

ON THE EDGE

Michael Cook's Newfoundland Trilogy

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MICHAEL COOK HAS WEAKNESSES AS A DRAMATIST that have drawn down upon him the obloquy of critics, and it is perhaps as well to consider these first. He thinks of himself basically as a poet, and has explained that plays occur to him not in the form of Aristotelian "action" but poetically as "a series of images, dramatic scenes, and circumstances."¹ The obvious difficulty he has in organizing his work, perhaps his most serious defect as a dramatist, reflects this centrifugal habit of imagination. None of his plays has much conventional plot and all tend to be wordy and overwritten. At one extreme, he uses overlong "realistic" monologues, as in *Quiller* and *Thérèse's Creed*, which reveal the effect of his apprenticeship to radio drama; at the other, he throws heterogeneous materials loosely together in quasi-historical Brechtian² structures with huge casts, like *Colour the Flesh the Colour of Dust*, *The Gaydon Chronicles*, and *On the Rim of the Curve*, where social caricature, historical or regional realism, and poetical philosophizing all clash. He compensates for his plays' verbosity with rather obvious stage effects: either by the detailed recreations of everyday routines — cooking, washing, net making — or by vaudevillean songs, dances, and allegorical tableaux, according to whether the bias of a particular play is realistic or presentational. His work can be thematically confusing because it combines an almost reflex sympathy for any underdog with a more existentialist concern with the strain isolation imposes on human relationships. And these imprecisions are reflected in unevennesses of rhetoric. Cook is capable of genuine poetic intensity, but too frequently he falls into philosophical overexplicitness or poetical overwriting, both of which can strain characterization.

Nevertheless, Michael Cook remains an important dramatist, because beneath the technical crudities, at the poetic heart of his work, lies an intensely imagined experience of Newfoundland life, presented with such integrity that at its best it rises to comment on the human condition.

Paradoxically, Cook is helped in this because he is not a Newfoundlander by birth, but a Briton of Anglo-Irish descent who arrived in Canada as recently as 1965.³ Thus he brings to Newfoundland an outsider's eye like that of the original settlers. What he sees is the "survival" experience which critics such as Northrop

Frye and Margaret Atwood have argued is the central Canadian literary theme: confrontation with a relentlessly hostile environment which undermines all confidence in human institutions and even in identity itself. By its very nature drama finds it more difficult to represent this experience than poetry or the novel because it can only represent reactions to the experience, not the confrontation itself, and Cook is perhaps the most successful dramatist so far in conveying the experience in stage terms. He says specifically that our drama needs

to try and come to terms with the landscape, the environment, and the people like any stranger walking new in the land. Like any immigrant, either now or four hundred years ago. . . . we have never developed a theatre of character in conflict with environment. Which also implies, the environment being what it is, a theatre inhabited by Gods and Heroes.⁴

Hence one of his attractions to historical drama, to which he says he returns in order to reactivate his own original experiences.⁵

Newfoundland seems to Cook "the last human frontier,"⁶ and it has given his work "focal identity" because he found surviving there a tragic and heroic individualism: "a way of life in which individuals struggle with timeless questions of worth and identity against an environment which would kill them if it could."⁷ Newfoundland experience strikes him as "essentially Greek, profoundly tragic,"⁸ with

a kind of mythic quality, a kind of elemental quality, very primitive, very brutal, and yet with immense community and tribal strength which we have just about lost everywhere else.⁹

"The experience of such a people," he says in his 1974 *C.T.R.* interview,

teeters between primitive suffering and defiant joy. Their expression is essentially artistic, a Satanic struggle to impose order upon experience rendered frequently chaotic by a blind and savage nature.

This "essentially artistic" mode of life takes several forms. It can be manifest in the rituals of work and celebration of *The Head, Guts and Sound-bone Dance*, or in the very houses themselves, as climactically in *Jacob's Wake*:

Their craft is manifest in the work of their hands, the boats made from wood, cut and hauled laboriously during the dark winter months; the houses whose simple design often deceives visitors, for they are built with absolute economy . . . in addition to acting as the prow of the ship in the teeth of Atlantic gales.

But pre-eminently for Cook, artistry is to be found in the Newfoundlanders' retention of "a language colourful, new, musical, scatalogical . . . full of the power of ancient metaphors."¹⁰

Experience on this primitive, existential plane appeals, Cook thinks, to men who have come to realize that "somewhere in the transition between rural and industrial man they left behind a portion of their souls."¹¹ His main purpose as a play-

wright is thus twofold: to reaffirm the validity of the traditional Newfoundland way of life, while also exploring the tragic cost of such “Satanic” assertions of order, and, at the same time, to record its demise beneath the pressures of a shallow, regimented, urbanized civilization with which Cook has little patience. He has explored these themes in some forty plays,¹² but his strengths and weaknesses and the range of his technique can be discovered by looking in some detail at his so-called “Newfoundland Trilogy” — *Colour the Flesh the Colour of Dust* (1972), *The Head, Guts, and Sound-bone Dance* (1973), and *Jacob’s Wake* (1975) — recognizing, however, that they are not strictly a trilogy at all, since there is no continuity of action or characters between them and they are written in wholly different modes. (Indeed, Cook seems originally to have envisaged *Colour* as the second play of the trilogy, to be preceded by a play on Sir Humphrey Gilbert which eventually became *On the Rim of the Curve*.¹³) What binds the plays together is their common concern with unmediated experience “on the edge of the world.”¹⁴

COLOUR THE FLESH THE COLOUR OF DUST was Cook’s first stage play and is something of a mess. Ostensibly it is a Brechtian “epic” about the surrender of St. John’s to the French in 1762 and its subsequent recapture by the English. However, as the “Spokesman” character in the plays points out, “Historically, this has been a pretty inaccurate play.” Its interest lies in Cook’s reactions to Newfoundland, but the overall effect is incoherent because he has tried to cram too much into it without a clear sense of priorities.

Perhaps the simplest element — the one that the reviewers seized on with relief — is the broad satire directed against a hypocritical merchant called Tupper and his ally, magistrate Neal, who manipulate the political situation for their own advantage (“Wars may come and wars may go, Tupper . . . but trade . . .”). This concentrates in two main scenes. In Act I Tupper adulterates his flour with sawdust only to discover that he must now purify it again in order not to antagonize the French, and in Act II he tries to learn French in order to trade with the new garrison and insists on teaching his shopboy what he does not know himself. But the comedy of these situations is complicated by other elements. In the first act a more savage level of satire comes into play when Tupper cheats the pathetic Mrs. McDonald whose family is starving, and justifies himself with selfconsciously villainous irony:

It wouldn’t be right now, for me to give you something and you worrying about whether you’d ever pay it back. . . . it’s a terrible thing in these times to have a working conscience, Mrs. McDonald; and I’m afraid yours will drive you to the grave.

Later we hear that Mrs. McDonald is dead. Moreover, in each scene there is an

episode with the shopboy in which the action overlaps with another, more complicated concern of the play. In a dumbshow at the end of the flour scene the Boy encourages starving urchins to loot his master's stores, and during the French lesson in Act II he reveals an unexpected (and implausible) command of idiomatic French and menaces his master with a knife. Both incidents remain comic within the context of the scenes, but their suggestion of hidden violence relates also to a more complex aspect of the play — its presentation of the populace of St. John's, towards whom Cook's attitude seems ambiguous.

Basically, *Colour the Flesh* conveys a sympathetic awareness that history does not interest or affect ordinary people except for the worse. Their concern is always for survival: whichever side governs, the drudgery of work must go on; social inequalities will continue; at most, war provides a break in bleak monotony and perhaps the chance of a cathartic outburst of violence. This attitude is made explicit in speeches by the Spokesman. He refuses the Lieutenant's challenge to personal combat in Act I (and encourages the mob to overwhelm him) with the explanation,

You need time and money to uphold honour. And you need to think of yourself as being someone with a place in life, as having a situation, you see. But us now . . . we're scum. . . .

And in Act II he elaborates on this directly to the audience in a speech which seems to have been influenced by the Common Man of Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons*, claiming that concern for survival represents the natural truth of humanity: "We are the nature you try to subvert, divert, convert; and in general screw up in a lot of ways."

This basic attitude is complicated and confused by several factors. Reminders of the Irish antecedents of the populace, for example, while serving to emphasize the gap between them and their governors, tend to shortcircuit their more basic position by popular jokes against the English, or to suggest that ambiguities in their attitude are typically and exclusively Irish. Thus, the Woman criticizes their adulation of her lover Sean, who has already been hanged at the opening of the play for distributing stolen bread, by complaining that

you made a hero of a fool and you didn't lift a finger. . . . Jesus Christ, isn't that Ireland all over . . . To make heroes of fools and every fool a hero.

In fact, the crowd shows no tendency at all to foolish heroics, so her generalization is confusing.

The crowd's actual behaviour also has its contradictions. The idea that ordinary people have no stake in war is challenged by a scene in which a deputation of loyal fishermen try to persuade the demoralized Captain to defend St. John's. Yet Cook also recognizes a viciously destructive side to the populace, an appetite for senseless violence. The Woman tells how her trapper husband gratuitously killed an inoffen-

sive Indian (“and it seemed as if nothing had happened”);¹⁵ and the play presents in sadistic detail what Cook’s stage direction calls the “communal orgasm” of the mob’s killing of an English soldier, the nihilism of which is later directed at the audience itself when the Spokesman threatens that “one day, we’ll kill you all. Because there’ll be nothing else left to do.”

The murder is explained (a little too glibly) by one of the soldier’s comrades: “In a funny way, Willie, you’ve saved us all . . . I mean . . . it was like you were a bleeding sacrifice . . .,” and its specifically sexual nature — impalement through the groin with a hook — seems intended to reflect relationships between potency and survival, imperialism and sexual exploitation that Cook has not really managed to make clear. Respect for a vitality that is destructive yet at the same time necessary for survival is an important motif in Cook’s tragic vision, but in *Colour the Flesh* he is not sufficiently in command of its contradictory implications.

A result of this is that the play’s imaginative force is concentrated on the negative aspect of Newfoundland experience — the spiritual defeat created by life on a barren rock hemmed in by the sea, where, as the Captain explains, nothing human seems able to endure:

People build. Then fire. Or drowning. Or famine. Or disease. Or just . . . failure of the spirit. The thin scrub marches back across the cleared land . . . The flake rots into the sea . . . I tell you nothing will be remembered here . . . That people will be born and live and die and their passage will go unnoticed. That their build-ings will fall and rot back to the land. That their history will die in their children. . . . It belongs to the bottom of the sea . . . to secrecy and silence.

The play shows this spiritual demoralization in various ways. At its simplest it is seen in the British soldiers of the opening scene, who have lost all hope for the future and all pride in their profession, yet at the same time hate the pointless brutality they have fallen into. More thoroughly, this state of mind is explored in the characterization of Captain Gross, the garrison commander. Gross tells Lieutenant Mannon that he was just as keen for “law” and “honour” as the Lieutenant once, “But this rock now . . . something in it defeats the spirit.” Squalor, insubordination, separation from his family, sexual infidelity, a growing sense of isolation, the harshness of the land, and the drink with which he has tried to dull his sensibility, have eaten away his self-respect.

At first the remnants of the man he was are reflected in a rather dandyish, epigrammatic turn of speech, reminiscent of Shaw’s General Burgoyne: “Honour is an expensive luxury, reserved for naval battles and campaigns mounted for Imperial gain”; but when a whore breaks in to shame him with her scolding, this brittle elegance snaps and Gross drops abruptly into a more symbolic mode of speech: “I see icebergs in my sleep. All the time.” The switch of rhetorical levels is shocking but quite deliberate: it reflects Gross’s surrender to a different plane of experience; and this poetic style becomes his norm for the rest of the play. At

times it seems a bit selfconscious, as when he answers Tupper, who has said he tries to avoid the sea:

But we are at sea, Tupper. At this moment . . . Can't you hear it? We're adrift, man. Helpless. The whales and ice thrash about us. Without a rudder, what can a man do? Drifts, Tupper. Only his head above the wave. Limbs, loins . . . ice cold . . .

— where poetry and dandyism seem to mix. But this, too, may be deliberate, since there is always a certain posing quality in Gross, a need to have his situation appreciable by others.

Gross's speeches play a large part in establishing the special Newfoundland *angst* of *Colour the Flesh*, as in the lines already quoted where he describes his pain at human impermanence, evoking despair in terms of the environment that caused it; and in that particular scene, which is a key one, the setting strengthens the link, because Gross speaks the lines to the Lieutenant when the two meet in a fog. Like the tattered uniform that he insists on wearing even after St. John's has been recaptured, the fog becomes a conscious symbol for the Captain. It represents his sense of isolation and spiritual drift, but at the same time, as he recognizes, it provides comfort by insulating him from reality ("The fog, I find, always makes life more bearable"); moreover, it also leads to greater self-knowledge ("a man learns things walking alone in the fog"), since it is in the fog that he recognizes that the seed of his collapse was already in him before he came to Newfoundland: "[My spirit] was defeated before I got here."

What that seed was is illustrated by his reasons for not defending St. John's. His initial explanation, that the garrison is outnumbered, is immediately (and a little too patly) contradicted by the arrival of the contingent of loyal fishermen. This drives him back to the real reason, his inability to take moral responsibility for the loss of life that a battle will entail. Our reaction to this is meant to be ambivalent. Gross's reluctance to take life agrees with the play's conclusion that just being alive, mere existence, is man's basic value; but it also relates to the idea, recurrent in Cook's drama, that feelings of humanity may be weakness in a savage environment — a point the Lieutenant's Woman later states explicitly. The play returns to a similar ambivalence at the end, when Gross tries to comfort the Woman for the Lieutenant's death by emphasizing the fact that she and the child she carries are still alive. This is very close to the Woman's own position, yet she rejects the Captain's support because from it he extrapolates a sentimental justification for his own collapse, appealing to authorities the Woman does not recognize: "I will tell them that you live here. . . . That I did what I did because you live here." As in his pathetic consolation that the official report of the debacle will secure for him some measure of remembrance, Gross shies away from the isolation of his position. He cannot dispense with an external source of notice and justification, even if it condemns him.

The Captain's breakdown is interestingly complex but not quite clearly worked out, and as he is not the play's protagonist, he is slightly offcentre in our interest anyway. Potentially more interesting than Gross, though even less developed, is the character of Lieutenant Mannon. He, too, feels the isolation of their position:

We are stranded on some island at the edge of time. There's the sea. And the fog. . . . We can't gentle it in any way . . . impose order or a universal design upon it. . . . Ultimately we respond to the ferocity of the sea. And the impermanence of life.

His hobnobbing with the common soldiers in scene one suggests that this experience has already begun to corrupt the Lieutenant's concern for "spit and polish," but the challenge of the French invasion apparently revitalizes his sense of "duty" and "honour." During the action, however, he discovers that he does not believe in these values for their own sake but because, without them, he, too, would face a moral collapse: "It's all I've got, see. Certain loyalties. Certain obligations and contracts." The strained nature of such ideals forces him into unnecessary rashness and falsifies his relationship with the Woman. Significantly, at the end he is shot in the back by one of his own men. A major flaw in the dramaturgy is that the reason for this killing is never made explicit, but there are sufficient hints for us to assume that it must be because of the pressure that the Lieutenant's idealism puts on others, a certain self-serving quality in his "honour" that Cook would later develop more fully in the monomaniacal skippers of *The Head, Guts, and Sound-bone Dance* and *Jacob's Wake*.

Cook explores the nature of the Lieutenant's failure through his love for the Woman, who began the play mourning for the hanged Sean, another "fool" killed for resisting things as they are. The affair has been condemned as a misleading cliché,¹⁶ but it seems to me quite central to Cook's purpose. At one level, it can be seen as a further stage in the Lieutenant's corruption, since, like Captain Gross and the common soldier, he is betraying the wife he left behind. Certainly, the Captain associates the Lieutenant's idealism with sexual guilt: "It's your conscience then and not our impossible position that's exciting you . . ."; and the Lieutenant himself admits he is tempted to settle down as a Newfoundlander, but recoils from the "rot" he thinks this will involve. More complex than this suggestion of corruption is the confrontation the love affair establishes between rival alternatives to the Captain's surrender to despair, nicely emblemized in a tableau where the Woman, having rescued the Lieutenant from the mob, holds him prisoner by a noose around the neck.

The Woman says she is attracted to the Lieutenant by two factors: by "the life that runs in my loins" (in contrast to Gross's image of frozen loins, cited earlier), but also by an element she sees in him that she calls "dignity," which he shares with her previous lover, Sean: "You have been gifted with a sense of yourself that nothing can break . . . Sean had that."

It turns out that she is wrong: the Lieutenant relies on the external order of “honour,” not the internal strength of “dignity.” After she finds she is pregnant, this leads the Woman to retreat to the other, more basic need to “be.” She now condemns her previous “humanity” because “It’s not possible to live very long once you accept that” — a sentiment adopted more cynically in the Magistrate’s advice about controlling the populace: “No matter how much they hate you — at the moment of violence, weaken . . . be generous . . . it destroys the flame of their spirit.” The Woman pleads for the value of mere existence (“You want to begin and end things . . . we exist”). In contrast to Gross’s reliance on his written report, she insists that her unborn child will be “the only testament we can scribble on”; and her position is summed up with the simple, almost banal comment: “the bravest people I know are the ones who endure.”

This is the stoic note on which the play concludes, though not without some further nuances. *Colour the Flesh* ends as it began with the Woman mourning a dead lover, but whereas the first death was emblemized by a tableau in which she cradled Sean’s body like a *pietà*, at the conclusion of the play the stage direction tells us she hugs her pregnant belly: an image of life has replaced the opening image of death. She comments to the dead Lieutenant:

You were nothing to anyone, but me; and your sense of honour, your King and Country. Now you’re dead. And the honour of the King and Country lie dead with you. And there’s only me left . . . me and him . . . me and her . . . what’s it matter?

This is an affirmation, if a very bare one; but “What’s it matter?” is ambiguous, meaning either “What does it matter whether the child be a boy or a girl?” or, more bleakly, “What does it matter that the child and I survive?” This shadowing even of stoicism is also reflected in her repudiation of the Captain’s attempts to console her because “there’s life in you yet”; and is expressed in the “Woman’s Song” that gives the play its title and is returned to at the end:

But to you I gave
as give I must
to colour the flesh
the colour of dust
But it’s a fool
who doesn’t trust
to give himself
because he must.

Dust colours the flesh; love ends in death. Nevertheless, it is foolish to deny them.

As a work of art *Colour the Flesh* is exasperating yet memorable. There are striking scenes, passages of vividly evocative poetry, and some shrewd insights into behaviour; but the overall structure is incoherent, as Cook himself recognizes (“*Colour the Flesh* is a lousily structured play”¹⁷). The presentational elements — the Spokesman’s address to the crowd and a voice-over reading of the official

report of the surrender (which was cut in production) — are not adequate to establish a truly “epic” mode; the songs can be tangible (as in the ballad of “Old Noll Cromwell”) and sink sometimes to pretentious doggerel; the rhetoric is uncertain, with no attempt at the Newfoundland dialect used so effectively in the other two plays of the trilogy; and the symbols of the hanged man, the fog, and the *pietà* (made more explicit in the original draft by comparisons to Christ, the Romans, and Mary) are all rather too obvious.

Nevertheless, for all its faults, *Colour the Flesh* stays stubbornly in the mind because it does manage to convey Cook’s intuition of a double-edged vitality in existence itself, destructive yet enduring, and his sense that this may be our last defence against spiritual collapse. These intuitions are developed further in *The Head, Guts, and Sound-bone Dance*, which is his most powerful stage play to date.

WHEREAS *Colour the Dust* is very loosely organized, *Dance* has a form that is almost perfectly suited to its theme. At its core is the same harsh Newfoundland experience, but confrontation with it is now more active and heroic. Moreover, the focus has been shifted to the tragic price exacted for such heroism, and the main threat is no longer nature itself but the modern world that renders heroism obsolete. Cook summarizes the plot as “Two old men trying to keep the past alive to the exclusion of the rest of the world.”¹⁸

The action centres on a Newfoundland fisherman, Skipper Pete, an “Ancient leader of a savage pack with the instincts still there but the ability in pitiful repair,”¹⁹ who in his “splitting room” on a fishing stage jutting into the Atlantic tries to keep tradition alive by remembering past glories and ritualistically making preparations for “one more trip.” Pete stands uncompromisingly for

The old way. The only way. The proper way to do things. Greet the day at cock-crow. The sea, no matter what the weather. Stack the gear. Mend the nets. Make the killick [a stone anchor]. Keep the store in order. There’s nothing without it.

His son-in-law, Uncle John, once the cook on the Skipper’s fishing boat, aids him, and so does his simple-minded son, Absalom, a sixty-year-old who is the only one of the three still physically able to go fishing. For most of the play, John’s wife tries unavailingly to free her husband from the Skipper’s domination, until a fatal accident convinces him she is right.

Our attitude to the Skipper is contradictory. He is admirable in his intransigent insistence on natural truths that lie beneath the surface of contemporary society; but, at the same time, he is a monomaniac like Melville’s Ahab,²⁰ who refuses to recognize change or alternative styles of life and is prepared to sacrifice everyone to his own stark vision. Though in the past he was famous for never losing a man, Uncle John accuses him of tyrannizing over his crews for self-aggrandizement:

You saved 'em alright. But not to stand up. Not to walk the world. Crawl! Ye made 'em crawl. Ye made me crawl. . . . We escaped the rule of others. And exchanged it for the rule of our own kind . . .

and he reminds the Skipper that (like the Magistrate in *Colour the Flesh*) he never showed humanity except to disarm men on the brink of mutiny. This same brutal imposition of personality continues into the present with the Skipper's vendetta against seagulls; his sneer that, if John had gone to the war, "You'd never have survived. Unless I was with you"; and, more comically, with his insistence that his son-in-law must urinate decently, as though he were still on board his ship. Most strikingly, it is shown in the elaborate work rituals — preparing equipment, cleaning, salting, and cooking the fish, and careful cleaning up afterwards — that he enforces before he will allow his companions to celebrate, also ritualistically, his son Absalom's "end of voyage" and miserably small catch.

The Skipper sees these rigid codes as necessary to impose order upon chaos:

I 'low the sea's a big place. Now a man's a small place. You've got to have order. Decency. There 'as to be a way of doing things. A man's way. That's why we're here, isn't it? They's only we left.

And according to the opening stage direction, this tension should be reflected in the play's set. The "splitting room" is crammed with

an immense variety of gear representing man, and fish and sea in a tottering, near derelict place, and yet also [revealing], as we become accustomed to it, an almost fanatical sense of order.

The egotism of the Skipper's need to impose order is qualified, however, by a strain of mysticism in him. He holds that it is useless to demand meaning, as Uncle John does at one point; life can only be accepted: "It doesn't matter what it means. It's enough that it's there." Fishermen in the past knew their proper place in nature: "We understood each other — the sea, the cold, and the dogfish, and the sculpin and the shark and the whale. They knew us and we knew they. . . ."

And in spite of the fish's disappearance, Skipper Pete believes — or wishes to believe — that this state of things will return, ousting the modern world of relief, welfare, and education, for which he has total contempt: "We waits. . . . And one day, they'll come back in their t'ousands. . . . They's waiting for the old days like we is."

These two sides to his attitude — the "Satanic" compulsion to an order based on egotism and his mystique of man's relation to nature — are given religious overtones, which are handled much more skilfully than the hanged man and *pietà* devices of *Colour the Flesh*. On the surface, the Skipper is an intolerantly conservative Catholic who will not attend his sister-in-law's funeral because it is to be held in a Pentecostal church, nor welcome the visiting bishop because he has come by car instead of boat and the traditional floral arches have not been built

to welcome him. The Skipper's orthodoxy is wholly superficial, however. He warns Uncle John that "God is not merciful. Don't ye ever forgit that," and seems to substitute his own authority for the bishop's when he defends the sternness of his regime by claiming "I made an arch for ye." When the Skipper boasts of never changing a habit or opinion, Uncle John replies with irony: "You and the Pope 'as got something in common after all then, Skipper . . .," and John's wife pushes the implications of this a stage further when she says her father is "Only one breath away from God or the Devil himself." On the other hand, the Skipper's reaction to the news of young Jimmy Fogarty's death is wholly pagan and fatalistic, deifying not himself but the sea: "The sea wanted him. Old Molly. She took him in her good time. . . ."

The set reflects this pantheism. The left wall of the "splitting room" has "a ragged window — once a church window, saved from an abandoned church somewhere and put to use by a crude insertion into the room . . .," and it is through this window that the Skipper gazes as he rhapsodizes about the past and envisions its return. At the end, when he is left alone, the setting sun dies through it to conclude the play.

For a while, with memories, work rituals, drink, and snatches of song, the Skipper and his two companions manage to create their own reality within the shack, culminating in the drunken dance of triumph that gives the play its title. A stage direction tells us that during this dance "For a moment they are all one. All free"; and one implication of the title is, of course, the celebration of a sense of life in the raw, a dance of fundamentals. But as the title also implies, it is a dance of discarded remnants as well, the pieces of the fish that are thrown away: the dance is ultimately a dance of death. All along, the emphasis on heroic individualism has been balanced by a recognition of the sterility of the Skipper's way of life. His is a world with no place for women or children. Though his sister-in-law, we hear, was good to the family, Skipper Pete has no intention of attending her funeral; and he despises his daughter, Uncle John's wife, partly because he wanted to father only sons, but also because he realizes she is a bitter rival for John's loyalty, without which he cannot keep his vision alive: "Memories ain't no good unless you can see someone else working out the same ones."

Uncle John and his wife have only daughters themselves, their son having been stillborn; and John blames this on the Skipper, who, he claims, killed their sex-life by his expectations of a grandson. We hear that when the Skipper's own son, Absalom, was young, his father sent him back into a fifteen-below blizzard to gather five more sticks of firewood and, when the boy's horse returned alone, refused to go to look for him because "Ye know ye had to bring 'em up hard or else they wouldn't survive."

Absalom is now retarded, a sixty-year-old with the face of a child, still unable to look his father in the face. When he asks the Skipper to sing, his uncle under-

lines the significance of his name by repeating the psalmist's cry for the son he has destroyed, "Oh Absalom, my son. Absalom. Absalom."

This destructiveness focusses in the action round the death of Jimmy Fogarty, which alters the relationships within the play. When at the end of Act I another child comes to the shed to beg aid for Jimmy, who has fallen off a wharf and cannot swim, the Skipper and Uncle John ignore him, continuing drunkenly to gaze through the church window, discussing a drowning that happened in the past. This callousness looms behind the subsequent celebration of Absalom's catch, as the noise of the search party is heard increasingly outside; and at the end it is Absalom who finds the body and brings it to his father: "Look what I caught by the side of the boat . . . I nivr caught a boy before. What shall I do with him, Father? . . . Can I have him?"

Up to this point Skipper Pete has been insisting that the death must have been fated, that "Old Molly," the sea, touched the boy the day he was born and has taken him in her own good time — "passionately believing what he wants to believe," as the stage direction explains — but confronted by the body in his own son's arms, the tragedy finally touches him:

Absalom is facing Skipper Pete, the dead boy in his arms. The grandson he might have had! Skipper Pete puts out his hand slowly, traces the blind, wet face with his horny hands. Then, he turns, the hand that touched the dead child's face to his throat, as if it is a weight that will choke him.

Uncle John had genuinely not noticed the child's plea, in fact, because the Skipper's arm had kept him turned towards the church window, but now he realizes that Skipper Pete had heard and had deliberately ignored the cry for help. The doubts and rebellions that have worried John throughout the play come to a head, and he breaks at last from his father-in-law's dominion, taking Absalom with him ("he don't know nothing about boys. Only fish"). The play ends with Skipper Pete alone, stubbornly returning to the ritual of his evening chores by lamplight, as the sun dies out in the shack's church window.

Except for the rather forced situation where the child's plea is ignored, *Dance* is remarkably economical and successful in fusing realism and symbolism. Cook admits that the Skipper's disregard of the child's request is "unrealistic," but says "The scene was intended to drive home the Skipper's character";²¹ and the advertisement for a CBC production of the play expands this by explaining that in the Skipper "fatalism reflects an acceptance of tragedy that seems like inhumanity."²² Yet it is less the situation itself that is at fault than the fact that so little of its significance gets into the dialogue. The Skipper's remarks about "Old Molly" emphasize his fatalism retroactively, but his deliberate *willing* of the disaster at the time of the child's plea is left wholly to the actor; the closest the dialogue comes to it is that, at that time, the Skipper and John are discussing the drowning of a young man whose father was restrained from trying to rescue him. Similarly, the

Skipper's *anagnorisis*, when the tragedy of Jimmy Fogarty's death at last strikes home to him, is all in dumbshow; Pete does not speak again after he has seen the body in Absalom's arms.

Apart from this particular incident the ingredients of the play are admirably coherent. The characterization of the four main personages — Skipper Pete, Uncle John, Absalom, and John's wife — is sharply individualized; the set, while realistic, has rich symbolic suggestiveness; sounds-off — the sea itself, the mocking cry of seagulls, the bells for Aunt Alice's funeral, and the encroaching noise of the searchers for Jimmy Fogarty's body — all acquire thematic significance; and the elaborate rituals of preparing equipment, feeding the stove, making tea, cleaning and cooking fish, and preparing a celebratory drink, do not substitute for action, mere visual filler, but reflect the old men's attempt to use routines to recreate the past. This culminates in the grotesque dance, which, like the shanties sung by Pete, absorbs "presentational" techniques into the play's realism yet also carries a level of symbolism. The use of a modified Newfoundland dialect which is sparse, proverbial, coarsely comic, and repetitive, gives a sense of authenticity which can rise effortlessly to poetry — as, to give one brief example, Uncle John's comment that Absalom dreams "Of the mackerel thicker'n on the water than moonlight, whispering together." And the result is a powerful, credible picture of the end of an heroic tradition.

The Head, Guts, and Sound-bone Dance is bracketed by two of Cook's shorter plays, each centring on a character like Skipper Pete, which were written originally for radio but subsequently staged: *Tiln* (1971) a very successful piece which takes the symbolism of *Dance* a step further, and *Quiller* (1975), a less interesting, mainly realistic monologue. A brief comment on these pieces is pertinent before turning to the final play in the trilogy, *Jacob's Wake*.

The setting of *Tiln* is a lighthouse — "a platform on the very edge of space and time" — inhabited by the keeper Tiln, "a crazy old man . . . living on the exposed edge of his soul," who has come to believe that he is God, and by Fern, the dying survivor of a bombed ship from the south (the direction of dangerous civilization where Tiln has refused to go), who with his bible, phonograph, and single record of "Eternal Father, strong to save," has tried for ten years to keep alive some human feeling in Tiln's monomaniacal world. The language of the play is wholly poetic, combining Beckett's stripped down repetitions with lush passages that show a debt to Dylan Thomas:

I, Tiln. God of Light. Of the tilting universe.
 Lord of the bladderwrack and the black sea moss.
 Keeper of the pearled and fishy parables of the sea.
 Master of sailing barns.
 Executioner. Jonah's hangman.

Tiln's rituals to impose order and their eventual undermining by a sense of lost

humanity constitute what action there is. Like Skipper Pete, Tilm wages war against the mocking sea gulls; he ascends and descends his ladder ceremoniously, counting the rungs and pausing on every third step; he decides to light the lamp in a fixed position to blind the gulls, instead of letting it revolve to warn off shipping (“There are no travellers. There are none to save or destroy”); and climactically he refuses Fern’s request to have the burial service read over him, repudiating his appeal “we have been good to each other” (as Pete repudiated his debt to Aunt Alice), tearing his bible and breaking his record of “Eternal Father,” and finally “burying” him still dying in a barrel of salt brine: “You are no martyr but my sacrifice. Me. God Tilm. . . . Tilm giveth. Tilm taketh away. That’s your service.” Once alone again, Tilm finds his isolation unbearable, and the play ends with a tableau like the *pietà* with which *Colour the Flesh* began: Tilm cradling Fern’s head in his arms and sobbing “You’ve cheated me.”

Quiller goes to the opposite, realistic extreme. Apart from very brief incursions from some children and two passing women, it takes the form of an old sea captain’s rambling monologue and hallucinations about the past, lusting after a neighbour woman, waging war against the mocking children (like Pete and Tilm against the gulls), and conducting folksy conversations with God (“Mornin’, Lord. Dis is your servant, Quiller”) and his long-dead wife, Sophie. Its mixture of reminiscence, gossip, simplistic philosophizing, and attempts at earthy humour show a good ear for Newfoundland speech and a compassionate understanding of character, but the piece is too long and too static for the stage, without any of the symbolic excitement of *Tilm*. It does show a new aspect of Cook’s technique, however, which is important in *Jacob’s Wake*.

WHEREAS *Colour the Flesh* is in presentational “epic” form and *Dance*, for all its realistic elements, operates symbolically, in *Jacob’s Wake* Cook relies mainly on contemporary realism. He has said, in fact, that “Of all the plays I’ve written, it’s the one that is most closely based upon the people I know.”²³ Yet this concern for realism is combined with a variant of the Newfoundland experience that is difficult to present realistically. Cook’s object now is apocalyptic. He wishes to convey the destruction of a humanity that has tried to turn its back on nature, evoking

an environment no longer responsive to the timeless bonding between itself and man which makes communion on this earth possible, an environment with the will for destruction to match our own . . . an environment which bred E. J. Pratt’s Titanic sinking iceberg, a vast neolithic structure created for such a time when man’s hubris had made him blind to nature.

An absolutely crucial aspect of the staging, therefore, which Cook emphasizes in

his "Production Notes," is a sense of the steadily increasing storm outside the outport house which is the setting for the play: "It is essential . . . that the storm becomes a living thing, a character, whose presence is always felt, if not actually heard, on the stage."

For most of the play, however, this storm is strictly background for the human failings displayed within the house, where the celebration of Good Friday has brought together three generations of the Blackburn family, who represent successive stages of alienation from nature. The traditional heroic fatalism of Newfoundland is represented by Elijah Blackburn, an old sealing skipper very like Skipper Pete of *Dance*, who lies bedridden upstairs, confusedly mingling past and present as he has his log books read aloud and barks out orders as though he were afloat. Elijah shares the Newfoundland attitude which holds that "A house is a ship. Lights agin the night . . . Some adrift . . . Some foundered, some rotting old hulks full of the memories of men . . . They's no difference."

Like Skipper Pete, he also has a mystic belief that the vanished seals will return and that somehow he will be able to hunt them again: "They'll come back. The swiles'll come back in their t'ousands and when they do, I'll go greet 'em just like in the old days." But his attitude to nature is "Satanic" ("Swiles is bred and killed in Hell, boy"). He defies the storm like Lear in his madness — and his attraction to sealing lies not in the value of the catch but in the excitement of the hunt itself, the risking of one's own life to have the primitive pleasure of killing.

Like Skipper Pete, he scorns his daughter, Mary, an old-maid schoolteacher whom he wishes he had never begotten, and considers her a "poor substitute" for his second son, Jacob, who was lost while hunting. But Elijah is more complex and sensitive than his predecessor. Offsetting his dislike of Mary is his comfortable rapport with his daughter-in-law Rosie; and he is still remorseful over his dead wife's grief for their son, and distressed by her refusal to believe that he did all he could to save him. Indeed, as the title indicates, Elijah's overriding sorrow is the abandonment of Jacob to the ice, a sacrifice that ended the family's capacity to face nature with traditional defiance.

The Skipper's other son, Winston, and Rosie, his wife, are utterly non-heroic but have a capacity for love which provides an alternative to Elijah's pride. This centres on Rosie, whom Cook presents as an almost too perfect Irish-Catholic mother, loving, undemanding, and self-sacrificing.²⁴ Rosie lacks grandchildren, however, and like Elijah mourns the death of a child, a daughter Sarah, who might have carried on her kind of values.

Sarah was also Winston's favourite ("Everytime I gits afflicted with me family I thinks of the one that might have been different"), and her birth galvanized him for once to a courage in defying the elements that reminded Rosie of Elijah: "I never see ye like it. Ye were like a wild man. Like yer fader almost. . . . I believe ye'd 'ave faced the Divil dat night and gone on."

For Winston, life collapsed after his daughter's death ("It was never the same after she died. I doesn't know why . . ."), and he has since been left believing in nothing: "They's nothin', Rosie. Nothin'. They's madness and they's death and they's some who work at it and some who wait for it."

Winston, in fact, is the most complex character in the play, to whom our attitude changes radically. At first he seems merely idle, vulgar, and malicious, drinking heavily, hazing his returned sons, and teasing his spinster sister with indecencies. There is a sense of violence in the man, moreover, which culminates in his ineffectual firing of a shotgun after he hears that his son Alonzo has forged his name. His cry on hearing of this — "My name! 'Tis all I've got left" — reveals the damaged self-respect beneath this coarseness. Winston is an Esau figure, an elder son who is aware he has not satisfied his father's expectations ("I wish sometimes that I could have been the son he wanted"); and his self-contempt emerges movingly in a conversation with his wife late in the second act:

What else could I ha' been, Rosie? What else could I ha' done? . . . It weren't good enough . . . Everything changed afore I knew what to do. The old ones so damned sure . . . Though what about, the Lord knows. And us, Rosie, us . . . Like rats in a trap, with the Welfare as bait. I didn't know what to do, so I didn't try. There didn't seem any p'int.

He drinks and curses to cover this sense of worthlessness: "I drinks because it helps me to forgit where I am and I swears because I like it. It sounds good and it protects me from your [Mary's] kind of literacy." As Cook's note on the use of dialect points out, "Winston is a man of considerable experience and education, both of which he seeks to suppress."

Our sympathy for him grows as we realize this sensitivity and note his tenderness not only for Rosie and the dead Sarah but also for the tragic Mildred Tobin, who froze to death with her illegitimate child when her father turned her out into a storm. Moreover, though he knew the culprit was really his own son Brad, Winston loyally kept this quiet even when gossip fathered the child on himself. Though he has proved a disappointment, the Skipper has a liking for him ("But y'are human. Ye talk to me"), and Winston in return is imaginative enough to appreciate his father despite his feeling of rejection: "I encourage him because beneath that wrinkled old skull and those mad eyes I kin sometimes see a truth about meself that might make some sense o' dying." He therefore resists the move to commit the old man to a mental home, and by the time his sister rejects his offer of reconciliation, throwing beer in his face, our sympathies for the two have switched completely.

In the Blackburns' degeneration Mary has a position between that of Rosie and Winston and that of their children, and our attitude towards her balances exactly our attitude to Winston. Initially, we are sympathetic to her pride in teaching standards, her contempt for her coarse brother and the nephew Alonzo, her opposi-

tion to her father's tyranny and to all the men's exploitation of Rosie's good nature, and the pride she shows in her favourite nephew, Wayne. But gradually the narrowness and lack of generosity in her nature emerge. Laudable independence shades into closefistedness, distaste for sexual coarseness becomes a chilling condemnation of the pathetic Mildred Tobin, and pride in Wayne shows itself possessive and even snobbish, as she exults in the impression they will make riding in his car to church. It is she who is ultimately behind the move to put the Skipper in an asylum — a move that denies the values of both Elijah and Winston — though it is Wayne who is her willing instrument in this treachery, just as he has been responsible for the final breakdown of his brother Brad by getting him dismissed from his parish.

The third generation of Blackburns has degenerated completely from the heroism of the Skipper, in fact: the "time of the seal" has given place to "the day of the dogfish." Winston describes their attitudes to Elijah without illusion: "One of 'em pretends ye don't exist and the other wants to save yer black soul. And the third waits fer yer will."

The eldest, Alonzo, is perhaps slightly less unsympathetic than his brothers. He is mainly what Winston pretends to be: drunken, vulgar, and brutal, forever daring his brothers to fight. He has no intention of accepting the responsibility of marriage but is promiscuous himself and the purveyor of lust to others — the proprietor of a roadhouse where he hires prostitutes as strippers — and the original inciter of Brad's affair with Mary Tobin. With his politician brother Wayne he trades business deals for votes, and to get a motel contract is prepared to commit his grandfather to an asylum by forging his father's signature — a cheat he claims to have performed frequently before. Yet just as 'Lonz is the only brother to retain his Newfoundland accent, so too he has some qualms about committing the Skipper and shows at least a vestige of sympathy for both Elijah and Winston. The second brother, Wayne, has no such traces of humanity. His affection for his Aunt Mary is unhealthily self-centred, and he has used the culture she strove to acquire for him merely to become a dishonest politician. Wayne is the furthest removed from nature of them all. Though he expects to become the Minister of the Environment, he has sold the island's last 50,000 acres of standing timber to the Japanese, and his personality collapses when the government he depends on for his power resigns ("Christ. He's turned to stone"). Most ruined of the three is the youngest son Brad, who is also the first to be destroyed. His guilt for Mildred Tobin has turned him into a religious fanatic, projecting his self-disgust onto others, and harrowed by fiery visions of an imminent last judgment. This collapse began when, as a child, he was maliciously abandoned to raw nature by his brothers — an incident which not only foreshadows his final destruction, when he goes out into the storm to die like Mildred Tobin, but also shows the brothers' complete lack of sympathy for or trust in one another. As 'Lonz states, perhaps

too badly, "There was never any love here, sure . . . We was too busy survivin' to put up with any o' that old foolishness." This lovelessness is reflected in a savage humour that finds its outlet in cheating, hazing and constant malicious joking, like the laughter of the ice which the Skipper swears he heard when Jacob died.

The realism of these family relationships (which have more than a whiff of O'Neill about them) is deepened by religious symbolism. Placing the action on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday not only provides a realistic excuse for the family's reunion but is also meant to relate to Elijah's sacrifice of Jacob on an April 5th many years before. Thus the mourning for Christ is also Jacob's Wake, and their parallelism is driven home by the crucifixion image, borrowed from David Blackwood's striking series of Newfoundland etchings "The Lost Party," in which the Skipper recalls his last sight of his son: "The way dey was, so far away, dey seemed to form a t'in black cross on the ice. Den the ground drift swallowed dem up. . . ." This image is recapitulated later as a premonition of disaster: "'Tis the shape of death, boy. I kin see'n jest like that first time, rising out of the drift, moving across the ice widout a sound, a man like a cross growing up into the sky."

The key names are also significant. The Old Testament Jacob was, of course, the favoured son who wrestled with the angel and who, by fathering twelve sons, established the tribes of Israel; thus Jacob's death is clearly the loss of Elijah's hopes for the future. Similarly, Elijah himself was the Old Testament prophet of doom to Ahab's false gods, and his ascent to heaven in a chariot of fire is probably meant to relate to the Skipper's curious apotheosis at the end of the play. A level of religious awareness is also maintained by the Easter hymns coming over the radio, which the Blackburns occasionally join in. Not only do these incorporate Cook's usual device of song realistically into the play, their sentimental rendering makes a point about the religious shallowness of contemporary society, while the particular relevance of several of them to the sea — "Eternal Father," for example, and John Newton's "Amazing Grace" — deepens the symbolic significance of the action, though that significance is far from being Christian.

As usual in Cook, there is also an attempt to use the set to suggest several levels of response. Wayne's type of society is represented by the blandness of the radio's music and its stilted weather forecasts, which gradually give place to the real thing as the storm increases in violence, screaming round the house and finally overwhelming the radio and the lights. Within the house itself a distinction is established between the ground floor and the bedrooms. On the ground floor the ordinary aspects of outport life are conveyed by realistic conversation and methodical processes of quilting, cooking, drying firewood, playing cards, and even preparing drinks — "a traditional part of the family ritual." The bedroom level, by contrast, is appropriately the realm of vision — Brad's nightmares of the last judgment and the Skipper's reliving of his sons' death and premonitions that the house is a ship drifting to disaster.

At the end these levels are suddenly reversed. While the apparent corpse of the Skipper is visible on his bed above, his "ghost" enters below to take charge of the house like a ship, impressing his son and grandsons as part of the crew, and heading, he says, defiantly into the truth of the storm: "Comes a time. . . . When ye has to steer into the storm and face up to what ye are." There is also the sound of seals, and Elijah exults, "The swales is back. Newfoundland is alive and well and roaring down the ice-pack. . . ."

But then the play ends with nature triumphing in "a blackout and the sound of a cosmic disaster . . . the final release of the insensate fury of nature that has been building throughout the play." When the lights go up, the fragile house is empty save for the death mask of Elijah, and "All fades into the lone quiet crying of a bitter wind."

This conclusion is certainly not "one of the most ludicrous cop-outs in the annals of Canadian theatre," as one reviewer complained.²⁵ Its significance is clear in the context of Cook's other work; he has mingled realism and symbolism in all his plays; and *Jacob's Wake* itself has a persistent symbolic level, with the identification of house and ship repeated many times before the transformation. Nevertheless, the experiment fails: the reversal of levels is too extreme, and the significance of the end remains unclear. Cook himself tacitly admits this when he suggests that, instead of a realistic set, an "acceptable alternative" might be

a stark skeletonized set. . . . as white as bone, stripped of formality, the house equivalent of a stranded hulk of a schooner, only the ribs poking towards an empty sky . . .

thus freeing the director for "an existential interpretation of the play."

The failure is an instructive one, however, because of its very boldness. The dilemma Cook faces as a playwright is that the experience he wishes to convey arises from an only too actual reality — the awesome environment of Newfoundland — which he cannot present on stage. He is forced to convey its significance poetically, through heightened language and stage symbolism, but this has an allegorical effect, removing the experience from the actuality that is its very essence. Only in *The Head, Guts and Sound-bone Dance* has he found a form to fuse these levels, and even there it is at some cost to the realism. *Jacob's Wake* switches between the levels too abruptly; while the "epic" looseness of *Colour the Flesh* allows realism and symbolism to coexist without a proper fusion. Perhaps the problem is insoluble in stage terms; but unless it is solved, Michael Cook's imagination itself remains "on the edge," its undeniable power denied an adequate dramatic form.²⁶

NOTES

¹ *Stage Voices*, ed. Sister Geraldine Anthony (Toronto: Doubleday, 1978), p. 215; see also pp. 211, 222.

- ² John Arden and Robert Bolt are other influences in this direction.
- ³ For an account of Cook's career, see *Canadian Theatre Review*, 16 (Fall 1977), pp. 26-28.
- ⁴ Interview, *Canadian Theatre Review*, 1 (Winter 1974), p. 76.
- ⁵ See Rota Lister, "An Interview with Michael Cook," *Canadian Drama*, 2 (Fall 1976), p. 179.
- ⁶ *Toronto Star*, 9 February 1974.
- ⁷ *Guide to Special Collections, University of Calgary*, 1978, p. 24.
- ⁸ *C.T.R.*, 1, p. 74.
- ⁹ Interview, *York Theatre Journal*, 5 (Spring 1973), p. 52.
- ¹⁰ *Univ. Calgary Guide*, p. 24.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹² For a full list of Cook's work, see *C.T.R.*, 16, pp. 28-31.
- ¹³ *Ottawa Citizen*, 14 October 1972.
- ¹⁴ *C.T.R.*, 1, p. 74.
- ¹⁵ This concern with the savage murder of Indians who had a proper link with nature is the central theme of *On the Rim of the Curve*.
- ¹⁶ By Urjo Kareda, *Toronto Star*, 17 October 1972.
- ¹⁷ *Can. D.*, 2, p. 179.
- ¹⁸ *Saskatoon Leader-Post*, 5 December 1977.
- ¹⁹ Playscript of *The Head, Guts, and Sound-bone Dance* (1973), p. 11; a revised text was published in *C.T.R.*, 1 (1974). The "Sound-bone" is the backbone of a fish.
- ²⁰ Cook makes this comparison himself: *Calgary Herald*, 26 October 1974.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*
- ²² CBC-TV, *First Choice*, 472 (4 October 1974), p. 2.
- ²³ *Stage Voices*, p. 227.
- ²⁴ A fuller portrayal of this type can be found in another of Cook's monologue plays, *Thérèse's Creed*, published in *"Tiln" and Other Plays* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1976).
- ²⁵ Audrey M. Ashley in the *Ottawa Citizen*, 23 July 1975.
- ²⁶ I should like to acknowledge the help of Heather MacCallum and Ronald Bryden in getting the data on which this essay is based.

DÉRACINE

Alexandre L. Amprimoz

this is not your landscape

you knocked
on a wrinkled door
to find time
with a cut wrist