

MEMORY = PAIN

The Haunted World of Philip Child's Fiction

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I wandering down the Road,
... I wandering in and out
Of memory and pain.¹

THE LATE DESMOND PAGEY'S single-paragraph dismissal of the fiction of Philip Child (1898-1978) in the Second Edition of the *Literary History of Canada* remains unchanged from its appearance in the original edition. No one can quarrel with its contention that Child's "skill as a novelist is not quite commensurate with the splendour of his ideals," that "he tends to be too didactic in his fiction" and shows himself "unwilling to rely upon indirection and implication." The trouble with the judgment is that it ignores an entire aspect of Child's fiction of considerable interest to students of the affective and psychological aspects of Canadian literature. An academic often involved in mediating labour-management disputes recently remarked to a group that in his job he was sometimes told the truth, once in a while the whole truth, but never nothing but the truth. So with the *Literary History's* judgment, in that its statement of a single indisputable truth shunts the reader away from some far more interesting ones.

Beyond an occasional review, an M.A. thesis which ignores 20 per cent of the canon,² and a brief treatment of *Village of Souls* (whose setting is New France in the 1640s) in D. G. Jones' *Butterfly on Rock*, Child's fiction has received no extended critical attention.³ Yet Jones' remarks — stressing as they do the mythic, dream-like, Jungian qualities of Child's first novel — indicate the kind of interest his work could generate within a literary ambience marked by *The Manticore* and *Surfacing*. My purpose in this article is neither revisionist nor rehabilitative. I seek only to point out the presence and significance of certain themes running throughout Child's novels⁴ and to demonstrate the degree to which the works' preoccupation with such matters as guilt and suffering, psychic fragmentation and sexual disturbance, provides a literary experience that does not always buttress the Christian humanist message of the books. The optimism and rationalism of Christian humanism is in fact bypassed in favour of a painful reconciliation of warring

elements through the symbolic devices of dreams. Child's is a fiction replete with the stuff of dreams, and by exploration attempts to chart a nighttime of confusion, horror and attempted restoration of calm which lies below the daytime serenity of the novels' overt messages.

THERE ARE MANY WAYS in which guilt shapes the characters and their dilemmas in Child's fiction. His crime novel, *Mr. Ames Against Time*, gives us Mike Ames, son of the title character, who has (wrongly) been found guilty by a jury of the murder of Sol Mower, a racketeer of Satanic *hybris*, himself guilty of all kinds of crimes. Mr. Ames in turn feels guilty because he feels his passive behaviour has been responsible for the poverty that may have driven his son into associating with criminals. Moulton Avery actually is guilty of attempting to murder Mower, though unaware that he didn't succeed, while Smoke, an out-cast and small-time crook, begins to feel guilty not so much for the murder he committed as for his willingness to let the son of a benefactor swing for a crime Smoke committed himself. Of course, the reader expects to find objective guilt (responsibility for misdeeds) in a detective story, but what impresses him here is the extent to which characters experience not only that "true" guilt, but also the guilt of the psychoanalysts: a neurotic acceptance of responsibility for the harm befalling others.

Mr. Ames blames himself for not having been enough of a "success" to have steered Mike away from hanging out with crooks; Mike's sweetheart, Bernie, suffers agonies of conscience because she uses a sexual come-on to try to worm out of Smoke the admission of guilt that may save her lover's life. Smoke in the meantime has been thrown into agonies of shame not only by his memory of the lynching of his father (for an unspecified crime), but through his discovery that he is descended from a notorious family of degenerates like the Jukes or Kallikaks whose miseries gained the harsh attention of social scientists. If this all appears too elaborate for the bare necessities of plot and too sophisticated for the character of a criminal degenerate, then its presence demonstrates all the more the story's absorption in the sense of ineradicable guilt and dishonour. Like Bill Sykes, Smoke is pursued by his dog (whom he has unintentionally maimed) as a reminder of his guilt; he entices the dog into a death by drowning, and almost throws himself off a bridge.

The world in this novel is one of radical corruption. Even though Sol Mower remains a brute of Hitlerian will-to-power, all the major characters enmesh themselves in guilt over his richly-deserved murder. Mr. Ames, we are assured frequently, eventually triumphs through a Ghandi-like force of personal righteousness; though he is old, frail and poor, his faith in Faith enables him to win

through to the truth in a fallen world. Yet that faith, whatever its efficacy, clearly has little basis for existence in view of the facts of this guilt-ridden world.

Guilt permeates Child's best works, *Village of Souls* and *God's Sparrows*, too. For now, recall that Daniel Thatcher, in the latter book, is burdened with sufficient guilt over an accident involving his sister to run away from home; and Jornay, in the former, is so overcome by the knowledge of his cruelty toward one of the women in his life as to accompany a missionary on his travels. Both are members of fictional worlds reflecting in a less obsessive manner the guiltiness of *Mr. Ames*. But to recall these other novels gives rise to the question: Can one rid these characters of their body of guilt?

Though Pacey has described the ideology of Child's fiction as that of Christian humanism, the frailty of that belief (even if it actually exists in the novels) becomes manifest once we consider the means by which guilt can be purged. For the author deals with a post-Christian world in which neither religious liturgies nor private prayers serve any longer as modes of purgation. A culture's attempts to come to grips with this problem lie at the very roots of Western literature. (The question of Aeschylus' *The Libation Bearers* concerns how Orestes can emerge from the rack of the obsessive sense of sin represented by the cosmology of the Eumenides and find a rational, public means for purging guilt.) Child's characters have to make do according to the tenets of secular humanism for their means of release. As anyone can observe from watching Dickens engrafting *John XI*: 25 on to Sydney Carton's final costume-change, these secularist rituals may derive their real punch from their resemblances to the religious ones they have displaced, though they are not presented in that fashion. Thus Smoke, after delivering his confession to a newspaper reporter, finds a burning building and saves a child from it, perishing in the attempt. Lys in *Village of Souls* expiates her former arrogance by tending smallpox-ridden Indians; John Wentworth in *Blow Wind, Come Wrack* atones for a period of academic ease by getting himself involved in counter-spy activities that result in his torture and near-death. While Pratt's *Brébeuf and His Brethren* offers us the ultimate version of the Great-Sufferings-Make-Great-Nations myth, a typical pattern in Child's fiction is to move from a motif of suffering-as-expiation-for-crimes-and-guilt to a practice, as in *Blow Wind*, of suffering-for-its-own-sake ("the smouldering look of one who has a moral ascendancy through having suffered more"). A brief glance at an incident in *God's Sparrows* and a lengthier one at the overall patterns of guilt and expiation in *Day of Wrath* will show the ease with which suffering comes to be its own justification.

At a World War I recruiting rally depicted in *God's Sparrows*, a jelly-bellied-flag-flapper delivers a tissue of clichés topped off by a gem of the colonial mentality. He rattles off the set piece from Shakespeare's *King John* about England being true to itself, and to the passage adds the word "Canada" as *prima facie* evidence of the rightness of boys from Hamilton, Ontario, signing up to fight

Germans in Flanders. A Victoria Cross holder follows this speech with an honest one about the nastiness and brutality of the conflict, but his argument then proceeds to the strange conclusion that the hellish sufferings he describes demand that men endure them in order to discover their capacities for enduring them. The circular movement of the logic, which sweeps the hero of the novel off his feet, reveals that beneath the rhetoric of secular heroism lies a primitive urge to affirm one's identity through suffering and annihilation. In many ways, it resembles all those post-Great-War ideologies of the European Right, demanding toughness, heroism and an eagerness to die from their followers.

To examine the fate of the principal characters in *Day of Wrath* (which is about Nazi Germany and a death-embracing ideology) is to find this pattern repeated on a larger scale. The novel is parabolic at best, set in a never-never Nazi-land where Jews escape singly from concentration camps and make their way back to their home towns.⁵ The story concerns the doomed love of a Jewish couple. Its use of familiar romantic conventions includes an ailing heroine who later goes mad and kills herself, a gruff, kindly doctor and finally an amiable prostitute. Just as *Mr. Ames* showed the wretched Smoke uplifted by his love for the good woman, Bernie Avery, so here the SS thug Froelich ceases for a moment in Anna's presence to be a brute. However, where Smoke later redeemed himself by trading his life for a baby's, Froelich is killed by the hero, Simon. He expiates his inevitable guilt — though it appears quite far-fetched, since the Nazi had been persecuting and torturing him — in a manner reminiscent of Smoke. Simon rescues a child from a bombed orphanage and is later shot as a looter since he has been skulking about the ruins. To bring the child back to life, he must crawl through a long dangerous tunnel formed by the wreckage to emerge finally upon a riverbank. But these images of childbirth yield to a final graveside scene of the acceptance of death and a trust in the emergence of some meaning from what has happened.

Simon comforts himself by saying his own *kaddish* beside the grave he has dug; the reader is told that his sacrifice has truly delivered from death the little girl he has rescued. Yet the story has also shown an operatic pattern of the wreckage of human hopes, with the whole cast littered about the stage. Some quality of meaning is asserted, but only after Simon's death. To the reader all the suffering may be irreducible to any explanation or rationalization, and the novel possesses a grimmer moral than it explicitly asserts.

Thus we have seen in the novels a pattern of widespread guilt; attempts to expiate it lead to gestures either pathetic (the boy in *God's Sparrows* trying to run off with the gypsies), desperate (running into a burning building in *Mr. Ames*) or schoolboy-heroic (becoming a counterspy in *Blow Wind*). My object is not to ridicule the gestures, but to indicate the might of the forces producing those gestures, as well as the absence of any more convincing or sophisticated ritual by

which guilt might be purged and the spirit restored to health. Even where the gesture is genuinely heroic (the rescue in *Day of Wrath*, the nursing of the sick in *Village of Souls*), it appears to be performed as much to soothe a needlessly angry conscience as to affirm life in the midst of death. We are, it seems, in the presence of great powers indeed, which shiver the individual with extraordinary ease.

God's Sparrows offers a classic instance of literary form conveying a theme more striking and profound than what the overt message states. Child's best novel next to *Village of Souls*, an excerpt from it formed the subject of a 1970 TV drama. Significantly, the TV play depicted an over-the-top moment in a Canadian squad on the Western Front, and it is the novel's treatment of the Great War that remains its most arresting feature. But, as J. R. McGillivray pointed out in an early review of the novel, the work offers an uneasy synthesis of family chronicle and war novel.⁶ As the hero, Daniel Burnet Thatcher, grows up and goes to war the family material devolves into a series of obituary notices and time-outs while the battle machinery gobbles up everything else in sight. The conclusion focusses upon the near-dead, shattered body of the hero (every companion he has ever had is now dead, and his last friend just tossed into a common trench), and Wellington (Hamilton) might as well be on the other side of the moon.

A family-based culture marked by tenderness and gentility ("gentleman" and "gentle folk" are frequently used terms; they do not appear snobbish or unconvincing) has been turned into an irrelevant sideshow by a culture now bent on self-destruction. As the recruiter's speech showed, that culture has come to accept violence and suffering as a moral means test. But the strains of a culture torn to pieces by its contradictory impulses — Upper Canadian civilization and its discontents — are best exemplified in the splits apparent in the hero and in the patterns of psychic division occurring among the other characters of the novel.

Daniel Burnet Thatcher's very name introduces us to the first tension within his personality, the Cavalier Burnets (Upper Canada) and the Roundhead Thatchers (New England). Much is made of this in the novel; the Yankee idealism and quest for righteousness of the hero's father provide a constant foil to the easy-going, respectable hedonism of Uncle Charles. Of course, neither response to experience gets one through a crisis: the morality of Pen Thatcher, the father, culminates in the heart attack he suffers as a result of his harrassment as critic of the War, while the cakes and ale, the Burnet style and flash of Uncle Charles drive him to blow himself up along with a bridge in order to deny it to an enemy who will find a way across the river anyway.

The familial divisions within Daniel's personality are intensified by the cultural barriers between respectability and the roving life. In other words, our concern shifts from in-laws to outlaws. To be sure, what constitutes a lapse from respectability on the part of an Upper Canadian might be taken as a proof of it in a less-restrained culture, but Daniel delights in his conviction that he bears gypsy blood. It is all a Bliss Carman, open-collared sort of genteel bohemianism, but Daniel does run away to the gypsies as a young boy in an effort to escape from the guilt he feels over an injury he inadvertently inflicted upon his sister. The gypsies bring him back (no one in a Child novel gets away that easily), though he encounters one of them again as his wartime batman (officer's servant). Since Daniel associates the gypsies with the Borrovin' life, the image of an artillery unit on the march as a gypsy caravan can only strike the reader as an odd one. More to the point is the fact that Jobey, the last person killed, dies protecting Daniel from a grenade, so that even his lifelong devotion to the pleasure principle must yield to a spirit of wartime self-sacrifice. Not even bohemians are safe.

If the idea of the gypsy represents a strain in Daniel's character at odds with the clannish comforts of Ardentenny (the monumental family pile later celebrated in *The Victorian House*), a more convincing — though no less conventionalized — alternative comes in the person of Daniel's cousin, Quentin. Like his more famous modernist namesake from Jefferson, Mississippi, his leanings are aesthetical. An outsider at prep school, Quentin goes on to alienate himself further from respectability by writing poetry and later trying to pursue the vocation of a conscientious objector at the Front. Upset at the nasty, routine war crime of bayonetting battlefield prisoners, Quentin manages to survive his harsh treatment by the military authorities. Daniel continues to own and respect his cousin and at the end of an involved dream (more on this below) cries that Quentin is "my friend . . . part of me." This only confirms what the reader has already guessed.

After all, Quentin is a more intense and passionate version of Daniel, his literary bohemianism a more convincing evocation of Daniel's repressed side than Jobey's footlooseness. Both Daniel and Quentin are bullied at school, though Quentin's delight in his own intellectual powers ensures that his treatment will be worse than his cousin's. Quentin's trials as a CO are more intense and demanding than Daniel's reluctance — out of concern for his father's health — to enlist. Quentin's abuse for his peacemongering is paralleled by Daniel's receipt of a white feather from an hysterical girlfriend. Ultimately, both men go back upon their rebel principles, Daniel because he cannot resist the recruiter's call to idealized suffering, Quentin because he feels that to continue not to fight is to separate himself from life itself, from the pain and suffering he views as the universal marks of existence. For both characters, suffering serves as the bond holding human beings together. Thus the closest moment between Daniel and his sweetheart happens when she is almost deathly ill and he due up the line for a final offensive.

The life force in this novel is simply not very strong, which is why a cousin, after a yes-to-life outburst that "people ought to spend themselves on others even if it destroys them," dies having a baby the doctors warned her against.

Whatever stronger and more passionate an embodiment of Daniel that Quentin may represent, that lively force is never really embraced. The reconciliation that represents the attainment of some sort of psychic wholeness occurs only during Daniel's lengthy dream of Chapter XIX, which happens the night of his cousin's death. The romantic convention of reconciliation during either dream or death obtains, but the action continues and leaves Daniel at the end an utterly alone, wrecked figure hauled away by the stretcher bearers. We return to the familiar paradox that this attempt to reconcile the family chronicle with the war novel concludes with an alienated figure whose family life and structure have become irrelevant to the world he has to live in.

There is always something very tiresome in writing about the gaps in a hero's psyche. After all, what culture worthy of the name has ever produced men so complete in themselves as to feel perfectly at home in this world? Why single out these novels for special attention; why notice one person muttering to himself in an insane asylum full of them? My justification is that the incidence in Child's novels of torn seekers of better selves is almost universal. It isn't merely a case of St. Augustine's universal restlessness that can find no peace until it rests in God, but a case of widespread sundering and deprivation. Recall Jornay who is torn between France and the New France of the 1640's, the Paris of the Court of Miracles (the thieves' quarter immortalized in Hugo's *Notre-Dame de Paris*) and the Quebec of the *pays d'en haut*. Thus he must, through a device familiar in romantic fiction (*Ivanhoe*, *The Deerslayer*), choose between a dark heroine and a light one. The dark one, a semi-Christianized Indian who represents Canada, embodies the creole's dilemma in the incompatibility of the cultures within her. The fair one, a Parisian *demi-mondaine*, shares the hero's dilemma, though misfortune, disease and death resolve it for her. Mr. Ames' efforts to save his son propel him into the unaccustomed (and life-shortening) role of mover and doer, breeding in him a dissatisfaction with (and guilt about) his old self and a discomfort in the new. And so it goes in the other novels, though none of them contains the variety of substitute selves one finds in *God's Sparrows*.

Something about the war experience itself seems to have produced the intensity of the pattern of human relationships, for even the author's purported distance from his text is shortened. However autobiographical it may be in parts, *God's Sparrows* is told in the third person. Yet one of Quentin's poems from his notebook concludes the novel. The poem's message, the gloomy one that his words about death do not even assuage his own loneliness, so the reader should not expect anything different, suits the rest of the novel. Yet this poem, along with other songs from books, is reprinted in Child's collection of poetry,⁷ though no

hint is given as to its supposed status as the product of a literary persona. It is as if Conan Doyle had included in his history of the South African War, without quotation marks, the comments of Sherlock Holmes. Not only does Daniel's experience to some degree match the author's, he gives Quentin an aspect of his own self as well.

Further evidence of the enduring nature of the splitting of the hero in *God's Sparrows* comes from the author's 1965 blank verse long poem, *The Wood of the Nightingale*. It, too, concerns the Great War. Its hero, Hugh Kingdom (*Matthew XIX: 14* discloses the link between the author's name and his character's), looks to the people around him for reflections of himself. His brother, Ken (the anonymous narrator of *The Victorian House* mentions him as one of the War dead) plays Dr. Jekyll, while his demonic counterpart remains Spurge (the name of a weed). Ken, the *preux chevalier*, is hated by Spurge, who surprisingly likes Hugh, possibly because both had a hand (in Hugh's case, accidental) in the death of close relatives. Here it is useful to recall the guilt experienced by Daniel Thatcher over the hurt involuntarily given his sister. Daniel loses his girl to his own brother, Alastair, while Ken Kingdom loses his to Spurge. Daniel woos and then saves the life of Beatrice, sister of the girl who jilted him to marry his brother. Beatrice herself regrets her failure to consummate her relationship with a former lover. A similar taint of death, renunciation and sexual substitution hangs over the events of *The Wood of the Nightingale* when Hugh Kingdom falls in love with the sister of a German he has slain. This person he terms his alter ego, and he has perforce embraced the corpse during a bombardment, in a Gothic realization of Wilfred Owen's "Strange Meeting." Hugh cannot win the girl until he has been reconciled with her brother in a dream, and here we recall the similar dream reconciliation in *God's Sparrows*.

My list of shadowy relationships and motifs argues that a common matrix, a symbolic vocabulary of psychic displacement, produced both War works and produces to an extreme degree in *God's Sparrows* what can be found in milder forms in the other novels. In the same way, the ever-present theme of sexual disturbance will be best observed through a close examination of *Village of Souls*.

SEXUALITY BECOMES A PAINFUL BURDEN in the world of *Village of Souls*, a strange phenomenon in a novel whose message is embodied in a process of sexual selection. As noted, Journey's acceptance of Canadian realities shows itself through his union with the Indian woman in preference to the French woman he first wed. Yet the acquaintance between Anne and Journey has not been a lengthy one before he comes upon her castrating an Indian captive with a bone dagger. Oddly enough, Lys, the refined French woman, has sat watching the

entire play with considerable aplomb, which recalls Jornay's first glimpse of her. One of the newly-arrived *filles du roi* in Montreal, Jornay spots her as he turns his eyes away from the public torture of two Mohawk captives at the Place d'Armes. The grim scene has its place in history, the Jesuit *Relations* assure us, but Child's use of this horror as a device for introducing one of his heroines is an ambiguous one. On the one hand, Lys undergoes shock at the sight (though its newness to her may be overstated: one's chances of viewing official atrocities in the streets of Paris under *l'ancien régime* were considerable) and the author takes care to underline the incongruities of this love-at-first-sight amid such savagery. On the other hand, we have witnessed a bizarre but still effective presentation of the death-and-the-maiden motif. That the image presented of death is sadistic rather than melancholy only renders the moment gamier, more modernist in tone.

This linkage between Lys and death continues. For example, when we are given a flashback to the events which plucked her from Fontainebleau and washed her up on the shores of New France, the story is no ordinary one of financial and social disasters that might force someone to abandon the *douceur de vie* and strike out for the wilderness. Instead, we are told of a girl trained in the practices of the *demimonde* by her gentleman-at-large father. Her refusal of the advances of a wicked duke results not only in the stabbing of her husband by his bravoos, but in a scene almost grotesque in its sudden violence her father is tossed out of a high window. Lys is hustled to the Bastille, branded on the shoulder with the *fleur de lys* and finally packed off to New France.

If Jornay's youth in the Alsatia of the Court of Miracles recalls Hugo, the branded shoulder reminds us of *The Three Musketeers*, while the brutalities of the artistocrat denied sexual privilege have appeared before in *A Tale of Two Cities*. Clearly, the conventions of the historical romance are at work here. Interestingly enough, it is the works just noted that are most echoed, rather than such home-grown grand operas as William Kirby's *The Golden Dog* or Sir Gilbert Parker's *The Seats of the Mighty*. The attempts of the latter novels — however compromised by their operatic sweep — to get at the larger drives of greed and self-enhancement lying behind the imperial presence in North America are not repeated in *Village of Souls*. Rather this novel — so strange are the bedfellows made by literary history — recalls nothing so much as Cohen's *Beautiful Losers*. Both books concentrate on sexual conflicts; both books do so by showing how a number of characters attempt to come to grips with a colonial reality.

If Lys' appearances have been accompanied by violence and death when her sexual attractions are most apparent, the presence of death continues to enfold her as the story proceeds. Taken captive by the Indians, she passes much of the rest of her life attempting to nurse them through an outbreak of smallpox. Jornay finally catches up with her after their separation at a splendidly evoked waste land that could have sprung from *Childe Roland*, an Indian village destroyed by small-

pox. Her final appearance before her husband after she has taken poison to hasten an approaching death happens during a dream of Jornay's which D. G. Jones aptly terms "a night journey into the unconscious."

In view of the usual clear-cut distinction between light and dark heroines, and with the light one in this case associated with a morbid, decadent sexuality, the reader would expect to find Lys' rival linked with the forces of life and fertility. However, this isn't the case. We have seen that Anne's cruelty is evident from an early stage. In her wilderness she embodies the monstrous aspects of the wilderness which the novel frequently mentions. Her first sexual experience with Jornay is a rough, brutal one which she provokes. Jornay's final reconciliation with Anne happens after she has Christianized herself and grown closer to Lys, so that she too goes off to Indian villages to nurse smallpox victims. Thus Anne and Jornay, once Lys and her spirit have departed, form a kind of prototypical Canadian couple, able both to embrace and transcend the savagery of their environment. Jornay's final vision is one of man's insignificance amid the wild grandeur of nature. Sexuality is seen as having the power to make for man "a dust-speck world within the infinite wilderness," but for this to happen the demonic aspects of Anne have to be displaced on to another character.

Such a figure is the Métis Titange, drunken and violent, who tries to carry Lys off and whom Jornay finally half-blinds in a fight. Titange later drowns himself in despair at his approaching total blindness, but not before he has reinforced a number of the links the novel establishes between sexuality and the demonic. Easily the most sexually aggressive male in the novel — Jornay, except for his brief outburst with Anne, fills the passive role of the hero of historical romance that has been with us since Sir Walter Scott⁸ — Titange sets up his attempted kidnapping of Lys during a stormy night suited "for love and devilry!" (Jornay's taking of Anne, by the way, is accompanied by "tophet flames" from the fireplace.) We are given a sequence of demonic images of nature and the Indians and Titange's place in that motif links sexual aggression with the infernal. Sex, death and the devil dance together, and account for Jornay's spasmodic patterns of behaviour. His rough taking of Anne precedes a period of drunken stupor and social retreat, socially a less acceptable form of the passivity marking his early romantic idealization of Lys. Any expression of sexuality knots him in crippling guilt; a rare moment of mutual sexual attraction between Jornay and Lys happens when there is "something demoniacal in the night." Married to the absent Lys while loving the nearby Anne, he must be released from his captivity by Lys' ghost before he can break from his passivity and choose the woman who has demanded this dynamism of him.

Obviously, sexuality remains a mysterious power that can become socialized only with difficulty, by the sort of compromises Anne must make in her bows toward Christianity and through the extinction of such demonic rowdies as

Titange. Nature, even when no longer seen as Atwood's nature-the-monster, is either purged into a vast indifference (the novel's conclusion) or made palatable by an idealized experience of mystical union with it. Just as Lys becomes purer and better the more she disregards her life-drives and immerses herself in the deathly reality of the disease-ridden village, so do the characters in *God's Sparrows* thrive best on a regime of renunciation.

Thus Daniel Thatcher, after an incomplete encounter with an inoffensive prostitute, stumbles out of her room declaring: " 'Women! God Almighty, how I loathe them.' He felt as though he had been dragged through ordure." Shortly afterward, he receives a telegram informing him of his mother's death. Of course, Daniel loses his first girl to his brother and best shows his love for Beatrice within an atmosphere of impending death. So also the love between Simon and Anna in *Day of Wrath* ultimately causes her death, while sexual rivalries implicate Mike Ames in the murder of Mower. Finally, John Wentworth of *Blow Wind* allows himself to admit his love for Ione only after he has discovered that she, too, is a counterspy and that they must brave danger together. Even then he is ready to have her killed by the villain rather than accede to his Satanic request to bow down before him. Oddly enough, the threatened heroine supports this magical concept of symbolic gesture, affirming that, " 'If he made you kneel, then men everywhere would bow to evil and we'd be done for. . . .'"

Granted then that sexuality appears largely as a destructive force, something often appearing within a context of violence and death, the paradox remains that to embrace suffering and death purges guilt and legitimizes sex. Jornay then wins Anne after he has pursued her through a demonically hostile wilderness, a treacherous morass in which he is granted the vision of a reconciled, etherealized Lys, a pursuit which nearly costs him his life. And Daniel Thatcher, who refused to sleep with Beatrice even after she had offered herself to him, can feel the depth of his love for her when she appears to be dying and he is bound for the next military offensive. As I pointed out earlier, guilt is a pervasive force throughout Child's fiction, and the rituals by which it may be purged are many. One of its principal sources remains the very existence of sexuality, with its unruly kicks against the goods of civilization and its associations with the demonic. (It is the devilish Spurge in *The Wood of the Nightingale* who steals Ken Kingdom's girl through an almost magical device of telling a few lies.) This inability to accommodate themselves to their sexual natures provides one of the forces producing the frequent splits within Child's characters. It produces as well the necessity for having a number of figures, each of whom carries a detached portion of the hero's psyche. In short, the novels are replete with centrifugal forces, with unmediated energies threatening to tear apart the works' moral coherences. What pulls these forces into some sort of compatibility? That, in art as in life, comes about through dreams and visions which provide symbolic re-enactments of the real events of the novel,

and it is to the dreamworld that our attention must now turn, and (as *Day of Wrath* puts it) “The unconscious mind — where some say deity does his work with men.”

DREAMS PLAY AN IMPORTANT ROLE in all of Philip Child’s fiction, foreshadowing disasters or providing flashbacks, granting both hope and despair in the many-tongued speech of symbolism. Even meditative, near-dream-like states of consciousness provide havens of peace and self-recollection during stressful periods. However the role of dreams in the two best novels is a structural one. Not only do the dreams advance the perceptions of the characters, but they bring into a temporary reconciliation the warring themes of the works. The clearest example of this occurs in *God’s Sparrows*.

The author once remarked to me that dreams and the ability to dream kept him sane on the Western Front even though nightmares were his bane in the months immediately following his demobbing.⁹ Daniel Thatcher’s major dream in chapter xix represents the closest the character will come to grasping that psychic wholeness that has eluded him.

The dream goes on for too long; it owes a little to Kipling’s “On the Gate: a Story of ’16” (1926). Most importantly, it offers a very “literary” (structured, patently referential) event rather than the more murkily symbolic and a-logical depiction of experience in dreams themselves. Its most striking characteristic consists in its use of the familiar stuff of military squalor and bureaucracy. Earlier, the novel has recounted Daniel and Beatrice’s encounter with a spiritualist; while the man is no charlatan, the advice given Daniel by a stranger on the bus does him as well as anything he heard in the Magic-Flute-Egyptian confines of the medium’s place of business. So with the dream, which follows a host of khaki-clad figures as they move through deathly parades to sentencing by military kangaroo courts to a glimpse of the celestial machineries where life is broken and renewed. The vision of reincarnation comes only after the commonplace frustrations of military life have been re-experienced.

I mentioned earlier that his cousin Quentin is the most interesting thing about Daniel, and in the dream Daniel reclaims himself through asserting kinship/twinship with his cousin during a court martial. In a way he has already done this, since partway through the dream his own consciousness merges for a while with Quentin’s. However abrupt this switch may be, its dream-logic reveals a significant step by Daniel in his own healing, a process that will culminate in the claiming of kinship and the vision of life’s process of distintegration/reintegration. The death of Quentin — which we learn happened as the dream took place — has become beside the point, and Daniel’s taking of the poetic notebook his cousin left behind

and the poem's appearance as the novel's last word reveal the extent to which (on the level of the dreamlike and unconscious) Daniel's mission has been accomplished. The difficulty holds that the novel still remains split between dream and waking. However exhilarating the look at the vale of soul-making, however much the novel's characters may choose to position their moves for personal integration within "inner" psychic processes, the fact remains that a realistic novel — this novel — possesses an ineradicable commitment to the "outer" processes of society and politics. Our final look at Daniel Thatcher shows him a shattered wreck barely preserved from being hurled alive into a common grave. This may not impress a *guru*, but it is the kind of thing that registers on novel readers. The ending of *God's Sparrows* demonstrates the extent to which the world of dreams and the unconscious helps to knit together the splintered hero, but shows as well the fissures between that world and the everyday one which the novel cannot bridge.

"Don't you know there's a war on?" has been a traditional formula for snuffing whatever candles of moderation and decency might have been left burning during wartime. Similarly, the world at war in this novel sucks dry every other value but that of survival, so that the visionary remains of less importance than the practical. This is not quite the case with *Village of Souls*; some explanation of this difference is necessary to understand the more credible role played here by dreams and the visionary. The novel maintains credibility as a somewhat modernist version of the matter of historical romance. Far less concerned with grand political questions than its predecessors, far more meditative in act and tone, it still owes a bit to their flair for melodrama, sudden violence and shocking revelations. Its tortured characters, however, the wasteland setting, its journey into the dark of the soul, its dependence upon the unravelling of a series of lies and misunderstandings as its mode of plot revelation, with truth thus made into a private rather than a public matter: all these mark it as a unique piece of historical fiction, especially in view of its publication date (1933). Current critical practice could be tempted into reading the work as the projection of a contemporary existential dilemma onto a New France background (Yourcenar's *Hadrian's Memoirs* serves as a case in point), but the urge must be resisted. The novel's historical sense consists of more than its reliance upon the Jesuit *Relations* for certain incidents (see the opening "Note"); it is also a matter of the characters' dilemmas between the realities of frontier life and the conventions — sexual, cultural, religious — of *la douce France* ringing true, though they may not be expressed with word-for-word literality. The haunted wilderness, the Gothicism that Margot Northey has found elsewhere in Canadian fiction, presents itself here as well, but as a function of the cast of mind which newly-arrived Europeans would bring to the scene. For them and for its native inhabitants the country demands that it be grasped in terms of the non-rational and intuitive, the dreamlike and the visionary.

We expect the Indian, Anne, to reflect her culture's reliance upon dreams for the interpretation of experience. From the start she possesses some sort of racial memory/dream of white men in big ships whom she is compelled to seek out (the source of this is never quite explained, a weakness in the novel). Anne initially shudders at the individualism and introspection of the whites, since her version of interiority consists of a closeness to a collective tribal consciousness. She lives within a magical universe which Jornay (a trifle unrealistically for an uneducated Frenchman of his class and time) has left. Both he and Titange are aware of the extent to which dreams through suggestion can be cynically manipulated into rationalizations for fulfilling otherwise illicit desires.

Lys also, as part of the process by which the competing heroines merge at their edges (they both come to nurse victims of plague), is a flagrant dreamer. Thus long periods of time can pass for her "Like a dream" and, more importantly, she comes to Jornay as the object of an idealized erotic attachment, someone who represents the fantastic ("we are phantoms"). Jornay's bad dreams of a withered Lys (are they wish-fulfillments of the sort Jornay accuses the Huron of dreaming?) come true, and he encounters her finally in the surreal landscape of the dead villages sinking back into the bush. The reader of the novel is more than once told that the title comes from an Indian image of the afterlife: a village everyday in its appointments but populated only by the spirits of the dead. The charnel-house where Jornay finally locates Lys is a grisly counterpart of this Elysium (everything has its double), and the ephemeral nature of the humans contrasted with the "everlasting" trees, rocks and water sees to it that most human activities come to appear tissue-like and dreamy.

No wonder that Lys, even though she is white, recounts the patterns of the soon-to-be-ended relationship between herself and Jornay in terms of an Indian legend involving magic and the dead. Whether or not the tale is an "authentic" legend or one the author made up to point a moral doesn't matter. The important thing is that the parabolic and fantastic have become the accepted mode of discourse, and that within that mode supernaturalism and surrealism have come to rule, as if Jesus had delivered his parables in terms of djinns and afreets instead of sheep and seeds. Through the same logic of experience, Jornay's quest for his once-beloved becomes the night journey, a process of exploration of an almost phantasmagoric landscape. When it nearly kills him, the environment will have then imposed enough suffering upon him to have relieved him of the burden of guilt over Lys. The remarkable concluding section of the novel climaxes when Jornay, "beaten," "bruised," hobbling on "in spite of the pain," "ill and trembling," beholds in a dream the spirit of Lys in a grand apotheosis of swirling cloud. She gazes upon him with love and pity, the whore now a madonna; he views her with terror. His final perception notes her beauty, bringing to full circle his first glimpse of her and "the connected thoughts of death and of woman's beauty."

The tragic (pity and terror) combines with the erotic to produce a ritual in dream by which the burden of guilt can be lifted. This incident, rather than the vague, inconclusive reunion with Anne,¹⁰ resolves the novel's principal themes, of guilt, its pervasiveness and its final purging.

It is in *Village of Souls*, with its world where the divisions between dream and reality have been blurred, that Child proves best able to provide a convincing (not realistic, but convincing, the way *The Magic Flute* is convincing) calming of the storms of guilt, psychic disintegration and sexual terror which afflict his characters. The success of the integration process in that novel provides us with a heightened awareness of the unbridled horrors existing elsewhere. This helps to explain the didacticism, the flat declarations of hope and rejoicing that spot the novels. They exist, not as beauty spots over an unacknowledged fear, but as charms against a clear and present sense of danger. The cruel and monstrous shapes of frustration, which reveal the wrong people falling in love and the right people under a steam-roller, never quite fade away from the novels, however intense their subjection to happy (or at least hopeful) endings. This psychic savagery makes them still interesting to read and of some significance in tracing in our culture the assaults of modernism upon the certitudes of traditional systems of belief. In Child's fiction, those beliefs are still there to be asserted, though they cannot be integrated fully with the tangled, more subversive realities of the stories. The clashing systems can only be accommodated in dreams. But we wake to pain.

NOTES

- ¹ Philip Child, *The Wood of the Nightingale* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1965), p. 87.
- ² Linzey Kupsh, "An Introduction to the Novels of Philip Child" (M.A. thesis, Université Laval, 1958). This work overlooks the wartime thriller *Blow Wind, Come Wrack*, published pseudonymously (by "John Wentworth") in 1945 and acknowledged by the author as early as 1951 on the page opposite the title of *The Victorian House*.
- ³ See also Wm. H. Magee, "Philip Child: A Re-Appraisal," *Canadian Literature*, No. 24 (Spring 1965), pp. 28-36. This article deals briefly with questions of literary form.
- ⁴ The novels are: *Village of Souls* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1948 [orig. ed.: London: Thornton Butterworth, 1933]); *God's Sparrows* (London: Thornton Butterworth, 1937); *Blow Wind, Come Wrack* (London: Jarrold's, 1945); *Day of Wrath* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1945); *Mr. Ames Against Time* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1949).
- ⁵ A similar absence of a firmly-felt sense of place also mars *Mr. Ames*, where a number of references are made to Canadian institutions even though one character asks another, referring to a brief, evening jaunt, if there has been much traffic in Hoboken.
- ⁶ "Letters in Canada. 1937. Fiction," *UTQ*, 7 (April 1938), 351-52.
- ⁷ "To a Future Poet," *The Victorian House and Other Poems* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1951), p. 52.

- ⁸ Significantly, Jornay's double, "who reflected his own moods grotesquely, like a twisted mirror," is a deracinated wreck of an Indian whose tribe has been destroyed by the Yankees, a very Canadian Last Mohican.
- ⁹ Conversation 3 February 1977.
- ¹⁰ "What had they for each other — happiness? tragedy? Perhaps both. They were together and life would go on. 'The Metchi-sipi,' he thought, 'we'll see where it flows. . . .'"

BLUE STOCKINGS

Alexandre L. Amprimoz

woman
speaks softly
laughs well

thin fire
spreading under
skin

papers
minutely marked
classes carefully prepared

allergic to rye
reads the greeks
and feels knowledge
as a chain

But ignorance bound,
he lets her speak of minorities
with a perfect CBC accent.
His own knowledge
breeding that stupidity.
The rich, the poor, the clever —
all equal minorities.

AND, NOW, HE,
WOULD, LIKE, TO, PUNCTUATE,
HER, SPEECH, WITH,
HIS, HEELS.