DUMPLINGS & DIGNITY

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In conversation with Donald Cameron, W. O. Mitchell stated: "To me the only justification for art is that this particular narrative, these particular people, shall articulate some transcending truth. . . ."[1] The "transcending truth" of *The Vanishing Point* is that the rights of others must not be violated, and that authority must be tempered with compassion if the delicate web we call civilization is to remain intact. But Mitchell knows that the word must become flesh; and his imagery contributes significantly to this incarnation in *The Vanishing Point*. It helps the theme to evolve not as overt didacticism but organically out of the whole matrix of character and situation.

The action begins when Carlyle Sinclair, a thirty-six-year-old widower who acts as teacher and agent on the Paradise Valley reserve, awakens one fine spring morning and prepares to drive into the city to spend the afternoon with Victoria Rider, a former student of his now training to be a nurse. Upon his arrival at the hospital, Sinclair is dismayed to learn that Victoria has disappeared. He begins a frantic search for her, at first in the wilderness and later in the city itself. When at last he does locate her, he learns that shame over "failing" both him and her parents has prevented her from returning to the reserve, and that she has been obliged to solicit and is now pregnant. Sinclair is shattered. He leaves her in the street. But later his instincts triumph over his vanity and over the values imposed upon him by an impersonal white society. He dances with her, sleeps with her, and determines to marry her.

This summary indicates little more than a quest and some measure of attainment. It reveals nothing of the humour and seriousness, the satire and sympathy, the conflicts and ironies which inform the novel. Nor does it indicate much about the theme or values, the "transcending truth" which Mitchell wishes to convey. But it does, I hope, provide some context for my subsequent comments about Mitchell's imagery.

The Vanishing Point abounds with images which relate significantly, and sometimes quite subtly, to idea and mood, and hence become in varying degrees symbolic. The categories from which these images are drawn are indeed diverse.

Places: Beulah Creek, Paradise Valley, Storm and Misty; objects: mirrors, reversed hearts, oatmeal biscuits, artificial birds and animals, drums, a magic lantern, a white nightgown, an oil company's coloured markers, Archie Nicotine's truck, Ian Fyfe's conservatory; natural things: a male grouse, a bee, an osprey, orchids, sloughs; the senses, especially of smell, sight and sound; even character or caricature where an idea or value and not psychological depth is primarily imaged: Ian Fyfe, Rev. Dingle, Rev. Heally Richards, Aunt Pearl, Old Kacky, Old Esau Rider, and Victoria. These and other minor images interact with the three controlling symbols or thematic images in the novel: excrement, the vanishing point, and bridges.

Human dignity is an issue in this novel. Sinclair recalls an early episode in which he had affronted and hurt Old Esau by boiling carbolic in the classroom, ostensibly as a disinfectant.

> "It's medicine, Esau," he'd lied defensively. "For the germs — it kills the germs — the ones in the air."
>
> Esau sat silent, his eyes on the oilcloth of the kitchen table, and Carlyle cursed the disinfectant's authority, bringing bitterness right into the kitchen, even though the door to the schoolroom was closed. How much sharper in Esau's nostrils after the outside winter air.
>
> "Hey-uh," Esau said, the Stony sound clipped off in the throat. It could mean almost anything: yes — no — maybe — you're right — you're wrong. "White people smell too."
>
> "Do we?"
>
> "Hey-uh." That was affirmative.
>
> "How do you mean, Esau?"
>
> "To us people, you know."
>
> "We smell to you."
>
> "Cow."
>
> "I don't . . ."
>
> "Quite strong."
>
> "Oh — milky. You mean we smell milky to you?"
>
> It was several deliberate seconds before Esau lifted his hooded eyes. "Hey-uh." This time he meant no.

What do whites smell like? It is an easy step from this question and Sinclair's reflection on "the disinfectant's authority" to the first of the thematic images I mentioned. Like Sinclair's deliberate misplacing of the Oil Company's markers but more consistently so, excrement as image is used to symbolize defiance of irresponsible and abused authority, to symbolize a response to some affront to human dignity. One of the most amusing anecdotes in the novel illustrates this. It occurs when Sinclair recalls the time he failed to obey Old Kacky's instructions during a lesson in perspective drawing. As a result he was ordered to Old Kacky's office and strapped. Then, left to regain his composure in the office, he defecated among the papers in Old Kacky's drawer. Old Kacky endured the indignity of living with

the smell for a week before discovering its source.[2] Years later Sinclair himself affronts the dignity of Harold Lefthand by bullying him over the poor attendance of his children at school. Lefthand retaliates by putting horse manure in Sinclair's water supply. Sinclair suffers the indignity of having drunk the water for two weeks before discovering the ruse.

Another important example of excremental imagery relates to Sinclair's Aunt Pearl, who produces white stools — "little white dumplings." There is an incongruity in Aunt Pearl's "purity": her stools are white but she burns string after each bowel movement, presumably as a deodorant. Her absolutes are arraigned implicitly in the following exchange between Sinclair and Doctor Saunders:

> "I never did get a professional explanation from you — what about Aunt Pearl?"
>
> "Her white stool? Oh — soppy — sippy — bland diet, I guess. You get it with older — no — more likely mucous colitis."
>
> "Whatever that is."
>
> "Anxiety — not ulcerative but — God, now wouldn't that be funny!"
>
> "What?"
>
> "Your anal erotic Aunt Pearl — responsible for the whole mechanistic mess we're in."
>
> "No. Not very."
>
> "Sent us all to play in the technological toy room — she's still burning her string you know — in that great bathroom in the sky!"
>
> "I agree."
>
> Sanders lifted a cupped hand, the thumb crooked back; he made a broad pass back and forth, depressing his thumb. "Haaaaaaah — haaaaaaaaah — sssssssssssit — pressurized cans of flora green — oh — oh, if only she'd toilet-train the hydro and pulp and gas and oil and the little automobile boys — before they do it all over the whole wild green broadloom!"

There is also something anaemic about Aunt Pearl that stands in sharp contrast to the red and raw vitality of the Stonys — or at least in contrast to the image of the Stonys before they contracted the white man's diseases. Mitchell apparently intended a similar negative connotation for Rev. Healy Richards who is described as a "photograph negative" and "the negative-man," and whose penchant for peanut butter makes Archie Nicotine shudder at the thought of a man eating all that "squirrel shit."

THE TITLE IMAGE OF THE NOVEL is also an image of negation. The vanishing point, in perspective drawing, is the point towards which parallel receding lines appear to converge. But the main function of the vanishing point in this novel is human rather than art oriented. The image does remind us of different ways of perceiving — not just objects but the human condition as well;

and it does allude to guiding lines in art and in life, where man draws lines of authority for himself and, often more destructively, for others. But the really significant thrust of the image, as Mitchell uses it, is towards a nothingness to which the species seems inexorably drawn because of the greed and callousness and intolerance of its members.

Disillusioned with Fyfe's attitude to the Indians as "terminal cases" and with his band-aid measures of helping them, disillusioned alike with what Sanders terms "the reserve-system slough — tepid with paternal help" and "the crowded, noisy, concrete and glass and plastic and asphalt slough," disillusioned with Rev. Dingle's "absent-minded masturbatory loving kindness that has borne no fruit," disillusioned with his own efforts, Sinclair by extension sees the whole human spectacle as futile. All is being "sucked into the vanishing point." "Despair like me . . . ," he tells Fyfe; "Right from the beginning the whole human race has been one God-damned mess!"

Alone at home, he recalls the premature death of his wife.

> For a moment there came back to him the profile of a woman seated in a window bench, her knees drawn up and arms clasped around them — and oh, the sad and shallow curve of her neck with head tilted down. So still — so still for hours! Once more, on an institutional counter, he signed away all happy days; he accepted a big Manilla envelope with its tiny silver wrist-watch, engagement ring, wedding band. Then a train was being sucked into the prairie vanishing point. He stood alone on a platform on a friendless planet.

But Sinclair, no matter how depressing the moment, refuses to say a permanent "No" to Life. Mate, his boyhood friend, had argued with him years earlier that the vanishing point is an illusion: "It only comes to a vanishing point. . . . " In the end the truth of Mate's remark is symbolically affirmed through traditional images of spring — new leaf, bird's song, soaring osprey, water, especially the "rebirth" of Beulah Creek — and in the working of Archie's truck. But this affirmation of life is made plausible through what I believe is the most important image in the whole book — bridges.

In the physical sense, bridges are essential links in communications and transportation systems: and one thinks immediately of the suspension bridge over the Spray, an essential link between the two worlds of this novel. But far more important to the revelation and affirmation of *The Vanishing Point* are the psychological bridges which must be erected among people if we are to escape extinction as *human* beings.

On the spring morning on which the action begins, Sinclair recognizes himself as a "thirty-six-year-old adolescent . . . starved for the thrust from self to the centre of a loved one." Later that morning, while crossing over the Spray, the need for positive contact among human beings prompts him to comment: "That was what

was needed really; some sort of suspension bridge that could carry hearts and minds across and into other hearts and minds."

Mitchell makes it clear, through his men of the cloth, that the Church has not erected such "bridges." Rev. Dingle's attempt at reaching the Stonys through their language provides a delightful little irony; and for all the Biblical texts referred to by clergy or layman, no mention is made of First Corinthians, Chapter Thirteen!

"Had he ever made it across to any of these people?" Sinclair asks himself. Occasionally he had — when personal and spontaneous good will rather than institutionalized charity had prevailed. There had been a genuine and mutual "thrust from self" in the giving of gifts on that first Christmas in Paradise Valley; even more sustaining had been that memorable August afternoon when he had taken Victoria, then twelve years old, into the city to have a tooth capped:

> As they walked through the crushing flow of people, she had taken his hand and held it as they walked. For the first time two worlds had merged, and he knew it. He and she were no longer so vulnerable on this concrete and asphalt planet. The memory of her hand in his could still surprise him with the dry, sun heat of its own.

Memories such as these, and Sinclair's initial faith in good works, help to articulate the thesis that mankind can escape "being sucked into the vanishing point."

But there is an Antithesis in his moments of depression, when he fears that communication among human beings might be just a dream: "What a weak bridge emotion was for people to walk across to each other — emotion swinging, unable to hold the heavy weight of communication."[3] And in his realization that the lines of authority which man draws do not ensure justice and dignity for his fellowman. Above all, he himself had dynamited a "bridge": he had failed Victoria when she needed him most. Out of these antithetical states of mind arises the Synthesis which is incipient in his admonition of Fyfe, in his glass world, amid his hybrid orchids, and away from reality and nature.

> "You're trying to — for something that hasn't got anything to do with what the orchid wants."
>
> . . . . . .
>
> "Listen to the orchid, Fyfe — let her tell her own delight and need. . . ."

Fyfe's imposition of his own will upon the orchid parallels what the white authorities are doing to the Indians, and, ironically, what Sinclair is doing to Victoria. Later, he will fully recognize that authority must be tempered by compassion; and that one may improve social conditions, but only if one has a sympathetic understanding of the human condition. People like Rev. Richards and Aunt Pearl lack the "compassion halo" and force other people into moral boxes. He, too, had not experienced the suffering and loss that help to build character, nor had he always

taken into account the dignity of others. "They perished and he taught them arithmetic; they thirsted to death on their time desert and he gave them reading and spelling lessons. . . . without twinning pain his compassion had been specious."

THE WHEEL COMES FULL CIRCLE. It was the drumming of a male grouse that had aroused Sinclair to new life on the morning he had set out to visit Victoria in the city. Near the end of the novel, the dance (and drums) — primitive ritual of transcendence and symbol of unity — finally lifts him out of "the home envelope of self." He seeks out Victoria, and, dancing with her amid that great tribal wash of passion that obliterates all but the Now, he rediscovers what he and Mate had discovered intuitively long ago:

> They were both alien from and part of a living whole. The dry husk of a dead gopher, an abandoned garter-snake skin, magpies, undertaker beetles, had taught them the terror of being human. But they knew that they were accountable to each other; the badger, the coyote, the kill-deer, the jack rabbit, the undertaker beetle, could not share their alien terror. They were not responsible for each other. Man was.
>
> Man lifted bridges between himself and other men so that he could walk from his own heart and into other hearts. That was the great and compensating distinction: man did — the jack rabbit, the badger, the kill-deer, the weasel, the undertaker beetle, did not. How could he have forgotten that! How could he have left Victoria on that city street. Archie hadn't; Archie had not destroyed a bridge. But he had turned away from her — from all of them, lost sight of their vivid need. Victoria had not truly failed, but he had. . . .
>
> He danced again with Victoria. . . .
>
> . . . . . .
>
> Who cared now — who cared now! Only the now remained to them — the now so great that only death or love could greaten it. Greater than pain, stronger than hunger or their images paled with future — dimmed with past. Only the now — pulsing and placeless — now! Song and dancer and watching band were one, under the bruising drum that shattered time and self and all other things that bound them.
>
> Her hand took his as they stood up, held it as they walked to the tent flap. The drum followed them all the way to Beulah Creek bridge, then with one lambasting sound, it was stilled.

This is the philosophical and emotional climax of the novel. Sinclair is, in Eliot's phrase, "At the still point of the turning world," where all opposites are harmonized. His subsequent sleeping with Victoria merely re-emphasizes symbolically his triumph over his own vanity, and his defiance of intolerant authority. Next morning, waking once more to the drumming of the grouse, and looking tenderly upon Victoria lying there without an "overlay of lace" and not "daisy-white," he reflects

that, until now, life "had given him the wrong commandments: be loved — don't love; tell — don't ask; take — don't give." But far from being "a separate peace," as was Frederic's relationship with Catherine in *A Farewell to Arms*, Sinclair's love for Victoria symbolizes universal kindness — the only solution possible in a world where Old Esau's Storm and Misty magic is obsolete, where Fyfe's welfare measures are demeaning, and where the miracle healing of Richards is just another form of prostitution.[4]

Three images — excrement, the vanishing point, and bridges — carry the burden of Mitchell's commentary on the delicate web we call civilization, and on the importance of compassion and responsibility in keeping that web intact. However, a word must be said about the minor images which twinkle in and around these controlling symbols and help to illuminate the theme, and to intensify the psychology of defiance and negation and abnormality, failure and despair, hope and affirmation which informs the narrative. (Here, a few examples must serve for the many.) Magic lantern, dead little Willis's toy-room, the three-balled bronze lion in Aunt Pearl's living room are images of the abnormality and artificiality which cramp the individual and help to negate all that we mean by such terms as "spirit" and "Life Force." Gloria Catface, the Indian prostitute, appears to have parallels in Miss Rossdance's girls. And "white" is almost always associated with excrement. But there are also images which are positive. The reversed heart image occurs at least twice in the novel: once, as a metaphor for the cloven-hoof prints near the beaver dam; and again, in the black comedy of the eccentric Dr. Dabbs at the hospital. The heart must be right: that message pervades the narrative. Bird's song, water, and soaring osprey symbolize love, generation, and the resilient spirit and contribute likewise to the motif of rebirth.

The little Powderface boy, playing with his battered toy truck or floating chips on his tiny canal system, reminds us that boys are one at heart, regardless of the colour of their skin. As he watches that "little bare-bum shaman," Sinclair reflects: "I want to mirror you so you may be more nearly true! . . . I promise you I won't destroy you with distorted image. I will not turn you into a backward person. . . . Let's you and I conjure together. . . . do our marvelous human tricks together!" The mirror image or metaphor, at various places representative of the Indians' shame and confusion, is, at the end, directed towards promotion of human dignity. Finally, there is "the little phrase," which may or may not constitute an image but which, by repetition and variation, contributes to the motifs of the novel and helps to provide rhythm: Fyfe's "see what transpires"; Archie's "that is the whole situation"; and Sinclair's "*Little lost lamb, Victoria!*"

But W. O. Mitchell is no romantic: he is not promoting images of "the noble savage" or the wilderness utopia. And the artificiality and bureaucracy of the white administrators are balanced by the filth and inefficiency of the Stonys. Mitchell is a lover of life for whom the "irresponsible" is often irresistible; and

his humour and irony help him to avoid the prejudice, sentimentality and condescension to which literature about ethnic and native minorities is so susceptible. He is a humanist who anchors his narrative in a milieu he knows well, the more convincingly to articulate a truth which transcends that milieu. The principle of love and compassion as the panacea for a troubled world is not new: what is important is that a man who is neither a cynic nor a sentimentalist can affirm it in our own time, and how that affirmation is made from experience filtered through a sensitivity and imagination unique in our literature. "[T]he main justification for art is that it grows out of the unique and individual human being, and that when the art experience happens between a creative artist and a creative partner [the reader], it is probably the closest a human can ever come to truly crossing a bridge to another human . . . ,"[5] Mitchell has claimed. His handling of image and idea in *The Vanishing Point* makes good that claim.

NOTES

[1] *Conversations with Canadian Novelists*, ed. Donald Cameron (Toronto: Macmillan, 1973), Part Two, p. 51.

[2] Heather Robertson, in a review of *The Vanishing Point*, recalls being told that the Indians of one Saskatchewan reserve used to steal into the R.C.M.P. detachment and deposit human excrement on the Corporal's living-room couch as a means of destroying the enemy's dignity without taking his life. (See "W. O. Mitchell: Pain Beneath the Laughter," *Saturday Night*, January 1974, vol. 89, pp. 31-32.)

[3] Later Sinclair reflects on the absence of real intimacy with his father: "It had been as though his father had decided that emotion was waste" and "He guessed that was the way it had been with him and his father: 'you in your small corner and I in mine'."

[4] Cf. Mitchell's skillful juxtaposition of scenes from Gloria Catface's prostitution and Rev. Healy Richards' evangelism.

[5] *Conversations with Canadian Novelists*, p. 51.

DISPROPORTION

Ralph Gustafson

Chalk this up: never before
Has such praise been given
Snow on the limbs of trees shaken
In a shoddy wind,