

# THE SEARCH FOR FPG

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D. O. SPETTIGUE'S DISCOVERY of the true identity of the late Canadian novelist who called himself Frederick Philip Grove will probably not greatly affect the criticism of the Grove novels.<sup>1</sup> However, the semi-autobiographical *A Search For America* and the allegedly autobiographical *In Search of Myself* demand a new critical investigation in the light of this discovery, not so much for biographical reasons as for aesthetic ones. For if Spettigue's claims are valid, we are dealing with works of fiction rather than with works of biography. Consequently, the reader's response is determined not by the story of the life of Frederick Philip Grove, but by a number of textual features of which the narrator's position (which can no longer be identified with that of the author) is only one.

The prologue to *In Search of Myself*, first published as an essay under the same title in 1940, offers the most dramatic juxtaposition of biographical and fictional readings. In its anecdotal framework and by virtue of its function as a quasi-preface to the "autobiography," it seems verifiably and tantalizingly biographical. At the same time the double-stranded narrative structure, the recurring flashbacks, the polarity represented by the position of the narrator and that of the "young Frenchman" constitute literary features which invite interpretation. The reader's knowledge of Grove's true identity is, of course, a factor which lies outside the text. His recognition of the irony expressed in the title *In Search of Myself* is, however, a consequence of this knowledge and may therefore be regarded as a point of departure for an interpretation.

Such an interdependence between author's biography and "autonomous" text is in any case problematical in terms of critical theory and methodology. It is especially problematical in *In Search of Myself* where it becomes, in a way, the subject of the text itself. The essay seems to describe an episode in the life of the author: it pretends to be autobiographical. But the accessibility of the "truth" (i.e., the real biography of the author) has textual relevance since it constitutes the indeterminacy of the text for the knowing reader. We are dealing not with a mixture of truth and falsehood, fiction and fact, but with their ironic displacement within an aesthetic form.

The main narrative, which describes a journey through the Ontario wilderness, is interrupted by flashbacks and philosophical reflections, resulting in an alternat-

ing pattern which presents a past ideality (the narrator's European youth) contrasted with a present reality (the North American experience), the one marked by wealth, social standing and promise for a brilliant literary career, the other by poverty, failure and disillusionment. In the course of the essay this past ideality becomes more and more identified with "art" as opposed to "life," or the immediate demands of the present reality out of which the narrator speaks. His allusion to his friend, the "young Frenchman," now a world-famous writer, is the point of departure for his personal and literary reflections. He cannot help comparing their situations, and muses over the fact that the exclusive and innovative circle to which he once belonged, today (i.e., 1940) can be said to virtually define modern literature, whereas he, isolated in a pioneer country, is struggling to maintain his material existence as a country schoolteacher, whose literary voice has awakened no echo, has, in fact, scarcely been heard. With this realization of failure comes a sense of the necessity to explain it. But as with his other work, the question of his readership, or lack of it, arises. With whom is he to seek communication, to whom explain? It occurs to him that there is no more appropriate listener for him to address himself to than the "young Frenchman," by whose success he has measured the extent of his own failure and acknowledged his own defeat.

The opening of the essay presents a landscape which in its barrenness and desolation suggests a vision of a primordial world, or an entropic one.

It was a dismal November day, with a raw wind blowing from the northwest and cold, iron-grey clouds flying low — one of those Ontario days which, on the lakeshore or in a country of rock and swamp, seem to bring visions of an ageless time after the emergence of the earth from chaos, or a foreboding of the end of a world about to die from entropy.

In the best romantic tradition, this landscape reflects the mood and the situation of the figure perceiving it. With his reference to the lateness of the season and the cyclical movement of creation and destruction, the narrator, who later portrays himself as an aging writer, may be seen to allude to the uncertainty of his own future life and creativity.

This vision of an ageless and uninhabited world recedes with the appearance of the narrator, who in one sentence focuses it into spatial and temporal familiarity.

It was into such a country of rock and swamp, a few miles north of Lake Erie, that my business took me that day.

The landscape becomes a physical obstacle to be overcome on the way to a destination. He is driving to a farm where he is to pick up a girl as household help. The road on which he is travelling grows progressively worse until finally he is forced to stop: it has been completely washed away. This forced pause in his drive leads him to reflect, to withdraw from immediate reality which demands that he act.

There follows a reminiscence of his youth, as promising as that of his friend, the "young Frenchman," whose biography has been brought him by a visitor the night before. His feeling of misery stems not from his momentary situation, but from the contrast between the Frenchman's success and his own failure.

Like a flash of lightning it had struck me that, to earn the distinction of seeing his biography published within his lifetime, he must have achieved things which had focused on him the eyes of a world, a living world as full of fire and enthusiasm as any world that had ever been — whereas I, only slightly his junior, in spite of often titanic endeavor, had lived and worked in obscurity, giving expression, at the best, to a few, a very few, mirrorings of life in the raw such as it had been my lot to witness.

But his situation forces him out of his reminiscences. He must decide on a course of action.

There were three possibilities. I might abandon my task and try to retrace my way by backing out. I might alight and, leaving the car where it was, leap the washout, to cover the remaining distance afoot. I might try to attract the attention of the people on the farm or in the house — they were expecting me — by blowing my horn.

Thinking once more of the Frenchman and the brilliant prospects of his youth, he chooses the last of these alternatives.

For ten minutes or so, at intervals of perhaps fifteen seconds, I made the horn of my machine ring dismally out over the fens whose very existence seemed a calamity of defeat . . .

As he again falls into his musings he suddenly sees movement on the farm. He has been heard. But the figure coming towards him is not the young girl he is expecting; it is an old man, her grandfather. The dialogue which ensues culminates in a grotesque scene: between bursts of senile laughter the old man tells how a salesman, trying to collect a payment from his son-in-law, struck the washout and somersaulted into the swamp. When the car was pulled out, the salesman was found dead with a broken neck.

The essay concludes with the narrator heading home, the girl by his side, and a resolve forming in his mind: to explain his literary failure by writing, "with an avowedly autobiographical purpose," the story of his ". . . LIFE AS A WRITER IN CANADA."

IT IS NOT SURPRISING that *In Search of Myself* has been consistently read as an expression of the artist's dilemma in a pioneer environment. It was, for a long time, seen as a sort of document, sociological, since it exposed the role of the artist in a pioneer society, and literary, since it revealed the effect of isolation, of the break with the past, on the artist's creativity. A. J. M. Smith,

introducing the essay in his anthology, sums up this view: "This pathetic and heroic piece of self-revelation written in a matter-of-fact and homely style throws a clear beam of light on the problem of the artist's isolation in a new and thoroughly bourgeois country."<sup>2</sup>

Little attention has been paid to the suggestive narrative structure and the equally suggestive descriptive passages — in other words to the essay as an artistic work. Yet the narrator's journey through the wilderness clearly has an allegorical function, and an ambiguous one at that. The difficulties met with on the journey may be seen to metaphorically describe not only individual features of the speaker's present life in Canada, but in fact his entire past, the decisive moments of which seem to be alluded to in the journey's description as well.

One need not dwell on the parallel between the journey, through the wilderness of rock and swamp, and Grove's life, which was determined by an ever-thickening bog of personal, professional and financial problems. The "complete stop" necessitated by the road which has been washed away finds its biographical counterpart in the fact that Grove's desperate situation led him to fake a suicide and flee to America, breaking all ties with the past.

The point of crisis, signalled by the washout in the road in the narrative, necessitates a decision. The three alternatives listed by the narrator, and the significance of the one chosen, are perhaps the most explicit references given the reader as to the intention of the essay. For in choosing to make himself heard (by blowing his horn) he seems to be referring directly to the essay itself, and even to its narrative structure. The sounding of his horn, "for ten minutes or so, at intervals of perhaps fifteen seconds," may be seen as representing the alternating pattern of description and reflection we find in the essay, a pattern which, in turn, corresponds to the duality of life and art which the essay seeks to demonstrate.

Read in this light, the horn-blowing episode may be seen as a hidden signal to the reader, around whose response one of the most moving passages of the essay turns.

... I had never had an audience; for no matter what one may say, he says it to somebody; and if there is nobody to hear, it remains as though it had never been said; the tree falling in a forest where there is none to hear, produces no sound. A book arises as much in the mind of the reader as in that of the writer, and the writer's art consists above all in creating response; the effect of a book is the result of a collaboration between writer and audience. That collaboration I had failed to enforce ...

The passage quoted above separates the sounding of the horn from the unexpected response to it, ironically confirming the validity of the narrator's statements. Yet the response to the dismal echoing of the horn, expressing an acknowledgement of the narrator's defeat as much as the will to make himself heard, is also ambiguous in its implications. The old man's appearance in answer to the signal

ironically anticipates the close of the essay, where the narrator announces his intention to address the explanation of his failure (in the form of his autobiography) to the "young Frenchman," now a man of over seventy. The old man's appearance is, however, only one consequence of the narrator's signal. The young girl's subsequent arrival represents the successful achievement of the journey while it also suggests a new impulse for both "life" and "art": the narrator announces his decision to write his autobiography.<sup>8</sup>

Like the metaphor of the journey, the allegorical function of the figures, landscape and events is not difficult to identify. The polarity suggested by the opening of the essay (in the vision of a world which is primordial or entropic) is echoed in the contrasts and oppositions represented throughout by the "young Frenchman" and the aging narrator. The one inhabits "... a living world ... full of fire and enthusiasm," in fact constitutes its centre (the "eyes" of this world are "focused" on his achievements) while the other is banished to an inhuman wilderness which diminishes man and his deeds to insignificance. Thus the two figures come to represent the contrasting "worlds" they inhabit, as well as the opposite extremes of success and failure, youth and old age, life and art, reality and dream.

The Frenchman, always referred to as young, incarnates the memory of a past which is lost, inaccessible to the narrator. This youth is, in fact, an illusion, for the "young Frenchman," like the narrator, is no longer young. But youth also manifests itself, in the narrator's present reality, in the form of the young girl he is on his way to fetch. These two figures, one a shadow from the past, the other an immediate reality, may be seen as two manifestations of the narrator's quest. He is seeking, through the Frenchman, to recover his past, his lost youth, but it is the girl he is going to fetch who represents the new beginning, in a new context, of an artistic life. He cannot recapture his youth in the reality which surrounds him: he can only re-create it, so to speak, in a new form, in the form of a "story," i.e., through art. Although it is the "young Frenchman" who, through the memories he evokes of his youth, inspires him, it is the immediate experience of that journey through the wilderness and the encounter at the farm that motivates him to act, that is to write.

The problem of old age also involves a two-way contrast, namely between the "young Frenchman," now a venerable old coryphaeus who has fulfilled the promise youth held for him, and the old farmer, that spectre of a senile old age, a vision of the narrator's potential decay. The story of the salesman, told by the old man, illustrates the dread vision of a fate narrowly escaped: like the senility of the old man, it is the potential fate of the narrator.

In addressing the explanation of his failure to the "young Frenchman," the narrator is addressing a figure into whom he seems to have distilled all the significant relationships, encounters and experiences from his past. The Frenchman's phenomenal success dramatically points up the narrator's failure, and so serves as

a strong point of contrast. But as a sort of *alter ego* to the narrator, he also reveals the man the narrator might have been. He represents not only the intended “audience,” the listener to the story of the “life of a writer in Canada,” but also, simultaneously, both its object and its subject — the dimensions of the self the narrator is in search of.

AS AN EXTERNAL CONTRAST figure to the narrator, the identity or even existence of the Frenchman has remained more or less irrelevant for the reader. As is now obvious, Grove must have intended it to be so, since identification of the “young Frenchman” would, presumably, have led to his own identification as well. However, the function of the Frenchman in the narrative may also be seen against the biographical background indicated earlier. In prefacing his “autobiography” with this essay, Grove may have meant, as Spettigue suggests, to address an explicit signal to André Gide. Spettigue has identified the “young Frenchman” as Gide, who recorded an encounter with Grove — his real name was Felix Paul Greve — under the title “Conversation avec un Allemand quelques années avant la guerre.” If, as Spettigue contends, we have all reason to believe that Grove had access to Gide’s *Oeuvres Complètes*, we can imagine how the publication of this intimate dialogue would have affected him. The antithesis of life and art implied in *In Search of Myself*, in which the narrator represents one side and the Frenchman the other, may indeed be a response to the conversation in which Grove affirms his preference for “life” as opposed to “art.” Gide introduces the subject with his comment on FPG’s essay on Wilde.

- C’est par là que m’a tant intéressé votre première plaquette (sur Oscar Wilde).  
Je crois très juste l’antagonisme où vous placiez la vie et l’art . . .  
Il m’interrompt.
- Eh bien! moi je ne trouve cela juste du tout. Ou plutôt . . . si vous voulez . . . oui, il est dangereux pour l’artiste de chercher à vivre; mais c’est précisément parce que, moi, je prétends vivre, que je dis que je ne suis pas un artiste. C’est le besoin d’argent qui maintenant me fait écrire. L’oeuvre d’art n’est pour moi qu’un pis-aller. Je préfère la vie.<sup>4</sup>

At the same time he warns Gide of his “lies,” which seem to consist in consciously creating an appearance which coincides with reality or “truth,” representing an ironic identity between the created, or the “lie,” and the real. Significantly enough, the example he chooses to demonstrate his “lying” is the self.

Il faut que je vous avertisse, Monsieur Gide, que je mens constamment . . . ce n’est pas ce que vous croyez . . . J’éprouve le même besoin de mentir et la même satisfaction à mentir qu’un autre à montrer la vérité . . . Non, ce n’est pas ce que vous croyez . . . Tenez par exemple: quand quelqu’un entend un bruit subit à son côté,

il tourne la tête (...): moi pas! ou quand je la tourne, c'est volontairement: je mens.<sup>5</sup>

Thus *In Search of Myself*, anecdotal and episodic, apparently relating a lived-through situation and crisis, sums up and demonstrates, structurally and thematically, the essence of the "autobiography" itself. It also illustrates the hiatus between *vérité* and *mensonge*, *vie* and *art* manifested in the "Conversation avec un Allemand." In purporting to address the young Frenchman in an autobiography yet to be written, the essay or prologue acts as a signal which, as it turns out, itself contains the message it announces. In its thematic structure, it reflects the phases of life "lived through" by the author in terms which refer with the same validity to the artistic problem mentioned in the dialogue with Gide: the *mensonge* is in the text presented to the reader, while the *vérité* is to be discovered, by the reader, in his recognition of the irony contained in the text.

One may say that in *In Search of Myself* the problem of the artist in a pioneer environment is only the most superficial one; the musings of the narrator lead to the statement of antithesis between life and art already mentioned, while the essay, itself an art-form, is the medium used to represent life, and thus, in a way, ironically resolves the opposition it expresses. Furthermore the entire essay may be seen as a "coded" revelation of FPG's identity, and finally, as an explicit signal to André Gide, not only that FPG is alive, but that, in fact, the dialogue noted down in the "Conversation avec un Allemand" is to be continued. Whether the signal is heard or recognized is not the important thing.

Whether he [the young Frenchman] ever read the explanation [of his failure], what did it matter? There would be others, if not today, then ten decades from now. And if there were none, at no time, did it matter? The only thing that did matter, as far as I was concerned, was the fact that the attempt had been made. The rest I must leave to the gods . . .

But in its attempt to communicate with the Frenchman, the essay affirms, through its very literary form of existence, the presence still of the common denominator, "a great enthusiasm for life and art," which seems at first to be negated as the narrator describes his own situation.

The landscape image at the beginning of the essay suggests itself quite naturally to the aging narrator, and leaves open, or seems to do so, the alternative whether the beginning of old age will represent the end of life or the beginning of a new phase of it. The determining factor is the act of will performed by the author in creating a literary work, in which he re-creates his entire life. The "beginning" suggested by the landscape is an image of birth and represents, in the artistic context, the birth of the work of art, which, in turn, represents the life of the narrator. Through this work of art, then, the author makes possible his own re-birth: he is re-creating himself, he is, as FPG said to Gide, "lying." The work of art, an act

of will of the author, defies the inevitability of the conditions of his life. The synchronism of the beginning of the essay and an undefined condition of the "world," the description of which marks this beginning, in fact defines the world as one "emerging from chaos" rather than one about to die from entropy. This act of definition marks the beginning of creation, and makes of the author, as the "creator" of the world of the work of art, an *alter deus*, creator of an *altera natura*. It is the artist's will which determines, symbolically, existence or non-existence, birth or death. The essay itself marks the affirmation of life and art, and a negation that the landscape surrounding the narrator represents, literally or metaphorically, the end of a world about to die from entropy. Just as in the essay the life-art, truth-fiction opposition is overcome by the form of the essay itself, the work also suggests the writer's surmounting that desperate phase of his life, or that mood, designated by the landscape.

NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Douglas O. Spettigue, *FPG: The European Years* (Toronto: Oberon, 1963).
- <sup>2</sup> A. J. M. Smith (ed.), *Masks of Fiction* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1961), p. 14.
- <sup>3</sup> There is a further irony in the apparition of the old man. At seventy-four, he is six years older than the narrator, and thus represents a warning as to what his mental state might be six years hence. The old man thus indirectly stimulates the resolve forming in his mind, to write his autobiography. The longish passage dealing with the farmer's age and that of the narrator may again contain a reference to Grove's real identity. In assuming his new identity in Canada it was by six years that he aged himself.
- <sup>4</sup> André Gide, "Conversation avec un Allemand quelques années avant la guerre," in *Incidences* (Paris: NRF, Librairie Gallimard, 1924), pp. 143-44.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 141.

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