

WOLF IN THE SNOW

PART TWO

The House Repossessed

Warren Tallman

In the last issue of *Canadian Literature* we published the first part of Warren Tallman's *Wolf in the Snow*, tracing a common theme through novels by Sinclair Ross, W. O. Mitchell, Hugh MacLennan and Ernest Buckler. Now, in the second part, Mr. Tallman draws his theme together and relates it to the urban fiction of Mordecai Richler.

TO READ NOVELS is to gain impressions and these are what I tried to document in the first part of this essay. Now let the four windows of the fictional house become as one view and let the four occupants (Alan MacNeil from *Each Man's Son*, Philip Bentley from *As For Me and My House*, David Canaan from *The Mountain and the Valley* and Brian O'Connell from *Who Has Seen the Wind*) be re-grouped in a scene where the intangible which I have been calling Self looks toward other intangibles which most decisively influence its efforts to come into presence. At the back depth of this scene an immeasurable extent of snow is falling in a downward motion that is without force through a silence that is without contrasts to an earth that is "distorted, intensified, alive with thin, cold, bitter life". How bitter can best be shown by lifting the snow shroud to let the sun shine momentarily as Morley Callaghan's three hunters (*They Shall Inherit the Earth*) move across "rocky ridges and the desolate bush" to where a herd of deer whose hooves had become caught in the snow crust now lie in bloody heaps, abandoned where they have been destroyed by a pack of thin, cold, bitter wolves. As the hunters watch, the sun sets, and "a vast shadow fell over the earth, over the rocky ridges and the desolate bush and over the frozen carcasses." The night shadows mingle with the wolf shadows and cover over the dark blood of the deer as the wavering shroud of snow again begins to fall through

the “dreadful silence and coldness” felt everywhere at the back depth of the scene.

Move now to the middle depth where from the left a bleak expanse of prairie gives way at the centre to forests and mountains which merge on the right with the seacoast looking toward Europe where Alan stands with his mother as he did the day his novel began. That day, Alan emulated Yeats’ sad shepherd from the opposite Irish shore, but in Alan’s shell the “inarticulate moan” which the shepherd heard becomes that “oldest sound in the world”, the remote waterfall roaring of his own salt blood. When Yeats’ shepherd grew and changed into an ominous older man the sound in the shell darkened and strengthened into the beating of a prophetic “frenzied drum” which later still became a “blood-dimmed tide” carrying to the Europe of his imagination as to the Europe of succeeding years “the fury and the mire of human veins”. But in Alan’s less tutored ear on his side of the Atlantic, the blood sea sounds a more innocent summons as his thoughts follow along those unseen paths wandered by his bright and battered highland father. All Alan knows is that this father is the “strongest man in the world.” All that this strongest man knows is the inner thrust of a ceaseless, mindless desire to prevail so powerful that even as he stumbles from defeat to defeat he follows this path down as though it were a way up to the championship, that mountain peak in the mind from which no opposing force could ever banish him. And so powerful is the son’s consciousness of his father’s destiny that even at the last when “the pack of muscles under the cloth of his jacket shifted” and the “poker shot up”, Alan’s immediate thought, far off from the murder at hand, is: “So that was what it meant to be the strongest man in the world!”

The desire to prevail. Move to where David Canaan is standing in a field beside the tracks as the train taking his friend Toby back to Halifax “came in sight thundering nearer and nearer”. But Toby, whom David had expected to wave as the train drew past, “didn’t glance once, not once, toward the house or the field.” And as the thunder on the tracks diminishes, the thunder in David’s blood takes over and “a blind hatred of Toby went through him. It seemed as if that were part of his own life he was seeing—his life stolen before his eyes.” His protest at being cancelled out rises from hatred to rage and he “slashed at the pulpy turnips blindly wherever the hack fell”, until he slashes his way through the rage and discovers a deeper depth where “in his mind there was only a stillness like the stillness of snow sifting through the spokes of wagon wheels or moonlight on the frozen road or the dark brook at night.”

At the far left, the prairies slope away like Shelley’s “lone and level sands.” But there is no fallen Ozymandias here where no Ozymandias has ever stood. Instead

there are the false-front stores of Horizon, warped by the heat, sand-blasted by the drouth dust, and blown askew by the prairie wind. Here, Mrs. Bentley walks once more—as in her diary she so often mentions—along the tracks to the outskirts of town where five grain elevators stand “aloof and imperturbable, like ancient obelisks”, as dust clouds “darkening and thinning and swaying” in the ominous upper prairie of the sky seem “like a quivering backdrop before which was about to be enacted some grim, primeval tragedy.” The swaying dust clouds above, the darkening prairie beneath, the ancient-seeming elevators she huddles against, as well as her mournful sense of the grim, the primeval, the tragic—these details speak for the entire scene which I have been sketching. They speak of a tragedy in which the desire to prevail that drives self on its strange journeys toward fulfillment is brought to an impasse on northern fields of a continent which has remained profoundly indifferent to its inhabitant, transplanted European man. The continent itself—the gray wolf whose shadow is underneath the snow—has resisted the culture, the cultivation, the civilization which is indigenous to Europe but alien to North America even though it is dominant in North America.

If Alan, Philip, Brian and David are notably unable to discover alternatives to the isolation from which they suffer, this is not because they are resourceless persons but because the isolation is ingrained, inherent, indwelling. One alternative is much like the next when all the rooms are equally empty in the vast space-haunted house they occupy. And those gods who over-rule the house toward whom self quickens in its need to prevail are such as preside over forests and open fields, mountains, prairies and plains: snow gods, dust gods, drought gods, wind gods, wolf gods—native to the place and to the empty manner born. These divinities speak, if at all, to all such as lone it toward the mountain pass and the hidden lake, the rushing river and the open empty road. And the experiential emptiness of the place shows on the faces of such loners as that weathered yet naive expressionlessness, the stamp of the man to whom little or nothing has happened in a place where the story reads, not here, not much, not yet. Underneath the European disguises North American man assumes, self too is such a loner. And the angel at his shoulder, met everywhere in the weave of these novels because it is everywhere and omnipresent in the vast house we occupy, is silence. Out of the weave of the silence emerges the shroud of snow. But underneath the snow, the dark blood brightens.

For self does not readily accept separation, isolation and silence. These are conditions of non-being, and whether one assumes that the ground toward which self struggles in its search for completion is divine and eternal or only individual

and temporal, either alternative supposes rebellion against no being at all. It is from this fate that Brian O'Connell flees in panic the night he walks from his uncle's farm to town. "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." It is against this same fate that Alan MacNeil's father beats with his fists, seeking some eminence from which the physical strength that is his measure of self cannot be pulled down to defeat. It is against this fate that Philip Bentley struggles those evenings in his study, seeking to liberate "some twisted stumbling" creative power locked up within him even though all he can create is sketches which reveal how pervasively non-being has invaded his life. And it is against this fate that David Canaan slashes in the field beside the tracks before yielding when he lies down against the flank of the mountain under a blanket of snow upon a bed of silence.

But it is not here that the scene dims out. For the last sound that David hears is that North American lullaby which sings the sleeping self awake as a train "whistled beyond the valley" then "thundered along the rails and was gone." Had Alan MacNeil turned his back upon Europe, the blood sound in the shell would have been that rising up from the railroad earth, those train sounds hooting all loners home to where, up front in the scene, the dark silence breaks up into the gushing of the neon and the noise.

BUT ALONG St. Urbain street in Montreal, the marvellous, the splendid and the amazing have given way to the commonplace, the shabby and the unspeakable. And even before thinking of anything so portentous as a new self, Mordecai Richler has been engaged in the much more onerous task of clearing away the debris which has accumulated in a world where all disguises have been put in doubt. His first three novels are studies of ruined lives: André, the guilt-haunted Canadian artist, who is eventually murdered by the Nazi, Kraus, whose sister Theresa then commits suicide; the guilt-ridden homosexual, Derek, his equally guilty sister, Jessie, and her equally guilty husband, the alcoholic, Barney; the Wellington College professor, Theo Hall and his wife, Miriam; Norman, the American Fifth Amendment expatriate, whose brother is murdered by Ernst, the German youth whom Sally, the Toronto girl, ruins her life trying to save. All of these persons reach out, cry out, for any masks other than the ones they have.

And they testify to Richler's affinity with that side of modern life where the misbegotten wander through ruined Spains of self-pity, poisoned to the point of near and at times actual madness by self-loathing. However, Richler does not seek out these persons in order to demonstrate several times over that we are wrapped up like so many sweating sardines in world misery, world guilt, world sorrow. Like André, Norman and Noah, the protagonists of these novels, he is inside the misery looking for a way out. What looks out is a courageous intelligence struggling to realize that the tormented sleep of self loathing which he explores is just that—a sleep, a dream, a nightmare: but not the reality.

In his fourth novel, *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, the sleeper begins to come awake. The nightmare is still there, but it is not the same nightmare. In *The Acrobats* and *A Choice of Enemies*, Richler chooses areas of world guilt as the basis for dream terror. The Spanish war, the second world war, the victims of these wars and of their ideologies make up the manifest content, the general human failure which images and invites the latent personal failures represented. People whose lives have gone smash drift into areas where life has gone smash and consort with the ghosts who have survived. In *Duddy Kravitz* the scope contracts. Both the ghosts who make up the nightmare and the ideologies through which they wander have faded from mind. Duddy's father, his brother Lenny, his uncle and aunt, his teacher MacPherson, his friend Virgil, his enemy Dingleman, and his shiksa Yvette all live tangled lives in a world where they do not know themselves. But they are caught up by personal disorders rather than world disorder, family strife rather than international strife, individual conflict rather than ideological conflict. And within the localized dream we meet an entirely different dreamer. We meet the direct intelligence and colloquial exuberance that is Duddy's style—and Richler's.

T. S. Eliot has said that poetry in our time is a mug's game. So is fiction, and Richler is one of the mugs. Duddy has ceased to care for appearances and this insouciance releases him from the nightmare. All of the other people in the novel cannot possess themselves because their vital energies are devoted full-time to maintaining the false appearances in terms of which they identify themselves. These appearances—the cultural, ethical, communal pretensions to which they cling—mask over but scarcely conceal the distinctly uncultured, unethical, isolated actuality in which they participate. Hence the importance in their lives of Dingleman, the Boy Wonder, who is a projection of their actual longings to be at ease in Zion in a Cadillac at the same time as he is a projection of the limitation of these longings, being hopelessly crippled. But Duddy, who has ceased to care for

appearances, sees people for what they are, himself included. And what he sees, he accepts—himself included. In an acquisitive world he is exuberantly acquisitive. When he is tricked, he weeps. When threatened, he becomes dangerous. When attacked, he bites back. When befriended, he is generous. When hard-pressed he becomes frantic. When denied, he is filled with wrath. From the weave of this erratic shuttling, a self struggles into presence, a naive yet shrewd latter-day Huck Finn, floating on a battered money raft down a sleazy neon river through a drift of lives, wanting to light out for somewhere, wanting somewhere to light out for.

PLATO TELLS US that when a new music is heard the walls of the city tremble. The music in Duddy Kravitz is where in novels it always is, in the style. The groove in which the style runs is that of an exuberance, shifting into exaggeration, shifting into those distortions by which Richler achieves his comic vision of Montreal. The finest parts of the novel are those in which Richler most freely indulges the distortions: the sequence in which the documentary film director Friar produces a wedding ceremony masterpiece which views like the stream of consciousness of a lunatic, a fantasia of the contemporary mind; the entire portrait of Virgil who wants to organize the epileptics of the world and be “their Sister Kenny”, as well as the more sombre portraits of Dingleman and Duddy’s aunt Ida. Because Duddy has ceased to care for appearances, he moves past all of the genteel surfaces of the city and encounters an actuality in which all that is characteristically human has retreated to small corners of consciousness and life becomes a grotesque game played by bewildered grotesques. The persons who make up this gallery not only fail to invoke self but can scarcely recognize what it is to be a human being. They are like uncertain creatures in a fabulous but confusing zoo, not sure why they are there, not even sure what human forest they once inhabited.

They testify in the language of the sometimes comic, sometimes grim, distortions Richler has created to the oppressive weight of doubt, guilt, remorse, shame and regret that history has imposed upon modern man, particularly upon man in the city, where the effects of history, most closely organized, are most acutely felt. The greater the system of threats to self, the more extensive the system of appearances needed to ward off those threats, the more marked the distortions of

characteristic human need and desire. And the more marked the distortions, the more difficult the artist's task. For sensibility, that active sum of the artist's self, never does exist in relation to itself alone. It exists in relation to what *is*—actual persons, an actual city, actual lives. When the impact of accomplished history imposes distortions upon that actuality, sensibility must adjust itself to the distortions. The story of these adjustments is, I think, the most significant feature of North American fiction in our time. Long ago and far away, before World War One o'clock, Theodore Dreiser could look at the world with direct eyes. Characteristic human impulses of love, sorrow, hope, fear, existed in the actual world as love, sorrow, hope, fear; and Dreiser could direct his powerful sensibility into representation which was, as they say, "like life". But after World War One, in *The Great Gatsby*, possibly the most significant of the between-wars novels, there is open recognition of a distorted actuality necessitating a re-ordering of sensibility, one which both *Gatsby* and Fitzgerald fail to achieve.

Since World War Two the need for adjustment has become even more marked, simply because the distortions have become more pronounced. In *Duddy Kravitz*, Richler follows closely in the groove of Duddy's exuberance and on out into the exaggerations and distortions which make up his adjustment to actual Montreal. By doing so he is able to achieve an authentic relationship to life in that city—Duddy's dream of Caliban along the drear streets of Zoo. In this Richler is at one with the considerable group of contemporary writers—call them mugs, call them angry, call them beat—who all are seeking in their art those re-adjustments which will permit them to relate their sensibilities to what actually is. History has had and continues to have her say. These writers are trying to answer back. If the vision which Richler achieves in answer to history jars upon our sensibilities, that is because we have all heard of Prospero's cloud capped towers and gorgeous palaces. Yet, if the style which conveys the vision twangles from glib to brash, from colloquial to obscene, that is because the true North American tone, at long past World War Two o'clock, is much closer to that of Caliban than ever it has been to that of Prospero whose magic was a European magic, long sunk from sight, and whose daughter and her beau and their world are out of fashion like old tunes or like the lovers on Keats' urn, maybe forever but address unknown. The brave new world toward which Duddy's self quickens is the lake property he covets throughout the novel and finally possesses. When he dives in, seeking a rebirth, he scrapes bottom. But he doesn't care, he doesn't care, he doesn't care. Which is why the mug can make with the music.

D. H. Lawrence contended that in the visions of art a relatively finer vision is

substituted for the relatively cruder visions extant. But in North America, as I hope this restricted study at least partially confirms, finer is relatively crude, because frequently untrue, and crude can be relatively fine. All too often, in fiction as in life, those pretensions which we seek out because they make us fine provide false furnishings for the actual house in which we live. This fine is crude. Duddy, who would not know a pretension if he met one, wanders for this reason by accident and mostly unaware into the actual house. His crude is relatively fine. True, there are no gods hovering over Duddy's lake, no grandiose hotel, no summer camp for children. There is only old mother North America with her snow hair, her mountain forehead, her prairie eyes, and her wolf teeth, her wind songs and her vague head of old Indian memories. And what has she to do with Duddy Kravitz? A lot, I think. For when the house is repossessed the gods come back—snow gods, dust gods, wind gods, wolf gods—but life gods too. And life is the value. When history conspires against life, ruining the house, life will fight back in the only way it can, by not caring. Heavy, heavy doesn't hang over Duddy's head. And that is his value.

Snow melts away. Mountains can be very beautiful. Wheat is growing on the prairies. And in the dark forest beside the hidden lakes the deer are standing, waiting. So turn off the neon, tune out the noise, and place Duddy in the foreground of the scene. Since life is the value, let blood melt snow, and place David Caanan beside him. Strike a match to light Mrs. Bentley a path through the wolf-wind night with its dust-grit teeth until she appears standing beside Duddy and David. Smooth over that bashed-in face, those cauliflowered ears, and let Highland Archie MacNeil, strongest man in the world, appear. For this reader it is these four who emerge from the novels considered as crude with the true crudeness of the place, and by this token most fine, most worth close consideration by those who take the visions of fiction as a decisive mode of relatedness to the actual house in which we live. And of these four, it is Mrs. Bentley in her utter absence of pretentiousness and Duddy in his utter absence of pretentiousness who most effectively and convincingly come forward and take their awkward North American bows. At which point, close out the scene.