

THE WAY IT WAS

Ernest Buckler

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CANADIAN LITERATURE seems to have come into existence at an opportune time for the student of English-Canadian prose. Two articles that have appeared in this quarterly, Warren Tallman's "Wolf in the Snow" and D. G. Jones' "The Sleeping Giant", have set a new standard of imaginative criticism of the novel. It may now be possible to examine the English-Canadian novel within a conceptual framework whose terms are supranational but whose application is readily adjusted to the national scene. Ernest Buckler is one author whose work lends itself to such treatment.

The two studies already mentioned show the influence of Northrop Frye and Roy Daniells. Roy Daniells has been foremost among those critics who have looked to the accidents of geography and climate for an explanation of certain characteristics of English-Canadian fiction. His assessment of the role of the "terrain", and Northrop Frye's identifying of fear and the "garrison mentality" as characteristic attitudes in our prose, are the more generalized precursors of the "Wolf in the Snow" and "Sleeping Giant" studies. W. R. Wilgar's "Poetry and the Divided Mind", to which Mr. Jones refers, is another parent of what may be called the "between two worlds" theme recognized by recent critics.

If it has been difficult in the past for critics to find a conceptual framework in which to treat English-Canadian fiction, that is partly because the writers have had such difficulty in finding a focus themselves. They have therefore tended to

look to the past for the illusions of unity or order, or abroad to greener pastures than a raw colony could offer. Among the early writers Major Richardson depicts British redcoats besieged in their forts in a wilderness connotative of fear. Mrs. Moodie, during the seven years in the bush clearing that she calls a "prison-house", looks to England as "home", but exhorts Canadians to work for their country's growth. Haliburton is another who contrasts the dismal present with what Maritime Canada could become. E. W. Thomson creates a Loyalist who, facing death by drowning, is content as long as he drowns on the Canadian side of the river. The inhabitants of Scott's Viger are trapped by their environment, but those in his northern tales are a part of the landscape. Modern English-Canadian writers renew the imagery of the threatening terrain, notably Sinclair Ross and Sheila Watson, but Malcolm Lowry finds in Canada both rest and inspiration, and Hugh MacLennan's Odyssean heroes, singing its vastness, seek themselves in seeking the source of its nationhood.

With nearly two centuries of fiction behind us, it is possible to identify somewhat more nearly than Mr. Jones has done, the Edenic image in our fiction as the environment of childhood or the immediate vanishing past, and to relate both Frye's "tone of deep terror in regard to nature" and Jones' Sleeping Giant to the perpetuation of the settler's response to the British North American terrain. The recurrent phrase, "the way it was", in Ernest Buckler's fiction is then relatable to the three fundamental attitudes to the Canadian environment, as *threat* (the wolf-in-the-snow or exiles-from-the-garden or drowned-poet or buried-life theme), as *haven* (the Canaan or New-World or Promised-Land theme) and as *potential* (the Adam-about-to-awake or child-of-nations-giant-limbed theme).

Ernest Buckler has been publishing fiction for some twenty-five years, but although he began his writing career with a prize-winning article and won the *Maclean's* fiction award in 1948, it was only with *The Mountain and the Valley* (1952) that he won critical attention. Again, he won the President's Medal for the best Canadian short story in both 1957 and 1958, but it was the publication in 1962 of the New Canadian Library edition of *The Mountain and the Valley* that won a wide audience for the retired philosopher of Bridgetown, Nova Scotia.

Writer of poetry, newsletters, articles, CBC scripts, novels and short stories, Buckler nevertheless has come to be known as the author of one novel. The phenomenon of the novelist who publishes one promising book and then sinks into silence, or who after many a summer publishes a second that does not seem to fulfil the promise of the first, is almost a Canadian tradition. It could therefore be predicted that Buckler's second novel, *The Cruellest Month* (1963), would

excite less comment than the first. It could also be predicted that the second novel would be less obviously confessional. But Buckler is already advanced in a third novel, and seems quite uninterested in conforming to expectation. One might even guess that he does not much care about the patterns of English-Canadian fiction. He knows what his fellows are doing but, like them, if he reads fiction at all it is likely to be contemporary American or European. It may then be asked whether there is any need to stress the Canadianism of an author who, unlike, say, Hugh MacLennan, does not take the national approach. The reply must be that there are distinct patterns in English-Canadian fiction which are just now coming to be recognized and that Buckler's fiction, which seems not only to conform to but almost to epitomize them, is worth studying as part of that context. A second reply is that, despite the obvious dangers and limitations of parochialism, it is no disadvantage, when judging the national product in the international arena, to know what the national product is.

“THE WAY IT WAS”, or “how it was”, occurs as commonly in Buckler's short stories and articles as in his novels. “How can you tell,” he asks in the reminiscent article “School and Me”, “such things as how it was the morning the mote-thickened spring sunshine slanted through the open window and you saw that the figure you were dividing with was the same figure in the denominator of the answer . . . ?” In “The Clumsy One”, a short story very close to the style of *The Mountain and the Valley*, the narrator broods: “I had the quicker way with the mind, and still I couldn't feel how it was with him, the way he seemed to know, with a quiet sensing, exactly how it was with me.” The story “The Quarrel”, which won the *Maclean's* prize for 1948, is built on a series of contrasts between the way a boy had expected the day of the fair to be, and the way it actually was: “That's exactly how it turned out to be. . . . You see, that was the August Sunday which was to have been twice as wonderful. . . . But it wasn't like other mornings. . . . We didn't keep saying what a perfect day it was. . . .” And at the climax: “Now here is where I wish for the subtlety to show you, by the light of some single penetrating phrase, how it was driving home. But I can only hope that you will know how it was, from some experience of your own that was sometime a little like it.”

Roy Daniells is one of many critics to comment on the prominence in English-Canadian prose fiction of reminiscence, especially of childhood scenes set on the

farm or in the village and attempting to capture the flavour of a way of life that can no longer be the way it was. The rural idyll of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was a sentimental development of that characteristic. Grove, Knister, Connor, Slater and W. O. Mitchell have exploited such material in sustained works, and it has been the staple of the short stories and sketches that make up so much of our prose tradition.

The Buckler short stories date from two *Esquire* publications of 1940-41, a promising year for Canadian fiction, though it must be admitted that the early stories showed little more than a facility with language. The published stories together seem to divide into four quite distinct groups. The *Saturday Night* group of the war years have a Sunday-school sentimentality about them, but introduce the concern with guilt, at any kind of separation or alienation, until separateness is resolved in a moment of transfiguring unity. The second group chronologically are the *Maclean's* stories of 1948 to 1951, which include Buckler's best: "Penny in the Dust", "The Quarrel", "The Clumsy One" and "The Rebellion of Young David". To these should be added "The Wild Goose" from the *Atlantic Advocate*, in which he has continued to publish to the present. These five stories are similar in style, theme and characterization to *The Mountain and the Valley* and might be considered exercises toward that novel, except that "The Rebellion of Young David" is incorporated in *The Cruellest Month*. The *Atlantic Advocate* group is generally less impressive but includes a number of stories exploring the personal and professional frustrations of the writer in his search for the unifying vision. These are suggestive of *The Cruellest Month* and again explore some of its specific complex relationships. Two stories from *Chatelaine* of 1956 and 1957 extend the *Mountain and the Valley* material. The remaining stories form a group of some range, from humour to thriller, but without much enlargement of the reader's experience.

Like the best of the stories, the two novels are set in the Annapolis Valley area of Nova Scotia. The principal difference between them is in range of characterization and time span. The first novel is a story of childhood and adolescence within a closely knit family group, but it is framed by a Prologue and an Epilogue set just before the protagonist's death, to which all the past has contributed. The action of the second novel occupies only a few days, with generous portions of flashback, but only the interpolated story reaches back into the rural past of *The Mountain and the Valley*. Like the novel, it is intensely involved in the complexities of hurting and healing in the context of love.

The representative Buckler activity is reminiscing, the area of reminiscence is

characteristically the childhood environment, and the emotions recurrently evoked are those of contrasting gloom and joy. The "it" of "the way it was" is the meanest of terms but on it is placed the burden of conveying the most transcendent experiences of unity in the fleeting moment. Against the memories of ecstatic experiences of wholeness are set those of separation, dissolution and alienation, and these are associated with guilt at the failure to seize the offered moment in which harmony might have been restored. The "was" of the phrase thus represents a complex of times in which the moment being lived by the character is contrasted with an ideal might-have-been which in turn is extracted from the recollection of an actual "was" of the character's past. That recalled moment (often the climax for which the suspenseful preparation is also given, as the days and hours leading to a child's Christmas) can only be rendered in terms of sense impressions — the way someone's face looked, what colour the leaves took in a certain light, how a voice would sound, the way the spring earth smelled, the feel of new skates, the warmth of familiar things — all intensely realized. At the same time, one is aware of an opposite impression, that these novels are remarkably abstract. Even in the sensuous *The Mountain and the Valley* the language may be that of the withdrawn intelligence extracting the essence of familial relations in analogies almost geometrically balanced. A balance in tension is created by comparing the present situation with a past or hypothetical situation which, if it obtained now, would reverse the present. But the perversities of human nature wilfully distort emotion, preventing communication, until just the right combination of sense impressions and circumstance bursts the floodgates of remorse and longing, restores unity and duplicates in the present the desirable emotion of the past.

This is a language of simile — not what *is*, but what it is *like*. The basis of the similes is the division of personality which can find analogies in two contrasting kinds of scenes, those of unity and those of discord. The basis of this division, in turn, is the divided personality, which has its counterpart in the divisions of the book.

The novel divides into six parts with Prologue and Epilogue, the eight parts tending to resolve themselves into two sequences. The first, the Prologue and Parts One to Three, are feminine in orientation; they are of the Valley. Parts Four to Six, the second sequence, are masculine; they align with the Epilogue, "The Mountain". In his Introduction to the New Canadian Library edition, Claude Bissell compares *The Mountain and the Valley* to "Fern Hill" as "a magnificent paean to the wonder and innocence of youth". The comparison is applied

to the first half of the book only, for “the very strength and sureness of Buckler’s treatment of the family . . . makes the last section of the book something of an anticlimax.” This is to overlook the structural unity of David’s struggle with time. The focus of the first half is forward: David’s responses to praise, to shame and to love, and his anticipation of the revenge or repayment or glory that he knows some day will be his. It is this sequence that has all the wonder, the enthusiasm and beauty of awakening youth. But the seeds of destruction are there. For all David’s love of family and farm home, he is an alien spirit. In a magnificently rendered scene at the centre of the novel, his frustration breaks out in a quarrel with his father. With the cruel desire to hurt and to escape, David provokes his father to a blow, then flees from home. But on the road to the city he is haunted and overwhelmed by the recalled faces of home, and he turns back.

He came to the bridge. He could see the house again. The ash of the quarrel, of blows given and felt, was tamped down physically into his flesh. The soreness was drawn out wire-thin, pendant at the corners of his lips. Suddenly he put his head into the only place left to hide: the crook of his elbow along the rail of the bridge. He began to sob. He sobbed because he could neither leave nor stay. He sobbed because he was neither one thing nor the other.

The chapter ends with his grandmother giving David the locket containing the photo of the sailor she once had hidden in the barn — symbol of the restless adventuring spirit she still supposes David will be. David is puzzled by the gift.

And then suddenly he knew where he’d seen a face like that. He was looking at it right there in the mirror. This locket had something to do with what had happened today. She’d sensed somehow what had happened. She’d sensed it because she too knew what it was like when the moonlight was on the fields when the hay was first cut and you stepped outside and it was lovely, but like a mocking . . . like everything was somewhere else.

He went to sleep at once, though. He was eighteen.

At this point David still is young enough to look forward to achievement and happiness. But by the end of Part Five, with Joseph’s death, the watershed has been crossed. Hereafter the bright moments will exist only in memory. “It would seem as if everything had gone by while he slept, down the road, and now he’d never catch up with it.”

In the second sequence the family unity that had provided the vitality begins to crumble; disintegration marks the central parts of the book, and thereafter the focus is backward as David declines into a defensive routine and withdraws even from the limited local society. This is the “buried life”, the “ritual death” from

which David must resurrect himself. The means to freedom is his discovery of his potential for writing. His childhood sensitivity to the familiar surroundings, and the anonymity that had enabled him to become the voice for others and release their tensions in ribaldry, now enable him to record with increasing precision "the way it is" at certain moments of the rural day. Like a new Adam, he will conquer his environment by naming it. The environment itself has thus changed from threat to potential, and now contains within itself the possible resolution of David's conflicting desires.

THE TITLE, *The Mountain and the Valley*, draws attention to the principal organizing device, the series of related, usually contrasting or complementary, symbols. The book is "about" the achieving of unity in an environment that does not seem to encourage unity — and thus the relation between Buckler and the Canadian prose tradition. The eight images named in the titles of the Prologue, Epilogue and the six Parts of the book are all indicative of the attempts, successful and unsuccessful, at reconciliation. "The Mountain" and "The Valley" make one complementary pair. They relate to certain characters and principles, as Mountain vs. Valley, Father vs. Mother, Male vs. Female, Toby vs. Anna, the tall pine vs. the house or, since the pine is to be the keel for a boat, the Ark (in Mr. Jones' terms) vs. the farm or garden. As in D. H. Lawrence, male and female are in opposition, antagonisms flaring or settling dully in at a word misinterpreted, a jealousy mistakenly aroused. Anna can find her fulfillment only through Toby, yet the two know very few moments of peace in their short life together. Chris, David's older brother (here, as in "The Clumsy One" and "The Wild Goose" the slow, inarticulate but intuitively knowing one, the one who belongs to the country) is forced by the demands of young sexuality into a marriage and a house where there is neither love nor understanding, where only separation can follow. David's early love is the pathetic Effie, a foil for the Anna David would marry were she not his sister. (Toby, whom she does marry, is virtually a double of David.) David tries to demonstrate a sexual prowess at Effie's expense and for Toby's benefit, but fails. Perhaps a kind of unity could be achieved in a sexual union wherein both accomplishment and security might be found, as in *The Cruellest Month*. But there is no such love outside his parents' marriage — this is precisely David's problem on one level. The climax of Part One is David's participation with Effie in a school play. Like a younger Stephen

Dedalus, he dreads and somewhat despises the gross event, but finds the play becoming a unity and achieving an effect beyond the worth of the parts or the players. This is the only promise David is given of a potential harmony that is not simply the effects of natural phenomena operating on youthful sensitivity. But a total unity is not achieved. David lacks Stephen's awareness of the distinction between the artifice and the fact; when he tries to kiss his startled princess and a coarse voice shouts applause, stepladder and Effie and illusion crash to the floor, and David flees. The play, first symbol in the first sequence, does not point the way to a resolution.

The second symbol, for which Part Two is named, is the Letter. Via a pen club, David makes contact with Toby who will become his only friend. That is, he has communicated with the outside world. Toby is a second David — in one scene David admires himself in Toby's sailor cap and realizes he could be Toby — just as both Toby and David are associated with the half-mythical sailor old Ellen had once hidden in her barn. He is the symbol of the restless spirit, the questing, moving male by contrast with the waiting female. After their marriage, Anna and Toby are separated most of the time, he away on naval duty, she awaiting his occasional returns. When he is lost at sea, she does not return to the farm. She has chosen the outside world and cannot go home again. Toby and Anna, then, are the questing side of David, and with their loss he is doomed to stagnate at home.

In the second sequence the equivalent communication to the Letter is the Train of Part Six. As so often in North American fiction, the train is the means to escape into the larger world — it has this role in Sinclair Ross's *As For Me and My House* and *The Well*. In the last leave-taking with Toby, David goes to the front field to watch Toby wave from the train. Toby, absorbed in another world with other friends, does not even look. David goes berserk, hacking in impotent fury at the parsnips that are rooted like him, the half-self that will never enlarge itself again, "because all the crossroad junctions had been left irretrievably far behind."

Balancing Part One, the Play, is Part Five, the Scar. During the killing and scalding of a pig (another of Buckler's wonderfully exact scenes of farm life), David falls from a rafter and sustains a permanent injury and scar. Thereafter the pain is part of his consciousness, leaving him only in rare moments of renewed hope. The fall and scar would link David with the Adam and wounded god figures of mythology, while his weak heart makes his exile from the vital life a permanent condition, the state of man.

The Prologue and the Epilogue, entitled "The Rug" and "The Mountain", are the other complementary parts. Once David has discovered that he can write, his ingrown self can be freed into anonymity by becoming the myriad elements of its environment and then be expressed in words. Only then can the Sleeping Giant wake, the wounded god be resurrected, the Word recreate the Flesh. But mastery of words is a potential only. David's environment provides him with a stimulating flux; it does not provide the models of harmony that he needs for literary form, and his potential book is therefore never written. He is frustrated by sheer quantity of impression. The challenge his environment offers him is to create the intelligible order of literature from what might be called an "unintelligible landscape". He tries to acknowledge each component individually and of course is overwhelmed. What he lacks is the abstracting power of symbol, the kind of pattern his grandmother weaves out of experience.

The Epilogue continues the Prologue, both occurring in the same afternoon and developing the same few phrases. Here old Ellen has something of the role of Lily Briscoe of *To the Lighthouse*, her rug pattern developing parallel to the action and completing itself as the action is completed, so that one unity is accomplished, that of the family in the context of cyclical time. In the Prologue David stands at the window — a telling Canadian position — while behind him his grandmother selects her rags and weaves them into her rug. In the Epilogue David flees this house of death and bondage and climbs the mountain of his lifelong desire, while Ellen continues with her rug.

As he ascends, David goes through the nightmare of guilt at all the creation he has failed to name. No longer recalling, he is reliving all the significant moments of his past that cry out accusingly for expression. He is seeing, hearing, feeling not only the present sensations but all those of his past. Under the pressure of accumulated sensation David achieves a moment of mystical exaltation, "The complete translation to another time" which Buckler celebrates and represents. "It is not a *memory* of that time", for "the years between have been shed." The immediate becomes the past and "there is an original glow on the faces like on the objects of home." But David's exultation becomes horror as he tries to respond to all the demanding past in the present as well as the swarming present itself: "That little cloud that way and no other; that little cloud I didn't see, exactly the way *it was*", and so with the way everything has been and will be, and even might have been, all pursuing him "with the relentless challenge of exactly how each one was", until in horror he "put his arms about the great pine and thrust his forehead against its hard body", screaming "Stop". With this

strong masculine image his nightmare ceases. He has reached the top of the mountain and has ended his purgatory with the sudden conviction that he can *become* and thereby encompass and control all those demanding experiences. Adam will become his universe in naming it: "I know how it is with everything. I will put it down and they will see that I know." Then the blackness that is the outer border of Ellen's rug "swam in his head again", turns grey, then the white of the centre of her rug, and David, dead, is buried in snow. But the unity of mountain and valley is completed as a partridge flies from the mountain to the valley in a single direct movement that recalls the single brush stroke with which Lily Briscoe completed her painting and achieved the unity of the lighthouse. At this same moment Ellen has completed her rug and has shown her way to unity, as she sorts through the clothing of the living and the dead to weave into her rug. She lets selected objects include and stand for the multiplicity of associations as one coloured rag in her rug is both the focus of all associations of its relation to its onetime wearer, and also a part in the design of the rug that includes those associations but recreates them in a significant order. The concentric circles of coloured clothing in the rug expand from a point of white, as David's consciousness struggles against the nightmare of expanding detail, only to contract again sharply to the point of lace and the snowflakes which are, in terms of the novel, the achieved unity, and in terms of David's potential, the irony of another buried life.

David Canaan's literary family is a prominent one in English-Canadian fiction. There was the ancestral Mrs. Moodie at mid-century, warning that this land of promise was a "prison-house" for the educated until the prosaic arts of nation-building had been accomplished. There was Grove's Len Sterner at the turn of the century, still pioneering, frustrated and defeated by poverty because the physical accomplishment that would free the intellect from material necessity had still not been realized, perhaps could not be realized where nature without conspired with nature within to distract a youth from the very struggle it imposed upon him. There was Knister's Richard Milne carrying on a forlorn courtship with the ingrown spirit of rural Ontario, as David with the Annapolis Valley. But Richard had a road out; for David, the trains run everlastingly away. Among the moderns there is Robertson Davies' Monica Gall, who lacks even the awareness of potential until accident provides the money—the only gift of her environment—for an escape out of Canada and into fulfilment. Finally there is Sinclair Ross's Philip Bentley perpetuating the spirit of *Horizon* by preaching a creed he no longer believes in, until self-pity and the promptings of sex, sole agents of

revolt in such a climate, impel him to flee to the city, where a human community may be found sufficient to create the necessary illusion of stability. And then there is David, for whom the green and golden promise of the Annapolis Valley seen through the eyes of youth fades into the light not only of common day but of sterility absolute. Where Sinclair Ross achieves the effects of monotony in order to render the failure of creativity from lack of stimulation, Ernest Buckler achieves the effects of redundancy in order to render the failure of creativity from lack of focus.

LIKE MANY ANOTHER confessional writer of the modern mode, Mr. Buckler is concerned with the problems of the literary artist. He is one who can master words, who can bring to life the way an intense experience was; he has the language of the earth and the home, and the language of the flesh, as no other Canadian writer has them. And yet he distrusts words. He shows with surprising earnestness that distrust that is so profound in North American life — and that perhaps most definitely marks it off from Europe — of whatever savours too much of the study. This bias in Canadian fiction may help to account for its fondness for the pathos of the inarticulate victim, the stories of children and the animal story.

In *The Cruellest Month*, Letty is illiterate. In *The Mountain and the Valley* it is said of Chris that his thoughts were not “word-shaped”, though they were thoughts nonetheless, and one detects in David — perhaps in Buckler himself — that sense of guilt on the part of the very articulate person that an anti-intellectual society fosters, as though too great a facility with words implied a lightness of character; a kind of black magic clings to the rituals of words even yet. Inarticulateness is part of the simplicity of rural life; Joseph, Martha, Chris and Ellen are strong almost *because* their thoughts are not word-shaped.

In *The Mountain and the Valley* Buckler refers to the “original simplicity of rural people”. He contrasts it with the “artificial complexity” of city people, at least of those who have not gone beyond complexity to simplicity again. In *The Cruellest Month* he examines city people whose complexities are word-shaped, whose pastime is finding the words for their own emotions.

Formally, however, *The Cruellest Month* has a simpler structure than *The Mountain and the Valley*. Paul Creed has an old house in rural Nova Scotia; Kate Fennison, Morse Halliday, Rex and Sheila Giorno gather there for a spring-

and-summer retreat. (It has to be April for Wastelandic reasons, but one feels that this should be a summer holiday; the weather lacks the sheer miserableness of a Canadian spring, and the forest fire sequence, though made plausible, seems to fit a later season.) The other visitor is Bruce Mansfield, whose family once owned Paul's place. He works occasionally on Paul's land, and joins the group because of a sudden infatuation with Sheila. This is the familiar "frame-story" setting, or the pattern of a Shakespearean romantic comedy. The characters withdraw from society into a green world where old conventions are allowed to lapse, where new relationships are allowed to develop and the genius of the place so manipulates or simply permits the action that the characters return to their real world with a new knowledge of themselves as the curtain drops. In this case all the actors, obsessed by guilt and fear, have failed to fulfil themselves. But being sophisticates — a professor's daughter, a society girl and her husband, and a writer — they disguise their uncertainties under a varnish of words that is supposed to reveal them. Among these is set Bruce, whose condition of guilty withdrawal resembles theirs, but who is less wordy because he is native to the area; the enigmatic Paul whose few words are a more effective defence than their many words; and Letty, the middle-aged and illiterate housekeeper who knows "the months on the calendar . . . and the days of the week. And her own name . . . And Paul's. . . And the short words you lived by." Letty dotes on Paul, but has no part in his life with these sophisticates: "They were his kind. She is not."

But Letty is only partly right about this. Like David, Paul is between two worlds, the Annapolis Valley world and the distant city — it is the familiar Archibald Lampman position. But unlike David, Paul has known the city world. One of David's attributes was his capacity to live vicariously, to *know* "the way it was" with people and in situations he never had experienced himself. David can talk the city talk, but he feels the guilt of betrayal if he does so. When he says "It's immaterial" to Toby, he knows he has made a breach with his rural schoolmates that can never be healed; language becomes the stockade for a garrison of two. But Paul is a David who has "gone outside", has been a city sophisticate and now has returned to the home soil (as Buckler himself did in 1936). Here he can be one with the local people when he chooses, or can open his doors to city people at will.

The reader's attitude to Paul is likely to vacillate. Interpreted generously, he is sharing with a few of the world's misfits who can benefit by them the healing powers of Paul's place and of himself. But their adoration of him, which puts him beyond all criticism — he's the singiest damn person; you don't know any-

thing *about* Paul but you feel you know him — suggests that he is to be less a character than a manipulator, a Prospero whose detachment is almost too clinical. Paul's place is nicknamed Endlaw, not only as an anagram of the Walden it does not resemble but also as the place where the absurd rituals of social life are to be set aside (or replaced by other rituals). The name Paul Creed — it is almost too apostolic — may indicate a rooted faith or certainty by contrast with the creedless visitors who themselves have dubbed Endlaw "The Home for Incroyables", which may also suggest their unreality. Kate says of Endlaw: "You know time. Anywhere else, you hear its meter ticking whether you're using it or not. Here, that meter's stopped." Paul calls it "the one pocket of the universe that nothing could ever turn inside out", but this is also ironical, since Paul and his visitors are to be turned inside out before the novel ends.

Kate has been here before, with the father to whom she had devoted her life. On his death Kate, now a rootless spinster, flees the image of herself she sees being prepared in the faces around her. Morse has also been here before; his successful novel, significantly called *Each in His Narrow Cell*, was written at Endlaw. Now that his art and his life have staled, he returns in the hope of renewing the inspiration. The married pair are Sheila, society girl who has not yet told her husband that her family has lost its money and she is pregnant, and Rex, her poor-orphan spouse, whose good looks and naiveté have got him a war medal and Sheila and nothing else. The odd-man-out is Bruce, the disinherited Adam of this demi-paradise, and sometime medical student whose guilt at causing the death of his wife and son in a car accident has made him a recluse. In a kind of *Mid-Summer Night's Dream* the relations between characters are rearranged in spite of them. Bruce and Sheila fall in love and move inexorably to a sexual union before an accident returns them to their first loves. Kate, desperate to be fulfilled as a woman, allows herself to love Morse while uneasily aware that Paul is her soul-mate. Morse, thrice-married, accepts Kate in the expectation that she will be different, and that he can teach her to be a woman. The probability is that they will become another Sheila and Rex on a more rarified plane, the wife too readily seeing through, and less and less patiently condoning, the male posturing. And Paul, who loves Kate, so steels himself against that temptation that he is slow to see the alternative.

Fugitives from self-deception and social ritual, now they enmesh themselves in the rituals of their truth-and-consequences games which dare the participants to find the words for their secret selves. For Sheila, the most guarded, this is a temptation. For Kate it is part of the excitement she seeks; and for Morse, the cryptic

writer, it's all grist for the mill. For Paul it is perhaps the holiday stimulant he thinks he needs, since for all his easy intimacy he only "rents people", keeping himself and Endlaw inviolate through the other three seasons. The member of the party the others ignore as beneath them, Rex, must amuse himself at tinkering and target practice and blunderings in and out of the others' incomprehensible conversations. They treat him as a child — formally his is a counterpart to Bruce's son Peter — but he is also, Caliban-like, an unwitting agent of the action. The rifle he fires in practice later wounds him by accident after Sheila has told him of her wish for a divorce. The wounding, misinterpreted as attempted suicide, brings the remorseful Sheila back to him, so duplicating the success of his phoney war wound and freeing Bruce for a return to his medical training. At the end Sheila has accepted her lot with Rex, and Kate and Morse have gone off to be married.

But the projected holiday at Endlaw is cut short. After his guests arrive Paul secretly travels to Montreal for diagnosis of a heart condition. As in *The Mountain and the Valley* there is a watershed between the forward and the backward focus, so Paul's drive to the hospital, glossed over with clowning, is "the first high point in the arc of dissolution". The anchor in the others' lives, he now loses his certainty and feels the necessity to make "the definitive statement of himself. In one single sentence," which was the way of their game at Endlaw. Dismissing Kate and his other talkative friends, he determines to live his last seasons alone. Baffled and hurt they leave, but they complete the process of self-knowledge as they go. As unwitting agent, Rex causes a forest fire that threatens Endlaw just after the last visitors have left. Morse and Kate must drive through the fire and so endure a purgatorial ordeal which also faces Paul and Letty who battle the flames to the very edge of the house. When Paul collapses Letty learns of his illness, as he learns of his need of her. It is "not words" he wants, but the living flesh.

The controlling symbols of this novel are the fire, the gun and the wounding of the "king", the exile and quest of the characters, Endlaw itself, the opposition between the Word and the Flesh (the sophisticated talk vs. Letty's wonderful silent hands, Morse and Kate's tortured examination of the marital relation vs. the simple act of Paul and Letty), and Paul, whose heart condition is the tangible mark of time and whose self in retreat is the human condition.

Ernest Buckler is a novelist, not a romancer, and yet certain characteristics of the prose romance are discernible in *The Cruellest Month*. One is the convention, as old as the *Decameron*, of the withdrawal into a microcosmic world out of

society and out of time. Another is the use of such archetypes as the purging and refining fire and the sick heart. A third is the tendency of the characters to melt into one another, a characteristic of Buckler's fiction as a whole. Thus the short story "Doctor and Patient" plays ironically with a writer who feels he should have been a doctor and a doctor who should have been a writer. In *The Cruellest Month* Paul, anonymously undergoing examination in a Montreal hospital, adopts the name Bruce Halliday, from Bruce Mansfield and Morse Halliday. Bruce has been and will again be the doctor-in-training; Morse is the writer. Paul, who feels that the chosen name suits him, is another Buckler character who would like to be both. But in some sense he *is* both, and this accounts for his enigmatical anonymity. The element in him that would like to be savage author lives vicariously in Morse (who also is Kate's lover as Paul would be), as the element that would be first Adam in this garden of man is displaced in Bruce.

The range of style is greater in this novel. These are outside people coming to the Valley and being altered by it; those of the first novel were Valley people going from or staying in it. And these people are talkers, so that a conscious cleverness, like the conscious allusiveness, must be part of the style. If a language of abstraction was part of *The Mountain and the Valley*, it is more so here where abstraction is a way of life: "And for the moment they felt that curious disembodiment, almost to the point of seeing their own faces as physically pinched, which people whose chief alacrities reside in thought's analysis of feeling feel between peaks of engagement." Beside this language of analysis belongs that of the characters assessing themselves and one another, as in the anecdote of Paul and the bees. A third language is Paul's own calculated irreverence — that most essential creative gift — in balance with the reverence for the infinite variety of the familiar recurrent patterns of existence. This latter makes part of that language of reminiscence that dominates *The Mountain and the Valley*; the chapter that was published separately as "The Rebellion of Young David" is of that sort. The novelist's problem in introducing his characters is resolved here by a shifting of point of view. Part One begins with the characters gathered at Endlaw at the end of their first summer there. Part Two jumps five years to show them individually in the circumstances that will bring them back to Endlaw, and then another few days to show them arriving. The chapters of reminiscence serve to fill the five-year gap as well as to justify the characters as they are to be now. Thus Bruce's reminiscient chapter deals with his son Peter; in Part Two, in the present, Peter and Molly, Bruce's wife, are both dead.

Time and place make up the essential grid of Buckler's novels. Together with

the bridging of time goes the focussing of time by coincidental place, a device that recalls Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*. Bruce has returned to the family farm, now Endlaw, and is chopping wood there for Paul — symbolically he is defining boundaries. As each of the visitors approaches he hears or does not hear Bruce's axe, which thus serves to pinpoint place and time. It is also a device for irony, since the sound of the axe has a different meaning for each: Kate thinks it a happy sound, but Bruce is slashing at trees as David slashed at parsnips. Morse hears it and recalls boyhood in Minnesota. But, as in *The Mountain and the Valley*, it is not recall but reliving. Yet Morse's response includes the commentary that makes explicit the imagery of the fall from that state of innocence which axe and deer are to connote. (The deer appears later in the novel for both couples to see, with much the significance of Frost's "Two Look at Two".) The scene that Morse recalls resembles the mountain and orchard of *The Mountain and the Valley* and the imagery is just in its vein of multiple simile: "the axe more beautiful like swimming naked than the gun is beautiful like Christmas". Both the form of that equation — like himself, Buckler's characters have an eye for mathematical relations — and the choice of swimming naked and Christmas as criteria of the ecstatic moment are typical of Buckler's language of innocence. But the tree falls and Morse returns to the cynical author of the present: "and he's lost his clean beautiful axe somewhere . . . and his very breakfast food is shredded wit."

Here again the contrast is between a world of childhood which recurs now only fitfully to remind you of the way it was, and a present world which is a state of experience, of knowing. The criticism so often made of the younger generation — that it knows too much — is made by Buckler in "School and Me". It is an acknowledgement of the growing sophistication of an affluent society. But Grove made the same observation a generation earlier, and perhaps every generation makes it. The point is, for Canadian literature the here and now is the place of knowledge, and knowledge is the fruit of the archetypal fall. The person who knows can never be content with this environment, and can never escape it. One hears, in *The Cruellest Month*, echoes of *The Mountain and the Valley* in the images of the great good time and the great good place that were one's childhood in rural Canada — and one realizes that one is hearing them from generations of Canadian writers. In *The Mountain and the Valley* too there was a fall to mark the loss of that time and place, after which place becomes bondage and exile and time the one inexorable fact. Endlaw in *The Cruellest Month* is the place where, for a season, the garden seems to be regained, but where in fact man must labour

and must come again to knowledge. Those who return to the stream of time are returning to a slightly lower world, a world longer and farther exiled, but they return there renewed by their contact with the terrain and themselves. And Paul, who makes again David's choice for the Valley, choosing the female of the flesh and the familiar way it was, has only a wince for the female of knowledgeable word and the way it might have been:

She stressed it again. "Just as soon as you've *drank* your coffee . . ."

Paul winced.

And then he grinned.

For a moment the April morning seemed to preen itself in that faultlessness which so mocks the one alone. And in that moment they felt the one inimitable safety. That great, sweet, wonderful safety from the cry of things not understood, of things said and things not said, of things done and things not done, of what is near and what far-off, and the sound of time and the sound of time gone by . . .

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