## THE PAST RECAPTURED

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The texture of youth was still intact in him. No blow or unhappiness is ever accepted as truth, so long as time can always be made to begin at the beginning again.

RNEST BUCKLER excels in conveying the texture of youth, and in The Mountain and the Valley presents a young man who suffers a series of blows and gradually loses, but finally, if ambiguously, recaptures the power to "begin again." Unlike novels about boys growing to maturity (Who Has Seen the Wind, Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, Sons and Lovers) which conclude by looking ahead to the expanding future of adulthood, The Mountain and the Valley concludes by looking back at youth, but at a youth which, on re-examination, expands in significance. From Prologue to Epilogue the novel circles the thirty years of David Canaan's life until his final walk up the mountain, which proves to be a means of rediscovering his own past. This experience is matched by the patchwork rug stitched together by Grandmother Ellen. As she works, each rag evokes memories of the clothing it came from, the person who wore it, the time it entered the family wardrobe. Thus she stitches together a family tapestry and brings the past into a pattern: "The years were like a ribbon she was in the act of pleating." David does the same as he climbs the mountain, and Buckler does the same in his novel: as Ellen fits a last scrap of white lace into the centre of her rug, David's "vision" turns white, he dies in the snow, and the novel comes to an end.

Throughout the novel, David's maturing is studied in terms of time. His growing self-awareness entails a growing sensitivity to time and its role in his life. He discovers that his life — or lifetime — is essentially temporal, that his sense of himself and his relation to others and to the Annapolis Valley depends on his relation to his own past, present and future. Consequently, when his awareness grows so intense that he is "nothing but one great white naked eye of self-

consciousness", he becomes obsessed with the "tick, tick, tick, of emptiness" within him; this in contrast to his unreflecting friend, Steve, who "had lived as many years as David, but time itself was a thing he would never hear or see." The importance to Buckler of time, particularly past time, has been noted, especially by D. O. Spettigue, but it has not received the close attention it requires. The Mountain and the Valley is a study of what Georges Poulet calls "human time", time as the forum of human growth and emotion and thought. In it, as in Buckler's second book, The Cruelest Month, characters tally up their lives through "the arithmetic of time"; they measure their condition "by clock's time ... by joy's time . . . by dread's time"; they are people "whose mainspring has snapped," balanced uneasily between "memory and desire," between past and future. In such a study, time is not just a source of metaphor to express their experiences. It is a felt constituent of experience, or the very condition of experiencing. Joseph Conrad, in one of his ironic moods, noted that all man has to make him human is his mortality, which is a "scurvy, mangy, little bit of time." David finds that his life is composed of such rags of memory, and his last act is to stitch these together and reassemble his past.

David's intelligence allows for direct discussion of time, but more often his condition is registered by illustrative incidents. His life is lived, not just discussed. We find that there are two modes of time conditioning his life: the time of the valley and the time of the mountain. The first is chronological time, carrying David from childhood to adulthood. The second is a timeless transcendence which surmounts and encompasses linear time, just as Ellen's rug gathers into a unity the disparate times of her life, making them all co-present. These two times are in counterpoint through the novel, and a source of tension in David's life. The story traces the tightening and final resolution of that tension.

Time and tension are established at once in the Prologue where David's condition is shown through temporal contradictions. He has a boy's face which somehow seems old: "The longer you looked, the less you could be sure whether the face was young or old." His expression of patience, which waits calmly for the future, is "disputed" by one of quickness, which anticipates it. Similarly, he is restless, yet "any impulse to movement receded before the compulsion of the emptiness: to suspend the moment and prolong it, exactly as it was, in a kind of spell." The novel consists of one great flashback tracing the development of this tense state of affairs. Through it, Buckler explores the temporal "arithmetic" of David's life and death.

In Part One, David is eleven years old and immersed in a childhood world

dominated by a present continually fresh. He knows nothing of time because the present is always sufficient to him.

There was nothing repetitive about the mornings then. Each one was brand new, with a gift's private shine. Until the voices of late evening began to sound like voices over water. Then, quite suddenly, sleep discarded it entirely. You woke again, all at once. The instant thought that another day had something ready for you made a really physical tickling in your heart.

This is the innocent age of the "Baptism Pool," the rainbow and Christmas. It is the magic time Buckler celebrates in Ox Bells and Fireflies: the "instantaneity of youth" when "Time was neither before you nor behind you: you were exactly opposite the present moment." The present moment is everything, and so David has little sense of change. In his eagerness to set off for the mountain, he cannot eat, yet cannot conceive of growing hungry later: "If he could only make them see how meaningless the possibility of being hungry later on was." At times of great enjoyment, such as Christmas, the moment "brims", "spills over" and becomes magical. These are "moments out of time altogether". "It was as if the cable of time had been broken and they were all magically marooned until its strands were sliced together again." David is too young to have a past or to conceive of the future except in the vaguest of terms. He always feels that it is a day of "promise", a feeling which may look to the future, but is rooted firmly in the present. When he declares that he will be the greatest general in the world or climb the mountain every day or marry Effie, he is forming convictions to fill the present and give it intensity. The idea of death, which interrupts the joyful fishing trip, means nothing to him. At the funeral, he can appreciate the grief of the moment and promising to marry Effie, but he cannot conceive of death as a future possibility for himself or, more abstractly, as the end of time ("human time") entirely. Anna listens in excitement to the stories of her Grandmother, the traditional means by which age entices youth out into life and experience. But again, death is a contradiction: "It isn't sound or silence. It isn't here or there; now or then." Even more puzzling is an idea which will recur, the idea of dying while still young. This is the fate of Effie, Toby, David and the sailor in Ellen's story. Children associate death with the aged, but death is neither "now or then"; it is "over the rim of Never", as he says in Ox Bells and Fireflies, and beyond time.

In Parts Two and Three, when David is between thirteen and sixteen years old, he enters the world of adolescence. Here he discovers the past. To a child, life is all of a piece and all in the present; but now past time begins to differentiate itself in a process of fragmentation — of the self, of the family, of the community —

which builds through the novel. Awareness of change in himself prompts David to compare the way he is now with the way he was before. Consequently, his gaze tends to be directed back to the past which is more accessible to him than the still undefined future. In a contrary view, D. O. Spettigue describes the first half of The Mountain and the Valley as looking forward in time and the second half as looking back.1 While David's mood often does modulate from hope to regret, it is really his attitude to change that alters and defines his position. Here we find an interesting reversal that will contribute to the tension in his life. As a youth, he notices how much things have changed: he is oriented to the past. Later in life, the very unlikelihood of any further change makes him painfully aware of the future which will offer no relief. Thus Part Two opens amid signs of the past. As they drive to the graveyard, David recalls local stories and legends: the tale of Effie's great-great-grandmother, murdered by a drunken Indian; the tale of Lord Rothesay's visit to his grandparents. He considers the history of the valley, his neighbours, and his own ancestry. His sense of the past is strongest at the graveyard. Once again, death does not make him look to the future or beyond time. It makes him look back at all that is "unchangeably ended": "all the stain of the word 'ago' was suddenly in that spot." And again, as he looks at the grave of Barney Starratt who died at age seventeen, David ponders the contradiction of dying while young.

When time is humanized, it manifests itself first as emotion. The feelings attendant on David's new awareness of the past are a sense of privacy, of loss and of betrayal. The present joy or pain of childhood can be shared, especially within a family, but the world of memory is personal and private. Memory is allied to solitude. As Ellen looks at her family, she finds that each face contains something of the others, and David, who in different moods resembles different members of the family, "seemed to have no face of his own." He has been inseparable from his family. Now he must detach himself as a private individual and assume his own face. At first he enjoys doing so, and in the new house has his own room where "there was the exciting feeling of being unreachably alone. It wasn't the isolation of real severance (that was intolerable), but a cosy isolation of his own making." Privacy is comfortable, but more and more, time and change bring pain. David's new individuality also prompts a sense of loss. He feels there is something gone which cannot be recovered. As he leaves the graveyard:

it seemed as if ... the whole place had drawn all its life back within itself. It was like a house you've always lived in, at the moment of leaving. It would never bring its life out for them again, just for them alone.

What are lost are simplicity, family unity and, to the adolescent Chris and David, sexual innocence. David's sexual experiences with Effie destroy the childish friendship they shared and replace it with a new, but as yet unformed, love. But David's sensitivity to the past is stronger than any awareness of future development, and so his strongest feeling is "a kind of loss. She was like a part of himself that had slipped away." Furthermore, he realizes he has betrayed her in order to prove his new virility to his boyfriends. Later, his new allegiance to Toby forces another betrayal: "Suddenly he had to do what he did. He had to show Toby he went all the way with girls." David finds himself both the betrayer and the betrayed. He feels betrayed by Chris when he learns of his brother's relation with Charlotte. He feels that he is betraying himself by taking advantage of Effie. And he feels betrayed by time, by a course of events in which he has participated, but which he cannot control. For David, the tension between past and present is measured by guilt. When Effie dies (although, in fact, through no fault of his), all the feelings which have grown out of his sense of the past - privacy, loss, betrayal, guilt - converge on him:

The guilt soon passed from voice to echo. But it was the first thing he could tell no one. It taught him that secrecy about anything (even a hateful thing like this) made it a possession of curious inviolability, and tempted him to collect more. The essence of childhood is that the past is never thought of as something that might have been different. He was never, even for a moment, all child again.

This is David's first realization that one cannot always "begin again" because the past is irrevocable. It is his first realization that death is final. When he seeks comfort by imagining the same events turning out happily, the "gust of fact" exposes his pretence and "the crush of 'never' got in behind everything."

Time continues to bring pain into David's life in Parts Four and Five when, as a young man in his twenties, his gaze finally turns to the future. It is a sign of immaturity that this should happen so late in his life. His ties to childhood, to family and to the past have been too strong and inhibited his development. Childhood "promise" has not led to adult "fulfilment". Anna leaves for school and Toby goes off to sea while David remains in the valley. His love for Effie never has a chance to develop and is replaced by a meaningless affair with her mother, Bess, an older woman who forms, in effect, another bond with the past, holding him back. When he does turn to the future, it is already too late, as the

episodes of the rock and the scar indicate. Where before his position in time was gauged by feelings of loss and guilt, now it is gauged by reference to the future through an uneasy suspense which gives way to a desolate suspension.

One path to the future that David might take follows his father's foot-steps. This is the only course offered by the life of the valley, but David cannot take it. To Joseph, the great rock which he and his son succeed in moving suggests permanence and stability, a continuity through time binding him to the land, binding father to son to grandson:

My land fits me loose and easy, like my old clothes. That rock there is one my father rolled out, and my son's sons will look at these rocks I am rolling out today. Someone of my own name will always live in my house.

But to David, the land is no longer "home." To him, the rock suggests inertia, a life of exhausting routine advancing at "the pace of an ox" into a future which is a tedious repetition of the present:

He looked toward home. He felt as if he were in a no man's land. He felt as if time had turned into space, and was crushing against him. He felt as if he must leap somewhere out of the now, but everywhere it was now.

This is the crisis in which Buckler's characters find themselves: in a no man's land between youth and age, memory and desire, regret and hope, past and future. David tries to run off to Halifax, but finds "he could neither leave nor stay." However, the suspense he feels also suggests waiting or anticipation. It still hints at the possibility of change:

Each year marks the tree with another ring, the cow's horn with another wrinkle. But until you were twenty, you were not marked. If one day was lost, the others closed over it so quickly that, looking back, there was a continuous surface. Everything was this side of the future.

David still has a future; but then he is painfully "marked," and the scar on his face indicates a deeper, inner wound.

An air of suspense pervades the pig slaughtering episode. Buckler delays the accident — which is inevitable; the reader has been forewarned — while assembling references to blood, knives, cutting and razor edges. David feels a "tension" in the "horrible lull" before the slaughter; it is not the killing but the uncertainty of waiting that bothers him: "Did the pig have ten minutes left, or fifteen?" The suspense in his own life is broken too when he awakens after a period of unconsciousness, a break in time, to a constant pain which becomes "the climate of

his mind." Gradually he realizes the significance of this pain, and moves into a deathly state of complete suspension. Time begins to lose its meaning:

It didn't seem like five years that he's been alone here.

It didn't seem like any time at all. These years were like a kind of suspension, before time became really, movingly now again.

There is still a future, but time is described as flowing "parallel" to rather than through him: he is not part of any change. Once, his watch stops as he works in the field, and he works on unaware. This is a sign of what is to come. A visit from Toby and Anna prompts the final realization that there will be no further changes in his life. He is cut off from his past, as he sees in "a stricken glimpse of the years gone by as of an utter emptiness." He cannot even take refuge in memory because "Even the ghosts of whatever things had happened here seemed to have fled." And the future is now closed to him as well: "He realized for the first time that his feet must go on in their present path . . . My own life brimmed and emptied so soon, and I could never fill it again." His life is over and he cannot begin again. The clock has stopped; time is suspended: "There was no beat in the day. Time was not a movement, but a feature of the frozen fields."

Running as a countercurrent to the chronological development of David's life and self-awareness is another kind of time which he periodically encounters, rejects, but finally embraces. In the valley, he has become frozen in a static present; but when he completes his long deferred trip up the mountain, he rises above his own life, views it whole and turns, characteristically, to the past. In *The Cruelest Month*, Kate Fennison realizes that life is not

a quantitative thing. It was not stretched out parallel to the railway tracks of time, so that any part of it you failed to seize as the train came opposite was forever lost. It was a qualitative thing. It repeated its eternal entity opposite each moment. It was available whenever you chose.

This is David's discovery on the mountain. He had been living quantitatively, linearly, until his time ran out. Now he enjoys a privileged moment of timeless vision, which is also the moment of his death.

This new dimension of experience is expressed by the sea, by literature and by the mountain. The sea is a timeless realm of adventure, glamour, romance. According to Ellen, who carries a locket with a picture of the young sailor she once helped to hide, at sea "it seems as if everything is somewhere else." The

locket contains the subject of one's secret concern or the focus of one's dreams. Ellen sees in it a picture of her sailor; Anna sees a picture of Toby; the self-regarding David sees a picture of himself. David dreams of being the sailor who lives the fullest life imaginable: "he'd be the only man who ever went every single place in the world and did everything in the whole world there was to do." Toby is reminded of the sea by the peace he feels at the mountain top, but Anna, who is standing beside him, associates the sea with death. Earlier in David's short story, he saluted the spirit of adventure by proclaiming: "The sea was in us." Now, the phrase means something more sinister to Anna: "The sea would be in Toby's mouth, when he could swim no longer. She hated the sea." Several characters in the novel drown: Barney Starratt, Spurge Gorman and Effie's father, Toby, Bess (who drowns herself in the "Baptising Pool"). The adventurous escape of the sea is allied to the ultimate escape of death.

In literature, David discovers the world of the imagination and its expression through language. At first, it is merely a timeless world of illusion which can supplant reality, as he finds when he ecstatically reads *Robinson Crusoe* (a tale of the sea). But later he finds that this illusion can illuminate reality because "things stated exactly" reveal "the thing itself", the basic truth of the world. Truth is exposed through fiction. Literature resolves such contradictions because it fuses opposites: the imaginative and the ordinary, the subjective and the objective, the self and others. Thus in the words of the school play David finds a "refuge", an intensely private world, which nevertheless links him to others in a shared experience. In performance, the play takes on a life of its own, in a transcendent time of its own:

the total plan sprang up instantly.... Oh, it was perfect now. He was creating something out of nothing.... None of all this was consecutive and time-taking like thought. It was glimpsed instantaneously, like the figures of space. And orchestrated in the subliminal key of memory.

But the beautiful illusion seems "treacherous", "foolish", "shameful", when it collides with coarse reality in the form of a crude jest after the delighted David kisses Effie. The exalted moment is suddenly "shorn of all its dimensions". The words lose their magic. In a characteristic manner, David then punishes himself, rushes off into solitude and derides what he once valued. The experience is repeated when he takes up writing. It seems to him the "key to freedom" which eases his pain, allows him to "surmount everything", and yet to accept everything, to "possess ... things by describing them exactly." More important, it

offers a means of coming to terms with his own life, of resolving its tensions and contradictions. His short story is autobiographical, confessional, a "cleansing cathartic" that shows "How a man could be trapped by his own Nature." But again, harsh reality — Charlotte's pregnancy, the intrusion of others — dispels the illusion. Instead of soothing David by allowing him to work out the conflicts within him, his writing has just been another source of tension in his life.

LIKE THE SEA, the mountain is associated with beauty, peace, clarity of vision, and with death. Its time is "the shut-in time of a dream" in which Anna reaches "the peak of her whole life" just before realizing that Toby will soon die. The mountain is the site of Joseph's death and of David's. As David begins his ascent, time, which seemed frozen, begins to thaw and flow. Vitality returns to the world: "A little pulse crept back into the road and the trees." The ghosts of memory are released and swarm about so rapidly that time seems spatialized, flattened on a single plane with all moments equally accessible:

It was as if time were not a movement now, but flat. Like space. Things past or future were not downstream or upstream on a one-way river, but in rooms. They were all on the same level. You could walk from room to room and look at them, without ascent or descent.

David loses himself in memory so fully that recollection gives way to "translation" to another time. The past is not just recalled, but recaptured. Change is no longer irrevocable since one can always go back to begin again:

It is not a *memory* of that time: there is no echo quality to it.... It is not a returning: you are there for the first time, immediately. No one has been away, nothing has changed — the time or the place or the faces. The years between have been shed. There is an original glow on the faces like on the objects of home. It is like a flash of immortality: nothing behind you is sealed, you can live it again. You can begin again ...

In this exalted state, David is transported from moment to moment. He repossesses his life as he gazes down on and through everything. Buckler frequently relates time to vision: how one sees depends on how time focuses the objects of perception. One might experience the blindness of a dull present, the "shine" of a glowing moment, the sudden clarity of prevision, the "cross-eye of anachronism", as he says in *The Cruelest Month*. As David transcends time, he attains total clarity of vision. Each pine needle, each snowflake is distinct; yet all are interrelated. He differentiates every object, every person, every thought, until he is

overwhelmed by their multiplicity. As in the case of the Borges character ("Funes the Memorious") whose memory is perfect, the past expands infinitely and maddeningly with each past moment an eternity in itself. Because the past is no longer irrevocable, it is no longer permanent. There are always further alternatives, further possibilities stretching out infinitely. The magic of memory has become diabolic.

But just as, in performance, the disorderly school play took shape, just as the scrambled short story suddenly fell into a controlling pattern, so a further "translation" unifies David's chaotic vision. It gains a harmony that resolves all the tensions and temporal contraditions of his life. The desolation of solitude fades before a feeling of communion with everyone in the valley. Isolation gives way to friendship and love. Guilt is relieved by "acquittal," betrayal soothed by "an absolving voice." Suspense and suspension are broken by an unquestioned certainty of the future: he will be "the greatest writer in the whole world" even if this means he must work for "a hundred years". Time offers no more obstacles. Writing provides the final, most complete "translation", for by "telling" things exactly, "you become the thing you told." David finally masters and unites himself with the world which has brought him so much pain. The budding artist finally achieves a timeless, aesthetic vision. He must work, not sequentially through time, documenting things "one by one", but by abstracting "their single core of meaning". This is the same harmony, the same focussing of essentials, the same triumph over time, which has calmed the chaotic vision and sorted out his entire life.

The significance of this last scene and of David's death is ambiguous. Because it is presented from within, as experienced, there is no objective comment on it. Is it a triumph or a failure? Can the past be recaptured only through death? One romantic possibility is that through his final agony David dies in a blaze of glory: in a sort of *liebestod* with literature, time and the mountain he attains what in Ox Bells and Fireflies Buckler calls the "saving instant that brimmed him whole." While he is filled to overflowing with memory through which he repossesses his whole life, it is less likely that this is his salvation. The partridge soaring over the far side of the mountain suggests the flight of David's spirit, released through a still purer "translation"; but it is countered by the image of the log which is indistinguishable from his snow-covered body. This is the lower order of physical valley-reality which he has sought to escape, but which now lays claim on him. He must combine mountain and valley, spirit and flesh, and the two orders of time each inhabits if he is to be "saved". This is the synthesis of art which fuses

fiction and fact, illusion and reality. The artist has the ability "to make a story out of a fact," that is, to create aesthetic order, beauty and meaning out of the disorder of ordinary experience. Buckler insists (and demonstrates) that the latter cannot be ignored. It can be "translated", but not escaped, which is why a spiritualized interpretation of the Epilogue would not do justice to the tone of the novel. The lyricism of *The Mountain and the Valley* is grounded in the natural world of potato harvesting and hog butchering, of dirt, blood and toil. The spirit is felt through the flesh, divinity through the soil, through a reality too concrete and compelling to be disregarded. It is so compelling that when it intrudes on David's imaginative experiences — at the play, while composing his short story — it proves too coarse and dispels his grand but fragile illusions.

The reverse occurs at the end of the novel when David claims to discover his vocation in literature. Now, illusion dispels reality: from the mountain, the valley becomes insubstantial and resembles "the intactile landscape of a dream". Contrasts with similar experiences in Proust and Joyce are clear. In Le Temps Retrouvé, Marcel recaptures his past by weaving it into the immense novel which the reader has just completed. Similarly, at the end of Buckler's second book, Morse Halliday regains the inspiration to write what is, presumably, The Cruelest Month. But David Canaan does not write The Mountain and the Valley or any other novel. Marcel does not use his past as a refuge. He turns to it because he discovers aesthetic perception is essentially retrospection: only by reconsidering one's past can the truth be found and re-created. Indeed, the discovery of his literary vocation reawakens in him a desire to live. He feels revived; he has found a future for himself and a way of making up for the time he has lost. He finds a timeless world of essences - time in its pure state - in art, not in death. But David turns to death and embraces his past at the expense of any future. He regresses to the world of promise where one can always begin again, but where, therefore, there can be no fulfilment and no finish. He speaks again with the voice of childhood, saying that he will be the greatest writer in the same tone as he said he would be the greatest general or the greatest actor. He will never become anything because the chronological world of becoming is the valley. In A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, Stephen Dedalus' decision to become an artist is marked by a similar "epiphany" associated with timelessness and the soaring spirit; but Stephen then returns (perhaps despite himself) to the tea leaves, lice and mud of Dublin, his equivalent of the valley. David does not return. He abstracts himself still further until, in his eyes, "the valley was completely gone." He can forgive, feel forgiven and achieve communion with others only when he

is high on the mountain and furthest removed from them. He resolves to be the literary voice of the valley-folk only when he is out of earshot.

The Mountain and the Valley explores a vision of childhood which gradually grows insidious. In his essay on Buckler, D. O. Spettigue reminds us of the prominence in English-Canadian fiction of reminiscence, especially of rural, childhood scenes. Buckler brings this theme into critical focus by showing how the past can become a trap. In Survival, Margaret Atwood observes that Canadian literature is full of such traps: traps of environment, marriage, family, solitude; the snares which trap wild animals. For Buckler, the snare is memory.

David seeks to escape from a world which has lost all vitality. This world is the Annapolis Valley, but it is also his own state of tedium and his own adulthood. Increasingly, escape means a voyage of the imagination into literature, up the mountain, out to sea. His retreat from the world turns inward and becomes a retreat into memory. Throughout his life, time has been an enemy bringing change, pain and mounting tension. To return to the past is to cancel these and recapture the "instantaneity" of youth. But it is also a regression that dooms David to immaturity: he has chosen not to develop, not to go forward. This is ultimately life-denying, which is why the novel concludes with his death. For Proust, a comparable experience proves life-affirming. Georges Poulet notes that Proustian memory plays the same supernatural role as grace in Christian thought; it is a miraculous phenomenon offering Marcel's fallen and divided nature "the highway of its salvation".2 David's memory is not his salvation, but his undoing. In his last moments, he is childlike again. His writing too has been immature, and now will never improve. While he always engages our sympathy and often our admiration, our judgment of David becomes increasingly critical. To some extent he may appear heroic, as Warren Tallman contends, because of the intensity of his suffering.3 Without such dignity, he would be unworthy of such prolonged attention. But our admiration for him decreases, especially on second and subsequent readings of the novel, as his shortcomings become evident, as he proves incapable of developing his obvious talents. In our final view of him, he joins the ranks of those who venture out to sea only to drown. If he has resolved the tensions in his life, it is only by entering into another paradox, that of dying while young.

## NOTES

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> D. O. Spettigue, "The Way It Was," Canadian Literature 32, 1967.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Georges Poulet, Studies in Human Time, trans. Elliott Coleman, 1956.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Warren Tallman, "Wolf in the Snow", Canadian Literature 5-6, 1960.