

# ENGLISH-CANADIAN FICTION & THE PASTORAL TRADITION

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WHEN DANIEL WILSON REVIEWED the cultural situation of Canada in 1858, the country seemed to hover halfway between wilderness and civilization:

We are past the first poetic birth-time, which pertains to the vigorous infancy of races; we have yet to attain the era of refinement from which a high civilization educes new phases of poetic inspiration.

This peculiar state, Wilson then argues, calls for practical efforts rather than for pastoral poetry. Referring to Longfellow's popular epic poem *Hiawatha* which had recently been published, he continues:

We cannot yet respond amid these charred stumps and straggling snake-fences of our rough clearings, to *Hiawatha's* appeal to those

Who love the haunts of nature,  
Love the sunshine of the meadow,  
Love the shadow of the forest,  
Love the wind among the branches,  
And the rain-shower and the snow-storm,  
And the rushings of great rivers,  
Through their palisades of pine-trees.

We want our pine-trees for lumber, and so long as they spare us a surplus for kindling wood, we ask no kindling inspiration from them. The rushing of our great rivers we estimate rejoicingly — for their water-privileges. The sunshine of the meadow is very welcome to us — in the hay-harvest; and the poetry of the snow-storm full of the music — of our sleigh-bells. As to our love for the shadow of the forest, that pertains to the romantic simplicity of our squatter stage of infancy, from whence we emerge as fast as possible into the clearing we hew out of it, rejoicing at the crash of falling pines, and keeping time with the music of the axe to the crackling of the logging-pile.<sup>1</sup>

Wilson's essay represents a remarkable early example of the Canadian search for identity. Wilson's contemporaries, however, were far from taking his advice about the poetical beauty of the pioneer's life. Instead, they set out to write the very kind of pastoral poetry which Wilson had considered premature. Pastoral forms and pastoral topoi were drawn primarily from English sources, and superficially adapted to the new surroundings. Until well into the second half of the nineteenth century, Canadian writers modelled their often melancholy idylls after

examples taken from the English romantic poets or from those of the Victorian period. Charles Sangster's "Sonnets written in the Orillia Woods" (1860) could be quoted as an example:

I've almost grown a portion of this place;  
 I seem familiar with each mossy stone;  
 Even the nimble chipmunk passes on,  
 And looks, but never scolds me. Birds have flown  
 And almost touched my hand; and I can trace  
 The wild bees to their hives. I've never known  
 So sweet a pause from labour.

The pastoral mood is not only a pervading element of Canadian poetry, it also shapes prose fiction. It is the "regional idyll" that, in *Creative Writing in Canada*, Desmond Pacey identified as the most important pattern of the novel at the turn of the century. The regional idyll, like the "historical romance" which preceded it, tried to recreate values and lifestyles of an idealized rural eighteenth century — at a time when the modern novel elsewhere attempted to come to terms with the perplexities of contemporary life. But though the pastoral was originally a set of conventions about rural setting, characters, and diction, it soon developed into an anti-realistic way of looking at life.

To explain this dichotomy, Northrop Frye suggested that there might be a specifically Canadian affinity to a pastoral myth manifesting itself either in a nostalgic look back to an idyllic past or in the imaginative vision of a mythical unity.<sup>2</sup> But Frye's categories are not always easy to apply. If we take a passage from Leacock's *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* it would seem to illustrate Frye's first nostalgic type of pastoral. In "Ministrations," the narrator introduces the reader to the Rev. Dean Drone as he sits at his rural table enjoying "the chequered light of the plum tree that is neither sun nor shadow." Dean Drone, we subsequently learn, is reading:

and when I tell you that at the end of the grass plot where the hedge is highest there is a yellow beehive with seven bees that belong to Dean Drone, you will realize that it is only fitting that the Dean is reading in the Greek. For what better could a man be reading beneath the blossom of the plum trees, within the very sound of the bees, than the Pastorals of Theocritus? The light trash of modern romance might put a man to sleep in such a spot, but with such food for reflection as Theocritus, a man may safely close his eyes and muse on what he reads without fear of dropping into slumber.

The passage testifies both to Leacock's learning and his sense of irony. In a modern world, he seems to imply, the status of the pastoral tradition is doubtful. The tone and the themes of the passage are reminiscent of eighteenth-century novelists such as Fielding or Goldsmith. The classical pastoral is not only explicitly referred to but also provides the topoi of the *locus amoenus*: trees and bees are the standard

attributes of the shady grove where time seems to stand still and the conflicts of real life lose their relevance.

But even if Dean Drone seems to personify the innocent country parson — a late successor to Goldsmith's Dr. Primrose — his idyllic peace is threatened. Not only does Drone eventually turn out to be involved in dubious business transactions which are beyond his control, but the narrator also exposes the limitations of the idyllic sphere.

There is, in other words, a contradiction between the closed world of the garden and the lofty literary tradition which it claims to represent: Dean Drone, nodding off over his Theocritus, really prefers not to translate the original Greek — for reasons the narrator tactfully hints at when he remarks that “when Dean Drone said that he simply couldn't translate it, I believe he was perfectly sincere.” The ironic commentary uncovers the Dean's comic inadequacy but at the same time reveals the unrealistic character of the pastoral convention.

Leacock's works contains a number of similar scenes. It can be said to mark a new stage in what Empson called the pastoral process of putting the complex into the simple: pastoral motifs and themes are no longer used “literally” but quoted as conventions. Leacock and his followers consciously recapitulate typical features of an historical genre. Below the seemingly unruffled surface of the idyllic scene there emerges a tension between reality and ideal.

From a comparative point of view, Leacock's ironic idyll is a fairly late example of the re-interpretation of the pastoral observable everywhere during the second half of the nineteenth century. The realistic novel, in particular, employs the idyllic scene as an emblem of a pastoral ideal of harmony and bliss which cannot last in reality. Thus, the conflict between an idyllic world-picture and the non-idyllic “real” world (which remains outside the scope of Theocritus' pastorals, Virgil's eclogues, Sidney's *Arcadia*, or Mazo de la Roche's *Jalna* novels, for that matter) becomes a central theme of fiction.<sup>3</sup>

An early form of the problematical attempt to recapture the innocence of Acadia is the pastoral tableau at the end of the narrative, a favourite device of eighteenth-century writers which survived until well into the nineteenth century, as a number of Dickens' novels demonstrate: idyllic elements intensify and confirm the happy ending. The interpolated idyllic scene is a different matter: it no longer anticipates a happy ending but usually stands for a temporary vision of harmony, for an idyllic moment overshadowed by an approaching catastrophe. Victorian novelists such as Robert Louis Stevenson and Thomas Hardy, Joseph Conrad and Henry James use the idyllic episode to explore fundamental tensions between town and country, individual and society, utopian hope and melancholy resignation. The *locus amoenus* is no longer autonomous but now vulnerable. It appears idyllic only from a certain point of view, for certain people, for a limited span of time. It may be no more than a dream or a fleeting glimpse of the past. The pastoral

may become a criticism of real life, but may also be shown as an escape into a simpler world of illusions. It seems essential, in discussing the form and function of the "pastoral relief" in modern Canadian fiction, to keep these developments in mind before forming theories about an indigenous "pastoral myth."

THE RISE OF THE CANADIAN NOVEL in the 1950s can be described as a quantitative and a qualitative phenomenon: more and better novels were published. Two of the most influential novels which appeared in 1959, in their different ways, take up the pastoral tradition: Hugh MacLennan's *The Watch That Ends the Night* and Mordecai Richler's *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*.

MacLennan's contribution to a definition and interpretation of the "Canadian experience" is obvious: the precarious co-existence of two languages and cultures, the country's difficult choice between political neutrality and commitment, but also the perennial struggle with hostile nature are among the recurrent themes of his novels. While these themes are undoubtedly relevant for a study of *Watch*, which is set in Montreal during the uneasy peace of the late 1930's, the role of pastoral conventions has frequently gone unnoticed.

Both male protagonists are associated with nature. Nature, however, is a thoroughly ambiguous concept. Jerome Martell throughout the novel represents the tough and primitive wilderness-relationship, which is most dramatically underlined in his escape from the logging camp. Martell's *unio mystica* with nature as a school for survival is carefully set against the much more conventional nature imagery which the narrator George Stewart uses when he characterizes his relationship with Catherine Carey. The beginning, climax and imminent end of this relationship is indicated in a series of idyllic scenes conjuring up a deceptive world of private happiness.

George's account of the past sets in at the very moment when this privacy is about to collapse with Jerome's unexpected return. The pastoral tradition clearly informs George's first encounter with Catherine which takes place in the Careys' garden:

Under our lone apple tree Catherine Carey stood with a basket of phlox and late delphiniums on her arm. . . . The actual colour of Catherine's dress that morning I do not know — it might have been white or red or blue — but with the sunlit green of the garden around her, with the dappled green of the shadowed grass under her feet, green was her colour at that supreme moment of my youth. . . . So that summer I entered Arcadia and the pipes played and the glory of the Lord shone round about. . . .

Catherine appears static and isolated like a statue, transferred into an ideal sphere outside reality. The prototype of this kind of picturesque idyll — regarding both

the imagery and the position in the plot — may be found in nineteenth-century novels. In Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, for example, Tess and her lover Angel Clare meet initially in the "vale of the dairies" which has a function similar to the sheltered bourgeois garden. Here and there, pastoral nature reflects an optimistic hope for a life free from external pressures. The tragic failure of the utopian pastoral and the corresponding idyllic scene which precedes it appear in both novels.

In Hardy's *Tess*, the lovers spend a few days together in the lonely country house, before Tess (having murdered her husband) gives herself up to the police. The second idyll in MacLennan's novel coincides with Martell's return, and concludes the narrator's chronicle of past events. George Stewart's memories of the country retreat in the Laurentians which he shared with Catherine culminate in the following reflections:

Happiness is one of the hardest things to write about, and the difficulty of doing so makes me long to be a musician or a painter, for painters and musicians are at ease with the supreme emotion, which is not grief but joy abounding. To be able to make a joyful noise to the Lord or a praise of colours and forms would seem to me to equate any man with gods or little children. Happiness annihilates time. We measure history by its catastrophes, we recall the weather by its storms, but the periods of peace and joy — who can describe them?

"Many a green isle needs must be. . . ." But is it not also true that years later it is the green isles of happiness that we remember best, even if we cannot tell about them?

The didactic tone of this direct address to the reader shows that not only the narrator but also the author himself is fully conscious of the pastoral traditions he draws upon. The vision of a classical Arcadia and of an earthly paradise serves to intensify the effect of the melancholy idyll, as does the allusion to the romantic topos. "Many a green isle" is a line from Shelley's "Lines written among the Euganean hills" (1818). In looking back to and reflecting on the past, George Stewart nostalgically refers to an island of pastoral bliss whose timeless harmony is encroached upon by the gathering tragedy. Nature — which may prove a source of mystical strength for the strong — provides the scenery where the conflict between the individual desire for privacy and the forces of a destructive fate are most poignantly felt.

The rationale of the pastoral — "Happiness annihilates time" — is explicitly stated rather than metaphorically suggested. This directness jeopardizes the evocative force of the imagery. By making explicit the contrast between ever-changing history and the utopian ideal of timelessness and harmonious balance, the narrator appears to waver between a politico-historical parable of love and a well-motivated plot. The characters are partly individuals, partly personifications of abstract concepts. It is this ambiguity that has often been called one of the most serious

flaws in MacLennan's fiction. It becomes apparent in the idyllic scenes as a clash of melodramatic tone, poetic atmosphere and intended "meaning."

THE WATCH THAT ENDS THE NIGHT, in the author's own view, marks a point of transition from an optimistic to a pessimistic view of history. "Requiem" was the title MacLennan had originally chosen for the book, because he saw the novel as a "requiem for these idealists of the Thirties who had meant so well, tried so hard and gone so wrong."<sup>4</sup> The threatened idyll and its eventual collapse symbolize not just the lost paradise of youth, but at the same time Canada's loss of national innocence and its failure to stay free from history, even though it tried to remain static in times of violent change.

Mordecai Richler's *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, also published in 1959, is obviously the work of a younger author who is much less concerned with the problems of national identity and the pastoral tradition. But still Richler, in his own way, apart from sharing to a certain extent MacLennan's pessimism, uses similar conventions of the tragic pastoral.

The fact that the title of the novel parodies Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* should not prevent us from realizing that in plot and structure Richler's *Entwicklungsroman* primarily draws on the novels of the "angry young men" in Britain during the 1950s. It is known that Richler wrote the film script for John Braine's *Life at the Top*, which appeared in 1962. Here, as in other novels such as John Wain's *Hurry on Down* (1953), Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim* (1954), or Braine's *Room at the Top* (1957), the protagonist is a social climber seeking to shake off the obsessive limitations of his class and milieu. He usually succeeds but subsequently finds himself in a social and moral vacuum. Sometimes this loss of traditional standards becomes evident in a focal scene where the hero experiences a conflict in choosing between personal loyalty and professional career. Joe Lampton, for instance, in Braine's *Room at the Top*, spends his last sentimental days with his mistress Alice Aisgill in a solitary cottage in Wales before he callously sacrifices her to his far-reaching ambitions.

Lampton's younger brother, Duddy Kravitz, follows this example, although he is rather more indifferent to the temptations of pastoral love. He wants to turn Lac St. Pierre into a holiday colony. To raise the necessary money, he systematically betrays his family and his friends, in particular the pastoral ideal epitomized in his grandfather's dictum "A man without land is nobody." In the plot of the novel, the corruption of Duddy's integrity is narrated in terms of the vanishing of a *locus amoenus*.

When Yvette for the first time takes Duddy to the lake, the couple crosses from the real into a pastoral world:

They came down on the other side of the mountain and walked through a field of corn and a wide, hilly cow pasture. They crossed some disused tracks, hopped from rock to rock over a swirling creek, and entered a wood.

Nature is shown as untouched by man. A sense of loneliness and timelessness prevails:

Before them spread a still blue lake and on the other side a forest of pine trees. There was not one house on the lake. Some cows grazed on the meadow near the shore and over the next hill there was a cornfield and a silo. There was no other sign of life or ownership or construction.

The ironic twist of the plot is foreshadowed in the last sentence. True, the ideal place of idyllic fulfillment actually exists but neither Yvette nor Duddy is capable or willing to play the archetypal pastoral role assigned to them. Yvette merely wants to have Duddy for herself; Duddy in his turn is instantly fascinated by the prospects of a commercial venture. This discrepancy becomes obvious when he casts off his clothes and dives into the crystal clear water: not, as we might be led to expect, to experience a mystical union with nature, but to test the quality of the rock.

In his ironic approach, Richler rejects the emotional potential of the pastoral scene, eliminating almost all traces of sentimental romance. It is part of this pervading irony that only the reader is fully aware of Duddy's business transactions as a gradual destruction not simply of the idyllic landscape but at the same time of the pastoral way of life. In each of the novel's four parts, Duddy secretly visits the lake to make sure that his grand scheme has remained undetected. He succeeds, but not quite: for while the seasons change, nature turns more and more hostile. When Duddy inspects his lake in winter (Pt. 2, Ch. 13), he almost freezes to death before reaching his car. At his next visit in autumn (Pt. 3, Ch. 7), Duddy sees the site already through the eyes of the entrepreneur. When he finally and proudly presents his newly acquired property to his family (Pt. 4, Ch. 2), the pastoral scenery has disappeared with a vengeance: Duddy is a man with land now — but his grandfather turns away in disgust.

The disappearance of the *locus amoenus*, like the gradual decay of the beautiful portrait in Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray*, symbolizes the loss of innocence as the price of experience and success. Although Richler interprets this loss by no means as entirely negative, the victory of human activity over pastoral contemplation, the delight in hearing the "crash of falling pines" — to use Wilson's image — appears as a thoroughly ambiguous achievement.

Richler's ironic allusions to the pastoral tradition distinguish *Duddy Kravitz* from MacLennan's novel. It is perhaps not by chance that Duddy's epileptic friend who becomes a paraplegic after a car accident indirectly caused by Duddy, is called Virgil Roseboro. The pastoral ideal, first unfolded in Virgil's eclogues, is

severely damaged. Richler's novel no longer aims at setting the scene for a bucolic dream world but analyzes the reason behind its diminished value.

The lonely Lac St. Pierre and the transformation it has to undergo are complex symbols. Their connotations are carefully controlled by a narrator who makes sure that the fundamental gap between ideal and real is never bridged. Under the prevailing circumstances, he suggests, the price man has to pay for making his vision come true is the distortion of the vision itself.

**F**ORMULA WRITING," which in Northrop Frye's view formed the bulk of nineteenth-century literature in Canada, was characterized by the imitation or adaptation of existing narrative patterns, and by their application to domestic characters, domestic themes and domestic scenery. The formal independence which Canadian writers have been gaining since the 1950's, by contrast, is quite often accompanied by a greater freedom in the choice of setting. This, in turn, means a wider scope in the handling of pastoral themes.

The work of Margaret Laurence offers numerous examples of both the "local colour" pastoral and the pastoral as a narrative device for exploring the "fantastic" aspects of reality. A well known example of the first kind is the cannery episode in *The Stone Angel* (1964), in which the biblical meeting between Hagar and Joseph (one of the archetypal pastoral encounters in world literature) serves as background for Hagar Shipley's Arcadian vision in a starkly realistic setting.

The second type emerges most strikingly in Margaret Laurence's collection of short stories, *The Tomorrow-Tamer*, published in 1963. In "The Perfume Sea" the threatened idyll is located halfway between reality and fantasy, between public life and private sphere, between geographical points and political factions. Set in West Africa during the turbulent period of transition from colonialism to independence, the story centres on two European expatriates of dubious extraction: the hair-dresser Mr. Archipelago — a sadder but a wiser man than his famous colleague Jefferson Thorpe in Leacock's story — and the girl Doree, his shop assistant. In the rapidly changing situation where power is shifting from white to black, both are outsiders and are forced to manoeuvre rather carefully.

Both seek refuge in Archipelago's house and garden. Within the house, the inhabitants are sheltered from the real world and from the confusing problems which a change of clientele poses for a fashionable ladies' hairdresser. The house and its exuberantly growing garden are shown as a secular Eden, as a spatial equivalent of man's desire for peace in the face of dangerous upheavals which he cannot hope to prevent. Although Archipelago's very name suggests green isles in the sea of misery, he is far from acting as an isolated hero in the romantic tradition. Instead, Archipelago represents the classical tradition of retirement to the country. Probably without being aware of it, he follows Horace's advice, and reviews the world from

a safe distance without getting involved. The rural ideal of the quiet country life had been revived by eighteenth-century novelists such as Henry Fielding. In what might well be an allusion to Mr. Wilson's "little garden," where Joseph Andrews and Parson Adams are invited to rest, Archipelago's garden is described as a *hortus conclusus*:

A large green house by the shore sheltered Mr. Archipelago. . . . It was off by itself, on a jut of land overlooking a small bay. The sprawling overgrown garden was surrounded by a high green wall which enabled Mr. Archipelago in the late afternoons to work outside clad only in his underwear and a round white linen hat.

The pastoral sphere is limited in more than one way. While in the eighteenth-century novel the *locus amoenus* was allowed to exist side by side with reality, in modern narrative the fantastical and allegorical overtones must be carefully controlled so as not to interfere with the reader's demand for a plausibly motivated plot. Thus, Archipelago's escapist private world, even if it is credible enough, is a comic pastoral. The hairdresser in his hat and underwear, who lets a fascinated Doree sniff at his countless scent bottles, which carry her away to the "perfume sea" of exotic smells and illusions, is a grotesque figure with tragic elements.

The tragic undertone derives from the vulnerability of the precarious idyll. Both protagonists are aware that their happiness is poised at the edge of destruction because they want to keep it stable but "outside the green wall . . . events occurred." Eventually they will have to give up the garden, not only because the world outside might find out about it but also because their privacy lacks vitality: it is sterile, if dignified; just like the sensitive flower in the garden which closes at the slightest touch, "it was not to be bribed or cajoled; it had dignity."

Margaret Laurence's version of the threatened idyll is by no means restricted to the description of the secluded garden, and to the characterization of the central figures who cultivate it. The dominant theme — a fundamental antagonism between the real and the ideal, between the world as it is and as it should be — is borne out by the structure of the plot. The idyllic garden scene is placed exactly in the middle between "events": the introductory episode dealing with the end of the colonial era, and the closing one describing the beginning of the new age, and Archipelago's brilliant survival under the new sign "African Ladies a Specialty." Just as his house occupies a central position, being situated halfway between the African and the European quarters, the realm of imagination is wedged in between stretches of inexorable historical developments.

In "The Perfume Sea," the paradox of pastoral conventions in a modern narrative context is deliberately faced rather than explained away. Unlike Leacock, Margaret Laurence doesn't camouflage the utopian element of the idyll by an anachronistic, if subtly ironic adherence to the style and values of the eighteenth century, or by using traditional topoi to intensify an emotional impression, as

MacLennan does in his novels. Instead, she keeps the pastoral scene in full view of the reader as a middle ground between the extremes. At the same time, she marks it as a possible way of experiencing reality. Archipelago's pastoral world picture is rendered with sympathy, but held at a critical distance: while it may triumph for a moment or two over "progress," it cannot stop it.

**I**N RECENT YEARS, THE INFLUENCE of the pastoral tradition on Canadian fiction in English seems to have increased rather than dwindled. A new generation of writers employs the tension between the harmony and self-sufficiency of the idyllic scene, and its utopian quality, in order to explore new areas of reality. Margaret Laurence's technique of using the pastoral as a metaphor of psychological states is further developed in the work of Hugh Hood. In his short stories, the protagonists are frequently confronted with idyllic "epiphanies": for a fleeting moment all the problems of their non-descript or solitary existence appear to be solved (e.g., in "A Solitary Ewe" and "The Tolstoy Pitch").

Pastoral patterns are particularly obvious in "Getting to Williamstown" where a dying narrator reviews his past life.<sup>5</sup> Various stages of his career drift by, evoked in a stream-of-consciousness technique, while he lies in a hospital bed. What at first appears as an extremely successful business career is gradually revealed as the failure to put into practice the essentially pastoral dream of a retired life in the country.

Again the idyll is located exactly: in retrospect, a peaceful country town in southern Ontario emerges as the quintessential place of an earthly paradise — paradoxically within easy reach all his life but yet strangely inaccessible; the banal events of life intervene, his wife objects to a dull life outside Montreal, the children quarrel, his own career demands priority.

Hood manages to turn this fairly conventional dilemma into a complex image of man's inescapable but forever unsatisfactory task of balancing ideal and reality. On the face of it, the *locus amoenus* is presented in full detail: the family leaving the motorway and crossing the river, with a sunny sky over the peaceful countryside, the desirable white house next to the church just visible through the trees, the old-fashioned village itself. The narrator remembers all that, but it belongs to a past which can never be recovered.

The elusive idyll, apart from contributing to the nostalgic atmosphere, is an emblem of the narrator's mind. It is recreated in a sequence of disjointed fragments by the dying man who confuses past and present. The rapid shift of narrative tenses reflects the frequent transition from factual account to dream vision. About the house he says at one point:

We made up stories about it; it was a little house or an enchanted castle . . . Now

we are coming to Williamstown; the trees are growing plentiful and the children need, they say, a stop. Deep, deep in the countryside.

The stream-of-consciousness emphasizes the unreal yet intense quality of the pastoral vision, while the continuous form adds a sense of timelessness. The desperate look back to an idealized past which is extinct merges with a vision of a promised land of hope just coming into view. The full significance of the idyllic village as "heavenly place" (as it is once called) is never explicitly stated, but metaphorically suggested. The sequence of memoirs stops abruptly with the narrator's arrival at the longed-for place — which at the realistic level indicates his death:

Being carried along the top of the hill and we swoop downwards as trees thicken, a green island, around us, and here at the edge of town I see the white building [i.e., the church] gleaming in the sun under the soft sheen of the tower, one narrow field from town.

This closing image remains ambiguous: is it the crowning illusion or does it point to eventual redemption? No rational explanation is offered; reality and fantasy are balanced. Although the pastoral topos is fully unfolded it is left to speak for itself.

Hood's "Getting to Williamstown" is remarkable for the skillful handling of point of view as well as for the subtle references to romantic motifs. The phrase "a green island" which had slipped into the passage just quoted takes the reader back to the story's Shelleyan motto:

Many a green isle needs must be  
In the deep blue sea of misery.

In MacLennan's *Watch*, Shelley's lines were merely part of the sentimental mood. Here, the reference is less obvious but more to the point. The author actually takes up Shelley's central idea that man's muddled and guilty existence may be redeemed by occasional glimpses of innocence and happiness. It is this hope, Shelley argues, which beyond any reasonable expectations gives man the strength to carry on:

Or the mariner, worn and wan,  
Never thus could voyage on.

As in Shelley's elegy, the sea and island symbolism has very specific connotations in Hood's narrative: it might be called a prose elegy on the meaning of the pastoral dream in a tragic world. From the way this vision is presented in the text, the green island of idyllic bliss is a fleeting moment, equivalent to the uncertainty of any personal belief, but still existing.

The author himself has this impact in mind when he says, about his protagonists in general,

I am interested in the hero as a model of virtue because he is like a redeemer — not

necessarily a Christian redeemer, but a person who unites the godlike and the human and acts perfectly as a God, of course, and also acts perfectly as a man.<sup>6</sup> The pastoral thus functions at yet another, allegorical level. The pastoral hero is an emblem of moral perfection for the very reason that he sticks to his absurd dream — although (or even because) this dream seems to have failed during his lifetime.

Hood's fiction is sometimes praised as descriptive, and classified as "traditional."<sup>7</sup> Such assessments overlook the pervasive importance of the allegorical level. About it, Hood says with characteristic exaggeration:

Everything I write is an allegory, there's no question about that. I figure that I've been teaching more and more the last few years that *The Fairie Queen* is in the centre of literature in English, I think that literature in English is all dream vision, allegory, pastoral, romantic epic.<sup>8</sup>

In "Getting to Williamstown," the tension between reality and pastoral dream works at three superimposed levels: those of actual events, of psychological background, and of moral parable. Hood's idyllic episode links scepticism and hope. The pastoral mode functions as a criticism of reality, just as reality modifies the pastoral dimension.

**I**N CONSIDERING A FEW VARIATIONS of the use of pastoral conventions in modern Canadian fiction, we have moved far away from the Reverend Drone reading Theocritus in the pleasant shadow of his plum tree — away indeed from the pastoral as a separate genre but also away from an analysis of Canadian fiction predominantly in terms of the "Canadian experience."

Judging from the examples, it appears that Canadian fiction, over the past twenty years, has both adopted but added to the pastoral tradition at large; a set of conventional themes has gradually become a non-realistic narrative mode suitable for exploring mythical, psychological, even ideological layers below the empirical surface. This creative process of re-interpretation involves thematic modifications but also structural innovations. It is difficult to explain these changes solely in terms of a national tradition without taking into account comparative aspects.

From this point of view, Frye's attractive hypothesis assuming an *a priori* affinity between Canadian literary experience and the pastoral "myth" would have to be modified — all the more so since Frye's authority has paved the way for the thematic approach which today is favoured in Canadian literature studies. The neglect of formal, structural and comparative aspects has to be seen against the background of literary nationalism and the dawning of a new "Elizabethan age" where works of art are mainly assessed on the basis of what they contribute to the national or cultural "identity."

From a purely literary perspective, however, thematic criticism suffers from a severe drawback in that it seeks, in Frank Davey's words, "above all to define a national culture but chooses to work with materials — literary themes — that are, because of their limited number, international in nature."<sup>9</sup> Davey further points out that in their efforts to single out "typical" themes — man as victim, hostile nature, the reluctant immigrant — critics have occasionally tended to overlook the fact that such themes frequently originate in an experience common to emerging national literatures in general rather than to one particular national tradition.

In trying to show how the pastoral episode in modern Canadian fiction develops older patterns, we have approached the problem of independence and interdependence from a different angle. In a dialectic process of reproduction and innovation, Canadian authors "reconstruct" literary developments: the reduction of the pastoral genre to the pastoral scene, the integration of pastoral topoi into realistic narrative in a more and more complex fashion.

The time lag involved in this process of assimilation is continually decreasing. This becomes evident if one tentatively applies the "telescoping" hypothesis to the periodization of modern Canadian fiction as suggested in the *Literary History of Canada*.<sup>10</sup> Here, William New characterizes the 1950's as the decade of MacLennan, concentrating on the "mimetic representation of ordinary lives." The doomed idyll in *The Watch that Ends the Night* and, to a certain extent, the rejection of pastoral perfection in *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* would seem to fit this formula. On an international scale, it refers to a type of the novel which emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century. In the 1960's, New continues, Canadian fiction shifts to a novel concept of individual experience most powerfully reflected in the psychological realism of Margaret Laurence (and, of course, the increasing influence of Malcolm Lowry's work). We might relate this to the rise of the psychological novel in the 1920's, with the stream-of-consciousness techniques in the novels of James Joyce and Virginia Woolf as the most prominent examples.

As one approaches the 1970's, relationships become less palpable. New claims that in contemporary Canadian fiction "linear narrative [is] giving way to complex artifice; realism [is] losing ground to improvisational modes, to science fiction, to the surreal, the absurd, and the consciously contrived mythic and fabular." Even though the tendency towards "fabulation" is perhaps less marked in Canadian literature than in the literature of the United States, Hugh Hood's short story shows a renewed interest in myth and allegory; it returns also to a straightforward plot and a simple psychology — characteristics of "post-modern" fiction at large.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Daniel Wilson, "Canadian Poetry" (1858); rpt. in *The Search for English-Canadian Literature*, ed. C. Ballstadt (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1975), pp. 16 ff.

- <sup>2</sup> "Conclusion" to the *Literary History of Canada*, ed. C. F. Klinck (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1976), p. 239.
- <sup>3</sup> A useful introduction to the history of pastoral is Renate Boeschstein's *Idylle* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1967).
- <sup>4</sup> "Reflections on Two Decades," *Canadian Literature*, No. 41 (Summer 1969), p. 31.
- <sup>5</sup> In *The Fruitman, the Meatman, and the Manager* (Ottawa: Oberon, 1971).
- <sup>6</sup> Victoria C. Hale, "An Interview with Hugh Hood," *WLWE*, 11, No. 1 (1972), 37.
- <sup>7</sup> See Dennis Duffy, "Grace: The Novels of Hugh Hood," *Canadian Literature*, No. 47 (Winter 1971), 10-25.
- <sup>8</sup> Hale, "Interview," p. 37.
- <sup>9</sup> Frank Davey, "Surviving the Paraphrase," *Canadian Literature*, No. 70 (Autumn 1976), 8.
- <sup>10</sup> William H. New, "Fiction," *Literary History of Canada*, Vol. 3, pp. 233 ff.

## TWO POEMS

*Dale Zieroth*

### FEAR OF FAILURE

Her first time on skis,  
 and the first real snow this winter,  
 she is unhappy with the spotlight, the snow, the very  
 air in her lungs: can't bend her knees  
 perfectly  
 right away — this is Five Years Old and I try to help  
 but the snow seems to be too much for us:  
 she whacks me on the knee  
 ski pole on cold bone  
 and I grab her and she cries  
 and I'm mad now cause I've done that wrong  
 and my record for being the kind of father I want to be  
 is still too few days.  
 And later I try to  
 explain but I must hold too tightly cause she  
 spins away and it's finished for her anyway, she  
 decides to take up skating while I  
 go over the words again: Look  
 Nobody's Good Right Away  
 At Anything  
 printing or putting on clothes or even  
 breathing: it's gotta be shaken out of you.