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CONTEMPORARY CANADIAN POETS

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UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA MEDAL FOR POPULAR BIOGRAPHY 1973

LAST YEAR THE Selections Committee lamented the fact that few books were submitted for this competition, and that it appeared that biography as a literary and historical art form was dying. We are glad to report that this year the committee was impressed by the range and quality — and number — of books submitted: Biography is alive and well and living in Canada!

Serious contenders for the award included Elizabeth Goudie's *Woman of Labrador*, a most engaging book, full of information; it must be saluted as one of those too infrequent autobiographical works on the "little" people in this country, "little" in one dimension only: what others know of them. Lovat Dickson's *Wilderness Man* also impressed the committee; it is a fascinating, and sympathetic, treatment of a strange character whom the author does his best to understand. Roderick Stewart's *Bethune* is a lively and currently topical book; we are still not sure, however, what makes *Bethune* run, and probably we never will be.

Because of the quality of this year's biographies, the Selections Committee decided that this was the year to acknowledge the new impetus in biography in Canada by making the award to two books: Denis Smith's *Gentle Patriot, A Political Biography of Walter Gordon*, and Douglas Spettigue's *FPG, The European Years*. The Smith book, in fine prose, gives an obviously sympathetic but finely judged account of Gordon's dilemma. And Spettigue's work is an interesting piece of detective work, a most fantastic research achievement that gives a strong sense of Grove. Both men — and their publishers (Hurtig and Oberon respectively) — are to be congratulated.

DONALD STEPHENS

HOW A LAND GROWS OLD

NO-ONE WHO TRAVELLED over Canada in recent years by ways other than the impersonal Highway could fail to observe with uneasy sadness how quickly the land grows old where man touches it. Of course, the country is so large that it remains possible for casual visitors to escape into pristine landscapes, wildernesses relatively unmarred; after all, the image of a *new land* is still fostered assiduously by publicists and politicians. But the poets think differently, and they speak for sensitive Canadians. When Al Purdy writes of the Ontario he knows as a land which history has worn down with glacial persistence, when a young poet like Dale Zieroth writes elegies on a dying prairie way of life, we ignore them at our peril. For they tell us how a century of unthinking exploitation has destroyed not only the original quality of the land, but also the human culture that was grafted on to it. For those inclined to trace this pattern of environmental disaster three recent books are worth reading.

Painters in a New Land, by Michael Bell (McClelland & Stewart, \$22.50) is one of those lavishly produced volumes of social history-cum-art which McClelland & Stewart do so well. Michael Bell, formerly a curator at the Public Archives of Canada, has gathered a fascinating anthology of drawings and water-colours by pre-Victorian and early Victorian artists in Canada; almost all of them have been preserved unexhibited and previously unpublished in the Archives, and this has helped to guarantee their freshness of impact.

One thing *Painters in a New Land* reveals convincingly is that Canada in the early nineteenth century fostered a flourishing extension of the great English school of water-colour painting. There is an extraordinary gem-like vividness of tone about many of these sketches, which vary in character from the engagingly

primitive to the highly accomplished, the latter usually the work of military topographers or of the few professional artists who in those distant days found their way into the wilderness west of Lachine. In their vigour and clarity the best of these works recapture in a way the camera has never done, and prose only rarely, the wild and evanescent beauty of parts of Canada that have now been long submerged by settlement, and the appeal of new places where the buildings may have been rough and makeshift but the alienating impersonality of modern cities had not yet taken root. Michael Bell has kept his own commentary to what is barely necessary for sustaining the historical flow, but he has very felicitously mingled the paintings and drawings he selects with well-chosen passages from the diaries and journals of the time. Thus, *Painters in a New Land* really does give a vivid sense of what its title describes — a land barely changed by man the hunter and as yet hardly spoilt by man the exploiter.

No-one who knows Canada well is likely to enjoy this fine book without experiencing a pang of grief — and of remorse on behalf of his people — at the thought of how much of this sparkling heritage we have ruined. Something of the change that human settlement wrought in the prairies, totally changing their original ecology, is charted in J. G. Nelson's *The Last Refuge* (Harvest House, \$7.50). This is a geographer's account of what has happened to the Cypress Hills and the surrounding plains since the introduction of the horse — even before white men appeared in numbers — began the process that on the prairies has changed the relationship between man, his environment, and the animal and vegetable species that share it with him: changed it so radically that it seems unlikely that — even if one's occasional fantasies of man's vanishing as a species could ever come true — anything resembling the original pattern of existence would form itself again in the vast southern regions of Rupert's Land. The moral of Professor Nelson's carefully written and researched historical narrative is summed up in his last paragraph with a simplicity that is its own eloquence.

In concluding this study, I would like to lay stress on the rapid pace of change since the appearance of the white man, and its implications for the future. It took about 200 years between 1670 and 1880 for man to emerge as an ecological dominant and for the European economic system to effect major changes in an ecosystem that apparently had been in a relatively steady state for thousands of years. In the following eighty or ninety years this economic system has grown to the point where remote areas such as the Cypress Hills are being subjected to the cumulative effects of urban, agricultural, transport and recreational developments as well as to proposals for mining in one sort or another. In about ninety years we have moved from abortive efforts to save the bison to the point where the very

air of the Cypress Hills might be polluted by gas and oil production. What will the Hills be like in fifty years if we do not seriously look at present economic activities and living patterns, and plan for life as well as growth, goods and earnings?

The real tragedy of the prairies goes beyond mere humanization, for what is happening now is the destruction of the plains not merely as an environment, but also as a setting for human communities. During the past two decades exploitation has taken on even more naked and rapid forms, exemplified in official encouragement of the ousting of the farmers by large corporations, with the consequent decay of the towns and villages of the prairie provinces.

This process — the death of a regional culture that has emerged, flourished and decayed in no more than a long human life — is splendidly described and chronicled by Heather Robertson in *Grassroots* (James Lewis & Samuel, \$10.00). Heather Robertson takes five communities, varied in character and history, and shows how the process of regional decay is working through all of them, so that they can be described only as moribund, no matter what efforts at rejuvenation their inhabitants may initiate. Their death, and the death of scores of communities like them, will mean that within another generation prairie life as our novelists have described it will have come to an end. The combines will still move over the vast fields, but they will move — so far as human community is concerned — through a near vacuum.

Heather Robertson has been accused by some reviewers of exaggeration, and here and there she does indeed perform that heightening of fact which all writers know is sometimes necessary to arrive at an underlying truth. But those who have travelled the plains during the last six or seven years will recognize the essential rightness of her presentation. These are in stark actuality the prairie towns and villages of the 1970s, a generation farther into decay than Sinclair Ross's *Horizon*. No-one now would think of calling any of them even ironically *Horizon*; they are our own destinations on a Journey to the End of the Night. Perhaps Heather Robertson is no Canadian Céline, but she has charted the territory in which such a novelist might operate, and has set the mood of the next wave of prairie novels, provided there are enough people left in the prairies during the later 1970s to make novels worth the effort. In the meantime Heather Robertson has shown herself in *Grass Roots* to be something more than a good journalist. She writes the kind of documentary reportage that is likely to be read a long time ahead. Orwell would not have resented a comparison between *Grass Roots* and *The Road to Wigan Pier*.

THE AREA of silence between those who write in French and those who write in English north of the 49th parallel and west of the Atlantic has long been a cause for regret. From the beginning in *Canadian Literature* we have tried to throw out precarious bridges of lianas and telegraph wire across the gap; our efforts have been largely frustrated by the manifest failure of the assumption that participants in either the francophone or the anglophone culture in Canada are willing to exercise bilingualism sufficiently to read much of each others' literatures in their original languages.

Reluctantly, we have had to accept the need for the copious translation of Canadian books from French into English and vice versa. A beginning has been made from French into English, and it is now possible for readers in Thunder Bay and Seven Persons to read in their own language a score or so of the most interesting novels written recently in Quebec; with due respect, I doubt if even ten recent interesting English Canadian novels are available in French translation to the inhabitants of Sorel or Rivière du Loup.

We welcome therefore the Canada Council's recent initiative in this field. Not only is the Council offering two annual prizes for the best translations of Canadian books into one or other of the major languages. More important, in the long run, it is allocating no less than \$225,000 to subsidize the publication of translations during the current financial year, and translations from the Canadian languages other than French and English are not ruled out. This modest fund, well spent, can do more to promote understanding between the various cultures than any number of expensive Royal Commissions.

G.W.

SEARCH AND DISCOVERY

Margaret Avison's Poetry

Daniel W. Doerksen

I_N "Love (III)", the poem which concludes his "picture of many spiritual Conflicts", George Herbert portrays the culmination of the religious quest in unexpected discovery. Unaware that she herself will one day describe such experience, the Margaret Avison of *Winter Sun* feels intrigued into envious comment. Having probed about in a world of Heraclitean flux and materialistic preoccupation, she marvels that

George Herbert — and he makes it plain —
Guest at this same transfiguring board
*Did sit and eat.*¹

And indeed Miss Avison's own poetical achievement in *Winter Sun* (1960) and *The Dumbfounding* (1966) merits consideration as spiritual quest and discovery. The first of her books is marked by a continual seeking, while the second speaks of fulfilment in lyrics which have been hailed as "among the finest religious poems of our time".² Aside from sheer literary excellence, what makes the two collections remarkable is that, far from being tacked on as a "Christian" afterthought to her previous verse, Miss Avison's later poems seem to grow out of her earlier searching ones in a sequence which if not that of simple cause and effect, is yet that of authentic experience.³ Search and discovery are thus like two sides of one coin, or like two main parts of that one thing Claudel declares every poet is born to say in the totality of his works. In this essay I propose to examine Margaret Avison's poetry of search and of discovery, noting the way in which search leads into discovery.

If to be secular means to be fully engaged in the world of the “here and now”, then all of Miss Avison’s poetry is secular. If to be religious means to care about meaning, to have (in Tillich’s language) an “ultimate concern”, little of her poetry is not religious. The search for the ultimately significant in life stands out as a main feature of *Winter Sun*, but it is not always obtrusive. “The Apex Animal” manifests a leisurely, playful curiosity as to the nature of “the One . . . Who sees, the ultimate Recipient/of what happens.” Fancy suggests to the poet, as it surely could not to a Christian, that this ultimate being is none other than a cloud formation shaped like a horse’s head, since after all the latter has a commanding view of things in its “patch of altitude/troubled only by clarity of weather” and seems free of matters in “mortal memory”. Under the fanciful surface of the poem, and hidden away before the parenthetical conclusion, there lurks a note of concern about the human individual, in this case the clerk whose “lustreless life” has been touched by the “ointment of mortality”.

“Dispersed Titles”, both more serious and more profound, also displays an ambivalence as to the spiritual nature of its quest. The “titles” of the title form a poem of their own, which aids in threading together the central metaphor of flight in its various transformations:

[FLIGHT]
 [HAS ROOTS]
 BUT IS CUT OFF
 EXCEPT FROM ALL ITS SELVES
 THE EARTH HAS OTHER ROOTS AND SELVES
 THE NAMELESS ONE DWELLS IN HIS TENTS
 AND “UP” IS A DIRECTION.

The “flight”, beginning as the modern scientific conquest of the air, is soon traced back to that other flight made possible for Kepler by his “Orpheus”, the Danish astronomer Tycho Brahe. The escape from the old cosmology (“the defiant break/with cycles”) has left a “weird hollow under the solar architrave”, and the repeated invocation of Tycho Brahe (suggesting man’s Narcissistic self-worship during the Renaissance and later) is accompanied by a feeling of corresponding emptiness within man himself:

Something wrought by itself out of itself
 must bear its own
 ultimates of heat and cold
 nakedly, refusing
 the sweet surrender.

For Tycho Brahe's sake I find myself,
 but lose myself again for
 so few are salvaged
 in the sludge of the
 ancestral singular.

Miring the person in the past rather than freeing him for flight, the new humanistic religion has apparently reversed the old paradox, "he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it" (Matt. 10:30). But such awareness of modern man's plight does not in itself set him free, and while the poet senses something beyond the known ("Things I can't know I smell/as plainly as if invisible camp-fires/smoked"), the conclusion of the poem reveals no joy of discovery, but at best the musing of one who wishes there were a Christian reality, yet feels compelled to conclude that "up", as the post-medieval cosmology demonstrates, is after all only a "direction". Thus, in the final twist of the basic metaphor, Christianity is seen as a "flight" from reality. Still the vividness with which the poet depicts man's persistent idea that the world is a cosmic "stage" betrays, despite the overt rejection, a quest for a reality beyond scientific humanism.

MUCH POETRY of religious search reveals a potentiality for "finding". Paul Claudel once said that the past is "an incantation of things to come, . . . the forever growing sum of future conditions."⁴ A Christian outcome may be implied but not necessitated by these poems. For the time being, the overt religious references point chiefly to frustration. The "waste land" quality of the "gardenless gardens"⁵ in "Not the Sweet Cicely of Gerardes Herball" is aggravated, strengthened by the allusions to myrrh and to "rams-horn thickets", which like the gardens themselves mock the very thing they seem to promise. It is the very bleakness that is religious. Disheartening scenes are frequently encountered in *Winter Sun*: the "Fallen, Fallen World" is a world of "breathing murk and apprehension of/Slow sure estrangement from the sun", an "enforced passage" through "vacant corridors". Life often seems like a "choked day, swollen to almost total swamp". Just as the piled-up consonants in these phrases help convey the sense of obstruction, the prevailing complexity of surface and structure throughout Miss Avison's first book reflects the difficulties of an as yet unrewarded search.

The quest proceeds under a variety of moods. The gentle speculation of "The

Apex Animal" yields to a more despairing note in the descriptions just given, and even to something like rebellion: "Since Lucifer", the poet says, "waiting is all/A rebel can." Yet since there is still the search, questions are raised in "Atlantis and the Department Store" as to whether she really is a rebel, and if so, what she is rebelling against. She proceeds to describe what she elsewhere calls "dull repudiated house" — the earlier religious ideas which she "did not hate" but nevertheless has rejected in favour of a secular world. The latter's "splendid/Echoing stairways" she contrasts with the "steady escalators" of organized religion.

But while the religious emporium's "stunned" hierarchies ignore the life behind "soiled concrete walls", the inquiring poet is only too much aware of the problems of modern society. "The World Still Needs", Miss Avison entitles one poem, and the incompleting transitive verb suggests the endlessness of the need. She sees not only the "communal cramp of understanding" which produces suburbia, and the masses, their eyes "swimming with sleep" at a concert, but the lonely and confined housewife suffering literally and symbolically from "Sore throat and dusty curtains" and the engineer "watchful and blank" who "had no Christmas worries/Mainly because it was the eve of April." Colloquial phrases here mark an occasional movement toward simplified expression which is to be more fully exploited in the poetry of discovery, and is in this poem accompanied by hints of coming harmony in the allusions to "piano-tuners" and "another spring". But the lucidity and lyric power of another "social problems" poem is both witty and grim: the pun in the title of "Mordent for a Melody" cleverly suggests just that combination of pungency and lilt that perfectly describes the poem itself. Fully alert to modern developments in science and society, Miss Avison adroitly mocks man's unthinking enthusiasm about them. However, it seems more typical of the searching poet to express a tragic realization with sympathy, as in "Apocalyptic?" (the question mark in the title is significant), where the poet explores the possibility that a "luminous" doom may be what frees us from the "tread-mill" of life.

Facing man's situation is an indispensable necessity, but, as the poet of *Winter Sun* realizes, what matters beyond that is how one responds to it. In these poems of search, Miss Avison explores various alternatives, but does not advocate any particular response — she is not ready yet, and the search itself, together with her hopes or fears, is all that she can share. In "Unfinished After-Portrait", a poem of mourning, the poet expresses her own dissatisfaction with the repeated frustrations of her quest:

Start-and-stop despairs of
 that royal moving
 keeps trying other sleights
 as rockets roar for the interlunar
 only to piffle out in
 the ocean's suds.

This trip and gamble cannot be
 the best, the looked-for.

The continually varying line-lengths, emphasized by indentation, reflect the erratic course of the searchings. Most of the remaining lines consist of just such "Start-and-stop", such "trip and gamble", and if the conclusion does not "piffle out", it is only because the poet is willing to settle for a somewhat vague feeling of a "human presence".

An increasing sense of urgency in the quest seems to develop in some poems of *Winter Sun*. "The Mirrored Man" articulates this increased intensity with artistic power. The opening rhymed quatrains (I quote the second and third) state the paradox of man's search which is at once a refusal to search:

So now we flee the Garden
 Of Eden, steadfastly.
 And still in our flight are ardent
 For lost eternity.

We always turn our heads away
 When Canaan is at hand,
 Knowing it mortal to enjoy
 The Promise, not the Land.

This re-statement of the gist of George Herbert's "Miserie" leads through a brief Miltonic evocation of a flaming sword and curse to a thoroughly modern yet, one feels, timeless picture of man's existential self-confrontation:

So each of us conceals within himself
 A cell where one man stares into the glass
 And sees, now featureless the meadow mists,
 And now himself, a pistol at his temple,
 Gray, separate, wearily waiting.

In the succeeding lines, alternative responses to the dilemma are pictured: ignoring the "burden" of self and thus turning the quest into "trivial ramblings"; despairing, and choosing actual or virtual suicide; or deliberately inculcating

illusion in an exploitation of the self. Realizing the futility of each possibility, the poet sums up the search in haunting, poignant lines:

All of us, flung in one
 Murky parabola,
 Seek out some pivot for significance,
 Leery of comets' tails, mask-merry,
 Wondering at the centre
 Who will gain access, search the citadel
 To its last, secret door?
 And what face will the violator find
 When he confronts the glass?

The passage itself mirrors the enigma that is life, its beginning and ending shrouded in mystery (implying some unknown Other in "flung" and "violator"), and even the relatively known element partaking teasingly of "murk" as well as of precise mathematical pattern ("parabola"). The central lines beautifully sum up the search itself, suggesting its purpose, hopes, fears, and protective disguises. Such is man's quest, seen from the point of view of one who has not found — not basically, though sensitivity to everything observable makes possible moments of calm and wonder such as that recorded in "Easter".⁶

A delightful poem which strikes one as being earlier than the more serious ones in *Winter Sun* is "Meeting together of Poles and Latitudes (In Prospect)". This poem of search comments on the seeming unlikelihood that active energetic seekers should ultimately "encounter at the Judgment Seat" the more relaxed, ambivalent explorers of life, who want "for death that/Myth-clay, though/Scratch-happy in these (foreign) brambly wilds"; yet the poem implies that such a "curious encounter", will take place. One feels that the poet herself in *Winter Sun* partakes first in the leisurely playful search, then in the more earnest kind. Of the latter kind are her poems on death. As the quest becomes more serious she begins to think of ultimate judgment as a cataclysmic "singeing-day" or a "universal/Swallowing-up". The poems "Jael's Part" and "Span" both, in carefully non-theological language, probe into divine judgments on sin.

GRADUALLY in this first volume of Miss Avison's there begins to emerge a realization that some radical renewal, some transforming rebirth might be possible, and might, if attained, turn out to be the true goal of the search. In one poem the struggle to "win belief in a new burgeoning" is,

as the context shows, written off as idealistic, and impossible for the learned or the rebellious. The conclusion of “Apocalypitics” is chiefly ironical and yet somewhat sympathetic to the idea of actually discovering a yet-not-evident harmony of the worlds:

Bewildered
 Each broods in his own world
 But half believes
 Doctrines that promise to,
 After some few suppressions here and there,
 Orchestrate *for* all worlds;

 Don't you suppose
 Anything could start it?
Music and all?
Some time?

In “Voluptuaries and Others”, a very Auden-like poem in its long lines and blend of clinical precision with casual tone, Miss Avison speaks of two kinds of discovery, one being like that which occasioned Archimedes’ “Eureka”:

The kind of lighting up of the terrain
 That leaves aside the whole terrain, really,
 But signalizes, and compels, an advance in it.

The accumulation of human experience “makes the spontaneous jubilation at such moments” of scientific discovery “less and less likely though”, since genuine significance is only to be found in that “other kind of lighting up/That shows the terrain comprehended, as also its containing space.” This latter illumination, then, is the object of the poet’s search.

A poem of quest pregnant with hints of future discovery is “Intra-Political: An Exercise in Political Astronomy”. The questions at its outset — the interrogative is appropriately frequent in these poems — concern the basic order (or disorder) of life, and man’s right (or lack of right) to make judgments on the matter. The poet decides that “nothing we know/who do know fearful things”, yet feels the pressure of a “precreation density”:

our darkness dreams of
 this heavy mass, this moil, this self-
 consuming endless squirm and squander, this
 chaos, singling off
 in a new Genesis.

(Would it perhaps set swinging
 the little horn-gates to new life's
 illumined labyrinths if, released
 from stifling,
 creatures like us were planet-bathed
 in new-born Light?)
 (Glee dogs our glumness so.)

Such "Dreams, even doubted, drive us," but the actual experience of being put to use by some power beyond us would be enough to break the pattern of life as a series of purely materialist transactions — to "change this circular exchange." Quite seriously, now, the poet, taking into account George Herbert's testimony, considers whether man by "daring to gambol" (i.e., to take himself less seriously as well as to risk) might yet call forth "an immense answering/of human skies?/ a new expectant largeness?"

Actual experiences, some vicarious, tend to confirm the expectation of impending transformation. In the half-allegorical poem "Our Working Day may be Menaced" an acquaintance, Madeleine, is observed to undergo a remarkable spiritual experience:

It was
 As if a spoke of the final sky
 Snagged her suddenly.
 For what seemed only one
 Queer moment, she was swept
 In some sidereal swerve,
 Blotted sheer out of time; then spurned
 Back to the pebbles of the path.

(The passage suggests one of the "timeless" moments in T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*.) All who know Madeleine are sceptical, but the speaker muses: "A calling from our calling? . . . Can they have appointed/A locus elsewhere for us?" and goes on to ponder a possible

universal
 Swallowing-up
 (Proceedings against Madeleine alone
 Clearly being absurd).

Despite the secular language (which in fact registers engagement) the increasing impetus toward a new and perhaps Christian outlook is evident.

An experience which seems more than vicarious is described in one passage of the long poem which concludes *Winter Sun*, "The Agnes Cleves Papers":

One evening, just a year or two ago,
 The simple penetrating force of love
 Redeemed me, for the last perhaps. I've
 seldom dared, since,
 To approach that; not that it would go out,
 But it might prove as centre of all
 Revolutions, and, defined,
 Limn with false human clarity
 A solar system with its verge
 Lost, perhaps, but illumined in
 A mathematical certainty
 And for my secret I would have a universe. (p. 83)

The experience seems real enough, but there is still a holding back — for fear, apparently, that this illumination or discovery might prove to be a “false human clarity”, as ultimately disappointing as that of Archimedes or that inspired by Tycho Brahe, but on a more sweeping scale. It is only much later in the poem, after “Telling it in plain words”, that she realizes that she had “feared the wrong thing”:

The other centre, the known enigma —
 All eyes I do not own, contours
 That force familiarity where I would
 Tumult and spurn like Pan — were the mountain
 passes
 Pure out of thought . . .

God's way, though demanding self-renunciation, is the true way to freedom. What she *should* fear and give up is the world she has loved till now, since it is “scarfed in dreadful mist” where “no sun comes”. In the remainder of the poem there is a new recognition of the world around as an “arena”, one in which there is to be no “glancing back” but instead a forward movement to the “other side” where the “wild smell” for which her heart yearns will replace the presently necessary “athlete's incense”. The landscape seems to be taking on an increasingly Christian configuration. Perhaps the sway of the winter sun has already ended and been superseded by the “Light that blinded Saul” (*The Dumbfounding*).⁷

THE DUMBFOUNDING contains further poems of inner search and debate, but they may be retrospective, and in any case they give the impression that the period of spiritual gestation has come to a close. “The Two Selves”

pictures two opposing aspects of the poet discussing the "birds in the sky," which somehow stand for spiritual realities:

And you *wait* for them here?

Oh no. It is more
like knowing the sound of the sea
when you
live under the sea.

The response to the sceptical self reveals a maturing confidence. The "Two Mayday Selves" (D., p. 11) are more mutually in harmony, yet the more hesitating one is urged to respond wholly to the new experience:

The power of the blue and gold breadth
of day is poured out, flooding, all
over all.
Come out. Crawl out of it. Feel
it. You
too.

It is the voice of a true finder speaking, one who can call for an end to talk and self-centred questioning, and in the simplest, most forthright language invite to participation in a new joy, a release. In "Many As Two," reminiscent of Christina Rossetti's "Uphill" or of Marvell's dialogue poems, the objections are now external to the new Christian, serving both to challenge and to define his life of discovery:

"Where there is the green thing
life springs clean."

*Yes. There is blessed life, in
bywaters; and in pondslime
but not for your drinking.*

"Where the heart's room
deepens, and the thrum
of the touched heartstrings reverberates — *Vroom* —
there I am home."

*Yes. And the flesh's doom
is — a finally welcome going out on a limb?
(No thing abiding.)*

*No sign, no magic, no roadmap, no
pre-tested foothold. "Only that you know
there is the way, plain,
and the home-going."*

*Outside the heartbreak home I know, I can own
no other.*

"The brokenness. I know.

Alone."

(Go with us, then?)

This is a remarkably subtle poem, in which the shifting indentation marks the development of the attitude of each speaker as the encounter proceeds. For our purposes it is significant that though the finder, having known "brokenness", can fully sympathize with that feeling, the two viewpoints expressed in the poem are really worlds apart — giving us a measure of the radical nature of the change that has occurred. The greenness of the new life means to the one the stagnation of "pondslime", to the other a fresh and pure vitality. The "way," clearly involving risk, may seem either a final madness or a "plain" way home, depending on whether one is a seeker or a finder. Since one viewpoint includes and transcends the other, only a finder could write such a poem.

Having become fully taken up in the new life, Miss Avison can look back at the first moment of discovery, and attempt to picture the miracle of transformation. One such portrayal is given in "Ps. 19", a personal interpretation of the statement, "The fear of the Lord is clean, enduring for ever." That fear (which in Proverbs 1 is called the "beginning" of knowledge) is here defined as

to love high
and know longing for clear
sunlight, to the last ribcorner
and capillary — and wonder
if, so known, a sighing-
over-the-marshlands me
might all evaporate, wisp away.

This is obviously the state of the searcher. The hyphenated epithet gives this fresh non-theological definition a personal touch, one which clearly recalls the seeking poet's fears that an encounter with ultimate reality might cramp the imaginative self. But this "fear" paradoxically does include seeking as well as shrinking, and when "sunward love" conquers, discovery comes: the love-fear proves to be

— not boulderstone,
baldness, slowly in fire consuming — but green
with life, moss, cup-rock-water, cliff riven
for a springing pine.

The whole poem hinges on the sun-metaphor for God, an image which does not

change but is radically re-interpreted as the seeker becomes a finder, as the “fire”, being “trusted”, is revealed to be the life-giving “enduring sun”. It is interesting to see that the now-understood seeking is defined in the early part of the poem with lucid precision, but that the language and syntax must be strained to express the greater reality of the finding.

Other poems describing the first discovery are “For Tinkers Who Travel on Foot” and “The Earth That Falls Away”. But an important question must now be raised. Having “found”, is one doomed to an inhuman fixity of position, perhaps a continual looking back to that first great experience, or, even worse, a pretence of sainthood in an attempt to live up to one’s past light? The answer is that “In the mathematics of God/there are percentages beyond one hundred” — the new creation is both “whole” and a “beginning”. In a poem of “Marginalia” bringing out commonly unsuspected implications in Christ’s teachings about the child and the kingdom of heaven, Miss Avison vividly describes the rhythm of vigour and weariness, the round of hopes, fears, and joys that makes each new day for the child (and for the Christian) a “new life time”. The exciting, fresh details in this poem and in more than a score of others on “secular” subjects (objects, people, scenes) show that the first “finding” has made possible a multiplicity of further explorations and brought new light to their aid. As Malcolm Ross puts it, for the Christian, existence becomes a “drama” in which no detail is without its “wholly unique reality. No thing is insignificant.”⁸

Appropriately, then, in his review of *The Dumbfounding*, Smith comments on the “purity” of Miss Avison’s “response to experience (*all experience*)”.⁹ Yet for him it is the explicitly Christian poems that climax her achievement; and some of these, such as “Person”, are indeed stunning in their power. Authenticity is the keynote of these specifically Christian poems. They have the ring of truth that comes, in part, from the genuine search experience that preceded them, which in Amos Wilder’s terms might be called the poet’s “baptism in the secular”, her coming “face to face with the reality of the first Adam”.¹⁰ But there is also a “recurrent” baptism, as the realism of the opening lines of “Branches” indicates:

The diseased elms are lashing
in hollowing vaults of air.
In movie-washroom-mirrors
wan selves, echoing, stare.

O Light that blinded Saul,
 blacked out Damascus noon,
 Toronto's whistling sunset has
 a pale, disheartened shine.

And the concluding stanzas of the poem deal directly with the problem of communicating a momentous "finding". Concerned to avoid the "fly-by-night" approach of the superficially religious, the poet comes to a realization that genuine Christianity will spread when "branches" of the Vine "scatter to tell what the root/and where life is made." It is only the human in touch with the divine that can "show him [i.e., Christ] visible". The gospel, as Wilder puts it, prevails "by revelation, by bodying forth".¹¹

In surveying the contemporary scene, Kenneth Hamilton makes some relevant comments on religious search and discovery:

It is not surprising that concentration upon the human condition should lead some artists to find religion a live option as they explore the landscape of the human self. The religious vision is one answer to the riddle of human existence; and it is an answer that declares itself right at the centre of man's descent into himself, when the resources of self-analysis are exhausted. Then comes the decision to accept — or not to accept — an understanding of the self and the world going beyond the bounds of the available and the verifiable. The religious believer says that not to believe would be a denial of the truth that has flashed upon his life, a truth establishing itself beyond his experience, yet confirming all other truths that he has discovered in his experience. The sceptic, choosing the opposite road, says that to believe is to take the easy way out The debate continues, and no impartial arbitration is possible. Yet, on whichever side he happens to stand, and wherever he has found his final loyalty, the artist helps us to see what is involved in making a decision.¹²

This able summary of an important "religious" function of every serious modern artist also serves as a valuable commentary on the poems of Margaret Avison, who has seen things from both viewpoints, that of the seeker and that of the discoverer. Her poems trace the progression from one to the other, and make her final position clear.

But despite that conclusion, Miss Avison's poems, whether of search or of discovery, cannot be dismissed as "propaganda". Their rich sensitivity to all aspects of life, amounting to a wholesome "secularity", their deep and incisive engagement in the world of thought and meaning, their full exploitation of all the modern resources of language and technique — all these mark them with the vitality which is the essence of true poetry. The poems of Christian discovery

are fully contemporary and dynamic, deeply rooted in the experiential. By a union in the truly human, they manage to avoid the seeming dichotomy of Christianity and art that perturbed Auden.¹³ In and through their value as poetry they have another value, a religious one which might well be appreciated by believers and others alike: they “body forth” an answer to man’s searchings that one may accept or reject, but not dismiss.

NOTES

- ¹ Margaret Avison, *Winter Sun* (London, 1960).
- ² A. J. M. Smith, “Margaret Avison’s New Book,” *Canadian Forum*, 46 (1966), p. 133.
- ³ One must not, of course, read the poems as pure biography, but rather as what Blackmur calls “life at the remove of form”—form implying a deliberate selectivity as well as the inevitable discrepancy between the poet’s original intent and the finished poem, only the latter of which is available for inspection. Throughout my paper I take this distinction for granted, and simply refer to “the poet” or “Miss Avison” for the sake of convenience.
- ⁴ Paul Claudel, *Poetic Art*, tr. Renee Spodheim (New York, 1948), p. 27.
- ⁵ This type of verbal paradox, amounting to virtual self-contradiction, recurs in both Miss Avison and the later T. S. Eliot, and thus appears to be one of a number of marks of that poet’s influence on her work. Other indications may be found in her allusiveness and use of symphonic “movement” patterns (in the longer poems), and in her line rhythms and other metrical forms, including lyrical quatrains reminiscent, say, of those in the *Quartets*.
- ⁶ It would be of biographical and perhaps of some interpretive interest to discover the relative date of composition of this poem. It might be taken as simply a hymn to spring, but its concluding images are remarkable anticipations of those in such poems of clearly Christian discovery as “Ps. 19” (*D*, p. 24) and “For Tinkers Who Travel on Foot” (*D*., p. 36), the first of which is discussed later in this paper.
- ⁷ Another poem in *Winter Sun* that might be a poem of Christian discovery is “Birth Day” (p. 73), whose title could be taken as an allusion to rebirth.
- ⁸ Malcolm Ross, “The Writer as Christian,” in Nathan A. Scott, Jr., ed., *The New Orpheus: Essays Toward a Christian Poetic* (New York, 1964), p. 86.
- ⁹ Smith, p. 134.
- ¹⁰ Amos N. Wilder, “Art and Theological Meaning,” in Scott, p. 410.
- ¹¹ Wilder, p. 419.
- ¹² Kenneth Hamilton, *In Search of Contemporary Man* (Grand Rapids, 1967), p. 21.
- ¹³ W. H. Auden, “Postscript: Christianity and Art,” in Scott, pp. 74-77.

POWER POLITICS IN BLUEBEARD'S CASTLE

Gloria Onley

Is it possible for men and women to stop mythologizing,
manipulating, and attacking one another?

MARGARET ATWOOD, 1971

IF THE “argument” of Sidney’s *Astrophel and Stella* is “Cruel Chastity,” the argument of Atwood’s *Power Politics* is cruel sexuality. The cover design¹ pictures a knight in armour from whose extended arm and gauntleted hand depends, like a game trophy, the body of a woman, torso swathed in mummylike bandages, head down, hair trailing on the ground at the knight’s feet. This inversion of the traditional posture of *homo erectus* — a deliberate echoing of The Hanged Man of the Tarot pack — is repeated in the novel *Surfacing* with David’s sadistic upending of his wife, “twatface” Anna. In *Power Politics*, as in Atwood’s two novels, the unrequited love of courtly myth gives way to its equally frustrating modern form, a hedonistic, yet somehow mechanical union. The woman in *Power Politics* feels that her being is lacerated and her capacity for vision destroyed by subjection to a sadomasochistic sexual love:

you fit into me
like a hook into an eye
a fish hook
a open eye

Atwood’s ironic inversion of courtly love connects her art with the revelations of MacLuhan, Millett, Roszak, and Chesler about the social mythology of Western culture. Romantic obsession with lover or husband is presumed to provide the woman with her most satisfying form of existence. “To a man, love and life are things apart. To a woman, love is life itself,” preaches *The Sensuous Woman*, echoing Byron.² The compulsively exact male/female polarity of “doing” and “being” implied by Atwood’s sardonic conversion of garment fastener into

deadly weapon expresses the conviction of the female prisoner of the machismo love structure that romantic love, in its modern version, is a devastating mode of existence. "Have to face it I'm/finally an addict," the "hooked" woman in *Power Politics* concludes. In "an air stale with aphorisms", a unique relationship that is sustaining yet liberating and joyous does not develop and, through a painful succession of claustrophobic encounters, Atwood suggests that maybe her female persona is looking for something that just doesn't exist.

Recent studies of the situation of women in our patriarchal society have established that the essential female traits are considered to be passivity, masochism, and narcissism.³ Atwood's "fish hook . . . open eye" image perfectly condenses this cultural definition of "normal" female personality and emotional capacity and hurls it at the complacent romantic sensibility. Hence the poet Robert Read writes of "Atwood as acupuncture"; her manipulations anaesthetize his persona so that she may gulp his heart down her "icy throat" (*The Canadian Forum*, Dec., 1972, 9). But Atwood is also aware of the basic victor/victim patterning she explores in *Survival* (1972), her thematic guide⁴ to Canadian literature, as a vicious circle. The woman in *Power Politics* can proclaim with an ironic self-awareness that verges on compassion: "Night seeps into us/through the accidents we have/inflicted on each other/Next time we commit/love, we ought to/choose in advance what to kill."

To Atwood, the love-aggression complex is an historical-personal fact. The cover of *Power Politics* expresses the predicament of women in the sexist society:

My love for you is the love
of one statue for another: tensed

and static. General, you enlist
my body in your heroic
struggle to become real:
though you promise bronze rescues

you hold me by the left ankle
so that my head brushes the ground,
my eyes are blinded . . .

There are hordes of me now, alike
and paralyzed . . .

The theme of *Power Politics* is role-engulfment: "You refuse to own/yourself, you permit/others to do it for you . . ." The self is lost to the social role of romantic lover, warrior, wife, superman: fulfilment means incarnation within the

archetype: “. . . through your own split head/you rise up glowing;/the ceiling opens/a voice sings Love Is A Many/Splendoured Thing/ you hang suspended above the city/in blue tights and a red cape,/your eyes flashing in unison”. Self-emergence is as difficult as pacifism in a world of war: “If you deny these uniforms/and choose to repossess/yourself, your future/will be less dignified, more painful, death will be sooner . . .” Beyond the mask of social role lies the paradox of Western culture: a postulated uniqueness of self that may not exist, or perhaps cannot be known, if it does exist:

You drift down the street
in the rain, your face
dissolving, changing shape, the colours
running together

My walls absorb
you, breathe you forth
again, you resume
yourself, I do not recognize you

You rest on the bed
watching me watching
you, we will never know
each other any better
than we do now.

The antithesis of the mask is the “face corroded by truth,/crippled, persistent,” asking “like the wind, again and again and wordlessly,/for the one forbidden thing:/love without mirrors and not for/my reasons but your own.” Poised on the brink of a metaphysical negation of individuality, the disillusioned female lover is possessed by a harsh nostalgia. At the same time there is a continuation of a previous movement in Atwood’s poetry towards accepting the visitation of archetypal presences as a substitute for authentic interknowledge of the selves, as in “your jewelled reptilian/eye in darkness next to/mine” or “you descend on me like age/you descend on me like earth.” But the implicit quest is always for some alternative to the sadistic penetration and destruction of the “fish hook-open eye” relationship, for some “reality” behind the engulfing political role, and for some communion with that “reality”. *Power Politics* confronts us with an entropic modern world in which a formerly solar masculinity now operates as a suction pump to exhaust and destroy the environment:⁵

You are the sun
 in reverse, all energy
 flows into you and is
 abolished; you refuse
 houses, you smell of
 catastrophe, I see you
 blind and one-handed, flashing
 in the dark, trees breaking
 under your feet, you demand,
 you demand

I lie mutilated beside
 you; beneath us there are
 sirens, fires, the people run
 squealing, the city
 is crushed and gutted,
 the ends of your fingers bleed
 from 1000 murders

The imagery in Atwood's novels also expresses mechanization and destruction, but there the woman's helpless suffering or retaliation changes into an urgent desire for liberation.⁶ In *The Edible Woman*, where social intercourse proceeds by means of "finely adjusted veneers," and the dominant aesthetic is conformity to the consumer ideal ("I love you especially in that red dress") images express role-engulfment as an omnipresent fate shared by everyone from the protagonist, Marian, a reluctant market researcher, to the "office virgins". To Marian, her fiancé's very clothes "smugly [assert] so much silent authority," she fears they would be warm, if touched. Dickens' caricatures and Bergson's essay on mechanization as a principle of comedy seem to underlie Atwood's satirical description of character and behaviour. Despite the humour, sex role mechanization is associated with death, until Marian finally sees Peter as a "dark homicidal maniac with a lethal weapon". A conditioned product of his consumer society, Peter is preoccupied with establishing, perpetuating, and worshipping himself within the glossy confines of the urban male image: a *Playboy* bachelorhood followed in due time by a *House and Garden* marriage. The "lethal weapon" with which he tracks and attempts to capture Marian is, of course, a camera; escaping from its focussing eye, Marian runs away from aggressive consumption and towards selfhood, rejecting the role of "soapwife" in a never-ending soap opera.

Deciding to remain an individual involved in a variety of human relationships,

Marian defeats the shaping power of the sexist consumer society. Making a surrogate self out of cake and then eating it in a comic parody of ritual cannibalism, she both destroys a false image and reabsorbs her culturally split-off female self. This form of magic, a self-assertive process of encoding and eliminating what she is *not*, looks forward to the ritual destruction of false images of the self at the end of *Surfacing*; it is a comic anticipation of the magic more seriously practiced by the schizoid personality to restore its connection with the world.

Marian's fiancé refuses to eat her cake body; unable to liberate himself from consumerhood by comic communion, he rejects even the possibility of self-knowledge. Peter's social world is luxurious, totally artificial, self-consciously sensual; the mirrored spaces of his apartment lobby epitomize the glittering surfaces of urban reality: the world of technological hedonism founded on industrial technology. The "high electric vibration of this glittering space", is the concept of the ego as consumer — the grossly inflated ego extending itself in voluptuous narcissism through its glittering "made-up" surfaces: images of chrome and glass, arranged interiors, iced cakes, elaborate hairdos, face-makeup, sequined dresses, ritualized, mechanized social behaviour. It is in reaction to this world of surfaces that Marian slowly becomes unable to eat anything at all. Psychoanalytically, the ego of the cultural personality is shown as being in a state of fixation at the level of oral aggression, an infantile state of consciousness in which "the good" is the consumable or edible, including other people. Marian's consumption of the "edible woman" is a transformation ritual to get her outside of this one-dimensional social nexus, in which the potential self is condemned to collective narcissism as an alternative to genuine interaction with others.

In *Power Politics*, sexual love is imaged several times as a shattering of the ego that seems to be epitomized in the collision between mirrors of "They travel by air:" "your/body with head/attached and my head with/body attached coincide briefly/. . . we hurtle towards each other/at the speed of sound, everything roars/we collide sightlessly and/fall, the pieces of us/mixed as disaster/and hit the pavement of this room/in a blur of silver fragments." In the semantic universe of technological man, what ought to be separate modes of existence somehow mirror each other through the shaping effect of myth. Hence velocity and violence enter into personal relationships. The woman cries to her lover, "I lie mutilated beside/you . . . How can I stop you?/Why did I create you?" Men and women are political prisoners of the sexist society, trapped as victors/victims in their own reflections of the world and of each other. Only in orgasm ("a kick

in the head . . . sharp jewels/hit and my/hair splinters”) or in fantasied death do the mirrors shatter.⁷

A persistent strain in Atwood’s imagery, appearing in the poetry as well as in *Surfacing*, is the head as disconnected from, or floating above, the body.

But face it, we have been
improved, our heads float
several inches above our necks
moored to us by
rubber tubes and filled with
clever bubbles, . . . (Power Politics.)

Often the imagery describes the body as a mechanism remotely controlled by the head; sometimes the neck is sealed over; always the intellectual part of the psyche is felt to be a fragment, dissociated from the whole. The “head” of Atwood schizoid persona is the “Head” described in Michael McClure’s “Revolt” (reprinted in Roszak’s *Sources*,) the Head that “quickly . . . fills with preconception and becomes locked in a vision of the outer world and itself. . . . The Head [that] finally may act by self-image of itself, by a set and unchanging vision that ignores the demands of its Body.”⁸ We think of Anna in *Surfacing*, locked into her *Playboy* centrefold stereotype, her soul trapped in a gold compact, her capacity for love locked into a sadomasochistic pattern. The narrator describes her:

Rump on a packsack, harem cushion, pink on the cheeks and black discreetly around the eyes, as red as blood as black as ebony, a seamed and folded imitation of a magazine picture that is itself an imitation of a woman who is also an imitation, the original nowhere, hairless lobed angel in the same heaven where God is a circle, captive princess in someone’s head. She is locked in, she isn’t allowed to eat or shit or cry or give birth, nothing goes in, nothing comes out. She takes her clothes off or puts them on, paper doll wardrobe, she copulates under strobe lights with the man’s torso while his brain watches from its glassed-in control cubicle at the other end of the room, her face twists into poses of exultation and total abandonment . . .

Anna conforms; therefore, she is. The narrator inhabits her own cartesian hell. Locked into a sex role herself by the conspiracy of her friends, pursued by “geometrical sex” as “an abstract principle”, her past “marriage” and “baby” a fantasy rationalization or restructuring of the personal history she cannot live with, she is clearly intended to be a representative schizoid personality: “I realized I didn’t feel much of anything, I hadn’t for a long time. . . . At some

point my neck must have closed over, pond freezing or a wound, shutting me into my head; since then everything had been glancing off me, it was like being in a vase . . .”

During the course of her search for her father, a biologist living in isolation near the Quebec-Ontario border who has mysteriously disappeared, she becomes painfully aware of “what circuits are closing” in her friends’ heads and in her own. Responsible for the group’s survival in the wilderness setting, she finds the mandatory sexual “liberation” of her lover and friends depressing and alienating. For her, it depersonalizes them into cartoon figures or rock drawings, linear caricatures of humanity. “Shadowing” her along the trail to where she is pragmatically contemplating, not the “names,” but the “forms” and “uses” of the various plants and fungi, Anna’s husband David imposes his one-dimensional, linear, or “phallic” thrust on nature:

[The Death’s Angel] sprang up from the earth, pure joy, pure death, burning, white like snow.

. . . “Hi, watcha doin’?” he said . . .

. . . it was like trying to listen to two separate conversations, each interrupting the other. “A mushroom,” I said. That wouldn’t be enough, he would want a specific term . . . “Amanita.”

“Neat,” he said, but he wasn’t interested. I willed him to go away but he didn’t; after a while he put his hand on my knee. . . . His smile was like a benevolent uncle’s; under his forehead there was a plan. . . .

“How about it?” he said. “You wanted me to follow you.” . . . He reached his arm around me, invading . . . I twisted away and stood up . . . “You’re interfering.” I wiped at my arm where he had touched it.

He didn’t understand what I meant, he smiled even harder. “Don’t get uptight,” he said, “I won’t tell Joe. It’ll be great, it’s good for you, keeps you healthy.” Then he went “Yuk, yuk,” like Goofy.

Through the perceptions of her narrator, Atwood records again the pathology of a sexual relationship in which the male asserts his masculinity by inflicting physical or psychological pain:

. . . then [Anna’s] voice began . . . a desperate beggar’s whine, *please, please* . . . She was praying to herself, it was as if David wasn’t there at all. *Jesus Jesus oh yes please Jesus*. Then something different, not a word but pure pain, clear as water, an animal’s at the moment the trap closes.

It’s like death, I thought . . .

“He’s got his little set of rules. If I break one of them I get punished, except he keeps changing them, so I’m never sure. He’s crazy, there’s something missing in

him, you know what I mean? He like to make me cry because he can't do it himself . . . ”

Echoing Laing's description of the depersonalized alienated personality — “Bodies halfdead: genitals dissociated from genitals” — the narrator conceives a mental ideogram for David's kind of love: “it would be enough for him if our genitals could be detached like two kitchen appliances and copulate in mid-air, that would complete his equation.” Her sudden vision of David as “an imposter, a pastiche”, relates him to the “creeping Americanism”⁹ that she feels is moving up into Canada, destroying the landscape, the animals, and the people. “He didn't even know what language to use, he's forgotten his own, he had to copy. Second-hand American was spreading over him in patches . . . He was infested, garbled . . . it would take such time to heal, unearth him, scrape down to where he was true.” At her worst moment of alienation, she sees those around her as evolving, “half-way to machine, the left-over flesh atrophied and diseased”.

The cultural link between depersonalized sex and modern technology is suggested by George Steiner in *In Bluebeard's Castle: Notes Towards a Redefinition of Culture*.¹⁰ Steiner comments on the significance of the “maniacal monotony” of de Sade:

. . . that automatism, that crazed repetitiveness, . . . directs us to a novel and particular image, or rather silhouette, of the human person. It is in Sade . . . that we find the first methodical industrialization of the human body . . . Each part of the body is seen only as a part and replaceable by “spares”. In . . . Sadian sexual assaults, we have a brilliantly exact *figura* of the division of labour on the factory floor.

Throughout *Surfacing*, as in Sadian fantasy, sex is linked with mechanization, coercion, and death:

. . . I didn't want him in me, sacrilege, he was one of the killers . . . he hadn't seen, he didn't know about himself, his own capacity for death.

“Don't,” I said, he was lowering himself down on me, “I don't want you to.”

“What's wrong with you?” he said, angry; then he was pinning me, hands manacles, teeth against my lips, censoring me, he was shoving against me, his body insistent as one side of an argument.

Anna's compulsive need to conform to male expectations makes it impossible for her, despite a degree of self-knowledge, to view other women as friends (“she resented me because I hadn't given in [to David], it commented on her,” and fills her with unconscious self-loathing. As Anna's relationships with others seem

to fall almost totally within a general sadomasochistic tendency, and as her love for David seems to be a kind of death, so detective stories are her “theology”.

To repulse David’s attack, the narrator is able to use magically her awareness of his golem quality:

His wrist watch glittered, glass and silver: perhaps it was his dial, the key that wound him, the switch. There must be a phrase, a vocabulary that would work, “I’m sorry.” I said, “but you don’t turn me on.”

“You,” he said, searching for words, not controlled any more, “tight-ass bitch.”

Obviously, David is projecting. In David, and to a lesser extent in Joe, Atwood creates a parody of the mighty hunter:

[They] appeared . . . one at either end of a thinnish log. They were proud, they’d caught something. The log was notched in many places as though they’d attacked it . . . David wanted some footage . . . for *Random Samples* . . . In the end they stuck the axe in the log, after several tries, and took turns shooting each other standing beside it, arms folded and one foot on it as if it was a lion or a rhinoceros.

Their film, a development from the camera imagery of *The Edible Woman*, is an aimless stockpiling of randomly chosen images — a linear, mechanical imitation of natural flux that is the equivalent in art of their other male activities. Just as ineffectual hacking at the log is rationalized as male strength, so a total lack of vision becomes creative spontaneity when David decides that the film “might be even better if it was out of focus or over-exposed, it would introduce the element of chance, it would be organic.” In both novels, Atwood satirizes a general tendency to rationalize — or transcendentalize — conformity to unsatisfactory behaviour patterns.

In connection with their posturing for the film, the narrator senses again the vicious yet pathetic narcissism of David and of her lover, Joe: “He didn’t love me, it was an idea of himself he loved and he wanted someone to join him, anyone would do . . .” Fear and hatred of the repressed “female” element of personality erupts in David’s conversation:

“None of that Women’s Lib,” David said, his eyes lidding, “or you’ll be out in the street. I won’t have one in the house, they’re preaching random castration, they get off on that, they’re roving the streets in savage bands armed with garden shears.”

To Atwood’s intuitively psychoanalytical consciousness of human nature, engulfment in the sexual role, as she satirically exposes it in *Surfacing*, means that the

ego of the cultural personality tends to become fixated at the stage of anal-sadism, condemned to the hellish circle of self-definition through violence, in which each man kills the thing he loves, in one way or another.

The end of Chapter 18 brings the sexual politics of *Surfacing* to a ritual climax of judgment and rejection by the peer group:

“She hates men,” David said lightly. “Either that or she wants to be one. Right?”

A ring of eyes, tribunal; in a minute they would join hands and dance around me, and after the rope and the pyre, cure for heresy . . .

“Aren’t you going to answer,” Anna, said, taunting.

“No,” I said.

Anna said, “God she really is inhuman,” and they both laughed a little, sorrowfully.

Rejecting her assigned sex role, Atwood’s protagonist becomes the modern equivalent of the heretic or witch — the mentally ill or “inhuman” person, the deviant by means of whose existence “normal” values are asserted and maintained. At this point, the expulsion/escape of the unfeminine wilderness guide begins. Skulking animal-like beyond the clearing until her friends have abandoned her (as she wishes), she approaches and returns from the verge of total madness.

Alone in the house her father built, she reflects: “Logic is a wall, I built it, on the other side is terror.” Starting to groom herself, she feels a “surge of fear”, knows the brush is “forbidden”, knows why:

I must stop being in the mirror. I look for the last time at my distorted glass face: . . . reflection intruding between my eyes and vision. Not to see myself but to see. I reverse the mirror so it’s towards the wall, it no longer traps me, Anna’s soul closed in the gold compact, that and not the camera is what I should have broken.

She then destroys all the “artifacts” of her past life: among other symbols, her childhood drawings, “the rabbits and their archaic eggs”; the “confining photographs” of her family heritage; her own false art, the “bungled princesses, the Golden Phoenix awkward and dead as a mummified parrot”. Her ritual destruction of all falsely defining images of her self and others, her temporary rejection of all linear structures (house, fence, even garden), her reversion to primitive survival by eating roots and mushrooms, leads her to an hallucinatory identification with the matrix of nature, in which the artificial structures of language and culture dissolve for a moment, and she becomes a microcosm of the biosphere:

The forest leaps upward, enormous, the way it was before they cut it, columns of

sunlight frozen; the boulders float, melt, everything is made of water, even the rocks. In one of the languages there are no nouns, only verbs held for a longer moment.

The animals have no need for speech, why talk when you are a word.

I lean against a tree, I am a tree leaning. I break out again into the bright sun and crumple, head against the ground.

I am not an animal or a tree, I am the thing in which the trees and animals move and grow, I am a place.

AS ATWOOD NOTES in the Introduction to *Survival*, Northrop Frye suggests that in Canada "Who am I?" at least partly equals "Where is here?" Here, in *Surfacing*, is the liberated naked consciousness, its doors of perception symbolically cleansed; the "place" is the Canadian wilderness, which becomes the new body or rediscovered original body of the psychosomatic human. The radiant plurality of the organismic realm into which the narrator descends is epitomized in the image of the frog: "A frog is there, leopard frog with green spots and gold-rimmed eyes, ancestor. It includes me, it shines, nothing moves but its throat breathing." The fairy-tale theme of metamorphosis is present: the narrator transforms herself from a schizoid personality into a basic human creature by going down into forest, swamp, and water, into a primitive Edenic reality where frogs, no longer revolting or worthless, become fellow creatures of the biosphere — breathing, shining kinfolk of the human. The basic metaphor of descent and surfacing is itself a transformation of Atwood's inherited romantic image of death by drowning. The last part of the novel is thus a paradigm of descent into and ascent from the fluid ego boundary state of schizophrenia.¹¹ But it is a carefully controlled, artistically simulated descent, of therapeutic purpose and value within the psychoanalytic dimension of the novel. The ego core (or inner self) of the narrator always retains its integrity, except for a fleeting moment during the peak experience of hallucinatory oneness with nature where Atwood seems to be synthesizing a primitive state of mind analogous to Lévy-Brühl's "participation mystique". Like Laing, Atwood seems to believe that schizophrenia is a form of psychic anarchy: a usually involuntary attempt by the self to free itself from a repressive social reality structure. John Ayre quite rightly terms her a "psychic iconoclast",¹²

In *Surfacing* and *The Edible Woman*, it is as if Atwood had inferred from the glittering surfaces of our social images the Freudian theory of personality as narcissistic, accomplishing self-definition through various forms of aggression,

ranging from overt coercion to the subtle forms of unconscious “induction” revealed by Laing. At the end of *Surfacing*, when the wilderness guide returns to the cabin where she had at the beginning of her descent into madness turned the mirror to the wall, symbolically rejecting the feminine image represented by Anna’s gold compact, she turns the mirror around again and regards herself as she has become:

... in [the mirror] there’s a creature neither animal nor human, furless, only a dirty blanket, shoulders huddled over into a crouch eyes staring blue as ice from the deep sockets; the lips move by themselves. This was the stereotype, straws in the hair, talking nonsense or not talking at all. To have someone to speak to and words that can be understood: their definition of sanity.

That is the real danger now, the hospital or the zoo, where we are put, species and individual, when we can no longer cope. They would never believe it’s only a natural woman, state of nature, they think of that as a tanned body on a beach with washed hair waving like scarves; not this, face dirt-caked and streaked, skin grimed and scabby, hair like a frayed bathmat stuck with leaves and twigs. A new kind of centrefold.

Beneath this ironic transformation of Narcissus’ mirror lies Szasz’s concept of the “mentally ill” person as political prisoner of the social reality structure of his society, as enforced by institutional psychiatry, Laing’s “mind police”. A fusion of many literary forms, Menippean satire, diary, wilderness venture, even the Canadian animal story, *Surfacing* is the classic human animal story: the wilderness guide as social deviant becomes a scapegoat, driven out of the technological society for her sexist peers so that they may define themselves by their rejection of her.

By the end of the psychological quest, it is clear why, as Atwood stated earlier in *The Circle Game*, “Talking is difficult” and why in *Surfacing* “language is everything you do”. The difficulty in human relations, metaphored in *Surfacing* as exile from the biosphere, is metaphysically related to the exploitative use of language to impose psychological power structures. The need for communion in *Power Politics* is paralleled by the realization that language tends to warp in the hand from tool to weapon: “The things we say are/true; it is our crooked/aims, our choices/turn them criminal,” and there is a corresponding recognition of the value of silence: “Your body is not a word,/it does not lie or speak truth either./It is only here or not here.”

In “Hesitations outside the door”, Bluebeard’s castle is the place where “you twist all possible/dimensions into your own”; it is the house “we both live in/

but neither of us owns.” As the self defines itself in relation to others, so Bluebeard cannot be himself without a victim/wife. Each induces the other to participate in the structuring of the myth. There is a surrealist sense in which language itself, because it is habitually and unconsciously used to erect and impose false structure, is Bluebeard’s castle. The “wife” cries to “Bluebeard” “Don’t let me do this to you,/you are not those other people,/you are yourself/Take off the signatures, the false/bodies, this love/which does not fit you/This is not a house, there are no doors,/get out while it is/open, while you still can . . .” To use language at all is to risk participation in its induction structure; to define is to risk committing or inciting violence in the name of love.

Why this should be so is suggested by George Steiner in his analysis of the current barbarisms of Western culture: there is a sense in which the grammars themselves “condescend or enslave”.

Indo-European syntax is an active mirroring of systems of order, of hierarchic dependence, of active and passive stance . . . The sinews of Western speech closely enacted . . . the power relations of the Western social order. Gender differentiations, temporal cuts, the rules governing prefix and suffix formations, the synapses and anatomy of a grammar — these are the *figura*, at once ostensive and deeply internalized of the commerce between the sexes, between master and subject . . .

For Atwood, the basis of the victor/victim patterning she sees in human relations in *Survival* and reflects in the male/female relations of her own literary structures is also psycholinguistic — that is, inherent in the monotheistic, patriarchal social reality structure of Western culture, within which man habitually defines himself by aggression and which has reached a pinnacle of alienation in sexist, technological society, the “America” of the alienated self. The narrator of *Surfacing* remembers her brother’s childhood obsession with “wars, aeroplanes and tanks and the helmeted explorers,” and realizes that his sadistic treatment of his experimental animals and his military interests are intimately related to his adult habit of imposing moral categories upon nature:

Below me in the water there’s a leech, the good kind with red dots on the back, undulating along like a streamer held at one end and shaken. The bad kind is mottled grey and yellow. It was my brother who made up these moral distinctions, at some point he became obsessed with them, he must have picked them up from the war. There had to be a good kind and a bad kind of everything.

In Atwood’s poem “Hesitations outside the door,” Bluebeard in his castle is both the suffering Christ, the emergent masochistic half of the sadomasochistic

Judeo-Christian tradition, and the culturally defined sadistic male, participating with his wife in the melancholy inevitable fusion of Eros and Thanatos:

What do you want from me
you who walk towards me over the long floor

your arms outstretched, your heart
luminous through the ribs

around your head a crown
of shining blood

This is your castle, this is your metal door,
these are your stairs, your

bones, you twist all possible
dimensions into your own.

The myth is a destructive one: it defines love as sacrifice and suffering, and consummation as death. As in *Surfacing*, the sadistic male uses women mechanically as keys to self definition by aggression:

In your pockets the thin women
hang on their hooks, dismembered

Around my neck I wear
the head of the beloved, pressed
in the metal retina like a picked flower.

If men possess and use women as keys, women have been conditioned to worship men as icons (the Victorian locket, the religious medal). These interlocking attitudes have had the effect of fragmenting and destroying for Atwood's persona the perhaps mythical but longed-for natural order ("women . . . dismembered": "the head of the beloved . . . like a picked flower"). The concept of ownership or romantic 'possession' resulting in exploitation by the man and idealization and obedience by the woman is found throughout *Power Politics* in many of its versions and inversions of the basic prisoner or victim of love theme. In "After the agony in the guest/bedroom", the would-be lover, resting in the woman's arms in a parody of the *pietà*, "wine mist rising/around him, an almost/visible halo", asks "do you love me" and is answered by cruciform manipulation:

I answer you:
I stretch your arms out

one to either side,
your head slumps forward.

followed by a further relocation and another kind of purgation:

Later I take you home
in a taxi, and you
are sick in the bathtub.

Atwood's delineation of the lovers' agonizingly compulsive tendency to relate primarily through suffering, brutally exposes the sadomasochistic nexus of the monotheistic, patriarchal society. The woman of *Power Politics* brings to her love relationships the advantage of intellectual enlightenment, but her analytical approach serves only to invert the power structure:

I approach this love
like a biologist
pulling on my rubber
gloves & white labcoat

You flee from it
like an escaped political
prisoner, and no wonder . . .

Please die I said
so I can write about it

She is aware of her own propensity toward sadistic sublimation.

In Atwood's exploration of sexual politics within the patriarchal value structure, orgasm becomes "a kick in the head, orange/and brutal, sharp jewels hit and my/hair splinters," a redemption by death of the self: "no/threads left holding/me, I flake apart/layer by/layer down/quietly to the bone." There is great ambivalence. The desired ego-transcendence, with its suggestion of a joyous return to a mythic primitive state of consciousness where the "skull unfolds to an astounded flower," is also dangerous, for "learning/speech again takes/days and longer/each time/too much of/this is fatal." In Atwood's poetry, the psychological basis and the value in human relationships of the individualism of Western man is very much in question: partly by reference to her sense of self-definition by violence explored in the transactional social worlds of the two novels, where individualism becomes a potent carrier of death; and partly by reference to a presumed primitive, non-linear, and pluralistic state of being which functions as a mythic reference in most of her poetry from the earliest work on, emerging in

Surfacing as a utopian alternative to alienation. In the love poems the tension between individuality and isolation, on the one hand, and loss of identity and sexual fulfilment on the other, is extreme and cannot be resolved. Imagistically it is an anguished oscillation within the *either/or* psycholinguistic structures of Western man,¹³ the existentialist trap the wilderness guide describes as the "walls" of "logic". An oscillation between the polarities of civilized/primitive, individual/generic, male/female (in terms of Atwood's camera imagery, focussed/unfocussed), in which reciprocity of being, psychosomatic wholeness, and a sense of genuine communion, as *integrated qualities of experience*, remain mythic states forever beyond reach. The channels of communication and action are patriarchal almost beyond redemption. ". . . you rise above me/smooth, chill, stone/white . . . you descend on me like age/you descend on me like earth". In her earlier poem, "Dream: Bluejay or Archeopteryx," there is an attempt to invert the hierarchic structure: "in the water/under my shadow/there was an outline, man/surfacing, his body sheathed/in feathers, his teeth/glinting like nails, fierce god/head crested with blue flame". (*Procedures for Underground*)

Atwood suggests that the end of sexual politics might come only with the end of civilization, as in "The accident has occurred . . . we are alone in . . ./the frozen snow", when problems of physical survival would replace problems of psychic survival. Images of desert, ocean, and tundra are attractive in that they presume a settler-like equality of the sexes, working together, an absolute need for compassion; but repellent in that they are places of isolation from humanity where the known forms of self-definition and of personality, however unsatisfactory, are absent. The isolation and limitation of romantic love is mirrored everywhere in the landscape of Atwood's poetry; the couple marooned on the island, stranded in the car, or in the house in a snowstorm, surviving the holocaust, and, finally, buried together. The couple-structure of love is opposed by the community of the dance, "the circle/forming, breaking, each/one of them the whole/rhythm . . . transformed/for this moment . . ." (*Procedures for Underground*); by the circle or flux of playing children; and by the dissolving of the ego-structure into sleep or into landscape as celebrated in "Fragments: Beach." "In the afternoon the sun/expands, we enter/its hot perimeter . . . light is a sound/it roars/ it fills us/we swell with it/are strenuous, vast/rocks/hurl our voices/we/are abolished . . . the sleepers/lose their hold on shore, are drawn/out on a gigantic tide/we also make the slow deep/circle/until/the sea returns us/leaves us/absolved, washed/shells on the morning beach." (*Procedures for Underground*.)

THROUGHOUT HER WORK Atwood speaks of other languages: “multilingual water” and “the jays, flowing from tree to tree, voices semaphoring, tribal” of *Surfacing*. In *Procedures for Underground*, she tells of learning “that the earliest language/was not our syntax of chained pebbles/but liquid”. *Surfacing* abounds with examples of oral aggression or the sadistic use of language for self-definition. Linguistic channels of communication are felt to be analytic, dissecting, futile, impelling the narrator to break out of her received mental categories by psychic anarchy. To the alienated self, linear, logical thought structures operate like knives on the body of love. The narrator remembers her abortion in imagery that is a paranoid echoing of Sadian mechanization: “Nobody must find out or they will do that to me again, strap me to the death machine, emptiness machine, legs in the metal framework, secret knives.” Imagining her future child, her “lost child surfacing within her,” by reference to her utopian organismic realm, as “covered with shining fur, a god,” she decides, “I will never teach it any words.”

The anguished lack of communion between the lovers in *Power Politics* is, for Atwood, the inability of the alienated self to break through the thought structures of Western culture. In Atwood’s story “Polarities” (*The Tamarack Review*, No. 58, 1971), overt demands for what the American poet Gary Snyder calls “inter-birth” — self-fulfilment through participation in a web of inter-relationships — are regarded as symptoms of madness. The protagonist Louise, who is isolated, even from her intellectual peers, by her deviance from the typical feminine role, tries to create a sense of wholeness by manipulating her friends into a literal acting-out of the title of Atwood’s earlier book of poems, *The Circle Game*. Louise has a vision of the city as a topographical image of human relations: “The city is polarized north and south; the river splits it in two; the poles are the gas plant and the power plant. . . . We have to keep the poles in our brains lined up with the poles of the city, that’s what Blake’s poetry is all about.” Her disorientation from conventional reality causes her friends to take her to the hospital where she is put into a chemical straitjacket.

Later, her colleague Morrison wants to rescue her, but is finally disgusted by his ability to achieve masculine self-definition only in response to drug-induced tellurian femaleness: “He saw that it was only the hopeless, mad Louise he wanted, . . . the one devoid of any purpose or defence. . . . a defeated formless creature on which he could inflict himself like shovel on earth, axe on forest, use without being used, know without being known.” Morrison realizes that

Louise's description of him is essentially accurate: "Morrison refuses to admit his body is part of his mind." He has a sudden perception of human warmth as the only answer to "futile work and sterile love," and of the impossibility of achieving it through mechanical means, either technological ("the grace of the power plant and the gas plant") or magical ("the circle game"). The eyes "yellowish-grey," "alert, neutral" of the wolves in the pen at the game farm where he has gone after leaving the hospital, foreshadow the wolf's eyes of the hallucinatory image of the father in *Surfacing*. Without human communion, Morrison realizes, leaning against the wolf pen, "dizzy with cold", there is only "the barren tundra and the blank solid rivers, and beyond, so far that the endless night had already descended, the frozen sea." Morrison's spatial co-ordinates accurately symbolize his psychic predicament.

Louise attempts to create a body of love by substituting the paleologic of children and primitive peoples¹⁴ for the unsatisfactory social syllogisms of the patriarchal reality structure. Mapping the repressive social polarities onto the landscape, she practices a form of primitive magic to overcome the collective insanity of communal isolation in "apartments". To read Atwood's description of insanity by social definition and of psychic iconoclasm in "Polarities" and *Surfacing* in conjunction with contemporary works which analyze the social construction of reality is to realize that what Atwood calls "mythologizing" is usually a conscious or unconscious enforcement of the sexual "polarities" inherent in the myths of romantic love, nuclear marriage, the machismo male, and the "feminine" woman. As an intelligent woman and a poet, Atwood indicates that we must somehow escape from this alienating cultural definition of personality and human relations. In *Surfacing*, the schizoid personality's magic ritual accomplishes her mental escape from role-engulfment into the personal eclecticism or search for new forms spoken of by Steiner.

I . . . step into the water and lie down. When every part of me is wet I take off my clothes, peeling them away from my flesh like wallpaper . . .

My back is on the sand, my head rests against the rock, innocent as plankton; my hair spreads out, moving and fluid in the water. The earth rotates, holding my body down to it as it holds the moon; the sun pounds in the sky, red flames and rays pulsing from it, searing away the wrong form that encases me, dry rain soaking through me, warming the blood egg I carry. I dip my head beneath the water, washing my eyes . . .

When I am clean I come up out of the lake, leaving my false body floated on the surface . . .

In *Survival*, Atwood distinguishes between Nature's order, "labyrinthine, complex, curved", and the order of Western European Man, "squares, straight lines, oblongs". The Canadian settlers having a strong preconception of order as inherent in the universe, build their "straight-line constructions, but kill something vital in the process . . . often Nature in the form of a woman." In Atwood's poem "Progressive Insanities of a Pioneer", the settler who fails to impose order on nature has his head invaded by "the Nature which he has identified as chaos, refusing to recognize that it has its own kind of order." The interplay between images of fence/garden, vegetable/weeds in *Surfacing*, and the narrator's voluntary exclusion from the fenced-in garden as part of her magic ritual, are an obvious development from this earlier exploration. Atwood also comments that the pioneer's final state of insanity may be a progressive development from an implicit earlier state, since "suppression of everything 'curved' may itself be a form of madness."

In *Surfacing*, the final hallucinatory vision is of the father, the scientist, the man who has both imposed intellectual order on nature and, presumably, taught his daughter the skills of survival in the wilderness. At first she projects on to the father, whose back is to her, her own realization of the limitations imposed by linear structures:

He has realized he was an intruder; the cabin, the fences, the fires and paths were violations; now his own fence excludes him, as logic excludes love. He wants it ended, the borders abolished, he wants the forest to flow back into the places his mind cleared: reparation.

But then she progresses through her "insanity" to a further stage of enlightenment:

He turns towards me and it's not my father. It is what my father saw, the thing you meet when you've stayed here too long alone . . . it gazes at me for a time with its yellow eyes, wolf's eyes, depthless but lambent. . . Reflectors. It does not approve of me or disapprove of me, it tells me it has nothing to tell me, only the fact of itself.

Then its head swings away with an awkward, almost crippled motion: I do not interest it. I am part of the landscape, I could be anything, a tree, a deer skeleton, a rock.

I see now that although it isn't my father it is what my father has become.

The dissolution of all mental structures returns man completely to nature: *he* becomes *it*. By first experiencing a dissolving of the ego into landscape and then objectifying in the human figure with wolf's eyes the consequences of maintaining this "participation" as a state of consciousness, the narrator is able to visualize

the furthest limits to which the dissolution of mental structures can be pushed without the permanent merging with the landscape that occurs in insanity, when the ego appears to dissolve into a totally schizophrenic state from which there is no returning.

Thus the father becomes a "protecting spirit" embodying both the vital anarchic impulse of the self, the husk-dissolving creative spirit, and the essential conservative element. As in the suspended animation of the final hallucination, the fish jumping, turning into a primitive artifact or rock drawing in mid-air, hanging there suspended, "flesh turned to icon", then softening and dropping back into the water, an "ordinary fish" again, there is a sense of all life as a temporary configuration of psychic energy, part of a greater flux of what earlier poets like Pratt thought of as cosmic energy structuring itself in personality and through work.¹³ For Atwood, despite the apparent oscillation between ideal and real¹³ implied by the image of the fish leaping, integrity of form resides primarily in the natural structure, not in the imposed social form or myth; thus being has a biological rather than a transcendental authority.

The narrator of *Surfacing* returns to sanity with the realization that she can refuse to participate in the destructive "mythologizing" of her society: "This above all, to refuse to be a victim. . . . The word games, the winning and losing games are finished; at the moment there are no others but they will have to be invented, withdrawing is no longer possible and the alternative is death." Arising renewed from the non-evaluative plurality of nature, the wilderness guide comprehends that reality is, as William James said, a "multi-dimensional continuum." For the first time she understands and has compassion for the subjective dimensions of others. She realizes "the effort it must have taken [her father] to sustain his illusions of reason and benevolent order," and how her mother's "meticulous records" of the weather "allowed her to omit . . . the pain and isolation." Her perception of her lover is altered. "He isn't an American, I can see that now . . . he is only half-formed, and for that reason I can trust him." She has escaped her former sense of total closure, thus achieving a liberated self and a basis for action within the world.

Atwood's sense of "participation mystique" as an alternative to alienation plays its numinous part in a personal dialectic of myths, restoring to sanity the wilderness guide of *Surfacing*. However authentic or inauthentic her concept of the primitive may be outside of the world of her alienated women, it manifests the search for new forms of reality spoken of by Steiner. The last chapter of *Surfacing* makes essentially the same statement as Birney's lines: "No one bound Prome-

theus/Himself he chained," but makes it within the new context of awareness supplied by such fields as cultural anthropology, the sociology of knowledge, and environmental studies. Interdisciplinary insights are leading us quickly towards what Atwood might term an ecology of human energy, a bioethic to replace what Steiner calls "the blackmail of transcendence".¹⁶ Atwood's poems and stories are not resigned and "graceful" sublimations of what is usually referred to as the human condition. Rather they are frighteningly precise image structures, iconoclastic keys to getting mentally outside of Bluebeard's Castle.

NOTES

- ¹ By William Kimber for the Anansi edition. Kimber's design appears again on the jacket of the first American edition, Harper & Row, 1973.
- ² "J", *The Sensuous Woman* (New York, 1969).
- ³ Phyllis Chesler documents *Women and Madness* (New York, 1972) by reference to these studies.
- ⁴ In my review article "*Surfacing* in the Interests of *Survival*" (*West Coast Review*, January, 1972), I suggest that *Survival* is really an ethical treatise presented as a thematic guide to Canadian literature. The present article, accepted for publication in March, 1973, is a development from this previous consideration of Atwood's work in relation to the psychology of R. D. Laing.
- ⁵ Atwood's vampire story, "The Grave of The Famous Poet," 72 *New Canadian Stories*, ed. David Helwig and Joan Harcourt (Oberon Press, Canada, 1972), should be read in conjunction with *Power Politics*. As in *Power Politics*, the lovers form a closed system, a deadly dyadic field characterized by violence and exhaustion. See references to Atwood in my review article, "Breaking Through Patriarchal Nets to The Peaceable Kingdom," *West Coast Review*, January, 1974.
- ⁶ The movement from bondage to liberation is not a chronological development of theme. *The Edible Woman* was written in 1965 (letter, Atwood to Onley, Dec. 30, 1972).
- ⁷ The mirror is one of Atwood's favorite images. See "Tricks with Mirrors," in *Aphra*, Fall 1972. "Mirrors/are the perfect lovers,/... throw me on the bed/reflecting side up,/fall into me,/it will be your own/mouth you hit, firm and glassy,/... You are suspended in me/beautiful and frozen, I/preserve you, in me you are safe./... I wanted to stop this,/... this life of vision only, split/and remote, a lucid impasse./I confess: this is not a mirror,/it is a door/I am trapped behind/I wanted you to see me here,/say the releasing word, whatever/that may be, open the wall./Instead you stand in front of me/combing your hair." Cf. *Surfacing*, 175 and 190.
- ⁸ New York, Harper Colophon Books, 1972.
- ⁹ For the narrator of *Surfacing*, "American" signifies not a national identity but a mode of existence. See Chapter 15.
- ¹⁰ New Haven, Yale University Press, 1971.
- ¹¹ Cf. R. D. Laing's description of Julie in *The Divided Self*, Chapter 11.

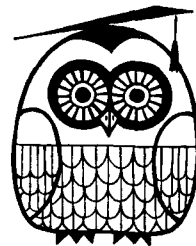
- ¹² *Saturday Night* (November, 1972), 26. "Atwood plays the role of psychic iconoclast, pulling the categories of existence apart and presenting a broken, confused reality that her readers must often back into order for themselves. . . . she demands uncomfortable mental confrontations that most people would obviously prefer to avoid."
- ¹³ According to the cultural anthropologist Melville J. Herskovitz, the tendency to dichotomize experience by using thought structures based on polarities is characteristic of Euroamerican culture. *Cultural Relativism: Perspectives in Cultural Pluralism* (New York, 1972), 238-239.
- ¹⁴ Before his death Lévy-Bruhl came to realize that there is in fact no difference between primitive mentality and our own. As Herskovitz comments, all human beings think "prelogically" at times (*op. cit.*, 28-29). Louise is not thinking and acting in terms of objectively provable causation, hence to the Euroamerican mind she appears to have regressed to a childish or "primitive" mode of thought. Much of our thinking and behaviour is similarly based on questionable premises, but if there is a consensus of opinion that the premises are valid, then the behaviour is held to be reasonable or "sane."
- ¹⁵ Sandra Djwa, "E. J. Pratt and Evolutionary Thought: Towards an Eschatology," *Dalhousie Review* (Autumn, 1972), 417.
- ¹⁶ Weyland Drew, in "Wilderness and Limitation," (*The Canadian Forum*, February, 1973), suggests that the real strength of the ecological movement lies in its association with the Romantic and libertarian traditions — "traditions which have respected the subconscious and the primitive" (18). His observation that "the only context in which Canadian nationalism can be acceptable is in the service of the ecological movement . . . as a responsibility to the land" seems to apply to the wilderness guide's dread of "creeping Americanism" in *Surfacing*, and to her pragmatic yet mystical relationship to the Canadian wilderness.

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REPRESSION

The Poetry of Alden Nowlan

Michael Ustick

I AM A PRODUCT of a culture that fears any display of emotion and attempts to repress any true communication.”¹ In this statement, Alden Nowlan is pinpointing the thematic and emotional centre of a very considerable portion of his poetic corpus. The suffering born of repression (of more than one kind) and a divided mind characterizes his voice, from the poems of his childhood, through the love poems, to its final development in symbolic, “imagist” poems on the human condition in general. It is my chief contention, moreover, that the art of Nowlan attains its zenith only when he is uncompromisingly faithful to his feelings of spiritual repression and psychic division, that is, when his poetic delineation of these feelings is precise and piercing.

Such is the case with “Beginning”,² a minor tour de force which deserves and repays close critical attention. It refers the problems of the poet’s persona back to their first source — his parents and their relationship with each other. The poem is constructed thematically and technically around their ambivalent attitude toward the act of love, or more accurately, the act of sex, or “making” (the main verb of the first and last clauses). Whether there is love here is certainly debatable. The puritanical couple see intercourse as pleasurable (“most lovely”) but as shameful too (“most abhorred”), and the effect of this ruling dichotomy upon their son is immediately stressed: he is conceived in a moment of joy (“like sound/stroked from the fiddle”) only to become the inheritor of a legacy of guilt, fear and oppression, which is the fate of a hunted animal (“the ward/ of tunes played on the bear-trap and the hound”).

The poem continues to move in contrasts. After the frenetic activity of “seven entrances”, there is a moment of calm following the storm, when he lays her down “the way the sun comes out.” In broaching the disgraceful deed, they have had to be “brave”, but, once underway, they are “like looters in a burning town.”

Their mouths left bruises, *starting with*
the kiss/
 and *ending with the proverb*, where they
 stayed;
 never in making was there *brighter bliss/*
 followed by *darker shame*. Thus I was made.

It is significant that they “stay” with “the proverb” (no doubt some pietistic or moralizing maxim of consolation) and the dark shame, for this is the tradition that shall be handed down to their son. We note further that the poem is in closed form — certainly appropriate to the “stifling” nature of the subject matter. The iambic pentameter is very nearly constant throughout. The alternate rhyme in each stanza permits the poet to emphasize the parallels between each set of two lines in the quatrain, since each set of two contains a pair of contrasting elements. In every aspect, this poem is a most impressive and polished work of art.

Partly on the basis of this initial discussion, I would now like to propose tentatively a pair of word-association lists for use as a working critical approach to Nowlan’s peculiarly dichotomous poetic landscape. To energy, freedom, spontaneity, fertility, sexual love, sensuous nature, laughter and life, let us oppose repression, bondage, regimentation, sterility, virginity, domestic-urban desiccation, tears and death.

And let us consider each term on either side of the “arena” to be the metaphorical equivalent of any other term on the same side (for example, freedom is natural sensuousness and repression is tears). Then, in a poem such as “Warren Pryor”,³ after noting in the first three stanzas Nowlan’s clever irony in using the third-person singular pronoun as a not-too-opaque mask for the third-person plural (since Warren does not exist except in his parents’ eyes), we can easily appreciate the significance of the contrasting words and images in the fourth, where the poet focuses on the boy’s futile desire to escape the trap that has been set for him:

Hard and serious,
 like a *young bear/* inside his *teller’s*
cage,
 his *axe-hewn hands/* upon the *paper bills*
 aching with *empty/ strength* and *throttled/*
rage.

Our lists of word-association stand us in better stead yet when we examine a more subtle poem, “When Like the Tears of Clowns”,⁴ one of a group on the

subject of child-punishment. Mention of “tears” and “rain” in the first line immediately signals an act of repression. (What the “clowns” represent is open to conjecture, though in Nowlan’s universe it is very likely that they may be mocking, domineering gods; or the paradoxical “tears of clowns” might be vaguely hinting at a comic-tragic ambiguity which verges upon non-meaning.) Notice the words which suggest regimented monotony: “ordered”, “chant”, “repetitious”. Significantly, the children’s shrill is “sexless”. The fourth line is rife with words connoting physical subjugation: “My heart crawls lean and lewd [in its original meaning: ignorant, vile, base], a shrinking thing . . .” At this point the images change.

In reaction against his punishment, the child seeks alliance with the world of sensuous nature: horses swear fidelity and drum out an accompaniment to the “wolf-thoughts” that “howl” within his wrists; the odour of “the seasoned hay” is raw and ripe; his “fleshly pride” unleashes a protesting cry. But there follows a startling about-face in the last two lines — bitter vision of the meek and “their deep and narrow heritage of earth.” From fantasies of freedom, the poet suddenly plummets to thoughts of the ultimate “repression”, the grave. All the major elements of this poem reappear in miniature in “Refuge at Eight”:⁵ the reactionary awareness of sensuous nature (“Darkness, the smell of earth, the smell of apples”), the dream of death, the “wolf-thoughts” of childish revenge, and tears — the final reality which here parallels the vision of the grave; the personal reality from which Nowlan’s persona can never free himself for any considerable length of time.

As well as the rather insidious (because psychological) repression which parents inflict upon children, there is the repression of brutality and hatred, recorded in “Britain Street”⁶ (which is less a poem than a social document) and the repression of poverty, recorded in “And He Wept Aloud, So That the Egyptians Heard It”.⁷ Here the poet skilfully develops the metaphorical association between the flies and his youthful poverty in phrases like “playing . . . football”, “skim-milk-coloured windows” and “leap-frogging”, until its significance becomes inescapable in the lines, “catching the bread/ on its way to our mouths,/ mounting one another/ on the rough deal table.” The identification is openly made with the mention of “Baal-Zebub [literally, ‘lord of flies’]/ god of the poor and outcast” and of the fact that the flies did not appear until the protagonist’s arrival. The poem’s movement follows the pattern we have thus far noticed: Nowlan’s persona is being tyrannized; he strikes out in some way against the “numbers and persistence” of the repressive force, for which act he feels guilty

("I... wanted to beg... forgiveness"); and his revolt ultimately fails ("the flies rebuilding their world").

We have already remarked that, for Nowlan, death is the ultimate repression. In "Aunt Jane",⁸ the child receives a lengthy education in death. The surface humour of the diction, the playful rhymes, and the sing-song rhythm all create an uneasy offsetting to the macabre subject. In "Two Strangers",⁹ the now-grown man can derive no thrill from the hunter's "climactic kill"; the only reality he knows is "the *child-like* scream of death", "his tightened breath", and the voice which "had died, had died." Nowlan is also, however, quite capable of raising his voice in protest against the forces of death which so often hold his spirit in bondage. "God Sour the Milk of the Knacking Wench"¹⁰ is a vividly vindictive condemnation of all life-destroyers. His demand that the knacking wench be sexually mutilated, even as she mutilates the bulls, is the furious outcry of a man too long frustrated and penned-in. And just as this poem is the man's reaction against the experience portrayed in "Two Strangers", so "I, Icarus",¹¹ a repressed imagination's dream of escape and release, is the child's reaction against the experience portrayed in "Aunt Jane".

NOW THAT WE ARE acquainted with the basic elements of the poet's psychic and spiritual make-up, let us turn to his love poetry. One reading of "The Grove Beyond the Barley"¹² is all that is required to unmistakably identify it as the work of Alden Nowlan. For the poem is, to a great extent, a self-portrait, since the girl is little more than the female counterpart of the male protagonist. This is not properly a "love poem" at all.

In the terms of our word-connotation lists, the atmosphere is immediately established as being "repressive" through the use of the words "too secret" and "murder" in the first line. The speaker comes upon a girl's "white body" and "naked limbs", but he does not think of her in sexual terms; he sees her breasts, but his only comment is that they "move like the shadows of leaves/ stirred by the wind." Her nakedness is her purity; like him, she is innocent and virginal under the crushing hand of the world. In harmony with both the particular setting and the repression with which we have elsewhere seen Nowlan's persona to be imbued, he approaches her with timidity: "I do not know you, therefore have no right/ to speak of discovering/ you...". Her limbs are in "disorder", "the arms outstretched/ like one crucified, the legs bent like a runner's..." — surely the poet is presenting an icon of his own suffering. This would seem to be

confirmed by his “novel”; what else is the story of the husband in black (“worn at his *wedding*”) and the hired man in rooster-comb red but a parable of the poet’s parents’ relationship as it is depicted in “Beginning”? The forces of death, puritanical guilt and repression interact for a moment with the forces of life, sexual love and energy, and the result is “an axed colt”, or “the ward/ of tunes played on the bear-trap and the hound”, or a stanchioned and maimed bull. The speaker’s fear lest she awaken or cry out is entirely characteristic, as is his cautious retreat with idyllic wishes on his lips. The poem derives its power, I think, from the tension between the lyric beauty of the state of virginity — the pastoral attractiveness of being “a gentle satyr” — and the implication that such a state is emotionally unsatisfactory, mainly because it is linked to repressive impulses.

This tension is highlighted and depicted in masterful style in “A Poem for Elizabeth Nancy”,¹³ one of Alden Nowlan’s very finest creations.

Here the protagonist has managed to escape his oppressive past to the point of physical consummation of his love for a woman, but the question the poem asks is, whether he is as free as he thinks he is. The first three words are resonant with meaning. The speaker may be considered literally “emptied” by the act of love; the word also has the sense of “discarded”, “expelled”, or “(unceremoniously) dumped”. The important point is that he sees Eden as synonymous with Virginity and Innocence, “the fall” being occasioned by sexual intercourse; and this automatically implies a measure of guilt which lingers on from the puritanical ethic which has been the inheritance of the Nowlan persona. Just as we would expect from our knowledge of this poet’s word-associations, the “post-lapsarian” world is one of extraordinary fertility and natural sensuousness: the beloved’s eyes are “like caves behind a torrent . . . blue-green valleys where cattle/ fatten on clover and grow drunk on apples . . .”. But the words “fatten” and “grow drunk” make us stop for a moment; is this excess to be approved of? In the second stanza, the protagonist returns to Eden, the House of Innocence, “this house of candles”, which is now, of course, empty. It is asleep, with “all the curtains/ skittish and white as brides (even the wind/ meeting their silence, whispers) . . .” (compare “The Grove Beyond the Barley”, lines 16, 17). He is an intruder; his hands “*stink* from milking” (again, sensuous nature), his feet on the stairs sound “like laughter” (as opposed to the “tears” of repression), and he does “not much” care that his lover is not there. The point is, though, that he *does* care to some degree — perhaps more than he realizes. Why else does he state *twice* that he knows there is no-one in the room? Why does he return to

the house at all? Why does the poet devote only the first stanza to "the post-fall" and the last two to "the pre-fall"? It is clear that the repression to which we have always seen Nowlan's persona subjected has now insinuated itself so inextricably into his spiritual fibre that, even after "vanquishing" it, he must look back upon it with nostalgia and a sense of loss.

I would stress again that both "The Grove" and "Elizabeth Nancy" come alive because of the poet's faithful attention to the dialectical tension of opposing forces, a tension which, in the former poem, is implicit, and in the latter, overt. On the other hand, when the dialectic is absent, the poetry suffers appreciably by comparison. "For Claudine Because I Love Her",¹⁴ like the last stanza of "Elizabeth Nancy", expresses a lover's feeling of abandonment as he stands in an empty house; but because it stands alone as one isolated experience, it cannot achieve the exquisite poignancy that the last stanza of the earlier poem attains in relation to its *first* stanza. Thus "For Claudine" can be little more than one of the world's many unremarkable "sad memory" poems. Another defect of Nowlan's later "more personal, confessional poetry"¹⁵ is that, lacking the steady influence of a taut framework of ideas (which more often characterizes his early work), his poetic language sometimes tends to become rather shabby. Hence in "Another Parting"¹⁶ (one of a group of "lying sleepless" poems), we find such unfortunate lines as, "[I] feel only my pain/ flowing into/ an all-encompassing sadness . . .". In short, to the degree that Nowlan loses sight of his immediate and most effective poetic "irritant" or stimulus — namely, repression, and its counterforces — his work correspondingly diminishes in quality.

Let us now turn to what one might call Nowlan's poems of cosmic despair. In taking an overview of all his work, I think that we must inevitably regard these as the final fruits of his repressive germ, since they generally deal with such familiar subjects as loneliness, purposelessness, misunderstanding, and of course death. The technique of "July 15"¹⁷ is comparable to that of the last two love poems discussed: brief poetic analysis of one isolated feeling or experience. And, even as "nothing is happening" metaphysically, so nothing is happening poetically either.

More successful is "Dancer",¹⁸ in which Nowlan reverts to a compact, closed form and restores a sense of dialectical counteraction through light-dark contrasts: the girl "bolts in and out of darkness . . . stumbling in the shadows, scalded blind/ each time she whirls to face the sunlight . . .". Some very adept imagery makes the significance of her plight clear: the spotlight-"sun" has her "netted" and "woven" into a "mesh"; she is literally up against the wall. She hurls the

ball “against the darkness, venomously” and it is hurled back, “all human purpose stript/ from its wild passage . . .”. “The Execution”¹⁹ is a chilling vision of doom (admirable especially for its parable-like economy) in a murderous world in which all communication and understanding have broken down. As one of the blackest of Nowlan’s “black” poems, it must be ranked alongside “Fly on the Blue Table”,²⁰ which is in some respects even more despondent. The poet first draws our attention to the familiar phenomenon of the “dance” of the fly’s legs, “quick and purposeful/ yet going nowhere.” It is “like walking on water”, which, as everyone knows, is possible only “in a movie” on “plastic water/ under perpetual static lightning” (i.e., the lifeless, never-changing “movie props” of human existence). This passage is a bitterly sarcastic mockery of man’s pretensions to godhood. The hard truth about his condition lies rather in the picture of “the blind actor/ testing the air with outstretched tremulous hands” — an image at least as old as Céline, but still powerfully evocative.

And all of this is nonsense
because I cannot describe your world
in which I only exist as a mountain or a rose
exists in my world.

In these shocking lines, Nowlan appears to be despairing of his very function as a poet — to affirm the spiritual bond between all men by “describing” all aspects of the reality which is common to all men.

As the poem concludes, it focuses upon an appropriate symbol of Evil or Death (or even God); the spider watches the man-fly, which the poet depicts in a manner that does little to disguise his contempt for the obscene creature: “. . . your striped ripe pimple of belly/ jerking over the blue table.”

Since it would be unfortunate to have to close the essay on such a bleak note, we might find some consolation in “The Mysterious Naked Man”,²¹ a piece in which Nowlan’s colloquial style and wry humour are at their very best. Here for a moment he manages to detach himself from his obsessions and rise above them. Thus society (the voice of moral authority) is no longer repressive, but only laughable and ridiculous, is not allowed the dignity of being a reactionary life-symbol. However, if one were morbid enough to look beyond the pleasant satire, one might discover a vision of contemporary life which is almost as pessimistic as the four preceding poems.

NOTES

- ¹ Gary Geddes & Phyllis Bruce, eds., *15 Canadian Poets* (Toronto, 1970), p. 285.
- ² *Under the Ice* (Toronto, 1961), p. 1.
- ³ *Ibid.*, pp. 18-19.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 43.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 2.
- ⁶ *Bread, Wine and Salt* (Toronto, 1967), p. 17.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9.
- ⁸ *Under the Ice*, p. 2.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 35.
- ¹⁰ *Wind in a Rocky Country* (Toronto, 1960), p. 13.
- ¹¹ *Bread, Wine and Salt*, p. 3.
- ¹² *Poetry of Mid-Century, 1940/1960*, ed. Milton Wilson (Toronto, 1964), pp. 222-223.
- ¹³ *Under the Ice*, p. 1.
- ¹⁴ *the mysterious naked man* (Toronto, 1969), p. 17.
- ¹⁵ Geddes & Bruce, *op. cit.*, p. 287.
- ¹⁶ *the mysterious naked man*, p. 9.
- ¹⁷ *Bread, Wine and Salt*, p. 42.
- ¹⁸ *The Things Which Are* (Toronto, 1962), p. 59.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 44.
- ²⁰ *Poetry of Mid-Century, 1940/1960*, p. 221.
- ²¹ *the mysterious naked man*, p. 1.

THE CIRCLE GAME

Gary Ross

... landscapes in poems are often interior landscapes; they are maps of a state of mind

— Margaret Atwood, *Survival*

W E SENSE RIGHT FROM THE OPENING POEM of *The Circle Game* — “This is a Photograph of Me” — in which the poet is unable to place herself in any sort of harmony with the landscape, that the haunting mood of isolation in the book is associated, in some undefined way, with geographical wilderness. No human form is visible in the photo; we get the feeling that wilderness somehow precludes human existence. If the setting (the geographical details of the print) is not overtly hostile, it is at least mutely obliterating: “the photograph was taken/the day after I drowned”. The poet impresses us as a not-too-unwilling victim: “I am in the lake, in the centre/of the picture, just under the surface”. The idea is startling, it works, but the closing lines appear deliberately puzzling, and so forced:

It is difficult to say where
precisely, or to say
how large or small I am:
the effect of water
on light is a distortion

but if you look long enough
eventually
you will be able to see me.

Mood, voice and setting in this poem are typical. *The Circle Game* is full of oceans, lakes and rivers, trees, rocks, islands and sand. The prevalent moods, especially in the opening poems, are those of solitude, isolation, and sometimes outright despair. Owing in part to the repeated conjunction of wilderness setting with moods of fear and alienation, physical landscape very soon comes to imply

a good deal more than neutral, external reality. The voice is calm and objective — but wait: we are being addressed by the same person who claims to be the invisible victim in the photograph. This schizophrenic touch is more than an eerie flourish; it effectively serves to compound her isolation. She is cut off, blotted out, even from herself. There is no direct relation between the two people implied by the poem, the two selves.

Neither is there a connection between herself and others. The atmosphere of detachment she inhabits is not diminished by the introduction of another character. Her companion in “After the Flood, We” is irrelevant, part of another world. He walks along, speaking “of the beauty of the morning,/not even knowing/that there has been a flood”. And here again, nature is working against people (“We must be the only ones/left”). Not only is it an obliterating force, it has now taken on a sinister, almost human quality; and when the poet speaks of “the almost-human/brutal faces forming/(slowly)/out of stone”, she achieves the reverse process as well: humanity takes on some of the blank, oppressive character of the wilderness. The equation of the internal and external worlds, the subjective, personal self and the objective, physical, real world, is made more explicit by this transference. Hence the unspecified conflict between poet and landscape is internalized within the poet herself to the extent that the wilderness world comes to stand for the outside correspondent of some internal state. The element of schizophrenia evident in several poems is, in this light, not only explicable, but indeed quite justified.

Atwood’s treatment of civilization — what we might be tempted to regard as the opposite of wilderness — affords evidence, if any be needed, that her use of landscape is predominantly and consistently figurative. Modern writers have, of course, long made use of the ironical truism that as more people crowd into an area, the more superficial becomes the contact among them. In other words, the city (and all it implies) has long supplied writers with contexts and symbols of human alienation. But Atwood provides her own twist: she portrays the city as nothing more than a variation on the wilderness theme. Civilization is a glass and steel and asphalt veneer, not a change so much as a disguise (“the landscape behind or under/the future cracks in the plaster”), and a temporary one at that, for the day will come

when the houses, capsized, will slide
obliquely into the clay seas, gradual as glaciers
that right now nobody notices.

(“The City Planners”)

As she writes in “A Place: Fragments”:

The cities are only outposts.
 Watch that man
 walking on cement as though on snowshoes:
 senses the road
 a muskeg, loose mats of roots and brown
 vegetable decay
 or crust of ice that
 easily might break and
 slush or water under
 suck him down

Like the wilderness, the city exists in an emotional vacuum. Civilization obliterates humanity as surely as a flood or the plague. Although “there is always/ someone in the next room” (“The Circle Game”), personal encounters are random, fruitless; each person dwells in a private bell-jar of isolation; messengers “come from nowhere”, “are going nowhere”, and attempt to communicate by shouting “in a silent language” (“A Messenger”). In effect, urban and rural landscapes are indistinguishable. The old men of “In My Ravines” dream of “impossible flight” — neither more nor less possible than the flight of a corpse from a lake bottom. If technology is a constructive impetus, it is nonetheless horrifying: the man with a hook (“Look, he says, glittering/like a fanatic, My hook/is an improvement”) is every bit as powerful a symbol of desolation as a desert or a burnt-out forest. In whatever setting, people are trapped, impotent. The poet can say “outside there is a lake/or this time is it a street” (“Playing Cards”), because it really makes no difference. The outer world, in whatever form, is wilderness.

BUT THE WILDERNESS, we have said, symbolizes something within the poet. That something, the barren side, the gravitation toward chaos, the isolation, prevents any type of valuable human relationship. An assimilation is never achieved, never even a happy alignment; instead there is always actual or potential repulsion, the reaction against, a jerky attraction reversed, like magnets.

These days we keep
 our weary distances:
 sparring in the vacant spaces

of peeling rooms
and rented minutes, climbing
all the expected stairs, our voices
abraded with fatigue,
our bodies wary.

Physical touch is useless, painful:

my face flinches
under the sarcastic
tongues of your estranging
fingers,
the caustic remark of your kiss.
(“Eventual Proteus”)

The need for love is real and strong, but it finds little sustenance and no parallel outside itself. Wilderness is dominant; human desire, the hunger for love, is nothing more than

a furtive insect, sly and primitive
the necessary cockroach
in the flesh
that nests in dust
...
In spite of our famines
it keeps itself alive
: how it gorges on a few
unintentional
spilled crumbs of love
(“A Meal”)

The black side of the self rules and everywhere she looks, every way she turns, she sees this wilderness reflected. The real world is brutal, hostile, for she cannot reconcile her inner world. She is, in short, the ultimate outcast, isolated from any sort of community and cut off from herself. She has no place, belongs nowhere, can find no stasis. “I move,” she writes,

and live on the edges
(what edges)
I live
on all the edges there are
(“Evening Trainstation”).

“The Circle Game” is the pivotal poem in the volume. It amplifies notes

struck previously: the city as wilderness (“these scuffed walls contain their circling trees,/that low clogged sink/their lake”); human relationships as hopeless, destructive (“all your word-/plays, calculated ploys/of the body, the witticisms/of touch, are now/attempts to keep me/at a certain distance”); and it crystallizes the feeling of entrapment and impotence that has been building. The image of the children’s “tranced moving” captures the endless, empty, pointless ritual of existence particularly aptly, I think, because the emptiness is presupposed, regarded as basic, an unopposed end in itself, even at the level of innocence:

... the whole point
for them
of going round and round
is (faster
 slower)
going round and round

The circle becomes the symbol of constriction, and at the same time makes us realize that because it is infinite, so final, the urge to refuse to resist its isolating power is very strong; and to realize as well that it is a temptation into which the poet has fallen. One of the causes of her entrapment — perhaps the most important one — is her attitude toward her predicament, her unquestioning acceptance of it. Hitherto, she has been passive, helpless; the possibility of change, of escape, has not been raised. The simple, powerful resolution at the close of the poem signals a shift from acquiescence to an active determination:

I want to break
these bones, your prisoning rhythms
 (winter,
 summer)
all the glass cases,

erase all maps,
crack the protecting
eggshell of your turning
singing children:

I want the circle
broken.

Granted, this is only a stated wish, a desire for change; but it is the first such evident desire; the decision is the vital first step.

In the poem immediately following, the intention has been translated: she

refuses to be passive, malleable, to be composed and fastened within the framework of a photo. We recall "This is a Photograph of Me" in which the opposite was true: she was helpless, wilderness was in control, and she was quite content that this should be so. Here, she is not yet free of the "glossy square of paper" but she is getting there:

that small black speck
travelling towards the horizon
at almost the speed of light

is me

("Camera".)

So, too, has she begun to struggle against the dark side of her self. The flaw of *The Circle Game* may well be that there is no specific reason for her gradual about-face. If the poet were a character in a novel, we might argue that her resolution lacks convincing motivation. Whatever the source of her determination, though, we can observe its effects. In "A Sibyl", she isolates her wilderness side, or a part of it. This enables her at least to identify what she is fighting; a scientist must isolate a virus before he can hope to combat it. In this poem, the disease is mortality:

... You must die
later or sooner alas
you were born weren't you
the minutes thunder like guns
coupling won't help you

To face the self honestly is to admit that

time runs out
in the ticking hips of the
man whose twitching skull
jerks on loose
vertebrae in my kitchen

Yet the admission is a sort of liberation. By accepting the fact of mortality she robs it of its dread and is able to abstract it from her consciousness:

I don't care

I leave that to my
necessary sibyl
(that's what she's for)

with her safety bottled
 anguish and her glass
 despair

A direction is plainly emerging. The poet's perspective is changing, the voice becoming more confident. The polarization of the inner and outer worlds is a stride toward reconciliation. The wilderness is becoming less intimidating.

While the idea of abandoning the old self, of establishing a viable stasis, is attractive and promising, the actual process turns out not to be so simple. As "Migration: C.P.R." demonstrates, places of "absolute, unformed beginning" are scarce in the real world and non-existent in the mind. The attempt to begin again, to find a new setting, is fruitless. During the journey from east to west the travellers notice that the inner lakes are reminiscent of "ancient oceans". Though moving, they are going nowhere. The west, once reached, turns out to be not the anticipated place of absolute, unformed beginning: "There are more second-hand/stores here than we expected". Even the wilderness is not new.

In the forest, even
 apart from the trodden
 paths, we can tell (from the sawn
 firstumps) that many
 have passed the same way
 sometime before
 this

Nowhere does Atwood use the wilderness metaphor more brilliantly than in *The Circle Game*, and nowhere does she employ landscape imagery more tellingly to reflect the condition of the mind perceiving that landscape. There is a fine irony to the lines "though we brought nothing with us/(we thought)/ we have begun to unpack", for they have brought, besides material things, ways of feeling and thinking that move along well-trodden and ineradicable paths.

Geographical freedom, or at least change, is not freedom at all. How, then, is any type of liberty to be attained, any reconciliation to be won? We have said that the need for love, to share with and enter into another person, has always been there. But it has been "furtive" and outpulled by the gravitation toward isolation. Now, in "Against Still Life", the need resurfaces, no longer furtive but open and acknowledged:

Your silence
 isn't enough for me
 now, no matter with what

contentment you fold
your hands together; I want
anything you can say

At times, the need approaches an obsession:

... I'd crack your skull
like a walnut, split it like a pumpkin
to make you talk, or get
a look inside

She wants now to break down the subject/object bifurcation, perhaps because to this point the distinction has been so acute. She will not settle for the mere fact of an "orange in the middle of a table"; rather, "I want to pick it up/in my hand/I want to peel the/skin off." Neither, it appears, will she settle for being a separate object.

And in fact her relation to others has been changed. The resolution to escape the circle evidently has allowed her to think not exclusively in terms of "me"; she has begun to speak of "us", of "two". In "Migration: C.P.R." and in "Some Objects of Wood and Stone" the first-person plural voice is taken for granted. Even "Spring in the Igloo" — in which once again we witness helplessness in the face of nature, the inability to act with no less than self-preservation at stake — even here the tone is calm and assured, a fact which derives, perhaps, from the "us" in the poem. Calamity, though unavoidable, is somehow less calamitous when shared.

The problem, however, refuses such a simple solution. Love itself turns out to be a dubious blessing. As the need for an involved human relationship approaches satisfaction, a counter-reaction grows proportionally stronger. Hence the poet, struggling to escape isolation, suddenly finds herself saying "How could you invade/me when/I ordered you not/to." Whenever the existence of a love relationship is assumed, this repellent force is very powerful. New variables are brought into the equation of self, and these are as difficult to understand and solve as the old. The emotions associated with the relationship demand classification and become finite, and because the feelings that would bind the two are so intense, the element of coercion is never far off:

Love is an awkward word
Not what I mean and
too much like magazine stories
in stilted dentists'

waiting rooms.
How can anyone use it?

I'd rather say
I like your
lean spine
or your eyebrows
or your shoes

but just by standing there and
being awkward

you force me to speak

love.

(“Letters, Towards and Away”)

In the end, the release accomplished through the merging with another turns out to be a negative thing, not freedom so much as a new mode of entrapment, equally unsatisfying:

What you invented
what you
destroyed
with your transient hands

you did so gently
I didn't notice at the time

but where is all that wall-
paper?

Now
I'm roofless:

the sky
you built for me is too
open.

The invention of the relationship, and so of a new self, implies a destruction of the old. “Letters” affirms the need for separateness — to this point regarded more as a curse than a need — seemingly contradicting the requirement of human involvement. An important question thus arises: how does one reconcile the need for individual identity, for separate wholeness, with the simultaneous and

equally urgent need for others, an escape from total isolation? In other words, we have come full circle and arrived at the question that has been implicit from the outset: how to reconcile the inner and outer worlds?

IT WOULD BE a gross oversimplification to say that physical wilderness is neutral, incapable of love, and that the inner, private world of self resembles external nature only when the capacity for love goes unused; but surely the poetry is drawing us in the direction of such an understanding. At the least we could say that nature, generally, is benign when the perception of it is shared. Even a landscape of threat is less terrifying through a common lens. We could say also that those poems dealing directly with the two-person relationship (“Eventual Proteus”, “A Meal”, “The Circle Game”, “Letter, Towards and Away”) tend to contain very little wilderness imagery.

“The Islands” is irrefutable evidence that physical landscape reflects quite clearly the inner state of the perceiver. Here the sight of the geography is actually “pleasing”. While the poem is about islands, it is no coincidence that there are “two of them”. They carry considerable symbolic weight, especially given the context of the poem in the book; so, when she writes “We know they are alone/and always will be”, we can hardly help feeling that she is referring as much to “the two of us” as to “the two of them”. We have, then, for the first time, an acceptance of aloneness, of personal isolation, and the very acceptance robs the fact of its terrifying connotation. Again, a kind of freedom is attained. The most significant point, though, is that she can accommodate herself to the condition of solitude only in the presence of someone else. What enables her to accept with such equanimity is the realization that her state is shared; everyone is cut off. Ironically, when things are shared — even things like despair and alienation — bonds are made, invisible bridges formed between islands, and insularity overcome.

The effect of landscape is altered by an alteration in attitude towards it. The change has come about through the poet’s recognition of her affinities with others, and, by extension, with the outside world. It is not the conflicts between self and nature that she dwells on now, but the likenesses; and once you start seeking overlappings, affinities, you find them: everyone is mortal, after all, everyone is “part of this warm rotting/of vegetable flesh/this quiet spawning of roots” (“Pre-Amphibian”). Significantly, this realization takes place while she is merging with another:

but here I blur
 into you our breathing sinking
 to green millenniums
 and sluggish in our blood
 all ancestors
 are warm fish moving

The natural, external world has its own integrity and communicates in a manner as logical and real as speech. Speaking of pebbles on a beach, she writes,

They were sea-smoothed, sea-completed.
 They enclosed what they intended
 to mean in shapes
 as random and necessary
 as the shapes of words
 (“Some Objects of Wood and Stone”)

A carved animal, passed from hand to hand around a circle, communicates primitively, almost magically, so that “the skin wonders/if stone is human”, and those who have held the animal “keep/the image of that/inner shape” long after the animal has gone.

Animal, vegetable and mineral become confused. Ultimately, the inner world of thought and feeling and the outer world of spruce and granite contain each other in much the same way that the wilderness in “A Place: Fragments” contains the woman’s house, which in turn contains its own wilderness:

a cushion with a fringe;
 glass animals arranged
 across the mantelpiece (a swan, a horse,
 a bull); a mirror;
 a teacup sent from Scotland;
 several heraldic spoons;
 a lamp; and in the centre
 of the table, a paperweight:
 hollow glass globe
 filled with water, and
 a house, a man, a snowstorm .

Where does it all end? Where is the point of reference? “The centres/travel with us unseen/like our shadows/on a day when there is no sun.” There is a point within each person at which the inner and outer worlds, the two sides of the self, conjoin; in the metaphor of this poem, the point is the doorway, “the fulcrum where

this trivial but
 stringent inner order
 held its delicate balance
 with the random scattering or
 clogged merging of
 things: ditch by the road; dried
 reeds in the wind; flat
 wet bush, grey sky
 sweeping away outside.

A tentative balance has been struck, a reconciliation achieved. The poles of isolation and community are not mutually exclusive. The poet is on her way toward creating a viable inner order; it remains now only to extend the integration by applying its implications back out to the real, physical wilderness. The connection is made through the direct juxtaposition of the outer landscape with the personal one, its human corerpondent.

Now, clutter of twigs
 across our eyes, tatter
 of birds at the eye's edge; the straggle
 of dead treetrunks; patch
 of lichen
 and in love, tangle
 of limbs and fingers, the texture
 of pores and lines on the skin.

Inner and outer worlds do not differ in kind; the two selves need not conflict. Each is an integral part of something more, something

that informs, holds together
 this confusion, this largeness
 and dissolving:

not above or behind
 or within it, but one
 with it: an

identity:
 something too huge and simple
 for us to see.

In the recognition of this identity, the terror of landscape disintegrates.

Death itself becomes relative in the new perspective; bones grow flesh again, come up "trees and grass". We recall the closing lines of the initial poem, the

THE CIRCLE GAME

poet's assurance that if we looked long enough at the image of the landscape, "eventually/you will be able to see me." And sure enough, the landscape has become less a place of dread than a source of solace and humanity:

Still
we are the salt
seas that uphold these lands.

Now horses graze
inside this fence of ribs, and

children run, with green
smiles, (not knowing
where) across
the fields of our open hands.

("The Settlers").

THE MASKS OF D. G. JONES

E. D. Blodgett

"Pour se reconnaître, il faut se traduire"

PUBLIC SILENCE surrounding the work of D. G. Jones in Canada is inexorable but not inexplicable. His three books of poetry have emerged and disappeared apparently without complaint against the more strident and ephemeral appeals of the poetry of the past decade in this country. Beside the meteoric flash of such writers as Leonard Cohen and, now, Margaret Atwood, Jones's subtle brilliance seems a pale fire indeed. This is because Jones is a poet who is penetrating with care and delicate concern many of Canada's more troubling æsthetic preoccupations. He is a poet of courage whose surfacing is always deceptive and often misleading in a country where the search for self and heritage can be so exhausting that most poets would prefer to settle for any mode of irony that would both expose the mysterious folly of self-discovery and, also, prevent whatever fulfillment of exploration might be possible.

This is the poetry of an imagination that was early formed, and such changes as occur are those of a style deepened only by tragic events.¹ It should be remarked, nevertheless, how the centre of Jones's circles of radiation is placed in his first book. As a poet who seems only minimally ready for statement, he enunciated an almost consuming passion in his first poem in *Frost On The Sun*² entitled "John Marin". Jones's passion is for art, form and the artist's ambiguous relation to the world present to the eye. Every volume of his poetry has, in fact, begun with meditations on this problem. *The Sun Is Axeman*³ opens reflecting upon Anne Hébert; *Phrases From Orpheus*⁴ moves confidently into the same kind of æsthetic dimension. By the third book, however, the self is no longer a spectator of a simple other; there the spatial order of his early work yields to an interplay, suggested in the course of the second book, of kinds of perceptual events where

The cries of children come on the wind
 And are gone. The wild bees come,
 And the clouds.

And the mind is not
 A place at all,
 But a harmony of now,

The necessary angel, slapping
 Flies in its own sweat.

The transmutation of "place", which was so much a part of design for the poet to whom Jones here almost to his undoing boldly alludes, is where the ambiguity of speech and its mode of visual revelation focus in his poetry. But Jones, unlike Stevens, never teaches explicitly, never *tells* it "As it is, in the intricate evasions of as." The Canadian poet's persona is every part, no part, a picture and absence: as he remarked once, "In order to recognize yourself, you have to be translated."⁵ He is Hamlet's voice and his father's ghost. He would be present to disappear, as he indicated in his first book:

I would eliminate this bombast, this
 Detail of type, and leave an image,
 And a space — in which the birds or trees
 Find all their palpable relations with the earth.
 ("A Problem of Space")

Conjoined, finally, to a love for art and the world seen as theatre, is a need for masks, either tragic or Edenic, whose rôle is to reflect upon how the place of tragedy — a disharmony of then — is at once present, illusory and quick with death.

If it is true that an exceedingly refined notion of art resides at the centre of Jones's consciousness, it is the sense of the visual relations of things and their deceptions that shades both the imagery and form of the poems. In its approximation to visual art, his poetry in fact illuminates imagery which is by its nature and in its effect illusory and deceptive. Similar to any image cast upon a screen, the "place" where it reflects is a blank, a reminder and menace of absence. The mechanics of beaming light is complicated *a fortiori* by the poet's ability to blend images. Jones's arrival at such æsthetic positions does not seem to be through an interest in film but rather *via* an obsession with photographs and painters, not only Marin, but also Klee, Chagall, the Hour Books of the Duke of Berry, Cézanne, Matisse, Hokusai and Chinese art in general. Such an interest may be

attributed to the fact that the poet is himself an amateur artist, and that he had once considered becoming an architect. These interests are more likely only aspects of an intensely visual imagination, and a peculiar bent for the way things come and go before the eye. The eye, as he suggests in "Phrases From Orpheus", is a kind of cosmic organ of nutrition:

We are fed
in the eye of God
in solitary, albeit blind
and intimate

Eye, as he notes elsewhere, is the reflector of all things:

The universe spins in a golden eye
And summer shrinks in four black claws.
(*"The Osprey"*)

As he exhorts in *"The River: North of Guelph"*:

O thin stream
if you must be the image of my mind
let me be that glass through which the light
shines — O mind,
be nothing, be
that translucent glass:
A crow, grown tired of cawing,
lights
on a dead branch;
he folds his wings; the sun
gleams black.
A fallen leaf
drifts and catches on a twig.
A tin
funnel,
pitched into the middle of the stream,
catches the light
and sends it back.

The poem stops almost thoughtlessly short of the Emersonian order of identities, for the final desire is dialectical and like a game of ball played with light against the modulating dark of things. Hence, while he may observe that "the general/ Identification/Leads us to love,"⁶ the sense of the phrase seems to derive its meaning from the following:

I am always your lover: walls

and the fences of time,
or the night, but discover
the world has been joined

indivisible, everywhere, ever.

(“Nocturne: in the Way of a Love Song”)

While walls, as the same poem makes clear, are “merely façades,” their face is sufficient to blur into ambiguity and prevent all things from being one; and like certain styles of painting, they prevent finalities such as vanishing points. In a stanza redolent of epanaleptic elegy, the poet suggests how much is possible:

I am the light where you find shadows,
I am the night in which you shine.
To your extension I am time.

(“A Place for ‘P’ ”)

Of shorter poems that demonstrate succinctly what I have been saying, I would choose “Antibes: Variations on a Theme” from the second book, from which I cite the concluding six stanzas:

“Night Fishing at Antibes”

(Picasso: August, 1939)

Introduces

The town and castle of Antibes

In violet tones.

In the exhausted harbour, two

Grotesque youth, spearing

Fish in the lamplight,

Register a degeneration.

Even the girls, standing

On the antique quai, one

Eating an ice-cream cone suggest

Necrosis. They watch

Under fallen stars, while the town

Corrupts in silence.

Antibes: there are

Places whose very emptiness

Mirrors our betrayal.

It has been remarked that this is a kind of nineteenth-century travel poem. Among its few faults, this need not be numbered. Its faults are more technical: an occasional failure of cadence, an unnecessary use of "very" in the next to last line. Its virtues, emerging like flotsam in many of the stanza's final lines, should suggest that little is being described in this poem, but much is thrust delicately into our purview and then removed. The poem has no background other than the repetition of the word "Antibes". The speaker is a demonstrator; his rôle is to thin out the three or four dimensional world to a screen where action is naught, where, "under fallen stars", gods are aligned with "trivial flesh", creation becomes "reproduction", and where all process is a silent corruption. The strength of the poem is not the apparent idea, but the skill with which emptiness becomes a mirror against the reader's eye. The action of the poem has nothing to do with either the speaker or the figures he indicates. The action depends upon a random superimposition of accidentally related images. But the modulation of imagery relentlessly urges upon us the fact that fantasy, memory, noon, night, Nicolas de Staël's suicide, an older painting of Picasso — that all these show us how the world becomes picture steadily emptying itself of centre and depth: time, deceptions of memory, fallen gods, necrosis become positions and azimuths of the visual world.

As a paradox working against the persuasive order of the poem's stanzas, we are urged to believe in the momentary and exclusive validity of every point of reference. In an article on D. B. Milne, Northrop Frye speaks of a similar effect in Oriental and medieval painting:

... it is absurd to say that Oriental or medieval painting is flat ... or that it has no perspective. The perspective is there all right, but it is a convex perspective which rolls up on the observer instead of running away from him. In some Oriental pictures the observer's eye seems to be at the circumference of the picture, so that it opens inward into the mind. Perspective in this kind of painting is not a mechanical handling of distance, but a proportioning of visual interest, which makes a man look smaller when further away because he is then pictorially less important.⁷

To proportion visual interest is precisely Jones's rôle in the poem. Against the depth-creating properties of line, colour and form, the poet juxtaposes time, plays with the irony of language, remembers the images of other men and, without any suggestion of continuity, allows Antibes to die at noon, at evening and at night, while somebody eats ice-cream. And where is Cap d'Antibes if not a projected fantasy?

My reference to the work of Milne is neither casual nor fortuitous. Jones himself wrote a poem on Milne with the evocative title "A Garland of Milne". Turn after turn of the poem summons up images of the painter's haunting canvases and exhibits a brief and allusive anthology. In many ways, Jones's Milne is an archetypal Canadian, the man who made a garden of the bush, for whom

All space came out in flowers
miraculous, erupting from a void or mouth.

But what is admired in Milne can also be admired in Jones for whom the form of a poem, particularly a longer one, is a spatial composition in which the tonalities of margins, masks and fragmentary implosions create an interplay of voices whose perspectives mix "background" and "foreground" which, for the unwary, seems inhuman.⁸ The persona of these poems may indeed have no precise outline, but the effort to project a shape, to cast a "profile in the birdless air",⁹ to shadow forth the labyrinth of the human spirit in the formal design of the poem is what distinguishes Jones from the unexamined romanticism of his contemporaries. The persona, finally, is a creation of a poem's design.

WHAT ALWAYS CHARACTERIZES Jones's levelled manner of speech is its reflective pitch. It is at once a meditation and an argument; it surrounds the world witnessed over the shoulders of both Narcissus and Li Po, the Chinese and the classical ("more practical and more/Frequented"¹⁰) pool of the mind playing one reply against another. Sometimes the poet's attitude emerges dry and pure, as in the image chosen as the title for his recent study of themes and images in Canadian literature, *Butterfly On Rock*. But the larger poems brood almost bizarrely over the water illusions of Narcissus's pool, a place of expected dissolution in expansion, and unforeseen restoration into depth:

So neither swim nor float. Relax.
The void is not so bleak.

Conclude: desire is but an ache,
An absence. It creates
A dream of limits

And it grows in gravity as that takes shape.

("I Thought There Were Limits")

Thus limit as a screen returns as an accepted illusion turning upon the grave. Such limits are wall-façades: they are interstitial, and so conjoin while seeming to divide. While the butterfly is not rock, he illuminates inertia and is defined by being there.

Of façades, the simplest is the mask. But the pathos of masks, as the poet asserts in the form of most of his poems, is their totally amorphous capability: they droop from branches like Dali's dead time-pieces. So in a poem dedicated to Michèle Lalonde:¹¹

Here you know nothing.
You are a rag, blown by the wind,

A negligee of sunlight on some twigs.
Here the Beast

Lifts you like a broken bush —
Old nests

Tumbling from your hair. The Beast
Snuffs your flesh,

Your limbs, smelling of summer . . .
Like a dead child's

Broken to the wind . . . like tears
Dried in his hands.

(“Les Masques de l'âme”)

Mask is modulation — it is in the same order of phenomena as a visual proportion. Hence their adoption by Jones is neither classical nor archetypal in Northrop Frye's sense. They are less disturbing than the mask borne at the conclusion of *The Story of O*, but they are equally attuned to the mortal and transitory. The woman is often Eve and often Persephone; and the speaker, when not Orpheus, Orestes, Odysseus, Phosphor, can assume even the guise of Michael the archangel in a curious peripheral allusion to the dissolution of his first marriage (“To Eve In Bitterness”). The paradox of Jones's use of the mask is such that, while it evokes some of the playfulness of Cocteau and Giraudoux posing past against present (the foreground and background of time), he seems to have abandoned the stability that past can provide in the mask. The past seems totally over in Jones, a blurred background. Yeats would recreate past; Jones's touch

seems to make it more remote. To that extent the past belongs to the visual presence of time:

The osprey disappears, dissolves,
 As suddenly returns, his wing
 Banked at another angle on the wind. And so
 all things

Deliquesce, arrange, and rearrange in field.

(“Mr Wilson, The World”)

As I have suggested, to find in these poems, even when no mask is employed, a unified voice similar to a unified vision, is not necessary. Jones’s strategy is field composition. In the first section of “Soliloquy to Absent Friends” the speaker’s voice comes only from the vast solitudes of northern winters:

Micheline,
 the winds dissolve our towns; the streets
 where once we played, bound each to each, even
 in solitude to others yet unknown
 twist like mirrors in the twisting wind
 and are dissolved.

Micheline,
 the world is a leafless wood; we stare
 abruptly upon tundra and the sky —
 soul’s frontiers where we meet,
 knowing ourselves only
 capacities for loneliness,
 solitudes wherein the barrens sound.

The second section addresses Quixote and cites W. C. Williams’ poem on the red wheel barrow. The third evokes Quixote again, now announcing that

Quixote, only your hands,
 their unproductive gestures on the air, *welcome*
 or *goodbye*, root us in the vast
 silence, the abyss where otherwise all things drift,
 a rain of fragments falling into death.

As a kind of gathering and fourth act, the next section is a surprising and intricately structured panel description of the month of February in the *Très riches heures* of the Duke of Berry. Everything is there, the magpies who “drop sounds like barley in the muted yard,” haystack, wood, axeman and drover, village and

cold that "has cast a greenish glow/On the dissolving hills." Even in late mediaeval France, dissolution stood upon the margins, but within the frame there is "No distance, no abyss". Here art plays the rôle of the monitory mask and screen, reminding us of that we have lost. The fact that it is ancient art transformed to word only underscores the elegaic character of the image. It is a poignant intrusion of the Ptolemaic order upon a world where "abyss is infinite." Its only consolation is the scant cheer of a pictorial presence:

And so bound round is the abyss,
By winter void, by battle and by labour and by love,
By homely comfort that will warm the thighs,
That in the Duke of Berry's *Book of Hours*
You and I, and old Quixote, Micheline,
And men and women whom we never knew,
And others whom we shall never know,
May find one bed together against cold.

But no one can live in or by an illuminated book, and the poet's advice is only sufficient for that poem. We may, in fact, consider the didactic hortations of the last section ("Let us be bare,/Let us be poor") is simply a shift of mood to suggest a variation of proportion. It is for Jones a new resolution of the dilemma of "Antibes: Variations on a Theme". Within the whole order of shifts employed to seize and release evasions of as, a parainesis, a poised margin, the appeal to art and Quixote and Williams, all these are aspects of an attitude toward life that Jones admires in Archibald Lampman. He observes that "at the centre of [Lampman's] poetry we find a celebration of the abundant well of universal energy and of its embodiment or epiphany in the manifold variety of life."¹² Jones, with more technical variety, aims at such successive epiphanies of visual variation.

OF THE LONGER POEMS, the most achieved is the title poem from *Phrases From Orpheus*, whose stature and originality arise at once against the kind of technical tradition in which Jones participates and the modern treatment of the Orpheus story as it has developed in Europe.¹³ In this poem the poet plays off in a disturbing manner Eliot's "voices" of soliloquy and direct address. It is disturbing for he adopts, among others, the mask and mythological hints of Orpheus; he then speaks across the mask in another voice, more modern, approaching probably his own, and this voice speaks to its own, and not the mate of Orpheus, Euridice. Weaving through these voices is heard the voice of

literary allusion; and that voice speaks contrapuntally against a kind of voice of no time and no body, which can be considered a parody of what Eliot calls the impersonal voice. This final voice gives shape to the modern drive to make the world an image and then to seize it as image. It is the voice of illusion, despair and loss *made visual*. Taken together, the four dimensions of the poem turn with varied response and intensity upon the several descents that the ancient myth evokes, and as the poem proceeds, its profoundly self-reflective character reminds us that Orpheus's need as a singer was intimately involved with the loss of the substantive world. He falls into the pool of Narcissus. Jones stamps his understanding of the fluid tangent of word and thing by an almost terrified response to the visual dissolution of things in time, such as one observes — and there are a number of poems that contain this mystery — in the punctuation of the “present” through an old photograph. Hence, Jones puts on the mask of Orpheus not to return the reader to a mythic past where there will be “no distance [and] no abyss”, but rather to open into the shared abyss because it is more courageous, as he suggests, to embrace mortality than to embrace the image which is beautiful only. The poem becomes Jones's most sustained effort to probe his consuming passion for art and the dark it aims to lighten.

This poem, to an extraordinary degree, employs margins to define masks, and the technique exemplifies in verse the proportioned play of visual interest. Part of the speaker's loss (in his first voice) is his brother's death, and the visit to the morgue runs through a remembered sentence from de Maupassant while the speaker broods on the problem of language at death:

et la bête saignante, le sang sur les plumes,
le sang sur mes mains, me crispent le coeur à
le faire défaillir

It

is

silence

when the great
trays
are

pulled out

speaks

the cold
cadavre gives up
the word

as if

love

speech

were but a hollow cup
drinking fills

Language, of course, participates in the normal curve of the Orphic story: it is a katabasis of recessive backgrounds. It should also be observed that, going beyond Eliot, Jones has split his voice to play off the problem of the gnomic (and, hence, suggestively Orphic) against the blankness of death. It is a technique characteristic of the whole. Its function is to point the central attitude that the gnomic must partake of an awareness of death. To seek the substance of gnomic realities dissociated from mortality is to court a kind of total dissolution. Such, I take it, is the point of one reminiscence that arrives and departs in the poem without echo except for its suggestion of desperate illusion:

I remember a girl like a blonde
wolf eyes
straight from the forest and made up a

lioness she wanted

nothing but music and
the elegant sadness of

garde-moi la dernière danse

there by the highway (her
mother could pitch logs, drive
cattle or deliver a calf) the young men

didn't exist

a Tartar, in love
with rumours of the Byzantine Court
wanting

nothing
but what she could not have

Here the abyss is infinite: she strikes into the poem like a vision choked with visions. Her centre is nowhere. As Antony perceives himself dying, she is a shapeless apparition. The necessary centre is grave; it combines gravity and shadow. As the first voice asks later, briefly adopting the mask of Orpheus but clearly suggesting the modern world of photography and image-making:

Is that flesh
hangs in the darkness?

I have passed
those lovers withered,
crucified

upon the beam of sight

The distinction that emerges, assisted by the unusual word-play, is that the House of Hades is not the camera oscura we would imagine it to be. To win the assurance of mortality, which is the assurance of what we are, the apparent tricks of the visual world must be faced and endured, as if an Antonioni movie were really a form of infernal purgatory, "upon the beam of sight." The descent continues:

Without
death honour is

perilous

a bright plaque

and beautiful

in Plato's vision

Descend
in the dark house

and not unlike
the
promiscuity of gods

embrace

the cold clay, the dirty
plaster

Disorder after death
appals

My love is not among them

My
love is in your midst

bitten by the snake
she is not

there in Hell

a shy
animal in grass

nor yet
exposed and like the glare
rock

but dark

her captured flesh (her flowers
are moonflowers

more the negative
of that

posed photograph
and tan
girl in sunlight

The gradations of descent, measured by recessive margins, step first into an allusion to John Crowe Ransom's "The Equilibrists" from which the italicized words are displaced. The allusion fits: Ransom's world is the pure world where lovers tease like ideal photographs —

And rigid as two painful stars, and twirled
About the clustered night their prison world,
They burned with fierce love always to come near,
But honor beat them back and kept them clear.

The place that Jones evokes is equally prison but of several superimposed dimensions deliberately unfocused, as opposed to "clear". The epigraph to the Canadian poem — "each in his prison/We think of the key"¹⁴ — points directly to this fact; and so also the poem's shape and central metaphor bear upon the closure of prison and death. But if our existence is a *huis clos*, some prisons are better for us than others, hence the dialectic employed between illusion and mortality. At the core of death the new life is possible. In that regard, Jones is paradoxically Dantesque, despite his efforts in *Butterfly* to persuade us otherwise. The dialogue beginning "My/love is in . . ." is emblematic of the central argument: love is only where death is, not posed and tempting as "a shy animal" (which refers to the imaged girl at the beginning of the poem). Incapable of being Platonic, she does not participate in "the promiscuity of the gods", an image strongly suggestive of the third stanza of "Antibes". The necrosis of Antibes, one might add, is made to sustain precarious and limited existence.

Most modern poetry runs the risk of becoming merely cosmopolitan. This poem runs not only that risk, but also that of being rooted in a sensibility that is normally taken for granted between the contending views of British and American writing. Canadians have made a virtue of remaining parochial within the blown universe. This poem's particular risk is that it assumes that the Orpheus myth, contrary to the usual assumption, is not a pattern for Gnostic modes of salvation. It is enough simply to hang on through death's winter that "descends like a glacier into the soul."¹⁵ By suggesting that literary allusion and image-making are metaphors for sterility, a kind of life without the definition of death, Jones is then able to persuade us that the Orpheus story, a major monument of our literary tradition, participates in illusion as well. Thus the myth subserves the poet's central preoccupation with visual art whose eye-play is the place of our awareness of mortality. Pure perception against a screen of non-death would be otherwise senseless. By so envisioning the myth as a dramatization of illusion and death, he strips the myth of its general character as a pattern or order. The myth's ambiguity is displayed everywhere in the poem's ambiguity. It projects deception as the only place where the self can be identified as an event capable of death. Along with other major modern views of the pattern, "Phrases For Orpheus" constitutes an important revision. Jones's burden is not that there is immortality in song, despite the ironies of language, but that survival is a visual craft.¹⁶ But such a burden is fundamental to his art, apparent from the poem that opens *Frost On The Sun*, and traceable through all the kinds of *trompe-l'oeil* that his poems hit upon.

A COMPLETE APPRAISAL of the work of D. G. Jones cannot overlook the art of his short poems. It is these poems that distil the kinds of technique I have pointed to. They are not simply lyrical; they press carefully against their form at the edge of evanescence. These poems, to modify slightly the subject of "On a Picture of Your House", often seem to be

no place. And I confess
 what I protect is your
 capacity for loss,

 your freedom to be no one, look
 so naked from that window
 you are lost in light.

So to protect art, by allowing it the freedom to disappear and to return as Jones's notion of the poet does, is, on a small scale, to suggest the amorphous character of the artist in consonance with his art. From the outset, from *Frost On The Sun*, Jones has sought a voice and a persona that without becoming cosmic would dramatize the problem of the world's conflicting claims. In "Phrases From Orpheus" a kind of resolution occurs in which the persona plays against other voices. The risk of the persona has less to do with language and silence than with the visual and non-visual presence of background and foreground. Absence in Jones is not silence but disappearance. Hence, as he remarks in "For Françoise Adnet", "Time is space, it glows." The longer poems seek such a spatialization of event; the best of the shorter poems employ such a technique by superimposing imagery in a manner suggestive of theatre.

Sometimes the movement is syllogistic:

The grey hills, like whales,
 Journey in the winter sea;

 I hardly know if I'm alive,
 Or shall ever love again —
 Unless I journey with the whales
 To where the hills rise up: green.

("Winter Hills")

The strength of the poem is probably thematic: the arena from colourless to green can be called the landscape of Jones's persona. In "Phrases" it is a similar

dialectic from the image as illusion to death as substance that draws the speaker apart. A more exquisite care for the demand of form is manifest in "Washed Up" from his last book:

The rock
 rising from water,

 cedars
 twisting from rock,

 clouds
 and a single birch —

 Nausicaa
 playing in the wind.

The technique is painterly; and Nausicaa, a kind of mask for the speaker's Odysseus, has nothing of a Homeric past, but is a psychological dimension of the Laurentian Shield. And Nausicaa, "playing in the wind," is a desire as evanescent as the act of becoming green. The figure is merely a mask; she belongs to wind; her rôle is to provide visual ambiguity, for Odysseus was not made for that child.

Some objects lose substance by being seen too much. Or, to put it another way, a frequency of modified images suggests the same kind of ambiguity as several voices emerging from different levels of awareness. So "Devil's Paint Brush" —

After the rain
 They are rust upon the field,

 They are suns
 Burning in a spider's space,

 They are
 Nipples by Matisse — One

 White daisy
 Is a virgin or a saint,
 A vestal in a host of flames.

 Musk is their smell,
 Like sunlight on a girl's face.

The paradox of the poem is that all the things the flower becomes are “flat”, brilliantly coloured and totally non-tactile. They are not nipples but “Nipples by Matisse”. These things are as painful visually as a Nausicaa of wind, and they are things whose deceptiveness belong to the vision of mortality.

To seize mortality in the form of art — it can only fail as an endeavour. Had Orpheus been a painter, many things would have been “lost in light” and dark. Jones seems haunted by this: if art cannot possess anything by illusion, what can? “Where do they go?” he asks of snow buntings. And he enjoins:

You must think of the birds

And make them as you will:
Wood or stone or broken clay
With a brown glaze.

You must lie down in the dark
In the naked fields.
You must think of the birds

And make them as you will.

In an unpublished poem entitled merely 13/3/72 he speaks of the effort to make art mortal so as to overcome death:

Je tourne vers toi
à travers l'effritement des âges
pour n'être que ta pierre fine

pour n'être enfin
que ta chair

Jones is rarely so spare: art is simply fine stone; mortality, thy flesh, with all the ambiguity that demands. Loss is broadly spatialized into a crumbling field. As in “Phrases”, the action of actualization is dialectical for the speaker moves “à travers” as if to foil absence by becoming its foreground, by becoming finally, the act of art, and so dramatizing an illusion played against the eye of death, “pour ‘naître’ enfin”.

I would avoid any conclusion that would call Jones a romantic. I would say rather that I have been endeavoring to sketch aspects of a Canadian, of a classical Canadian, poetry. James Reaney has remarked that

the Canadian poet has to stay in the country and at the same time act as if he weren't in it. It looks as if I'm saying that the Canadian poet has to be some sort of poltergeist.¹⁷

I see Doug Jones so, shuffling in his Northern American attic, brooding upon Anchises and another Lavinia. But it is a past that has become untimed and makes the present difficult to perceive. It is an ambiguity peculiar to Canada, and Jones has observed it as well in public papers in which the American that explodes from Whitman to Ginsberg is welcomed as a continental possession, but the Pentagon is condemned as simply "European". Jones's response to the predicament is natively elusive, but it is as centrally Canadian as the work of Lampman to whom I have referred, and to Lampman's contemporary Charles G. D. Roberts, who provides an image that captures the harshly beautiful sense of "butterfly on rock". While Layton's butterfly is precariously near its own death, the butterfly at the end of "The Sentry Of The Sedge Flats" illuminates the pitiless character of death. It is a brilliant image cast upon a mortal ground through which illusion endures:

... a splendid butterfly, all glowing orange and maroon, came and settled on the back of the dead heron, and waved its radiant wings in the tranquil light.¹⁸

From such situations, Jones's poetry and the best of Canadian literature arise, full of sidelong glances forth into the world and back into itself.

NOTES

- ¹ See the long poem, "Sequence of Night," *Tamarack Review*, 50 (1969), 104-26 which endeavours to illuminate the familial aspects of such tragedy.
- ² Toronto: Contact Press, 1957.
- ³ Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1961.
- ⁴ Toronto: Oxford, 1967.
- ⁵ Cp. Ann Hébert's letter to Frank Scott in *Dialogue sur la traduction* (Montréal, 1970), pp. 47-48. I am grateful to Barbara Belyea for drawing my attention to this and other kinds of similarities that exist between "Le tombeau des rois" and "Phrases From Orpheus."
- ⁶ "De Profundis Conjugii Vox Et Responsum" from *Phrases From Orpheus*.
- ⁷ "David Milne: An Appreciation," *Here and Now* 2, (1948), rep. *The Bush Garden* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1971), p. 204.
- ⁸ See David Helwig "Poetry East, West and Centre," *Queen's Quarterly*, 75 (1968), 533.
- ⁹ "A Danger of Birds," *The Canadian Forum*, June 1972, p. 15.

- ¹⁰ "Li Revived" from *Frost On The Sun*.
- ¹¹ A useful introduction for the English reader to her work may be found in *Ellipse*, 3, (1970), 4-41, ed. chiefly by D. G. Jones.
- ¹² *Butterfly On Rock*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970), p. 99.
- ¹³ See Walter A. Strauss, *Descent And Return — The Orphic Theme In Modern Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971) for an extended discussion of the myth's European development from Novalis.
- ¹⁴ An inversion of T. S. Eliot, "The Wasteland," 413.
- ¹⁵ "Soliloquy to Absent Friends."
- ¹⁶ Strauss remarks, p. 249, that song is the basis of the myth, and that the poet's rôle is one of unifying the cosmos, but nowhere does he elaborate upon the fact that Orpheus lost Eurydice because of looking.
- ¹⁷ "The Canadian Poet's Predicament," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 26 (1956-7), 284-95. rep. in *Masks of Poetry*, ed. A. J. M. Smith (Toronto, McClelland & Stewart, 1962), p. 120.
- ¹⁸ *Neighbours Unknown*, (London, Melbourne and Toronto: Ward, Lock & Co., 1911), p. 63.

MARGARET THE MAGICIAN

Linda Rogers

WHEN THE DART is an icicle aimed right between your eyes it is difficult to separate the magic from the magician. Reading the novels and poetry of Margaret Atwood is an intensely personal experience which culminates in a confrontation with the ubiquitous image of the poet on the back cover of the book. It is always the same. The eyes stare out hypnotic from the pale mask surrounded by her furry camouflage.

The photograph is a positive of the negative printed on every page, like an avenging angel in the snow. The used words subside like snowflakes as Atwood, the magician, hypnotizes with the brilliant image which dazzles without illuminating. The hypnotic subject participates involuntarily in a grotesque, dances without knowing the steps. There is nothing shared in the experience of manipulation. The puppet learns nothing of itself or of the puppeteer.

The refusal to be known, except as female god or witch doctor is articulated in the motif of invisibility as the Atwood persona struggles to extricate herself from personal relationships. Like the extraterrestrial cliché of popular science fiction, she cannot feel, exists only to comment. In *Surfacing*, the protagonist "prayed to be made invisible, and when in the morning everyone could still see me I knew they had the wrong god." She is always the outsider, existing only to shatter the illusions of her fellow beings.

When the ice-woman is touched with fire, she simply melts away. The lovers of the novels and the poetry are left groping the air for a phantom that will not say "I love you," but will simply observe the lover under the microscope. *Power Politics*, the latest book of poems, is a liturgy for the funeral of romantic love:

Around my neck I wear
the head of the beloved, pressed
in the metal retina like a picked flower.

Physical love is cold and unpleasant, war orchestrated by the sound of finger-

nails on blackboards. In *The Edible Woman*, Marion copulates in the bathtub with her fiancé and later runs away, an objective correlative for her emotional withdrawal. The only successful encounter occurs in *Surfacing*, where the lover is taken outside and transformed into an animal so that she might give birth by herself to her own image:

The baby will slip out easily as an egg, a kitten, and I'll lick it off and bite the cord, the blood returning to the ground where it belongs; the moon will be full, pulling. In the morning I will be able to see it: it will be covered with a shining fur, a god, I will never teach it any words.

Childbearing is usually a repulsive feminine function. Marion, in *The Edible Woman*, subscribes to a classic psychiatric phenomenon. Her refusal to eat is a rejection of the function of motherhood. Atwood's words reek of formaldehyde as images of pickled fetuses dangle like a gold watch from the hand of the magician, whose power struggle with men is simply a foil for her pervasive misanthropy. There is no compassion for the women who are victims either. The landladies, the pregnant friends, and the bleached and perfumed fatalities of feminine conditioning are littered like lipstick stained kleenexes about her imaginary landscape.

The woman at the centre of her universe is numb. She cannot feel and she cannot give. The value of her existence lies in observation. What is lacking is the humanity which will tie the brilliant impressions together. The magician is left with only the tricks. Where there is no feeling, there is no ultimate reality;

Pleasure and pain are side by side they said but most of the brain is neutral; nerveless, like fat. I rehearsed emotions, naming them: joy, guilt, release, love and hate, react, relate; what to feel was like what to wear, you watched the others and memorized it.

Although a wearer of masks herself, the author rejects words as an impediment to reality. The world stripped of emotions and words is left visual and tactile and this is where Margaret Atwood finds her real strength. Her poems are petroglyphs indelibly printed on the brain. It is the image which persists when the words, often cruel and bitter, subside. Words are a substitute for and distortion of her world, which is silent and concerned only with survival and the passing seasons. One of the reasons *The Edible Woman* fails as a novel is the awkwardness of the dialogue. Atwood is self conscious in the urban environment which requires language. There is little dialogue in *Surfacing* to disturb the sounds of the country and this is one of the strengths of the more mature novel.

There is no warmth in the natural world where she takes refuge, only a lack of hypocrisy. Atwood, the observer, knows she has no control over the northern landscape she describes as no one else does and she admires its proud refusal to submit, except to death. In spite of her identification with animals, the fur coats, the leather jackets and startled grace, the Atwood persona is left to salvage what she can of the human condition. She knows a language and is burdened with a personal and social history. She cannot be animal. In *Surfacing*, she proves her dependance upon society. She cannot live alone in the wilderness.

The magician, masked in theatrics, is still a part of history and the interlocking mesh of human membrane. The detachment is another illusion. Even the rejection of the life-giving function cannot negate the reality of her own parents. This is the problem of *Surfacing*, where the dead parents have more credibility than the living friends, and of "An Attempted Solution for Chess Problems" in *The Circle Game*;

The shadows of the chessmen
stretch, fall across her: she
is obsessed by history;
each wooden totem rises
like the cairn of an event

The cold eye of the hypnotist wavers when "inherited events barnacle on the mind."

There is a pervasive chill in her imagery. Death is cold. Love is cold. Snow is cold. The lack of a warming counterpoint in her work is the failure of compassion in the characters who dance in an involuntary circle around her ice-woman. No one is strong enough to challenge her supremacy at the centre of the universe and this is a weakness, as her voice becomes too strident, losing conviction. There is no dialogue on any level.

There is no life-giving warmth in her metaphorical water either. The ascent from drowning is no resurrection, just a return to conventional reality. In or out of the water, the drowned soul persists. Even life in the womb is surreal, grotesque. There is no state of innocence and there is no state of grace. The nightmare overcomes the dream. There is no escape. The fiction is a glassy mirror to cold realities.

The poet is the agent of beauty and the sharp instrument of death. She is a knife cutting through onion. Each layer falls away in beautiful symmetry. But there is no relationship between the layers and the centre is hollow.

COMPREHENSIVENESS UNATTAINED

Clara Thomas

The Evolution of Canadian Literature in English 1867-1914, ed. Mary Jane Edwards; *The Evolution of Canadian Literature in English, 1914-45*, ed. George Parker; *The Evolution of Canadian Literature in English, 1945-70*, ed. Paul Denham. Holt Rinehart & Winston, \$5.95 per volume.

The Evolution of Canadian Literature in English, presently available in three volumes, with a fourth due out covering the period 1867-1914, is a large and a brave venture. The volumes, almost 300 pages each, are attractively produced, each one prefaced by an introductory essay by its editor and followed by a brief bibliography of materials on its writers and period. In her prefaces to the present volumes, Mary Jane Edwards, General Editor of the project, has outlined many of the objectives of the series and also some of its problems:

Criticisms, too, can always be leveled at the anthologist for his selection of authors and works. We have tried to be as effective as possible in our choice of both. But personal preferences have swayed us . . .

Other decisions were made for us. One author refused to allow his work to be published by a company with American connections. Very high permission fees restricted our choice of other authors and works. Limitations of space had us jiggling occasionally as craftily as Layton's "Tall Man".

It is all too commonplace for both critics and general readers to assume that print-

ing a selection from an author's work is as simple a matter as asking permission politely. This, as Professor Edwards makes clear, is far from the case: the process is complex, expensive, laborious and frustrating; when it is all over the anthologist is still vulnerable to charges of creating an arbitrary canon. Furthermore, in this case the title of the series strongly suggests a complete coverage of our literature, but the editors' decision to print only complete pieces has inevitably resulted in a less-than-adequate coverage of the development of our fiction.

It is hardly surprising then, that of the present three volumes, the first one, where no copyright permissions or fees were involved, strikes one as being most truly representative of its period and also as filling our most serious present gap in teaching materials. We have had recently a proliferation of 19th century reprints, but until now we have had no single volume, covering both prose and poetry, that could be prescribed as a basic text for 19th century Canadian literary studies.

The choice of authors and selections in this first volume has been governed, as Professor Edwards has said, both by the editorial decision to print only complete pieces and by her own preferences. Thus we gain *The Charivari*, Levi Adams' literary curiosity "after the manner of Beppo", Rosanna Leprohon's long-story "Clive Weston's Wedding Anniversary", and D'Arcy McGee's "The Mental Outfit of the New Dominion" as welcome bonuses of hitherto unanthologized material. Volume 1 does not, however, include as much prose as one would have hoped for in a three-hundred page selection: neither Richardson nor Kirby is represented by his fiction, neither Howe nor Dunlop, Traill nor Jameson, is represented at all. Thus teaching from this text would still mean supplementing heavily from other texts. Ironically, too, our 19th century is most likely to be studied in depth by senior undergraduate and graduate classes where no anthology is likely to replace individual textual research. However, this first volume is a valuable collection and Professor Edwards' introduction seems to be a model of its kind — scholarly, informative and eminently readable. Both Volume I and the one to follow — covering 1867-1914, not yet available, will be useful companion pieces, not only for the study of English-Canadian literature, but for use in a variety of inter-disciplinary studies as well.

Volumes III (1914-45), edited by George Parker, and IV (1945-70), edited by Paul Denham, are less satisfying. In one form or another their contents are readily available to us and though the poets who are represented are well served, the omissions are also crucial: it is difficult, for instance, to consider teaching Canadian literature from 1914-45 from a

text that does not include Hugh MacLennan. MacLennan is included in volume IV, but there he is represented only by his 1969 Address to the Montreal Symposium on De-Canadianization, "The Struggle for Canadian Universities". Professor Edwards defends this choice in her preface to this final volume:

We wish to show what significant Canadian writers have been thinking about important issues in contemporary society. MacLennan's essay about the De-Canadianization of Canadian universities and Richler's about Quebec in the '60s are, therefore, here for the positive reason that each considers a problem worrying many Canadians today.

Fair enough. But why, then, do we not have *two* selections from MacLennan, this one and one of the fine essays in *Scotchman's Return*, or *Cross Country*, as in Volume I we have two or more selections from Haliburton, Moody, Kirby and McGee? Similarly, if the editors are really convinced of the value of Richler's "Quebec Oui, Ottawa Non", first printed in *Encounter* in 1964 and showing all the hallmarks of slick and witty topical journalism, why not supplement this with another Richler selection? There have been some short stories.

It is very strange for the editors to have included an article by George Grant, an article by Earle Birney which mentions Marshall McLuhan as "our acknowledged philosopher of communications", an introductory paragraph about the poets who have been influenced by the teaching and the criticism of Northrop Frye — but no representation of either Frye or McLuhan. The Essays of B. K. Sandwell and Frank Underhill are certainly valuable assets to Canadian studies in general, if not expressly so to the teaching of English-Canadian literature, but their inclusion points up another

major exclusion: why is biography not represented at all, and autobiography only by one passage from John Glasgow's *Memoirs of Montparnasse*? Joseph Schull's *Laurier*, Donald Creighton's *MacDonald*, and William Kilbourn's *The Firebrand* are excellent examples of a genre which should not be neglected by our anthologists. And of course amongst autobiographies, the works of Emily Carr are only the first of those which come to mind immediately.

Here it must be said that Volumes III and IV show most clearly the deleterious effects of both the editors' and the publisher's policy. For the editors to decide to include only complete pieces throughout these volumes sounds laudable; in the final two volumes, however, such a policy inevitably short-changes our prose and especially our fiction representation. There are many serious gaps here — volume IV contains no fiction by Richler, Cohen or MacLennan; Margaret Laurence is represented by "The Drummer of All the World", (1956), her first published short story and, while excellent in its feeling for the human problems inextricably bound up with emergent Ghana, it is far from representative of her later, Canadian work; Ernest Buckler and Robertson Davies are perhaps preeminent among the many fiction writers who are not represented at all. Volume III would require heavy supplementation from MacLennan, Ostenson and Stead, at least, to give anything like fair fictional representation to our literature between the Wars.

To consider these two final volumes is to become very suspicious of the publishers' policy with regard to their entire project. In the midst of the publicity generated by the sale of Ryerson Press to

McGraw Hill, the subsequent Royal Commission on Publishing, and the proliferation of Canadian literature courses in universities, community colleges and high schools across the country, Holt Rinehart & Winston's interest in a 4-volume Canadian anthology would seem to have been both economically feasible and politically astute. Having undertaken the project in all the odour of sanctity, did the publishers then budget too tightly to allow their editors to pay permissions for first-class representative selections from many of our writers? Professor Edwards' "very high permission fees restricted our choice of other authors and works" echoes its alarm as one looks at the Table of Contents for Volume III and IV, and it is easy to suspect that yet another valiant project has been badly blemished and misshapen by uninformed — or cynical — publishing policy.

George Parker's introduction to Volume III is both learned and witty, though somewhat over-simplified in its discussion of liberalism and over-generalized in its application to our writers. In some cases, notably in his remarks on E. K. Brown, he perpetuates the orthodoxies of former commentators without seeming to recognize the fine irony of his own wording: "... Brown applied the best 19th Century standards to the evaluation of our poetry and fiction..." In many instances, however, his introduction of little-known material — the quotations from Charles G. D. Roberts on Morley Callaghan, for example, spins off fresh and valuable insights.

Paul Denham has written a competent essay on trends and movements in our contemporary poetry. He gives the impression of a considerable range of knowledge about our poets, and about the his-

tory of critical theory, poetry coteries, and their voices in the various journals and little magazines across the country. His statement about the influence of Northrop Frye on our poets is ludicrously understated, however, the more surprising since in his introduction all literature

seems equally, and grimly, fodder for literary-critical schools and theories. Unfortunately, his introduction lacks knowledgeable comment about our fiction as crucially as his volume lacks its content.

COHEN'S WOMEN

Tom Wayman

LEONARD COHEN, *The Energy of Slaves*. McClelland & Stewart.

WELL, FOLKS, here's the news: 1. Leonard Cohen is still getting screwed. 2. He likes it. 3. He doesn't like it. That, plus some whimpering that is either for or against the vague idea of a revolution, seems to make up the content of his newest collection of poems, *The Energy of Slaves*.

Women in Cohen's poems in this book primarily are holes, though sometimes they can be breasts or thighs or asses.

I did not know
 until you walked away
you had the perfect ass
Forgive me
 for not falling in love
with your face or your conversation

As in Irving Layton's poems, women are discussed in terms of their usefulness to the poet for sticking something into the holes that they have and are. But whereas Layton can have a poem in which a hole reads Kafka, Cohen gives us holes that watch television.

I loved to creep up behind her
when she was engrossed in Star Trek
and kiss her little ass-hole

Now this is not to castigate Cohen for failing to take a certain position on Women's Liberation, as though there was

some absolute morality in the world and Women's Lib was good and being anti-freedom was bad. But it is the effect of Cohen's attitude on the *writing* that seems unfortunate. By reducing women in this way to mere bodies, he makes the topic that he spends most of his time considering appear one-dimensional, dull, predictable. Seen from a viewpoint that allows women to be people — no more, no less — Cohen's poems celebrate a Mystery that is not mysterious, recoil in bafflement from situations that are easily explainable, and in their attempts to be sympathetic to women demonstrate an unlimited contempt for their subject. So the opinions on life that his poems try to explore finally seem trivial.

When Cohen writes a poem called "Portrait of a Girl", he imagines her entirely concerned with her body (as he is):

She is profoundly worried
that her thighs are too big
and her ass fat and ugly
Also she is too hairy
The lucky American girls are not hairy

The poet hastens to reassure her that she really has "no problem whatsoever" because *he* finds her body attractive.

I wish I could show her
what such hair and haunches
do for one like me

Women in these poems cause the sorts of troubles haunches and holes generally get poets into. They tend to get filled by other people, giving rise to all the whining anguish of poems of jealousy. Or, conversely, holes can get possessive. Cohen says that his music is

... not merely naked
It is open-legged
It is like a cunt
and like a cunt
must needs be houseproud

And on and on: Cohen's many poems about his ups and downs with various holes are usually pleas addressed to an ambiguous "you". He pleads throughout the book, in poem after poem, to a particular woman or woman personified.

Play with me forever
Mistress of the World
Keep me hard
Keep me in the kitchen
Keep me out of politics

Twice in this book as Cohen does his whine-act, it apparently dawns on him that there is more to women than their holes:

I act like a fool
when I speak to two girls on yet another
night
the one cunt sunk like an imperial bathtub
in my slippery conversation
and the other an endless tribute to
Helen Keller

Helen Keller — popularly imagined as blind, withered, intellectual — is a good symbol for Cohen's distance from women as human beings. In this poem he predictably opts for his familiar hole. A girl must "fall", he says, and so he pleads to be there when she does:

Choose me louder please

if only in the moment that you fall
We could be lovers begging together

The other poem in this collection which perhaps hints that there might be more to women than their bodies is the poem beginning "There are no traitors among women". This poem suggests that women do not always respond favourably to men who see them as bodies. In fact, the body itself can be a weapon directed back at men.

There are no traitors among women
Even the mother does not tell the son
they do not wish us well

She cannot be tamed by conversation
Absence is the only weapon
against the supreme arsenal of her body

Cohen concludes this poem by saying:

Forgive me, partisans,
I only sing this for the ones
who do not care who wins the war

"The war" here apparently refers to the war between women and men. So is this stanza directed to the "partisans" of this war, men and women, saying that this poem (and/or Cohen's other poems?) is written for those people who don't care much about the outcome of the currently-publicized battle of women to obtain full status as human beings, first-class citizens, equally-paid employees, etc.? If in fact this is Cohen's intention, this is an interesting statement. It seems then that he is aware of the current struggle, and although his poem above addressed to the "Mistress of the World" hardly shows it, that he is aware that there is plenty of politics in the kitchen. If this reading of the poem is accurate, then it also shows Cohen lining up with those who feel themselves outside the current struggle: who don't really mind if women's status and condition in society stays the same as at present.

To put this more charitably: Cohen seems to be saying here that his poem's categorizing of women as bodies is not intended to be read by people concerned about women. Rather, he sings for those who either like things the way they are or those who in any case don't intend to do anything about women's place in the world.

The concentration in this review on *what* Cohen is saying arises from the poet's style in *The Energy of Slaves*. Poems here are mainly untitled, and in a simple manner spell out what an "I", presumably Cohen himself, has to say. (At least, there is never any indication that a persona, rather than Cohen himself, is speaking in these poems.) Occasionally, Cohen's thoughts can descend to the sententiousness of a Rod McKuen:

They locked up a man
who wanted to rule the world
The fools
They locked up the wrong man

Often when Cohen wants to discuss politics, however, he adopts the weary tone of the supposedly-failed revolutionary. In the poem "Crying, Come back, Hero", the speaker says he is aware of politics, but decides to give it up to "speak for love alone" in order to reassure girls who are upset because their holes (once again) aren't being filled:

... I
would rather haunt cafés on both
sides of town than break my only
heart for your millennium . . .
It's panic in the eyes of girls
that tells me I must speak for love alone,
panic at their empty beds,
at sanitary rows of monsters born.

In another poem, Cohen complains that foreign governments are anxious to subvert our government.

The killers that run
the other countries
are trying to get us
to overthrow the killers
that run our own

In this poem the speaker says he believes foreigners "will kill more of us" than any present regime. He adds:

Frankly I don't believe
anyone out there
really wants us to solve
our social problems

And as Cohen's solution to us solving our social problems, he ends the poem with a lecture on the evils of flag burning

... it excites
the killers on either side
to unfortunate excess
which goes on gaily
quite unchecked
until everyone is dead

Nothing in the poem gives any indication *why* Cohen feels foreign governments are trying to subvert our government, or why burning a flag leads to the death of "everyone". What is given here is the poet's opinion, take it or leave it. As in another, self-abasing little spurt of ego:

Each man
has a way to betray
the revolution
This is mine

But what does "this" in the last line refer to? The poem? Does Cohen really believe a poem can betray "the revolution"? What effect does a poem have on anything? Or does Cohen mean "this" to refer to the *act* of writing poems? How does writing poems "betray" the revolution? Is he involved in some sort of revolution that is betrayed by producing art? This poem, like many of Cohen's in which he pretends to be discussing politics, seems like an intricate puzzle that

would hardly repay anyone's efforts to puzzle out.

And it is this *pretence* of discussing politics that leads to the fuzziness of these poems, and hence their failure to give any pleasure or insight. I feel certain that if Cohen actually were involved with any of the social movements commonly described as revolutionary, some of the vagueness that these poems convey might vanish. Once outside of one's own head, where you are free to be vaguely "revolutionary", any thinker moving into the real world of people and their problems in present-day North America soon finds he or she has to tighten up mentally in both concepts and language. The sort of sloppy, generally anti-establishment sentiments Cohen's poems here sag into reek of the world of radical chic.

Cohen's poems in this collection often mention torture, war, revolution. These poems usually employ the Distinctly Ominous Ending, such as "This is war/You are here to be destroyed" or "This machine is rubber and metal/it fits over your body and you die slowly" or "Any system you contrive without us/will be brought down". But as with Cohen's poem on betraying the revolution discussed above, exactly who is threatening whom with what is left vague and unresolved. For example, in another poem the poet says:

One of these days
 You will be the object
 of the contempt of slaves
 Then you will not talk so easily
 about our freedom and our love
 Then you will refrain
 from offering us your solutions
 You have many things on your mind
 We think only of revenge

But who is the "we" and the "you" here, specifically? Is Cohen linking himself with the poor, the downtrodden, the

wage-slave? It might appear so, except that elsewhere he distinguishes clearly between himself and the majority of people who have to work hard for a living.

I am punished when I do not work on this
 poem
 or when I try to invent something
 I am one of the slaves
 You are employees
 That is why I hate your work

Apparently Cohen's "slaves" are people distinguishable from the ordinary North Americans who are at work each day in order to survive. So what is the "revenge", the "contempt of slaves" that Cohen mentions in his poem above? What sort of revolution is Cohen involved with? In at least one poem, he suggests an incident that seems to arrive out of De Sade's vision of revolution in *Marat/Sade*. He sees himself testifying at some revolutionary tribunal, on behalf of a girl:

I will remember if I can
 the fragrance of your skin
 perhaps you can get away
 with five years People's Field Whore

It is difficult, due to Cohen's lack of comment on this idea, not to believe he is using this image to give himself some sort of titillative mental thrill.

In an interview in *Macleans*'s last year, Cohen was quoted as saying his next book of poems would be about the problems of fame. Of course, he is not responsible for what the press says he said, but some poems here do seem to tackle the question of fame, albeit predictably:

the 15-year-old girls
 I wanted when I was 15
 I have them now
 it is very pleasant
 it is never too late
 I advise you all
 to become rich and famous

Another poem discusses “the poet” (Cohen?) and his present life. The poem ends with:

Three nights at the Hilton
a girl with round buttocks
suntanned and cheerful, fourteen, Athens

Are we to believe that what Cohen has to say about fame is to suggest the delights of having sexual intercourse with children? Surely this is some sort of pose. Otherwise, it seems to me that a kind of basic immorality has to be added to Cohen’s poetic faults as exhibited in this collection of tedious male supremacy, vagueness, sententiousness and mental self-titillation brought on by talk of revolution and violence. And what I mean by immorality here is immorality in Wilde’s sense of the term: boredom. Does Cohen, who is 39, really have nothing more to say about having intercourse with children less than half his age except “very pleasant” and “round buttocks”? If this is all he can say, pro or con the idea, surely his poverty as a writer is evident.

Most of these criticisms of himself,

however, Cohen has anticipated. He has a poem in *The Energy of Slaves* that really serves as a miniature review of the book (or at least the first nine lines do):

I have no talent left
I can’t write a poem anymore
You can call me Len or Lennie now
like you always wanted
I guess I should pack it up
but habits persist
and women keep driving me back into it
Before you accuse me of boring you
(your ultimate triumph and relief)
remember that neither you or me
is fucking right now
and once again you have enjoyed
the company of my soul

Lennie Cohen seems to be saying here that anything short of fucking is likely to be boring and without talent. I don’t think that’s true. And certainly I don’t think that is any excuse for producing this book. Nothing inside that I can find will repay anyone — female or male — for the time necessary to read through these poems, for the time necessarily spent in the company of Cohen’s soul.

WORDS AND MUSIC

Donald Stephens

DOROTHY LIVESAY, *A Winnipeg Childhood*. Peguis Publishers, \$6.00.

I dreamed that I dwelt in a house
On the edge of a field
With a fire for warmth
And a roof for shield.

But when I awoke I saw
There was nothing at all
But rain for my roof
And rain for my wall.

THIS POEM of Dorothy Livesay’s, though written over thirty years ago, exemplifies her poetry at its best: it

is a direct and sharply imagistic presentation of a deeply felt perception of life. But now that she is older, Dorothy Livesay has gone back to her childhood to discover that the “fire for warmth/And a roof for shield” still exist and, that contrary to what she once felt, there is something there after all. This collection of short stories — *A Winnipeg Childhood* — is most rewarding to read. Like much

of her finest work, it is deceptively simple. The story of a childhood is straightforwardly presented, unpretentiously and succinctly. At times it almost seems too simple. Yet countless levels of nuance radiate from the understated themes of these stories. Dorothy Livesay's childhood becomes a powerful symbol for the essence of life, as she realizes that her personal myth never did collapse, that the realization that dreams end which is so much a part of her poetry is not what she learns as she looks back to the time when she was young. Livesay's particular genius is displayed to the full in this book: her ability to sense and to capture in word and sound the depth and subtlety of human feeling.

Because Northrop Frye did so, most of Livesay's critics have labelled her an imagist, but the label is, for me, too sweeping. Certainly Livesay was influenced by the imagists; her affinities to H.D., both in quality and method of expression, are obvious, and have been noted by the critics. But there is much more to Livesay's poetry than her imagism. For me, she is primarily a lyricist, a poet who is deeply concerned and committed to the interaction and fusion of sound, rhythm, and expression in poetry. She has said that "song" (sound) and "dance" (rhythm) are the roots of poetry, that she is "always hearing this other beat behind the ordinary spoken language and I'm always hearing the melody". This is the ingredient which usually distinguishes poetry from prose, but occasionally there are prose writers who focus in on the sound and rhythm of their words; Virginia Woolf was one who did this. Margaret Laurence does it. And so does Dorothy Livesay.

Most short story writers rely on their

ideas for impact. The details are important, the careful way in which so much is set up in such a short space. Livesay, the poet, is tremendously aware of the effect which word music can create; she has transferred this aspect of her poetry to her prose. And the best sections of this volume are those in which sound and idea merge with image into a wholeness of expression; in "Christmas", the family leave the church service:

When they came out of the flowing light of the church, gentle with greetings and warm with music, the new snow would be spread softly along the boulevard, sparkling like glass; in other places dove blue like the undersides of angel's wings. She would run and slide, run and slide, all the way home.

The image is commonplace, but it sings! She sets her words and phrases clearly, stacking them to increase expressive intensity. At times the language becomes almost chant-like. It weaves a spell, becomes an incantation which recreates an atmosphere. Words work to create senses of urgency as in "Matt", feelings of fear as in "The Two Willies", of the inevitable as in "The Sparrows". Her language conveys the basic pulsing sense of the movement of life, as the child grows older, and as dreams fade.

Dorothy Livesay obviously has a deep feeling for, and an empathy with, people. Over the years, she has committed herself to humanity, both in her art and in her work (as a social worker.) These short stories are remarkable for their capacity to express the anguish and the joy which flash through the minds of Elizabeth and her family. Her ability to get inside other people's psyches is quite compelling, to feel how they feel, as in the story of "Anna". This strong sense of people is intensified by her picture of Elizabeth, who is obviously Dorothy Live-

say herself, the child who grows and matures as the collection progresses. The fact that the third-person is used, as Livesay stands back and looks at her memory of herself, is particularly attractive. She is not the same person as she once was, and to use the first person would constrict the things that Dorothy Livesay now sees in herself when she was growing up. To give herself another name, Elizabeth, and to stand outside and look in, is a difficult stance for a writer; but in so doing Elizabeth is not shown as a painfully precocious child — as often is the case as people look back — but rather as a very human little girl, trying to find answers in her small life.

The depth of feeling expressed in these stories imparts complexities to the theme which its simplicity belies. Although most of Elizabeth's discoveries could scarcely be considered philosophically earth-shattering, she does learn about her own essence, about the vague, deep-rooted impulses and fears which motivate and clarify individual human beings. Elizabeth learns through what happens to her that she will always be alone, that there is always the irremediable isolation of the individual. Livesay's perceptions of the reality of existence — that is, of people trapped and alone in their own minds — is evident in many of her poems, and is the main theme to these stories, presented and structured like the processes of the mind. *A Winnipeg Childhood* proceeds in flashes of vision and memory,

the most obvious example of the mind working. And the stories express the frightening sense of separateness, and of the ultimate uselessness of communication. As the family leave Winnipeg, in the last story, "The Uprooting", Elizabeth senses her own separation, but it is not altogether a bad thing, for:

She pressed her face against the car window and saw, high overhead, scudding along amongst soft spring clouds, the deep V-wedge of the geese. She could not hear them, but she knew their song.

There is a need for separateness, a longing to keep part of the self private, inviolate. That is what Elizabeth, and Dorothy Livesay on reflection, has learned. And as the family move to new things and places, so has Dorothy Livesay moved through her life, looking for certainty, yet recognizing that it is impossible. She realized in her poetry that the process of living results in the endless creation of new myths; many of her poems express an awareness that the humanitarian belief in life, in its unconquerable onward rush and in its possibilities for betterment, can become, in fact has become the new myth. Life for Livesay has been ever new, a constant moment to moment process of creation. And now, in repose, Livesay has looked back to her beginnings, and has presented a group of stories with a reality rarely equalled this year, or any other year, in Canadian writing.

TWILIGHT ZONES

George Woodcock

AUDREY THOMAS, *Songs my Mother Taught Me*. Talonbooks. \$8.50.

TONY ASPLER, *One of My Marionettes*. Secker & Warburg. \$8.50.

ANTHONY BRENNAN, *The Carbon Copy*. McClelland & Stewart. \$7.95.

NIGELL FOXELL, *Schoolboy Rising*. Oberon Press.

I BEGAN THE ORIGINAL VERSION of this review with a tirade on the subjects of immature and mature nationalism. Immature nationalism I classified as simplistic and xenophobic, its representatives concerned with those arid questions of strict citizenship and pure ancestry that give every country's Julius Streichers their sustenance. Mature nationalism I classified as that which saw in the richness of a culture the effects of interbreeding rather than inbreeding. The Anglo-Saxons, absorbing and transforming a superimposed French culture, and emerging with the English tradition that Chaucer began and Shakespeare took to its peak, impressed me as the models for this kind of nationalism. (Significantly, perhaps, they were not conscious nationalists.) I found in a true love of nation (interpreted as a land and its people) the urge to be expansive rather than exclusive, the desire to absorb rather than to reject. And I saw myself leading up to the conclusion that Canadian literature and the other Canadian arts, in so far as they represent a growing and maturing tradition, are inseparable from the fact that Canada, even more than the United States, has been an immigrant's land, and for every considerable writer or painter native to it we can count at least one artist equally important and equally Canadian who was born beyond the great oceans or south of the 49th parallel. It is this uni-

que mingling of the far-born and the near-born that up to the present has given the culture of Canada its special configuration.

I content myself with mentioning these notions in a casual way, mainly because their development would lead to a full-scale article rather than the opening of a review article. The fact that is germane to the present review is that this mingling continues without any present appearance of diminishing. Canada is still deeply indebted to men and women who have chosen to adopt it as their land, and the quartet of novels I am reviewing, one by an American-born and three by British-born writers, suggest that there are certain forms of craftsmanly competence that immigrant writers still tend to present more often and more reliably than their native-born counterparts. Here I am not talking of the highest level of Canadian writing, the level of the Three Margarets (Atwood, Avison, Laurence) for example, though at least one of the writers I am discussing belongs among them. I am talking rather of that company of sound second-raters, the workmanlike and inventive rank and file who give any tradition its solidity and continuity, who guarantee the presence of a literary world where writers can develop more naturally than in the artificial setting of the university campus, and who are found so abundantly in places like London and Paris and New York.

All the four novels I am discussing are written with a sound command of the literary language of the times and an equally sound understanding of the mechanics of fiction. In both respects their authors have surer ears and hands than, say, most of the school of experimental native writers who a few years ago gathered around the House of Anansi and were published in the Spiderline Editions. I am not saying that there is a difference in talent between the two groups, and I am ready to grant that in terms of originative imagination the Anansi writers may even be superior. I do suggest that the immigrants show more clearly the skills that such imagination can use. Every tradition of living art is based on a parallel and usually older tradition of good craftsmanship. The novels I am discussing are all well-crafted works, with in each case a little added to mere workmanship, and in one case a great deal.

The one case is that of Audrey Thomas's *Songs My Mother Taught Me*, very handsomely printed and produced by Talonbooks of Vancouver, which has never before ventured into this field of well-made hardbound books. *Songs My Mother Taught Me* is one of those deliberately tantalizing books that hover in the borderland between fiction and autobiography. Like her heroine Isobel, Audrey Thomas was born in upstate New York in the 1930s and spent her childhood and adolescence there; it is, on the dustcover, the actual photograph of Audrey and her sister, extracted from the family album, that sets our minds in tone for reading the tale of Isobel's passage to maturity. Given that little fiction is without some element derived from the author's life, and that autobiography

cannot even be written without a shaping of actual life that gives it some of the character of fiction, it is hardly presumptuous to suggest that at least the central armature of *Songs My Mother Taught Me* was provided by the author's youth, and that her senses experienced the impressions of childhood and adolescence that give *Songs* so rich a textural surface. But beneath this appealing impasto of mood and detail, there is a powerful and living structure in which Isobel's inner development moves sometimes with and sometimes against the other currents of the novel, which at one level of awareness is a shadowy landscape of the human condition. The ineffectuality of Isobel's parents, the shifts and agonies of shabby gentility, the small tragedies of adolescent relationships, and the grandly macabre scenes in the madhouse where Isobel finds summer employment: all these try and temper the heroine's character until she emerges, not unhurt indeed, but unspoilt, a being as well as a becoming. *Songs My Mother Taught Me* is written in a marvellously controlled prose which confirms beyond any doubt that in the last few years, working in her distant home among the Gulf Islands, Audrey Thomas has developed into one of our first novelists.

Two of the other four novels, Tony Aspler's *One of My Marionettes* and Anthony Brennan's *The Carbon Copy*, are concerned with problems of perception and reality that have intermittently fascinated novelists ever since the days of the Gothicists. Aspler deals with the truth of memory and the truth of fiction: which is the deeper? A young man living in one of those Bohemian boarding houses which have been a feature of London's artistic fringe for at least three

generations falls in love with a model who is the daughter of an aircraft magnate; she in turn is in love with a married man who happens also to be a swindler. She dies horribly in a deliberate car accident, and Mark tries to exorcize his grief by writing a novel in which, turning the actual Diana into a fictional Jenny, he carefully reconstructs the reason for her death — an obvious suicide — as all the facts he can find suggest it to him. We get a double view of the past, partly in fragments of the novel and partly in Mark's recollections of Diana, but a third dimension is added when the publishers decide the novel may well be held libellous and insist that Mark clear the book with Diana's father, Sir Albert Greerman, who is actually named in it without any effort to conceal his identity.

Mark runs Sir Albert to earth in Ireland, and is appalled when the old man tells him why the reasons he — Mark — has given for Diana's suicide are erroneous. She did not kill herself because her lover was revealed to be a heartless scoundrel, but because when she went to tell her father of her troubles, Sir Albert got her drunk and incestuously seduced her. Mark has learnt an apparent truth he finds appalling; Sir Albert has shared a guilt. Yet even this emendation of the story remains in question. For Sir Albert, we realize, is living in the borderland between sanity and senile imbecility, and his mind is constantly wavering over the edge from one to the other.

The Carbon Copy is an even stranger exercise in the nature of delusion. In constructing a world of fantasy to be inhabited by the absent mind, there is no doubt that Anthony Brennan has well learnt his lessons from such earlier mast-

ers of the ambiguities as Franz Kafka and Rex Warner. He devises a skilful narrative filled with points where doubt may settle, so that even at the end we never know if what the narrator has told us is total illusion, or partial illusion, or actuality. A man awakens in a room that will recur through the novel; finding himself without memories, he goes to a railway station and takes a train to a country in revolution where he finds himself identified as Harry Carbon, a celebrated terrorist leader. He goes through a series of fugitive adventures described with a repertorial concreteness that enhances their strangeness, until he meets a rebel general who tells him that he is indeed an amnesiac and that the legendary Harry Carbon is a fictional figure the general has constructed around the narrator's photograph. The general takes Harry — now Joe — back to the clinic where they met, but when the narrator awakens there in the familiar room, a doctor tells him that even the general did not exist and that he has never left the clinic. All the adventures have taken place in his mind. They belong to the world of insanity. And yet, since we have nothing but the narrator's story, we are unable to judge in the end what part of it is reality. Might not the clinic and its room be themselves the recurrent nightmares of a madman actually involved in a world of action? And what, since each man perceives the world anew, is the true perception of reality? If what the madman sees is his own nightmare, may not the same be true of what we regard as the sane man? What, ultimately, is sanity? Or perception? Adroitly, and in the kind of clear prose that is necessary to reveal the ambiguities of what seems evident, Mr. Brennan guides his story so

that it keeps one's attention and its own tension to the end. It is not a major novel, but it is a *tour de force* in its own strictly limited terms.

Nigel Foxell, like Aspler and Brennan an English immigrant, has already written a very sprightly satirical novel, *Carnival*. *Schoolboy Rising* is a return to a genre that in various forms has been popular in England for well over a century, the story about public school life. On the surface there would seem few types of fiction with less to say to a Canadian public, since the private schools which are their Canadian equivalents have never played a part in the national life like British public schools with their immense influence from the early nineteenth century onwards in the forming of a ruling class and the shaping of national attitudes. Yet situations in real life often acquire universality outside their immediate functions. This was of course the case with the cowboy society of the American west, simple enough in its values and restricted enough in its scope to be treated as a microcosm and hence to be elevated into a mythology. The public school is really very similar to the "classic" west: a world of simple values and of restricted scope in which one can look to find microscopically displayed the relationships of power and personality that sway the great world beyond. Because of this the public schools did in fact become myths as well as realities.

It seems to me that Foxell has treated the public school in precisely the way that draws out its microcosmic character and

thus makes it of interest to Canadians whose traditions after all largely derive from the world it encapsulates. He has avoided the merely snobbish or the merely scandalous approaches which have dominated a great deal of public school fiction, and quite rightly, since the great controversial factor in the public school system has been neither rank nor sodomy, but the false social patterns which its hierarchy and its cult of the team seek to impart, as opposed to the real human patterns that emerge under the shadow of the system. (As a result, public school men have often possessed the worst of public and the best of private virtues at the same time; they were inclined to be inflexible rulers and administrators and loyal and understanding friends.) It is this duality of the system that emerges in *Schoolboy Rising*. Nobody is titled or buggered, and there is only one most discreetly rendered passage of love-making when the hero is seduced by his mother's best woman friend, but the pattern of conflicting loyalties in Robin Thrale, scholar at Aldenham School but also son of the worst martinet among the house-masters, is very sensitively drawn. Through enthusiastic conformity followed by bitter rebellion, Robin eventually finds in compromise a solution characteristic of his country and his class, while in the background emerges the compelling twilight picture of a culture which once so balanced its oppositions that it produced the world's most successful imperialists and the world's best poets.

THE NAME UNDER THE NAME

Laurence Ricou

DOUGLAS O. SPETTIGUE, *FPG: The European Years*. Oberon, \$8.95.

THE LURE of the detective story lies in mystery and intellectual intrigue, not in the ultimate explanation of the puzzle. It was a mystery that compelled such interest in Professor Spettigue's *Frederick Philip Grove* (1969): his questions hinted at a strange and fascinating figure obscured in the hitherto accepted biography. Four years later the solution to the mystery — that Frederick Philip Grove is a pseudonym for Felix Paul Greve, born 1879 in Radomno, West Prussia — is provided by Spettigue's *FPG: The European Years*. Perhaps the sense of anticlimax was inevitable, but the relation of the facts is less satisfying than the original tumble of questions.

Much of the enticement of the earlier book is now lost in the meticulous detailing of Greve's early years. The accumulation of dates and place names, the complexities of the family tree, academically impressive and necessary as they are, would take several readings to embrace completely. Consequently, the subject of the biography (appropriately enough considering Grove's reputation) seems remote and lacking vitality. For an informative contrast we need to go no further than Professor Stobie's recent *Frederick Philip Grove* in the Twayne World Authors Series. Stobie's account of Grove's Canadian years, more detailed, more personal, enhanced by an effective use of taped interviews with Grove's

acquaintances, gives the man a depth of personality lacking in Spettigue's story.

In the grip of the Grove story Spettigue also tends to build a romance, but one which distances its subject before it involves the reader. In a *Queen's Quarterly* article of Winter 1971 Spettigue confidently claimed to know Grove's identity but somewhat coyly declined to reveal it. In the Spring 1972 issue of the same journal Spettigue briefly summarized the biography of Felix Paul Greve without explaining how he was certain that Greve and Grove were the same man. That same absence of the one piece of incontrovertible evidence that Felix Paul Greve is Frederick Philip Grove — a comparison of handwriting, a photograph, an admission in the correspondence — is noticeable in *FPG* and explains in part why Greve remains in shadow. Nevertheless Spettigue's identification is completely persuasive: the weight of circumstantial evidence is massive, the parallels between Greve and Grove varied and numerous. It still seems curious that if there was an abrupt moment of discovery, as Spettigue's comment that "while working in the British Museum, I suddenly realized who Grove really was" suggests, it is still buried deeply. The element of mystery is cultivated, too, in Spettigue's narrative, a slow and tantalizing revelation which repeatedly promises "more of that pres-

ently". It is frustrating, for example, that such key documentation as the correspondence between Greve and the biographer Franz Brümmer is alluded to in the notes, revealed almost incidentally in fragments through the text, and is never seen whole.

Of course when Spettigue ignores the process of discovery he is sensibly asserting the *FPG* is biography, not a scholar's autobiography. The theme of that biography is that Grove's Canadian years are so often a repetition of the patterns and experiences of a European youth. Greve like Grove was a man of enormous energy, constantly undertaking more than he could accomplish, his life and imagination increasingly stifled by economic pressure, which, like all unpleasantness, he avoided by moving away and by cultivating a fertile capacity for bluff. Spettigue pictures Greve, again like the Grove we know, shifting between the "romantic role of the aloof poet scornful of the mob" and the "equally romantic role of the suffering poet starving in a garret for the integrity of his art." Regrettably neither role has much substance for Greve was repeatedly forced to sacrifice his literary ambitions to the exhausting work of a translator, which would bring him more immediate financial returns. (Spettigue's bibliography lists over fifty translations from several languages.) The story of Felix Paul Greve is not a joyful one; there is, however, enough early promise of a literary career that the despair of *In Search of Myself* seems justified.

Greve cultivated a mystery which the intervening years have deepened. Often Spettigue fills the gaps with his own reasoned speculations: that "Uncle" August Hinrich Jacobsen may have kept

Felix in pocket money, for whatever reason; that Felix "was something of a mother's boy"; that much of Felix's money may have disappeared in gambling; that the final 10,000 M of which Felix defrauded his closest friend, Herman Kilian, went to support his wife during his trial and imprisonment; that in his first interview with André Gide Greve plays boldly on Gide's known homosexual sympathies. There are other occasions when large and fascinating questions persist: When was Greve "married"? Who was Elsa (known only by her first name), his bride? Why did he leave her? And largest of all . . . where was Greve/Grove and what did he do during his first two years, 1909-1912, in North America?

Obviously some of the enigma in Spettigue's *Frederick Philip Grove* carries through to this volume; "perhaps," Spettigue cautions, "we shall never confidently separate the fiction from the fact." At the same time there is much invaluable factual material. Spettigue's industry, though as I have noted the chronology and genealogy is often difficult to follow, provides details of Greve's work in the classical grammar school, lists of Greve's university courses and professors, summaries of the conflicting currents and personalities in turn-of-the-century European literary life, a thorough outline of the society, culture and landscape in Greve's ancestral home, and extensive quotations from a Greve article published in 1909 titled "Travelling in Sweden."

This article merits particular mention because it is immediately informative about the images and themes of Grove's Canadian writing. It fits admirably with Spettigue's second major theme, a theme

which he introduced in his earlier book: that the Greve biography is not only interesting in itself, but essential to understanding Grove's writing:

Only when we "stand back" from the total oeuvre, reading it thematically or biographically, does it seem to become a whole. Grove was a strange man, and when we read the autobiography we should remember that in a sense all his writings are autobiographical, a working out of an image, and a rationale, of himself.

As the life and works come together the theme is more specifically defined, until Spettigue senses "that in his Canadian writings Grove is projecting the characters and memories of his European past into his new settings." This argument is convincing when one notes that the austerity, solitude, and "poetry of greyness" described in the article on Sweden have their later echoes in *Over Prairie Trails* and *The Turn of the Year*. That Greve lived much of his early life in proximity to the nightclubs and prostitution of the St. Pauli district of Hamburg suggests an origin for the more exotic moments in his novels, especially in *The Yoke of Life*. And as Spettigue observes, it will increase our understanding of Grove's Canadian works to recognize that *The Master of the Mill* was written by the translator of seven of H. G. Wells' works, *Consider her Ways* by a translator of Swift. On other occasions Spettigue's thesis prompts him to read the novels almost as allegories of Greve's early years: it may be that Clara Vogel resembles the mysterious Elsa and that Niels' six and a half years in prison parallel the six and a half years from Greve's imprisonment to his flight to North America, but this reading of *Settlers of the Marsh* leaves me more bewildered than enlightened. Greve's German novels, of which two are extant,

show that Grove was much the same novelist at the end of his career as at the beginning. But Spettigue provides only plot summaries of these novels with very little direct quotation: most students of Grove will have to await the translations which Professor Spettigue is preparing before the connections can be explored further.

For the moment, contemplating the connections between the mystery, the life, and Grove's Canadian writings demonstrates that *FPG: The European Years* might have been any one of three books. It might have been a detective story to satisfy the surprising popular interest in Grove (as it is one Manitoba daily that seldom reviews books ran a lengthy column quoting most of William French's review of *FPG*). It might have been a biography of Felix Paul Greve, but the present information is too fragmented to present any comprehensive picture of a life — and Spettigue is fastidious in acknowledging the many aspects of Greve's life which are still unknown. Finally *FPG* might have been a book on the roots of a prominent and important segment of Canadian literature. Much is accomplished here; much remains to be said. Certainly there has been nothing written about Grove to date (except Stobie's book, which draws on Spettigue's findings) which could not be enhanced and improved by incorporating the discovery of Felix Paul Greve. What we have is an important piece of literary criticism that preserves some of the puzzle of the detective story, but lacks the pace and the "romance of reason" in the earlier book, a book that portrays a man of rakish confidence and great unease whose personality is yet too elusive and distant to involve us.

Thanks to Spettigue's enthusiastic persistence the man Robert Kroetsch calls "the hobo tragedian" is a still greater challenge to future students. We are still

looking, to borrow another phrase from Kroetsch's *F.P. Grove: The Finding*, for "the *wirklichkeit* of the word itself/the name under the name".

THE STILL CENTRE

Patricia Morley

John Sutherland: Essays, Controversies and Poems. Edited by Miriam Waddington. McClelland & Stewart. \$2.95 paper.

MIRIAM WADDINGTON says she has discharged a double debt to John Sutherland: one personal, to Sutherland the man; and one public, a witness to Canadian literary activity in the forties. It is fitting that a double debt should be paid to a double man. For one of the most interesting aspects of this collection of Sutherland's articles, poems and sketches is the revelation of a shy and fascinating personality, a naive sophisticate, a tormented double man. Through art, nationalism, and religion Sutherland sought to resolve his duality. He sought the still centre, the core beneath change and motion.

The story of Sutherland's life, as Waddington notes, is also the story of Canada's literary magazines of the forties and fifties. It was a time when many of the now-legendary writers were just beginning to write (Irving Layton, Louis Dudek) or just getting into full stride (Frank Scott, A. M. Klein). The story has been documented by Michael Gnarowski and Louis Dudek in *The Making of Modern Poetry in Canada*, and partially described by Wynne Francis in *Canadian Literature*. This new collection of Sutherland's work adds several pieces to the historical jigsaw puzzle.

Sutherland (b. 1919) edited a small literary magazine called *First Statement* from 1943 to 1945; and *Northern Review*, an amalgamation of *Preview* and *First Statement*, from 1945 until his premature death in 1956. He held that literary magazines played an essential part in the development of a national literature: "We shall re-discover the fact that literature in Canada, for rather obvious reasons, depends on the existence of magazines; that in no other way can close connection be drawn between the writers and the people, or a literary growth be stimulated that is rooted in Canadian soil." And in no other way, he insisted, could writers find adequate outlets for their writing.

In the forties, while Sutherland was stapling together the half-dozen mimeographed pages which made up the early issues of his magazine ("We are going on a diet of cheap mimeographed paper, a kind of literary bread and water"), the number of literary magazines in Canada could be counted on one hand. Sutherland's Dec. 1949-Jan. 1950 Appendix to the Brief of the First Statement Press and *Northern Review* to the Royal Commission on the Arts stated: "We have only three publications of this kind in Canada

at present, two magazines of verse and *Northern Review*." Twenty-five years later, there are about two hundred literary journals and "little magazines" in Canada. What Sutherland would think about their quality is a matter for speculation.

Sutherland's belief in the importance of criticism is a tonic for critics who feel (as most do, at times) unloved. He had no hope for a healthy and growing literature save in the context of an intelligent and informed opinion, and no expectation of the latter without literary criticism.

He held that literary criticism, literature and society were interdependent. Prevailing critical values and fashions would inevitably reflect current social realities, and times of social chaos would generate the cry for social consciousness in art. It falls to the critic to make a literature reflective, self-conscious, and connected with its own society.

In his criticism, Sutherland was not a man to pull punches when he felt a piece of writing should be condemned. He wrote: "In a small country like Canada, where literature is only in its beginnings, it seems inevitable that writers and critics should form a ladies' and gentlemen's club of literary endeavour, whose unwritten rule is that no member should tell a home-truth to another." Sutherland believed in home truths, and found nothing more deadly than undeserved kindness in literary opinion.

An example of Sutherland's pursuit of home truths is found in his publishing, in 1947, a damning review of Robert Finch's Governor-General's award-winning *Poems*. The awards committee, Sutherland suggested, might have been moved by sanctimoniousness, hypocrisy,

snobbery, credulity and/or ignorance. Strong words. This review prompted P. K. Page, Frank Scott and A. M. Klein to resign from the editorial board of *Northern Review*. Earlier, *First Statement* had been threatened with a libel suit by Patrick Anderson because of Sutherland's critique of Anderson's poems.

Some two dozen of Sutherland's poems are included in this collection. Waddington notes that, by the end of his life, Sutherland saw his essential self in his poetry. She considers the poems to be of enduring value, yet pessimistically anticipates that reviewers will ignore them, since Canadian magazines, now as in the forties, remain dependent upon political and economic factors and "seldom concern themselves in anything but a superficial way with Canadian writers."

I'll join Waddington in a vote of confidence in the poems. Many of them make use of the sonnet form while ignoring rhyme. A fictional-autobiographic sketch reveals Sutherland's passion for Shakespeare's sonnets, many of which he memorized while confined to a sanatorium. Shakespeare's sonnets, Sutherland notes, revolve on a series of set themes and are closely bound together in a pattern of ideas. Similarly, many of Sutherland's poems revolve about the theme of "The Double Man", the title of one sonnet which includes the following lines:

Departing he would learn the parlour trick
of living like an average individual;

... and parody

The boring hackneyed art of being human.

Sonnets like "The Double Man" and "With Expert Tailoring" reveal a Proustian sensibility to the environment. In "Choice" and "Guide to the Canadian

Poets" one finds the same wit and insight which characterize Sutherland's critical work. "The Shadow", one of three prose poems which follow the poetry, is concerned with the recurring doppelgänger theme. "The Bee", another prose poem, describes the bee's flight as cutting the air to tatters, "with a fire's freedom of design. . . . Summer had stuffed his ears with the cotton batten of silence. . . . Summer had offered him a draught of ripeness and silence." In Sutherland's poetry, pre-Raphaelite lushness cohabits with intellectual clarity and metaphysical conceits.

Sutherland died young from cancer complicated by tuberculosis. A weakness towards TB had enforced three years of semi-convalescence in his teens, a confinement during which his solitary genius had begun to learn, as he put it, "the art of hopping crooked straight." This phrase is from his fictional Allegorical Sketch, a portrait of one George Jones. Obviously autobiographical, this psychological portrait is one of the most interesting pieces in the collection. It reveals Sutherland's sensitivity, his driving ambition, his isolating egotism.

Sutherland's critical prose indicates a tough and incisive mind, whether he is making a case against obscurity in literature ("Originality of expression is made the excuse for leaving the content obscure": A Note on Metaphor, Feb. 1944), or questioning A. J. M. Smith's

definitions of "native" and "cosmopolitan" schools in Canadian poetry. At the same time Sutherland is a stylist of the first order whose criticism is informed by wit, irony and metaphor. Layton is linked with Wordsworth through "their joint capacity for emotion recollected in tranquillity. The difference is that, while Wordsworth recollected daffodils, abbeys, etc., this poet recalls selling newspapers, buying bad fish, walking innumerable times under the obscene cross squatting on Montreal Mountain, and similar emotions. Moreover, his tranquillity takes the form of anger." Another example of Sutherland's prose style is taken from the preface to *Other Canadians*: "Mr. Eliot has not taken more glances at the classical world than he could manage over the shoulder of Dante; but Mr. Smith has slipped past the colossal statue by night and come to anchor in the bay of Virgil."

We are indebted to Miriam Waddington for a lively Introduction and an interesting selection from Sutherland's work. It is regrettable, however, that she did not choose to include more criticism from the last few years of Sutherland's life to illustrate his change from a Marxist to a Christian stance. Perhaps the double man found, at the end, the still centre which he sought. If so, the resolution is denied the reader of this collection.

GROVE IN CANADA

MARGARET R. STOBIE, *Frederick Philip Grove*.
Twayne.

MARGARET STOBIE, with a study of Grove's Canadian years, provides the most recent insight into the many lives of F.P.G. By working with correspondence to and from Grove, and by tracking down people who remembered him, Dr. Stobie has provided a lucid and objective chronicle of Grove's life from 1913 until his death in 1948.

There is little information available concerning the years between 1909, when Felix Paul Greve arrived in North America, and 1913, when Philip Grove appears in Haskett, Manitoba, but Dr. Stobie feels that the Haskett letters prove that Grove was "beyond question a professional and professionally trained elementary school teacher before he arrived in Manitoba".

Dr. Stobie is at her best when she deals with Grove's relationships with his contemporaries. She has tracked down people in small towns like Winkler, Virden, and Gladstone where Grove taught, and we hear first-hand reports that he was a good teacher, a strong disciplinarian, and a teller of tall tales about himself which the students enjoyed even if they knew them to be fancy. Grove did not get on well with authority and inevitably he had conflicts with his school boards. His longest tenure as a teacher was two years.

Particularly useful is the description she provides of Grove's Canadian Club tours of 1928-29. Exalted by the response of his Ontario audiences in 1928, Grove was moved to observe in a letter to his wife that "they all know that the rest of Canadian writers are pigmies by my side".

Dr. Stobie's chapters on Grove's relationships with his publishers—he had business dealings with most of the Canadian houses—and her research into the fortunes of Grove at Graphic Press are also illuminating. Grove always gave the impression that the failure of Graphic Press was one more slap from a malignant fate which had left him financially depressed. Dr. Stobie notes that in fact Grove was the only person to make money from Graphic, taking seven thousand dollars away from Ottawa when he resigned his position.

Dr. Stobie has managed to penetrate Grove's romantic smokescreen, and she reveals how often his actual state of affairs was different from the picture he wished to present. It is not easy to deal with this undercover Grove, since he is often not a pleasant man. Confrontations with Lorne Pierce of Ryerson Press or with Simcoe's mayor, Percy Carter, leave one with the distinct impression that few people could love F.P.G. Dr. Stobie maintains objectivity and records biographical events with tact and understanding.

Douglas Spettigue has recently brought out his biography of Grove's European years, and Desmond Pacey will soon release his edition of Grove's correspondence. Sooner or later, someone will find the missing pieces explaining where Grove went in 1909, and what happened to him between then and 1913. The materials for a definitive biography on

Grove are gradually coming together, and Dr. Stobie's book offers valuable insights into Grove's years in Canada.

No one can complain about a lack of interest or poor scholarship in terms of solving the biographical mystery surrounding Grove. What is lacking is sound critical evaluation of his work. It is in her critical commentary that Dr. Stobie's book is weak. While she does a fine job of maintaining objectivity in the biographical chapters, it quickly becomes evident from her critical comments that she has little use for Grove as a writer of prose. With the exception of *A Search for America*, and *Consider Her Ways*, none of the books receives balanced criticism. The remaining Grove canon is described in negatives: *Our Daily Bread* is written "on the level of a not very good soap opera of noncredible characters uttering nonhuman dialogue". *It Needs to be Said* is dismissed as "a potboiler". *Master of the Mill* is "a voluminous notebook, out of which a novel could be formed". *Search for Myself* is called "thin and unrewarding" with the last section reading like "not much more than an annotated ledger". *Over Prairie Trails* degenerates as it progresses: *Turn of the Year* is "pretentious". Dr. Stobie does not do justice to herself by substantiating these negative responses, or to Grove in evaluating his strengths.

In her attempt to isolate the sources of Grove's ideas, it is suggested that "Rousseau's two Discourses and his *Emile* together with Thoreau's *Walden*, provide most of the ideas to be found in Grove's novels." Such a claim is too simplistic. That Rousseau and Thoreau played a role in the formation of Grove's artistic sensibility will not be denied, but to limit the source of most of his ideas to Rous-

seau and Thoreau is to deny clear evidence in the correspondence with Richard Crouse and Watson Kirconnell that Grove was continuously reading and absorbing ideas from a broad span of European and North American authors. In later years, for instance, he read D. H. Lawrence, Oswald Spengler, and T. S. Eliot. One wishes that critics would start examining how Canadian authors modify, adapt, and change ideas to shape their own philosophical perceptions. For example, Rousseau or Thoreau do not explain Grove's frequent vision of nature as hostile, nor do they explain the cyclic patterns of cultural and family life. Both of these themes are of major significance.

An attempt is made to deal with some of the themes in Grove's work, but at best the result is to leave them ill-defined. Her comments on the hermaphroditic figures are intriguing but left undeveloped. That Grove's perception of life in North America follows a consistent and logical pattern of its own was demonstrated at the Grove Symposium at the University of Ottawa in May of 1973. If Dr. Stobie had not confused issues by expecting Grove's views to parallel Rousseau's or Thoreau's and had looked for Grove's own views instead, a number of apparent inconsistencies would have disappeared. For example she says that in *Master of the Mill*, "the cycling movement is, of course, at variance with the evolutionary theory which had been the carefully constructed framework of the whole novel". Had she looked at the way Grove used ideas of evolution and historical pattern the conflict would resolve itself. Perhaps such critical brevity is the necessary result of working within the Twayne format which seems to demand extensive plot summaries rather than extended critical

evaluations. Ultimately, the excellence of the biographical chapters dealing with Grove and his contemporaries over-ride the critical failings and make this a book worth owning.

STANLEY E. MCMULLIN

RATIONALITY IN MIND

SYLVIA FRASER, *Pandora*. McClelland and Stewart, \$7.95.

Pandora is deceptive. Although at first glance it appears to be little more than a brilliantly-written description of a war-time Ontario childhood, in reality it is as packed with abstractions as the mythical Pandora's Box. In fact, the book is really an allegory, making it closer akin to *Lord of the Flies* than to *Anne of Green Gables*.

Unlike William Golding, however, Ms. Fraser does not explore the concept of original sin. The evils of Pandora's world, while equally as brutalizing as those on Ralph's island, are present simply as a fact of life, and coexist with that other abstraction which the original Pandora discovered at the bottom of the Box: Hope.

Virtually all of the young Pandora's immediate surroundings demonstrate a divided reality. She has twin sisters who do not like her but will not "tell on" her, and who are addicted to the exasperating practice of reading aloud, "sentences turnabouts". Her mother is pious and self-effacing; her father, a butcher, is a sadistic brute with a steel hook for a left hand. Grannie Cragg is an illiterate but likeable witch with a camomile lawn; Other Grandma, who makes lace and lies

in wait for death amid decaying splendour, once danced with Neville Chamberlain. Even Pandora, with her princess-golden curls, has a "double-crown, where the Devil touched her and her hair won't lie flat." And Charlie, her adored cat, came from a garbage-can and has fleas.

In the outside world it is the same. The nice breadman lets her drive his horses and then molests her. The unholy trinity of classroom bad boys bears the names Jessie Christie, Howard Ghostie, and Godfrey Trumps. Rosie, Pandora's giddy glamour-girl aunt who rides a red bicycle and works in the munitions factory, attempts suicide. And Ruth-Ann Baltimore, her anxious-to-be-diplomatic best friend, succeeds in being "mean" to every girl in the class, causing Pandora to ponder the question, "How come the NICE people miss seeing so much?"

Mercilessly, Ms. Fraser introduces the horrors expected of war into life in Pandora's small ken. When the school principal (Col. Burns) makes a scapegoat of an innocent Jewish child, when Jessie Christie tortures a cat, when we squirm at the mindless violence of Pandora's own father, we are brought to the realization that life can be evil anywhere. "Open your eyes, nice people of the world," says Ms. Fraser in effect, "you have nothing to lose but your scales."

Poor Pandora, who is imaginative and sensitive as well as brave, independent, pretty and clever, has a hard time comprehending it all. In her dreams and when, as a punishment, she is shoved into the basement winter storage vault, her mind teams with the grisly stories she has heard her elders repeat. The divided reality becomes one, and the wrong one:

Pandora smells mothballs. Blue gas rises in a cloud. . . . Her green eyes bleed, then pop,

first the right, then the left. Her lungs sear, expand, explode. She claws the gas chamber with the bloody stumps of her paws. . . .

In the end, however, Pandora triumphs. She finds a way to defeat Jessie Christie; now she is strong, too. As Ms. Fraser puts it:

Look! Up in the sky!
 'It's a bird!' says Ruth-Anne.
 'It's a plane!' says Roger.
 'No!' says Miss Macintosh. 'It's Pandora!' . . .
 And God put on his sky-blue spectacles.
 'Bless my soul! Roll out the golden streets!
 Serve up the tutti-frutti icecream! Here comes PANDORA!!'

As the quotations illustrate, *Pandora's* prose style is original and impressive. Its pages sparkle with metaphor and divert us with carefully-researched 1940's detail, from Pandora's Sisman scampers to the uncomfortable hickory bench at the bank. Dozens of quiet jokes reward the attentive reader. (The heroine's full name, for example, is Pandora Gothic.)

Apart from an occasional lapse into sociological jargon, only the final pages of the novel mar Ms. Fraser's *tour de force*: Other Grandma leaves a small legacy, and Pandora's parents decide to save it to help finance their daughter's future education. Pandora is to have "Another Sort of Life".

Presumably this device is our insurance that Good, or at least Hope, will continue to fight the forces of Evil. Although, allegorically speaking, it is sound enough, on the realistic level it is less successful. In addition to our difficulty in believing in the generosity of either Other Grandma or Pandora's father, there is the matter of Education as the Answer. Perhaps Rationality is what Ms. Fraser really had in mind.

PAT BARCLAY

LANDSCAPE WITH ARSONIST

DAVID HELWIG, *The Best Name of Silence*.
 Oberon, \$2.95.

AN ARSONIST moves across the flaming landscape of the Helwig country. He is the universal spirit of everliving Fire which enkindles all things to their inevitable consummation, so ushering them into the next phase of their metamorphosis. The figure variously assumes the mask of a Bluebeard, a Heathcliff, a Bolshevik, an old gander or often that of an unidentified lover. The role is seen to involve great suffering but reaches beyond the physical into dream ecstasies known only to lovers' ghosts. The arsonist is conscious of his absurd role—in the words of the old gander in "Toward Winter", "I am an arsonist going in the disguise of foolish alien feathers." The idea of alienation suggests that the arsonist might also be Helwig's projection of the role of the artist.

The element of fire so central to Helwig's themes is but one feature of his predilection for the metaphysics of Heraclitus. The structural principle of polarity and paradox, the inconclusiveness inherent in the concept of time as flux—and all the rest of the mystic apparatus—reflect the Heraclitean contempt for the rational. A passage from "Hooker at Christmas," is representative:

Our soundest knowledge
 is to know that we know him not
 as indeed he is, neither can know him
 and our safest eloquence is silence.

This seems to be a quotation from Hooker but, were it not for the italics, might have passed for one of Helwig's own Heraclitean aphorisms, the best ex-

ample of which is his title *The Best Name of Silence*. Enigmatic to the point of obscurity, the title is only slightly illumined by considering the line from which it derives. The line is to be found in the title poem, "The Best Name of Silence", and it reads: "The best name of silence is death."

There are many introspective poems reminiscent of Helwig's earlier volumes, *Figures In a Landscape* and *The Sign of the Gunman*. In these, the mind looks inward at its own autonomy to find within itself a microcosm of the world's autonomy. They affirm the authority of the mind to know what it knows even although the sum of such knowledge is to know that it knows nothing. Some lines from "Drunken Poem" say it better than any paraphrase:

O sentimental absurd man, who
can you think you are, writing
this something, nothing, drunken words
that solve nothing and say
nothing, only that I know
nothing and that the earth
is the body of a god and you
and I are the body of a god.

It is from such roots that a growing tendency toward a poetry of the grotesque can be seen to be developing. In particular, such poems as "Apparitions: for George and Lenna", "This House", "Old Man, Young Lady", "The evergreen trees", "Parmenides Among the Lost", "Audubon", "Heathcliff as a Spaceman", "Heraldry", "Groundhog Day", "Toward Winter", and most importantly, "The Best Name of Silence", are examples of Helwig's recent work which exploit the potentialities of the supra-natural with astonishing effect. The subjects provide externalized images constituting a kind of correlative with which the poet is enabled to distance himself — the result being an

increased objectivity and maturity.

These grotesque poems are particularly mythic in origin, although they are distortions of the standard versions. They are often a conglomerate of disparate mythologies such as that which makes of the Persephone myth, the story of a maiden held in the arms of Bear Brother throughout the winter hibernation, only to be left lonely and despairing in the spring. Another is "Toward Winter" where a North American Indian myth about a Spider King is strangely confused with the Parsifal legend of a Fisher King and a wandering gander knight. The technique serves to point back to a common mythology beyond the carefully manipulated plots and characters of children's literature to primordial memories of grotesque archetypal figures which can be seen to represent universal psychological forces.

The most painfully shocking of Helwig's distortions is the title poem, "The Best Name of Silence", a dramatic version of the Bluebeard legend. Unlike Perrault's version, Bluebeard, not the wife, seems to be the one rescued. In tone, there is a resemblance to Bartok's opera, *Bluebeard's Castle*, but the dialogue of the opera is lacking between Helwig's husband and wife. The wife relates her despair in the closing scene:

On the floor the head
of my husband lies on one ear
eyes open watching me

I lie beside it
and the lips reach out
to kiss me, fail and slacken
and the eyes close.

Something must be said of the attractiveness of the book's format. The spirit of Helwig's themes is arrestingly captured in the purity of light and line in the

magic realism of Kim Ondaatje's panelled doors opening outward to immaculate labyrinths of empty space. That it is duplicated on both covers is an effective device by which to convey the inconclusiveness of a book of poems which closes thus:

Somewhere a story
is beginning to happen.

There is one mysteriously closed door in the painting. That one is for each reader to investigate for himself. Like Bluebeard's wife, he should be prepared to find some skeletons.

DORIS EVERARD

A SINGULAR VOICE

TOM WAYMAN, *Waiting for Wayman*. McClelland & Stewart, \$4.95.

REVIEWERS IN the eastern press have been warm in their welcome to Tom Wayman's first solo book of poetry, partly, I conjecture, because they are happy to discover a strong voice from Vancouver that appears to have no connection with the "West Coast" movement. Wayman is one of those increasingly rare birds, singular, in fact isolate from the literary scene in his surroundings. He writes in part of his experiences in the U.S., but the poets he mentions are not the usual Creeleys and Olsons, but the stiffcollars, Donald Justice, Charles Wright, Robert Bly. (It is curious that here I have stated that Wayman's is a singular voice, yet I think that this notice will be peppered with names; there is no paradox there, simply the natural curiosity that seeks any old measure by which to account for such a freak.)

Often the *persona* that Wayman dons

is the face of the intelligent, wry, academic outsider, who speaks from inside the post-Kafka buildings of western America. A kind of hip Earle Birney, if you like, the land-loving socialist — there aren't many of those around these days, either.

The poetry depends greatly on projection of a personality, as does that of Purdy or Newlove or Atwood. That means a mode of control (of you, reader, too) by the artist, the artist who may often speak of madness with poetry that can never go mad., Like Purdy's, the material is narrative anecdotal, and the physical properties of verse, even their advantages are not of paramount concern. It is not rhetoric we find, but drama.

The personality we learn is that of a man bemused by the commercial enemies of human spirit and by his own efforts to thwart them or escape them. We are told slightly bizarre stories of the character "Wayman" occupying a college building, nervously cashing a welfare cheque, getting a job cleaning the walls of a bank. The author's favourite design is to present third-person stories of this Wayman as the dumped-on but right Everyman of our time.

So his audience, unfortunately small because that is the fact for poetry audiences, will be assured of something unusual and likely necessary, an idiosyncratic chronicle of the passing political scene, LBJ, Cuba, student activism, supermarket boycott, *etc.* All these have been areas important to the "underground" press and its readership, and yet till now that people has not produced any decent poetry. Wayman is proof that you can combine economics and love in one poem, that the political poem can be

beautifully made, and not only in Latin America. He can make abstract words on a homesteading young couple sound like sure music:

He is the nation.
 She is the nation.
 When they enter the field of struggle
 against what defines them
 the nation is born

A two-page poem called "Childermas Hymn: December 28, 1970", is a touching formal hymn to celebrate the birth of a baby among welfare recipients on a cold winter day, something very difficult to bring off against the obvious constraints, but Wayman does it. He does just as well with the subject of money and its misplacement, or with the waste and exploitation of human labor.

He usually does it with images that are nutty; what are we to think of a book that tells us of our immediate social concerns with such oblique language?

Then I am not in, but with
 the family. I want to walk around and look
 in each face. Who are we?
 The parts of an automobile. Of an egg.

He resembles Atwood in his determination to astound with his ability to invent amazing imagery of a world transmuted by his singularity of vision.

I feel a reservation about that. There are lots of good concrete images, but their use — they are recognizable pieces of houses showing in a landslide. Often, part way down a poem a survivor lets himself drift in the deluge, no longer strong enough to reach for a piece of timber. Sometimes one is led to see that either Wayman or the poem is trying to go straight, but usually one of them gives way and the fantasies start coming true, the street bums form a union, or the shoes start a fist fight in the closet.

Some of the poems remain obscure in the unproductive way, due to sequences of disparate wrenched-apart images; the effect is similar to that of the recent non-sequential comic strips from the underground. Often it is too hard to grasp the poem, it becomes a lizard in your hand, you read it again and again, looking at its red eyes and saying: I hear what you say but what's your point, what are you trying to get me to decide? I am "trying to cheer myself and perhaps another/ with the anecdotes of history," the lizard replies.

The poems are generally worded as collages of imagery, each line or picture a piece stuck on to the assemblage; the result is often static, as in the poem, "The King of Colour", a collage of Mexican-militant-young California. Many of the more static poems, with the strips of surprise, are better heard than seen, read aloud by Wayman, aided by his comic sense of timing.

The lines are usually determined to get their ends as sentences, short sentences. Wayman's rhythms are not dance; they get there straight, like a train. Gwen MacEwen's verse is like that too, with the determination to end the lines, but Wayman's units are shorter, more nervous bursts. Not a train. A machine gun.

Yes, many of the poems are static, revolutionaries' postcards. In the best ones there is some amusing or frightful action, or some decision made, to occupy the armouries, maybe, some striving toward narrative, Wayman's forte. This happens more often in the second half of the book, when the locale shifts from the U.S. of Wayman's studies and teaching apprenticeship, to the Vancouver of his unemployment, where he learns

“what it is to be a refugee in your own country.”

Wayman begins the Vancouver poems with this fine insight at the end of “For the American Deserters”:

The people of Vancouver want the deserters
to be birds, sea-gulls.
To fly high as an eagle and
disappear. They want them
to be walking along the street
and turn into something delicious,
some marvellous confection Now Available
in Canada.

The people of Vancouver do not want
anyone
to be lonely, or hurt, hungry or frightened.
But there would be nothing they could do
if anyone were. Sometimes they wonder why
the deserters are becoming an Army again.

He continues sometimes with nice actualities of sense about this place:

I walk in the City through the rain.
Here are row on row of wooden houses
each with steps going up to the porches.
I have known dry houses, full of death.
But these houses are soaked with rain,
alive and dripping like old cedars
deep in the woods. Here is one to enter.

In poems such as “Gastown”, he provides concrete images of the downfalling streets, and somebody’s guilt, shared. That is strong, and a promise that yes, poems can look the “developers” in the eye. Wayman can write funny political poems (Lionel Kearns being the only other practitioner I know). That is a power that can be shifted neatly to attack priority targets; that is, to make the enemies, Dow Chemical, the banks, *etc.*, not ridiculous but comic, to let us look down on them with reserves of pathos.

Always with the humanity that entails. In Wayman’s way one observes a contention going on, between the causes that indicate enemies, and the personal glimpses that jostle corporation-serving

individuals into the light of human sympathy.

GEORGE BOWERING

PAINTER INTO POET

JACK SHADBOLT, *Mind’s I*. McClelland & Stewart, \$12.95.

AT THE TORONTO ART GALLERY in the late twenties and early thirties there was an air of excitement which drew students of all ages. We were enthused by The Group of Seven, by Lawren Harris, and later by the West Coast painter whom he so helped, Emily Carr. As a “beginning” poet I remember well going to a lecture given to the Theosophical Society by Lawren Harris, during the course of which he read from his newly published book of poems, *Contrasts*. It was a fascinating experience, comparing the words with the paintings. I remember thinking that Harris’s free verse was very close to Imagism, but that he did not have the feeling for the rhythm and music which was a part of that movement. His poems were, it seemed to me, a stage removed from poetry: linguistic guides to the painter’s vision.

Something of the same impression must have hit me when, after coming to Vancouver in the mid-Thirties I first met Jack Shadbolt at a writer’s group. His painting had exhilarated me with its daring, dash and originality. The influences were strong: forest, rock and sea, the insignia of British Columbia; but undoubtedly there was also the painterly influence of Lawren Harris’s abstract impressionism and of Emily Carr’s vibrant anthropomorphic vision. To these painters the British Columbian landscape,

whether on Pacific shores or in northern mountain country, became a living organism that somehow grew roots right into the painting — illustrating Harris's key theme — "the North as a source of beneficent informing cosmic powers behind the bleakness and barrenness and austerity of much of the land." The same response was to be evoked in poetry when, in the Forties, Earle Birney and Malcolm Lowry began publishing. But at that time little did anyone realize that the painter Shadbolt was also attempting to translate the thing seen into the thing communicated through language. Today, when I remember him reading his poems aloud, I think that none of us listening (Ethel Wilson, Bill McConnell, myself) understood what he was trying for; perhaps because his rhythms were rough and his language too often was searching for "poetic" effects and philosophical abstractions.

Now that all of Shadbolt's poetry is available — some 60 poems interspersed between 35 black-and-white drawings pulsing with life, vibrant with trees, roots, branches, rocks, ocean waves and the small creatures that inhabit them — it is possible to appreciate what evocations Shadbolt is capable of, in language.

First, though, a sour note. It seems a pity that the artist saw fit to include the early efforts at confessional love poetry, for these have little relationship to the paintings or to the natural world that has inspired them. Occasionally there is a successful poem like the one which begins:

I'm told a man new blind
shaving with no mirror
cuts himself
His mirror fetched
habit controls
and he continues easily

Since you are gone
habit and I go on
but sometimes when by thought
you are not here
who mirrored me
who blind as I?

Here the metaphysical dialectic works, exemplifies Shadbolt's credo that "my form always develops from a dialogue of opposites." But unfortunately few of the poems from this early period achieve this effect: rather there is a sense of strain, as in this stanza:

Whatever may be scanned
in the morning edition of me
when I am proof-read for the truth
by the unsparing day

with its disastrous last line: "She left her print on me." This is bad verse.

Happily Shadbolt gets into his stride as a poet when he is concerned not with his human relationships but with what his outer and his inner eye see in the objective world:

Down I go by
red shed on bleak rocks to
Hidden creviced beach
Heart on foam-flower stalks feeding
dead in leaf

In his book, *Mind's Eye*, we reach this stage with the lovely imagist poem "Beech Groves" (version II) dated 1934, where

Tonight again is starless
Fall has bared an ice-fang
gleamed with light
The proud beeches wear
moon's agony
of shining rain

until

Forest veins
the sweet sap-hunger
know no longer
but remember
axe blades' gash
and sap-gush stain
Now these bronze glades will know
the solace of snow

These short two and three-beat lines really work. The only puzzle is the rationale behind the poet's use of capital letters. Why?

From the 1930s also come poems like "December Woods", in which a favourite symbol, the scarlet bird, appears:

Near me on a limb
perched tensile with
the held-breath skill
of fragile things
this scarlet
jet-eyed
flick-winged mystery

The drawings are charged with these birds, these mysteries; as are poems like "Strange Tale", "November Afternoon", "Quarry" and the beautiful reminiscence of childhood, "Metchosin", which calls to mind Roberts' "Tantrammar Re-visited". But this is the West Coast, Vancouver Island, and the time is 1938:

These were the gold-grained fields
whose memory fretted
the long years of trying to forget
this land of sweet yield
with the plow's ridge wheeling
clear to the sea
followed by gulls' screaming
the white lips of foam
silently sighing . . .

But oh that aching roll
downfield and over
to the slow grey crumpling of the bay
threshing those silvered logs
the oak groves gyrating
out to meet the rocks
in the late breeze — these
could be a start

Perhaps Shadbolt's happiest, most lyrical poems are those which evoke flowers, such as "Spring Rain", "Anniversary", "Looking Across". In the last-named poem the artist-poet looks across the sea to the island where he was born:

Always facing me
the brooding Island

with its sombre conic evergreens
its dark openings inward

. . .
. . . calling me across the heads
of pink opiate poppies
just above the windowsill
and blue spurts of larkspur thrusting up

Beyond them he sees "along the very level/of the riffled racing water" the "beckoning mysterious rim". And when he moves north he meets the power and mystery of "Agamemnon Channel" and "Princess Louise Inlet". Exciting poems!

Many of the illustrations in this book are of birds: ravens, larks, gulls, "blue heron's frightful cry". The poems too are peopled with birds, but it is the horned owl who emerges as the key feathered figure both in the drawings and the poems. The longish dramatic poem "To a Young Horned Owl" (1971) should be forever anthologized. The language is clinical, that of a naturalist: "Rope-like muscles contract down/spine and/sword-unsheathed wing feathers", but it is also charged with metaphor, "fan bristlingly/. . . in panzer grip to/steel talon clenching." Owl becomes "King of dreams . . . lord of near field/mouse terror . . ." More poems such as this could transform the unforgettable painter into an unforgettable poet.

DOROTHY LIVESAY

TORTURED TWENTIETH CENTURY MAN

TONY KILGALLIN, *Lowry*. Press Porcépic. \$8.95.

SOME AUTHORS would seem to attract commentators on their *oeuvre* with both the vigour and success of the Lorelei seeking sailors down the Rhine. And very often

the result is as parlous. First to mind, I suppose, is D. H. Lawrence who continues to draw critical attention throughout the English-speaking world, from writers with widely differing viewpoints. The Lawrencian wake is much littered with critical corpses.

One could hardly claim that Malcolm Lowry has yet been honoured with the vast critical industry bequeathed Lawrence, but given the relative sparseness of his output and the arcane factors within Lowry's literary art, it can surely be said that his own critical industry flourishes. Not least, I feel sure, because he sojourned awhile upon our Canadian shores and has thus enjoyed the attentions of that rapacious critical factory which has evolved in this country to devour, digest, and regurgitate in acceptable monographic forms, each and every piece of creative work that can be possibly encapsulated under the heading of "Can-Lit."

By far the prettiest package from this quarter to date, is Tony Kilgallin's *Lowry*, published (one is tempted to say "created") by the Press Porcépic of Erin, Ontario. In padded maroon binding, splendidly illustrated with designs of a Cabbalistic and Rosicrucian flavour, printed, (we are informed) on *echt* Canadian paper, with large bold type-face plus the 19th Century conceit of tissue-paper before the photo frontispiece, *Lowry* is indeed a fine example of book production. But what of the content? Indubitably gift-wrapped — what of the gift? A short book — it runs to two hundred-odd pages, with that large type and much use of blank space — there are two natural sections. The first half is really a potted biography and Mr. Kilgallin makes ample and intelligent use of

quotation from those who knew Lowry, however fleetingly, including such unlikely witnesses as Sir Michael Redgrave, the actor, the Vancouver author Norman Newton and the C.B.C. producer, George Robertson. The testimony of these commentators is not so much profound as unusual and Tony Kilgallin is to be congratulated on including them.

Another positive factor in this first portion of *Lowry* is the plain and commonsensical style employed by the author who links his material deftly and enables someone wholly unfamiliar with Lowry's life, as opposed to his work, to speedily grasp its significant contours.

In no way does Mr. Kilgallin attempt a full-length *opus*, in the fashion of the recent Lowry biography by Douglas Day, but this work under review could certainly lead one to the larger, biographically more important, book.

The second part of *Lowry*, however, consists of exegetical treatments of first, *Ultramarine*, and then *Under the Volcano*, and here I find the précis-like aura which hangs over the whole work a severe handicap. It will frustrate the true Lowry scholar and do little for the common reader wishing for some elucidation of Lowry's preoccupations with such esoteric matters as the Caballa, astrology, and kindred medieval concerns. For my circumscribed taste and undoubted prejudice the author's ratiocinations in these areas is to sterile purpose as well as boring. My attention was only riveted when Mr. Kilgallin explores the effect of classical cinema on the sensibilities of Lowry, and hence as an influence on his work.

The impact of the motion picture upon so much of this century's fiction is still in need of exhaustive analysis, but given Lowry's fanatical absorption with

films — we are told here that Earle Birney aptly described him as a “cinem-addict” — a study of Lowry in this respect makes fascinating reading.

Given the quantitative limitations of *Lowry* it is not surprising that the author starts up more hares than space permits him to capture. But the influence of Eisenstein alone on *Under the Volcano*, and the tracing of this and comparable influences, is worth whole volumes on the obscurantist complexities of cabbalistic puzzle-solving. Unfortunately it is the latter that takes up too much of Mr. Killgallin’s critical attention.

The Selected Bibliography seems to a layman to be a decent piece of mini-research. But instead of the two appendices, (one a bibliography of Charles Stansfeld-Jones’ Magical Library, the other a list of one hundred writers of interest to Malcolm Lowry) I would have preferred a more substantial treatment of the cinematic influences upon this tortured, so very twentieth-century man.

DAVID WATMOUGH

OPACITIES

DAPHNE MARLATT, *Vancouver Poems*. Coach House Press, 1972. \$3.00.

SUSAN MUSGRAVE, *Entrance of the Celebrant*. Macmillan, 1972. \$6.95.

I’VE NEVER SUBSCRIBED to the theory that taste in poetry is like taste in cheese, but there is an element of purely personal response to a poet’s language, rhythm, imagery. Both these poets start what they’re doing a long way from the surface of my skin, so that reading them is a process of reaching.

Recently in a pickup game of softball without an umpire, I stood beside a run-

ner who’d been caught between bases and who waited on second base for somebody else to decide whether I’d tagged him or not. I had to call the play I’d made myself. That moment came back to my mind while I was trying to begin a review of Daphne Marlatt’s *Vancouver Poems*. I wish there was an umpire.

The book is a series of middle length poems that clearly intend to define Vancouver and a life in it, the presence of the past, the details of the present, the shape of the emotional life of some of its people. I can see, I think, what the book intends, and I have a suspicion that there are poets and critics (those of the West Coast or those associated with Coach House who publish the book) for whom the poem is effective. But not, by and large, for me.

The rhythm both of lines and of larger units is fragmentary, and I think the poet intends a cumulative effect, a building up of impressions from moment to moment. Sometimes I find the individual sections convincing:

‘Old Bird’, he

turned up thin this time, bones held together by yellow & translucent parchment: rags & bags & papers. His torn collar, scarf at so craggy & knotted a neck declared itself to be holding the trachea, thin rind of muscle. When he opened glass to admit me a skeleton stood, in the broom cupboard where the toilet was. I sat. Clotted broom bristles hugged the wall. All around, coughs & creepings of old men trickled in under the door.

In general, the most convincing sections of the poem are those that are most clearly focussed on a single personality or a single moment.

At other times I find the poem centrifugal to the point of incoherence.

Tripe. or cellular white tongue. Bacon makes eating comfortable (whose shoe, on

the right foot can she bend (an ear) the
scot in stained apron knows, kipper in
string, whatever, other habits pose)

The poem seems to take place in the mind of an anonymous characterless perceiver, and this, in combination with the mannered style, often makes the attempt to enlarge or deepen the significance of observed details merely portentous.

I can't build up any continuing emotional involvement or sense of form, so that I'm left with a collection of disparate fragments where the interest in only local, one line, one phrase, a verse paragraph. As I started out to say, I have the feeling that maybe this is my weakness, that I don't have the power of concentration necessary, but in the absence of an umpire I have to make the call myself. And feel uneasy.

If it is possible to imagine a substance both opaque and translucent, it would make a good metaphor for the poetry of Susan Musgrave. Her poems are a dark landscape populated by pronouns, and the only bearings offered to the reader are emotional. The images are traditional, dark, sea and sky, thorns, forests, cold, mysterious figures, and the references outward to the world of fact are few.

But perhaps it is true that after a while, all scenery looks the same, so that the enlargement of the world may best take place by travelling through such private landscapes as these. For while the references are vague, the poems are emotionally precise. We don't quite know where we are, but we know how it is being there

I remember the beginning
like the first day of the world.
I floated like a scar along some river
listening for an answer
whenever I called. This dream,
on the edge of things, troubled me —
the dream I was lost and halfway there.

There are times when the poetry strikes me as devoted to a kind of secrecy, and in that, its thrust inward, its precision, it reminds me from time to time of both Margaret Atwood and Gwendolyn MacEwen. MacEwen especially, in the persistent symbolism, the creation of dramatic landscapes of secret loving; but Susan Musgrave is more pointed, less rhetorical or magniloquent. In that more like Atwood, careful, tensed.

I mention these other poets, not to suggest indebtedness, or to reduce Susan Musgrave's achievement, but to suggest that although she speaks a language that is in ways foreign to me, she is within a certain tradition, and I get my bearings in her poetry partly with reference to that tradition.

The poems are intended, I think, as celebrations of darkness, and while the darkness she celebrates is not mine, she often succeeds in drawing me into it, making it happen in my mind, if not quite on my skin.

DAVID HELWIG

A LURKING DEVIL

ALDEN NOWLAN, *Various Persons Named Kevin O'Brien*. Clarke, Irwin, \$6.75.

THE MAIN TROUBLE with Alden Nowlan's new book is that it is not about various persons named Kevin O'Brien but about one person who has a past but no present. In returning to Lockhartville, the wretched Nova Scotian village in which he was born and raised, the 25-year-old O'Brien is not the present-day newspaperman who, when younger, escaped to the big city, but is instead the miserably unhappy boy he once in fact was. Boy or man, his alienation from the village is

almost complete, and he is only able to gain some rapport with it when he goes to a dance and knocks out a local bully, thus earning the respect of his two tough cousins and the right to take home one of the village's miniskirts.

Today's visit and the triggered memories of yesterday are conveyed in a variety of tenses, a technique which is no doubt intended to point up the "various" persons but only achieves a stilted effect. We do not really care about Kevin O'Brien, past or present, but only about his context, for atmosphere is the principal strength of this fiction. "Fiction" is the word, for Nowlan calls the book not a novel or collection of stories but "a fictional memoir". An ambiguity exists whether "memoir" refers to the fragments of autobiography O'Brien carries around in a briefcase, or in his mind — or to Nowlan's own recollections.

What *are* the memories? Boyhood war-games while his elder brother goes to die a soldier's death overseas. An embittered father who works in the woods for promises and the rare dollar, and has no sympathy for a "lazy bugger" of a son. A bewigged old grandmother — perhaps the family's only life-affirming member, — who fancies Billy Sunday and randy folksongs, and a sister who uses sex as a key to unlock her prison-environment. In place of motherlove a series of vicious stories about "the bitch your father married", retailed by an aunt. In place of ecstasy some petting with a girl who later becomes a nun; an aborted trip to Boston with an older woman who deserts him, taking \$100 of his money.

In all, there's not much joy in these memories, but a curious kind of intensity. It's this intensity which redeems the book despite what seems to me a laboured

technique and the presence of an uninteresting protagonist. My background is not greatly different from O'Brien's (or Nowlan's) and my own father, in his less benign moments, can commit a sentence like Judd O'Brien's, "He had hair down over his ears, and he was wearin' them Christless sandals." But it is not personal interest alone that makes me find much power in the book. There's sawdust, sweat and rum here, and the quality of nightmare that one finds in the early Nowlan poems. A young O'Brien pursues his sister across the fields:

Then she sees something running — or flying — toward her.

A bear or an ape with wings.

A bat half as big as a man.

An old man with arms outstretched under his cloak so that it seems that he possesses wings.

An old man in a black mask. An old man with a staff. An old man almost flying.

Kevin playing a prank — or the Devil? A Devil lurks somewhere in the landscape, that much is sure. The springs of childhood have been poisoned and for all of Kevin's years ahead there will be but a bitter introspection, a going back to those cold woods, to the imprinted knowledge that there is no possibility of change, and no will to make it happen.

FRASER SUTHERLAND

BISSETT'S BEST

BILL BISSETT, *Pomes for Yoshi*. Blew ointment Press, \$2.00.

IN HER SELECTION of Bill Bissett's poetry for the volume *Nobody Owns The Earth* (Anansi), Margaret Atwood provided Bissett with what many of his readers had long felt he needed: a good editor. While Bissett has seldom pub-

lished anything totally without interest, or without flashes of his own very individual brilliance, far too many of the books and pamphlets which pour out of the Blew Ointment Press have been random and haphazard collections of whatever he had to hand, with the good poems inextricably mixed up among the bad.

Indeed, it might be argued that this randomness, this deliberate abdication of selectivity and control, are so central to Bissett's aesthetic and life-style that it would seem like a distortion of his vision for him to present a tightly edited, carefully chosen selection. Certainly Bissett is best when read at some length, but Atwood's selection goes some way towards proving that the better poems can be successfully separated from the mass.

Nor is it absolutely clear that Bissett at his best *does* depend on uncontrolled haphazardness. On the contrary, his chants depend on a very strict manipulation of rhythmical effects, and anyone who has heard him perform can testify to the extraordinary control he has over his voice. Moreover, in some of his longer satirical poems — I'm thinking especially of "Th' Emergency Ward" and "Killer Whale" — the pretence of the poem's being an unadulterated recital of facts is surely just a pretence. These poems practice a kind of reticence, an ironic understatement, a refusal to comment which is in the end far more effective than any actual comment could have been (especially the rather frenzied political rhetoric that Bissett often indulges in). These poems, with their very studied naivety in accepting all the strange things that happen to him, show Bissett as a master of narrative and ironic tone.

These considerations are very impor-

tant when approaching *Pomes for Yoshi*, which I think is Bissett's best collection to date (excluding Atwood's selection.) In the first place, it is a book with a unified theme: in effect, it is one long sequence of poems in which every piece bears directly on the central concerns. The major concern is with the poet's love for a girl called Yoshi, who has left him (he hopes temporarily) because she wants to be alone for a while. Juxtaposed to the poet's expressions of longing, as a kind of contrapuntal minor concern, are accounts of Bissett's attempts to move out of the house he's living in. The increasingly hectic disorder of that house may be taken as an image of the disorder of the poet's emotions, and his final escape to a saner, more human environment hints at a resolution of the major theme as well.

In the love poems, Bissett tackles head on the oldest poetic theme in the world, and he succeeds in giving it a remarkable freshness by the very naivety, directness, and openness with which he treats it. In simple, colloquial language he speaks of how he misses her, and of how he accepts her need to be away from him for a while, even if she's with some other man. Love is not possession, Bissett says, and seldom has this ideal been realised more fully and more convincingly. The poems take the emotional warmth and idealistic romanticism of Bissett's earlier work and manage to focus them on a particular situation, a particular relationship.

The sub-theme, the housemoving, reaches its climax in a long poem at the end of the book which fully deserves to stand alongside "Th' Emergency Ward" and "Killer Whale". As with these poems, the ostensible form is that of a purely factual narrative of an increasingly fan-

tastic sequence of events. (Bissett appears to be the kind of person that the wildest things just naturally happen to.) But again, the tone is perfectly judged, and the absence of comment becomes a comment in itself. It also produces a hilarious kind of straight-faced humour.

None of this, I think, is accidental. It is a product of Bissett's life-style and aesthetic (the two are almost the same), an openness which seems naive but isn't, an innocence which has gone through experience and out the other side, a purity of outlook which brings freshness to the most outrageously clichéd situations and phrases. Nothing but this consistency of tone could account for the way in which Bissett is able to use such terrible clichés of counter-culture jargon as "Far out", "I can dig it", "Heavy", and "Got to get my shit together" with such complete honesty that the reader accepts them as being meaningful (accurate descriptions of a certain state of mind), amusing (in slyly self-mocking, understated asides), and even deeply moving (see especially the final page of the book).

Such sophisticated manipulations of language may be accidental, or unconscious, but I rather doubt it. *Pomes for Yoshi* strikes me as a very carefully crafted book, as well as a deeply personal one. It is surely the mark of a good poet that very strong personal emotions intensify rather than decrease his sensitivity to language. Such is certainly the case with this book.

STEPHEN SCOBIE



PICTURESQUE AND MORALISTIC

KEN MITCHELL, *Wandering Rafferty*. Macmillan. \$7.95.

BLANCH HOWARD, *The Manipulator*. McClelland & Stewart, \$7.95.

THE MAXIM GORKI epigraph that Ken Mitchell places at the beginning of *Wandering Rafferty* states there are two types of romanticism: active and passive. Passive romanticism is a retreat from life whereas active romanticism "attempts to strengthen man's will to live, to rouse him to rebellion against reality with all its tyrannies." Clearly, Mitchell intends his central character, Rafferty, to embody this principle of active romanticism. Rafferty's chief weapon against reality is illusion.

One of the things that distinguishes the romantic writer from the classicist is his attitude to illusion. Swift provides us with the model of the classicist's approach. Gulliver, encased in the liberal illusions of his day, smashes up against reality and goes into shock. Unable to face reality he retreats into an unnatural world where horses are placed above men; his illusions have led to his destruction as a human being. Cervantes, on the other hand, provides us with the paradigm for the romantic. Don Quixote's illusions are a constant source of trouble to him but when the illusions are gone and the Don gets rid of his books he dies; life unsupported by illusion is impossible. In *Wandering Rafferty*, Ken Mitchell has created a romantic *picaro*. He lives upon dreams and when what is apparently the last dream is destroyed he symbolically turns his glass over. But Rafferty is too vital to die for long, and so his glass is soon full once more. Al-

though we do not know what dream will now carry him on we have no doubt something will arise. The important thing is not knowing when to quit.

There are basically two types of wanderers; those who are on the outside and want to get in (Moll Flanders and Dickens' orphans, for example), and those who are in but want to get out (the modern alienated figure). Rafferty is basically of the second type. In love with losers and the past, he carries his symbolic load of Indian bones or an old cannon. And when he does make it as a good burgher he finds he has merely run up against the Pacific and the end of one dream. Significantly moving east, retreating from the Eldorado of the Pacific, he sets out in quest of the past, the "shimmering girl" he lost and still loves.

Selling subscriptions to *Mother Goose* magazine, Rafferty wanders over western Canada from Vancouver to Thunder Bay. The sense of place, despite a few minor inaccuracies, is excellent. The pubs and hotels, filled with men who are the last faint images of the exhausted dreams of the west, could not exist in the older parts of the country.

As the Gorki epigraph suggests, Rafferty is a creation of the liberal imagination. He is the individual who pits himself against the group and its deadly norms (although he does accept the whoring norms of frontier culture). Rafferty is, of course, a cliché, the roaring boy, if not Irish at least of an Irish father. However, he is a successful cliché. On his personality the novel must stand or fall, and it stands very well because Mitchell has made his main character both believable and engaging enough to sweep the reader up in the seemingly erratic journey of Rafferty's life.

The plot of Blanche Howard's *The Manipulator* develops out of the arrival of a devilish young architect named Bill Wentworth in a small western city. The narrator, John Phillips, is an ex-bank clerk, who, with the encouragement of Wentworth, becomes an architect by serving an apprenticeship with the town's largest architectural firm.

The plot, not totally without interest, is weakened by improbability. But in this soap-opera that's the least of the problems. The style is as close to rhythmless as is possible in English and the dialogue is stilted. The characters are drawn without insight into their motivations. Moral situations are hackneyed and the outcomes are obvious. In fact, the worst aspect of this book is its moral vision which alternates between indecision and viciousness.

The supposed moral is presented in the last chapter by John Phillips:

But if I am, as I think, a good man, and Wentworth is an evil man, am I not justified in destroying him? This is dangerous thinking, I know; the philosophy of the Inquisition, of the witch hunters of the world. For who can say where evil is absolute? Wentworth may not be all evil; I cannot judge.

However, this stated moral is completely belied by the plot. First, John Phillips is not a good man. He's a moral marshmallow with an eye always for number one, although Howard isn't aware of it. He does nothing while Wentworth murders his own in-laws, causes the death of woman by bungling an abortion, and psychologically destroys his wife, thus driving her to suicide. Finally, however, John picks up a lamp intending to kill Wentworth, but only after finding out Wentworth is homosexual (unforgivable sin apparently). John thinks he's "stamp-

ing out the evil, slimy thing." But he isn't; he's having a heart attack. Now that's one way to get your hero off a murder rap!

But if John Phillips can't judge, that doesn't stop Blanche Howard and her judgments are shocking. Two women have affairs in the novel. The next door neighbour, bored by her husband and kids (Howard seems afraid to go into this) has an affair with a director of the local amateur theatre group. (Who else!) Of course she gets pregnant, so after a bit of formulistic liberal comment about abortion by Peg Phillips, John's wife, the neighbour is settled by letting her die because of Wentworth's attempt to perform an abortion. The director leaves town. The other woman who has an affair is Wentworth's wife. She's set up for her infidelity with John by her husband, and of course commits suicide in the next chapter. John becomes a successful architect. Wentworth, who is responsible for the deaths of four people is allowed to set up a branch office in another city. The only hope that he will ever be brought to trial resides in good old wishy-washy John's pursuit of the case; some hope! Moral: the only people Howard seems to hate more than homosexuals are women.

DON JEWISON

SIMPLE COMPLEXITIES

FLORENCE MCNEIL, *The Rim of the Park*. Sono Nis. *Walhachin*. Fiddlehead.

DEBORAH EIBEL, *Kayak Sickness*. Sono Nis.

WHILE FLORENCE MCNEIL is in no narrow sense a regionalist, often in *The Rim of the Park* (a second collection of poems) her personal response to experi-

ence is shaped by her west coast background. In "Homecoming," for example, the summer scenes of childhood are warm memories of

the sea where we put
out clam boats
and soared on our backs
feeling the sky
was overgrown

The prairie makes an effective foil to the coastal vision. Returning from "the didactic prairie winter", as in "Afterthought,"

the crystal summer shapes
extend themselves
into a sufficiency
and just looking is a
moral enough
reason for being.

Not surprisingly it is the bitter prairie winter which brings on the full desolation of the personal loss in "Storm Warning":

I see out there only slanted snow
like blank lines on writing paper
and hear the empty thunderous noise
of no applause for my remembering.

On the other hand, in the same poem, and in "Spring", the sense of the living presence of the dead father is recoverable in the fondly remembered setting of an ocean bay.

But even in this sympathetically conceived world of beach, ocean, mountain, and sky there are disturbances other than the poignancy of death in the family ("Elegy") or the inevitable unfamiliarity of the familiar after absence ("Homecoming"). Harshly intrusive is the tawdry ersatz of an expensive seaside restaurant. The peace of a beach trail is shattered by the collision of motorcycle and cat,

and when the motorcycle apologized
and left
and the fur stopped moving
We walked to the Indian banks

and spent the day digging
without luck
for evidence of another civilization.

This irony of terse, almost flat, understatement is also characteristic of Florence McNeil's handling of the more intimate subjects such as self-identity ("Family Records," "9:30 A.M.") and love.

While the same sensibility is clearly working in *Walhachin*, this is a book of a different order, a sustained study of the double vision of a first generation consciousness. Here the poet projects herself into the mind of a sensitive Englishwoman who has immigrated to the dry belt of the Thompson River area at the turn of the century. While the interior monologist of the 21 poems is fictitious (although with her own brand of Susanna Moodie traits), the landscape is not. Once more an inner voice expresses reaction to a harsh, unsympathetic landscape. This time it is against "furred canyon," "jagged spruce," and "whirling sage," which contrast so strongly to the order and certainty of "warm rains," "carriages and lamps," "predictable bloom of churches." Thus "steeped in the solutions of other days," at first she is scarcely able to preserve her sense of self:

I am light enough to disappear
if you dig in too many holes
you may find me
buried by a new desperation.

Although survival is always an open question, gradually the rows of young trees growing with the aid of irrigation flumes cease to be "cemetery crosses against the sky." But despite the heroic dedication of its settlers, *Walhachin* was doomed not to survive, (as the preface and opening poem relate). War reasserted that other loyalty:

because we have nudged uneasy canyons
into compromise
because the long days of killing sage
have ended in this temporary outburst
of trees
we are no less British
the small grass bayonets my shoes
there are dreadnoughts at anchor in the
Thompson.

Reading the verse of Deborah Eibel is quite a different sort of experience. The poetry of her first collection, *Kayak Sickness*, is a curious combination of complexity and simplicity for which she favours traditional verse forms. She possesses an oblique imagination, often expressing herself in either symbol or parable rather than direct statement. Clearly she is attracted to exotic wisdom traditions, as for example in "St. Jerome the Translator", a poem which seems to hint at the essential directions of the poet herself. The speaker has returned from the desert to Bethlehem:

I have brought
All my books of knowledge
To this small room —
At times it has four corners,
At times it has a hundred.

Kayak Sickness shows a penchant for cryptic little portraits in which the figures play a variety of wisdom-seeking or wisdom-imparting roles, ranging from a mad Kabbalist to Colvin Kell "the illiterate charwoman". While the nature of the wisdom sought or imparted is sometimes elusive, the process of quest is perhaps the greater concern. This seems to be the case in the rather striking title poem, which begins:

The hours are curvatures, the days are rings
Concentric with the hunter of the seal;
Within the bounds of circles, he aligns
Himself with mysteries that facts conceal.
A storm is promising on August seas:
The kayak overturns; the hunter drifts
Within it, undertime, locating seals;

The boat turns upright, and he claims these gifts.

The carefully contrived imagery inventively sustains "the mysteries that facts conceal" motif throughout the poem in what might be termed a successful attempt at home-grown exoticism.

Less arresting, however, is the somewhat arch verbal play arising of the personal associations she places on such figures as clowns, prophets, hosts, and guests. These reverberate throughout several poems. One might suspect playful mystification, as in the cryptic "Kaspar Hauser in Nuremberg," or fear pretentiousness, as in "A Clown in History." However, at her best, Deborah Eibel's gift for formal control combines effectively with her eye for the quintessence of situation, that of the "unmet lady" of sonnet "Homecoming," for example, or of the quietly suffering child of "Work and Play."

DIANE BESSAI

DOWN FOR THE COUNT

IRVING LAYTON, *Engagements*, ed. Seymour Mayne. McClelland & Stewart. \$12.50.

THE PREMISE behind this book is simple: Irving Layton is a wild-eyed brawler, a gargantuan lover, a bardic soothsayer wielding a pen that slashes across the history of mealy-mouthed Canadian literature with blood and burning truth, and as for his critics, they are nothing but spineless ineffectuals, "juiceless librarians" and "embittered eunuchs". Not only is he, as he declares over and over, ad nauseam, a master in the "cock and cunt affair", i.e., life; but he can toss off a brilliantly lucid essay or an original inspiring prophesy any damn time he con-

descends to do so. In other words, he is so great that he can beat the reviewers and the idea men at their own game and without missing a stroke in life.

What a man!

What a bore!

I would like to believe this book is a joke, and if it wasn't a collection I might think so, but this stuff dates back to 1943 and the man takes himself much too seriously to be putting us on. One of these letters, reviews, prefaces, or introductions read in its proper place might be considered lively or refreshing, but all together they are more than a little oppressive.

There are, no doubt, some armchair brawlers and would-be Casanovas who will quiver all over in back of this raw macho, as well as some intellectual lightweights who will find the "ideas" stimulating but many, I'm sure, will be too bored even to finish the book and those who do will probably regret it. Layton's enemies can enjoy a good smirk.

It's difficult to remember after reading *Engagements* that Irving Layton is a good, often a great, poet. His prose is definitely not poetic; in fact, it is usually pedestrian sprinkled with hyperbole. To be fair there are exceptions, two; his article "Cemetaries Are Where I Am Most Dionysian" and the story "Piety". The first is a lyrical evocation of a visit at a Tel Aviv cemetery to the resting places of Max Nordau, Zalman Schneur, Isaac Peretz, and Chernikovsky. The second is an autobiographical reminiscence of poverty and life on the Montreal streets. The rest of the book covers the field from ridiculous — letters to magazines, through just plain boring — book reviews, to workaday mediocre — the short stories.

Ridiculous, sums up the flood of sexual vituperation directed at his critics who actually gain our sympathy by association. Anyone who suggests that Layton is not Rimbaud, Rabelais, and Villon all at the same time, everytime, must be one of the following: "a bloodless long-nosed Anglo-Saxon . . . a prissy schoolmarm . . . a juiceless librarian . . . a virgin . . . an embittered eunuch . . . a joyless castrato . . . a small-minded castrate" etc. Layton is such a virile bard that critics "make the ritual nose dive for [his] groin" out of sheer envy. "There must be" he concludes "something irresistibly fascinating about my balls". But, of course.

The man appears to be completely ignorant of the times. The sexual revolution happened one day while Irving Layton was off jousting with joyless castratos in some desolate Portage la Prairie of his own imagining. He is like the fellow at the orgy who gets drunk and brags into a mirror about his sexual conquests while everybody else is copulating on the beds, the chesterfield, the carpets.

Superficially, Layton's fusilades are reminiscent of the cut and slash literary polemics of Arthur Cravan who wrote in Paris before the First World War. The major difference is in their opponents. Cravan spared no one. He took on the great figures of his time from Apollinaire to Gide, as well as the whole Parisian art world. Layton's opponents? Padraic O'Broin, Barry Callaghan, Gerald Taaffe, Walter O'Hearn. Wow! Often Cravan was challenged to duels by those he had offended and live ammunition was used. By comparison, Layton fires blanks.

Another difference is discernible in the statements themselves; Cravan cared little for libel laws while Layton is a master at tip-toeing around a statement.

Look closely and you'll realize that with him all is inference. So, he doesn't actually state that Gerald Taaffe is an "embittered eunuch" but that any hack journalist is, and Taaffe he insinuates is a hack journalist. How manly and courageous is it really to *infer* that Northrop Frye is a necrophile?

Layton's attacks on reviewers ring hollow after all. He's rather like a would-be professional boxer who thinks he's dynamite because he slugs sportswriters. When all is said and done Layton is not a brawler but a shadow boxer with balloons for fists.

Despite Layton's manly posturing he doesn't appear to like women too much. "Modern women" he sees "cast in the role of furies striving to castrate the male . . . this is the inglorious age of the mass women." And he cries, "We're being feminized."

He doesn't spare female poets. On the contribution of women to the poetry of the '60's: "Several female poets during this same period added a menstrual note to our national habit of moaning and whimpering in genteel verse."

Perhaps the sexual loud mouthing can be laughed off, the Howdy-Doody performances shrugged away as "just old Irving". Perhaps. But consider that Layton claims to be a fighter for the freedom of individuals and nations, for body and mind. He decries the totalitarianism of Nazi Germany and modern Russia yet supports wholeheartedly the United States genocide in Vietnam. This man who commands the largest audience of any Canadian poet uses his position to advance the view that the United States, while simultaneously backing military dictatorships and bombing southeast Asia, "is the most powerful single force

promoting peace and social democracy in the world today". Perhaps the dead, the prisoners of war, the starving, the oppressed, the Indians, and those negroes Layton actually calls "sensuous" and "rhythmic" might disagree.

And what does he see as the alternative to totalitarianism? Government by big business! As he states, "The only hope for civic and world peace rests with multi-national corporations."

To borrow a phrase of the author's "What a sour boring joke!"

In these *Engagements* Layton the battler has gone down for the count.

JIM CHRISTY

RIDEAU ET ENTR'OUVERTS

ALAIN PONTAUT, *Dictionnaire critique du théâtre québécois*. Leméac.

CES NOTES HATIVES, inégales, ne constituent en rien un *dictionnaire* (l'ordre onomastique des auteurs n'est même pas toujours respecté), encoure moins un *dictionnaire critique* judicieux. Sans demander à l'auteur d'être exhaustif — il est impossible de l'être dans les circonstances, sur un tel sujet — on pouvait espérer quelques précisions (titres, dates...), un début d'inventaire, un panorama équilibré. Or, peu d'indications bibliographiques, aucun tableau chronologique, aucun index (des pièces) n'accompagnent ces brefs et vagues comptes rendus.

M. Pontaut ne *défriche* pas, quoi qu'il dise; il utilise des parcelles de terrain (et

des souches) pris ailleurs, çà et là, au hasard de ses lectures ou de ses soirées au théâtre. Il fait une analyse intéressante de *La Charge de l'original épormyable*, mais ne mentionne pas la première pièce de Gauvreau (*Bien-être*) ni même *Les Oranges sont vertes*. Une page sur Pamphile Le May, dont trois lignes concernent l'oeuvre dramatique ("littéralement injouable"). Pourquoi ressusciter une "moralité dialoguée" de Laure Conan (voir ANGERS, Félicité) et ignorer complètement celles, beaucoup plus significatives, de Rina Lasnier et de Gustave Lamarche? Pas un mot sur Levac (sauf à l'article LORANGER), ni sur André Caron, Raymond Cloutier (et le Grand Cirque Ordinaire), Maurice Demers, Robert Gauthier, Michel Gréco, Marc-F. Gélinas, François Hertel, Roger-B. Huard, Yvon Lelièvre, Marcelle McGibbon, Louvigny de Montigny, Pierre Moretti, Jean O'Neil, Jean-Paul Pinsonneault, Alain Pontaut lui-même, André Ricard, Denys Saint-Denis, Jean Simard, Roger Sinclair, Katy Touchette, etc., tous plus importants à mon avis que l'Albanais Luan Asllani, "intelligent et prolifique auteur d'oeuvres radiophoniques et télévisées pour la jeunesse", ou l'abbé Alphonse Villeneuve, auteur, en 1871, d'une satire anti-sulpicienne "à l'intérêt limité".

Il est étonnant qu'un écrivain de la valeur d'Alain Pontaut, au surplus directeur littéraire d'une maison d'édition qui se spécialise dans le théâtre québécois, laisse paraître un livre aussi peu rigoureux, aussi peu *fini*.

LAURENT MAILHOT

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