

GROVE'S "MAGNIFICENT FAILURE"

The Yoke of Life *Reconsidered*

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ALTHOUGH *The Yoke of Life* has had its champions — W. A. Deacon hailed it on its first publication as “a great novel which, beyond any question, will stand the test of time,” and W. J. Alexander is reported by Grove as saying that only the great Shakespearean tragedies could compare with it¹ — the novel has not received the kind of critical attention that has been accorded *Settlers of the Marsh* or *Fruits of the Earth* or *The Master of the Mill*. In general, commentators have praised individual scenes but have shown themselves reluctant to respond very positively to the novel as a whole. As enthusiastic a Grovian as Desmond Pacey was content to call it “a magnificent failure,” while Margaret Stobie, complaining that its main weakness lay in “the plethora of themes,” implied that it lacked artistic unity.² Moreover, because it has not been reprinted since the early 1930's, the book is comparatively unfamiliar to the Canadian reading public.

A careful study of the novel suggests that this neglect is closely related to its unique fictional qualities. Few novels, I suggest, are more difficult to appreciate on a single reading. Only when we become accustomed to the curious shift in the narrative from a basically “realistic” to an unabashedly “symbolic” level will the novel yield up its more satisfying effects. I remember carrying away from my first reading of *The Yoke of Life* a sense of irritatingly uneven quality, of a confusingly inconsistent literary tone. Subsequent readings have not only made me more aware of the novel's strengths and less disturbed by its weaknesses, but have convinced me that Grove has taken pains to prepare the reader for the unusual direction that the book eventually takes. In the following pages an attempt will be made to justify this claim.

The all-important first chapter may be considered representative in containing within itself intimations of both the strengths and the weaknesses. Superficially realistic, it is in fact so constructed as to communicate to the careful reader a symbolic digest of the book's major emphases. Len Sterner, a small thinly-built boy dwarfed by “an enormous plow-horse” on which he is sitting, waits by the door of a cottage (itself “diminutive” in comparison with the vastness of the

bush) from which is to be heard “a strangely melodious and cultivated voice.”⁸ This voice belongs to Mr. Crawford, schoolteacher, but he is representative of what, for Len, is a mysterious and attractive world (beyond the prairie horizon) in which the boy dreams of one day finding a place. Their conversation arises from Len’s report that he has seen a strange bird, which Crawford identifies as an American magpie sixty miles outside the boundaries of its normal territory. Palpably but inconspicuously, the bird serves two functions within the scene. To Len it is, like Crawford, an interesting visitor from the beckoning world outside, but to the reader, who is more likely to notice the fact that it is strangely out of place on the Manitoba prairie, it can serve as a suggestive analogue for Len himself.

This is an impressive opening, but the effect is dissipated as soon as Len and Crawford begin to talk of other things. Their conversation is stiff, unconvincing, and somewhat pretentious:

“What is a great man?”

“One who has thought and known more and more deeply than others.”

“So that he can make inventions?”

“That, too. Though the greatest hardly do that.”

“What do they do?”

“They explore the human heart and mind and help other men to understand themselves.”

A Socratic dialogue seems incongruous in this setting. Even if we take into account the farm-boy’s awkwardness and embarrassment in the presence of an educated teacher whom he admires but does not understand, the falsity of this — its notable lack of colloquial rhythms, for example — is disturbing. Even when we realize that it connects with Len’s determined but inevitably frustrated efforts to become “a great man,” it still fails to convince.

Yet the rest of the chapter, in which Len tracks down the strayed cattle and brings them back to the homestead, is masterly in its presentation not only of the external scene but of Len Sterner as a carefully-realized figure within it. Grove achieves this by means of a shrewd balance between his own narrator’s stance and Len’s response as a dreamy imaginative child. It so happens that Len’s journey takes him into the countryside of *Settlers of the Marsh*, and it is worthwhile juxtaposing Grove’s account of Niels Lindstedt’s arrival at Lund’s place and the equivalent description here. The passage in *Settlers of the Marsh* reads as follows:

After four miles or so they emerged from the bush on to a vast, low slough which, from the character of the tops of weeds and sedges rising above the snow, must be a swamp in summer. It was a mile or so wide; in the north it seemed to stretch to the very horizon. To the east, in the rising margin of the enveloping bush, Niels espied a single, solitary giant spruce tree, outtopping the poplar forest and heralding the straggling cluster of low buildings which go to make up a pioneer homestead.

That was Lund's place.

Slowly they approached it across the frozen slough. Taller and taller the spruce tree loomed, dwarfing the poplars about the place. . . .

They drove up on a dam; and the view to the yard opened up.

There were a number of low buildings, stable, smokehouse, smithy — none of them more than eight feet high in the front, and all sloping down in the rear. The dwelling at the southern end of the yard was a huge, shack-like affair, built of lumber, twelve feet high in front and also sloping down behind.⁴

Grove is content here to reproduce the viewpoint of his hero, new to the country, who notices what most observant visitors would notice. Niels Lindstedt's vision is domestic rather than imaginative, and attention is therefore focussed on external features. The whole passage is spare, objective — good, solid description without frills.

When we turn to the complementary scene in *The Yoke of Life*, however, we encounter a different, more complex effect :

At last Len saw a huge spruce tree ahead, outtopping the poplars all around. It stood close to the road, guarding like a sentinel a homestead in the margin of the forest where once a family of Swedes had tried to wrest a home from the bush. Mr. Lund, half lame and half blind, had one day, many years ago, gone into the bush or swamp and never been seen again. The rest of the family had moved away. Now, a Ukrainian settler lived there, doing well because he profited from the labour the Lunds had wasted on the place.

The landscape which, a few minutes ago, had still been a sombre green began to be redrawn by the rising dusk in grey and black. Len hurried his mount on: in him was the dread of the dark which is common to all such children as people the landscape with the creatures of their brain.

When he reached the clearing of the yard, however, just beyond the great spruce tree, he pulled the horse in. His heart was in his throat: the scene looked so bewitched in its utter stillness. Over the whole of the open space which lay like a niche in the woods, and reaching out into the swampy slough to his right, there was spread, like a ceiling, a thin layer of smoke, snow-white, but quite opaque and marvellously level. It arose from a smudge in the cow-lot over which a straight pillar of smoke stood in the air, motionless like a pillar of stone; it was only two or three inches in diameter and reached up to a height of twenty or thirty feet above the ground, eight or ten above the dam, and from that point spread out in a level sheet which floated like a lid over all the landscape.

The boy on the horse was sorely tempted to turn back and to flee. This was a witch's habitation in an enchanted forest!

An increased richness of language is immediately evident here, but I do not compare the passages in order to claim one as stylistically superior to the other; the point is, rather, that both are thoroughly appropriate to their respective novels. Grove's own narrative stance in this passage contains within it the bald details of landscape, but in addition we find an eye more sensitive to the natural effects of light and weather and a cogent awareness of the economic realities implied by

natural conditions. These can be introduced aptly enough, since Len has lived all his life in this area, and the narrator is therefore at liberty to present a broader perspective; he gives us more details because Len would notice more than Niels. A basic theme in the novel is the contrast between Len's dreams and the realities of his situation, and in this passage the two are clearly juxtaposed. Far from being an unnecessary digression, the history of Lund's place comes to be recognized as the narrator's carefully-pointed account of the nature of the world in which Len must struggle. Later, we learn that Len's father had succumbed to the harsh pioneering conditions, and in the course of the novel his stepfather will be forced out. Against all this, we have Len's imaginative response. The huge tree "like a sentinel" is, we may be sure, his simile as distinct from the narrator's, and the scene "bewitched in its utter solitude" also conveys the viewpoint of the dreaming boy. His conversion of the prosaic burning of waste in the cow-lot to "a witch's habitation in an enchanted forest" may at first seem rather too "cute" for our taste (more characteristic of one aspect of W. O. Mitchell than of Grove), but it admirably communicates not only Len's imaginative naiveté but his vulnerability in the world in which he finds himself. It is evident that in these two passages, with their differing versions of the same landscape, Grove is reaping the harvest of his experiment with varied descriptions and differing conditions in *Over Prairie Trails*.

At the end of the chapter we see Len in the immediate context of his home; and the tension between mother and stepfather, and the unending routine and hard work of the homesteading life (how impressive Grove always is when work is being described — not eloquently but absorbingly!), all help to set Len in an environment with which, sooner or later, he must inevitably clash. Even the apparently arbitrary game of "tag" played by Len and his younger brother Charlie ultimately falls into place as an active, make-believe revolt from the humdrum. The whole chapter forms a skilfully-created microcosm of the tensions and struggles which dominate the whole book.

I HOPE TO HAVE DEMONSTRATED that the opening of *The Yoke of Life* is both very ambitious and a distinct artistic success. It would be impossible, for reasons of space, to continue an elaborate literary analysis chapter by chapter; in any case, one has to admit that the promise is not consistently maintained. Although the first chapter was obviously planned with great care, there is elsewhere room for the suspicion that Grove's effects are to some extent hit-or-miss. One would like to be able to show, for instance, that the carefully-controlled relationship between narrator and sensitive hero was carried on through the novel, but unfortunately this isn't so. The narrative is not, as one might expect, limited to Len's viewpoint; Grove inserts several scenes in which he is not present.

There is, too, a basic difficulty in the presentation of Len. When we are shown his thought-processes "from the inside," he just does not convince us of the intellectual promise which Crawford sees in him. We are asked to believe that, after only two months' intensive study, Len passes first in the province in his examinations, but we are sceptical because Grove has never shown us the prodigy who could perform this remarkable feat. Len the "genius" rubs shoulders awkwardly with Len the confused and immature youthful lover. The terms in which his intellectual ambitions are expressed hardly change: "One day he was going to master all human knowledge in all its branches. Whatever any great thinker or poet or scientist had thought and discovered, he was going to make his own." This is the dreaming schoolboy, and the naiveté is endearing. But some years later, immediately after he hears of his examination success, we get this: "When he took leave of Mr. Crawford, he said exultantly, 'I shall be a university professor yet!'" The remark fits the youth who is incapable of recognizing the incompatibility between his own attitudes and Lydia's, but it hardly bodes well for his intellectual future. And I find it difficult to believe that this is the conclusion Grove expects us to draw.

Len's initiation into the world of love and sex also invites comparison with Grove's treatment of the subject in *Settlers of the Marsh*; the rather crudely-presented scene between Kolm and the mother, together with Len's reaction on overhearing it, virtually repeats that involving Ellen and her parents in the earlier novel. The common theme is easily recognizable, but it is the difference in treatment that is important. It is typical of Grove's practice (since he is continually repeating situations from novel to novel with subtle changes of circumstance and significance) that this time the incident should be experienced by the hero rather than the heroine, and that its effect upon his hero's actions should be different in detail but equally far-reaching. In this novel, however, the implications of the scene are more complex. While we know that Len is profoundly shocked, we are not told exactly what he is shocked by. It may be the very idea of sex, but it may also be Kolm's blundering vulgarity, the embarrassment of overhearing what is intimate and private, or the presumption that his mother is being forced against her will. To assume the first (and to judge from the assumption) is over-simple. On the other hand, Grove's vagueness here may be said to blur as well as complicate the effect.

Since Len's relations with Lydia are so central to the novel, this seems an appropriate place to consider Grove's attitude to love and sex in some detail. There was, I believe, a basic tension in Grove caused by two conflicting responses to human sexuality. One was the realization that sexuality is central to human experience, and that no novelist who attempts anything approaching a comprehensive view of human behaviour can honorably ignore or avoid it; the other was a deep-set belief, sometimes but not always recognized by the intellect as

false, that sexuality is invariably shameful. It is to Grove's credit that he did not shirk the subject, but, given the conflict within himself (to say nothing of the touchiness of the contemporary reading public on the issue, especially in Canada), the reader is not surprised to discover that his treatments of sexual themes vary radically in quality. Particularly noticeable is a distinct self-consciousness that can be felt within the prose. A crucial example occurs in Book I, Chapter IV, entitled (somewhat gauchely) "New Stirrings":

A longing was in [Len], unrecognized as such: a first adumbration that a human being is, in mind and soul, imperfect by itself; that somewhere in this world it must find its complement. A half is seeking the other half which will complete it into a self-contained whole. The first wing-reaches of this awaking are always painful: they are never understood by the one who suffers from them. If they were, the purpose of life would be thwarted. They are the most delicate thing there is in human growth: more delicate in a boy than in a girl; and the most disastrous thing that can happen to the young, emerging soul is to have its mysterious stirrings coarsely explained.

The subject is faced doggedly, but adequate words are not found in which to discuss it. The image of half seeking complement, a solemn version of the not-so-solemn fable in Plato's *Symposium*,⁵ avoids a direct confrontation of the problem, and is itself confusing since the complementary half can imply either flesh (as against spirit) or the opposite sex. More significantly, while the process is seen as "awaking" and "emerging" (we are imagistically close here to Len's speech about the pupa and the butterfly, to be discussed below), the phrase "one who suffers from them" suggests a disease. The closing remarks are cogent, but the fact that the author has to step forward to lecture his readers is a token of his failure to integrate the material into his novel.

By comparison with *Settlers of the Marsh*, however, I think we can discern here a more deliberate attempt to dissociate the narrator from Len's fumbling attitude in sexual matters. When we are told that "he seemed half aware that he had obeyed a shameful impulse" or that "he must redeem himself from what he now called the curse of sex," we feel that the sentiments are Len's, though the words "aware" in the first quotation and "redeem" in the second teeter on the very edge of implicating the narrator.⁶ Unfortunately, Grove's embarrassment in the matter of physical attraction becomes only too evident in the decline in quality of his prose at intimate moments. None the less, when a scene is realized in sufficient depth, this proves to be only a temporary blemish on the over-all effect.

THE MAIN SECTION IN BOOK II, Chapter III ("Return and Decision") is, I believe, one of the finest passages Grove ever wrote. It has certainly not received the attention it deserves. Here he succeeds in communicating

a crucial scene in all its underlying complexity — psychological, political, social and sexual. It is also remarkable for its drastic yet curiously discreet shifts of tone. Len has just returned from his winter at the lumber-camp. Thinking himself older and knowledgeable in the ways of the world, he plans to propose formally to Lydia. We see him buying his first Sunday suit for the purpose, and Grove views him externally, humorously, and with detachment:

To town or city people he would have looked grotesque. His suit, of a heather grey mixture of cotton and wool, ill-fitting and stiff with newness, was too ostensibly worn as a symbol of budding prosperity; his striped shirt and the stiff celluloid collar about his neck, with a plaid-pattern and sateen tie, were too unmistakably causing him acute discomfort. . . . He was self-conscious and appeared to advantage to no eye except his mother's.

On arrival at the Hausman homestead, he is received with formal courtesy by Lydia's parents, who clearly recognize the significance of the occasion. We are then given a detailed account of Len's circumstances — a potted history, as it were, of his prospective ownership of half of the Sterner farm — and as a result see the social implication of the expected engagement from the parents' point of view. It would be quite easy to read this as a clumsy digression (one of the problems with Grove's frequent artistic awkwardness is that readers can underestimate and misinterpret a subtle effect), but in locating Len's romantic aspirations in a bluntly realistic context, Grove is in fact adding a complicating and "placing" dimension to the whole Len-Lydia story.

Lydia herself is not deceived by Len's appearance: "He divined that, in Lydia's eyes, he played a slightly ridiculous part. The village boys at Odensee could outdo him in this business of 'dressing-up.'" But ironically Lydia is also specially dressed — she has, indeed, carefully prepared her parents for the visit — and the description of her, through Len's eyes, indicates not merely the quality of his attraction to her but, only too clearly, the fact that she does not deserve his devotion. The genuineness of Len's feelings is contrasted, in a situation which is both moving and pathetic, with the artificiality of the circumstances in which he tries to reveal them.

In a deftly humorous scene of a kind relatively uncommon in Grove (though not, I believe, as rare as is sometimes assumed), the parents leave Len and Lydia alone in so pointed a fashion as to increase Len's self-consciousness to the maximum. At last he begins his proposal speech about the pupa and the butterfly:

"Under the eaves of our sheep shed," he said, "there hangs a pupa, attached to the boards by a fine, thin stalk. It is greyish brown and quite plain. It looks like the wood and has been there since last fall. Inside of it something is growing; and soon it will burst its shell. It will be a butterfly, checkered in gold and black.

...

"That is you," he said. "While you were at home, you were the pupa. You have burst your shell and become a butterfly."

The passage has often been cited as an extreme instance of Grove's conversational awkwardness,⁷ but this, I am convinced, is a misreading. There can be no doubt that Len's metaphoric parable is painfully laborious, but it is clearly an earnestly rehearsed speech, and desperately true to character. We properly experience a sense of embarrassment, but it is (or should be) embarrassment for Len, not for Grove. We are intended to realize the inadequacy of the speech, recognizing that Len does not know what to say in the circumstances, that this is pathetic, but also that in a strange way his inarticulateness is in some respects in his favour. Lydia's response is both comprehensible and revealing: "Had she felt critical, she would probably have laughed. This was so ponderous, far-fetched, round-about." Recognizing it at once as a sign of Len's emotional immaturity, she feels "frightened" both for Len and for herself — for Len because it indicates the pathetic vulnerability of his idealism, for herself because it reveals, behind its clumsiness, a sincerity and loyalty which she has already exchanged for a promiscuous sophistication and which she no longer has the right to claim.

Len blunders on, his reference to "the beast in man" revealing in its simplistic moralism, while Lydia's desire for "lots of money" betrays an equally simplistic materialism. Her "cool and ironical" insistence is as characteristic as Len's looking "into a dreamy distance." As Lydia begins to assert her purely physical attraction over him, the language begins to relapse into cliché ("Her eyes were swimming"; "prickling currents were sweeping through him"; as usual, Grove can only assert, not convey, "a paroxysm of passion," and the relation between narrator and protagonist is again blurred. But because the earlier part of the scene has built up a masterly effect of assumed awkwardness, the real awkwardness here only weakens and does not wholly dissipate the artistic and emotional tension. It leads, indeed, to a momentary revelation that is crucial to their relationship (and to the whole novel) — a realization which, because it is an analysis of the experience of passion rather than a presentation of passion itself, Grove can bring off crisply and successfully:

Len was conscious of a feeling of shame and guilt. Yes, his feelings suffered almost a revulsion as he looked at her and saw her half triumphant, half terrified smile. In that smile there was something which called him. It was not discovery; it was recognition. Had there not been that shade of superiority and knowledge in her smile, he would have spoken and claimed her as his very own; but, though he could not have expressed what had dawned upon him, he was dimly aware that she who stood before him was Eve indeed, but after the fall.

At this point narrator and protagonist are properly distinct once more. The discriminations are clear and just. Grove displays here a remarkable understanding — a major novelist's understanding — of human motive, behaviour and reaction.

That Len can experience this revelation and yet still hold to the dream which bears no relation to Lydia's reality is a prime factor in his make-up and leads on to the catastrophic outcome of his story. This is a moment only surpassed by Grove's masterly conclusion to the chapter by which, with dry humour and controlled verbal economy, he forces Len back once more into a shabby, prosaic reality: "A few minutes later, the clattering of things on the stove having been agreed upon as a signal, Lydia's mother burst into the room, followed shortly by the yawning father." And so a scene verging upon tragedy ends on a note of human comedy that paradoxically accentuates the underlying poignancy in Len's whole relation with Lydia — a poignancy that contains within it the hints of an oppressively bleak future.

GROVE'S CHOSEN METHOD in *The Yoke of Life* involves continuing studies in contrast — scenes of harsh reality juxtaposed with those of dream and aspiration. The idea behind the method is sound enough; in practice, however, it tends to be blurred by the fact that Grove's "touch" is invariably sure in the former scenes but decidedly erratic in the latter. In Book I, Chapter IV, for example, the account of the hail-storm is in Grove's best manner. The one-sentence paragraph after the storm — "Man ventured out to look at his losses" — is supreme in its economy and impersonality. But the scene is followed closely by Len's embarrassingly unconvincing vision of the unicorn with its ponderous and insistent symbolism (and, in our post-Freudian world, its crassly obvious sexual vocabulary) seriously interfering with the narrative tone.

A similar contrast is to be found at the opening of Book III, and here we notice in particular how a breakdown in style coincides with — and therefore draws attention to — a breakdown in artistic rigour. The first chapter, "The Slough," is one of Grove's obvious triumphs, an unforgettable vignette of farming disaster. Although in a sense self-sufficient (with a minimum of adaptation it would fit as a short story into *Tales from the Margin*) it none the less performs an imagistic function within the novel. As Desmond Pacey remarks, "the effectiveness of the scene is enhanced by its symbolic overtones: to Grove the world is a kind of slough from which we vainly struggle to escape, often at the expense of another's agony."⁸ This is followed by the bitter dialogue, "To Farm or Not to Farm," which is one of Grove's more successful examples of extended conversation. But when one turns the page, and the focus is once more upon Len's thoughts concerning Lydia, we can actually see the prose collapsing:

Lydia! Whenever the name emerged, it coupled itself with fragments of visions. These caused a tightening of the heart or a releasing of its valves so that the blood, in a sudden burst, rushed more freely and fully through the sluices of his

veins, according as they showed him the heaving edge of a simple dress which heaved with her bosom . . . — or, in her later phases, the bold, challenging look of her violet eyes, . . . the sensuous yet cool abandonment to his caresses in the kitchen of her parental home.

How to present immaturity without seeming immature, how to capture the earnestness of young love without sounding either pompous or ridiculous — these are challenges requiring, unfortunately, a particular kind of literary tact in which Grove was notoriously deficient.

Contrasts, as we have seen, are integral to *The Yoke of Life*, and the contrast in settings — homestead, lumber-camp, city, lake — plays a central part in the total effect. The homestead is the microcosm, a world of limited but comprehensible horizons: “This was a self-contained world, closed off from the rest of the universe.” Len’s horizons expand somewhat when he spends the winter in the lumber-camp, but he realizes later that it was an incomplete world: “A camp in the bush is as truly an epitome of the whole as anything else. Is it? Woman was omitted from it.” The city, for Len a “plunge into the abyss,” is an alien world in which the conditions, norms and values of the pioneering life have been discounted. The moving scene in which Kolm seems almost physically diminished by the hostile atmosphere of McDougall (“He was out of place in town: he needed the bush and the fields for his background”) is repeated on a larger scale when Len finds himself dwarfed and out of his depth in Winnipeg, while Lydia’s descent into prostitution is an example of narrative likelihood having to take second place to symbolic aptness. And finally, the journey up the Lake is a break with all previous communities and associations towards a world more primitive and elemental than that of the Big Marsh. As a boy Len had considered the Lake “as distant and wonderful as fairyland,” and the same point is made when he regretfully turns in the opposite direction on his first journey to the city. But the Lake is reserved for the final chapters of the novel where the Gordian knot of Len’s entangled destiny is to be either unravelled or cut through.

I
N THESE CHAPTERS Grove is concerned to isolate Len and Lydia from the complicating distractions not only of city life but of communal life of any description. Len’s is a personal problem and a personal destiny, and must be worked out in the company of no one but Lydia. At the same time, the Lake is no escapist retreat. Len and Lydia here evade the normal categories, whether geographical (the direction is towards “absolute wilderness”), moral (the judgments of human societies no longer matter, though Len’s effort is to evolve his own moral criteria as a basis for living) or philosophical (Grove himself tells us that the novel is “beyond pessimism and optimism”). They have only

themselves, and must come to terms with each other. Similarly, the literary conventions that have governed the novel up to this point have to be transcended.

It is surely clear to anyone reading the novel with attention that a sort of stylistic gear-change takes place as soon as Len and Lydia move out on to the Lake. Grove's writing has been flexible enough before — it had to be to encompass the varieties of tone that I have already discussed — but here we encounter a more drastic change. In the following paragraph we catch the transformation in process:

The evening was the typical, quiet summer evening of the northern prairie. Through the day a sharp south wind had been blowing. Now it stood *with folded wings of haze* above the landscape, *poised*. The sun, in the west, was a crimson ball, heatless, rayless, scarcely distinguished in *incandescence*, though in colour, from the surrounding *wall of glowing vapour*. The forest which, from a slight ridge a few miles inland, swept right down to the water's edge, stood *breathless in an intoxication of rest*, after the *feverish swaying and tossing* of the day. Here and there, a swampy meadow *stretched lazily* between the higher reaches of the bush.

The paragraph opens straightforwardly enough, but the phrases I have italicized guarantee that by its end the "typical" northern evening has changed into something very different. This is a prose that we have not met in Grove since the central chapters of *Over Prairie Trails*, one in which pathetic fallacy is deliberately — and ironically — employed to communicate a heightened response to an awesome but essentially alien environment. As omniscient narrator, Grove injects a surrealistic intensity into his description. Though generous and precise in his detail concerning geological formations and weather effects, he reduces the landscape to its basic constituents of rock and water. Specific geographical details are sloughed off: "They seemed to be sitting on the shores of the sea of life and looking out over its dimly gleaming waters." As they go further north, "the landscape had the grandeur of death," and although Grove assured Desmond Pacey that "the end was suggested by the actual sight of the chattering rocks on Lake Winnepegosis,"¹⁰ the effect seems remote from actuality — a setting of dream or, rather, nightmare.

The whole landscape seems transformed into a world of art and myth. The pointed references to Eden have strong thematic but no topographical relevance, but the allusions to the poets, particularly Shelley, are suggestive. Shelley's influence, indeed, explains the preoccupation with boats, water and islands, nourishes the high-flown idealism overlying Len's strongly passionate nature, and summons up the imposing spectre of Death. This is the world of "Alastor," the alluring but ultimately destructive spirit of solitude. We even recognize an unspecified but none the less definite sense of Wagnerism behind the elemental vastness of these closing scenes as they work up to a ponderous but overpowering crescendo.

Yet although, stylistically, the final scenes represent a dramatic departure from the tone of the rest of the novel, there are connecting factors that prevent a complete split. Len and Lydia may be moving towards untouched wilderness where there is "no one to give help or to interfere," but even here the temporary camp they set up on the shore "had built a smaller, narrower world into the immensity." Grove is quite specific about its being an "artificial microcosm" — a "small world . . . surrounded by another huge world of unknown or at least unseen things." In one sense this is but another version of Len's "self-contained world, closed off from the rest of the universe" of the first chapter. Throughout the novel — and, indeed, throughout *Grove* — the individual is dwarfed by his landscape. The "fairylane" Lake provides a suitably impressive background for Len and Lydia to consummate their love, but it cannot blot out their past or alter their destiny. Ironically, Lydia's explanation that her last attempt at street-walking was undertaken for Len's sake ("You were ill. There was no money. I . . .") makes their union possible, yet by the same token Len's image of her as sometime prostitute is fatal to any permanency in their love, and leads directly to their suicide-pact. And the final image of their two bodies lashed together in death is itself, as Margaret Stobie has noted, a symbolic and material equivalent of Len's earlier meditation on the separated halves seeking union.¹¹ The novel that began within the realist-naturalist tradition draws to its close in a fictive world of myth and emblem. *Grove* allows Len to move into a landscape which is itself the psychologically appropriate emblem of his thinking. Len's original imaginative vision, which converted the environs of the Lund place into an enchanted forest, finds a context which is also a nemesis.

Grove has attempted a major effect here, and there can be no doubt that it was wholly deliberate. He tried, clearly, to extend the boundaries and enlarge the scope of the traditional novel, to probe levels of intensity and trace patterns of psychological experience not previously attempted in Canadian fiction and rarely achieved elsewhere. It recalls, in some respects, the Stonehenge scene at the end of Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, though *Grove* claims (for what it's worth) that he had read no Hardy before writing the novel.¹² But the effect is closer to the shift at the end of some of D. H. Lawrence's novellas, notably *St. Mawr* and *The Woman Who Rode Away*, which were being written at approximately the same time. More to the point, perhaps, it suggests the progression in the later plays of Ibsen — *John Gabriel Borkman* is a convenient instance — from conventional realism in the first act to symbolic action in the last.

I make these analogies not to detract from *Grove's* particular achievement but to demonstrate how, in coming to terms with it, we need to consider it within a broad literary context. We must, of course, learn to read each serious and original work of art in its own terms, but the experience of reading other literature can often help us. In the present context, Hardy again comes to mind. In *Jude the*

Obscure — a novel frequently alluded to in a discussion of *The Yoke of Life* — the section involving Little Father Time is experienced at first reading as a shock to our sensibilities, and this shock takes precedence over any detached artistic response. On later readings, however, the episode can never have the same effect, and we can the more easily adjust to it and appreciate its implications. The same is true, I believe, of *The Yoke of Life*. We are at first caught off-balance by what I have called the stylistic gear-change in the final chapters, but, once we are prepared for it, it proves less startling and we recognize earlier references which anticipate it and render it more acceptable. No longer distracted by wondering what is going to happen, we can concentrate on the more important issue, why (within the established logic of the novel) there should be no other possible way out.

But Grove has one further surprise, one last gear-change, in reserve. The novel does not end in the symbolic wilderness, "the gorge of the Narrows," but at a homestead in the bush. The last page, I would argue, is more than a loose-end-tying epilogue. News of the deaths of Len and Lydia coincides with the birth of a step-brother, duly christened Leonard. A "happy ending"? Not, certainly, in the conventional sense. The child receives its name "in commemoration of one who was dead and as a promise, perhaps, that he should have the opportunities which his older namesake had lacked." A careful reader will not miss that "perhaps." The new Leonard may or may not achieve the success which, Grove would have us believe, the older Leonard deserved, but if he does it will be a success gained not in a heightened symbolic landscape — Len's world of enchantment — but in the real world of life and labour. Thematically and stylistically the novel at last comes full circle.

NOTES

- ¹ W. A. Deacon in Desmond Pacey, ed., *Frederick Philip Grove* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1970), p. 145; Desmond Pacey, ed., *The Letters of Frederick Philip Grove* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1976), p. 247.
- ² Desmond Pacey, *Frederick Philip Grove* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1945), p. 63; Margaret R. Stobie, *Frederick Philip Grove* (New York: Twayne, 1973), p. 87.
- ³ Frederick Philip Grove, *The Yoke of Life* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1930).
- ⁴ Frederick Philip Grove, *Settlers of the Marsh* (1925; Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1965), pp. 27-28.
- ⁵ For a detailed discussion of Grove's debt to Plato in this novel, see Henry Makow, "Grove's Treatment of Sex: Platonic Love in *The Yoke of Life*," *Dalhousie Review*, 58 (Autumn 1978), 528-40.
- ⁶ For a discussion of this problem in *Settlers of the Marsh*, see my "The Art of Frederick Philip Grove: *Settlers of the Marsh* as an Example," *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 9 (August 1974), 32.
- ⁷ See, for instance, E. A. McCourt, quoted in Pacey, ed., *Frederick Philip Grove* (1970), p. 71.

⁸ Pacey, *Frederick Philip Grove* (1945), p. 61.

⁹ Frederick Philip Grove, *In Search of Myself* (1946; Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1974), p. 357.

¹⁰ *Letters*, p. 433.

¹¹ Stobie, p. 88.

¹² See Deacon in Pacey, ed., *Frederick Philip Grove* (1970), p. 145 and compare *Letters*, p. 316.

POSTSCRIPT

Ralph Gustafson

Buffy and Art,
 I don't know, I don't know if
 They will come again,
 Art with his glass of martini
 Wandering, getting the news,
 His poems chiselled till they shone,
 Like Brancusi,
 And Buffy we stayed off to meet,
 Art driving the car two-wheels
 To somewhere else but we had to meet Buffy
 Horseman among the farmers,
 Polished, his verse, too, formal as a
 Four-in-hand, a glass of Beaujolais,
 Whips and something odd,
 The bathroom done in black,
 Grace, and the silent chuckle —
 Chewing gum stuck on the Parthenon —
 Moccasins on Montparnasse — mortality
 And news of the phoenix,
 The outboard tearing up off Drummond Point —
 I don't know if they will come again,
 Or when or how,
 Classic shade and a point of sky
 Over Memphramagog, Brome,
 Both hating death.