

A FEELING OF COMPLETION

Aspects of W. O. Mitchell

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WHEN I BECAME A MAN," wrote Saint Paul to the Corinthians, "I put away childish things." In context, this exchange of childish for mature behaviour is related specifically to man's perception of God, but the question of human growth and development, of man's relationship with time during his mortal existence, is one that varies with each society's estimation of what constitutes appropriate reaction and behaviour in childhood and in maturity. The transition itself is many-sided, and when it is recorded in written literature or in folk traditions, it takes on different forms and emphasizes various concepts. In his two novels, *The Kite* and *Who Has Seen the Wind*, W. O. Mitchell makes use of this transition as a means to consider man's awareness of time and perception of reality during his life's span on earth. The two novels explore these questions, however, from different points of view. Though one is an artistic success while the other falls short of this, part of their interest lies in the extent to which they complement each other, and an examination of the intent, method, and accomplishment of the two works leads to a clearer understanding of the questions that Mitchell asks about life and of the answers that he postulates.

Mitchell's first novel, *Who Has Seen the Wind*, is the success. It is a study of the development involved in a boy's increasing conscious awareness of abstraction, a study of Brian O'Connell's transition from the perfection of sensitive childhood, through conflict, to a balance that is achieved in early maturity. In *The Kite*, which fails largely because of technical difficulties, Keith Maclean is parallel to Brian in many respects, but the author is concerned less with the growth of a child than with the effect of continuing awareness of time on an old man, Daddy Sherry, and the late awareness of the truth of emotional abstractions that comes to the apparently mature David Lang.

Brian O'Connell's growth begins in perfection. He is a child, complete in his own environment, when *Who Has Seen the Wind* opens; he meets existence from an awareness of self and by sense perception of the material things around him. For the actual growth to take place, however, this state of harmonious innocence must be disrupted, and it is, by the conflict that is aroused in Brian as he is brought into contact with death. An examination of each of the six death scenes in the novel will demonstrate Brian's changing reactions — his growth — and the extent to which he transcends age in developing to maturity.

Before he encounters death for the first time, Brian is given a dog for a pet, to serve as a diversion from the incipient jealousy he feels towards his younger brother Bobbie and to counteract the fantasy world of R. W. God which he invents to escape the imagined tyranny of his grandmother. When the dog is taken from him because it annoyed the grandmother, Brian seeks another pet in a baby pigeon and inadvertently kills it in his attempt to love. Because death deprived him of the pet he wanted, he cries, and drying tears stain his face when he seeks explanatory knowledge from his father, asking "Why does it happen to things?" [cf. Keith Maclean: "Why does stuff have to die?"] But not till the bird's body ("just like dirt, he thought, like prairie dirt that wasn't alive at all") was placed in the prairie was Brian "aware of a sudden relief"; not till then was "the sadness . . . lifted from him". Immediately following this first contact with death, however, he is reunited with the dog, and he then experiences a "soft explosion of feeling. It was one of completion and of culmination." The sought-after knowledge concerning the abstract is forgotten in the immediacy of the child's egocentric world. "The boy was aware that the yard was not still. Every grass-blade and leaf and flower seemed to be breathing, or perhaps, whispering — something *to him* — something *for him*." (Italics mine.) His world is complete; the truth he knows begins and ends in himself, in sense perception. It is only disturbed when emotion is kindled in him by contact with the implied complements of life and death, with the abstracts that youth does not and cannot comprehend.

The feeling of completion alters in character as Brian grows older, however, for with growth and experience comes an intimation that beyond the private world is a social world and beyond that another, a universal world, wherein Absolute Truth and Basic Reality can be known. But certainty still eludes him.

The barest breath of a wind stirred at his face, and its caress was part of the strange enchantment too. Within him something was opening, releasing shyly as the petals of a flower open, with such gradualness that he was hardly aware of it. . . . He was

filled with breathlessness and expectancy, as though he were going to be given something, as though he were about to find something.

But though the feeling is intermittent, it carries, by the time Brian encounters the second death, a tremendous impact. Brian, Art, Fat, and Bobbie at this time go to the prairie to drown gophers, but when Art begins to torture an animal by pulling its tail off, Brian

realized with a start that an excitement, akin to the feeling that had moved him so often, was beginning to tremble within him. His knees felt weak with it; the Young Ben could cause it too. The Young Ben was part of it.

Indeed, the very old Young Ben, who was “born grewed up”, springs into action at this moment, killing the gopher with “one merciful squeeze” and clawing Art in a violent retributive attack.

Uninhibited and primitive, the Young Ben is a personified eternal in the novel; one with the prairie, he is a sort of incarnate life-urge that in microcosm and in physical terms demonstrates in his attack on Art the potent retributive violence that knowledge of not having acted justly can wreak upon the spirit and mind — the conscience, or the childhood memory of perfect order — of man. Art, who repeated tearfully “‘I didn’t do anything to *him*’”, did realize that he was “doing something” to Life: which, however, amounts to the same thing. Bobbie’s reaction in this situation is the child’s reaction of crying, but Brian’s, characteristically, is introspection.

The feeling was in Brian now, fierce — uncontrollably so, with wild and unbidden power, with a new, frightening quality. . . . Prairie’s awful, thought Brian, and in his mind there loomed vaguely fearful images of a still and brooding spirit, a quiescent power unsmiling from everlasting to everlasting. . . . The Young Ben was part of all this.

In introducing characters such as the Young Ben or Saint Sammy, who are in some ways the most vividly drawn of all the people in the book, Mitchell runs the danger of letting his focus shift from the central development. Such a shift occurs in *The Kite* and weakens that book, but in *Who Has Seen the Wind* the focus is fortunately sustained, and because of this, the author achieves a remarkable insight into the operation of his central character’s mind. Though much of this novel deals with characters other than Brian O’Connell, Brian’s growth to responsibility always remains central, and the various successful and unsuccessful adaptations that the minor characters make in their respective situations of conflict,

reflect upon this central growth. Svarich, for example, fails to accept his Ukrainian identity; Hislop fails to accept the existence of opposition in his church and merely resigns. Sean, Digby, and Miss Thompson, however, come to take responsible positions in their own spheres; they act positively to solve the conflict in which they find themselves, and yet they are able at the same time to accept what they cannot control. Brian, therefore, has both examples before him. Also before him are the vividly-drawn Saint Sammy and Young Ben with their strange adaptive abilities, but even they remain minor figures, because they, too, serve to contribute to an understanding of the emotional sensitivity of Brian himself.

After Brian has encountered death for the second time, this sensitivity brings him to a vague awareness of a difference between death inevitable and death avoidable and of the bond of life that joins all mortal creatures. He must then come to a realization that in life there is deformity, but that this can be lived with and even loved. His first reaction to such deformity is one of shock. "The feeling", when he looks at a dead two-headed calf, for example, "was fierce in Brian as he stared down . . . ; he felt as though he were on a tightrope high in the air. . . . It was wrong!" His judgment is based on the still vivid recollection of completion — of perfect order — but the very recognition of deformity leads to a movement away from the complete awareness of this perfection, and the feeling "lacked the sharper quality of the other times." The knowledge of perfection decreases, therefore, to the extent that the knowledge of departure from perfection (deformity) increases.

Later in the novel Brian becomes aware that the deformities men recognize are those that differentiate physical realities from earthly norms, but that some deviations from those norms do not necessitate correction in order that human love can be expressed toward them. On Sean's farm he looks down at a pet runt pig and considers:

It would always be a runt, he decided, a shivery runt. It had no twist to its tail; it never would have. The world was a funny place. He loved his runt pig that wasn't good for anything. Ab was fussy about Noreen, the snuffiest cow in the herd, with her wheezing and sneezing and coughing. Before Annie's eyes had been straightened he had . . . [loved her too].

Brian knew then.

But by loving what exists on earth, man moves imperceptibly further and further from instinctive love of antecedent perfection. By consciously becoming aware of love *per se*, as of death, he is becoming increasingly aware of conceptual and emotional abstractions which sensory perception cannot explain.

To the deaths which he has heretofore encountered, Brian has been largely able to maintain an objective attitude. Even towards the baby pigeon, the love expressed was in infancy as well as the child who loved. With growth and with acquaintance with the love object, however, comes a more fully developed emotion, and when that is disturbed, as in the case of the fourth death when Brian's dog Jappy is killed under the wheels of a dray, the boy's reaction is as profound as it is subjective. Though he "looked as though he were going to cry", he does not. Though filled with memories of the dog's life, he also "remembers the stiffness of the body, the turned head, the filmed eyes. He knew that a lifeless thing was under the earth. *His dog was dead.*" [Italics mine]. With this personal deprivation comes also a knowledge of personal mortality, and the feeling of completion, once so strong, is lost.

Somewhere within Brian something was gone; ever since the accident it had been leaving him as the sand of an hourglass threads away grain by tiny grain. Now there was an emptiness that wasn't to be believed.

IT IS AT THIS STAGE that *The Kite* can be again considered, for the reader knows of David Lang's childhood completeness only by inference from his loss of it. As a boy, David had anticipated a day of kite-flying with Lon Burke, only to be disappointed by lack of space, by bad weather, and finally by Lon's heart attack, at which time David loses the kite:

as he walked towards home, the late guilt he felt could not overcome his sense of irreparable loss, mortal loss too great for tears. It would never soar for him. . . . While he had been fruitlessly searching for his kite, Lon had died.

David tries to fill the void he has now encountered by taking Lon's "explosion-pills", by experiencing as it were "explosions of feeling", and knowledge of the pills "soothed and reminded him of when he used to suck his thumb, though he hadn't done that for years." But this is an unsatisfactory solution, for it is in effect an attempt to regress to a stage of childhood that he had already left behind, and so after the pills are used up, the emptiness returns, partly because David has been using another's remedy, partly because in attempting to achieve a reversal of time, he is attempting that which is impossible.

The "other sort of legacy from Lon", however, was the encyclopaedia, and by

immersing himself in knowledge, David can grow intellectually and after some time accept adult occupations in journalism and in the television industry. But these do not complete him; "In a way it was as though he were being requested to die — as himself." What he lacks he lost when he never flew the kite: the elasticity, the acrobatics, that would allow him emotional maturity, that would give him an awareness of life whereby he could realize that social participation does not necessarily mean concomitant death of individuality. His visit to Daddy Sherry is the growth of this awareness.

David does not know what he is looking for when he first heads to Shelby; nor does he understand Mr. Dalglish when the latter says, "I suppose all of us at one time or another have had something to do with Daddy that's — well especially between ourselves and — and Daddy." Like the Young Ben, Daddy Sherry is more in the novel than an individual character; like the Young Ben, too, he is a sort of incarnation of a life urge. "He is excitement," says Harry Richardson; "The life force sparkles more through him," the minister suggested"; and after some time in Shelby, David himself realizes that Daddy "had been too immersed in living to build historical significance out of his days." He too has to have an individual contact with Daddy, with life; he too must find, in living, the completeness that has only been known before in his childhood lack of awareness of anything that might disturb the apparent immortality of the immediately perceived world. David is of course attempting to write and complete a story, but the completion he needs and of which he becomes aware in the old man, is bound with the other need for completion at an emotional level; "the cross-willed old human had completely won him, and somehow — if Daddy were to die now — their relationship would have failed to complete itself."

David's contact with Daddy is the central relationship in *The Kite*, and the growth that occurs through this relationship is David's, not Daddy's. The danger of shift of focus, however, that had been circumvented in the case of the Young Ben and Saint Sammy in *Who Has Seen the Wind*, recurs here with results that weaken this novel. Structurally and thematically, Daddy Sherry is a minor figure, but the vividness with which he is drawn and the frequency with which he appears in the novel combine to draw attention away from David Lang. Neither character is sufficiently created to take a central position therefore, and the novel suffers from the resultant lack of an insight into human behaviour comparable to that achieved in the depiction of Brian O'Connal.

To achieve in *The Kite* the focus he desires, Mitchell has set up reflector patterns in the subplots comparable to those in *Who Has Seen the Wind*; he depicts

a series of relationships with Daddy on the part of the Shelby townspeople that should act as reflectors or commentaries on the central interaction. Unfortunately this device fails in operation. Because Daddy figures prominently in each case, and because David himself remains relatively passive during the recounted anecdotes, the focus shifts to Daddy, and David's centrality is concomitantly diminished. Daddy, however, remains a constant throughout the book, albeit a constant vitality; he does not change. It is David who suffers the development and who discovers the "answer", achieving completion, at the end of the book and at the end of his stay in Shelby.

Like David Lang, Brian O'Connell, too, must move from childhood completion through emptiness to a new completion. The "explosions of feeling" which he has felt before his "emptiness" do momentarily return after Jappy's death and before his own final glimpse of the nature of reality. A visit to Saint Sammy on the prairie, who mystically in age can know (to his own satisfaction) the "majesty of His glory" and "the greatness of His work" stirs up the feeling once more, but this time "coloured with sickening guilt". In his development, Brian, again like David, has been acquiring knowledge, but when that knowledge deals grossly with the physical facts of birth and life and death, it "spoils" the inherent knowledge of immortality. Brian is in conflict with experience, and more often than not,

it was as though he listened to the drearing wind and in the spread darkness of the prairie night was being drained of his very self. He was trying to hold together something within himself, that the wind demanded and was relentlessly leaching from him.

At this stage in Brian's development, his father succumbs to hepatitis and dies, and Brian is forced again on a highly personal level to recognize the inevitability of death — this, however, the death of a human being. Moving as he has been from childish reaction in emotional situations (the tears of deprivation) towards more verbal response, Brian "did not feel like crying" at the death of his father. Tears of relief come only when he realizes responsibility for others and a direction to take during his own life: his mother "needed him now". Aware of death, he is maturing; aware of some inevitabilities, he begins to accept what he cannot control; and some years later his grandmother MacMurray's expected death "did not come with the shocking impact."

Brian's "growing sense of responsibility" accompanies the growth of this awareness; expressed towards all around him, it is a manifestation of his increasingly

competent and humanistic attempts to rectify the unjust and the improperly controlled in that part of his environment over which he has influence. But as the growth takes place, the feeling disappears, and Brian would wonder "with regret, that he never had a return of the old excitement since he had heard the meadow lark sing to him the day of his father's funeral." The egocentric world becomes a sociocentric one with Brian outward-oriented, a transition which culminates in his desire to be a "dirt doctor", in his laying plans for his own future in terms of living in the physical and the social world.

Still seeking certainty in his new rôle, Brian meets Digby and Palmer in the harness shop and puzzles at the adult difficulties of Berkeleyan philosophy. Digby's first impression that Brian was "not old enough" to understand, that his approach to understanding would be through the child's sense perception of material things, is changed when Brian abruptly tells him: "I don't get the feeling any more. I — don't think I will — get it any more." At this point Digby makes the judgment which I assume is crucial to the novel. He

was struck by something more than familiar in the serious eyes under the broad band of the toque with its red pom. . . . That was it — the look upon Brian's face — the same expression that had puzzled him on the Young Ben's: maturity in spite of the formlessness of childish features, wisdom without years. 'Intimations of Immortality,' he thought.

'Perhaps,' said Digby to Brian, 'you've grown up.'

And yet Brian is certainly different from the Young Ben. Western society defines maturity as responsibility to the social world, as the leaving of petulant childishness for emotional restraint at least in recurring situations, and Brian comes to this, in spite of his years, whereas the Young Ben does not. But for that matter, few of the adult characters in the novel achieve maturity to the extent Brian has done. Bent Candy in his greed and the Abercrombies and Mr. Powelly in their desire for revenge furnish ready examples of pettiness and petulance despite their adult years. Their world, like the child's world, is built around themselves, and basing their actions on material values, they can neither appreciate breadth of mind nor express valid and deep emotion. But the Young Ben and Saint Sammy, though socially immature to the extent that they, too, live for themselves, do possess a maturity of a different kind. Unlike Bent Candy or Mrs. Abercrombie and although their methods of appreciation remain those of sensory perception, their values are non-material. By reason of their primitive awareness of life and death and existence, by their uninhibited passion, by their

oneness with the prairie, they have achieved apparently instinctively the egocentric "maturity" of contact with the timeless and immortal.

Brian, however, gives promise of coming to a contact with the Absolute which is comparable to this, but of course his methods will differ. The approach of the Young Ben and Saint Sammy to eternal truths is from a material, a physical point of view. They see the Eternal through the senses, by running *with* the prairie wind and watching coloured butterflies and collecting broken glass and labels, and their appreciation of beauty and truth is as if by instinct, whereas Brian's changed approach, his socially mature approach, is not through sense perception but rather through the more abstract routes of emotion and conscious intellect. Staring out at the prairie when he is twelve, he muses:

It had something to do with dying; it had something to do with being born. Loving something and being hungry were with it too. He knew that much now. . . . Some day, he thought, perhaps when he was older than he was now, he would know; he would find out completely and for good. He would be satisfied. . . . Some day. The thing could not hide from him forever.

But the day of rebirth to oneness with the perfect and immortal would be a day of death to the physical and mortal, a cycle of existence that is reflected in Mitchell's recurrent imagery of light and dark, summer and winter, growth and decay and new growth.

The realization of the nature of this cycle would bring Brian to the state of awareness — an intellectual awareness — that Digby himself has achieved. Brian does not in the novel come to full knowledge and understanding of the "realities of birth, hunger, satiety, eternity, death". For him are only glimpses, only foretastes of the final order — or perhaps only recollections of early childhood — in Mitchell's terms: "moments of fleeting vision". Maturity involves moving *from* childhood, however, and to acceptance of the responsibilities of a social world. Brian, in achieving the degree of maturity beyond his child's years that Digby recognizes as "growing up", chooses a way of life which is balanced between the isolating extremes of material crassness and private mysticism. And yet he preserves in curiosity and breadth of vision the sympathetic state of mind that will allow at once both acknowledgment of human interdependence and an adult-grown contemplation of the mysteries of existence that activate the world in which he lives. This is the maturity that will allow the new completeness — leading a full life — to replace satisfactorily for the period of mortal existence the old, the childlike awareness of a different order.

DAVID LANG and Keith Maclean and Daddy Sherry are seen in their period of mortal existence, too, and at the end of *The Kite* David realizes that it is Daddy's "awareness of his own mortality" that supplies the completion he needs to live his own life fully. David already has intellect, but as Donald Finlay has told him, intellect by itself is insufficient:

"... intuition is nearer to life than intellect — or science . . . That's why we have the arts, isn't it?"

"I suppose."

"It's one of the reasons I'm a minister."

"Just what do you mean by living fully?"

"Expressing your whole potentiality — taking advantage of every bit of elasticity life offers and stretching it to your profit. . . . Liberty — freedom."

But freedom does not mean indulgence of appetite, nor does it mean disregard of all but the self. Daddy Sherry, for example, has led a full life, has taken advantage of its elasticity, and though in his age he is at times cantankerous, he remains loyal to his ideals (Ramrod Parsons) in spite of the opportunity to turn Paradise Valley to personal material gain. He stays concerned, too, for his family (Helen and Keith), but, as the doctor notes, "he steps at will into the past — might even be a form of adjustment for him. His personality may have lost some of its elasticity."

Daddy's life, which in Helen's words " 'didn't encourage conformity — it gave him a chance to resist imprint' ", has therefore been a continual expression of individuality within the framework of a given environment. Because it has expressed the potentiality of the man, it has brought him happiness — an awareness of growth and an expectation of the future that will not allow him to die in the spring season. Having achieved the completeness of a full life, Daddy no longer fears death, just as the child, who is unaware of death, also has no fear of it — but different, because the mature approach is a conscious one. No longer fearing death, he must still continue to live fully, however, for once he consciously lets time live for him — once he allows his actions to be governed by the clock — he loses the attunement with immortality that allows him to continue to live. Hence he can say to Keith Maclean:

"Get to ninety-five an' you're immortal agin — jist as immortal as you are right now — settin' there ten years old on the front my porch step. . . ."

The one does not know death, and the other does not fear it and can therefore destroy time by destroying the clock on his one hundred and eleventh birthday. Unlike the others at the Daddy Sherry celebration, Daddy himself cannot partake in any "propitiation of the god of mortality". He recognizes it, and that suffices.

At these celebrations, however, David Lang achieves a new completion of his own, for here he at last recognizes the necessary relationship between the individual and the realities of life and death. Limbo — surrender to the negating power of time — is a kind of death-in-life for the journalist in him, but elasticity of self within his own environment, in place and in time, will allow immortality and let the artist in him create. Recognition of this also allows him to anticipate a full future — out of limbo — with Helen and Keith Maclean.

BOTH DAVID LANG and Brian O'Connell, then, undergo a process of growth and development that results in their increased awareness of realities beyond the physical. But though their situations are in a sense complementary — the sensitive boy balancing emotion with intellect and the man in limbo balancing intellect with emotion — the two novels that explore these situations differ markedly.

In *Canadian Literature* No. 14, Patricia Barclay quotes W. O. Mitchell as saying: "When I wrote *Who Has Seen the Wind*, I didn't have an answer. It was just a question, which is a perfectly fine reason for writing a novel. In *The Kite*, there is an answer. . . ." The answer in *The Kite*, however, which should have become apparent through the situation itself, is made so explicit by the end of the book as to weaken the effect of the central symbol:

Now he knew what it was that Daddy had for him — the astonishingly simple thing the old man had to say — and had said through the hundred and eleven years of his life — between the personal deeds of his birth and his death, knowing always that the string was thin — that it could be dropped — that it could be snapped. He had lived always with the awareness of his own mortality.

But *Who Has Seen the Wind* approaches the question merely from a different point of view, and the same answer is implicit here in the development that takes place in the novel itself.

The flaws which weaken *The Kite* do not, however, prevent an appreciation of the concepts that Mitchell attempts to convey. David Lang's intellectually

competent approach to living recognizes the truth of there being life in art; only when he tempers his objectivity with emotional intuitiveness, however, can he recognize also that there is art in life. His contact with the forces of life when he visits Daddy Sherry in Shelby allows him at last to see the short period of mortal existence as a continuum that does not “arrive at anything” or “echo anything” except what the individual makes of it. If he orients physical reality towards the self only or if he reacts only intellectually towards life, he deprives himself of values that are inherent in more abiding relationships; and if he indulges in emotion only, he again lives in a world populated by self alone. Only by the balance of objective reason and judgment with subjective concern and contemplation can he enjoy the fullness that mortal existence offers. Brian O’Connell’s development is also one that brings him to an awareness of the possibilities in mortal life. His maturation takes him from unimpeded emotional indulgence when confronted with death to a balance beyond his child’s years that allows him to recognize intellectually the inevitability of death and yet to appreciate through his emotional sensibility the abiding expressions of transcendent perfection. Here, in *Who Has Seen the Wind*, the answer to Mitchell’s question is more subtly revealed; partly because of this, and partly because of the novel’s unity, its insight, and its world of suggestion, it manifests the strength of certain artistry.

