disgust, and Naseby is the guy to satisfy her." Odile does leave, but we do not know if she goes to join Naseby in his mire. Ti-Paulo believes that she does but Ti-Paulo, in his journal, paints with a vivid palette, intense contrasts, Odiles and Nasebys.

How much Ti-Paulo shapes the break-up records must be a matter for conjecture. We see only his side of the story. The problem, however, is still more complex. Even the evidence Ti-Paulo presents supposedly to demonstrate his own good faith "seems" (a loaded word in this novel) ambiguous, and no authorial intrusions resolve that ambiguity. Thus Ti-Paulo's very gestures supposedly designed to persuade Odile to remain are precisely those that demonstrate, for him, her desire to leave: "I went over and told her I loved her and she said she adored me . . . when they talk adoration [or love?], it's already too late." He uses chess metaphors to describe the end game he plays in a match that he sees as already lost. After the opening move, the gambit of pretended gentleness, he concludes that "White's game is in its last throes," and White's game can be either "hers or mine." He seeks stalemates in defeat. Or he would find Pyrrhic recompense in the patterns established and the postures struck as the game winds down — the artist's eye for grace under pressure. One morning, he wakes her with a kiss, serves her an elegant breakfast in bed, bathes and anoints her while she applies make-up to her face. He then sits back to gaze upon the perfect beauty he has helped her to achieve: the "sun streaming in, . . . her face turned quarter face from me so I could see the good lines in her cheek, her throat." A Vermeer — or only a Wyeth? He also notes again that "it's already too late," and even hopes that when she subsequently leaves to go shopping, she will not return: "Perfection would be nice just once in my life." He has created a perfect picture, a tableau, and the artist insists on the ending that will hurt the man. When Odile returns for a few days, before her final and permanent departure, the man welcomes her back. It is the man who has begun to realize how much he loves her.

When she does leave, Ti-Paulo even more slowly begins to recognize that love is other than art:

Today I read *Measure for Measure*, watched a ball game on TV and listened to some Mozart. While I was making lunch I listened to an interesting radio program

about archaeological digs in Tanzania. Then I went out and got drunk. So I loved that woman. So what?

The “So what?” shapes the rest of Ti-Paulo’s life: “So I loved her, love her. All right, I admit it. So? I even admit I can’t replace her.” Yet, as we discover from a single parenthetical line dropped much later in the novel, Ti-Paulo tries desperately to replace her. Ever the artist, he manages to find seven close copies of the first Odile, but he never recovers the original. We need not be fooled by his flippant phrases.

At the beginning of the chapter, Ti-Paulo described how, for the great nineteenth-century exhibitions, “painters would slap on a new coat of varnish to make the garbage look fresh for the public the next day.” He continues: “My stuff is drawing under glass. Just for the fun of it, I ought to varnish the whole lot.” But this is precisely what Ti-Paulo does with his life and in his journal. He creates the situation, the work of art, and then covers it over with varnish — with the varnish that an artist would wish to apply, a thin coat that does not at all obscure the picture beneath:

So I went out for a few beers. Students in the cheap bars, ad-men in the expensive ones. When I got home it was a shock to my eyes to find everything, every light, every book, every cushion, even the match I dropped in the hall on the way out all exactly as I left them.

Still life, indeed.

W

WE HAVE ANALYZED THIS CHAPTER in some detail and not just because it effectively illustrates the subtlety of Smith’s technique. The vernissage also merits careful attention because it represents a sustained exercise in the painting metaphors that run through the work. And still more important, the larger vernissage, Ti-Paulo’s glossed-over portrayal of his failure in love, the way he makes a fiction from possibly fictional facts, serves as a synecdoche for the whole novel. The one chapter can be seen, then, as a key to the structure of the book. Furthermore, this question of structure is particularly important because John Moss, one of the few critics who has written substantially on *Lord Nelson Tavern*, admires the novel for some of its qualities but still dismisses it as an interesting failure — a work that sadly lacks any unifying vision or artistic unity:

Rather than a plot to the whole, there is a filling in, an almost random compilation until the picture is complete. But the picture itself is irrelevant, being so entirely different from every perspective. What in the end are important are the stories that make it up. There is meaning in particulars, but the whole they add up to is meaningless, the shape of a void.²

But pictures do not become “complete” nor stories “important” through the process of an “almost random compilation.” Neither are kaleidoscopic configurations (“different from every perspective”) thus established. Moss obviously overlooks the pattern that informs *Lord Nelson Tavern*. The shifting perspectives continually intersect and, at their loci, imply meaning. The vernissage, as earlier observed, is one such obvious locus. Against the backdrop of Ti-Paulo’s success at art and failure at love, we catch glimpses of the other characters who are struggling to achieve in both mediums and who succeed — if they do succeed — not by chance but mostly through acts of will, a sense of design, craftsmanship, handiwork.³ What Moss sees as a void seems, instead, to be an answer: a re-assertion of one’s power to direct the course of one’s life or — probably more accurate — to live, at least in part, the fiction of one’s ideal life. Smith’s most admirable protagonists artistically gloss over their inevitable human failings in order to achieve the larger perspective they have set for themselves. A few imperfect strokes need not ruin the whole canvas. But the less capable characters get stuck in their own varnish. Reconstructing a more flattering past, envisioning a more perfect future, they make little of the workable reality of the present moment.

This contrast is effectively established in Chapter Three when Ti-Paulo recounts in his journal “an incident with my father.” That incident occurred much earlier, soon after Ti-Paulo was out of art school and probably while he was living unsuccessfully with plump Sigrid (he had not yet found his model muse) in a purple apartment filled with Chianti bottles. But more important is the placement of the digression. In the middle of his own account of his own disappointment in love, Ti-Paulo tells of his father’s earlier comparable experience:

He was about fifty then and having his problems. My mother had finally taken her money and gone to Rome to live among the gigolos. The old man was hitting the booze, his law practice was slipping. Then he started going with a new typist from the architect’s down the hall. It was serious. He called and offered me the plane fare home.

The young artist finds the lovers “ludicrous.” But their relationship still has a kind of appeal and Lucy, the twenty-five-year-old typist, shows a certain class:

She put out the best tableware for honoured son, was careful with it but not finicky. Served the meal without apologies (even if she knew about the old lady’s cooking, this showed a cool hand) and never once called my father by his first name. That last was genius. I could hardly wait to call her Mommy.

For all his glibness, Ti-Paulo admits to a begrudging admiration. It is merited: “The old man was on his way to recovery.” The “old man” also recounts how he discovered the route he is following: “I was having supper one night, if you could call it that. Sitting at the kitchen table with greasy dishes all over the place,

eating a fried egg with the yolk broken.” The cat leaps onto the table and starts cleaning off the other plates: “I keep eating, the cat keeps eating, we’re watching each other. Suddenly it dawns on me, I’m fifty years old and I’m going to spend the rest of my life eating supper with a cat. Was I? No goddamn fierce I wasn’t.” It is a “good story” made so, the cynical son suspects, through many tellings. Yet the father does more than repeat his compensatory tale. He also chooses Lucy, even though that choice well might lead to his being abandoned again: “I figure I can give her ten years before she wants something more.” It is still a wise choice. Ten years of Lucy is much preferable to ten years with the cat. Yet then Ti-Paulo (to his father he is simply Paul, and small Paul at that), at the conclusion of his account of his abandonment, writes: “Maybe I’ll get a cat like the old man. . . . A house-trained cat.”

Ti-Paulo’s backward glance at the lonely father who *solves* his loneliness through a pragmatic love stands in marked contrast to his account of the aesthetically shackled son who proposes a cat but will really settle for nothing less than an impossible ideal, a perfect copy of Odile. In short, Smith gives us a different version of the story even within that story. It is in this sense that the chapter sets forth the pattern of the book. The internal parallel also parallels external ones. For the Lucy Ti-Paulo barely recollects when he meets her as his father’s prospective wife is the Lucy who occupies most of Chapter One, which is Paleologue’s tale of love lost to poetry and another version of life sacrificed upon the altar of art. In that opening chapter, Paleologue, at university, writes poetry to his muse. Like Ti-Paulo painting even his plump models in the image of Odile, Paleologue refracts Lucy through a lens of Petrarchan romanticism. The down-to-earth, gum-chewing secretary becomes “my pale Lucy, pale Lucia, light and airy, brave love.” Like Odile, Lucy finds that unlikely casting uncomfortable. Yet her love for Paleologue is apparent even in the way she leaves him, which, incidentally, occurs during a celebration designed to mark his first professional success — a dinner during which he intends to propose :

“No, don’t say it,” the glitter on her cheeks now, it would never work, it had to end, to end now, she wanted him to take her home now, she was sorry, she was really, really sorry, love, it wouldn’t work, they came from two different worlds, love, he was a poet, he had sold a poem, he was going to be famous, he should marry someone from his own world, she was only a dumb typist, no, let’s be honest with each other, we always have been, love, we just come from two different worlds, a couple should come from one world, . . . and I’ll always love you, always, the glittering tears on her cheeks. . . .

And she is right. Paleologue does not realize this at first; he tries to find the poet’s eternal sleep beneath the waves in the harbour. But he is saved (inexplicably by Grilse) to realize that Lucy must have her older businessman, the secretary her boss. He needs something else, and not a succession of imitation Lucys. Paleologue

learns the lesson of his first love. He finds Gussie and lives as happily ever after as any character in serious contemporary literature can reasonably hope to do.

BUT WHAT IS *Lord Nelson Tavern* all about? We would suggest that it is both a return to an older type of fiction and yet one of the most experimental novels in Canadian literature.⁴ The older form is the novel of manners. Jane Austen presides here. We follow characters through vernissages, sophisticated cocktail parties, crass student gatherings, celebration dinners, bar-room sessions, polite teas, book signing parties, and extended summer visits. Yet in these public settings we see private faces too. Again Smith's narrative technique allows him to transcend the usual limits of the realistic mode. The shifting I-voice and the playful omniscience of the narrator results in a continuous counterpointing of oblique views. With pointillism, the blue and yellow dots together and from a distance seem like green. In much the same fashion the private perspectives in the novel add up to a larger public picture, yet the constituent primary pigments remain distinct and can be closely examined.

In exploring the discrete scenes, the separate highlights and their countering dark contrasts, we can begin to see more clearly what Ray Smith has been showing us all along. The characters in the novel who live best live with a kind of good sense and decorum, peculiar values in a twentieth-century book. And yet their decorum is suited to the age. Note, for example, how Gussie has an affair with a sleazy actor while Paleologue fights at the front in a war unaccountably past and future. Gould and Rachel are incensed by her behaviour, yet Paleologue, informed of his wife's infidelity, realizes that Gussie's temporary escape from the battle of loneliness has little to do with him or the nature of their relationship. Conversely, when Paleologue finally accommodates the precocious Sarah who has been trying all day to seduce him, it is Sarah, not Gussie, who for two decades plays the betrayed wife. Sarah, it should be added, also imitates Ti-Paulo, her father, in her extended search for another Paleologue and the lost innocence of virginity innocently lost. Only belatedly, when reading the diary she wrote to her older self, does she realize that one cannot live imprisoned in the past. Yet other characters, most notably Gould and Rachel, play out the defeats of their past in their present, always tormenting each other with what "other times, other places" might have wrought, neither one budging from the time and place they share, unhappily, together. They lack Paleologue's "balance," his ability to "see the good and bad in all things" and to be "neither impressed by the one nor disgusted by the other." And they all, from Paleologue and Gussie, through Ti-Paulo, Nora, Sarah, Rachel, Gould, and even Naseby — like the Bennet sisters in *Pride and Prejudice* — get pretty much what they deserve. In short, despite the seeming

randomness of exposition, the erratic time, the displaced place, we have a balanced and symmetrical work. Lord Nelson Tavern looks rather like Pemberley Hall after all.

So the novel exhibits a coherent vision, and a clearly moral one at that. Naseby, significantly, never recovers from his first mistake. The realization that he was outmanoeuvred both financially and aesthetically when he tried to con Paleologue and Gussie into making a pornographic movie (pornography was elevated into art and his intended victims collected most of the cash) precipitates further failures. No longer sure of his base abilities, he dies a victim of his continuing miscalculation. Grilse would substitute nefarious business for Nora Noon yet cannot live without her. He saves Paleologue from suicide but, forty years later, will not allow Paleologue to return the favour. In contrast, Nora Noon puts debasement behind her and even transcends the “figures in the cave,” the perpetual nightmares of her waking world. She, too, becomes an artist, a better one than Ti-Paulo, precisely because she can replace the figments of her haunted imagination with the pale pigments of her awesome canvasses. In love, too, she plays a better game. With Grilse on his aimless travels, with her journalist-lover too drunk to be her lover, she joins, instead, Roger Portable :

They ran into each other every morning for a week. The following week they were married.

“Because you found my bench.”

“Because you found me on it.”

As good reasons as any, they felt, and a better marriage than most.

And meanwhile, through all the other tales of loves lost and won, the “perfect lovers,” Dimitri and Francesca, stay young forever, bound only to each other and the present moment, as vacuous as a soap bubble — and just as self-contained.

The characters who live most admirably — and most happily (an unusual state in serious contemporary fiction: *happiness?*) — are those who recapitulate in their fictional lives the method of the artist who creates them. But their happiness does not demonstrate an easy optimism. Halifax is not located in Arcadia; *Lord Nelson Tavern* is not romantic pastoral. The numerous references to Dante and Chaucer, particularly to “The Inferno” and “The Wife of Bath’s Tale,” are not bucolic at all. As Dimitri and Francesca especially demonstrate, fortune — luck and riches — is not enough. As all the characters in the novel show, a certain art in living is required. Those who do not achieve it are condemned to live their failures. As in Dante’s “Inferno,” they might protract their limitations — their sins — by insisting they have none. As in Chaucer’s “The Wife of Bath’s Tale,” they might seek solace in fantasy alternatives and the sympathy of listeners as unconcerned with them as they are with others. The sinners of Dante and of Chaucer never escape the psychology of their sin, just as the more modest sinners of our secular age regularly re-enact the neurosis implicit in their imperfect lives

— Jean-Baptiste Clamence, Moses Herzog, Madame Tassy Roland, Jake Hersch, characters Canadian or otherwise, who are trapped in an I-voice of self-consciousness, a hell of self-examination, the tedium of psychoanalysis. Smith's shifting "I's" present the other side of other stories. Contrary to Moss's assessment, these intersecting lives and chapters offer a completeness almost cosmic in its very human comedy.

We began by quoting the penultimate paragraph of *Lord Nelson Tavern*. With that authorial glance at "other places, other times," the reader must also clearly glimpse again the dark possibilities that serve throughout the novel as mostly hidden underpainting. The final paragraph then completes the picture:

In the bright dining car almost empty at third call, Paleologue and Gussie . . . leaned toward each other and kissed over the white linen. A red rose floated in a glass bowl. They smiled at their reflections in the window and could not see the snow-covered countryside they passed through. Gussie glanced about to see if anyone was paying them any attention, then shifted forward in her chair.

"Higher," she purred, "Yes, higher."

And this is the way the novel ends. The train, a symbol (for journeys and connections) that recurs throughout the novel, passes through the night. The elderly couple inside kiss sedately "over the white linen" but underneath the table they are adolescents still. Here, too, are other places, other times. The world outside is dark, cold, snow-covered, connotative of death (as all northern landscapes regularly are), but the window reveals only the bright reflection of smiling faces. As the red rose, another touch of Dante, floats in the bowl, two autumnal lovers re-experience the fires of their long passed spring. Thus time runs backwards to allow, for those who can achieve it, an earthy heaven. "Higher . . . Yes, higher." Smith toys with the vocabulary of mysticism but he does so with serious intent. Higher is sometimes lower. Paleologue and Gussie are happy because they possess the ability to play with and play over the paradoxes of life, which are themselves — a basic point in the novel — the different shadings that an honest rendering of human experience must convey. And Smith gives us an honest rendering polished to a high art. With Paleologue and Gussie and their final play, he completes a group portrait that is strikingly Rembrandtesque in the way in which it highlights, juxtaposes, blends, and mutes both the dark and the bright possibilities of life.

NOTES

¹ Ray Smith, *Lord Nelson Tavern* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1974), p. 160.

² John Moss, *Sex and Violence in the Canadian Novel* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1977), pp. 150-51.

³ Yet Ray Smith, it must be emphasized, is not a Canadian version of Ayn Rand. Thus Gussie, at one point, talking of how "lucky" she and Paleologue have been,

SMITH

observes: "I was reading Herodotus again; I had forgotten how chaotic and accidental life can be."

⁴ Moss does pay partial tribute to "Smith's brilliant formal innovations" but sees them as "not matched, quite, by the quality of the vision they are meant to convey."

FROM 7TH AVENUE

Stephen Bett

It becomes increasingly
problematical that the
house is not the place
described, but a
place enacted. Having
no real features save

those you make of it
moving past a window or
throwing open a balcony
door, it could easily be
reduced to the mimicry
of design. But surfaces

are constantly being
confronted by your hand
weaving its own purpose
through the rooms, like a
painter who has inherently
consented to his medium.

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