

# IN THE WHALE'S BELLY

## *Jay Macpherson's Poetry*

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JAY MACPHERSON'S FIRST MAJOR BOOK of poems, *The Boatman*, was published in 1957 by Oxford University Press and then republished in 1968 with the addition of sixteen new poems.<sup>1</sup> Her second book of poems, *Welcoming Disaster*, appeared in 1974. No discussion of modern Canadian poetry is complete without at least a mention of Jay Macpherson's name, but the only article on her poetry that I have come across is the one by James Reaney, "The Third Eye: Jay Macpherson's *The Boatman*," which appeared in *Canadian Literature* in 1960. Fortunately, that article is almost definitive. Superficially, there seem to be some obvious differences between *The Boatman* and *Welcoming Disaster*. The second in some ways seems much "simpler." It is my purpose here to explore some of the similarities and differences with the aid of Jay Macpherson's other writings,<sup>2</sup> which include two theses, two lectures, and a children's text on classical mythology.

As Reaney makes clear, the central myth of *The Boatman* is that of the ark. The ark appears to contain us, as though we were trapped in the belly of some monstrous creature, and its contents appear to be hopelessly miscellaneous; but properly perceived, Man, in fact, contains the ark, and its contents are ordered:

In a poem entitled "The Anagogic Man" we are presented with . . . the figure of a sleeping Noah whose head contains all creation . . . The whole collection of poems requires the reader to transfer himself from the sleep our senses keep to Noah's sleep, and from Noah's sleep eventually to the first morning in Paradise.

Or, to state the matter in Northrop Frye's terms:

In the anagogic phase literature imitates the total dream of man, and so imitates the thought of a human mind which is at the circumference and not at the center of its reality. . . . When we pass into anagogy, nature becomes, not the container, but the thing contained. . . . Nature is now inside the mind of an infinite man who builds his cities out of the Milky Way.<sup>3</sup>

Noah's salvaging operations at the time of the flood correspond to the activity of the poet, the man who perceives or "dreams" and thus makes "a Cosmos of miscellany." In other words, Noah, Endymion (the sleeping shepherd) and the

poet merge into one another. The type of the poet is, of course, Orpheus; and Narcissus, Orpheus and Psyche are interconnected figures. Narcissus is not seen in a negative light by Jay Macpherson. He also is the type of the poet, and the elegiac Orpheus engages in the same activity.<sup>4</sup> But the poet as an Orpheus or as a Psyche are conceptions that are of greater importance to the second book (*Welcoming Disaster*) than to the first, because both stories contain an element that is missing in the stories of the other figures. Both Orpheus and Psyche have to make a journey underground. Redemption is no longer a matter of starting with the world of the fall and gradually proceeding upwards. In the second book it becomes necessary to hit bottom and then to make the journey up with a fully regained or "half-regained Eurydice." Now the problem is not simply to get the animals outside, but to find the way to that perception again, the source of dreaming: "If you love me, take me back / To tread again the ancient track. . . ." Again, "Take me, guide of souls, with you / Paddled in your ghost canoe. . . ." Psyche is cast out of the palace,<sup>5</sup> and has to separate the seeds of good and evil<sup>6</sup> and to make the journey to the underworld before she can be reunited with love.

Again, as Reaney makes clear about *The Boatman*, the separation of the sexes corresponds to the separation between Man and Nature: "So Man, once a complete Man with Eve inside him, has seen himself split into two." In *The Boatman* it is enough to say that in a fallen world all attempts at union are bound to be somewhat unsatisfactory: "The sexes waking, now separate and sore, / Enjoy conjunction not feasible before; / But never long enough, never near enough, nor yet / Find their death mortal, however deeply met." In *Welcoming Disaster* the corpses that result from this disjunction have to be recognized and acknowledged. They have to be given their due. It is only then that they can in any way be recovered. "Naked spectres, come for shrouding, / Those I failed and snubbed and crossed, / In the deadly waters crowding: / Angel, let not one be lost." In *The Boatman* the Ark appears simply as a much misunderstood creature that has been needlessly at odds with Man: "Why did your spirit / Strive so long with me?" In *Welcoming Disaster* it is the self itself that is lost, and that is the corpse that must be recovered.

The obvious place to go looking for corpses is, of course, the world of the dead, the Kingdom of Hades, the world undersea, the world of memory, the world of the past. This is the world that *Welcoming Disaster* is primarily concerned with. Noah the boatman can be turned quite easily into a fisherman,<sup>7</sup> and this is, in fact, done in *The Boatman*, but the action is kindly rather than expiatory. To restate the matter, Noah is not a diver. Again, sleep imagery can be used to point the contrast between a drugged sleep and the sleep of the dreamer who sees with the third eye of real perception. This also is done in *The Boatman*, but in *Welcoming Disaster* the world of nightmare must first be explored. It becomes necessary to come to terms with or at least to face the past before the process of dreaming can begin again. (The Muses are, after all, the daughters of memory.) But here

a passage from *Anatomy of Criticism* is very much to the point: "Recurrence and desire interpenetrate, and are equally important in both ritual and dream. . . . In the middle of all this recurrence, however, is the central recurrent cycle of sleeping and waking life, the daily frustrations of the ego, the nightly awakening of a titanic self." The descent into the kingdom of Hades is not a search for the waters of forgetfulness, but for the source of dreams, for, in a sense, "pools where I fished with jamjars for minnows," for "strangeness of water." Rivers are life-giving, the sea is destructive. (In "Revelations" there is no more sea.) The boatman appears as a type of Charon. The corpses to be brought back are their own, the kid and the teddy bear (doll-god). This is, in fact, done, and expiation is achieved by a kind of acceptance of wrongs done and wrongs endured. The prayer to "infallibly restore my share in perdition" is granted.

**T**HERE ARE IN GENERAL FOUR BASIC LOCATIONS. To quote Jay Macpherson: ". . . if you take *Paradise Lost* as illustrating literature's imaginative world-picture over a very long period it gives us an essentially four-level arrangement with Heaven on top, Hell at the bottom, and the unfallen and fallen worlds the important two storeys in between. . . ."8 If Heaven is the total dream or the ark contained, then Hell is the waking nightmare or existence inside the belly of the fish. "Out of the belly of hell I cried. . . . I went down to the bottoms of mountains; the earth with her bars was about me forever."9 Reaney points out that *The Boatman* shows the way up from the fallen world. "If 'here' is this world and 'there' the world of Eternity, then this book shows the reader all the necessary steps of the way."

In *Welcoming Disaster* there are two kinds of movements. The first of these is concerned with the two lower levels, and the five sections of the book indicate the pattern. It is after a descent into the underworld that it is possible to return to the ordinary world of everyday life, the world in which "Some are plain lucky — we ourselves among them: / Houses with books, with gardens, all we wanted, / Work we enjoy, with colleagues we feel close to — / Love we have, even." The teddy bear brought back from the past can in this world be seen in its ordinary aspect as a worn-out toy, but he is at the same time "the Tammuz of my song, / Of death and hell the key, / And gone to mend the primal wrong, / The rift in Being, Me."

While, in one sense, there is a movement from the fallen world to the world of nightmare and back again to the daylight world, there is another kind of movement as well. To put it simply: If you dig deep enough, the way down becomes the way up, and you eventually see the stars. In Northrop Frye's terms: "if we persevere with the *mythos* of irony and satire, we shall pass a dead center, and finally see the gentlemanly Prince of Darkness bottom side up." Appropriately

enough this movement can be seen most clearly in the middle section of the book, "The Dark Side," that is, when the lowest point of the descent is reached. It occurs, for example, in the lines: "A well of truth, of images, of words./ Low where Orion lies/ I watch the solstice pit become a stair,/ The constellations rise." But see also "Transformation" in the fourth section, "Recognitions": "Tadwit is the world-tree made:/ I, reposing in his shade,/ See through leaves the heavens, where/ Whirls in play a smallish Bear. . . ."

It is evident, of course, that the ark for Jay Macpherson represents not a withdrawal into isolation, but a merger into a community, a sealing of the "rift in Being," the externalization of the dream. The final chapter of her doctoral dissertation deals with Canadian literature, and she observes there: "The dream . . . at least points towards communion. If at our worst our civilization is mass-minded, reflecting the qualities of nature at deadest . . . perhaps at best it is socially-minded, and the search for America or True North resolves itself as the quest of community."<sup>10</sup> It is the descent into the kingdom of Hades that makes this entry into the world of community possible.

For the purposes of the central theme, that is the closure of "the rift in Being," it does not really matter very much whether Man is represented by a male figure or by a female one. With regard to *The Boatman* Reaney makes the following observation: "In the 'Garden of the Sexes' we see the natural feminine and fallen world imprisons man's waking life until he is bound to a Tree; but at night Man escapes from his prison in dreams and it is Nature that finds herself imprisoned there." And again: "So Man, once a complete Man with Eve inside him, has seen himself split into two. He has been content to copulate with the other half (the hideous hermaphrodite Phoenix); now the first Man returns." In *Welcoming Disaster* it is made explicit that the figures are interchangeable.<sup>11</sup> "First was Inanna . . . She sold to Hell, to save her skin, Dumuzi . . . Hell was Ereshkigal, her sister — her, then . . . he had a sister too, it seems Geshtinanna . . . She too offered herself for him . . . Four are there? No, my Ted, I guess just us two. . . ."<sup>12</sup> Psyche seeks a lost love; Orpheus a lost Eurydice; Demeter a lost Persephone, Venus a lost Adonis. Alice, the little girl who fell down a hole in the earth and then figured she had dreamed it all, seeks herself. (The poem "Playing" gives us the Questor Frustrated.) And Jonah in the whale's belly is in an underground world. But it is convenient in some ways to see the primary questor figure as that of Psyche since the doll-god is not allowed to speak directly for himself.

Murderer and victim are interchangeable, two halves of one another,<sup>13</sup> and the quest is in a sense a joint quest. Jay Macpherson sees the reverse of the story of Psyche in the story of Bluebeard.<sup>14</sup> Since the fact of murder must first be faced, Bluebeard's chamber serves very well as in the poem, "Visiting": "takes one to know one: he/ Never fooled me, Even without the/ Blood on the key. . . . I/ Can't any more/ Tell you to what, love, you've/ Opened your door."

Again, Psyche's candle or lamp can be seen as a means of exploring the underworld (something that must be done) and also as a beacon for those now lost. "Long desired the dead return./ Saw our candle and were safe. . . ." "Take the lantern: here I'll stay/ Nevermore behold the day,/ Keep a lasting watch above/ My undying monster love." In her lecture on Beauty and the Beast, Jay Macpherson expresses interest in

the odd reversal by which . . . in Keats and in the Brontës . . . Psyche becomes specifically the poetic soul, and the other worldly lover at the window becomes the spirit of inspiration — whereas in the old story he is burned by the lamp and flies out in a temper, in Romantic revision the point of the lamp is to guide him safely in.

This aspect of the story fits in very well with the first section of *Welcoming Disaster*, "Invocations."

About Apuleius' story itself Jay Macpherson says:

it seems close to the themes of fall and redemption; . . . Psyche . . . is also the first literary model we have of the adventures of a human heroine along the lines of the labours and sufferings of such a hero as Hercules [who also descended into the underworld]; but what the story is most obviously doing . . . is commenting on the double nature of love. . . . Cupid . . . is certainly also the dragon. . . .

So then, if asked what the book is about, it would be easy to say that it is about a little girl and her teddy bear. What could be more familiar? But it is also about the human soul exploring hell. What could be less abstruse, less abstract than human pain? — "too late . . . / . . . to unlearn / needed familiar pain. / Come, little thorn." The most obvious point, however, is that, placed side by side, *The Boatman* and *Welcoming Disaster* reveal that the distance between the mythopoetic and the familiar is less great than might be supposed.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Her very first book, *Nineteen Poems*, was published at the Seizin Press, Deya, Mallorca in 1952 by Robert Graves. *O Earth Return* (Toronto, 1954) contains the poems from Section II of *The Boatman*. "A Dry Light" and "The Dark Air" appeared as a pamphlet in the 1960's, from Hawkshead Press, Toronto. These do not appear in *The Boatman*. "Jonah, a cantata text set to music by John Beckwith, arranged by him out of the Bible with commissioned verse by Jay Macpherson" appeared in Reaney's *Alphabet*, No. 8, June 1964, pp. 8-13. Six "Emblem Drawings for the Boatman" appeared in *Alphabet*, No. 10, 1965, pp. 51-57. *Welcoming Disaster* was published privately in 1974 (Saannes Publications, Toronto).

<sup>2</sup> "Milton and the Pastoral Tradition," Master's Thesis, University of Toronto, 1955; "Narcissus: some uncertain reflections," *Alphabet*, No. 1 (Summer 1960), pp. 41-57, and No. 2 (July 1961) pp. 65-71; *Four Ages of Man: The Classical Myths* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1962); "Narcissus, or the Pastoral of Solitude; Some Conventions of Nineteenth-Century Romance," doctoral dissertation, University of Toronto (1964); "Pratt's Romantic Mythology," The Pratt Lecture, Memorial

- University, St. John's Newfoundland, 1972; "Beauty and the Beast and Some Relatives," A Lecture Given to the Friends of the Osborne and Lillian H. Smith collections at Boys and Girls House, Toronto Public Library on Jan. 28, 1974.
- <sup>3</sup> *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1971), p. 119.
- <sup>4</sup> See "Narcissus: some uncertain reflections," p. 56: "Behind Romantic elegy — such poems as *Kubla Khan* and *Dejection* — stands the 'gloomy egoist' Narcissus . . . He carries his laments for a lost paradise over from the poems into romances . . ." And again: "Orpheus is the central figure of Renaissance pastoral elegy . . . The identity in his myth of mourning poet and the one mourned for clarifies and justifies the old inclination of the pastoral elegiac poet in another's fate to weep his own."
- <sup>5</sup> See "Narcissus," p. 69. Psyche's castle is the house of the soul. The whale's belly is its opposite. See "Jonah, a cantata text," p. 9, "(Whale) . . . A living soul I did contain / Till God withdrew that soul again."
- <sup>6</sup> See "Milton and the Pastoral Tradition," pp. 40-41. This is one way of looking at the task Venus sets Psyche. The other two tasks and the main purpose of her errand could be interpreted in such a way as to fit in with the poems in *Welcoming Disaster*, but perhaps that would be stretching matters.
- <sup>7</sup> See "Emblem Drawings for The Boatman," p. 56. The one for the boatman depicts an ark with a hat on its head and a fish swimming underneath.
- <sup>8</sup> "Pratt's Romantic Mythology," p. 6. See also "Milton and the Pastoral Tradition," pp. 3-4, and Northrop Frye, *Fables of Identity* (N.Y.: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1963), p. 63.
- <sup>9</sup> *Jonah*, 2. But see also "Jonah, a cantata text," p. 11, and "Narcissus, or The Pastoral of Solitude," p. 442.
- <sup>10</sup> "Narcissus, or The Pastoral of Solitude," p. 447.
- <sup>11</sup> See "Narcissus," p. 52: "One could compare for example the view of . . . Landino . . . that Narcissus is the man who yearns after earthly beauty, while his own soul . . . fades away . . . to the configuration of 'my Spectre Round Me.' The same pattern applies in Blake's view of the Fall: the watery surface in which Adam sees his image corresponds to Adam's sleep in which his emanation Eve is separated from him and becomes the delusive object world of nature."
- <sup>12</sup> As Jay Macpherson indicates in the notes to *Welcoming Disaster*, the figures are taken from *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, edited by James B. Pritchard, 2nd edition (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1955). The fertility goddess, Sumerian Inanna is the same as Ishtar. Dumuzi is Tammuz (Adonis).
- <sup>13</sup> See "Narcissus," pp. 56-57. "The Narcissus motif is characterized by a tendency towards triangular grouping of persons, roughly corresponding to Narcissus, the other self and Echo, or in Blake's convenient terms, 'Subject', 'spectre' and 'emanation.' . . . Which is the soulmate and which the demon is left to the particular writer. . . . As with Frankenstein's 'demon' and 'friend', the moral status of one or both of the supporters may be left profoundly ambiguous."
- <sup>14</sup> "Beauty and the Beast and Some Relatives," pp. 12-13. "It's inevitable that in later story-telling we should find split forms of this theme: on the one hand the 'Beauty and the Beast' group, where the hideous beast becomes, or proves to be after all, the desirable lover — on the other hand a group where the dashing suitor turns out to be a monster, and what I may call the archetype there is the story of Bluebeard. . . ."