

THE THIRD EYE

JAY MACPHERSON'S

The Boatman

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THE WORLD of Canadian poetry is like some lonely farmhouse at the centre of a remarkably large and bleak farm. One enters the farmhouse to find the inhabitants all busy at making wonderfully strange carvings apparently unrelated to the prairie fields and Yonge streets that lie outside. I say "apparently" unrelated because the more we stay with these carvers the more we realise that the carvings *are* related, related in a very freeing way to the whole farm of ten fields and two wastelands.

On our way home we saw a heron fishing in the bog; Mr. Le Pan is carving that heron into a hollow Silenus figure filled with tiny shapes of gods and goddesses. The old farmer himself, Mr. Pratt, has just completed a dragon, one of many, a dragon that represents the muskeg we had such difficulty with on the road here. There is also Miss Macpherson who has just completed a model of the farmhouse itself — it's a whale. This carving (her volume *The Boatman*) has made a great difference in the world of Canadian poetry. Let us proceed to explain the greatness of this difference.

First, what one must remark about Miss Macpherson's whale or "Leviathan" is that it is so very skillfully carved, and so are all the other beasts inside it, for her Leviathan turns out to be a Noah's Ark as well. It can also be said that she is the first Canadian poet to carve angels at all well. No one before had ever told Canadian poets that the Angel was or could be a very suitable and good topic for poetry.

Miss Macpherson's angels, of course, have a lot to do with the fact that she does some very natural but very hard things connected with the Bible. The Bible is still a vexatiously ill-known work in Canada despite all the

nineteenth-century piety and the packed churches of the twentieth century. I mean that it is ill-known as a key to art and as a source for new art. Miss Macpherson knows her Bible, knows that the natural world about us is not natural, knows how her Bible shows you how to deal with this unnaturalness; so nothing seemed more amiable probably than to have lots of angels, for they are the structure of the Bible and they prove to be a subject that immediately creates a tension in which any object or animal or being — Egg, Abominable Snowman and Mary of Egypt — begins to have an outline that glows. In *The Boatman* there is the “faceless angel” of the Storm, the angel who knows what “sways when Noah nods”, the “inward angel” — of a poem called that — who has a “diamond self”. There are the angels who look on as Leviathan frolics and there are the seraph forms within the “caverned woman” which are later named “flowers, fountains, milk, blood”. In this equation we see that what the poet means by an angel is anything or anybody or any being seen in its Eternal aspect, that is, at its most glorious and most real, its most expanded. Actually, in leaping backwards through *The Boatman* and tracking down the angels, I’ve forgotten to mention the very important angel in the last poem:

The world was first a private park
 Until the angel, after dark,
 Scattered afar to wests and easts
 The lovers and the friendly beasts.

This angel represents the giant and supernatural force all Creation lost at the Fall. This force, like a cork in a bottle, stands between us and Paradise in the sense that we must attain to it again before we can return to Paradise. This significant angel and his companions are a great part of the reason why *The Boatman* is such an exciting book. Of course, Genesis, St. John, Milton, Blake and Rilke can’t be wrong — the concept of the angel is one of the most stunning things man ever stumbled across. To have landed and handled this concept is a real achievement.

NOT ONLY is this poet able to arrive at a skill with a very important symbol; she knows also how to deal with a great variety of topics in a carefully modulated variety of ways. The variety of methods or ways or tones is so cleverly arranged that by the time the reader has

finished the volume he has boxed the compass of the reality which poetry imitates. This should be an ability an enthusiast for poetry would naturally expect from the author of any volume of lyrics. Even the meanest musical composer can manage a suite in which the prelude is different from the gigue which in turn is different from the sarabande. But the average poet cannot manage this, nor does he very often even want to, or know that it is possible. Even in really academic circles where one might naturally expect to meet ultra-theoretical sympathies, the idea that a poet might arrange his lyrics in suites or build up a collection of lyrics around a consistent and observable variety in poetic effects is usually poohpoohed as being rather mechanical or even rather immoral. If Miss Macpherson smashes the spell that still holds many a poetry consumer both inside and outside literary circles in Canada — that the stuff is written more or less as if an undistinguishing frenzy had overtaken one — she will have accomplished one miracle at least. This problem is very much connected with the conspiracy of brute silence about criticism in Canada which Mr. Mandel mentioned in the first issue of this quarterly. Miss Macpherson shows what interesting results can be achieved when one dares to break this silence, dares to accept almost casually the fact that literature can be talked about and described.

Canadian poetry has always been plagued by the book of unrelated lyrics. I often feel that, aside from the fact that for a long while there were no Canadian critics who could help with this problem, the influence of the average collection from England should bear some of the blame. Despite the fact that Yeats, Eliot, Thomas and Sitwell have tried something different, the usual English poet generally dishes out a selection of his latest “real” walks. Canadian poets are unfortunately rather trapped when it comes to writing English poetry about walks, since in some parts of Canada it is impossible to take a walk either because the traffic would kill you or the particular province was designed to be interesting only to birds. Miss Macpherson’s angels help tremendously, since it is possible to talk about an angel no matter where you live. One of the proudest conclusions the author of *The Boatman* might draw about her own volume is that very few of the experiences described are “real” or “natural” experiences. The situations, the beings, the speakers are all gloriously artificial like the themes of Bach, which no “real” bird, no “real” train whistle could imitate or has ever imitated. If the tyranny of

the “natural” or unorganised results in the ragbag approach to a volume of lyrics, then the monarchy of the better than “natural”, the monarchy of the organised, has resulted in the beautifully articulated structure of this book, and it is a monarchy that shows the way to future ones. I can remember feeling so envious with regard to one of my own earliest poetic enthusiasms — Edith Sitwell; I envied her the idea of a suite such as *Façade* represents. I envied because I felt that to imitate it would be to plagiarize. But *The Boatman* quite persuasively shows that originality consists not in avoiding what has been done before but in doing what has been done over again. So far as the organization of a book of lyrics is concerned William Blake showed the way forever. To transplant that organization into our poetry which so sadly needs it is not the least interesting of *The Boatman's* accomplishments.

In a poem entitled “The Anagogic Man” we are presented with a figure as interesting as the angel, the figure of a sleeping Noah whose head contains all creation. “Consider that your senses keep / A death far deeper than his sleep”. This is Blake’s Albion, Emerson’s Giant in his great early essay “Nature”, Joyce’s sleeping Finn, and it represents as do these analogues the slumbering imagination of all life, a slumbering imagination that slowly through art and science rearranges the sun, moon, stars and figures of the gods until they are once more under human control. This Noah is the artist, a man who has brought and still brings all of society safely through the flood and tempest of a fallen world’s whirlwind of atoms and death-wishes. But Art must be allowed to decide for itself when the time for universal apocalypse has arrived. If we waken him or it beforehand it is akin to building the Tower of Babel, to attempting a leap into Paradise when we are by no means ready for it. The whole collection of poems requires the reader to transfer himself from the sleep our senses keep to Noah’s sleep, and from Noah’s sleep eventually to the first morning in Paradise. Miss Macpherson’s book is a dream that starts off in the world of the senses and slowly lifts us higher and higher until in the final half dozen pages we are as high as we can be.

Other Canadian poets, as a matter of fact, have handled this figure, and he is a figure that a poet has to handle in one shape or another sooner or later, since the very process of being interested in metaphor evidently must lead to an interest in giant and mythical figures. Once you start saying that “my love is like a red, red rose”, you might

as well start saying that she is like a great many other beautiful things as well, and then of course if she really is a goddess she is like everything, because a goddess isn't a goddess unless she can control both beautiful and ugly things, even things indifferent. So she *is* everything and contains all the things she is like. If anything is like anything (metaphor) it eventually is everything (myth) and is an anagogic figure similar to Miss Macpherson's.

Douglas Le Pan has a poem about this figure called "Image of Silenus". The motto is from Plato: "He is like one of the images of Silenus. They are made to open in the middle, and inside them are figures of the gods", but the basic image of the poem is from Canadian nature — a heron who is equated with this image of Silenus. Le Pan's Silenus or Noah contains the "shrunken figures of desire". Miniatures rather, toys in a toyshop window" — Dionysus, Christopher, Francis, Apollo, foam-born Aphrodite. The speaker turns and looks down from a railway viaduct at the so-called real world, "real and suffering city". "They are rows of jostling seeds, / Planted too close, unlikely to come to maturity. / Some will shoot up (germs are brave things and hard to kill). / But most will be crushed." This is the world we live in. But in the inner city, the world we think, feel and imagine in, the figures of the gods — ". . . The puppets have looked out / Like sick children with their faces pressed to the window / (Guarded by guiling glass / By an invisible barrier)". Le Pan's glass is Miss Macpherson's golden bubble head of glass which in turn is the container of Noah's anagogic dream life. But in Le Pan's poem it is not time yet for the complete union of the figure of the gods — or completely expressed desire — and frustrated, wretched, longing humanity. "Now the blinds drop, the shop shuts, the mask grins again", and as the Silenus figure closes away his hidden myths to become one more mocking figure imitating our own ugly imprisonment the heron flies away.

The Boatman climbs from Le Pan's seedbed to his figures of the gods. Both poets here remind one of Northrop Frye's concept of the verbal universe which hovers over the seedbed of the so-called real and natural world picking out this or that event for admission into its world of literary forms. Both Noah and Silenus are humanizations of Frye's concept and the idea is, I suppose, that eventually all will be verbal universe. The concept is obviously a very valuable one to poets and should be a far more fruitful one to discuss than the usual chestnut of "obscurity", especially

since one can see it as lying behind these two fine poems, Le Pan's "Silenus" and Miss Macpherson's "Anagogic Man", which achieve so much intensity and communication.

The epiphany of the mysterious heron, the vision of the all-containing head, show as in a lightning flash a sight of what the whole world would be like if it were completely metaphored, completely humanly controlled. One day the sleeper will awaken, the film will be all developed, the images of desire will break through their imprisoning glass. Now I have lined up another poem by another poet with Miss Macpherson's "Anagogic Man" in order to show that the sleeping mythical Noah figure connects up very easily with what most people might consider the more real and more Canadian world of viaducts, herons and cameras. I have also wanted to show one of the things *The Boatman* continually does; after reading it, other poems and poets take on a new design and sharpness. I remember about the time that *The Boatman* came out there was an account in the papers of a doctor who said that it was much more sensible to hang abstractish Braques and Picassos in children's hospitals rather than representational works since the eye can make an endless variety of faces and scenes out of a good abstract painting, only one or two things out of the representational painting. So here Miss Macpherson's "Anagogic Man" is an abstract or mythical design which, as we have seen, lies behind another poet's representational particulars — a heron, a slum district under a viaduct — and it also could lie behind a great many more particular and varied experiences. Mr. Le Pan has attached his concrete particular to the abstract design of Plato's god-bearing Silenus, but Miss Macpherson has taken just this design itself, carried it about as far as it can be carried, so far as precisely probing its clarity is concerned, and so produced a poem to which, as faces and scenes flock into the abstract painting, other poems and a great many experiences can be attached.

In the poem actually called "The Boatman" we have the Anagogic Man in comic, Gilbert and Sullivan terms. Comic mirroring or parody is one of Miss Macpherson's most striking organizational devices; themes usually considered rather august, and often treated elsewhere by the poet with dignity, are quite suddenly unbuttoned and playfully kicked about. One has only to contrast the chuckling rhythm of "You might suppose it easy" from "The Boatman" with the meditative atmosphere of "Noah walks with head bent down" from "The Anagogic Man" to see how skill-

fully the poet can transpose a theme from one mode into another. The reader is asked in this comic anagogic "Boatman" to turn himself inside out in order to get his beasts outside him. Presumably one can't be a Noah whose head is filled with all the images of the world until one has been thoroughly turned upside down and cleansed of the world-parts inside your head in the wrong way; you have to be turned inside out since that is the only way to get ready for rebirth — to be the very opposite of all the so-called real and natural world expects of you. The range exhibited by the distance between this comic rollicking poem and the serious "Anagogic Man" is remarkable. Serious poets often attempt to be the opposite of serious, and Ogden Nash no doubt furtively attempts elegy, but here we have a poet who makes both elegiac and comic equally rich.

One other key poem I should like to glance at before attempting a description of the book as a whole is the last poem, "The Fisherman". Fishing is a much praised Canadian activity, although few Canadians, even the much befisheried National Film Board, ever quite catch as important a fish as this one. What the Anagogic Man, The Boatman ("That's to get his beasts outside him, / For they've got to come aboard him") and the Sleeping Shepherd (another version of anagogic Noah) have been doing is fishing, that is, humanizing the myriad forms of the world which old Adam let slip away. Miss Macpherson's Fisherman is, as Northrop Frye pointed out, a successful Fisher-King. He is also the Emily Carr of Wilfrid Watson's poem who has been coughed up on the shores of Eternity by a green Leviathan. Emily Carr got to Eternity through humanizing or catching Leviathan in her paintings; here the Fisherman catches Leviathan with all the humanizing devices that human imagination provides.

ONE CLUE to the mystery of Miss Macpherson's hold on one's imagination is the feeling she constantly gives of things inside other things. This idea of things within things can be expanded into the most satisfying explanation of existence I think I know of. We live in a Leviathan which God occasionally plays with and is always attempting to catch. Once we played with it and tried to catch it but it caught us

instead. This myth is the essential design of Miss Macpherson's book, and the key poems I have glanced at as well as her ability to organize everything grow naturally out of this myth — the myth of things within things.

In the very first poem the reader can spot the larger fable in the line "A mouse ran away in my wainscot". There the speaker feels only the beginning of an insideness-outsideness which slowly spirals upward into the magnificently final statement of the very last poem where inside and outside disappear for ever. What Miss Macpherson eventually seems to be saying, for example in her Ark poems, is that the God who plays with the monster of our universe has also got this Leviathan or universe within him. Man inside the Leviathan will one day become the God who plays rather than gets entrapped and finally the God with Leviathan inside him — Milton's "all in all".

There is another early poem called "The Third Eye". The Third Eye that made a "Cosmos of miscellany" is the guiding force that can still help us back to the lost world of the second section where "the lost girl gone under sea / Tends her undying grove". The reader must read these poems with a third eye. This is like Eliot asking us to read *The Waste-land* with Tiresias' eyes; Tiresias, the hermaphrodite, represents subject and object joined in the same enlightening way as the third eye here represents a possible freedom from the divided world of left eye, right eye; man, woman, left hand, right hand and so on. The Third Eye loses its power in the first pages of the book, but grows again throughout and reappears in the reader's brow at the end where cosmos is indeed made out of miscellany.

In the third section of the book, "Plowman in Darkness", the feeling which emerges is one probably bubbling to the reader's lips at that very moment. This feeling might be expressed as that "it's damn cosy in this Leviathan and I'm not going to stir an inch":

Well, the blessed upshot was,
Mamma worked her way across
From Egypt to the Holy Land,
And here repents, among the sand .

When the reader realizes that this particular Mary worked her passage to the Holy Land by prostitution he has no doubt realized the intention

of this section, which seems to be the showing of how useful evil can be. It can get you to the Holy Land. It's amusing and it provides a muddy filthy nest for humanity, which is some sort of protection from complete nothingness until the sleeping shepherd of the next section can dream up something better. The epilogue to this section, "Plowman in Darkness", presents us with the sister birds Procne and Philomela, the swallow and the nightingale. The nightingale broods upon a lost garden world, but the swallow:

. . . snug in walls of clay
Performs as she is able:
Chatters, gabbles, all the day,
Raises both Cain and Babel.

These two birds are displaced versions of angels and in Miss Macpherson's iconography are to be carefully placed beside the dove and the raven later mentioned in connection with Noah's Ark. "Plowman in Darkness" is a very exhilarating part of the book to read since it performs the difficult feat I have already glanced at of taking myths and symbols usually canonized in deep sanctity and playing them in a different key. I think most poets in Canada could babble a few lines about the phoenix as a very sacred bird indeed, but few are sufficiently trained in literary symbolism to see, as Miss Macpherson does, that the phoenix could be funny, even squalid as well as solemn. The hermaphroditic Phoenix who is a companion bird to the chattering Philomela is certainly a disturbing creature, but needed to be invented. And that's the whole point of this suite filled with holy harlots and second rate Thomas the Rymers — holiness has to fall, has to be laughed at or else it can never be holy again, or rather remain holy.

The fourth suite, "The Sleepers", represents an advance spiritually forward in that the various sleepers, sleeping shepherds for the most part, are dreaming their way out of the prison of Nature. This Nature is the Nurse of the last poem who "spins a sensual shining web". In the world of the Sleepers female figures, partly of the nightingale variety, partly of the babbling swallow type, attend the sleeping male figures. In the "Garden of the Sexes" we see that the natural feminine and fallen world imprisons Man's waking life until he is bound to a Tree; but at night Man escapes from his prison in dreams and it is Nature that finds herself imprisoned there. Babbling and singing and crooning beneath all these

poems, of course, we have the story of the Bible like a ground bass to which classical allusions are connected with great ease. For example, the poem "Helen in Egypt" reminds one of Israel in Egypt and Christ in Egypt. The "Faithful Shepherd" has both Ezekiel and Endymion behind it. In the "Old Enchanter" we get a clue as to what Miss Macpherson means somewhat later on by an island and also what sleep means. Merlin was not "betrayed by love or doting": his enchanted sleep is a skillful retreat to a place where he and the civilization in his bosom can survive the Fall and prepare a new world:

Long ago,
Shaken by dragons, swamped with sea-waves, fell
The island fortress, drowned like any shell.

But the dreamer "hears no tales of overthrow"; he wills that the island which is civilization does not drown but only falls asleep. The exciting crossover between Abraham's bosom and Merlin's bosom should be noted as well as the modulation on the Helen in Egypt theme. Perhaps this begins to indicate what reading this book is like. One poem reminds the reader of another poem in a slightly different key; read one poem eventually and you are reading all the poems at the same time. Simultaneity is the result of Miss Macpherson's method if I am right in seeing the whole book as a set of variations on that very first intimation of the insideness-outsideness theme — the mouse that runs away in the wainscot.

By the time we have come to the "Natural Mother" (a nightingale) at the end of this fourth suite, and just before the "Nurse" (a swallow), we have come as far in the Biblical ground bass as Christ's birth. Actually it seems but yesterday that Cain and Abel fought, Helen waited and Endymion slept. The pressing together here of widely separated historical figures reminds the reader of Spenser's Fairyland in which Adam and Eve meet St. George, and Arthur exists at the same time as Elizabeth. Both the world of the Sleepers and the Elizabethan Fairyland are dedicated to the dream world where time and space are more beautifully arranged than they are in the waking world. The speaker of the very first poem "Ordinary People in the Last Days" has lived to see the third eye disappear, to see the world of two eyes, the world of one eye ("Plowman in Darkness") and then in this suite, like the moon above a fog, the slow return of the third eye. So Man, once a complete Man with Eve in-

side him, has seen himself split into two. He has been content to copulate with the other half (the hideous hemaphroditic Phoenix); now the first Man returns.

In the fifth suite entitled "The Boatman", the point of the Ark poems is that when Man found himself sinking in the fallen world he had enough sense to build an imitation of that world which met it and himself halfway. One day he'll regain his island or Eden, but a floating island will do for now. The poems here have sharper, more urgent tones than those of the "Sleepers", as if all the conjunctions and parallelisms throughout the whole volume were tightening up. The Ark is a Leviathan within Leviathan and it prophesies to Noah that one day he will swallow his own Ark, that is, make mental and controllable what was physical before and not so easily controlled. I suppose primitive religions are as good a meaning for the Ark as any. They did ferry humanity across some frightening abysses, but now we have reached the point where instead of crawling through a Bushman's whale-shaped hut to rebirth we can do all that in our heads:

Shall swim circled by you
And cradled on your tide
Who was not even, not ever
Taken from your side.

The last line reminds us that Eve, the half-man, was a sort of Ark too who one day will be a spiritual controllable reality, not a constantly turning and elusive female Nature. "You dreamed it", says the Ark as like an eggshell it is cast away and Man walks on to his island again. The island or Eden is a new world and the flood that obscured it was after all only the Man's tears. The "Inward Angel", we note, has an inward eye which is the Third Eye; this eye should reappear now that the escaped diamond self has been recaptured.

IF THE READER has really tried to turn himself inside out, that is, discipline and organize his life around a focus of Eternity, then the riddles of the last suite of *The Boatman* are easy. Each riddle is the top of a spiral staircase leading down through the book. In all the riddles the effect is very much like that of the dancing sequence of those

naked ladies on the Acidalian Mount in Spenser's *Legend of Courtesy*. There is an air of release in Spenser — the Mountain of Contemplation is also at last the mountain of love and joy, nakedness and beauty. So here, after learning how from the other poems in *The Boatman*, the reader can look at anything in the world and find joy in it, from a lungfish to an abominable Snowman. This is the world Yeats is talking about where body is not "bruised to pleasure soul", where root, bole and blossom are one. For example the lungfish was once a fish — "a swimmer in the fallen world" — but now is "no Friday faring". It contains both fish and a higher state in the same being. "The Mermaid" is both nightingale and swallow, both romantic and ironic. The Whale is Leviathan and also God's Creature. The last section in effect says to the reader that Creation, Fall and Redemption are part of a dance whose final figure is the scene in which the Fisherman, in the very last poem, having corrected the Fall is himself corrected for all time. But perhaps in Eternity we would never dream of playing with lungfish and mermaids completely scrubbed of their fallen characteristics, which would be their firm graspable outline. Even when one finally achieves the freedom of being outside one keeps very wisely a delight in the perils of insideness.

Perhaps the best way to conclude what should be said in praise of *The Boatman* is that it shows you how to get from "here to there". If "here" is this world and "there" the world of Eternity, then this book of poems shows the reader all the necessary steps of the way. These are steps that I am sure an increasingly great number of readers and writers in Canada are going to find very exciting to take.

