

GEORGE ELLIOTT

The Kissing Man

Denis Duffy

Certainly the world is immeasurably beautiful, but it is quite horrible. In a small village in the country, where there are few people and nothing much happens, "old age, disease, and death" are experienced more intensely, in greater detail, and more nakedly than elsewhere.

Karl Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, trans. Aniela Jaffé.

1. AN "UNDERGROUND CLASSIC"? Perish forbid, but I read the book at Clara Thomas' insistence, in the same way friends had pressured me into reading *A Clockwork Orange* and *Dune* before they had caught on. Once I had read Elliott's book (he published it in 1962 and hasn't had a thing out since), I began passing it on, to the extent of reading it aloud to (willingly) captive guests. It's catching.
2. CAGEY in public converse ("A very tough cookie," muttered one of my students after a class Elliott attended), the author has let the following drop:
 - a) "nostalgia" means going home, but *with pain*;
 - b) it is a feeling we seek refuge in because the pain nostalgia brings is preferable to the anguish of the present;
 - c) if themes and passions in various of the stories in the collection remain unresolved, it is because nothing in life is ever resolved.
3. RITUAL as resolution: rituals attempt to congeal life's fluidities. The wedding feast states that a relationship both social and sexual has or ought to have reached a solidity sufficient for proclaiming it to all the world; the funeral party that a person's existence has now been "framed" and that the world can analyse and reminisce over that existence as if it were now an *objet d'art*. Undertakers,

with their rage for the-person-as-artifact, are the last dandies. In a secular, provincial society, lonely people come up with their own rituals: Honey Salkald (“An Act of Piety”) turns upside-down a set of empty milk cans as a way of marking off a time of life, Young Audie Seaton’s nameless mother (“The Listeners”), blows out the insides of eggs and places them on a shelf after passing on to one of her sons an account of her lifelong frustrations. The Tsars had Karl Fabergé to do this for them; Southwestern Ontario farmers must make do with whatever’s around.

The actions are double-edged. From one viewpoint, they are the pathetic gestures of the socially atomized, feeble attempts to graft a meaning onto life through the equivalent of macramé or kinky sex. The gestures are puny, eccentric microcosms of those larger pomps and ceremonies and thus tend to undercut all that is grand in social existence. Seen in another fashion, they assert man’s need for ritual, his tireless effort to fashion a dwelling-place amid the chaos of existence. Like symphony orchestras in the death camps or birthday parties for leukemic children, they seek not to hide cruel realities, but to proclaim a vision of an existence bigger than those tortures. Honour to the strivers, honour to us fools!

4. OUR LITERATURE has conditioned us to look on small towns as hotbeds of obsessive, private re-enactment of essentially magical gestures, ways of social intercourse seeking to create changelessness. A shrewd portrayer of that life gives us that sense of a film loop perpetually running in the following ritualised cross-talk:

And a little further down they passed the Shingle Beach, and Dr. Gallagher, who knew Canadian history, said to Dean Drone that it was strange to think that Champlain had landed there with his French explorers three hundred years ago; and Dean Drone, who didn’t know Canadian history, said it was stranger still to think that the hand of the Almighty had piled up the hills and rocks long before that; and Dr. Gallagher said it was wonderful how the French had found their way through such a pathless wilderness; and Dean Drone said that it was wonderful also to think that the Almighty had placed even the smallest shrub in its appointed place. Dr. Gallagher said it filled him with admiration. Dean Drone said it filled him with awe. Dr. Gallagher said he’d been full of it since he was a boy and Dean Drone said so had he.

Stephen Leacock, *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town*.

Twenty-nine years later, the rituals remain, but only to chafe the sensitive/neurotic soul enmeshed within them:

Mrs. Finley, for instance: she must have spent hours preparing for us, cleaning her house, polishing her cut glass and silver — and if I know anything at all about Main Street economics she'll spend as many more hours polishing her wits for ways and means to make ends meet till next allowance day. Yet as President of the Ladies Aid, and first lady of the congregation, she had to do the right thing by us — that was Propriety; and as Main Street hostess she had to do it so well that no other hostess might ever invite us to her home and do it better — that was Parity.

Sinclair Ross, *As for Me and My House*.

As a background to these rituals pounded into daily life, the small town life-cycle possesses its greater shows, Leacock's Marine Excursions of the Knights of Pythias, the prayer-meetings for rain in Ross's Partridge Hill, the L.O.L. convocations bedevilling Doc Fletcher in Elliott's "You'll Get the Rest of Him Soon". Elliott's small town fulfils the reader's expectations. Without ever finding out the name of the place (the author grew up in Strathroy, Ont.), the reader learns of the location of Weaver's Barber Shop, the Queen's Hotel, the Fair Grounds (with the W.I. lemonade booth), the base-line road along the eighth concession, and Geddes' dry-goods emporium. Not that this wealth of precious knowledge pours over the reader at once. Rather, it all happens in passing, since the gossipy speech of the faceless narrator ("Aunt Cress said the store was something like the street dance the Lodge puts on every fall. . . .") burbles on as if the reader were naturally *au courant* with the movements of this all-inclusive, self-confident society. It is the authentic tone of successful provincial literature, whether it come from Hugh Hood or Sherwood Anderson, whether it relates of life in the Russian town of F..... or in Cranford. It is the voice of the wise or wise-assed insider, the fellow whom everything placed, with a story to relate whose dimensions he doesn't quite grasp but whose effects upon his society he realises acutely.

Southwestern Ontario has produced some fair literature of this sort (as well as Galbraith's delightful memoir, *The Scotch*): James Reaney's Stratford (*Colours in the Dark*), Alice Munro's Wingham (*Dance of the Happy Shades*, *Lives of Girls and Women*), Robertson Davies' Thamesville (*Fifth Business*), towns seen with a sturdy sense of place and positioning.¹ Let Western Ontarians ascribe this to the breezes from Lakes Huron and Ontario; I only note the regional fact. George Elliott has speculated in conversation that perhaps because Western Ontario "peaked" in the 90s and has gone nowhere since ("One by one they'll all clear out/Thinking to better themselves, no doubt/Never caring how far they go/From the poor little girls of Ontario"), its liveliest spirits migrating West or

to the cities, the place provides that sense of a golden age gone bust, that old-bitch-gone-in-the-teeth, botched-civilization sensibility that good writing thrives on. Certainly the region has produced considerable writing about childhood pain and humiliation.

5. *The Kissing Man* differs from the works I've mentioned in that the realistic aspect of the collection is balanced by its sense of another dimension of existence. In practise, this means that detail is thinner than in the works above. Between those town landmarks listed in the preceding note lie vast stretches of the diffuse, the opaque, the reality that cannot always be conveyed through concrete detail. Let two passages illustrate this:

The years went by. Doctor Fletcher kept on delivering babies. The secretary of the Aid got old. Jacob and Esau, for they were boys as the doctor had promised, grew up in the orphanage in the city.

Esau developed a nervous affliction in the orphanage as he came on to adolescence. Jacob was shy and didn't talk or play much with anybody but Esau.

Shy Jacob and nervous Esau came back to the town where they were born. They had to, because there came the day of their sixteenth birthday and the people at the orphanage in the city and the people at the Aid in town had no alternative. And there was a wedding going on in the Anglican church the day the twins, Jacob and Esau, came back to the town where they were born.

George Elliott, "When Jacob Fletcher Was a Boy", *The Kissing Man*.

Contrast the first two paragraphs of this passage with the final paragraph. They have about them an air of the parabolic and timeless that is not a product alone of their subjects' Biblical names. The three short, simple sentences in the first and the repetitions of the names in each of the brief paragraphs, the prosaic yet genteel tone ("a nervous affliction"), convince us that the story is told in a manner seeming to deny any individuality to the twins. The prose crawls along, never bothering to accumulate detail. We are not told how the boys look, and can only infer what extent of woe and/or madness lies behind the euphemisms, "nervous affliction" and "shy".² "Went by," "kept on," "got old" — we are watching events from a very great distance indeed.

In the third paragraph, we re-enter the "real" world. Now the twins are re-located in time (but with those very heavy adjectives looped about their necks), and within a social context (those stymied bureaucratic Siamese twins, the orphanage in the city and the Aid in town), and finally at a particular moment within a social framework (a wedding-day). The final clause brings the wheel full circle — the boys have been away from that world of tick-tock time into

which they were born, but now they are back, and that moment too has been firmly re-located in time.

A passage from another tale in this collection of inter-connected stories⁸ presents a differing aspect of the book's strange realism:

There was a way down the high bank to the flat lands below, to where the cedar clumps were. It was along the top of the bank for a way, to the rail fence where there was a crude stile. Here there was a grassy lane cut out of the side of the bank in a gentle slope for maybe forty rods. At the bottom, little tracks were worn in the clay by the farm animals on their way to the river. At that time of year it was easy to step across stones in the river and get to the other side.

Bertram stood up, then, with Froody in his arms. Honey's first feeling was weakness because he knew how strong Bertram was. He had seen the yellow callus pads and the dusty hair on his wrists. When Bertram started walking away from the blanket where the food was spread and where Honey and Lillian sat, Honey was filled with horror because he was now so small and the sky seemed far off. There was nothing to hold to. Lillian was there, not looking, only staring down the clay bank. ("The Commonplace")

The first paragraph presents a pastoral landscape, a section of humanized natural space. The rail fence with its stile and the tracks made by the farm animals confirm that the spot has known the hand of man. The landscape has been moralised into a pattern of accessibility. A mountain/valley duality exists in the setting (banks *vs.* flat lands) but "there was a way." That way isn't so much described in itself as shown in its relationship to the land ("cut out of the side of the bank"). It is a way — not the cut-out road of the engineer — and thus not subject wholly to human control. "At that time of year" it is open to the other side of the river — a traditional mark of accessibility, especially in hymnbooks — but obviously not at other times. No less than a freeway cloverleaf, the scene observed has "limited access" posted over it.

Just how limited is that access comes across in the next paragraph, where Honey watches another fellow literally carry off his girl (new life in a pop cliché). The view, once displaying a way to and through, turns into empty space ("he was now so small and the sky seemed so far off"), that empty space that is so persistent a feature of the Canadian literary landscape. Bertram carries Froody *away* from the communal meal into a realm that Honey can see only as the void ("nothing to hold to"). As we shall see later, the movement is from a humdrum polite ritual to a movement, a dance, of far greater moment than a picnic usually offers. We know already that there is no void, or rather that it is inside Honey, in his feelings of impotence. The accessible, friendly countryside exists alongside

this momentarily crazed vision of it. There has been no preparation for this shift from pasture to void, communal to individual, outer to inner; it has happened instantly as Honey senses the assured masculinity of his rival. This is realism, but of a complex sort. It is an effort to convey to the reader the fullness of the world we inhabit, and it therefore has to include a view of our primitive as well as our socialized selves, our unconscious as well as our conscious. Another way of expressing this dualism that is our reality is to realize that the former self is far less timebound than the latter. The second passage complements the first one I treated, which is a less psychologically-oriented expression of this complex nature of reality. The first passage presents this duality through traditional narrative strategies — the twins move into the story from outside, accumulating more concrete detail about them as the narrative proceeds — while the second moves from the detailed and controlled to something greater and terrifying. But the movement is within a single consciousness. The “Commonplace” passage, we can say, ultimately employs psychology as a figurative language for a reality lying outside the individual psyche, a reality we contact fitfully and dangerously.

6. GILBERT RYLE has pointed out that just because there are more things in this world than are dreamt of in your philosophy doesn't allow you to put more things in your philosophy than are in this world. When this sort of thing happens in literature, we speak of a failure in tone. For example, the devices and conventions of fantasy may be used to smooth the narrative or moral progress of a work chiefly realistic in dialogue and setting. When this happens in Victorian novels we accuse them of being evasive, melodramatic or cheating, but what we are expressing is an aversion against any attempt to express one of those dual aspects of reality in terms of another. The Kingdom of Wish has to be kept distinct from that of Must. When this is carried out by persons in a socially approved fashion, it is known as sanity.

Literature, like the other arts, revels in blurring the boundaries; it is filled with talking animals, living urns and blushing angels. Such naughtiness is excusable because it is the result of conscious choice; everybody knows it is make-believe. Some make-believes, even in fiction assumed to be realistic, are more fantastic than others, and unrealities in the telling are more acceptable than the same in what is told. We all assume that *The Stone Angel* is a more realistic novel than *Fifth Business*; is the latter's magic any more fantastic than the former's controlled inner monologue? We demand a consistency in the amount of credulity a writer tries to squeeze out of a reader. A suspension of disbelief remains willing

only so long as the reader suspends a steady one ton per hour. If he has to shift back and forth between one cwt. and two tons within a thirty-minute period, his muscles will strain. After all, when Judy Garland laments that birds fly over the rainbow, why then oh why can't she, only a fool would deliver an explanation of gravity in reply.

7. ELLIOTT'S PROSE STYLE is laconic, elliptical even. As the passages cited demonstrate, the reader is left to fill in the blank spaces with feeling, a characteristic demand of the modern writer.⁴ This demand on the reader is a foundation of the narrative structure, in that facts are presented about characters and their setting in no particular order, only as they arise in various contexts. Thus Froody, the principal character of "The Kissing Man", is also the girl taken from Honey Salkald in "The Commonplace", while another glimpse of her and her husband, late in their life together, is given in another story, "A Room, a Light for Love." Not all the blanks can be filled in; for example, we know that Froody dates Dougie Framingham for a long time and eventually marries him. Does her relationship with Honey in "The Commonplace" precede or occur in the middle of the lengthy courtship? Probably it happens before, because we are told the characters are still in high school, but we cannot be certain. Elliott is skilled in the placing of detail, forcing the reader to review each story in the light of the entire collection in the same way a reader learns to pause at a passage like: "He had a real name all right. John something. It's sure to be on the desk pad at the Queen's. Nobody used it" ("The Man Who Lived Out Loud"). The gross defects of one of the greatest of collections of small-town *contes*, *Winesburg, Ohio*, are for me summed up in the following:

Before such women as Louise can be understood and their lives made livable, much will have to be done. Thoughtful books will have to be written and thoughtful lives lived by people about them. (Sherwood Anderson, "Surrender", *Winesburg, Ohio*)

It is so trudgingly earnest, so padded-bra uplifting! Elliott avoids this browbeating of the reader, yet tries to give him a world in which feeling still exists.

8. "I never said that people were terrorized but that they were terrorists. I said that a lot of people were satisfied and that a terrible unease prevails none the less." Henri Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in the Modern World*.

The first things we find out about Froody in the title story are visual: "A real Gibson girl Froody was. . . ." Strong black lines against a white page outline the willowy beauties of Charles Dana Gibson, and the narrator next mentions the

way the July sun drained the colour from the town's main street. Garbed in white blouse and dark skirt, cool-looking in the sun (Gibson's girls always have a pout upon their luscious lips), Froody is cooler still in the shade of Geddes' dry-goods store where she works. One way of summing up the story is to state that an initial black/white version of reality (reality is *here*, fantasy over *there*) melts like a Dali watch in the face of an awareness of the raw emotions governing our lives. Briefly, Froody sees a mysterious stranger arise out of nowhere to kiss three of her store customers and evaporate. Related baldly, it seems the soppiest of sentimentalities, a quite illicit intrusion of the Land of Oz into the Upper Canadian store of Jethro Geddes one Thursday in July. But the story is about the onset of maturity in Froody; the appearance of the Kissing Man (sounds like an Errol Flynn-romantic bandit movie) is incidental to this, however large it may loom in the actual reading experience. "Froody was a dreamy girl," we are told, "Sometimes it was a bother to her to keep her mind on the work." Dreamy girls of a strong sexuality ("Froody, in a get-up like that, was just what it took on a hot day to put gumption in a fellow") are forever having things happen to them in literature, from *Pamela* to the brilliant Gothic imaginings of Joyce Carol Oates. But the scene is rural Ontario, a little while after the Great War, so that the Kissing Man will not be a dark rapist-deliverer. Instead, what could have been a romantic archetype becomes a fantasy of another sort. The dreamy Froody watches him kiss the three women (one on Thursday, another on Saturday, the last on Monday; after all, the business is closed on Sunday and it wouldn't do to have anything unreal in the story), and finally questions him after his last foray. The kisses are not gestures of comfort, as the term is generally used, but rather marks of a new awareness on the part of the recipients. Each of them, after the experience, sees some cruel fact of life in sharper relief, and responds either with "It's not fair at all" or by weeping. The comfort extended is the harsh one of knowing where they stand. In a sense, it has been a consciousness-raising⁵ rather than a healing that Froody has witnessed. When the Kissing Man assures Froody that she has been one of the lucky ones, not needing him *yet* (emphasis mine), she is branded by maturity, seared by the knowledge that it must all come to this: knowing what it is that makes one hurt so badly. "She knew more than she wanted to know, ever."

But how seriously can we be expected to take this sci-fi device of a Kissing Man for Froody's lapsing from Innocence into Experience? Of course, a young girl's fantasies could indeed take the form of a Kissing Man, as is apparent from my noting of his resemblance to the sort of dashing figure who sweeps in and

out of women's fictional lives. But if he is merely a dream, an hallucination, why does he so kick against the wishes of the dreamer? He doesn't offer the stuff of adolescent fantasy, but the urgent insight of a mature dream. Two italicized reflections by the Kissing Man on the pain the Women suffer follow his encounters; they give him a flesh solidier than a ghost's. What the story is saying, I think, is the truth that there is more to dream than cookie-castle wish-fulfillment. The man represents Froody's struggle to attain maturity, no matter how steep a price it may exact in unhappiness. She has watched the facades of placidity crumble away from the three women, and we know she pays for her moment of insight by what will probably be a hum-drum married existence (the story alludes to the routine nature of Dougie Framingham's courtship, and we are told that "she finally married him.") Well, an eagle is not fine a thing as a truth, and all the truth in the world cannot give it literary value if it is clumsily put. The Kissing Man as a device intrudes upon the action of the story, putting forward too glib an evocation of the more charged state of existence surrounding our everyday one.

9. IN EXAMINING the work of an admired author, we discuss "Patterns", "Rhythms", "Recurrences"; anyone less esteemed is talked of in terms of "Formulae", "Repetitions", "Limitations". The basic pattern of the stories in Elliott's collection is that of the small-town organism reacting to stimuli it eventually numbs itself to. Some of these disturbing tremors come from within. The insiders either die off or go mad — Alison Kennedy in "A Room, a Light for Love", Doc Fletcher in "You'll Get the Rest of Him Soon", Young Audie's mother in "The Listeners" — or else, in the case of a young boy, hop it out of town ("A Leaf for Everything Good"). In other stories, the disturbers hail from outside and either die in frustration ("The Man Who Lived Out Loud") or pass back to where they came from ("The Kissing Man", "The Commonplace"). It is typical of the author's entire approach that, while the last stories concern a spiritual or metaphysical distance between townees and outsiders, the collection's opener, "An Act of Piety", treats in passing the commonplace social ostracism visited upon a goitre-ridden Irish family seeking to settle in the town. Since I admire the work, "The Commonplace" doesn't strike me as a repetitive piece, but a successful handling of this pattern of entry and withdrawal. As well, it develops successfully the opposition between the two aspects of reality that is treated with less skill in "The Kissing Man."

The idea of a small community shaken by the entry of a dynamic stranger

occurs especially often in the literature of fantasy, though it is one of the themes of *Middlemarch*, *The Pied Piper*, *The Mysterious Stranger*, Westerns: they all deal with upsets among the good burghers, whether the strangers arrive on horseback or (a trendy development) motorcycles. Perhaps the story of Jesus, especially as diagrammed in the opening chapter of *John*, offers the central Christian source of this narrative type. In "The Commonplace", the town is invaded by a clan of strangers. The Sunbirds, who remind us a little of the role played by the Bens in *Who Has Seen the Wind* (1947), proceed to raise chicks in an abandoned hotel they occupy. Of course, in the last line of the story the Sunbirds move on at winter's onset (if a writer is to be that heavy-handed in his naming, he might as well go all the way). The tale is saved from being an easy put-down of provincial narrowness by its focus upon the effects of the Sunbirds on Honey Salkald, the principal character of the collection. This prevents it from becoming another raggle-taggle-Gypsies-oh romance.

The story climaxes during a private ritual-dance in which Bertram Sunbird, having whisked Froody away from Honey, puts before his rival a pattern of a life too rich in its style and satisfaction for him ever to reach. What in a townee would be the stripping of a girl before feeling her up becomes with Bertram the prelude to a deeper act:

He took the two ribbons from her hair and hung them up in the branches of a bush. Then he took her hat and placed it on another branch. He took off his tie and hat and put them on branches. He took out his handkerchief and hung it up. The little bits of cloth fluttered in a breeze that Honey couldn't feel on the river bank, and the horror of it hurt his stomach.

Honey's pain and confusion even before this act of stripping away of all that is fluttery and likely to blow away has been examined in Note 5. His turmoil is not the product of sexual jealousy alone. It is also the feeling — most notably expressed in English Literature in *Hyperion* — of pain that comes from a lesser being's understanding that, however devastating its upshot may be for him, the work of a rival compels admiration and is beautiful in itself.

Bertram stood before Froody in the little clear area. He took her hands in his and they walked sideways around the cleared area. Then he walked sideways in the other direction, still holding hands.

Gradually the pace of their sedate step was quickened and Honey realized it was a kind of dance. He couldn't hear from that distance, but he thought he heard, now and then, Bertram's voice singing.

They were skipping lightly round in a circle by now, and Froody's dress flared out. There seemed to be no weight to her at all.

He is watching a ritual whose music he barely hears, as if Bertram were Dionysius and he, Mark Anthony. The patterned movement seems to have more to it than the eccentric, lonely steps taken earlier in the book (see Note 3). I am reminded of Atwood's "The Animals in That Country", where the stylization of killing gives a drama and urgency to the slaughter of animal life that is not attainable in the secular, rationalist society we know, with its routine zapping of raccoons along the highway.

Thus there are other things besides capital that are subject to accumulation: for instance knowledge, techniques and even . . . populations. . . . But everyday life is not cumulative. . . . Emotions and feelings change but they are not stored up; neither are aspirations. . . . Physical performances, erotic achievements, the time required for growing up or growing old and natural fertility oscillate on a relatively limited scale. . . . In short the effects of accumulation on everyday life are superficial though they cannot be completely eliminated. Everyday life, when it changes, evolves according to a rhythm that does not coincide with the time of accumulation and in a space that cannot be identified with that of cumulative processes. (Henri Lefebvre, *op. cit.*)

Honey weeps because everyday life is not cumulative and it is not a matter of him saving up his pennies or his energies until he can acquire Bertram's *mana*. In the unsuccessful "What Do the Children Mean" Elliott explores the difficulties of inventing an emotional calculus, and Honey is here shown sunk in the knowledge that it never can be. There is that in life which can redeem it from the banal; behaviour informed by the sense of things that gives a glimpse of greater dimensions to existence. Not everyone is born into a society that can teach such behaviour. The townees, with their tea-table mumbo-jumbo, cannot grasp that it is stronger medicine they require. The more they immerse themselves in codes of manners, the further they get from what ritual is really about.

The story twice emphasizes Bertram's strength, in its description of him as a harvest hand, and in the ease with which it shows him lifting Froody. The strength is not the mindless compulsion of Big Audie Seaton ("The Listeners"), it is instead the flow of energy a man can put himself in touch with, if he only lives deeply enough. (And if — ascetic moral here — he is willing to forego the conventional delights of stability. Bertram does not, after all, have Froody. That will be left to her townee lover, Dougie.) I think this is what Sheila Watson conveys about Kip, that very ambiguous character in *The Double Hook*. A prying fool, blinded, he is also a more serene figure even than Felix in his acceptance of the pattern of things and his place — for weal or woe — within it.

Bertram's dance is a liturgy in a society that knows only theatre. Moderns can be patronizing about those philosopher-killing Athenians who also reacted so violently to Euripides, our brother. Shallow folk, not to see the devastation that matchless playwright represented. From ritual to stagecraft, moral intelligence to intellect, Pericles to Alcibiades. Who but the leanest technocrat would willingly let go so rich a portion of reality?

"All he did was sing and dance with me a little, Honey. Bertram, he's very much older than you and me. Very much older."

Such a statement needn't be literally true to be truthful. A family of nomads who stick to the older ways of doing things would easily freak the good townsfolk upon whose territory they light. The effect of even the most offhand courtship ritual on a shy, insecure boy grown up in a flat and petty place makes Honey's trauma over Bertram's far from casual gesture credible.

10. I HAVE a deep liking for these stories, even when they do not work. When they do, they become themselves metaphors for grace, for man's refusal to slog along in an impoverished existence, whatever pain it may cause him to take larger views and gaze upon a world that may not even have room for him.

NOTES

¹ Compare Davies' Deptford with his Salterton: the latter is Provincial Society, the former a sharply felt place in time.

² One recalls the private code of Victoria R.I. and John Brown when she was scurrilously known as "the Empress Brown." "Shy" meant passed-out drunk, enabling Her Majesty to explain her servant's absence from a function in an unembarrassing manner.

³ A popular enough form in our literature; see *Sunshine Sketches, Around the Mountain, A Bird in the House, Lives of Girls and Women*.

⁴ In a time of films like *A Clockwork Orange* and *Straw Dogs*, when behavioural scientists bemoan "the loss of affectivity" in language that adds to it, students of literature can no longer assume that the general reader is putting back into a scene the moral elements a hard-boiled prose style excludes. I suspect, for example, that *Men Without Women* is a very tricky work to teach because it is unthinkingly equated with such brutal crime novels as (say) Richard Stark's "Parker" series. The process by which, in our collective sensibility, Nick Adams became the Continental Op offers a paradigm of a brutalisation in public taste and feeling.

⁵ I thank Miss Heather-Jane Sanguins for pointing this — as well as many other things about the story — out to me.