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THEMES AND VARIATIONS IN CRITICISM

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Notes

BY JANIE WAGNER

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editorial

HISTORIANS AND BIOGRAPHERS

THE RELATIONSHIP between history and biography is far from simple. The historian is concerned with external and collective manifestations of human existence. The biographer is largely concerned with its inner and individual manifestations. The two worlds of course are interdependent, and history that ignores the psychology of its actors is likely to be as deficient as biography that ignores the role of external events in shaping its subjects' lives. Yet the disciplines are different enough for historians not always to be good biographers, and vice versa; the eye that is attuned to the broad sweep of historical events cannot always weigh accurately the minutiae of one man's life. When that man is a public figure, the problem is inevitably compounded.

I was reminded of this when I read C. P. Stacey's *A Very Double Life*, whose second title is *The Private World of Mackenzie King*. Colonel Stacey's book cannot fail to be interesting, since it offers the first lengthy presentation of the hitherto inaccessible private diaries of Mackenzie King. Much, of course, is what one had expected. We have known for decades that King frequented seances and regarded himself as inspired by his dead mother; we have had hints of his belief in a curious kind of metempsychosis that turned his dogs into guardian spirits. (There were, significantly, no spirit cats in his world.) But it is still strange and interesting to read King's own words, almost to hear that eerie voice, talking not only of insubstantial spirits but also of the notably substantial ladies with whom he sustained apparently platonic attachments and the less-than-ladies whom he attempted to rescue from prostitution while, according to Stacey's reading of the diaries, sinfully enjoying them.

Much of Stacey's reading, in fact, is highly conjectural. When King goes out on "strolls" and returns with the thought of having wasted his time sinfully, it is carrying matters far to assume that he had really been involved in fleshly

commerce with prostitutes, a sin to which he never in fact confesses. Given King's defensive nature, the thought of his taking a physical initiative with a prostitute seems completely out of character; far more plausible is the idea of his having wandered about on a summer's evening to look at the girls and lust after them and then return to the guilty enjoyment of what his generation called "the solitary vice".

The pushing of conjecture to extremity, thus presenting King's life in harsh contrasts, is extended in Colonel Stacey's book into other areas than the sexual, and with equally questionable results. Was there really such a division as Stacey suggests between the man who consulted the spirits and the man who framed high policy? Were King's political decisions in fact unaffected by the "insights" which other men regarded as superstitions? Certainly he looked for political reassurance to the spirits, and found numerological significance in the times and dates of events; is it likely that he did not on occasion conceive it possible to use such means to the actual influencing of events? Once private fantasy takes hold of a mind, there is no logical limit to its manifestations.

It seems to me that Colonel Stacey has in fact been writing biography as a historian, accustomed to the chiaroscuro of history, whose high lights and deep shadows contrast so sharply with the degrees of half-light in which individual lives are mostly lived. One might even, to turn one of Stacey's methods against him, conjecture a little on the extent to which the fact of his being specifically a *military* historian has led him to see individual lives as patterns of opposed and warring forces, with the public pursuit of virtue opposed to the private following of vice, and the "real" world of politics opposed to the "unreal" world of psychic phenomena. A military historian, accustomed to dealing with events in their most concrete forms, might also be led to assume that acts must be physical — as crimes are — to qualify as sin, whereas in fact the most torturing sins are those of the mind.

To suggest that the historian cannot be a biographer — or vice versa — is far from the intent of the historian-biographer who writes these lines. In the face of such a splendid historian's biography as Margaret Prang's recent life of Rowell, it would be absurd to insist. Nevertheless, there are limiting elements in the craft of history to which the writer must be sensitive when he moves from narrating events to examining the individuals out of whose actions these events arise. What has happened is never ambiguous; the motives of those who precipitate happenings always are, and the biographer must steep himself in the shadows that would only blind the historian. In the process he discovers that there is no such thing in reality as a "double life". All lives are unities, and Mackenzie King's private superstitions permeated his public life as surely as Hitler's mania shaped the collective life of all Europe in his time and in ours too.

GEORGE WOODCOCK

SURVIVING THE PARAPHRASE

Frank Davey

IT IS A TESTIMONY to the limitations of Canadian literary criticism that thematic criticism should have become the dominant approach to English-Canadian literature. In its brief lifetime, Canadian criticism has acquired a history of being reluctant to focus on the literary work — to deal with matters of form, language, style, structure, and consciousness as these arise from the work as a unique construct. It has seldom had enough confidence in the work of Canadian writers to do what the criticism of other national literatures has done: explain and illuminate the work on its own terms, without recourse to any cultural rationalizations or apologies. Even the New Criticism's espousal of autotelic analysis did not move Canadian critics in this direction. Instead, in every period they have provided referential criticism: the evaluative criticism of Brown and Smith looks away from Canadian writing toward other national achievements; the anti-evaluative thematic criticism of Frye, Jones, Atwood, and Moss looks away toward alleged cultural influences and determiners.

With few critics interested in writing as writing, it is not surprising that Canada has in recent years seen the emergence of a large number of writer-critics. For unlike much earlier Canadian work, the recent writing has been engaged for the most part at the level of form and language rather than theme. Rudy Wiebe's journey from *Peace Shall Destroy Many* to *The Temptations of Big Bear* has been an odyssey in novelistic technique about which thematic criticism can say very little. bp Nichol's *Two Novels* speaks only through its formal complexities, and until these are illuminated the thematic critic has to remain silent — as he has. At the moment it is Canadian writers who appear to have the greatest understanding of the technical concerns and accomplishments of their fellows, and it is these — Mandel, Waddington, Geddes, Barbour, Scobie, Bowering, Livesay — who are writing most of the periodical criticism that in any way comes to terms with the writing. Many of the academic critics (and I include here Douglas Jones and Margaret Atwood because of their acceptance of the thematic approach) appear almost as ignorant of movements in contemporary Canadian writing as their colleagues in the 1920's were the formal experiments of Eliot, Pound, and Joyce.

Most of the weaknesses of thematic criticism stem from its origin in Arnoldian humanism, a tradition in which both the critic and the artist have a major responsibility to culture. In this view, the artist speaks, unconsciously or consciously, for the group. Says Jones, "[artists] participate in and help to articulate . . . a supreme fiction . . . that embodies the dreams and nightmares of a people, shapes their imaginative vision of the world, and defines, as it evolves, their cultural identity".[1] Language here is a tool employed not for its own intrinsic qualities but for the expression of ideas and visions. The critic's role is not to attend to language, form, or even to individual works of literature but to something called by Jones in *Butterfly on Rock* "our imaginative life", by Moss in his *Patterns of Isolation* the "national being",[2] and by Frye in *The Bush Garden* "cultural history".[3]

At best these assumptions are extra-literary; at worst, anti-literary. The focus of such criticism invariably rests outside the writing — on "literature", "culture", geography, history, and ideas. Books which begin ostensibly as attempts to illuminate separate instances of Canadian writing become messianic attempts to define a national identity or psychosis. The critical process produced by these assumptions is reductive. A novel is reduced to its declared themes and its plot outline; a poem to its declared themes; the Canadian culture ultimately to catch-words such as Atwood's "victimization" and "survival". Critical analysis is performed mostly to derive new catch-words and formulae.

The movement here is towards paraphrase — paraphrase of the culture and paraphrase of the literature. The critic extracts for his deliberations the paraphrasable content and throws away the form. He attends to the explicit meaning of the work and neglects whatever content is implicit in its structure, language, or imagery. Thus Atwood discusses the overt attacks on puritanism in Marian Engel's *The Honeymoon Festival*, but makes no comment about the novel's two most arresting technical features: its low-key style (common to all of Engel's fiction) and its unlikely, perhaps incredible, conclusion. Douglas Jones quotes lengthy passages from F. R. Scott and Patrick Anderson in order to integrate into his thesis their explicit statements on Canadian culture, but has no comment about their direct and largely denotative use of language. My objection here is based on a principle formulated by Frye: "the literary structure is always ironic because 'what it says' is always different from 'what it means'."[4] Thematic critics in Canada have been interested in what literary works "say", especially what they "say" about Canada and Canadians. They have largely overlooked what literary works "mean" — for the attempt to establish meaning would take them outside thematic criticism. As Robert Creeley has remarked,

> . . . it cannot be simply what a man proposes to talk about in a poem that is interesting — this is like going to hear an after-dinner speaker. His information will be interesting just to the extent that it exists, but after that we are through with him

> and through with the information in the form that he has given it to us. But the poem has this informational character . . . in such form that we don't throw away the poem. In other words, after we've read a play by Shakespeare, let's say, we don't throw away the play. We continue to define what is said/happening in how it is said.[5]

SINCE FRYE'S GENUINELY THEMATIC CRITICISM of Canadian literature constitutes a small body of work (less than half of *The Bush Garden*), since Moss's criticism is largely derivative of Frye and Jones, and since my opinion of Atwood's *Survival* is on record elsewhere,[6] I will restrict my detailed comments about thematic criticism here to Douglas Jones' *Butterfly on Rock*. One of the first characteristics of thematic criticism that one notices in this book is the humanistic bias. To Jones, culture is a gentleman's club inside which any member can speak piously on behalf of the rest of the group.

> . . . our westward expansion is complete, and in the pause to reflect upon ourselves we become increasingly aware that our identity and our view of the world are no longer determined by our experience of Europe. . . .

Apparently no one is allowed by Jones to detach himself from this rather arrogant humanistic assumption of corporateness of society. The assumption leads to further difficulties when extended to writing; the literary work comes to have little significance outside the body of the national literature. It can be valued not for its unique or idiosyncratic qualities but only for what it shares with the larger body. This means, in effect, that the derivative and the mundane can receive the critic's attention while the unusual or original do not. The eccentric Robertson Davies, for instance, does not get even a mention in Jones. Such a situation parallels the effect of humanism on society and culture where whatever coincides with mass-values is tolerated and whatever conflicts is rejected or ignored.

A second feature of thematic criticism evident in Jones is a disregard for literary history. Atwood develops her thesis that victimization is a characteristic theme of Canadian literature by ignoring its ubiquity in contemporary world literature. Moss develops his thesis that isolation is the major theme of Canadian fiction by overlooking, as George Woodcock has noted,[7] the fact that in all literatures the traditional subject of the novel has been the person who is "isolated" by his not being able to fit comfortably into society. Similarly, Jones tries to advance on the basis of work by the Confederation Poets the thesis that the Canadian landscape has been seen as "a savage place . . . holy and enchanted" — ignoring the documented fact that the ghostly presences in Carman, Lampman, and Roberts were inherited from English Romanticism and American Transcendentalism rather than gained osmotically from the Canadian condition. In each case the critic is forced into ignoring literary history by a paradox unique

to his critical approach. Thematic criticism in Canada seeks above all to define a national culture but chooses to work with materials — literary themes — that are, because of their limited number, international in nature. The paradox creates a dilemma from which there appears to be no scholarly escape.

A third feature is thematic criticism's tendency toward sociology — usually bad sociology. While the social scientist is content to describe society and predict the effects of specific events or interventions, Jones attempts both to describe Canadian culture and to prescribe how it should change. His sociology is not only extra-literary, it is normative and polemic. His declared aim is to locate a culture "in which the Canadian will feel at home in his world" and abandon his "colonial mentality".

> The weakness of the colonial mentality is that it regards as a threat what it should regard as its salvation; it walls out or exploits what it should welcome and cultivate.

This unscholarly approach leads Jones eventually to cast himself as a Canadian Adam who can announce to Canadians the end of exile and the discovery of "the first days of Creation".

A fourth feature is an attempt at "culture-fixing" — something very common of late in Canada in such books as Purdy's *The New Romans*, Kilbourn's *The Peaceable Kingdom*, Redekop's *The Star-Spangled Beaver*, Frye's *The Bush Garden*, Fulford, Godfrey, and Rotstein's *Read Canadian*, and Atwood's *Survival*. To Jones, Canadian culture is in transition from an Old Testament condition of exile and alienation toward a New Testament one of affirmation, discovery, and community. This metaphor for the Canadian experience dominates *Butterfly on Rock* and becomes, much like Atwood's victim/victimization concept, a formula for Canadianism. Like all formulae, it is a restricting and potentially paralyzing thing. It restricts the writers which Jones can discuss; they are necessarily selected by their suitability to the thesis rather than by the quality of their writing. It is potentially paralyzing in the way that any attempt to define the Canadian subject must be — it serves to intimidate future Canadian writing into taking as its own the particular concerns that have been declared officially Canadian.

A fifth feature which Jones has in common with other thematic critics is the fallacy of literary determinism. The artist "embodies the dreams and nightmares of a people"; his work can be "explained" by reference to the geography and climate of the country, to western intellectual history, to his culture's religious heritage. Jones is much less guilty of this fallacy than is Frye in *The Bush Garden* with his reference to the "bleak northern sky" and to the St. Lawrence River's swallowing of travellers into "an alien continent", but he nevertheless fails to make clear that the writer is in some small way free, that the writer chooses among influences and traditions rather than being passively formed by them,

and that this process of election is more important to an understanding of literature than the influence or tradition itself. As Gaston Bachelard has observed, to "explain" a work by its sources is tantamount to explaining "the flower by the fertilizer".[8] But of course thematic criticism is not principally interested in the artistic progress, in the artist, or in the literary work — its interest lies, as Jones states, in things "cultural and psychological rather than purely aesthetic or literary".

THE MOTIVATIONS OF thematic criticism strike one as essentially defensive in respect to both the culture and the literature. A declared motive has been to avoid evaluative criticism, which Frye has claimed would reduce Canadian criticism to a "huge debunking project". An even more important but undeclared motive appears to have been to avoid treating Canadian writing as serious literature. For there are many kinds of non-evaluative criticism which these critics could have practised other than the thematic. It seems that the thematicists believe Canadian literature incapable of sustaining analytic, phenomenological, or archetypal inquiry — of sustaining any kind of criticism whose existence is not also supported by the ruse of sociological research. Another declared motive has been to articulate a cultural identity to a nation which the thematic critic believes convinced of its lack of one. It is noteworthy here that the thematicists' concerns — Jones' quest for "the obscure features of our own identity", Moss's for "a coherent body of Canadian fiction", Atwood's for "a single unifying and informing [Canadian] symbol"[9] are not those of critics of more mature and secure literatures. One cannot imagine a British critic being worried about what constitutes, in one word or less, the essence of his literature. Instead, he goes about its illumination, writing books with such titles as *New Bearings in English Poetry*, *A Key to Modern English Poetry*, *Four Metaphysical Poets*, *The English Novel*. Much more effective than *Butterfly on Rock*, *The Bush Garden*, *Survival*, and *Patterns of Isolation* in asserting a Canadian identity would have been books of this British type — books which assumed, rather than argued, a national identity's existence and a national literature's significance.

It is extremely important that Canadian critics not forget that there are indeed alternatives to thematic criticism, and that most of these do not involve a return to that *bête noire* evaluation. Further, these alternatives, like thematic criticism, do allow the writing of overviews of all or parts of Canadian literature. But unlike thematic criticism, they attend specifically to that ground from which all writing communicates and all themes spring: the form — style, structure, vocabulary, literary form, syntax — of the writing. One such alternative, historical criticism, could provide a history of Canadian poetry — a history not of its themes and concerns but of its technical assumptions, the sources of these assumptions, and

the relationship between the prosody of Canadian writers and that of other Western writers. While the prosody of Canadian poets has undoubtedly been mostly derivative, there have been shifts in the ingenuousness of the borrowing, in the time-lapse between the model and its imitation, in the sources of the models, and in the amount and significance of the modifications contributed by the borrower. All writing is to some extent derivative, but there would appear to be a clear division in Canadian poetry between obsequious borrowing — for example, that of Mair or Roberts — and the intelligent combining and expansion of borrowed forms. Needless to say, one by-product of such a non-thematic study would be an implicit statement about Canadians, Canada, and its evolution.

Analytical criticism could yield such works as "Modernism in Canadian Poetry" or "Discontinuous Structure in Post-modern Canadian writing". The former would not only address itself to the late appearance of the modernist movement in Canada — some thirty years after its appearance in Hispano-American literature and fifteen years after its appearance in Anglo-American literature — but inquire into the formal characteristics which distinguish Canadian modernism from its sister movements. Hispano-American modernism was anti-colonial in spirit; its rejection of European models in favour of native forms led artists eventually to primitivism, Anglo-American modernism was anti-Georgian and, from an American point of view, also anti-colonial. Canadian modernism, in the work of Smith, Scott, Gustafson, and Finch, copied the Anglo-Americans in both theory and practice; it proposed, unlike the South Americans, "cosmopolitan" models rather than regional ones, and to this extent seems to have been a colonial movement. My point here is that a colonial, imitative modernist movement is not to be deplored or rationalized into something other. It is itself an intrinsically interesting literary phenomenon, and in an absolute sense worthy of analysis and study; such a study can be done in terms of Canadian literature as successfully as it can in terms of any other.[10]

The second analytical project, "Discontinuous Structure in Post-modern Canadian Writing", could directly attempt on the basis of Canadian literature an elucidation of the problems and advantages of discontinuous literary structure. Such structure has been at the core of most significant new writing in Canada in the last decade: Rudy Wiebe's *The Blue Mountains of China*, David McFadden's *The Great Canadian Sonnet*, Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Losers*, Gerry Gilbert's *AND*, bp Nichol's The *Martyrology*, Juan Butler's *The Garbageman*, to name a few. While it would be absurd to argue that Canada has had any kind of monopoly or "lead" in such writing, the opportunity nevertheless exists for a literary problem important to all literatures to be usefully discussed strictly in terms of Canadian writing. The literature would provide the critic with a rich stock of relevant writing and a compact, clearly defined area for investigation.

Were genre criticism to attempt a work such as "The Polemic Novel in Canadian Literature", the same procedure would be involved; that is, of discussing on the basis of Canadian writing a literary issue of paranational interest. Here I am not asking for a repetition of thematic criticism's numerous discussions of the ideas of these novels, but for an examination of them as examples of a literary form — for an examination of their language, usual methods of characterization, narrative techniques, etc. The polemic novel exists throughout Canadian literature in abundance, with Kirby's *Chien d'Or*, several of Connor's works, Duncan's *The Imperialist*, Callaghan's *Such Is My Beloved*, McLennan's *Two Solitudes*, Wiebe's *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, Atwood's *Surfacing*, Clarke's *Storm of Fortune*, and Richler's *The Incomparable Atuk* being among the stronger. Having had such an unusually large hold on Canadian fiction, it could, like derivative modernism or discontinuous form, be studied as thoroughly through Canadian literature as through any other body of national work. Such a claim does not imply that these Canadian novels are "great" novels; only that they form a more than adequate basis for serious literary study and deserve to be so treated.

Phenomenological criticism is another alternative non-evaluative approach which could do much to replace the present sociological perspective that dominates Canadian criticism with a literary one. Again, the essential assumption would be that Canadian literature is a highly useful frame of reference for approaching particular literary problems. One title which the phenomenologist could — and here no derogation would be intended by the word "colonial" — produce is "The Colonial Writing Experience". From Mair and Heavysege to Smith and Richler our writers have given literary form to the experience of living and writing in terms of values imposed by non-native cultures. The phenomenological critic could study how this experience is projected by the form of the writing, could participate in the consciousness of the artist as it is betrayed by his syntax, imagery, and diction; ultimately the critic could give the reader a portrait of each writer's psychological world. Another possible project for this kind of criticism is "The Regional Consciousness in Canadian Writing". In regional literature too, Canada has a more than sufficient body of work for the study of a particular, intrinsically interesting literary phenomenon. In fact, it is not unfair to say that the bulk of Canadian literature is regional before it is national — despite whatever claims Ontario or Toronto writers may make to represent a national vision. The regional consciousness may be characterized by specific attitudes to language and form, by specific kinds of imagery, or by language and imagery that in some way correlate with the geographic features of the region. The analyses in Atwood's *Survival*, for example, despite the book's ignoring of regional factors, imply a possible prepossession with closed space in Southern

Ontario writing and with the closing of space in Prairie writing. These leads call for further investigation.

A final type of criticism which might profitably be practised by Canadian critics is archetypal criticism which, despite the eminence of Northrop Frye, has never been applied in its pure form to Canadian writing. Frye's "theory of modes" would supply an especially interesting approach to a literature which has seen in recent years a curiously large number of attempts at high-mimetic art — including Newlove's "The Pride", Gutteridge's *Riel*, Cohen's *Beautiful Losers*, Nichol's *The Martyrology*, MacEwen's *King of Egypt, King of Dreams*, and Wiebe's *The Temptations of Big Bear*. Possibly Frye's theory of an evolution from high mimesis to low mimesis to irony does not fit Canadian literature; perhaps in literatures which lack a native high-mimetic inheritance writers are stimulated to attempt such writing despite living in ages in which international writing is overwhelmingly low-mimetic or ironic. Only an archetypal examination of the language and structures used in Canadian and other recently-developed literatures could confirm such hypotheses.

Unless these or similar critical alternatives are taken up, there is a danger that the shape of the literature could suffer long-term distortion. Thematic criticism does not use, or need to use, literary criteria in selecting writers to document its arguments. It selects writers not in terms of literary competence or talent but in terms of how well their work fits the critic's particular thematic thesis. While one may agree with Frye that evaluation is the "incidental by-product" of criticism rather than its end, one finds that the by-product of thematic criticism is to create the illusion that palpably inferior writers are somehow more important — at least to loyal Canadians — than obviously superior ones. Thus Atwood makes Dennis Lee appear more significant than Irving Layton and Graeme Gibson more significant than Margaret Laurence; Jones makes Patrick Anderson and Phyllis Webb appear more significant than Dorothy Livesay; Moss makes Charles Bruce and Thomas H. Raddall appear more accomplished than Robert Kroetsch, Hugh Hood, or Robertson Davies. The only criticism which can yield the kind of critical by-products which Frye has in mind is one which focuses not on sociological issues but on the writing itself. Here no writer can be excluded because of his attitudes or subject matter. All competent uses of literary form can enter into the deliberations of the historical, analytic, genre, phenomenological, or archetypal critic. The more profound uses rise to prominence because of their power, complexity, and ingenuity. Thematic criticism searches for apples among oranges by looking for cultural seers among men and women whose principal task is articulation and whose principal loyalty is to their language; these alternative kinds of criticism would turn the critic's attention back to where the writer's must always be — on literature as language, and on writing as writing.

NOTES

[1] *Butterfly on Rock* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970), p. 4.
[2] (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1974), p. 7.
[3] (Toronto: House of Anansi, 1971), p. 215.
[4] *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 81.
[5] Tape-recorded lecture at home of Warren Tallman, Vancouver, B.C., August 29, 1962.
[6] "Atwood Walking Backwards," *Open Letter* (second series) 5 (Summer 1973), 74-84.
[7] "Isolating a Theme in our Fiction," *Maclean's*, April 1974, p. 96.
[8] *The Poetics of Space*, tr. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), p. xxvi.
[9] *Survival* (Toronto: House of Anansi, 1972), p. 31.
[10] For another example of the analytical approach to colonial writing see William D. Gairdner's article, "Traill and Moodie: the Two Realities," *The Journal of Canadian Fiction*, I:2 (Spring 1972).

EVEN WISDOM

John Newlove

He is the nervous hunter.
Words, women, whisky, even wisdom,
are his game; he admits
to no favourite order.

He follows any road,
looking at everything.
No tree escapes his inspection,
and horses are not safe either.

This week his baldness
assaults the radio; next,
his wine rusts an island, a junta
feels the weight of his cigar.

Back and forth he wanders,
asking questions. He ought to have
a greasy grey felt hat
pushed back on his head. Perhaps he has.

I can see those shoes of his
plumb in the middle of a forest;
that hand grabbing a beer
at the north pole; that wet cigar
shining, just like a bloody star.

SPORTIVE GROTESQUE

Margot Northey

IN THE MIDDLE OF *La Guerre, Yes Sir!*[1] the young nun Esmalda returns to her home in the village to pay homage to her dead brother, the soldier Corriveau. Obeying her religious order's strictures against entering the house, she views the mourners around the coffin through an opened window and asks: "Qui est mort? Qui est vivant? Le mort peut être vivant. Le vivant peut être mort." Despite the unthinking, almost mechanical quality of her speaking, the question is important, underlining the complex and problematic issue of death in the novel. In *La Guerre, Yes Sir!* the coffin sits in the centre of the house as it remains in the centre of the characters' consciousness, and it is the symbolic focus of the story's meaning.

Roch Carrier has referred to his writing as "a funny adventure", and we can readily see the humour in his first novel.[2] Varieties of humour can be found in almost every section, from the farcical fairness of Amelie's every-other-night policy with her two husbands, to the sexual jokes unconsciously contained in the prayers of the villagers, to the satirical bite in the depiction of Bérubé's first sexual encounter and in the priest's eulogy. Using John Ruskin's terminology, it can be said that the novel moves away from the terrible towards the sportive grotesque. In other words, in Carrier's grotesqueness play or jest is more dominant than, for example, in Marie-Claire Blais' grotesque writing.

However it is also clear that fearfulness is always present in the playing and that Carrier's mockery carries with it an almost constant undercurrent of horror. The bizarre and amusing actions of the characters have much in common with the type of black comedy found in *Le Chercheur de trèsors*, a novel by Philippe Aubert de Gaspé (*fils*) which Carrier admits he was much influenced by and whose motifs he obviously borrowed from. Moreover, as in so many other gothic and grotesque works, in *La Guerre, Yes Sir!* images of death are a primary source of the fearful or horrifying aspect.

The sense of death on a personal, physical level is of primary concern to the characters, a reality brought home to them by the returned body of one of their

own villagers. He is treated as a hero, although we learn that he has been ungloriously killed in action while relieving himself behind a hedge in the army camp. Mother Corriveau questions the purpose of a life which leads inevitably to the grave:

> A quoi servait-il d'avoir été un enfant aux yeux bleus, d'avoir appris la vie, ses noms, ses couleurs, ses lois, péniblement comme si cela avait été contre nature? A quoi servait-il d'avoir été un enfant si malheureux de vivre . . .
>
> Tout était aussi inutile que les larmes.

Where Mother Corriveau weeps in response to death, her husband Anthyme rages; where she attempts prayer he can only swear.

The menacing fact of individual physical death is a metaphor for other kinds of death and dying which spread in widening circles of implication through the story. The unconscious blasphemies of the mourners' prayers emphasize the spiritually moribund condition of a people for whom their religious teaching is ironically itself a kind of death force. The priest tells his parishioners that life is unimportant except as a prelude to death and final judgment, "que nous vivons pour mourir et que nous mourons pour vivre." His Jansenist sermon portrays a vengeful God, and warns of the torments of Hell awaiting mankind with its "nature pecheresse et voluptueuse" and especially awaiting those people who stray from the prescribed devotions. The narrow emptiness of his message is a bitter satire upon the whole Church, with its glorification of war and admonition to overburdened women to produce more children — the latter a grotesque and deadening distortion of the life force. The nun mouths the platitude, "Qu'il est doux de revenir parmi les siens!", while remaining apart in the cold outdoors. The decayed teeth in her wan thin face suggest that submission to the Church's dictates results in a withering of humanity.[3]

The characters in *La Guerre, Yes Sir!* also face a cultural death in which their sense of identity as individuals and as a community is being increasingly repressed. The villagers are powerless against the authority and force of the English-speaking soldiers, and in the end are thrown out of their own house by these strangers. The uncomprehending sergeant disdainfully views the "pigs" who do not even speak a civilized language, and whose behaviour throughout the night is proof of the truth of his old history lesson on French-Canadian animality. Bérubé, who attempts to bridge both French and English cultures, is caught in the middle. At the conclusion he faces the prospect of his dismal future; considered by both sides to be a traitor, he is condemned to be a perpetual outsider. Thus the novel repeats the pattern of fear found in John Richardson's *Wacousta* and Jules-Paul Tardivel's *Pour la patrie* in which the notion of cultural annihilation is a primary anxiety; it reinforces the idea that collective social menace as much as individual menace is a recurring motif in Canadian gothic fiction. Yet there is a difference

between Tardivel's nineteenth century, French-Canadian version and Carrier's contemporary novel. In *Pour la patrie*, the enemy is clearly defined as the non-Catholic, notably the Freemason and English-Canadian Protestant, while the French-Canadian ideological fortress of religion and *patrie* is still intact. In *La Guerre, Yes Sir!*, by contrast, the garrison has all but fallen, having been undermined from within as well as from without.

The enemy is also more nebulous, wearing many faces besides that of the *maudit anglais*. Despite the dominance of the soldiers and the subsequent resentment of them by the villagers, the awareness of menacing cultural annihilation is more than the threat of English masters overriding French-Canadian victims. Margaret Atwood takes too limited a view of the menace in her analysis of *La Guerre, Yes Sir!*,[4] when she emphasizes the two opposing cultures. The threat is also a matter of modern technological society stamping out indigenous cultural mores and desires, of massive, impersonal forces acting against the villagers' feebler human particularities and peculiarities. As the railway station employee observes, "c'est la guerre des gros contre les petits. Corriveau est mort. Les petits meurent. Les gros sont éternels."

There is a gradually surfacing fear that even the big guys are on a path to destruction, that humanity as a whole will march to a mechanical doom. In Henri's nightmare, Corriveau's coffin enlarges and all the people in the world march into it "comme a l'église, combés, soumis". Significantly the last to disappear are the armies of soldiers, "à la discipline mécanique" like the group around Corriveau's bier. The latter stand like automatons, rigid and impassive, and even the girls noticed "il n'était pas humain qu'ils restent ainsi tante la nuit figés, raides, immobiles." Thus there is a warning that technological society with its will to power will not only turn man into a desensitized, impersonal robot, but will eventually draw him ordered and submissive to his doom. The train, roaring through the snowy wastes into the little village with its mechanized soldiers, is a technological engine of death not unlike the train which intrudes into the woods in Faulkner's "The Bear".

The horror of technological society, with its reduction of the spontaneously human to the automatic, is one more version of the gothic-grotesque motif of mechanism, found in Canadian gothic fiction as far back as *Wacousta*. Carrier's soldiers, who seem to function without feeling and to move without motive other than obedience to orders or the fulfilment of a mindless drill, represent the ultimate in dehumanization. In this as in other modern grotesque works, the technological automation suggests something demonic beyond the logical implications of a powerful system. It invokes fear of a world which is actively menacing as well as incomprehensible. In Henri's nightmare, the soldiers are like mechanical toys drawn by a central control in a little box, which marches them back into its depths and shuts the lid on them.

DESPITE THE IMPORTANCE of death as a symbolic focus, Carrier's novel is not simply a tale about death, but, as Nancy Bailey points out, it presents a battle between life and death[5] in which the two forces are often surprisingly confused. This confusion and the resulting sense of both death-in-life and life-in-death is a key to much of the grotesqueness in the book. The nun's question reveals her uncertainty as to who is really alive, despite the Church's teaching that life after death is the only valid life. Henri senses that life on earth has become a living death, that "l'homme est malheureux partout," but like the other villagers, he fears the truth of an afterlife in which the flames of Hell and purgatory torment all sinners.

Despite the forces of death which threaten to squash their humanity, the villagers have an irrepressible desire for life:

> Les villageois vivaient, ils priaient pour se rappeler, pour se souvenir qu'ils n'etaient pas avec Corriveau, que leur vie n'était pas terminée et, tout en croyant prier pour le salut de Corriveau, c'est leur joie de vivre qu'ils proclaimaient en de tristes prières.

Corriveau underlines their life-in-death desire when he complains that "s'il fallait passer devant des cerceueils et s'arreter à un cercueil, il n'était pas juste qu l'on eut en soi l'amour si évident de vie."

Many of the activities of the villagers are a mixture of life and death forces. Although the eating and drinking bouts lead to a brawling, destructive conclusion, they are in themselves a defiant display of sensuousness. Mother Corriveau's cooking becomes an almost savage attack on death in which she sweatily beats at the pie dough, sensing that the perfume of the golden baked tortiere is the essence of living; she explains that "quand on a un mort dans la maison, il ne faut pas que la maison sente la mort." In this role she becomes a kind of earth mother, a characterization which Carrier explores more fully in the second novel of the trilogy, *Floralie, où es tu?*

Sex is both an instrument of death and of life. On the one hand, the Germans are described as killing women by raping them and, to the sleeping Molly, the attacks of her loveless husband cause dreams of a knife tearing her stomach open. On the other hand Molly, a prostitute, represents the happiness of living to all the young soldiers who used to come to her. For Bérubé, the initial thought of sex outside a Church-blessed marriage leads to visions of damnation; yet with Molly in bed with him as his wife, "c'est la mort qu'ils poignardèrent violemment."

The pervasive violence also represents a confusion of life and death forces. In the story we find father beating up son, husband against wife, neighbour against neighbour, English against French, and the omnipresent spectre of the world war

itself. The war beyond the village acts only as a catalyst for the war within. The violence is an expression of the villagers' intellectual and spiritual isolation from each other, of the decline of commonly held cultural values and the resultant profound ignorance and misunderstanding of each other. The violence is destructive, but it is also a positive response to repression. It is a sign "of vitality badly used,"[6] of upsurge of life in a society where there is no common language of meaning but body language.

The recurring images of blood and snow suggest the dual implications of violence. At various points in the book, blood spills on the winter snow, whether it is the blood of the amputated hand or the beaten-up faces of the villagers in their battles with each other and with the soldiers. Snow is a traditional image of purity and innocence. In French-Canadian literature it is also an image of isolation and the inward looking naivety or sterility it produces. Maria Chapdelaine comes to mind as do the words of the familiar song by Gilles Vignault: "Mon pays, ce n'est pas un pays, c'est l'hiver." The French-Canadian garrison is built of snow and ice as much as it is reinforced by religious and nationalist principles. The bloody brawls are obviously disfiguring, cruel and destructive. At the same time the blood that spills on the snow as well as on Molly's virginal, white wedding dress may suggest a human sensuous response which overrides traditional "bloodless" ideals. Carrier's concluding statement in the novel — "La guerre avait sali la neige" — has ironic rather than tragic overtones.

Whether violent or not, many of the activities and actions in the story relate to a selfhood not fully realized, to a society where it is increasingly difficult to feel at home. At the beginning of the book Arthur tries to persuade Henri to accept the war and his soldier's role as a defence of traditional social values: "Les soldats ont comme devoir de protéger les fermiers pères de famille, les enfants, le bétail, la patrie." Yet increasingly Henri realizes his true position: "Sa femme n'était plus la sienne, sa maison n'était plus la sienne, ni ses animaux, ni ses enfants." The characters' bizarre actions reflect their estrangement, their inarticulated anxieties about an alienated life.

Sherwood Anderson has related the quality of grotesqueness in people to a single-minded pursuit of partial truths.[7] Ronald Sutherland has also suggested that Carrier's characters are grotesques because they cling to outworn truths.[8] Thus Mother Corriveau's desperate observance of religious practices becomes grotesque in its distortion, and Bérubé's reflex-like response to the values implicit in the soldiers' way of life makes a grotesque out of him, as when we see his frenzied and inhuman attempt to make a good soldier of Arsène. At the same time the characters may reflect D. W. Robertson's definition that the grotesque "is a monster because of unresolved conflicts in his makeup."[9] Sometimes "the grotesque pretends to be one thing but is actually something else,"[10] as is the case with Esmalda in particular. The unresolved conflicts often have to do with

spiritual values or social attitudes which the character has ostensibly accepted, and another reality which he actually practises. The source of humour as well as of fearful meaninglessness or absurdity partially comes from their divided response.

In a more formal way, the grotesque quality of Carrier's writing relates to a constant juxtaposition of extreme incongruities. Repeatedly he combines the extreme poles of the sacred and profane in Quebec life, a characteristic similar to that found in the late gothic phase of medieval art, and which Charles Muscatine associates with a loss of purposeful direction in the culture:

> Its religion is incongruously stretched between new ecstasies of mysticism and a profane, almost tactile familiarity with sacred matters. Its sense of fact is often spiritless or actually morbid. For all its boisterous play, the age is profoundly pessimistic; it is preoccupied with irretrievable passage of time, with disorder, sickness, decay and death.[11]

In *La Guerre, Yes Sir!* we find the twin "spiritual" values of patriotism and religion are incongruously yoked with the mundane practicalities of everyday living; the flag is a table cloth; the image of Christ on the cross merges with that of a stuffed pig; Mother Corriveau's prayer becomes an unconscious blasphemy when her Hail Mary invokes a picture of the pregnant virgin. Similarly in Mireille's dream, her toes become transformed into waxen votive candles. Sometimes the grotesque incongruity is achieved by yoking something tragic or horrible with something comical. Thus Joseph's amputation of his own hand to avoid going to war is horrifying, but it becomes grotesque when the hand is casually substituted for the frozen turd and used as a hockey puck, that commonplace of Canadian life. Disruption or confusion of our usual single response (the comic laugh with the tragic cry and the gothic gasp) reinforces our awareness of the confusion of the traditional world views and values.

There is a literary resonance in this latter image of the amputated hand which Carrier seems to be playing upon. As Madame Joseph snatches the hand from the child and tucks it under her coat before going on her way, one immediately recalls that other grotesque occasion in *Le Chercheur de trèsors* when Charles Amand snatches the *main-de-gloire* from under the noses of the medical students. The act of dismemberment is yet another variation on that recurring motif of bodily disfiguration in French-Canadian literature. Joseph's self-mutilation may be seen as a parody of the motif by a kind of *reductio ad absurdum*; Carrier may also be extending the gothic death motif by a symbolic suggestion of cultural masochism or suicide.

In other ways *La Guerre, Yes Sir!* plays with or disturbs our literary expectancies, further providing a sense of strangeness or estrangement. The view from the window in which a captive being (usually a woman) looks out from her isolated imprisonment is a repeated motif in gothic literature, but also has a

special place in Quebec literature, where the "captive" spirit often symbolically represents the isolated containment of French-Canadian society, cut off from participation in the larger outside world. One remembers, for example, the image of Maria Chapdelaine looking outward both longingly and in fear, from the confinement of her backwoods house, upon the forest and its avenues of escape. In the opening scene of *La Guerre, Yes Sir!* Joseph found, after cutting off his hand, that "cette fenêtre embuée qui le separait de la vie peu à peu fut transparente, très claire." He had a brief moment of lucidity, in contrast to the image of Isobelle-Marie in *La Belle Bête*'s opening scene, where she presses her face against the train window but soon sees nothing outside it. In nearly all cases there is a sense of a claustrophobic confinement behind the window. In *La Guerre, Yes Sir!* it is a nun standing outside in the cold who is cut off and who is left to gaze through an open window at the bustle of activity within. In this image Carrier does not seem to imply a reversal of customary meaning, that is, he does not seem to suggest that the inner group rather than the outer world is the source of vitality. After all there is death inside the room as well as without, in the coffin as well as in the decayed teeth of the nun. The nun's puzzling question as to who is alive and who is dead would rather suggest that Carrier means simply to disrupt or disturb the customary image and its cluster of associations.

TAKEN AS A WHOLE, the effect of *La Guerre, Yes Sir!*'s striking images is to startle the reader's thoughtful response rather than direct it; despite the visual clarity and dramatic impact, the images are most often ambiguous and paradoxical in their symbolic implications, unlike Carrier's later *Floralie, où es tu?*, in which the allegorical push is stronger and more insistent. Thus in this first novel in the trilogy, the grotesque alliance of horror and humour is essentially disruptive. Yet despite the sense of estrangement or absurdity which the disruptive grotesque usually expresses, *La Guerre, Yes Sir!* does not project a vision of annihilation but of cultural alteration.

Critics such as Ronald Sutherland have been quick to point out the similarity between Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* and *La Guerre, Yes Sir!*[12] Both stories revolve around a coffin, and describe the grotesque behaviour and attitudes of rural characters in response to the death of one of their own. The American's novels, like Carrier's, reflect what he regards as the moral confusion and social decay of his society, and, as Malcolm Cowley remarks, Faulkner is "continually seeking in them for violent images to convey his sense of outrage."[13] Faulkner's characters, like Carrier's, have a double meaning besides their place in the story, also serving as symbols or metaphors with a general application. In both novels, the

incidents in the story represent forces and elements in society, although neither *As I Lay Dying* nor *La Guerre, Yes Sir!* can be explained as a connected, totally logical, allegory.

However, I think there is a fundamental difference in emphasis between *As I Lay Dying* and *La Guerre, Yes Sir!* In the former novel, the smell of putrefaction, both literal and symbolic, hangs heavier in the air. Although some of the characters occasionally show signs of Faulkner's later statement that "man will not merely endure: he will prevail,"[14] survival seems an individual achievement in the face of a general social decay. In *La Guerre, Yes Sir!*, by comparison, the collective assertion of life is as pronounced as the smell of Mother Corriveau's cooking. What one senses in the grotesque distortions and inversions of dying values is the presence of change as much as of destruction; it is less a story of death than of metamorphosis. The general sense of confusion — in the character's attitudes, in the symbolic values which issue from the story, and in the response of the reader — are signals of this process. Old shapes and images shift; patterns dissolve and the disparate elements come together in startling vivid new associations.

Carrier's reference to his trilogy as a depiction of "the Middle Ages of Quebec" reinforces this notion of change rather than doom as his central theme. In Carrier's reference, the Middle Ages stretches from a period before the second world war to the middle sixties, and encompasses the end of the parochial period, the discovery of the outer industrial world and the passage from country to city life. The medieval analogy is apt, since the twentieth century decades in Quebec, like those of earlier times, present an inward looking, church-dominated world, in which the old ways are no longer life-giving forces. It marks a time in which the gap between ideal and real, seen by many critics as the essence of late medieval "decadent" gothicism, becomes an abyss in which the traditional beliefs and social values are to tumble. Yet society did not collapse at the end of the Middle Ages, but was enfused with a new life; the Renaissance was a transformation of the old into new modes of activity and awareness.

In *La Guerre, Yes Sir!* the Renaissance is not yet accomplished, but the process of change has begun. The novel is disruptively grotesque, not because of any overriding feeling of futility, but because there is no specific moral or philosophic framework against which the grotesque distortions may be judged. Carrier gives no real hint of the shape of things to come, but the undying energy of his characters and the constant upsurge of humour against horror, precludes a vision of total despair. In *La Guerre, Yes Sir!*, as in the later *Floralie, où es tu?*, the process of metamorphosis is one in which the old grotesque encasements of society must be broken through, or overturned and discarded, before a new, freer being will emerge. In this sense, then, the wooden box carrying the body of Corriveau and by implication the whole of Quebec society is less a coffin than a cocoon.

NOTES

[1] Roch Carrier, *La Guerre, Yes Sir!*, trans. Sheila Fischman (Anansi, 1970). First published by Editions du Jour (Montreal, 1968).

[2] Writing about *La Guerre, Yes Sir!*, René Dionne states that the humour largely lies in the disproportion between the characters' psychological or social stature and their actual situation. "La Guerre, Yes Sir!" *Relations*, 331 (1968), pp. 279-281.

[3] When discussing the base or false grotesque in which "grossness, of one kind or another, is, indeed, an unfailing characteristic of the style (Vol. III, p. 137)," Ruskin mentions, as an example of abominable detail, a carving at Santa Maria Formosa in which "the *teeth* are represented as *decayed*." However, the decayed teeth of Carrier's "saintly" nun do not indicate the diminutive power of the author's mind, as Ruskin would have it, but rather indicate the unhealthy attitudes of the purveyors of religion, while possibly satirizing the vacuous pink and white statuettes ensconsed in households and in whose image the villagers attempt to place Esmalda.

[4] Margaret Atwood, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (Toronto, 1972).

[5] Nancy Bailey, "The Corriveau Wake: Carrier's Celebration of Life," *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, III (Summer 1972), pp. 43-47.

[6] Carrier used this phrase in a seminar at York University.

[7] Sherwood Anderson, *Winesburg, Ohio* (New York, 1947), p. 25.

[8] Ronald Sutherland, "La Guerre, Yes Sir!," *Canadian Literature*, 40 (1969) pp. 85-86.

[9] D. W. Robertson, Jr., *A Preface to Chaucer: Studies in Medieval Perspectives* (Princeton, 1969).

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 253.

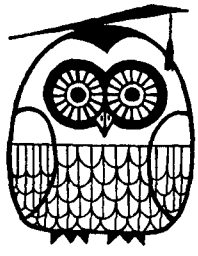
[11] Charles Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition* (Berkeley, 1969), p. 246.

[12] Ronald Sutherland, "Faulknerian Quebec," *Canadian Literature*, 40 (1969), pp. 85-86.

[13] Malcolm Cowley, "Introduction" to William Faulkner, *The Portable Faulkner* (New York, 1967), p. xxi.

[14] William Faulkner, "Nobel Prize Address," *The Portable Faulkner*, p. 724.

[15] John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*, 7 vols., 1851-53 (London, 1906), Vol. III, p. 141.



MEMOIRS OF A ROMANTIC IRONIST

Elizabeth Brewster

WHEN R. G. BALDWIN published an article about Edward McCourt a dozen years ago in *Queen's Quarterly*,[1] he commented on how little critical notice had been taken of McCourt's work. In 1976 Baldwin's complaint still remains substantially true. For an author who published during his lifetime six novels, a biography, three travel books, a work of criticism, two books for children, and numerous short stories and articles, McCourt has created singularly little stir, even in a period when people who have done much less quantitatively and whose work does not appear remarkably superior qualitatively have been praised and discussed at length. To my knowledge, no substantial articles, other than book reviews, have been published since Baldwin's. McCourt is not mentioned in such notable thematic studies as Jones's *Butterfly on Rock* or Atwood's *Survival*, nor is his work represented in such recent anthologies as the new edition of Klinck and Watters' *Canadian Anthology*, Brita Mickleburgh's *Canadian Literature: Two Centuries in Prose*, or Mary Jane Edwards' *The Evolution of Canadian Literature in English*.

Perhaps a part of this neglect is caused as much by McCourt's somewhat retiring personality as by the unassuming nature of his work. He once wrote to me jokingly, at a time when I was having difficulties in getting a book of poems published (December 18, 1967), "The trouble is, I'm sure, that you don't project the right image. And you must remember that the right image is much more important than the quality of your poetry. Can't you head up a militant campaign of some sort? Get yourself arrested?" McCourt himself was certainly not one to head campaigns, get himself arrested, or otherwise provoke comment on himself as a human being. Yet to his family, friends, colleagues, and students, his personality was an attractive one, not without its mysteries. Both as a human being and a writer, he aroused more interest on the second look than on the first.

More attention, I am sure, will eventually be paid to McCourt's writing. *Music at the Close* and *The Wooden Sword* are now available in the New

Canadian Library. A book on McCourt is being written by Winnifred Bogaards, and this will provide much information on the man and his work. It is also to be hoped that sooner or later some of his unpublished work will be published.

This unpublished work, now in the Special Collections of the Library of the University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, includes three novels, *Ragged Regiment*, *The Coyote Hunt*, and *No Snow on the Mountain*, a collection of short stories, and an autobiographical work, *The Long Years*. It might even be suggested that his most important work has not yet been published.

All three of the novels are interesting, although somewhat untypical of McCourt's published work. *Ragged Regiment*, which was written directly after his last published novel *Fasting Friar*, is an academic novel set in a fictional Atlantic university with distant resemblances to the University of New Brunswick. It perhaps owes more to an odd combination of Kingsley Amis and Angela Thirkell than to actual observation of the Maritime scene. Yet it has some effective comic passages, especially those involving Lewis Otterburn, a movie mogul who is given an honorary degree in the hope of benefactions to come, and whose resemblance to Lord Beaverbrook seems more than coincidental.

The Coyote Hunt is a much grimmer work. It is set in an ugly little prairie community named Sunlight, a later version of Sinclair Ross's Horizon. Bypassed by the "new super-highway", Sunlight is a ghost town inhabited by the living dead, full of boredom and hate. The coyote hunt of the title, a desperate effort of the community to amuse itself, turns into something more sinister as the novel progresses, a "hunt" of the outsiders in town, the local school teacher, the minister, and the community hermit. McCourt has preceded Heather Robertson in his picture of the decaying prairie community. Indeed, he was already doing so as early as *Home is the Stranger*, although in that novel the modified hopefulness of the ending tended to distract the reader from the picture of community breakdown.

Of the three novels, *The Coyote Hunt* is perhaps the most currently interesting, in spite of some unevenness, though some readers might prefer *No Snow on the Mountain*.

No Snow on the Mountain is a strange romantic and symbolic work which would probably have more appeal now than it might have had at an earlier date. It is in part a retelling of the Hippolytus-Phaedra story set in the Canadian West. Perhaps Jones and Atwood would have been interested in this novel if it had been available to them. It includes a true Canadian Venus, in the form of a girl named Rachel Lowe, rising from the waters of the river after a picnic. And it ends with the death of Roy Bothwell, the modern Hippolytus, part way up a mountain which he thought would make him divine if he reached the top. As a capsule summary, this may sound fairly comic, but actually the novel has considerable power. The classical plot gives the book a sense of inevitability, and the

voice of the first-person narrator, Roy's friend Rick Warner, has an authentic ring. It is the only one of McCourt's novels to be written in the first person — unless one considers the autobiographical *The Long Years* to be a species of fiction. McCourt might not have gone along with the term "non-fiction novel." He was too well aware of the long tradition of biography and autobiography as an art form. But the line between a novel and an autobiography as aesthetically conceived as *The Long Years* is certainly thin.

The Long Years seems to me (although I may be wrong) to be the best of McCourt's works, better than anything published during his lifetime. The typescript (267 pages double spaced) is a fair copy which appears, except for a few typing errors, to be ready for publication. The typescript is not dated. Some chapters clearly belong to the last year or so of McCourt's life, touching as they do on the old age and death of his father, whom he mentions as being alive in 1970. (McCourt himself died in January 1972.) "Our Hired Man" appeared as a short story in the Spring 1971 issue of *Queen's Quarterly*, and must date from 1970. (He mentioned, in a letter written to me December 9, 1970 that he had been doing "a good deal of writing" including "a short story for Q.Q. — and various odds and ends." This must be the story he means, and I would guess that some of the "odds and ends" later became chapters in the book.) However, some chapters are definitely of earlier date. These include "A Man for the Drink" and "The Maltese Piano," both published in the *Montrealer* in the early sixties, and both also included in his unpublished collection of short stories, *Cranes Fly South*, which he submitted unsuccessfully to a publisher in 1968. One or two others may possibly also date from the sixties.[2] I would conjecture that he wrote the larger part of *The Long Years* in 1970-71 but incorporated a few more highly fictionalized chapters which he had written earlier. Mrs. McCourt also believes the date to be approximately 1970-71, and considers it his final work aside from unfinished work in progress, a novel and a biography of Sir William Gregory of Coole which were never completed.[3]

The Long Years is not a complete autobiography. I would conjecture that the work is the first volume of what would have been a longer work if he had lived; but it is self-sufficient in itself. It tells the story of McCourt's life from his earliest memories until the time when he wrote the Provincial examinations which opened the way to his attendance at the University of Alberta. The concentration is on the first ten years of his life, the period, before and during the first Great War, when he was growing up on an isolated prairie homestead near Kitscoty, Alberta. The setting is one which, in spite of its later time, seems as harsh and primitive as that of Mrs. Moodie's *Roughing it in the Bush*, and one remembers that McCourt's sympathy with Mrs. Moodie (as expressed in his article on her reprinted in A. J. M. Smith's *Masks of Fiction*) is greater than that offered to her by younger readers such as Atwood.

I READ *The Long Years* last summer with interest and recognition and some surprise. I was a student of Edward McCourt's for two years at the University of New Brunswick in the 1940's. The background I came from was, in spite of the difference in regions, amazing similar in some respects. Perhaps because of that similarity, he had treated my own early attempts to write poems and short stories and one abortive undergraduate novel with a great deal of sympathy. He had impressed on me the importance for the writer of being faithful to his local background, of looking at the people and places he knew best. And he made it clear that a writer ought to be honest with himself, face his own personal demons, not soften or sentimentalize or smoothe over the harshness and absurdity and clumsiness and dullness of life. His novels, it seemed to me, had worked in the direction of these ideals, but they had not always come up to them as completely as had the autobiography. Many novelists begin with autobiographical fiction and proceed to do something more objective and external. McCourt seemed to reverse the procedure and work up to the personal and subjective. But, by the time he had completed *The Long Years*, he had a lifetime's practice in writing fiction behind him. He had also written a highly competent biography, *Remember Butler*. What he produced was not the amateur narrative which a beginning writer might have provided, but an aesthetically satisfying whole.

Autobiographical material is, of course, present in his published novels. Neil Fraser's schooldays, in *Music at the Close*, for instance, bear a strong resemblance to McCourt's own schooldays as described in *The Long Years*. No doubt the account of Neil's university days owes something to the young McCourt's own experience on the University of Alberta campus. Charlie Steele, the remittance man of *Music at the Close*, whom the young Neil idolizes, is clearly based on the young Englishman, Charlie Hayward, of *The Long Years*. But there are great and significant differences. Neil enters the novel, perhaps conveniently, as an orphan, so that the crucial relationship of father to son need not be analyzed. Charlie Steele is presented as a more romantic figure (although of course some of the romance is in Neil's imagination) than Charlie Hayward. And Neil is a weaker figure than his author. Neil as a central character is in some ways an interesting failure. One suspects a certain ambiguity in McCourt's intentions. No doubt he partly wished to present, as Baldwin suggests, a character led astray by "escapist" romantic dreams. But then McCourt is not unsympathetic to these romantic dreams. There is a great deal of Edward McCourt in Neil Fraser. If Neil Fraser is not always presented with approval, one may suppose that McCourt did not always approve of himself.

Home is the Stranger, my own favourite of the published novels, is not in any

obvious way autobiographical; but the sensitivity, the romanticism of Norah, the protagonist, is present in all his principal characters. She is a prairie Madame Bovary, observed less coolly than Flaubert observed Madame Bovary. It is a pity that McCourt softened the ending. Some of his sympathy with Norah's homesickness for Ireland may come from his memories of his own mother's struggles in adjusting to life on the prairie, though certainly her character as it is revealed in *The Long Years* seems to have been very different from that of Norah.

The Wooden Sword also makes use of autobiographical background only in a general way. Steven Venner, the protagonist, has a childhood far different from that of Edward McCourt. Yet, like the young McCourt, he was a bookish boy who loved the poetry of Lord Byron and wanted to be heroic like St. Paul and Robin Hood and King Arthur. And much of the novel is concerned with Steven's sense of worthlessness as a teacher, symbolized by his impotence as a husband and lover. Behind the occasionally melodramatic plot is a serious discussion of the role of the university teacher, of what is involved in a sense of vocation. Steven Venner's doubts of the value of his teaching must be doubts that every teacher, including McCourt, has shared.

Michael Troy, the youthful protagonist of *Walk Through the Valley*, is probably closest of these fictional characters to the young McCourt of *The Long Years*. As a matter of fact, McCourt wrote to me about the book (in a letter dated October 18, 1971), "I think I liked the book very much indeed when I was writing it — perhaps because the youngster and I seemed to be the same person." It is the personalities of the two boys that are alike, their boyhood dreams and youthful romanticism. But there is a great difference in the father-son relationships in the novel and the autobiography. McCourt's own father, although like Dermot Troy he was an Irish immigrant, was otherwise almost Dermot's complete opposite. It is as though McCourt found it necessary to create for his fictional counterpart a father who had the charm and romanticism and gaiety which his own father lacked, but who also had weaknesses not present in his own father.

These four novels have, as Baldwin points out, main characters who live to a certain extent in the world of romantic illusion. Michael Troy is the only one of these protagonists whom Baldwin sees as being genuinely "triumphant" because, after an initial disillusionment, "he has . . . found an invulnerable romance in the heroism of life itself."[4] Is the McCourt of *The Long Years* also "triumphant"? Perhaps. But then there are two McCourts present — the ironic, somewhat detached observer who is the adult narrator and the romantic child and youth whom the narrator remembers.

Much of *The Long Years* is less about the young McCourt himself than about the community, the neighbours, and his parents. Immigrants from Northern Ireland who had come to Canada when Edward McCourt, the youngest of the three children, was only two years old, the elder McCourts found the pioneering

experience difficult. Even though he himself could not remember the move, the immigrant experience bulks large in the McCourt novels, including the unpublished *No Snow on the Mountain*. William McCourt was a stern, undemonstrative Calvinist whose nature was made harsher by failure. McCourt writes, "I have rarely observed a companionable relationship to exist between a fundamentalist father and his offspring. Our family was no exception. My father lived in fear of God, his children lived in fear of him."[5] Yet he is not simply a stereotype of the rigid father, for McCourt notes his good qualities — his love of the countryside, his "intellectual curiosity" — and is aware of the harsh and narrow upbringing which, together with his later hardships, prevented a flowering of his personality.[6] A complex personality is suggested, and the personality is revealed not only in McCourt's direct comments but in the father's relation to the foils provided for him, the hard-drinking Charlie Hayward or the gentle hired man, Sandy.

Although McCourt's father did not model for any main characters in McCourt's novels, his mother as presented in *The Long Years* is not unlike the mother of *Walk Through the Valley*, whose first name, Elizabeth, she shares. She too had a strong religious faith, but she held it less grimly than her husband held his. A woman who yearned for more beauty and more demonstration of affection in her life, she obviously won her son's pity as well as his love. The account of her early homesick days in the new country is especially effective and is similar to the account of Norah Armstrong's yearning for Ireland in *Home is the Stranger*.

The dreamy, introspective, romantic personality that appears in some form or other in most of the published novels (and also in Colin Jarvis of *Ragged Regiment* and Roy Bothwell of *No Snow on the Mountain*) makes perhaps his most convincing appearance in *The Long Years*. Here is the small boy growing up in a setting where his imagination could wander as he willed it to. A slough "two hundred yards long and three feet deep" becomes for him all the Seven Seas. One day the Creek

> might be the Amazon or Congo, I an explorer battling my way through the dense menacing jungle that lined its banks; the next the Rubicon, with Julius Caesar, wooden sword in hand, waving his legions across; the next the Rio Grande, the cattle grazing on the hills beyond the far bank a rustled herd I had trailed all the way from Canada to Mexico and was now set to recover at gun-point.

In "the poplar bluff on the ridge above the east pasture" he played Robin Hood with a bow and arrow.

Much of his imaginative life was nurtured by books. One chapter (Chapter 12) is entitled "Books of my Boyhood." The book heroes of his boyhood are similar to those he gives to Steven Venner and Michael Troy — that is, Robin

Hood, D'Artagnan and the Three Musketeers, Wild Bill Hickok, Girt John Ridd, Buck Duane. All heroes appeal to a romantic imagination. Like every book lover brought up on a small supply of books, he read whatever he could get his hands on, from the poetry of Byron to Creasey's *Fifteen Decisive Battles of the World* and Horatio Alger's *Only an Irish Boy*. And he placed the characters from old-world books in his own prairie surroundings:

> Girt John Ridd stands forever on the manure pile down at the edge of the slough and from that lofty eminence hurls Carver Doone into the murky slime below; Pugh the blind man comes tapping along the trail winding past our shack door; Ivanhoe and the Knight Templar face each other from opposite ends of the cow pasture (when Wellington and Napoleon aren't using it); and in the dark hours the Hound of the Baskervilles still bays from the hills on the far side of the Creek.

As a romantic adolescent, although he did not have the sexual adventures of which a later generation would inevitably have written, he cherished a schoolboy crush on the thirteen-year-old niece of Colonel Buckland, the aristocrat of the neighbourhood — the teasing Peggy McKinnon, on whom Janet Maitland of *Walk through the Valley* seems to be based. But it is the comedy of the romantic attachment, and the boyish ineptitude of his youthful self, that the adult narrator emphasizes, along with his disillusionment at Peggy's hands.

Our last glimpse of the young McCourt occurs when he travels to Vermilion, Alberta ("a town so big you might as well call it a city") to write his university entrance examinations. Obliged to leave his first boarding place because of the sudden heart attack of his disagreeable landlady, he delightedly jogs off to the local hotel. Here he thinks of himself as leading the life of an independent sophisticate for a week, in whatever time he has free from writing exams. He spends the early part of his evenings alone, walking the two intersecting main streets of Vermilion, "a gawky farm lad projecting a lot of wrist and ankle from a mail order suit several sizes too small for him." Later in the evening he attends the movies (going twice in succession to the same movie) or listens to the town band when it takes over the movie house for an evening:

> Viewed in the hard clear light of common day I spent my evening in a shabby little movie house listening to a small-town band play tired old numbers in and out of tune, and to two semi-professional artists who would never make it to anywhere within a mile of the top. But the truth for me was something far different. The pianist symbolized the union, on the highest level, of art and romance, and I fell deeply in love with her. And the trumpets and trombones of the town band, played mostly by paunchy middle-aged business men who tended to run out of wind in sustained passages, were the authentic horns of elfland . . .

This glimpse, however second-rate it might be, of the larger world beyond the homestead and the small town, was the beginning of the change from boy to

adult. "I had begun moving inland away from the immortal sea into a world far different though not less splendid than that in which I had spent the long years of childhood and early youth." There speaks the eternal romantic in McCourt, triumphing for the moment over McCourt the ironist.

The young McCourt of *The Long Years* may thus be viewed (if he is historically true) as the original of McCourt's romantic protagonists; but he may equally well be viewed as their cumulation, for as a literary creation he comes later than Neil Fraser and Steven Venner and Michael Troy. If he is more appealing than Neil and Steven and Michael, it is perhaps because McCourt the narrator sees his younger self with saving irony and unsentimentality, and yet with sympathy. The book is full of droll touches of comedy and also of a kind of stubborn refusal on the part of the narrator to sentimentalize or soften what his younger self might have sentimentalized. "Splendid" though he might think the world of childhood, for instance, he will not sentimentalize his schooldays. The school was uncomfortable. He learned little, he said, from his teachers. "I disliked my schoolmates and they me. About all I remember of my schooldays with pleasure is being left alone to read in peace." Perhaps the only way he could bear to view some of the unpleasant incidents of childhood was to view them in the light of comedy.

The double personality which emerges from *The Long Years* is complex, sometimes contradictory. It seems doubtful if McCourt ever completely reconciled his romantic, idealistic, hopeful self with his cool, ironic, stoic self. But the tension between these contradictions is what, for one reader at least, makes *The Long Years* more compelling than his published novels. The authenticity of the first-person voice and the easy polish of the style no doubt also help.

McCourt did his most ambitious writing in his novels, his most immediately popular writing in his travel books; but, if one work of his more than any other is likely to last, I would predict it to be *The Long Years*. Provided, of course, it is published.

NOTES

[1] 68 (Winter 1962), 574-587.

[2] "A Man for the Drink," *Montrealer* 35 (December 1961), 36-42; "The Maltese Piano," *Montrealer*, 37 (June 1963), 29-31.

[3] This conjecture is supported by other evidence, such as the inclusion of a note on *The Long Years* in a notebook devoted to material for the unfinished biography of Sir William Gregory, on which McCourt was working in 1971. A partial handwritten first draft with the title "Remembrance, Bk. 2, Draft 1," exists in an unpaged scribbler. This includes the original of several chapters of *The Long Years*, including "The Hired Man." There is a not too legible note after one chapter which looks like "Work in stories I have." Also a typescript in the possession of Mrs. McCourt, an intermediate version, includes a handwritten note: "*The Long*

Years. First draft of autobiography. Very rough in spots. Into it should be integrated two stories — *A Man For the Drink* & *The Maltese Piano* — both in short story collection."

[4] Baldwin, p. 587.

[5] *The Long Years,* p. 9. This and all subsequent references are to the typescript in the Special Collections of the University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon. Permission to quote from unpublished material has been obtained from Mrs. McCourt.

[6] In a few pages of loose ms tucked into the draft *Remembrance,* McCourt writes about his impressions of the Ulster relatives, and says of his father, "Measured in terms of emancipation, he moved a long way. The blight of a narrow, hate-filled evangelism he never escaped from."

STEPPING OUT OF WATER

Peter Stevens

The sensation is acid.

In it, the feet
feel ice;

then out,
flesh seared away.

Bones in bright air
burn white coiled clear:

filaments
in a bell jar.

The sun shines
outside

not warming.

Feet will hiss
into steam
if you step into
that enticing
glitter
again.

POET OF APOCALYPSE

Robert Gibbs

AN APOCALYPSE is an uncovering of what has been covered. The disclosure takes the form of a dream or vision, revealing in a psychological sense what is subliminal to human consciousness. Any work of the imagination is a kind of apocalypse, but we generally reserve the label for those that have the alpha-and-omega scope associated with the last book of the New Testament. We might easily call a poem like Pratt's "The Cachalot" apocalyptic since it explores hidden places and depicts a leviathan big enough symbolically to encompass the whole of creation. Yet "The Cachalot" 's symbolic strength resides in its physical solidity. To release his imagination the poet has not had to go beyond the bounds of possibility; he has created the illusion of being wide awake and objectively faithful while suspending as much as necessary his literal awareness. The works I wish to examine are two which allowed a more overtly free play of imagination and a more conscious removal from everyday reality. The poet has cast them as dreams, visions or fantasies. Perhaps the chief source of irony in these poems lies in the fact that their inherent significance — what they disclose imaginatively — varies inversely with their conscious intent — what the poet set out to disclose. Of the two, *The Witches' Brew* and "The Great Feud", the first is richer in ironic and symbolic possibilities largely because in writing it Pratt was as free from conscious designs on his readers as on his own imagination.

What he did set out to do in *The Witches' Brew* he described in a letter to Desmond Pacey: "I must confess that the only didacticism I had in mind when I scribbled that fantasy was to get away from the dead seriousness of much of Newfoundland verse.... I wanted to strike a new vein which generally has persisted til the present with sufficient variation (I hope) to break the monotony of tone."[1] Such a disclaimer will not prevent any reader from seeing in the poem much more than a refusal to be serious. What Pratt was turning from was not seriousness but "dead seriousness," and what he was trying to strike was not a new vein for a particular work but a new direction for himself as a poet. The conscious rebellion behind the poem is not against the mechanics of the universe but against the mechanics he had too often geared his imagination to in the early poems. The poem, then, is itself a rebellion and an effort toward self-discovery,

a releasing of the poet's imagination so that he himself might know it better. The apocalyptic aspect of the poem comes from its exploration of the limits of freedom and control within the poet himself as poet, an exploration that the reader will inevitably extend.

Compared as a total form to "The Cachalot" or "The Great Feud", *The Witches' Brew* lacks solidity of body. This is apparent from the physical appearance of its ten sections on the page — the free breaking in of dialogue, inventory and prose description. Even the passages of continuous narrative vary greatly in pace and procedure, for the poet allows himself room for asides, gratuitous scraps of erudition and generous catalogues. The importance of pace is particularly noticeable in the opening sections, where the poet is taking his time in laying the table for his banquet-binge. He savours every detail for itself and expends the same care here as with one of his famous stag dinners. The one constant that gives the form its true elasticity is the tetrameter measure. Although Pratt works it with all possible freedom, and although it is not as portentously present as the "great consonant" of "The Cachalot", it is still there in the poem as an unremitting regulatory force. The tetrameter measure, as it does in *Hudibras*, effects an ironic detachment, which allows for a full imaginative engagement and which asserts its own irony against the thematic material of the poem. In this way, the rhetorical pattern, while it allows for elasticity of shape — giving the poet room to do all that he desires — demands, as true elastic does, a return to order. It is a forming agent and an informing force. The limits of freedom and control assert themselves in the poem as a poem first, so that the "brew" and its dispensing are not just matters of the poem — they are the poem.

The poem as an "apocalyptic dinner" is a submarine counterpart of the marriage supper of the Lamb. As such, its burlesque character is not so much a mockery or take-off of the biblical picture of final things as an effort to turn inside out the arbitrary order imposed on creation by dogmatic restrictions. The witches complete their concoction according to a formula which seems to reflect the divine view of things when they add to the alcoholic base —

> Cold-blooded things yet not marine,
> And not of earth, but half-between,
> That live enclosed within the sand
> Without the power of locomotion,
> And mammal breeds whose blood is hot,
> That court the sea but love it not,
> That need the air but not the land, —
> The Laodiceans of the ocean.

There is a judgment here against half-way creatures, but unlike the Divine Judge, who spews Laodiceans out of his mouth, or Dante, who allows them no place in heaven or hell, Pratt's generous vision includes them in the feast, if not as partakers, at least as food. But the witches, once started, stick to no formula. The catalogue of actual ingredients departs freely from the sanctioned recipe and includes anything from an Ungava bull moose to Zulu hams. This generous refusal to make a separation between sheep and goats is typical of a poem which develops expansively to test any limits it asserts.

One of the more obvious ironies of the poem is that the creature chosen to maintain order, to act as sentinal over the brew and the elect, is Tom, the cat from Zanzibar, himself an archetypal rebel. Yet the choice is appropriate to the experiment, which is to bring total release from natural discipline to a whole order of creatures. In depicting Tom, Pratt clearly sees him as a cosmic force, a Lucifer in the natural order:

> No leopard, lynx or jaguar
> Could match this cat from Zanzibar
> For whiskers that from ear to chin
> Ran round to decorate his grin.
> And something wilder yet than that
> Lay in the nature of this cat.
> It's said that mariners by night,
> When near a dangerous coast-line, might
> Recover bearings from the light
> Of some strange thing that swam and gleamed;
> A Salamander it might be,
> They said, or Lucifer that streamed
> His fiery passage through the sea.

He is a solid creature of Pratt's imagination, clearly a close relative to the omniscient ironist of *Alice in Wonderland*, but he is just as clearly the embodiment of that free force with which the poet himself is moving. He is the central figure of the poem, its most Prattian creation. As such, he symbolizes an imagination freed to rove through the cosmos, to illuminate its dark places with his fiery tail. He electrifies the poem and its readers as he electrifies the banqueters. For all his identification with Lucifer and for all the poet's carefully kept illusion of detachment from his poem, Tom is the creature with whom his creator clearly identifies, since he bodies forth the very spirit which is the poem's impulse.

The identification of Tom with Lucifer is not, at this point in the poem, a moral one. Tom in the expression of his own nature is as free from moral blame as any of the lower creatures. The poet in his imagination, then, enjoys a moral

freedom that he does not otherwise enjoy. This irony is at the heart of the poem and at the heart of Pratt's poetic vision. Poetry itself becomes a means of release from the order of nature and from the moral order, to which man alone is subject. A work of imagination which gives the poet's *alazon* spirit free expression, while by its nature keeping an ironic check upon that spirit, embodies the central paradox of man's place in nature as seen by a rational mind and in a moral universe as seen by a Christian humanist. The imaginative embodiment of an insoluble riddle effects a release from it. Tom's presence at the banquet is itself a guarantee for the electrified revellers of a final revelation.

The "Inventory of Hades" reinforces the central theme. The spirits released through Hell's Gates are not escaping the bonds of individual moral responsibility but are breaking from the restricting, artificial masks that they have had to wear in life. The poet sees them as such roles and not as individiuals. The comic tone effected by the cumulative play of rhythm counters any sense of their release with a good-humoured acceptance of their bonds. After all, they come not to partake of the brew's releasing force but to observe rather enviously. The distinction between them and the other creatures lies at the poem's moral centre. The mock-epic question that the poet set out to explore was "The true effect of alcohol/ Upon the cold aquatic mind." This is really another assault on the "monologue of silence", another confrontation with mechanical necessity and the creatures subject to it. But here, the poet's imagination is intent on releasing them from what they are.

The fishes' release is not from moral inhibitions; from them they are already free. Yet their moral innocence is conditional upon their being mechanically determined. The experiment that the devil, the witches and the shades will watch with such interest is to see what effect mechanical freedom will have on creatures already morally free. The destructive chaos that results answers the epic question and brings the circular argument around to its beginning. Moral freedom and mechanical freedom are mutually exclusive, just as moral responsibility and mechanical necessity are mutually exclusive. That man sees himself as simultaneously under both conditions is a dilemma from which only his imagination can free him.

The mechanism by which the witches dispense their brew is hierarchical, carefully calibrated and adjustable to every need. The mechanism by which the poet dispenses his brew to slake his own "vast Elizabethan thirst" is equally well regulated. Just as the volume of traffic in the sea threatens to wreck the witches' mechanism, so Pratt's almost breaks under the force of his imaginative indulgence. The choral comments by the Shades on the chaotic events by their ironic

detachment maintain an order, a rational superstructure over the drunken riot. The pace and the threat of complete collapse heighten when the cauldron is breached. At this point, when a more cautious poet might have drawn back satisfied with the extent of freedom asserted and realized, Pratt chooses to push on to an ultimate stage.

"The Supreme Test" is, then, one for the poet as well as for the witches and Satan. Tom, the archetypal rebel, the embodied assertion of imaginative freedom, will receive enough of the liquor to release his full force into the poem's universe and into the poem. He becomes with the hundredth flagon ". . . Hell's darkest fiend — / A sea-cat with an awful jag-on", the archetypal fighting Irishman, at war with everything and everyone including himself. He is all natural and metaphysical energy at war with itself, the very spirit of chaos. As the poem is Pratt's means of releasing this infernal and celestial energy into his universe, it also is his means of controlling it, of subduing it to creative ends. As the poem must come to an end, Tom's luminous trail must disappear, driven back to some "mystic goal", the occult source of its creative and destructive being.

The energy and freedom that the poet found here would persist as imaginative potentials for release in later work. No other poet among those published before 1930 expresses as fully and as distinctly Pratt's own peculiar vision.

"The Great Feud", published with "The Cachalot" in 1926, differs in several important respects from *The Witches' Brew*. Fundamental to all differences is the greater degree of conscious intent that controls the poem's narrative and imaginative development. Pratt cast it as an allegory, an animal fable having clear relevance to human affairs.

> I have called it a Dream though it might appropriately be termed a nightmare. What might happen in a Second War or a Third, though naturally the A-Bomb and the Hydrogen type were not forming their terrible mushrooms. It is an Armageddon between the inhabitants of the land and those of the sea. It is an attempt to give a picture of some stage in the evolutionary struggle for existence, of how near extinction a race might come if the instinct of aggression were given absolute rein.[2]

From this statement in retrospect of the poem's intent, we can see that Pratt's mind was working in at least two directions: one, from the contemporary situation back to an imaginary situation which would effectively allegorize it; and the other, from the remote past to a forward view of the whole evolutionary struggle. This twofold perspective enriches the poem's imaginative possibilities and allows for several valid interpretations, such as those which Sutherland examines.[3] Yet the poet's seriousness of purpose cannot help but circumscribe the possibilities that the poem offers for interpretation.

The release that Pratt allows himself in "The Great Feud" manifests itself as a release of the violence which he consciously abhorred. The freedom he discovered in *The Witches' Brew* lies behind this release, but it comes now closer to the release of nightmare anxiety than to one of wish fulfilment. The ambivalence of attitude toward violence cuts more radically into this poem, effecting at times a greater tension than it can bear. Between what the poet consciously wishes to depict as horror and what he less consciously reveals as self-indulgence, the poem generates an irony that calls into question the deliberate ironies of the allegorical conception. The poem seems to ask the reader to take it both more seriously and less seriously than he is willing or able to do. The result is a fluctuating response, which carried throughout a reading may result in fatigue or frustration.

The poem begins securely enough. The tetrameter measure with its frequent enjambements and interlocking rhymes gives sufficient impetus at the outset and at the same time effectively expresses the slow, inevitable uncoiling of the evolutionary scroll, which forms the basis of the fable. The poem does, in fact, as effectively as it does anything, capsulize in a single episode the whole evolutionary struggle. On this level, it is a vision of all struggle as one struggle, the gathering of all biological time into one time and uncovering there the cumulative magnitude of an endless expense of violence. This revelation is perhaps the most original of its apocalyptic aspects, since it places in the Darwinian principle the fearful possibility that cumulatively it may prove more destructive than creative.

Jurania rises in the poem as a freely imagined and spontaneous creation, though obviously she has a place in the allegorical scheme.

> Jurania, with her crater jaw,
> Her slanting forehead ancient-scarred,
> And breathing through her smoky maw,
> Lay like a dragon left to guard
> The Isthmian Scarps against the climb
> Of life. . . .

Clearly, Jurania in the context of biological evolution represents forces more primitive than those at work there. It is fitting that this geological dragon will later release into the poem a biological one, who will link the most primitive and the most developed manifestations of mindless force. The volcano's backward ties become clear at the end of the poem when it erupts ". . . as if to meet/ Its own maternal stellar fire." Jurania in herself contains the central irony in Pratt's view of evolution. As a link between cosmic and biological impulses, her energy is creative; as a check on the upward "climb of life", her energy is retarding. But when she releases her energy into the poem, it is to check, not life, but life run

wild in destructive violence. Her release has also the effect of saving the life most significant to evolution, as though an ultimate purpose behind her insentience were directing her force to that end.

The "fear of racial doom" induced among the fish by changing conditions leads to futile anger which is self-destructive — a "consuming vertigo". Pratt turns his tetrameter line to good advantage to make mock of this malaise:

> It broke their hearts and crushed their wills,
> It thinned the juices of their maws,
> Left them with gnashing of the jaws
> And deep prolapsis of the gills.
> And hitherto unsuffered pains,
> A ghastly brood, came in by legions,
> Rheumatic tremors in the veins,
> And palsy in the ventral regions.

Clearly any movement that turns upon itself, any whirligig motion, such as this vertigo, takes on in Pratt's imagination the symptoms of psychosomatic disease. Health requires a forward and outward and free expression of impulses. The question that rises now is whether or not the tendency of the poem to assume the character of its matter, which we noted in *The Witches' Brew*, applies here. Does Pratt's imagination turn in upon itself? Does the impulse of the poem become a "consuming vertigo" under the constricting force of the central fable? Pratt's own answer at this early point in the narrative is a clear no, although he too raises the questions as horrors in the fishy consciousness.

> But worst of all the horrors which
> Enmeshed them was the galling sense
> That never would the recompense
> Of battle come; the primal itch
> For vengeance would expend its force,
> According to an adverse Fate
> Running a self-destroying course
> Down the blind alley of their hate.

THE FREEDOM which the poet looks for in himself he finds as a saving grace in nature, a quirkiness that keeps her like her fish from "Running a self-destroying course/ Down the blind alley. . . ." Subsequent events do release the fish by providing suitable objects for their destructive impulses. But viewed from a higher vantage point, and the poem as it moves forward demands

such a perspective, the Armageddon that comes is as self-destructive, as much a matter of "consuming vertigo," as the fish's earlier malaise. The quirk has altered "the settled scheme of things" only by universalizing it. I am not at all sure that the poet does not hoist himself and his poem on his own petard. The forward impulse in the poem is almost lost in the display of self-destructive energy.

If Pratt prevented such anomalies from doing the poem irreparable damage, it was done by a strict adherence to his own role as the irreverant observer of the twists and doublings back and struggles for escape in the evolutionary mechanics of the universe. His poem, which moves with these movements, never quite becomes a pointless self-indulgence, since it continues to body forth a distinctive vision.

The female ape holds the centre of the stage through the remainder of the first half of the poem. Her position in the scheme is quite clear. She represents the glimmerings of reason and of moral responsibility. The freedom she enjoys is clearly the freedom to be wrong. Even the reasoning that has brought about in her the birth of ethics is spurious, since she has taken an event of pure chance as manifesting a universal moral principle. The "raw/ Material of the moral law" which she has "sniffed" holds no promise of enlightenment beyond a concept of mechanically retributive justice. She assumes leadership of the land animals before she is able to lead, except toward chaos. Yet her freedom mirrors in its essentials the kind of freedom man enjoys in Pratt's universe, freedom to act with only a glimmering of moral insight, freedom to work out his own destruction as well as his salvation. Pratt's "anxiety-dream" for mankind is implicit in this image of limited freedom with moral responsibility.

Bloated with a sense of her own enlightenment, the ape becomes an alazon figure, guilty of hubris in presuming to pass judgment on a whole order of beings. Her epic address of the land creatures occupies almost a hundred and seventy lines of verse, and although it advances the narrative somewhat, it allows her self-indulgence to spill over into the poem. The poet lets his material expand beyond his slender fable's capacity. A similar expansion occurs in "The Muster". Captivated by his own conceit regarding the effects of vegetarianism on carnivorous animals, the poet gives himself the long leash of a hundred and twenty lines to work it for all it is worth. The material of these lines contains the most Prattian humour of the poem, but again it distends the total form. The critical irony here is that where the poet has, in fact, more limited freedom, he has chosen to take greater liberties.

Tyrannosaurus Rex comes into the poem as part of the poem's process. He represents a doubling back of evolution on itself and so symbolizes the entire

movement of the poem. He is to this poem what Tom is to *The Witches' Brew*, the most original and Prattian creation in it as well as its central symbol. The laborious machinery by which the poet brings him to birth is appropriate to the poem as are his ponderous bulk and movements. He represents the kind of imaginative energy that Pratt is generating here. He dominates the latter part of the poem, though he remains like his creator essentially apart from the rest of creation. He is not as clear a centre of sympathy as Tom. By his very nature, as a mindless creature, impelled by purely mechanical instincts, he remains something of an abstraction. He has none of Tom's vitality and individuality. Only his dumb confusion at being thrust out of his time into a conflict that he cannot understand brings him near his end closer to the poet and his readers. From being an incongruous and ridiculous figure laying about him indiscriminately in the battle scenes, he takes on a kind of pathetic stature in the long climb to his death:

> He cleared the base, his body fagged
> And clambered on from shard to shard,
> Pausing, jibbing, breathing hard.
> Under his weight his knee-caps sagged;
> Bleeding fast from fissures torn
> By tiger fang and rhino horn
> He groped and stumbled up until
> He reached a level granite sill;
> Raw fillets hanging from his thighs
> He sank a moment faint with pain;

As a symbol which gathers in the whole force of the poem, apart from the moral and rational glimmerings manifested in the ape, Tyrannosaurus Rex has become the object, the victim as well as the repository or sleeping potential of destructive energy. At this point, he appears to symbolize the whole creation and its suffering. The voice of the sea-god who laments his passing is mourning for all "blind wanderers" caught in and destroyed by the evolutionary struggle. Tyrannosaurus Rex achieves a certain Christ-like sublimity here, but since no choice, no moral decision, no glimmering of love or sympathy has motivated him, he cannot be taken as Sutherland takes him[4] for a Christ-symbol. His victimization lies in his mindlessness; Christ's, in the supremacy of his awareness. He is the "dark unreason" that reason has unleashed, yet his presence as a "mutual enemy" of land and sea creatures has kept their conflict in abeyance. His death allows in them a total release of violence, which is as primitive and undiscriminating as his own.

In its conclusion, "The Great Feud" re-establishes the poet's vision as primarily

ironic. Jurania, a primal source of destructive power, in her eruption saves creation from self-extinction. The female ape does not deserve to escape by any virtue other than the superiority of her perceptions. She, in relation to Jurania and the whole evolutionary process, represents the involvement of reason and moral awareness with fate or necessity in the unleashing of destruction. She is no tragic figure, since her survival involves no self-discovery or assuming of responsibility. She is a new and unpredictable element in the ironic mesh. Pratt manages to leave her a more sympathetic creature than he finds her at first:

> She found her lair, and brokenly
> She entered in, cuddling her brood
> To withered paps . . .

What is to the fore here is the instinct of mother-love, more primitive and more universal than reason or moral awareness. The primal powers that have worked in the poem to preserve the highest being in creation manifest a similar concern. The poet continues to see nature as controlled and driven by impulses that contain their opposites. His own imaginative indulgence uncovers the paradox in himself as creator. When the violence in the poem is at its height, the rhetoric exercises its power to detach the reader from it; when the violence subsides or is in abeyance, the rhetoric allows for a closer sympathy between the creator and his creation. In this respect, the form is admirably suited to the conception and can be justified in all its bulk and ponderousness as a natural growth. There is, however, the matter of a deliberateness which is at odds with the freedom that the poet needs to work best within the hyperbolic convention. That the poem brings forth Tyrannosaurus Rex is a triumph of the poet's imagination. That Tyrannosaurus Rex has not the vitality of Tom, the Cat from Zanzibar, points to a limitation that shows up elsewhere in those distortions which are distortions of the total form.

NOTES

[1] Letter to Desmond Pacey, November 11, 1954.

[2] Letter to Desmond Pacey, October 29, 1954.

[3] " . . . *The Great Feud* can be viewed with almost equal validity from at least three distinct standpoints: as . . . a poem of social comment, as an essay in psychological analysis, or as a work of religious vision." John Sutherland, *The Poetry of E. J. Pratt; A New Interpretation,* (Toronto; Ryerson, 1956), p. 81.

[4] "In fact, as in the case of the whale, it is impossible not to associate the dinosaur with the figure of Christ." *Ibid.*, p. 105.

NOVEL AND ROMANCE

T. D. MacLulich

RECENT THEMATIC STUDIES have brought a considerable degree of order into discussions of the main intellectual concerns of Canadian literature. In particular, the thematic critics have specialized in unearthing the hidden patterns of fiction — a form which appears to yield more readily to their analysis than does poetry. But the more traditional picture of Canadian fiction, obtained by defining the chronological stages in its development and isolating the formal literary "kinds" of writing, has not advanced significantly beyond the state reached in those two monuments to critical orthodoxy, Desmond Pacey's *Creative Writing in Canada* and the collectively authored *Literary History of Canada.*

These books propose a simple hypothesis about the development of fiction in Canada: the movement they project is basically a straight-line progression away from romantic and unrealistic treatment and towards a realistic, socially committed fiction. In presenting their argument, the authors make the traditional identification of the mainstream of Canadian fiction with the realistic novels of Grove, Callaghan, MacLennan, and Davies. But this analysis may be misleading. When all the works which fall outside the central tradition are grouped together — the isolated anomalies like Howard O'Hagan's *Tay John* and Sheila Watson's *The Double Hook*, as well as the best of the many works usually described in a somewhat dismissive manner as "regional" — the mavericks seem, in fact, to outnumber the mainstream.

The theory of a development towards realism has gained wide credence largely because critics have started with a built-in bias in its favour; they have felt, on what appear to be fundamentally moral grounds, that a progression towards realism *ought* to have taken place. The writer should face up to his social obligations; fiction should depict the actual world, not some escapist fantasy-land: these have been tacit critical axioms. Therefore, critics have equated realistic with "serious" fiction and non-realistic with less serious, more "popular" fiction. Realism and non-realism have been turned into value-judgments rather than simply being used as descriptive categories.

It was Pacey's work which gave canonical form to the idea of a movement towards realism. His division of fiction into historical romance, regional idyll, and realistic novel has haunted Canadian criticism ever since the first publication of *Creative Writing in Canada*. To the first two of these forms he attributed a lower intrinsic value than to the last, and he argued that the trend away from historical romance and regional idyll was an upward climb towards a higher incarnation as realistic fiction.

The *Literary History of Canada* repeats what is essentially Pacey's theory. Its authors trace with approval the way Canadian literary geography has gradually caught up with the country's actual physical and human geography. A limited number of critically respectable writers are praised for the way they "have confronted their experience with critical independence and have recorded their insights with a new subtlety and technical power." The great mass of less reputable or merely popular writers are condemned or patronized because they "still inhabit romantic worlds which have very little to do with the realities of Canadian life."[1] Only Frye's "Conclusion", which is largely thematic in method, implies a reservation about this easy dismissal. In the eyes of most Establishment critics, realism seems to be the natural form of prose fiction in Canada, the condition towards which it has evolved by a sort of literary natural selection.

What is needed, I suggest, is a different analysis, one conducted in terms which are both less biased and more fundamental. The *Literary History* is strewn with a bewildering variety of terms resulting from the critics' attempts to describe the kinds of writing done by Canadian authors. In the end these terms serve to disguise instead of to reveal the larger overall pattern of development. However, a terminology which describes in a neutral way the basic distinction the critics have made, that between realistic fiction and fiction which is not realistic, is already well-known to criticism. A revealing picture of the development of Canadian fiction, a picture which is closely in accord with the trend of the work actually produced, can be obtained by using the conventional distinction between the "romance" and the "novel". This distinction avoids the confusing multiplicity of *ad hoc* terminology which has grown up, and helps to explain some of the developments, especially in new fiction, which upon occasion have troubled the critics.

Rather than a steady progression towards realism, the development of Canadian fiction reveals a tension between the romance and novel, between "romantic" and "realistic" ways of portraying the world. The basic elements in the pattern are quite simply stated: the emergence in the nineteenth century of the romance as the dominant form; the degeneration of the romance around the turn of the century into more sentimental popular forms; a reaction during the first part of the twentieth century away from the romance and towards the realism of the novel; a brief period at mid-century when the novel was the

prevalent form; and most recently a reappearance of the romance in modern guises. Most of these stages can be traced in the consciously held attitudes of the writers, as well as in the fiction itself.

The first fiction, in the usual sense of the word, written about Canada is *The History of Emily Montague,* published in 1769 by the British authoress Frances Brooke. The first full-length fiction written by a native-born Canadian is *St. Ursula's Convent; or, the Nun of Canada,* published in 1824. Mrs. Brooke's work, despite its romantic subject and attitudes, is arguably the first Canadian novel; *St. Ursula's Convent* is undoubtedly the first Canadian romance. But these books, and the few scattered works which appeared before the great influx of immigration (and thus of potential readers and writers) which occurred during the middle years of the nineteenth century, did not establish any firm literary tradition.

THE TRUE PARENTS of Canadian fiction are the early magazine editors, such as John Gibson of the *Literary Garland,* and the writers, such as Mrs. Moodie and Mrs. Traill, who helped to fill the pages of these magazines. Of course, the books for which Mrs. Moodie and Mrs. Traill are best remembered are not fiction in the usual sense. Nonetheless, considered as proto-fiction, *Roughing it in the Bush* and *The Backwoods of Canada* illustrate the two opposing attitudes to the fictionalizing of experience — what W. D. Gairdner has aptly called "the two realities"[2] — which give birth to the two most common forms of fiction, the romance and the novel.

Mrs. Moodie's heightened emotional aspirations, her distaste for mere physical things, and her fascination with the extreme and the grotesque in human behaviour, are all characteristics which are found in the romance. Mrs. Traill's matter-of-fact vision, her concern with real objects and with comfort, and her view of the social niceties as an evolving set of customs are concerns which underlie the novel — the form of literature most closely allied with bourgeois materialism. Mrs. Traill's actual fiction, such as *The Canadian Crusoes,* although romantic in outlook, is more novelistic in form than is Mrs. Moodie's. Mrs. Traill includes the realities of Canadian life, albeit somewhat softened and sentimentalized, within the framework of her fiction; but when Mrs. Moodie turns to wholly imaginative writing, her sense of what an educated British audience would expect, her sense of what is conventionally correct in fiction, takes over completely. As a result, she produces a series of sentimental and genteel love-stories set in elegant English manor-houses.

In the fiction of nineteenth-century Canada, it is Mrs. Moodie's impulse towards the romance which carries the day. Major Richardson exploits the hair-raising aspects of frontier Indian warfare to provide appropriate action for his

gothic romance, *Wacousta.* In *The Golden Dog* William Kirby views exaggeratedly emotional events centring on love, cruelty, and greed as the proper subject-matter of fiction; as characters he favours the aristocratic personages of the *ancien regime*, preferably those rumoured to have had secret vices and weaknesses of character. Both of these writers have at times been praised for their literary skill, but neither could be held out as a model of historical accuracy or of fidelity to everyday life.

Although writers in nineteenth-century Canada believed their task was worthwhile, being "literary" made them feel isolated. Through their art, they sought to raise audiences to a higher level of cultivation, and thereby to re-establish a sense of social solidarity. Mrs. Moodie had an elevated conception of her role, and a high ideal of the level at which writer and reader should meet. But gradually, as a larger and less educated reading public appeared in the later years of the century, writers lowered their target and came to pursue a wide readership at the expense of standards. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that since there were no established standards for them to uphold, Canadian writers allowed themselves to accept popularity as a measure of merit. Had not Sir Walter Scott and Charles Dickens been popular in their day? And in Canada, had not Richardson and Kirby imitated Scott and produced works of acknowledged worth? Then the popular writers of their own day, many Canadian writers seemed to feel, provided appropriate models to follow. Novelists imitated American local colour writers or popular British novelists and romancers, especially those of the Kailyard school; poets were influenced by Kipling. The way was soon prepared for Robert Service, with his shamelessly popular sort of verse.

In Canada, then, at the turn of the century, the distinction between serious art and the merely popular was not a clear one. The same writers could be found publishing poems in magazines with intellectual pretensions, and stories in magazines aimed at a broad popular readership. The Confederation poets yearned for a renewed union of artist and audience, and in their pursuit of readers they produced much work which today appears little removed from the level of the hack. Roberts and Campbell both wrote several sentimental romances; Roberts produced his patriotic odes and Campbell his *Sagas of Vaster Britain.* Even D. C. Scott turned out stories of French-Canadian village life which, although on a higher level than the romances of Roberts and Campbell, are still notable excursions into sentimentality and bathos. And Bliss Carman pandered to the popular taste for his brand of romantic escapism combined with vague spiritual uplift.

Like the earlier movements in Canadian fiction, the emergence of the realistic novel was also based on the imitation of foreign models. In this case the inspiration was those later nineteenth-century British writers, such as Meredith, George

Eliot, or Hardy, who wrote for a smaller and more exclusive public than the great Victoria novelists had reached, or the American novelists, like Howells and James, whose work was critical of established social values and sometimes wilfully "difficult" in style.

In Canada the chief spokesman for the new critical realism was Sara Jeannette Duncan. Under her own name and as "Garth Grafton" she conducted columns in the pages of Goldwin Smith's *The Week* which frequently attacked the middle-class values of those she called (by analogy with Matthew Arnold's British Philistines) the Canadian "Maoris". Miss Duncan described the Maori's favourite reading in terms which leave little doubt she was describing the popular romance:

> In fiction he likes a story with a good deal of incident and accident — though he condemns sensationalism — and he likes it to end well. He is particular about the ending, and it not infrequently determines the whole merit of the book for him.[3]

During recent years, she said, fiction had undergone a great transformation, which the Maori seemed totally unable to appreciate:

> The novel of to-day may be written to show the cumulative action of a passion, to work out an ethical problem of every-day occurrence, to give body and form to a sensation of the finest or of the coarsest kind, for almost any reason which can be shown to have a connection with the course of human life, and the development of human character. . . . The old rules by which any habitual novel reader could prophesy truly at the third chapter how the story would "come out" are disregarded, the well-worn incidents discarded, the *sine qua nons* audaciously done without. Fiction has become a law unto itself, and its field has broadened with the assumption.[4]

The outstanding early example of a full-realized realistic novel is also from the pen of Miss Duncan. *The Imperialist* provides a rounded and perceptive anatomy of life at the turn of the century in a Canadian small town. Elgin, Ontario, is populated chiefly by Maoris, with as light admixture of the colonially-minded, and a very sparse leavening of free spirits like Advena Murchison. The book shows how the materialistic values of the town defeat the idealistic Lorne Murchison and uneasily reject the intellectually-inclined Advena. However, criticism of established social values was not a thing Canadian audiences could readily accept. Miss Duncan's barbed comments were not always appreciated by the conservative-minded among her readers — a not inconsiderable class. At only a slightly later date, another Canadian with a considerable gift for social criticism, Stephen Leacock, allowed his talents to be frittered away in meeting the reading public's insatiable appetite for "further foolishness" — or so Robertson Davies has persuasively argued.[5]

A book which strikingly illustrates the Canadian writer's uncertain grasp of

literary forms is Ralph Connor's *The Man from Glengarry*. The first part of the book, in keeping with Connor's stated intention "to so picture these men and their times that they may not drop quite out of mind,"[6] memorably depicts the Glengarry backwoodsmen in terms which magnify but do not destroy their humanity. The tensions within the community, centred on its strict Presbyterian religion, are convincingly portrayed, and the conflict within Ranald Macdonald is well-developed. But in the second portion of the book Connor sidesteps the intense psychological tension he has created by releasing Ranald from the ingrown and repressed east into the free and honest west. In the process he shifts his book from a novel to a romance. From a human being facing difficult moral and social choices, Ranald changes to a peerless embodiment of Christian manliness and virtues — a combination of the Redcrosse knight and the local scoutmaster. The change is more than the book can bear. Conviction is lost and Ranald becomes a cardboard figure. Romance, in its most abased form, triumphs over the initial novelistic impulse.

Although occasional examples of the realistic novel continued to appear in the years immediately before and after World War I, it was not until a new post-war generation had grown up that the critical, realistic attitude became the norm in serious Canadian fiction. The change from romance to novel was not complete until the works of Morley Callaghan and Frederick Philip Grove began to appear during the late twenties and the thirties. Callaghan began his career with novels which contain traces of the theories of environmental determinism held by earlier European and American writers. He progressed to a series of parables which criticize society by comparing it with an ideal standard, derived from a literal application of Christian ideals. Grove deliberately created a series of novels which record the opening of the west during the early years of the century, and analyze the upheavals in moral values and social structures which took place during those years.

After World War II the realistic novel continued to dominate, reaching new heights in the work of Hugh MacLennan and Robertson Davies, as well as in the continuing work of Callaghan. MacLennan's ideas about the writer's task can stand as representative of the views of this group of writers. Like Grove and Callaghan, MacLennan sees himself as a "serious" writer, as opposed to a merely popular one. He and other serious Canadian writers, he says in one of his articles, intend to record aspects of social reality. In so doing they are following in the tradition of the great nineteenth-century British and European novelists who attempted to depict society and human nature in an accurate, realistic manner:

> The serious novel of modern times has usually concentrated on what I have called social symbolism — on man in his relation with organized society, with politics, war, economic conditions, and with the local morals of a specific group.[7]

In the works of Grove, Callaghan, and MacLennan, the triumph of the novel might seem to be complete. Certainly, in their critical theorizing, the novel's urge towards realistic social comment is the dominant element. Yet Callaghan and MacLennan, in many of their books display a longing for heroism, an impulse towards the romance. Many of Callaghan's heroes meet their fate because they have sought to pattern themselves on divine perfection. MacLennan has a strong affinity for the heroic and primitive Odysseus figure, although he habitually, but with great reluctance, destroys him. Even if we believe MacLennan's disclaimer of deliberate intent, the fact remains that the repeated mythic pattern traced by George Woodcock is present in MacLennan's books, providing a strong pressure towards the romance form, within the conventional novelistic framework of MacLennan's fiction.[8]

It has been said that the action of the romance proves the protagonist "to be what he, and the author, and we the readers knew from the start he was — a hero." On the other hand,

> the protagonist of the novel is likely to discover, with Falstaff, that there is no future for heroism, that he himself is a perfectly ordinary man, with the experience and knowledge that suit his station.[9]

In these terms, both Callaghan and MacLennan lean towards romance themes, for they depict small men yearning to be great or pure. It is more from flaws in the arrangement of the world than from flaws in their own nature that Callaghan's heroic idealists perish; the world ought to be different, Callaghan seems to imply. Moral heroism ought to be possible. Grove is more purely the novelist; he depicts men who yearn to be great or pure, and learn they are only men, with finite, mixed natures.

The pivotal chapters in D. G. Jones' *Butterfly on Rock* and Ronald Sutherland's *Second Image* agree in basing their argument on books in which a strong romance strain can be detected. Most notably, the two critics concur on the thematic importance of MacLennan's *The Watch that Ends the Night* and Colin McDougall's *Execution*. The crux of Jones' and Sutherland's argument is that Canadian writers attempt to present solutions to the dilemma of the man who feels the world is not a fair or a reasonable place in which to live. The Canadian protagonist asks: how can I believe there is a purpose and meaning to the seemingly arbitrary events of the world?

The solution, Jones and Sutherland argue, is proposed in individual and existential terms. Canadian fiction takes a personal viewpoint; not a social viewpoint. Grove is our most consistently socially-minded novelist, and his outlook

can be explained as being the result of his wider European background. Abe Spalding, who resolves his quarrel with the universe by finally returning to a full participation in his immediate local community, is not a typical Canadian protagonist. But MacLennan, to take a more representative example, provides romantic resolutions to the national political issues raised in *Barometer Rising* and *Two Solitudes*, as if love could transform political realities; and in *The Watch that Ends the Night* the social issues raised in the book's first portion are quietly shelved in favour of a general consideration of human mortality. McDougall's *Execution* turns away from the larger problems of meaning and justice presented by the events of World War II, and focuses on a redeeming act of personal sacrifice.

Another way of saying that Canadian fiction chooses a personal viewpoint is to say that it prefers the romance to the novel. Frye has said that "the romancer does not attempt to create 'real people' so much as stylized figures which expand into psychological archetypes." In the romance, he says, "we find Jung's libido, anima, and shadow reflected in the hero, heroine, and villain respectively."[10] Many of the best-known "realistic" Canadian novelists have written late, mature works, recognized as being among their best, which contain such characters. MacLennan's *The Watch that Ends the Night* gives us the heroic Jerome Martell and the ethereal, saint-like Catherine. Callaghan's *The Loved and the Lost* centres on MacAlpine's pursuit of the lovely and idealistic, but not-quite-real Peggy Sanderson, who represents all that is best and most innocent within his own soul. Robertson Davies, whose first three novels were the epitome of social dissection, has turned in *Fifth Business* and *The Manticore* to the theme of inner self-discovery, and has filled his pages with hints of intangible powers, and with characters or dream-visions who seem to be projections of the central character's psyche.

Recent writers, those who began publishing in the late fifties and the sixties, have turned away from literal realism. Books like Cohen's enigmatic *Beautiful Losers*, Robert Kroetsch's *The Studhorse Man*, or Sheila Watson's *The Double Hook* are essentially modern versions of the romance. In this modern fiction, the mythic underpinnings of fictional structures are again being brought close to the surface. Although Mordecai Richler, when he is not writing satire or journalism, turns out traditional novels, he is an exception among post-war writers. In general the writer has retreated to, or perhaps simply reoccupied, the ground which he alone can best inhabit. Literal realism has been abandoned to the writers of non-fiction and to the moviemakers.

Although it may be true, as Frye has suggested, that "of the general principles of cultural history we still know relatively little,"[11] it is possible to suggest an explanation for the strength of the romance strain in Canadian fiction. Canadians have traditionally lacked confidence in their own country and in its culture and institutions. The studies of Jones and Sutherland, along with Margaret

Atwood's *Survival*, suggest that English-Canadian writing (and Sutherland adds French-Canadian fiction) is characterized by a profoundly negative outlook, by insecurities and feelings of victimization. Canadian writers cannot with conviction base their faith in life on an analysis, much less a celebration, of a society they see as a trap or a cage. Instead, writers have turned to inner experience in their attempt to rebuild the fabric of meaning left in tatters by the decay of all fixed systems.

Like writers the world over, Canadian writers have decided that in a world apparently gone mad, sanity must be sought within the self, if anywhere. The romance, rather than the novel, is the most suitable vehicle for such introspective explorations of inner space. But there is also a uniquely Canadian predisposition to this form, for the romance is a better vehicle than the novel for exploring the pastoral vision which Frye suggests characterizes the Canadian imagination. The "peaceable kingdom" is an inner and self-contained realm; it is not compatible with the world of assumed public masks and social intricacies which is the realistic novel's supporting ambiance. If the peaceable kingdom is to be found anywhere, its home is not in the novel's harsh, uncompromising landscapes, but somewhere within the gentler world of the romance.

NOTES

[1] Hugo McPherson, "Fiction: 1940 to 1960," *Literary History of Canada*, ed. Carl F. Klinck (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965), pp. 694, 722.

[2] "Traill and Moodie: the two Realities," *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, I.3 (1972), 35-42.

[3] "The Maori," *The Week*, III (July 22, 1886), 548.

[4] "Outworn Literary Methods," *The Week*, IV (June 9, 1887), 451.

[5] *Stephen Leacock* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1970).

[6] "Preface," *The Man from Glengarry*, ed. S. Ross Beharriell (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1965), p. xiii.

[7] "Do We Gag our Writers?" *MacLean's*, XXVI (March 1, 1947), 52.

[8] "A Nation's Odyssey: the Novels of Hugh MacLennan," *Canadian Literature* 10 (Autumn 1961), 7-18; reprinted in *Odysseus Ever Returning* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1970). McLennan's rejoinder appeared in *Canadian Literature* 13 (Summer 1962), 86-7.

[9] Maurice Z. Schroder, "The Novel as a Genre," in *The Theory of the Novel*, ed. Philip Stevick (New York: The Free Press, 1967), p. 15.

[10] *Anatomy of Criticism* (New York: Atheneum, 1968), p. 304.

[11] "Conclusion," *Literary History of Canada*, p. 822.

THE EDGE OF ETERNITY

Barry Wood

MALCOLM LOWRY'S "Forest Path to the Spring"[1] is a story without a plot but rich in detail. Thirty thousand words in length, it revolves around Lowry's life with his wife Margerie at Dollarton (Eridanus), British Columbia — a rich shoreland of ocean tides, wind and fog, dripping pines and rugged mountains, an Eden-like motif which recurs throughout his other work. Eridanus appears as a kind of distant *paradiso* in Lowry's three major novels — *Under the Volcano* (1947), *Dark As the Grave Wherein My Friend is Laid* (1968), and *October Ferry to Gabriola* (1970). The importance of Eridanus in all these works hinges on its mystical associations for Lowry, and in fact "The Forest Path to the Spring" is perhaps best understood as the unfolding of a mystical experience. Such an approach explains its lack of plot, provides important keys to its wealth of imagery and symbolism, and accounts for one of the major themes in the rest of his works.

A close reading of "The Forest Path" reveals a subtle relationship between "the forest path" and "the spring". Each evening, the narrator tells us, he went through the forest to the spring for water, "walking as if eternally through a series of dissolving dusks down the path". And, while the canister was filling, he "watched the gulls coming up the inlet or gazed up the trunks of the trees to the highest pinnacles of the smallest branches trembling like a moonsail, and breathed the scents of evening". His habit at the spring was total involvement with his surroundings. But one evening he finds himself filling the canister without looking at or smelling anything: from that moment "very different seemed the journey back". First the canister became heavy; then he began to have doubts, fears, and feelings of insecurity about the future; finally he began to dread the chore. The daily walk became terrifying because of thoughts of the past and future — thoughts which began to arise at exactly that moment he failed to surrender himself to experience at the spring.

It seems clear that the spring is a symbol for the present and the path to and from it is a symbol for the past and future. Life in the present is destroyed by

dwelling in the past or future. As he says of the ladder which forms part of *the path*: "this vermiculated old ladder, stinking with teredos and sea-worms, washed down from the sawmill, this sodden snag, half awash when I first saw it, is the past, up and down which one's mind every night meaninglessly climbs!" Later he notes of his experience on the path: "This much I understood, and had understood that as a man I had become tyrannized by the past, and that it was my duty to transcend it in the present".

The quality of the present moment in which the narrator "transcends" his past is revealed in the meaning of the spring. Just as the spring is "a source of water, a source of supply", where the water of life perpetually bubbles forth, the present moment is the instant of real life, the only place where living occurs. It is a moment sandwiched between those past and future times which can tyrannize over it. Life in that moment is life "between the times" or, as the narrator describes their life at Eridanus, "an intermezzo". The decision to live in this present is therefore synonymous with the decision which comes when they "saw spring. And that I think was when we really decided to stay". The narrator makes this clear when he says, speaking of the water source, "it is a nuisance, but not insignificant that I have to use the same word for this as for the season".

In conventional fiction we usually find a sequential time-structure which arranges and unifies the story around a chronology. "The Forest Path" lacks such a chronology, so that the story seems to brim with unassimilated imagery. But rather than lacking *any* time-structure "The Forest Path" displays an organization around the present moment, and it is *this* organization, enhanced by the mystical qualities of that moment, which finally unifies the story.

In mystical traditions, Eastern and Western, eternity is met in the present, in the *eternal now*. The now has no duration, no beginning, no ending; put another way, its beginning and ending correspond. Too small to grasp, too fleeting to be "timed", the present moment is the inlet to the time-less. This is the world of "The Forest Path". Like Thoreau, who lived at Walden in "the nick of time . . . the meeting of two eternities, the past and future, which is precisely the present moment,"[2] Lowry's narrator writes that "sometimes we could scarcely see beyond the porch, so that it had been like living at the edge of eternity".

To the extent that sequential time is imaged by a line, present time is imaged by a point. But since the present moment is itself time*less*, it is a point *apart from* the line of sequential time. From the standpoint of the timeless, all time is equally "now", which is to say that sequential time bends around the point called "now" as a circle bends around a centre. The image of circle-and-centre is a suggestive one, indicating that sequential time of before-and-after is less important for the mystic than cyclical time. Indeed, cyclical time is a "reflection" of eternal time — a circle which, symbolically, has no end or beginning. This approach goes back at least to Bonaventura, who found the whole temporal world to contain

traces (*vestigia*) of the eternal. It was Bonaventura, too, who came up with the inspired idea of God as a circle whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere. If there is a medieval analogue to "The Forest Path to the Spring" it is Bonaventura's *Mind's Road to God.*

In "The Forest Path" many important images centre on the cycle of life: the cycle of the tides in the inlet, the rising and setting of the sun, the daily walk to the spring, the circling constellations, and the perpetual march of the seasons. Yet in every cycle there is a moment of rebirth or renewal, a reflection of the renewal taking place every moment: "the swim at high tide [suggesting baptism], and love at high tide [the very act of creation]", the brilliant disc of the sun seen through the fog, the fiery disc of the rising moon turning the pines into a vision of a burning windjammer, the replenishing of the water supply each day at the spring, and the arrival of the season of new life — spring. The passage of cyclical time becomes, for the narrator and his wife, another form of the death and renewal that is part of every moment of time — the continual death of the past and birth of the future in the undivided now.

THIS CIRCLE-CENTRE PATTERN recurs through several other layers of imagery. The symbolic present moment is the spring, a *place*, and the temporal circle-centre is thus repeated in the spatial organization of Eridanus. The whole world of the story — the world of nearby Vancouver, the ranges of the Rockies and Cascades and Cordilleras, the distant European war-scape, even the wheeling constellations — is treated as a vast circle whose centre is Eridanus. Yet, in a very real sense, Eridanus is a place which, like the present moment, is impossible to locate, for it is not even on the map, as people from the city complain. It is not a real "place". At the same time Eridanus, like the present moment which is all moments, is everyplace. It is a shack on the beach; it is a collection of shacks with strange names; it is "two hamlets, like interpenetrating dimensions," and it is "yet another town, or sort of town, by the sawmill round the northward point". Moreover, it is a sunken ship from the other side of the world with a strange, exotic cargo; it is the whole inlet beside which they live; and it is a constellation "dark and wandering beneath Orion". *Dark and wandering*: mysterious and placeless. In the streets of the nearby city "streets and houses are mere soulless numbers" — a collection of distinct, identifiable, numbered places — whereas Eridanus is ubiquitous, nowhere and everywhere, a part of the ebb and flow of the inlet, a part of the rising and setting stars. Even its population is in flux, consisting of people who come only in summer and fishermen who come only in winter. Like the *now* which is timeless and therefore every-time, Eridanus is placeless and therefore capable of being

anyplace and everyplace — an infinite "here" which is eternally "now," the still point of the turning world.

The basic structure of circle-and-centre — of the measured, numbered city and Eridanus; of "civilization, creator of deathscapes", and the "holophrastic brilliance" of Wywurk, Doo-Drop-Inn, High-Doubt, and Dunwoiken — functions at a new level of symbolic meaning. Just as the death and renewal of the present moment, the "now", finds its echo in the cycle of time, so too does the image of the still point of the "here" find its traces in the things of the surrounding world. The typical image of the still point is the brilliant light in the midst of darkness. The night is full of such lights "like a great Catherine wheel", but there are also the lights in Quaggan's and Kristbjorg's shacks reminding the narrator of the Isle of Delight "where an absolute stillness reigns", the "blazing gold" of the rising moon against the blackness, the gleaming white lighthouse on the point, and the brilliant vision when "the struggling sunlight turned a patch of black water into boiling diamonds". One of the most beautiful images in this sequence occurs when the narrator writes that "sometimes too, on the seaboard of the night, a ship would stand drawn, like a jeweled dagger, from the dark scabbard of the town"; and again, in an image that links the eternal now with the still point, "in the morning when one got up to make the coffee, with the sun blazing through the windows . . . it was like standing in the middle of a diamond".

Eridanus is the temporal and spatial centre of the universe, but at a higher level of meaning it is the spiritual centre too. At one point the narrator writes that "we too had grown unselfish, or at least different, away from the tenets of the selfish world". If there is such a quality as ec-centricity, it is man lost in the tangles of egoism, man confusing his "mask" (*persona*) or "role" with his true spiritual centre. "The Forest Path" portrays a place where the false persona-lity, erected to perform the fragmenting work of the city, is finally stripped away, where the original innocence of Paradise — "something that man had lost" — is recovered. By the act of "renouncing the world altogether" the false values of egoistic man are stripped away and the inner spiritual "I" is recovered.

Both wealth and poverty are things of the selfish ego: they are conditions which man loves or hates because they enhance or destroy the private "image" he has of himself, or the public "image" he wishes to present to the world. But an "image" of the self is not the real self, and when the dwellers at Eridanus discover their still point and decide to stay, they simultaneously discover their real selves. From that point forward neither wealth nor poverty is of concern. They can live with nothing because they have everything; in losing themselves they have found them-Selves. Egoistic man in the city divides off his world into numbered lots, fenced and labelled, effectively isolating him from a world which then confronts him as an alien reality. But at the still point, where consciousness is spiritual rather than egoistic, there is no circle to divide and no reason to try,

for the spirit "possesses" all things. The spiritual centre in man is the integrating perceiver of the world, giving itself to the universe and, in turn, finding the universe giving itself to him.

The spiritual integrity of life at Eridanus is portrayed through numerous images of reflection, refraction, and sympathetic correspondence, suggesting the harmony of the inner and outer worlds. The inner world is an abyss reflecting the world, like the dark water of the inlet reflecting the universe in "an inverse moonlight geometry, beyond our conscious knowledge". Like Emerson who sometimes saw the world as the externalization of the Soul, the narrator (following Ortega) suggests the world is a "fiction" made up by man as he goes along. At first there is a symphony in the air — "the thrilling diatonic notes of a foghorn in the mist, as if some great symphony had just begun" — but it soon becomes the "singing" of their lives at Eridanus, and finally bubbles out of the depths of his own spirit. The young lovers in their boat discover that the objective world revolves around their own subjective states, as when they notice that "these great peaks . . . seemed to move along with us . . . a whole mountainside or ridge of pines detaching themselves and moving as we rowed". "When they spoke of damming the inlet . . . cutting it off from the cleansing sea altogether, it was as if for a moment the sources of my own life trembled and agonized and dried up within me". Eventually, having completely escaped from the circle of the ego to a spiritual centre, the narrator discovers that mystical illumination in which the centre expands to encompass the whole world:

> The experience seemed to be associated with light, even a blinding light, as when years afterwards recalling it I dreamed that my being had been transformed into the inlet itself, not at dusk, by the moon, but at sunrise, as we had so often also seen it, suddenly transilluminated by the sun's light, so that I seemed to contain the reflected sun deeply within my very soul, yet a sun which as I awoke was in turn transformed.

There is one image in the story which links together all these levels of meaning: the image of the Tao, or the "way" of all things. Set forth in the ancient Chinese Book of Changes, the *I Ching*, and Lao Tzu's philosophical poem, the *Tao Te Ching*, the concept of the Tao is symbolized by a perfect circle divided into the *yang* and *yin*, the bright and the dark. Originally signifying the sunlit and shaded sides of a mountain, *yang* and *yin* came to represent interrelated opposites: hot and cold, strength and weakness, active and passive, positive and negative, male and female, good and evil, life and death. Sometimes described as two fishes in eternal intercourse, the diagram of the Tao is so constructed as to suggest that each of these opposites grows out of the other, or is defined by its opposite. Moreover, the *yang-yin* symbol suggests rotation in the same way that a photograph of a galaxy clearly reveals motion in the far-flung trailing stars. This rotary motion implies that the universe is not an absolute dualism of oppo-

sites but rather a unified process resulting from continual interaction, from each polarity continually yielding to — or dying to — its opposite. Together *yang* and *yin* evolve a unity — the seamless robe of nature, the everlasting flux, the ebb and flow of life.

The yang-yin Tao symbol may be regarded as an extension of the circle image which we have used as a metaphor for the structure of "The Forest Path to the Spring". If the circle of the Tao is visualized in rotation, the exact centre not only remains motionless, but also rides on the point where *yang* meets *yin* in perfect harmony. In terms of time, the still point at the centre is the everlasting "now" containing *yang* and *yin* in equal measure — a single birth-death process in which the moment is always being created and destroyed. In terms of space, the still point is the infinite "here" which focusses every "there"; and since this "here" rests where *yang* meets *yin*, Eridanus is inevitably a place where the bliss of heaven is forever threatened by the tides of hell (The oil refinery across the inlet, with its missing S, is symbolically called HELL); where the possession of the All is threatened by the shadow of eviction; where the life-giving inlet is "known as the River of Death and the River of Life". And, in terms of man himself, the still point is that inner "I" which unifies the perceived universe within itself; and because that "I" stands where *yang* meets *yin*, the spirit of man must continually face "the fearful wrath . . . sweeping the world" and, above all, "those nameless somnambulisms, guilts, ghouls of past delirium, wounds to other souls and lives, ghosts of actions approximating to murder . . . betrayals of self . . . ready to leap out and . . . to destroy us, and our happiness". Life at the still point may bring the mystical identification of bliss, but even that experience can be terrifying: "in my agonized confusion of mind, my hatred and suffering *were* the forest fire itself, the destroyer, which is here, there, all about".

This total fusion of opposites at the still point is conveyed by dozens of images and symbols. The narrator tells us that "a tide which to all appearances is coming in may be doing so only at the surface, that beneath it is already going out", that "here in the inlet there was neither sea nor river, but something compounded of both", and that this is "the Tao . . . something so still, so changeless, and yet reaching everywhere, and in no danger of being exhausted". At this still point, be it "now" or "here" or "I", all things are joined together:

> It was there that our life had come into being and for all its strangeness and conflict, a pang of sadness struck us now. Longing and hope fulfilled, loss and rediscovery, failure and accomplishment, sorrow and joy seemed annealed in one profound emotion.

It is out of this rich texture of experience at Eridanus, experience which is fused at the still point, that true creativity arises, the symphony of life which is in turn a focus of death and rebirth — "my whole intention seemed to be to die

through it, without dying of course, that I might become reborn". And when the little shack on the beach burns down carrying into ashes the score of this symphony, it is reborn as the opera which is called *The Forest Path to the Spring*; and the narrator tells us that "the fire was [both] a dramatic incident and our own life, with its withdrawals and returns, what I had learned of nature, and the tides and sunrises I tried to express".

It is highly significant that music forms so large a part of the narrator's consciousness, that he writes first a symphony and then an opera, and that he feels their life at Eridanus to be "a kind of singing". In music more than any other of the arts a fundamental truth is imaged forth about reality as a whole. As the narrator puts it, "in some composers I seem to hear the very underlying beat and rhythm of the universe itself". The very sounding and silencing of musical notes captures directly the fundamental living/dying rhythm of existence, for no other art form captures change as completely as music does. Indeed, music only exists as change: as moving melody and harmony.

Yet music — even though it is constant change, indeed, *because* it constantly changes — presents us with an image of time itself, and especially that *time now* which encompasses eternity. Victor Zuckerkandl has noted that

> . . . hearing a melody is hearing, having heard, and being about to hear, *all at once*. . . . Every melody declares to us that the past can be there without being remembered, the future without being foreknown. . . . What a melody is on a small scale, the total course of a musical work is on a large scale — a whole that unfolds in time and is so constituted that, though its individual members appear one after another, the whole, in order to be present, does not have to wait for member to be added to member, but is, so to speak, *always already there*."[3]

Music, then, is the appropriate vehicle of expression for a life existing simultaneously in the temporal world of constant change and the still point of the eternal now.

The "singing" life captured in the narrator's opera turns out to be a "strange magnificent honeymoon that had become one's whole life". The symbol is not entirely strange, however, when the honeymoon is understood as a withdrawal from the demands of time and place and the individual ego, and a discovery of the union of opposites in the "here" and "now". Yet this life, they discover, is not built by clinging to their own past, nor to the luxuries of things, nor to the selfish ego, nor even to one another. And it is not even built out of clinging to the still point: "one could not make a moment permanent, and perhaps the attempt to try was some form of evil". It is built out of totally yielding to the "eternal flux and flow". The narrator and his wife come to realize that the person they each loved ten years ago is not the same person today. Only the past is stable and secure, and the past is dead. The present is the changing frontier,

the point of rebirth. Life has its final meaning "here" and "now," "on the very windrow of existence" — on the edge of a sunlit fog, at the edge of eternity.

"The Forest Path to the Spring" was intended to be the final piece in a cycle of six or seven books which Lowry called *The Journey That Never Ends. Under the Volcano*, *Dark As the Grave*, and *October Ferry to Gabriola* were to have their places in the cycle. Lowry did not live to complete this task, nor did he see more than *Volcano* into print. But the place of "The Forest Path" at the end, and the recurrence of Eridanus as a powerful motif throughout the books we have, indicate that The Journey was an exploration into that eternal moment which is *now*, that infinite place which is *here*, that unknowable but knowing *I* who is the spirit of man. Perhaps Lowry's failure to complete his *Journey* is itself symbolic of the voyage that can have no ending, precisely because every now is a new beginning.

NOTES

[1] The final story in *Hear Us O Lord from Heaven Thy Dwelling Place* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1961), pp. 215-283.

[2] *The Portable Thoreau*, ed. Carl Bode (New York: Viking Press, 1947), p. 272.

[3] Victor Zuckerkandl, *Sound and Symbol: Music and the External World*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton University Press, 1969), pp. 235-237. Italics added.

TWO POEMS

Joyce Carol Oates

AFTER SUNSET

Broken walls of waves
said to be the Atlantic
sweep toward us

Wave upon wave
so much is breaking
so much is happening

For centuries, here,
so much has happened
unrecorded
irretrievable

Droplets of water
bubbles of bright flesh
we stand here
hypnotized
again and always
and once again, again,
hypnotized out of flesh
jarred by the earthquake
of the sea

We are waiting
for something

We are waiting
for something to record

How icy the shock on our bare feet!

A hundred yards away a vendor sells
stickers for the bumpers of cars:
the proclamation of the achievement
of the replication of —
The recording of —

We are waiting
again and always
and again, again,
stalkers of meaning
human and cold

THE NOISY SORROWFUL ONES

They cut their flesh into inch-long strips
they tottered above us on stilts
their eyes were black with pupil
their teeth were wetly white
their ecstasies soared to giggles
their pain stretched to yawns

It cannot be borne, they claimed
they seized us by the shoulders and claimed
to wish that we might be delivered
from the Garden like themselves
delivered soaring in ecstasy
transformed by bleating heedless breaths
they had wished to be aborted
were instead brought cruelly to birth
You cannot bear it either, they cry

stilted above us
smirking with wisdom
hot-breathed as if brotherly

You dare not bear it, they whispered
in baffled derision in unison
ennobled now by granite and newsprint
lonely in posthumous pride

STRANGE TO STRANGERS ONLY

M. G. Parks

JAMES DE MILLE'S intriguing romance of a strange and macabre civilization near the South Pole, *A Strange Manuscript found in a Copper Cylinder*, is at last becoming recognized as a minor classic of Canadian fiction. For a long time it was a forgotten book, known and admired by only a few bibliophiles and literary men who bothered to explore what was commonly regarded as the prehistoric era of Canadian letters. During the last few years, however, it has shared in the general expansion of interest in Canadian literature. An extended notice of the novel in the *Literary History of Canada* (1965), its reprinting in 1969, and the efforts of a few writers to demonstrate its considerable stature have all helped the novel to its proper place in our literary canon.

While *A Strange Manuscript* is now becoming appreciated and understood as it never was before, the short history of critical rather than merely appreciative comment on the novel has been marked by some unfortunate errors as well as by perceptive insights. As the novel appeared posthumously in 1888, the errors have primarily been over the date of composition and have led to some dubious and even misleading assumptions about De Mille's sources, purpose, and meaning. A brief sketch of De Mille criticism will explain this rather ungracious assertion.

Fred Cogswell set in motion the first misconception in, of all places, the prestigious *Literary History of Canada* by citing Rider Haggard as an influence on De Mille, somehow forgetting that the death of De Mille in 1880 made such influence impossible. This was a rare slip of which that astute critic of Maritime literature must by now be thoroughly tired of hearing. The next in chronological order, R. E. Watters, in 1969 corrected Cogswell's error and dragged in no fresh red herring, although, having no evidence to establish when the novel was written, he assumed that Samuel Butler's *Erewhon* (1872) was probably one of De Mille's sources.[1] Then in 1972 the third critic, Crawford Kilian, in the course of drawing heavily upon D. E. MacLeod's unpublished M.A. thesis of 1968, brought into print much-needed evidence for a date of composition no later than the 1860's and consequently helped to clarify the hitherto confused matter of De Mille's indebtedness to writers of the 1870's.[2] At this point, with the novel

placed at least in its proper decade, it seemed that criticism could proceed more confidently. But that was not to be. Again, as in 1965, one of our best critics brought confusion into the picture. Apparently unimpressed by Kilian's article and its important evidence, George Woodcock wrote just a year later an article which conjectures a composition date of 1879 and then proceeds to trace the influences upon De Mille's novel of three British novels of the 1870's.[3] In spite of its perceptive analysis of other aspects of *A Strange Manuscript*, this article of 1973 can only be confusing in its resumption of what is pretty clearly a false scent. At the moment, therefore, a reader following the chronological order of critical comment is more than likely to wonder what is fact and what is fiction.

Much of the confusion is resolved if Kilian's report on MacLeod's thesis is taken seriously. At the risk of some repetition of what already appears in Kilian's article, one can outline the matter as follows. The crucial evidence is contained in a letter of March 6, 1880, written by James De Mille's brother, Alfred Henry De Mill, to the Reverend Dr. John Pryor, James's father-in-law. The relevant paragraph of this letter runs as follows:

> The "Copper Cylinder" MS is one of the first stories ever written by James, and he was never able to make a satisfactory *denouement* to the plot in it, and consequently I do not think he ever offered it for sale. I read it over some years ago and told him that the concluding chapter could be re-written with advantage, and he entirely agreed with me. I do not know whether he has ever touched it since, or not. . . . I think that a purchaser might be found for it among the publishers of the great monthlies and when I heard from Willie [James's son] that you intended offering it to Lea and Shepard I thought that possibly you were not alive to the fact of its being a work of considerable merit. It might be changed a little at the end with advantage and offered either to Houghton [?] or in England.[4]

Here is evidence from the very person who knew something about James De Mille's life as a writer. There is absolutely no reason to doubt Alfred De Mill's knowledge or veracity. "Some years ago", though frustratingly indefinite, establishes the existence of the completed manuscript of the novel — without, of course, the "satisfactory *denouement*" De Mille never achieved — no later than several years before 1880. Even more revealing, of course, is the testimony that the novel was "one of the first stories ever written by James". The remark eliminates the 1870's completely and places the time of composition somewhere in the 1860's, when De Mille began his short but prolific career as a published author of fiction. A brief survey of James De Mille's activities in the decade will serve to place A. H. De Mill's statement in context and make it less vague than it appears to be.

By 1860 De Mille was dashing off serial fiction of the Sunday School variety for the *Christian Watchman*, a Saint John magazine edited by his elder brother, Elisha Budd De Mill.[5] It is probable that he also wrote *The Dodge Club* in 1861,

although the work was not published until 1866 (or 1868?) as a serial in *Harper's Magazine* and not until 1869 as a book.[6] These very early endeavours, however, are almost certainly not what A. H. De Mill means by his brother's "first stories". That he is thinking of book publication as a definition of authorship is made clear by another sentence in the same letter. In the course of remarking on the gross inaccuracy of a recent newspaper report on James's life, especially "the assertion that all the profits of his books went to pay his father's debts and that his father was a bankrupt", A. H. De Mill remarks that James's only contribution to the settlement of their father's estate was his payment of $1100 to release a bank note *"in 1865 or 1866 long before he began to write"*.[7] As De Mille's first published book,[8] *Helena's Household* (1867), was what A. H. De Mill must therefore have considered, like *A Strange Manuscript*, "one of the first stories" written by his brother, his testimony places the composition of *A Strange Manuscript* in the latter half of the 1860's — more specifically, in 1867 or 1868.

The known facts of De Mille's life in the decade support a date of composition no later than 1867 or 1868. After the flurry of serial writing in 1860-61, De Mille produced nothing more for several years. From September 1861, until the summer of 1865 he held the post of Professor of Classics at Acadia College. While his work as an energetic and popular teacher would have kept him busy in this period, it is quite possible that he also continued to write, and he may indeed have spent some time in these four years on *A Strange Manuscript*. His resignation from Acadia was followed by his appointment as Professor of History and Rhetoric at Dalhousie College, but, according to the testimony of his earliest biographers, he did not step directly from one set of duties to another but spent the next academic year (1865-66) preparing for his new post. It is likely that he also wrote (or completed) *Cord and Creese* and *Helena's Household* during this interval, as both were published in 1867, the first as a serial.

From the fall of 1866 to the end of the decade his teaching at Dalhousie would have at first curtailed his writing, especially because the new post required preparation of material he had not taught at Acadia. Nevertheless he found time to prepare two manuscripts in 1867 and 1868 — *The Cryptogram*, published in serial form in 1869, and *The B O W C*, published as a book in the same year. Around the end of the decade his tempo increased, for in 1870 five titles appeared — *The American Baron* (as a serial), *The Boys of Grand Pré School*, *The Lady of the Ice*, *The Minnehaha Mines* (as a serial), and *Lost in the Fog*. Thereafter, his brother's testimony makes speculation unnecessary, and at any rate De Mille's steady grinding out of pot-boilers and juvenile fiction at the rate of two to four per year until the middle of the decade and his work on *The Elements of Rhetoric* would have left little room for *A Strange Manuscript*. It appears, then, that there were two periods in the 1860's when De Mille would

have had the opportunity to write his masterpiece — during the years at Acadia (late 1861 to mid-1865) and in 1867 before he began *The B O W C* and *The Cryptogram*. Therefore A. H. De Mill's testimony makes good sense in terms of De Mille's activity as a writer in the decade, and 1867 appears to be a highly probable *terminus ad quem* for *A Strange Manuscript*. Certainly, as MacLeod notes and Kilian agrees, De Mille may well have conceived the idea for the novel as early as the 1850's,[9] and quite possibly he worked on it intermittently for years before 1867. Such careful and prolonged attention would account for the professional polish of the novel and its manifest superiority to every other work of fiction he produced — qualities of the novel which have led critics to assume mistakenly that it must therefore be a late work belonging to the 1870's. De Mille's usual practice was to write rapidly, even in a slapdash manner, a habit which he cultivated after *Helena's Household* in a deliberate attempt to turn out manuscripts for a quick cash return. But even in the 1860's he was capable of writing the kind of prose one finds in his best novel, as passages of his early serials and *Helena's Household* prove. There is no foundation here for doubting A. H. De Mill's evidence.[10]

This relatively early date of composition — or, more accurately, line of demarcation — naturally affects current conjectures about De Mille's indebtedness to other novelists of his time. Obviously, the novel could not have been influenced by Mallock's *The New Republic* (1877), Butler's *Erewhon* (1872), or even Lord Lytton's *The Coming Race* (1870).[11] As Crawford Kilian observes, "A careful examination of *Strange Ms*, and of the facts of De Mille's life, will show that the author's influences are far earlier than Haggard or Butler" — and he rightly singles out More and Swift as two of the general influences upon De Mille's novel. Both *Utopia* and *Gulliver's Travels* depict imaginary societies which reflect back upon the actual societies in which they were written; both are anti-Utopias in which the good elements of the imagined societies are counterbalanced by the bad and in which utopianism as an ideal is implicitly repudiated; both are presented by narrator-characters, Hythloday and Gulliver, who are more or less naive and imperceptive of the implications of what they see and experience. Similarly, De Mille's imaginary society is a distorted reflection of his own, his Kosekin have evolved a society that is at first glance better but ultimately as bad as actual Western society, or even worse, and his narrator, Adam More, like Hythloday and Gulliver, brings an ordinary and relatively imperceptive mind to the task of understanding and judging his strange hosts. *A Strange Manuscript* is therefore squarely in the "classic" line of English anti-Utopias, and its general conception need not be sought for in minor fantasies of the nineteenth century.

Various more restricted influences have been pointed out by George Woodcock, all of which — except, of course, the three novels of the 1870's — are certainly

possible. Among these are the novels of Peacock (or imitations of their form) as models for De Mille's frame discussion by the yachtsmen, Prescott's *Conquest of Mexico* (1843) for the idea of sacrificial rites performed atop pyramids, Melville's *Typee* (1846) for the notion of gentle and seemingly benevolent cannibals.[12] The suggestion that Jules Verne's earlier novels in their original French would have been known to De Mille is plausible, but their bearing on *A Strange Manuscript* is less likely. By the 1860's, Verne had not produced much that is relevant. The only possibility would seem to be *A Journey to the Centre of the Earth*, which first appeared (in French) in 1864. As will be argued below, however, De Mille did not need Verne's help to envisage a subterranean entrance to an unknown land.

All of these writers may have contributed to De Mille's novel in such very minor ways. Others equally deserving of passing notice have not been mentioned by Watters and Woodcock.

One peculiar notion picked up by De Mille was the brainchild of an eccentric army captain, John Cleves Symmes, who in 1818 issued and distributed a circular propounding the thesis that the earth is hollow and open at the poles. In 1823 he went so far as to petition the American Congress to support a polar expedition to test his theory, and actually received twenty-five supporting votes. Three years later, in 1826, Symmes and his collaborator, one James McBride, published *Symmes Theory of Concentric Spheres*, a full explanation of his thesis that there are enormous openings at both poles through which the sea flows into a series of hollow, concentric spheres. Circles of ice and volcanic peaks surround the openings, but within these barriers the climate is tropical. Not surprisingly, the notion first publicized in 1818 was picked up very quickly by a writer of fiction. In 1820 appeared *Symzonia*, by Captain Adam Seaborn — possibly a pseudonym for Symmes himself. This fantasy tells the story of a voyage of discovery to the South Pole undertaken under the guise of sealing. The ship follows ocean currents through a ring of ice and is borne imperceptibly over the ocean rim into the interior of the earth, where Seaborn and his men come upon the continent of Symzonia. They land at a city, where they are welcomed by a friendly white race. This new civilization turns out to be Utopian in both the admirable nature of the people and their institutions. Fearing to be contaminated by their visitors, the Symzonians subsequently ask them to depart, and Seaborn and his crew retrace their course, eventually returning to New York.[13]

One cannot be sure that De Mille had read *Symzonia*, although it fits one of Adam More's remarks: "As a boy I had read wild works of fiction about lands in the interior of the earth, with a sun at the centre, which gave them the light of a perpetual day". A few other possible echoes come to mind: Adam's seal hunt which leads to his separation from the ship, the strong current, the approach through a subterranean passage, the friendly strangers. Obviously, if De Mille

had read this fantasy, it did not govern his imagination to the point of suggesting the core of his novel. What is certain, however, is that De Mille knew about Symme's eccentric theory. Adam More is made to refer to the possibility of "an opening at the South Pole" and his companion Agnew is made to deny the theory by expostulating "Do not imagine that the surface of the earth is different at the poles from what it is anywhere else", and by advising More that "Theories about openings at the poles, or whirlpools, must be given up." A little later More refers directly to Symmes' theory:

> I recalled that old theory which had been in my mind before this, and which I had mentioned to Agnew. This was the notion that at each pole there is a vast opening; that into one of them all the waters of the ocean pour themselves, and, after passing through the earth, come out at the other pole, to pass about its surface in innumerable streams. It was a wild fancy, which I had laughed at under other circumstances, but which now occurred to me once more . . . "

Symmes' theory was in fact widely known. Among writers who made use of it was Edgar Allan Poe, who in turn supplied De Mille with a few ideas for *A Strange Manuscript*. Poe's fragmentary story, "MS Found in a Bottle" (1883), probably suggested the copper cylinder. Incidentally, the story tells how an unsinkable ship is drawn irresistibly toward the South Pole and goes down into a whirlpool, presumably through Symmes' opening into the interior of the earth. The same author's "Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym" (1838) has a closer bearing on De Mille's novel. In this tale of another voyage to the South Pole, various points look ahead to De Mille: details of the approach to Antarctica, the Arabic carvings of a strange race discovered by Pym, the distortion of latitude near the Pole (a detail which Poe had borrowed from *Symzonia*), the separation of the narrator from his ship when he goes ashore (Poe has the collection of *bêche-de-mer* as the purpose, but Adam More intends to shoot seals, precisely the same motive given to Adam Seaborn in *Symzonia*), the southward-flowing current, the semi-tropical climate of the polar region. It is noteworthy that J. O. Bailey, whose *Pilgrims Through Time and Space* unexpectedly includes *A Strange Manuscript* in its survey of "scientific" and "utopian" fiction, has no doubts at all that De Mille borrowed such details from Poe.[14]

These borrowings, however, are not significantly germane to an interpretation of *A Strange Manuscript*. They attest to De Mille's wide reading, but the more of them one finds the more it becomes clear that the vital aspects of the novel, particularly his ingenious creation of the Kosekin, are very much his own. Where, then, are we to look for some insight into the cast of mind which produced the Kosekin and for some external aid in understanding the

relation of De Mille's strange civilization to the real world of the 1860's? The general Victorian context of the novel naturally suggests various relationships, as Watters and Woodcock have observed, but there remains at least one unexplored means of getting closer to De Mille's mind and consequently understanding more about his meaning and purpose. What remains is what can be learned of De Mille's life and thought, especially what can be established about his moral and religious convictions and interests from the scattered evidence available. That evidence is not abundant, but there is enough of it to save interpretation from mere conjecture.

De Mille's family background, and what is clearly his significant reaction against one element of it, are the first relevant clues to pursue. His father, Nathan Smith De Mill, was a prominent shipowner and merchant of Saint John — a man of integrity and strong social conscience who seems to have been highly respected by his sons, James De Mille included. Certain other aspects of his character, however, have more negative connotations. Archibald MacMechan, who worked hard to piece together an accurate biography of James De Mille, judged Nathan De Mill to be a man of "unbending Puritanism".[15] Certainly he was a pillar of the total abstinence movement in Saint John, being president of the local society from 1832 to 1845 and a dedicated member thereafter. According to MacMechan, he was known, presumably among the more "liberal" citizens of Saint John, as "Cold Water De Mill", a name supported by the story that, having found a barrel of rum in one of his ships, he set it rolling to oblivion in the waters of Saint John harbour. MacMechan also deduced that he was inclined to anti-intellectualism. He is said to have burned a package of novels he discovered in a cargo, and "seems rather to have disparaged book-learning." His support of Acadia College in Wolfville was not, MacMechan thinks, based on any admiration for secular learning but rather on approval of its dominant atmosphere of evangelical Christianity and strict morality. The picture emerges of Nathan De Mill as a sternly upright and unbending puritan, a man to be respected but not necessarily emulated. One other fact about him is important: although the De Mills were all Anglicans, in 1842 Nathan De Mill, at the age of thirty-eight, joined the Baptist church. The reasons for his break with the family religious affiliation are not on record, but it seems obvious that at least one motive lay in his militant crusade against the demon rum. Long before 1842 he must have found the Anglican position on temperance a weak and ultimately immoral compromise. He may, of course, have been moving towards a more pietistical form of Christianity in other ways as well before he made his decision to turn his back on the *via media* of the Anglicans.

The father's influence on James De Mille can be only glimpsed here and there in the records of the early years. From the age of nine, when his father changed the religious affiliation of the family, James was a Baptist; he was sent to Baptist

institutions — to Horton Academy in 1848 and to Acadia College in 1849, and was baptized while at Horton. After a year-long tour of Europe with his elder brother, he was sent in 1852 to Brown University, another Baptist institution, graduating in 1854. He seems to have been marked by no particular religious zeal during these years. At least he did not follow his elder brother, Elisha Budd De Mill, into the Baptist ministry,[16] and he was very active at Brown in the secular pursuits of public-speaking and debating, and in the production of comic verse, being elected class poet in 1854. There is no question of any departure from normal Christian devotion in all of this, but merely no indication of him following his father's austere bent or of revealing the evangelical zeal common to many of his fellow Baptists.

There is also no evidence of a change in the picture in the next few years. James De Mille remained within the Baptist fold, and by 1860, when "Horton Sketches" was written, was even expressing approval of religious revivals. During his Acadia period (1862-1865), however, a change in his attitude may have been gathering force. He approved publicly of non-sectarian education (Inaugural Discourse, 1861), which Acadia upheld in theory but hardly in practice — a choice of emphasis that may have carried deliberate ironic implications but may, of course, have been seriously made in the belief that the institution he was about to join exemplified his own ideal. Much more significant, indeed markedly so, is the well-known remark of one of his students at Acadia, which gives us the first glimpse of another side of De Mille. Herbert C. Creed, in a letter to MacMechan, recalled that although De Mille was "doubtless a sincere Christian", he "took delight in ridiculing everything like cant, and even the ordinary words and actions of the 'pious' sort of people often brought to his keen eye and thin curling lip that peculiar sarcastic smile of his."[17] It is hardly necessary to observe that such a marked disdain for evangelical piety strikes an alien note in the Acadia of the early 1860's, which contemporary accounts depict as intensely conscious of its duty to oversee the spiritual and moral condition of its students. Certainly it is not what one would expect of an ardent or even a moderately committed Baptist.

Then, in 1865, De Mille made two surprising moves: he resigned from Acadia in August, and not long afterwards left the Baptist Church and became an Anglican. His resignation was not engendered by dissatisfied students or administration; in fact, he was much admired by students and was earnestly requested by the college to reconsider his decision.[18] The most reasonable assumption is that he had become uncomfortable within the confines of the Baptist faith and its academic centre at Wolfville. His move to Dalhousie College in Halifax was not a step upward in the academic world, for at the time Acadia had emerged from its earlier struggle for survival and Dalhousie was just getting on its feet financially and academically. One other fact supports the inference

that for some time he had been approaching a spiritual crossroads and at last in 1865 felt free to take another direction: his father had died on December 26, 1864, removing a serious obstacle to his change of religious affiliation. One assumes that De Mille had no desire to wound his father by an act which, however blameless, would probably have been taken as a tragic betrayal.

One can find few signs, besides Herbert Creed's evidence, of the cast of mind that led De Mille to his decision. His first published novel, *Helena's Household: A Tale of Rome in the First Century* (1867), would seem to be a likely source of evidence, but in fact it does not reveal the "sarcastic smile" at overt piety of which Creed writes. This interesting but uneven novel, in which De Mille is generally strong in description and historical imaginaton and weak in the craft of the novelist, has much to say about the Christian doctrine of love and the supreme example of Christ in the context of a pagan world desperately requiring spiritual sustenance. Yet the evangelicalism, insofar as it is coloured by authorial bias, is broadly Protestant in its emphasis on the Word of God in the New Testament and in its interpretation of the Eucharist as a symbolic sacrament. De Mille's depiction of conversion and the converted, though sometimes rather sentimental, would agree well with Anglicanism. There is one odd omission in his account of early Christianity. Historians are generally agreed that two sacred ceremonies or sacraments of the early Christians, baptism by immersion and the Eucharist, were firmly established by the time of Paul. Yet De Mille never mentions or depicts baptism in the novel. As a former Baptist, he would have been keenly aware of this sacrament and of the running battle in his time between Baptist defenders of total immersion and their less literalist Protestant opponents. The omission is therefore surely deliberate and perhaps is a sign of his special sensitivity on an issue so much a matter of contention between his old and his new church.

Although *Helena's Household* furnishes no plain evidence of its author's opposition to sectarian Protestantism, it does demonstrate his keen interest in the religious and philosophical currents of the ancient world in the infancy of Christianity. As we shall see, this aspect of the novel has a bearing on *A Strange Manuscript*. De Mille's interest in church history — MacMechan says that he specialized in the subject — appears clearly in *Helena's Household*. He is bent on bringing together and comparing various strains of thought in the Rome of Nero — the Platonism of Socrates, Roman moral philosophy, militant Judaism, and Christianity. Indeed his tendency to examine at length the interplay of these forces slows down the action of the novel. His method is to invent characters to express, in intellectual terms and in their lives, the beliefs they uphold: Cineas, the Greek rationalist and Platonist, whose conversion to Christianity is a gradual and soul-searching process; Helena, who embraces the new religion with the quick ardour of intuition; Isaac, the honourable but fanatical Jew whose zeal

for his nation and faith aligns him against Christians as well as against the Roman overlords of his homeland. De Mille's understanding of what Matthew Arnold calls Hebraism and Hellenism is displayed fully,[19] though simplified in the interest of the fictional context. Cineas' resistance to accepting the Christian doctrine of sin suggests both the tendency of beleaguered early Christianity to over-emphasize human depravity and the Greek genius for appreciation of the palpable glory of nature and man: "It is a good and a pleasant world that we see around us", Cineas affirms, "and to apply the name sinners to the 'kindly race of men' seems like saying that the world is all dark, even in its bright daytime."[20] Though Cineas eventually develops a sense of sin, throughout the novel De Mille's emphasis is not in fact on the depravity of man but on the boon of divine love. Furthermore, his admiration for Greek thought and culture is reflected in the sympathetic portrayal of Cineas, in the presentations of Platonism as the highest reach of unaided human wisdom, and in viewing Socrates as in some measure a precursor of Christian truth. In short, while *Helena's Household* leaves one with no doubts about De Mille's Christian point of view and dedication to Christian belief, it reveals as well his knowledge of the historical context and his understanding of basic principles of the Hebraic, Hellenic, and Christian positions.

De Mille's conversion to Anglicanism, as has been suggested above, fits what is known of his interests and attitudes — his love of classical learning, his scholarly interest in the early history of Christianity, his distaste for outward shows of evangelical piety, the moderate tone and philosophical emphasis in *Helena's Household*.[21] One might also mention his unswerving support of a humanistic education based on a study of the classical world and his opposition to denominational education, convictions which are expressed unequivocably in his Inaugural Address at Dalhousie in 1873. One other related point remains to be noted — that of his acceptance of the official Anglican position on the apostolic succession and the relation of the Roman and English churches. Although there are no signs in De Mille's works, early or late, of the fierce antipathy to Roman Catholicism expressed by many Baptists of the day, he seems to have found in Anglicanism a satisfactory compromise between Rome and sectarian Protestantism. His faith in tradition and his sense of history were both satisfied by Canterbury. This is what one assumes would have influenced him, and the assumption is supported by his only known statement on the subject, "The Early English Church: A Paper read before the Church of England Institute" (Halifax: Nova Scotia Printing Co., 1877). This address is an historical sketch of Christianity in Britain from the second century to the time of the Venerable Bede (672-735). De Mille's treatment of the subject is flatly matter-of-fact and not at all polemical, but his conception of a distinct British church adhering to primitive Christianity and resisting as best it could the dominance

of highly organized Roman authoritarianism indicates that he saw his church as an indigenous entity as venerable as the Roman and Greek establishments, not as a Protestant schism from Catholicism dating from the Reformation of the sixteenth century. In other words, De Mille agrees on this point with that earlier staunch Anglican, T. C. Haliburton, who had seen the Reformation in England as reactionary rather than revolutionary, the English church as regaining the purity of doctrine which had long been sullied by Roman domination, and the Anglicanism which emerged from the purging away of long-established Roman heresy and corruption as the best and truest form of Christianity. What is more to the point, De Mille had by 1865 aligned himself with the theological and ethical climate of the Anglican *via media*, with the tradition of Hooker, and had formally repudiated the more uncompromising temper of sectarianism. It is noteworthy that, when he settled in Halifax and became an Anglican, he chose High-Church St. Luke's rather than Low-Church St. Paul's as his place of worship. Moreover, he took his new allegiance seriously, becoming an active member of the Church of England Institute.

THE BEARING of all of this upon *A Strange Manuscript* is of course one's prime concern. The following paragraphs attempt to suggest some ways in which De Mille's biography, mundane and spiritual, comes to our aid in understanding his novel.

First it should be noted that De Mille calls on his knowledge of ancient and biblical history for his conception of the Kosekin. His general intention is to depict what has happened to an Eastern Mediterranean people who have been utterly isolated from their original milieu for a very long time, and have developed their religious and moral beliefs in ways contrary to those of the civilization from which they have been separated. It does not much matter whether the original Kosekin were the Troglodytes (Red Sea cave-dwellers described by Agatharchides of Cnidus) or one of the lost ten tribes of Israel, as Melick facetiously suggests. The important point is that they were Hebrews (or at least a Semitic people speaking the Hebrew tongue) who left the Mediterranean world long before Greek civilization had affected them. According to the Old Testament, the lost tribes were transported to Assyria when Israel was conquered in 734 B.C., and it was of course nearly 300 B.C. before the Jews as a nation came into contact with Greek culture. The Kosekin, then, are a people from what one might call an Old Testament background who have never been touched by the later developments which took place in the world they had left — in particular, they have lived completely unaware of Greek rationalism and humanism, and of the Christian tradition centred on the New Testament and

enriched by Greek and Roman philosophy. In one way the development has been directly opposite to that of Western civilization, for the Kosekin adhere to a pervasive other-worldliness and denial of life, while Western civilization, as De Mille knew well, has tended to develop an equally pervasive worldliness despite the transcendental idealism of its philosophical and Christian heritage. At any rate, the Kosekin have driven the spiritualism, fatalism, and *contemptus mundi* of the ancient Hebrews to gross extremes that are believable within their isolated confines, untempered as they have been by Hellenism or Christianity. Indeed, they have even reached the utter absurdity of upholding other-worldly fanaticism without any *raison d'être*, any ultimate religious belief, for as Crawford Kilian has rightly pointed out, the Kosekin are a godless race. Their departure from their Hebraic origins is consequently degenerate to an alarming degree.

While the Kosekin, seen in this light, have developed in a direction opposite to that of Western civilization,[22] in another way they may be seen as pushing to logical conclusions extreme religious and moral tendencies in Western religion, tendencies that may be traced either to Old Testament times or to qualities inherent in Christianity. Previous commentators on the novel have noted this in passing, but it would seem reasonable that it should be given much more weight in view of De Mille's experience of sectarian extremism, his rejection of it, and his embracing of the *via media* of Anglicanism.

In effect, the Kosekin embody in extreme ways what De Mille would consider as pernicious tendencies in the history of Christianity. Thus what Adam calls "their strange and unnatural love of death" is an intensification of the pietism which looks upon life solely as a preparation for death, in effect prefers darkness to light, exalts poverty, and regards love of the beautiful, indeed all the pleasant elements of life, as sinful and degrading. De Mille did not need to look back to the most dour exemplars of New England Calvinism for models. The tradition of Alline in Nova Scotia, though softened in many Baptists by the middle of the nineteenth century, still persisted among the more rigorous and uncompromising members of this particular holy community, and was vigorously supplemented by similar "unworldliness" in the most fanatical wings of the Methodist and Presbyterian churches.

The Kosekin drive to literal extremes positions which such religionists, and perhaps De Mille's own father, held as articles of faith. It looks very much as though De Mille reveals the absurdity and even the depravity of such attitudes by pushing them to their logical conclusions. The central Christian tradition to which De Mille adhered has never regarded what is *natural* as sinful or vile; it has never made such a sharp division between body and soul, between the natural and the divine. Adam is given a moment of insight, although he is unaware of the implications, when he declares that the Kosekin "lived in opposition to nature itself". According to the Kohen, it is "unnatural" or against

human nature to fear death, to detest and avoid poverty, to seek the requital of love. These are all animal rather than human instincts, says the Kohen. In effect, the Kosekin deny that man shares any instincts with the animal; their totally uncompromising position is to segregate man from animals, man from nature. They have built up a body of ideas which denies any connection except the common need of animals and man for nutrition in order to remain alive. Even more than the most extreme Calvinist, the Kosekin have cut man off from nature, and have defined nature as evil. Then, to rationalize their own denial, they name the artificial the "natural". For De Mille, as for Hooker, the great apologist for his church, nature is part of the divinely-ordained and ordered universe, and what is natural in humanity is not by definition unclean or evil but morally neutral, capable of being used for good or evil purposes. But for Christian extremists and the Kosekin, much of life is indeed in opposition to nature itself. Both devalue life as something to be released from as quickly as possible so long as the release is honourable (suicide is a sin for both). Moreover, the whole symbolism of light and darkness in the novel applies to Christian extremists as well as to the Kosekin—both are blind to the glories of the natural life and try to live in the darkness and gloom associated with death, with a denial of life. Both are so suspicious of pleasure and enjoyment as occasions of sin that the most envied people are those destitute of worldly goods and worldly pleasures. The only difference between the Kosekin "aristocracy" and the self-styled aristocrats of Christian grace is that most Christian extremists hold such ideas as convictions without putting them into indiscriminate practice. The Kosekin, by carrying their convictions into uncompromising action, reveal just how abominable, De Mille seems to be saying, the convictions are. The leading paupers of the land are filled with blood lust and are actually the worst of murderers. Such is the logical outcome, De Mille implies, of an utter denial of the goodness of life. He may even be implying too that the distorted conception of God held by life-denying Christians is actually akin to the godlessness of the Kosekin, that a caricature of God amounting to blasphemy is not far removed from utter unawareness of God.

Another aspect of Kosekin life is closely related and equally an ironic comment on Christian extremism. In their system of ethics the Kosekin are completely ignorant of the Aristotelian principle of the golden mean that has been so influential in establishing the *via media* of liberal Christian ethics. The Kosekin drive the virtue of temperance to its deficiency of abstinence in denying the beauty and pleasure of life rather than simply avoiding its harmful attractions. They drive the virtue of courage to its excess of foolhardiness when they seek death in battle with fanatical persistence. They drive the virtue of liberality to the excess of prodigality when they strive to give away all possessions in the attempt to attain the poverty and worldly misery that they deem necessary to

their "salvation". Their perverted extremism is well summed up by their first citizen when the Chief Pauper tells Adam of his almost ideal condition: "I have poverty, squalor, cold, perpetual darkness, the privilege of killing others, the near prospect of death, and the certainty of the *Mista Kosek*."

The subject of love in the novel is a perfectly integral part of the Kosekin philosophy. The Kosekin notion of love is forced to the point where lovers remain apart because it would be "selfish" for them to act otherwise. They deny love as they deny life itself. They reject any compromise between the flesh and the spirit. Selflessness is not for them a relative force in a fallen and imperfect world but rather utter self-denial. Kosekin "love" is not really love at all, but rejection of love. No one can *receive* love any more than any other "commodity". The love which the Kosekin say is so strongly felt has nowhere to go, no object upon which to act or fulfill itself. It is entirely abstract, never real or realized — in fact, inhuman. One can hardly fail to notice how closely the Kosekin resemble Swift's Houyhnhnms on this point. Both are distinguished from human beings by their impervious rationalism, the main difference being that the Houyhnhnms, being horses, simply have no human emotions, while the Kosekin, being men, have smothered their human instincts in the name of an absurd ideal which seeks to deny their humanity.

To interpret the Kosekin ideal of love and Adam's total opposition to it as basically an amusing satire on romantic love in Western society, as R. E. Watters does, would seem to be a distortion of De Mille's intention. Certainly Adam More echoes the sentimentalities of romantic love in Western culture, and in this as in most ways is an impercipient extremist in his own right and so an unconscious satirist of the values he holds. But De Mille's emphasis is surely on the absurdity of the Kosekin position on love, as it is on their uncompromising extremism generally. Adam's shocked incomprehension is no more and no less marked or significant on the subject of love than on any other Kosekin article of belief. What is involved here as elsewhere is a more complex meaning derived from De Mille's basic principle of moderation. Satire there is, but it works in two directions simultaneously, and depends just as much upon the inadequacy and extremism of Adam as upon those qualities in the Kosekin.

The novel makes better sense if De Mille is seen as opposing *two* sets of extremes rather than one — extreme self-denial and consequent life-denial as in Kosekin society, and extreme self-indulgence and consequent denial of transcendence and moral idealism as in Western society. Adam is not really De Mille's spokesman but a simple-minded and naive representative of Western culture, propounding values as they are commonly practised in his corrupt society. His resemblance to Gulliver is close enough to put us on the alert. Like Gulliver, Adam is not utterly depraved, not really extreme, for example, in his espousal of self-indulgence, but he is at best no more than a unreflective humanist of the

shallow sort and at worst, perhaps, "a prig, a ninny, and a hypocrite", as Crawford Kilian declares him to be. He is primarily, however, an impercipient representative of a materialistic and essentially godless society — so impercipient that he does not even realize that the selflessness and self-denial of the Kosekin are in fact self-indulgence. There is little in him of the idealism of De Mille, of De Mille's declared disapproval of self-indulgence in his own society. Consequently the arguments he opposes to the Kosekin ideals are not the ideals of his culture but the imperfect realities all too common in its practice. His attitudes are the counterparts not of Kosekin "high-minded" ideals but of the ordinary Kosekin citizen's imperfect realization of those ideals. The idealism of Western culture, De Mille's idealism, is far below the surface of the novel, implied rather than stated. The outward conflict is between two extremes, irreconcilable because they are seemingly poles apart and because their chief spokesman, the Kohen and Adam, are only vaguely touched by the principles of moderation that would move them closer to the golden mean — the Kohen by the touch of humanity which has made him a failure by Kosekin standards, Adam by the basic decentness which partly belies and relieves his materialistic and pragmatic outlook. The ultimate of Kosekin idealism is of course represented by the Chief Pauper, and the ultimate of Western materialism, ironically enough, not only by Adam but by the Kohen Gadol[23] and especially Layelah, whose daring iconoclasm makes her "a new Semiramis — one who might revolutionalize an empire and introduce a new order of things" (p. 168). Layelah's statement of her principles, which amount merely to the substitution of extremes opposite to those of the Kosekin, places Adam's extremism in clear perspective: "The rich shall be esteemed, the poor shall be down-trodden; to rule over others shall be glorious, to serve shall be base; victory shall be an honor, defeat a shame; selfishness, self-seeking, luxury, and indulgence shall be virtues; poverty, want, and squalor shall be things of abhorrence and contempt" (p. 167). Here is the imperfect and of course depraved *practice* of Western society, as extreme and as far from the mean as the Kosekin values Layelah rejects. Similarly, Adam's view of love in his own society is as limited as his other conceptions. His philosophy of love is tritely romantic, even sentimental, and no doubt unconsciously satiric of love as practised in our culture. The missing element is of course the highest ideals of his civilization. The opposition of two defective extremes defines the mean only by implication. Moreover, the two extremes, ironically enough, are "ideals" in another way: just as very few of the Kosekin are able to live up to their ideals and become paupers, so few people in our civilization are able to become self-indulgent and wealthy despots. Most of the Kosekin and most of us are back-sliders, incapable and even sceptical of the single-minded zeal necessary for attainment of either imagined *summum bonum.* From De Mille's point of view, the extremes are equally heinous, and Adam's judgment is as inept as the Chief Pauper's. Like Swift in Book IV of *Gulliver's*

Travels, De Mille makes his narrator impercipient of the ironies involved. The main difference is that De Mille did not follow Swift to the point of converting Adam to an acceptance of Kosekin life-denial in a movement analogous to Gulliver's total acceptance of the Houyhnhnms' inhuman rationalism.

The satire of the novel therefore is double-edged, an assault upon extremes of opposite kinds. It is as crucial to see Adam as the impercipient and unwitting apostle of Western materialism as to recognize the painfully obvious imperfection of the Chief Pauper. Both put forth recipes for the death of the spirit. De Mille's position in the midst of this ingeniously confusing welter of ironies and cross-purposes is far from obvious. Like Swift in his creation of Houyhyhymland, De Mille has kept his own point of view so completely behind the scenes that he runs the risk of mystifying the reader or leading the critic into irresponsible interpretation. In both cases an appeal outside the literary work to the nature of the creator is the likeliest means of keeping one's feet in the slippery mazes of ironies and counter-ironies. The self-effacing irony of both satirists can easily be a trap for the unwary. While the personality, convictions, and ideals of De Mille can be only partially understood at our present stage of knowledge, what is known or can reasonably be deduced is of the utmost importance for a judicial interpretation of *A Strange Manuscript*.

NOTES

[1] "Introduction", *A Strange Manuscript* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1969), vii-xviii.

[2] "The Cheerful Inferno of James De Mille", *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, I, #3 (1972), 61-67.

[3] "De Mille and the Utopian Vision", *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, II, #2 (1973), 174-179.

[4] The manuscript letter is in the De Mille Manuscript Collection, Dalhousie University. The credit for unearthing this uncatalogued letter and realizing its importance must go to Douglas E. MacLeod, who quoted part of it in his M.A. thesis, "A Critical Biography of James De Mille" (Dalhousie University, 1968). As Crawford Kilian's article reveals, Mr. MacLeod's thesis contains much information on De Mille's life that will not be found in existing published accounts.

A. H. De Mill (only James's branch of the family adds an "e" to the name) was a younger brother of James. He had graduated from Acadia with B.A. and M.A. degrees, had studied law, and at the time of James's death in 1880 was practicing law in Saint John, New Brunswick. As James's sudden death had left his wife and children in serious financial difficulties, A. H. De Mill was working with other members of the family to raise money by publication of several works still in manuscript. Lea and Shepard of Boston had published many of De Mille's books for boys, but were rightly regarded by A. H. De Mill as not suitable publishers for *A Strange Manuscript*.

[5] These fictional pieces were "The Missionary's Son" (1860-61) and "Andy O'Hara" (1860-61). At the same time his sketches, "Recollections of Rome" (1861),

"Recollections of Naples" (1861) and "Horton Sketches" (1861), were also appearing serially in the *Christian Watchman*. See MacLeod, p. 141.

[6] Archibald MacMechan testifies to the early composition of *The Dodge Club*, saying that it "was written before going to Acadia" ("De Mille, the Man and the Writer", *Canadian Magazine*, 27 [1906], p. 413.)

[7] The italics are mine.

[8] The bibliography of De Mille's fiction is still somewhat uncertain. According to some bibliographies, his first novel was *The Martyr of the Catacombs* (a "Sunday School Book", according to MacMechan), which is said to have first appeared in 1858 (perhaps in serial form) and again as a book in 1865. Although R. E. Watters was unable to locate a copy for his *Check List of Canadian Literature*, this rare item has surprisingly turned up in an undated, modern paperback edition published by the Moody Press of Chicago. The paperback edition clears up none of the bibliographical problems (it does not even bear the author's name), but at least it proves that the book exists.

[9] See D. E. MacLeod's description and reproduction of the drawings in De Mille's notebook of 1853 (thesis, pp. 104-107), and Kilian's remarks ("Cheerful Inferno", pp. 66-67).

[10] The "arguments for a late composition date" mentioned by Crawford Kilian — that *A Strange Manuscript* "shows a skilled writer in complete control of his material" and that De Mille's ironic reference to authors lacking prestige in Kosekin society (*SM*, p. 141) reads like the remark of a seasoned professional writer — seem of little account, and indeed are given merely passing notice in the article (See "Cheerful Inferno", p. 67).

[11] These are the three works discussed by George Woodcock as influences upon De Mille. See "De Mille and the Utopian Vision", *JCF*, II (1973), 174-179. It must be added that the "significant echoes" cited in the article strike this reader as much more tenuous and unconvincing than the confident tone of their presentation makes them appear — even if one examines them with A. H. De Mill's evidence dismissed from the mind. Is there really much resemblance between the conversation of Mallock's sophisticated characters in *The New Republic* and that of De Mille's yachtsmen? Then the fact that Butler, like De Mille, "begins with a criticism of moral and philosophical attitudes" rather than focussing on political and social institutions seems to be a weak indication of De Mille's indebtedness to *Erewhon*, simply because De Mille's basic interest in men rather than institutions needed no encouragement from Butler. More and Swift would have confirmed his inclination just as well. As for Lytton's *The Coming Race*, the very minor resemblances between it and *A Strange Manuscript* are easily accounted for by the two authors' common knowledge of earlier works recounting the discovery of strange and contemporary civilizations.

[12] It should be noted, however, that the idea of having the Kosekin perform cannibalistic rites comes from De Mille's knowledge of ancient history — the superstitious belief current among the first-century Romans that the Christians in their midst practised cannibalism at their religious services. The following passage from *Helena's Household* suggests the connection: "They [the Christians] met in secret assemblies, where it was reported that they indulged in the worst vices among themselves. The mysterious repast which they celebrated in memory of their dying Lord was particularly suspected. A report prevailed that at this repast they fed on human flesh and drank human blood — a strange perversion of that symbolical rite which represented by bread and wine the body and blood of the Saviour" (p. 271).

[13] For notice of Symmes' theory and a summary of *Symzonia*, see J. O. Bailey, *Pilgrims Through Space and Time* (New York: Argus Books, 1947), pp. 40-42.

[14] See Bailey, pp. 64-65, for his summary of De Mille's novel. Unfortunately, Bailey is not as perceptive in interpreting the meaning as he is in noticing some of De Mille's sources. He concludes that "no satiric purpose is clear in the book" and reads it merely as "a yarn of strange adventure."

[15] This and subsequent references to MacMechan on De Mille are drawn from MacMechan's article, "De Mille, the Man and the Writer", *Canadian Magazine*, 27 (1906), 404-416.

[16] Elisha Budd De Mill was unquestionably a Baptist minister — not, as Crawford Kilian says ("The Cheerful Inferno", p. 61), an Anglican.

[17] The letter is in the MacMechan Collection, Dalhousie University. The remark is quoted by Allan Bevan in "James De Mille and Archibald MacMechan", *DR*, 35 (1955), p. 205, and is picked up by later commentators.

[18] See MacLeod, p. 41.

[19] No influence of Arnold on De Mille is implied, for Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* was first published in 1869, two years after *Helena's Household*.

[20] *Helena's Household*, p. 233.

[21] It is possible, in fact probable, that the doctrinal and theological flavour of this novel was originally even less evangelical than it is in the published version. D. E. MacLeod ("A Critical Biography of James De Mille", p. 42) quotes the following tantalizingly suggestive passage from H. L. Koopman's "Literary Men of Brown, III: James De Mille", *The Brown Alumni Monthly*, VIII (July 1907):

> He [De Mille] had difficulty in finding a publisher for *Helena's Household*, and, to his chagrin, the one that he had at last secured insisted on important changes in the treatment to conform to the theological taste of the day. It was not a question of truth, but of trimming. De Mille resisted stoutly; but he needed both the money and the recognition which the book would bring; so at last he yielded, and rewrote the obnoxious chapters.

One assumes that "the theological taste of the day" refers to the predominent evangelicalism of the popular audience the publisher had in mind — in particular, the tastes of Baptists, Methodists, Congregationalists who would have formed the greater part of the potential readership for such a novel in the United States of 1867. As for "trimming", the mere cutting down of long theological discourses *may* have been meant. It is much more likely, however, that the word means the modifying of opinion according to expediency — in this context, presumably the simplification and evangelization of theological doctrine. Mere cutting could hardly be described as "important changes in the treatment."

[22] One could also say that their godlessness is a satiric analogue of Western godlessness, and that in this, as in so many ways, the Kosekin are caricatures of Western man rather than his opposite.

[23] It is worth noting that the Kohen Gadol is seen to be much more contemptible, much less "virtuous", than the Kohen. The latter knows what is "right" and tries to live up to his ideals, but fails because he is genuinely human. The Kohen Gadol lacks Kosekin "virtue" almost entirely, being greedy and selfish, embracing riches by deliberate choice. The Kohen tries to be a "good" Kosekin, but is victimized by less scrupulous people who take advantage of him. In a sense the Kohen is not unvirtuous, even by Kosekin standards, because *generosity* causes him to accept what others offer. He is self-sacrificing, by Kosekin standards, in accepting wealth at his own spiritual expense.

review articles

COMMANDS AND DESIRES

Kathy Mezei

ANNE HEBERT, *Les Enfants du sabbat*. édition du Seuil. $8.50.

IN ANNE HEBERT'S latest novel, *Les Enfants du Sabbat** we again encounter the archetypal Quebec literary experience; a precocious adolescent becomes the battleground between the commands of the spirit and the desires of the flesh. *Les Enfants du sabbat* seems to be a logical development of Anne Hébert's earlier novels, *Les Chambres de bois* (1958) and *Kamouraska* (1970). The fable-like, implicitly incestuous world of *Les Chambres de bois* and the romantic, implicitly demonic northern landscape of *Kamouraska* develop into a much more explicit, earthy, "experienced" version of incest, mortification and sacrifice in this tale of the devil's struggle for the soul of the heroine, Julie. This "enfant du sabbat" is in the line of Hébert heroines who struggle between the strictures of a repressive, closed and macabre tradition and the promise of liberation through violent defiance. Anne Hébert, in this novel, pulls away the veils of an impotent religion and the hypocrisy of faith, just as in her earlier ones she attacked the decadence and impotence of the seigneurial breed. It is the dynamic possession of a soul that interests her here, not the shrivelling of a soul. Yet the struggle she depicts seems contrived and romantic.

Hébert, as her earlier works demonstrated, is not interested in character or action, but in mood, and in states of being shaped by the peculiarities of Quebec's social, historical and religious verities. This novel takes place against the backdrop of the depression years and World War II, a fact which enters the novel only infrequently and does not alter its aura of timelessness.

Julie de la Trinité, with her yellow eyes and strange pupils, finds herself in the convent of "le Précieux-Sang" alternating between two states of consciousness signifying two forms of being. Trapped within the false piety of the rarefied air of the convent (the mother superior forbids windows to be opened; "on ne sait jamais ce qui peut nous venir de l'extérieur, caché dans une poussière, dans une escarbille. Le démon est rusé, insidieux, comme un grain de sable"), she flees, in a dream state, to the release of a cabin "dans la montagne de B . . ." where

* 'sabbat' in French may also imply a black sabbath.

she relives an earlier period, "la source de ma vie perdue". She and her brother Joseph, dirty, full of lice, assist in black sabbaths, steeped in drugs, illegal alcohol, and sexual orgies, hosted by their sorceress mother, Philomène, and demonic father, Adelard. This couple "souriant de leur grande bouche rouge aux dents blanches" are well matched in their lust and malice and their ability to carry on a three day sexual performance.

The novel moves through the unfolding and contrasting of evocative images. The closed world of the convent contrasts with the cabin open to the luxuriance of nature. Blood, the "précieux-Sang", becomes the pervading image of the dual aspects of being. The anaemic pallor of the nuns counterpoints Julie's exultation in the blood that marks her violation by Abelard. The frail Soeur Gemma's queasiness before slabs of meat in the convent kitchen is set against the ecstatic worship of the slaughtered pig's blood that drips into basins held by the children at black mass.

The novel begins with Julie succumbing to a vision of the cabin which she had resisted to this moment. But the demonic lures her, "Elle est affamée de cela qui est caché dans la montagne". What alternative does the holy life represent to the call of Satan? "Et pourtant, c'est le même départ léger de soi-même, la même envolée vers les délices étrangères". Just as the black mass is the inverse of the eucharist, so too, the convent inverts values. The celebration of corruption and the corruption of celebration are everywhere. All that can stem the growing malevolent power of the possessed Julie from destroying the sanctity of the convent are prayers — "Vous pouvez toujours prier, ma soeur. Cela ne peut vous faire de mal". The sketches of the mother superior, Marie-Clothilde de la Croix, the lustful Dr. Painchaud, the decrepit Léo-Z Flageole, eager to perform an exorcism, the cigarette-smoking "soeur économe" whose haywire business deals almost bankrupt the convent, are quite diabolic. Other writers, such as Marie-Claire Blais, have already painted the hypocrisy and vice of the religious community with a black and ironic brush. Hébert, like Jacques Ferron and Victor-Lévy Beaulieu in his *Manuel de la petite littérature du Québec* seems to suggest there is a magic of myth and legend to be woven out of the popular lives and despairs of the people. She, in fact, lingers over details of the kitchens and magic brews and beds, drawing out the poetic possibilities of the commonplace, the gruesome and the perverse. To further cement the relation between art and authenticity, Anne Hébert has appended a short list of works on demonology she has consulted.

Philomène and Adelard, and later Julie (the unholy trinity) reaping panic throughout the village and the convent, nevertheless fulfil a need. As Adelard says, "La plupart des gens ont un besoin effrayant de fête!"

The life of the convent teeters on the brink of hysteria and absurdity amid the continual shuffling and praying of the nuns. The life on the mountain becomes an invitation into the demonic for Julie, though not for Joseph whom Julie loves as a god. Both worlds move towards dramatic climaxes, and Joseph, somewhere out in the world, "somewhere on the front", is the link and the sacrifice.

The narrative by association (that also marked the style of *Kamouraska*), where-

by the past flows into the present until past and present merge, gives us a picture of the cause, the nature and the necessity of the possession of Julie. It also attempts to diminish the division between past and present, demonic and godly, dream and reality. For example, the steam of the convent laundry room suddenly transports Julie into the mists of the mountain. The line between association and artifice is sometimes a fine one.

The need to exorcise "l'enchantement pervers" has haunted the work of Anne Hébert. "L'enchantement pervers", framed in *Kamouraska* by an historic crime of passion, is less effectively framed by demonology in this tale of two innocents. Sorcery does provide the precise formulas for the macabre rites and relationships Anne Hébert likes to describe and roots the novel into a particular culture. But "l'envers du monde" is not an alternative to existence or to an affirmation of life, but an anti-existence. The trouble is that Julie is simply not very interesting. We are caught up in the battle waging within her soul, but not in her. She is neither sympathetic nor antipathetic. There is little in the sketches of the twilight realm between God and satan, mountain and convent, or the "states of being" of Julie to suggest, as Julie claims, "que l'atroce se change en bien". Therefore, I am puzzled as to where redemption lies and which form exorcism must take.

SEPARATE AND MULTIPLE WORLDS

Clara Thomas

NEW, WILLIAM H., *Among Worlds*. Press Porcepic. $6.95. NEW, WILLIAM H., *Critical Writings on Commonwealth Literature*. Pennsylvania State University Press. $15.00.

PROFESSOR NEW's two publications mark a giant step forward — to coin a cliché — for Commonwealth Literary Studies in Canada. Those of us who have been attracted to the field, who find a compelling common denominator in the themes of the literatures of the Commonwealth, have had to accustom ourselves to constant, nagging frustration about our lack of critical resources for its teaching. Our students do bibliographic exercises on the work of major writers — Achebe, Soyinka, Naipaul or Lamming, for instance. The Commonwealth field is recently cultivated, the master-works themselves have all been written within the last fifteen years, our libraries are often poorly equipped in critical resource material, and the harvest is both meagre and too often marked by critical and racial condescension or prejudice.

Some of the available works are fine — Kenneth Ramchand's *The West Indian Novel and its Background*, or Margaret Laurence's *Long Drums and Canons* — but these are specialized studies of the writers of one geographical area only and the speedy rates of change in literary production and in social and political situations within developing nations make them

quickly insufficient. Since Laurence wrote, for instance, the balance of Wole Soyinka's work has shifted with the publication of the novel, *The Interpreters* and the memoir, *The Man Died*; since Ramchand wrote, V. S. Naipaul's canon has been enlarged and his remarkable talent extended through *The Mimic Men In A Free State* and *Guerilla*. Gerald Moore's *The Chosen Tongue* is a book to read, to savour, and to learn from; the acuteness of his critical judgments, the sensitivity of his reading, the depth perception of the societies whose writers he treats, and the grace of his own writing are entirely to be admired. But Moore deals only with English writing in the tropical world; furthermore in his introduction his consideration of the beginnings of American Literature, without so much as a nod in the direction of the northern part of this continent, its colonial history and its present Commonwealth place, leaves a slightly bitter flavour with the Canadian reader.

Now in *Among Worlds* we have a collection of essays on the fiction of the Commonwealth including Canada. Subtitled: "An Introduction to Modern Commonwealth and South African Fiction," *Among Worlds* has chapters on "The West Indies: Patterns of Dislocation"; "South Africa: The Politics of Freedom"; "East and West Africa: In Search of Tomorrow's Traditions"; "New Zealand: Escape Into Distance"; "Australia: In Response to a New Old Land"; "South Asia: Fastidious Antitheses"; and "Canada: Home Ground, Foreign Territory." Each chapter is, in its general plan, a wide-ranging survey of the fiction of the area. But Professor New has been well aware of the possible dwindling into catalogues of such vast surveys and he has organized each chapter around the themes of its title.

> This book offers a guide to fiction written by modern Commonwealth and South African writers; it describes the thematic parallels that mark the literary contemporaneity of each Commonwealth culture, and it examines some of the ways in which the writers have used their cultures' preoccupations to construct separate and multiple worlds.

New is very far indeed from the regrettable, lingering Imperial assumption that in 1964, following a Conference of Commonwealth Literature at the University of Leeds, led to the publication of a group of papers entitled *Commonwealth Literature: Unity and Diversity in a Common Culture*. Instead, he perceives the sharp divisions between cultures as providing both internal tensions for the writers themselves and external interests for their students and general readers.

> While the separateness reflects their sometimes sharp, sometimes clouded insight into both their own and their society's distinctiveness, the multiplicity demonstrates their unrelenting awareness of the distance between themselves and traditional ways of life. They are conscious almost always of trying to make sense out of the chaos of the modern world, a chaos which their local history seems to intensify.

Professor New does not deal with poetry or drama, but he does use prose writings other than fiction, sometimes to fine effect as in his considerations of Naipaul and Wilson Harris, and sometimes rather less effectively as in his discussion of B. K. Sandwell's "The Privacity Agent" as a point of reference in his Canadian chapter. His discussion of the literature of the West Indies inevitably suffers most from his exclusion of poetry, since Edward Brathwaite's *The Arrivants* and Derek Walcott's *Another Life* are such major

contributions to the literature, both in their themes and in their artistry. Similarly, the drama, *A Dance of the Forests*, is central to Soyinka's themes and talents and major in its position in West African literature. However, given the scope of New's project and the lurking catalogue-nemesis of all such ventures, some considerable selectivity was forced upon him — and his essays have not become mere lists of names and references. The reader is most apt to be impressed, of course, by the chapters about which he knows least, and most intensely critical of the treatment of his own literature. By this exacting standard the work is a signal success, for "Canada: Home Ground, Foreign Territory" is a perceptive and comprehensive essay, one which will be as valuable to literary studies inside the country as outside of it.

Among Worlds is offered to us modestly as "a guide to fiction written by modern Commonwealth and South African writers." This function it fulfils admirably. The reader-student will not come away from it with any sense of finality in literary canons or critical judgment. He will certainly emerge from a reading of the work with questions and challenges which both *Among World*'s useful bibliography and, much more exhaustively, Professor New's *Critical Commentaries on Commonwealth Literatures*, are designed to aid in answering.

I would, however, question the effectiveness of the illustrations in *Among Worlds*. They are reproductions of nineteenth-century prints and they have not been reproduced particularly well. In many cases they are both too dark and too blurry to please the eye or to be of any particular interest. Furthermore, I very much doubt that the individual or collective sense of humour of former colonial peoples is yet ready to appreciate them for the ironic visual commentaries that they must have been meant to provide.

Critical Commentaries is a selective bibliography of *Commonwealth Literatures* to 1970. It is 312 pages long, with an excellent index. Its text is arranged under section-headings beginning with Commonwealth General and proceeding through Africa (East and West), Australia, Canada, New Zealand, South Africa and Rhodesia, South Asia, South East Asia, The West Indies, and — this a very valuable addition — Theses and Dissertations, similarly divided into sections by geographical area. Each section is subdivided into three parts: Research Aids, General, and Individual Authors. All items are listed by number, to a total of 6576.

This work is the first comprehensive bibliography we have had in the field — it is correspondingly priceless as a research and resource tool. If we wonder at New's particular selections or omissions in any one of the areas, we have only to remember the magnitude of the task, the need for a volume which was portable and of reasonable price, and the heavy funding which comparable Canadian projects have received, but which New, except for a University of British Columbia grant in aid of the project, did not have to draw upon. His Foreword, outlining his rationale for the work and setting forth some of the special problems it presented, gives ample evidence of the magnitude of the bibliographic task he undertook. His text is the evidence of its successful completion. Furthermore, using the critical bibliography of one's own

literature as a yardstick, New's selectivity has been well exercised. The section on Canada is a brief, but sound bibliography of our literature by any standards — as a listing of the works by which other Commonwealth scholars might most handily become familiar with our literature, it is excellent.

These two works provide us with major sign-indicators toward the multiplicity and richness of Commonwealth and South African literatures. Having now given us the tools, I hope that Professor New will be free to continue his own work on the writers who, in *Among Worlds*, seem most to fire his imagination — Harris, White, Armah, Naipaul and Godfrey are pre-eminent among them.

PLAYING WITH FREEZING FIRE

George Woodcock

MARGARET ATWOOD, *Selected Poems*. Oxford. $6.95.
ANDREW SUKNASKI, *Wood Mountain Poems*, selected and introduced by Al. Purdy. Macmillan.
ANDREW SUKNASKI, *On First Looking Down from Lions Gate Bridge*. Black Moss Press.
SID STEPHEN, *Beothuck Poems*. Oberon. Cloth $7.95, paper $3.50.
PATRICK LANE, *Unborn Things: South American Poems*. Harbour Publishing.
RICHARD OUTRAM, *Turns & Other Poems*. Anson Cartwright Editions. $4.00.
DOUG FETHERLING, *Achilles' Navel*. Press Porcepic. $3.95.
DOROTHY LIVESAY, *Ice Age*. Press Porcepic. $3.25.

IT IS TEN YEARS — just — since Margaret Atwood published her first book of verse, *The Circle Game*, though there had been slim pamphlets leading up to it; for once critics were alive to the fact that a poet of more than promise had appeared. The verse collected in *The Circle Game* had an extraordinary assurance of tone, and the kind of sharp laconic discipline which few poets achieve until mid-career, and most not even then. 1967, when Margaret Atwood received the Governor-General's Award on the strength of that book, was one of the few recent years when criticism of the Canada Council's choice for the poetry prize did not seem necessary.

Now, after five more books of verse, Margaret Atwood has published a massive *Selected Poems* of 240 pages which not only keeps the promise her first book seemed to make, but also establishes her, at the age of 37, as a major poet in the Canadian tradition. It is almost a *Collected*, and one feels that only Atwood's sense of being still in the full swing of creation has prevented it from being so. The whole of *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* is there, and this is a good decision, since in fragments the work loses its mythic impetus; it is essentially a long poem on the Canadian sensibility refracted through history. The other books are almost as completely reproduced. Of Atwood's most recent collection, *You Are Happy* (1974), for example, I find only nine poems that are not transferred to the *Selected*; the two major suites of that volume, "Songs of the Transformed" and "The Circe/Mud Poems", have been reprinted whole, which is appropriate, since in each suite the individual poems take on full resonance only in context,

and "The Songs of the Transformed" acquire complete stereoscopic depth only when read with the "Circe-Mud Poems" that take off from the encounter between Odysseus and the legendary witch.

As what I have just said will suggest, the *Selected Poems* reveal admirably the consistency of Atwood's preoccupations and the unity of her work. I suppose the adjective that might throw most light on that consistency is "shamanic". The ambiguous relationships between man and the animal world and the curious spiritual emanations of such relationships; the awareness of the mythical universality of transformation, which can move in any direction, so that men behave like animals as popular metaphors suggest, but animals in their turn display qualities we had thought of as a human monopoly; the war that is love: such factors dominate a verse-sequence like the "Circe-Mud Poems", but they also dominate Atwood's fiction, in the shamanic anthropophagy of *The Edible Woman* and in the equally shamanic regression-and-rebirth theme of *Surfacing*, while they are present in a work outside fiction and poetry like *Survival*.

One can even draw minutely particular comparisons. For a preview of *Surfacing*, look at the very first poem of *Selected*, "This is a Photograph of Me", published and presumably written a good six years before the novel; the setting is that of the island in *Surfacing*, and the narrator of the poem (not her father as in the novel) is drowned and floats suspended in the lake, just below the surface. The next poem, "After the Flood, We," concerns disaster and survival; for the flood of the poem substitute the flood of American culture into Canada, for the two people of the poem (one unaware and the other aware) substitute Atwood and the readers and writers she has tried to awaken to the deluge, and you have the basic framework of *Survival*. There is nothing unusual in such creative recycling; the best writers, indeed, are often those who remain attached to a few essential concepts and percepts and effectively permute them in a variety of forms and genres. To do this one must possess great virtuosity, and there is no doubt that Atwood has it; she is among our most precise and exacting literary craftsmen. But to avoid tediously repeating oneself, an inventive kind of imagination is also needed, and this too Atwood has. Each of her works — even the shortest poem — creates when one reads it a circle, if not a world, of its own; only on later reflection does one remember other works and realize that something — a theme or at times merely a cast of mind — has remained constant. In sum, *Selected Poems* is to be welcomed as confirming one's sense of Margaret Atwood's status as a poet and a woman of letters; on a more practical level, it is satisfying to have almost all of those six separate indispensable volumes within one set of covers.

In most literary times and places there is one figure who expresses with peculiar felicity the spirit of the age. That writer is not always in every respect the best of his time, as the examples of Samuel Johnson and Ben Jonson (a truer mirror of his specific time than Shakespeare) clearly show, yet he not only reflects in his work the significant themes of his era; he also elucidates for other writers — and for their readers — the nature of those themes. In Canada today when we pick such a writer for our time and place, we have to choose among "shes" rather than "hes", and Margaret Atwood is my choice and probably the choice of many others. In *Survival* she isolated the proper themes of our place and time with an accuracy that has made her imitators in thematic criticism quite superfluous, and her work in other genres — quite apart from its individual merit — has taken

shape as a kind of prismatic mirror in which many attitudes are reflected that otherwise might seem irreconcilably variant, such as those of the geographical-historical poet, the mythopoeic poet, the wit poet. All of them are there, in her work and in her view of Canadian writing as it is and might be, and reading through the other books I shall mention in this article, I realize that though I cannot effectively relate, say, Andrew Suknaski to Richard Outram, or Doug Fetherling to Patrick Lane, or Dorothy Livesay to any of them, I can in some way or another relate all of them to Margaret Atwood. I am not suggesting she is the head of a movement or the Great Queen Bee of Canadian Literature. But I am suggesting that she is something of a polymath, with antennae sensitive to whatever may be currently important in Canadian writing. Having said so much, let me pass on to the others without further mentioning her. For whatever Atwood's role as an interpretor of contemporary themes and of the writers who express them, it remains *her* role.

Preoccupations with place and time have made much recent Canadian poetry read like a gloss on the writings of those historians who have been conscious of the effect of our environment, as it was originally and as we have changed it, on the Canadian collective consciousness. Much of Purdy and John Newlove inclines in this direction. So do the poems of Andrew Suknaski, yet as soon as one begins to approach a real poem with historical generalization in one's mind, the situation becomes changed by the nature of the glasses through which, darkly or clearly, it is seen: the poet's sensibility and his experience. It is true that on one level Suknaski's *Wood Mountain Poems* are elegiac records of Saskatchewan's past; of the Indians, Sitting Bull and all the others, who were only memories in Wood Mountain by the time he grew up there; of the pioneers, including his father, who broke themselves in the process of breaking an ungrateful land and who survived to populate the poet's youth.

There is thus a great deal of sheer history to be sifted out of these poems, and no prairie archivist worth his salt would fail to note it, but *Wood Mountain Poems* has other dimensions. It is, to begin, not merely a record but also a judgment, of white rapacity that killed the Indians' culture, of urban indifference that allowed the way of life replacing the Indian way to expire in its turn of neglect. For Wood Mountain, as a white village, is dying as the nomadic Indian villages died before it. And Andrew Suknaski, in the flat eloquence of reproach and regret, laments alike the Indian life that drained away into survival, and the wasted lives of European immigrants who gave their manhood and often their sanity in the thankless task of taming a region — the south Saskatchewan prairie — that should never have known the plough. "Indian Site on the Edge of Tonita Pasture" is a haunting example of the poet's attempt, as he traces the stone circles of an old Sioux encampment,

> to chronicle the meaning of these vast plains
> in a geography of blood
> and failure
> making them live.

And make them live he does, for if the Indians have already become wronged ghosts, the old pioneers are there in all their individual idiosyncrasy, from the poet's father, unpredictable violence turning his life into five decades of terminal solitude, to the farmer who madly threshes Russian thistle when his land has borne no wheat for years. A smaller Suknaski collection, *On First Looking Down from Lions Gate Bridge*, just published by the new Black Moss Press, consists largely of items already included in *Wood*

Mountain Poems; the new poems have a transitional feeling, for they follow on the poet's departure from his omphalic village and his search for an imaginative hitching post in a new setting.

By now one could probably compile a thick anthology of poems about Indians by non-Indian Canadian poets, poems compounded of admiration, of regret, of nostalgia, of guilt — all the varied emotions we experience when we recognize the irreparable harm our forebears did in destroying viable ways of life and — often — highly creative native traditions. Sid Stephen's *Beothuck Poems* is a rendering of the worst episode of all, the complete physical destruction of the native people of Newfoundland. Even in plain prose it is an appalling story; Stephen's chopped, inelegant verse brings out yet more of the unbearable pathos, the terrifying pointlessness of this hunting down of a people.

In his *Unborn Things: South American Poems*, Patrick Lane moves on a quite different level with his threnodies of the Inca past and his appalled presentations of the here-and-now in which the descendants of those who created the Andean civilizations survive. Patrick Lane's earlier poems have already shown his exceptional quality as a poet recording with mingled delight and anger the splendour of the world and the shame of what man has done to it and to his fellow inhabitants. I had read already with admiration the main suite of *Unborn Things* when it first appeared in an issue of the west coast poetry journal, *Blackfish*; entitled "Machu Picchu", it evokes the past of that lost final fortress of the Inca realm, perched on its splendid crags above the jungle and the river: the departure of Manco Capac, the last Inca, to die in a Spanish ambush; the dying out of the deserted Virgins of the Sun; and the fate their refuge now shares with other tragic loci of history, with Mycenae and Elsinore, with Taxila and Persepolis:

Today we lay in the Temple of the Virgins
As centuries filled our mouths with moss.
They have stripped away the jungle.
They have torn the winding cloths.
They have scattered bones to the wind.

Strangers walk through the ruins.
They talk of where they came from,
Where they are going.
As we lay in this roofless room
They stoned a snake.

It crawled out of the earth
To lie in the brilliant sun.
Coils of its body like plaited hair,
Eyes of cracked stone. They left it
Broken, draped on a fallen wall.

The kind of transference that equates modern man's brutality to a snake with the Spaniards' destruction of a civilization they could not understand, is extended to other poems in *Unborn Things*, which is not unexpected when one remembers the indictments of man's abuse of his will and power over other beings in earlier Lane poems like "Mountain Oysters" and "The Black Filly". "At the Edge of the Jungle" is a poem about disillusionment with a place romantically anticipated, and the narrative of horror begins with a dog burying its head in the Amazon mud to evade the flies that swarm on his sore eyes; it ends with a tethered rooster whose beak children have cut away so that he cannot eat. It is a fine, appalling poem, whose truth I recognize from having made that journey myself, over the Andean sierra and down to the Amazonian headwaters. It ends:

Diseased clouds bloom in the sky.
They throw down roots of fire.
The bird drags sound from its skin.
I am grown older than I imagined:
The garden I dreamed does not exist
and compassion is only the beginning
of suffering. Everything deceives.

A man could walk into this jungle
and lying down be lost
among the green sucking of trees.
What reality there is resides
in the child who holds the string
and does not see
the bird as it beats its blunt head
again and again into the earth.

South America has provoked Canadian poets to remarkable work. It gave Earle Birney the hints for some of his best poems, and the same is true of Patrick Lane, whose recent work — this volume and *Beware the Mouths of Fire*, establish him clearly as a poet unusual in his direct and telling response to experience, whether that experience is a memory of the collective mind or an episode individually lived.

Doug Fetherling and Richard Outram both strike one, after Suknaski and Stephen and Lane, as poets both urban and urbane. Outram's *Turns and Other Poems* is a collection which illustrates the fastidious sparseness of his work. Published in the Phoenix Living Poets, a series intended mainly for British readers, it is only 48 pages long, but a fair proportion of its contents has already appeared in two brochures printed over quite a long interval by two different Canadian small presses.

Outram is one of those traditionalists who talk in what sounds like a voice of the past, but whose message nevertheless can at times seem disconcertingly present. There are quite a number of them in Canada: John Glassco and George Johnston, Roy Daniells and Robert Finch, and even, in his own quasi-Jacobean way, Ralph Gustafson. Such poets are nimble, very clever at wordplay, able in exploiting the incongruity between the archaicism of their manner and the contemporaneity of their matter. At its best, when the vein of satire runs clear as in Johnston, or when the irony masks a deep philosophic seriousness, as in Daniells and Glassco, this kind of mixture can be extraordinarily effective, and some of its practitioners are among our most important living poets.

Outram, I think, is not, yet it is hardly

from a lack of virtuosity in his verse. The craftsmanship is almost faultless; the wit is smooth; the cosmetician has done his job with total dedication, but where is the heart? I confess I have not found it. And perhaps I would not have searched for it if someone — and I suspect the poet in this case — had not blurbed on the cover about "a continuing preoccupation with evil; with the intransigence, terminal or heroic, of man; with passion and with compassion; with the ordinary of life, which shall prevail, and with graceful necessary death." All these things *are* present, I suppose, as subject matter, but they never dominate the poems, since Outram is always seeking that felicitous and fastidious pattern of words, that twisting and witty end, and so, while I found these poems highly amusing, I was at no time moved by them to any inconvenient emotion.

Doug Fetherling is, it seems, a somewhat different type of the urbane poet. His *Achilles' Navel: Throbs, Laments and Vagaries*, makes no pretensions to eschatological aims. It is content to be a collection of poems that observes the world sardonically and allows the morals to fall where they will. Much of it comes from a wry observation of what goes on in the quotidian world, given emphasis by isolating it from its context. E.g. the poet finds himself earning a few necessary dollars working on the resiting of a cemetery; his predicament provides the excuse for some grim reflections on death and on life also:

> No curses on these dirty bones
> we transplant,
> they did not believe
> in magick to the extent
> they believed in ignorant money
> and were anxious about the century
> ending
> the past getting longer
> the future near and the present
> a device to measure transition
> in a comprehensive way . . .
>
> All around it are
> the well-off plots, the monuments
> continue to show their cost, the caskets
> brought up tightly sealed,
> the remains
> inside still largely intact but
> placed unopened in another larger box,
> money having guaranteed them
> everlasting
> freedom from human hands

Or, having read the narratives of explorers, he pauses to consider how the natives must have considered these men who would "move too quickly/ to notice life best viewed/ standing still . . . " Their conclusion is gentle, unjudging in its yet devastating irony.

> Soon they will return to
> wherever it is they are from
> talking as though they invented
> what we show them now
> and encouraging others to come
> in truth they invent only new names
> never content with the old ones we use
> We who are only willing to help

The complementary poem, "Western Manitoba", is that of the traveller who recognizes he is dead to the country he travels through at top speed:

> . . . The sky in the west
>
> grows progressively bluer, we are led
> to expect some large celebration
> when cement air and earth end together
>
> in a point. Until then we are rotting
> in speedless time and distance
> two skeletons with maps in an old Chevrolet

The easiest poets to write about are always those who deal in implication; one can always diverge into some game of interpretation. Fetherling is one of the explicit poets; everything is clearly there for whoever wants to follow it, and the critic finds himself tempted to write what the poet has already said. So read *Achilles' Navel*, not just this review.

Dorothy Livesay's *Ice Age* is all its title suggests, a collection of poems whose basic theme is the process of ageing which

to the outsider seems like the cooling of a hearth but to the experiencer can be more like eating every day one of those chef's concoctions in which hot and cold are combined miraculously. In a poem actually called "Aging", Livesay talks of her body that "haunts me/ thieves in on me at night/ shattering sleep/ with nameless pointless paint", and yet, while every night "my fingers search the wound, the old/ spine curvature, the creaking knees", something else is also at work:

> but tongues, the darting tongues
> lick elsewhere, fan desire
> until all yesterdays are gulfed
> in freezing fire

"Freezing fire", indeed, is as good an epithet as one could find for this collection, where the facing up to whatever is proximate is done boldly, seeing, in mergansers watched, a paradigm of existence — "We live/ only to submerge", and in a poem to P. K. Page, "The Other Side of the Wall", stating explicitly enough the realization about which the whole book revolves.

> I have climbed
> put my foot in the rock
> looked over.
> That tangled secret garden
> weedful, with fallen trees
> thistles and thrusting flowers
> is not fearsome . . .
> would welcome a clean-up
> a lover.
>
> Beyond, sky is secure
> song lulls the air
> all things once living have changed
> but live on
> there.
>
> The wall is death.
> My death. Not to be climbed
> yet.
> I have no fear.

Dorothy Livesay is 67; her first book of

verse was published 48 years ago. Like all of us she has had her intermittencies, periods of silence, of the muse's meagreness, but always she has come back not merely renewed, but with her view enlarged in scope and expressiveness, and more than any other poet she has been a constant creative presence throughout the period in which we can think of Canadian poetry as a tradition distinct and of its own. For the last ten years now she had been writing better poetry than she ever wrote before, which is only one of the many current examples disproving the old legend that the best lyricists are those who die young. And *Ice Age* shows, in my view, no slackening from her recent upsurge. The speech is strong and firm, the empathies are wide (e.g. the astonishingly penetrative poem to Alan Crawley, "To be Blind"), there is a good deal of the liberated cantankerousness of those to whom age brings a further clearing of the eyes, and there is a haunted consciousness that we advance towards death in a dying world, that the ice age may be universal.

> We, born to flourish
> in a heyday of the sun
> and tumble to ruin
> when the ice age comes.

That ice age may be final, but the book called *Ice Age* has no air of finality, even if that is partly its subject. It is immensely vital, celebrating life in every sentence that talks of death, and, one can be sure, is no last word.

SHEILA WATSON AS LEWISITE CRITIC

Linda Sandler

Sheila Watson: A Collection. Published by *Open Letter*, Third Series, No. 1 (Winter 1974-75).

THE PUBLICATION of the short writings of Sheila Watson is a literary event of no mean importance. And that it should have been the editors of *Open Letter* (the Toronto-based, West Coast-derived quarterly devoted to *avant garde* writing) who personally solicited Watson's manuscripts, is especially interesting. The academic journals, I think, show up less well.

Watson is not a writer who commits herself lightly to paper or to publication. *Sheila Watson: A Collection* contains four stories, six essays on Wyndham Lewis, four additional studies of satirists (Swift, Carlyle, Ondaatje and Stein) and a transcript of Watson's introduction to her first public reading. I believe that aside from her novel, *The Double Hook*, this is the sum of her published writings. (There remains her unpublished doctoral thesis, "Wyndham Lewis and Expressionism," written under the supervision of Marshall McLuhan.) Yet Watson has had a considerable influence on Canadian literature, far exceeding the number of her readers — perhaps even exceeding the number of students who attended her classes at the University of Alberta. Her ideas have become current coinage.

What kind of critic is Watson?

She is part of the line of critics descending from Wyndham Lewis (who passed World War II in Canada),

through Marshall McLuhan, to Hugh Kenner and herself, to Frank Davey, George Bowering *et al.* And as Watson implies in her review of Lewis's letters, it was Lewis who taught them all to observe how machines and mass media were altering human perceptions.

It's easy to see why Watson belongs in *Open Letter*, and why Frank Davey, when I asked him about this, should have said that Watson's position during the Fifties parallels *Open Letter*'s radical stance in relation to the Seventies. I have no space to examine this assumption, but I'm not sure how Watson would take to being identified *too closely* with the "post-modernists" who, Davey has written, "seek to participate in anarchic cooperation with the elements of [their] environment."

Watson is a difficult critic to review because she is seldom visible during the critical process. One has the impression on reading her that a train of ideas, associatively linked, is passing before one's eyes. Watson says of Lewis that he "trained his mind to be a delicate instrument for recording the gestures of minds around him and of relating them to his own." This is even more true of Watson than of Lewis, who was, as he acknowledged, often fiercely partisan. (I'm thinking of his political blindness during the Thirties. Watson — and I don't blame her! — doesn't deal with that here.)

In Watson's two studies of Lewis's painting, "The Great War: Wyndham Lewis and the Underground Press," and Canada and Wyndham Lewis the Artist," we see the critical process in its purest form, without intervention of personality. Watson studies the complex interrelation of Lewis's ideas and his icons in fiction and painting; her grasp of her subject is second to none.

There are clues to Watson's critical method lurking behind the ideas she elucidates. Her intellectual portrait of Lewis, "A Question of Portraiture," is particularly relevant. Lewis was technically a Canadian by birth and an Englishman by education, but he fought to overcome the mechanical ascendency of birth and environment, to develop his mind as an impersonal instrument of research. *Conscious* personality as opposed to *received* identity. With this finely tuned instrument he investigated the cultural metamorphosis in Europe after the Great War; he explained to his favourite reader, Everyman, the forces that were controlling his life.

Believing satire to be a surgical instrument, he laughed loudly at all the manifestations of fashion and reaction that he knew were at odds with social realities. In his fiction and in his polemics he played the hangman, executing poets pretending to be communists, politicians pretending to govern, artists pretending to imitate the revolutionary experiments of science, men and women behaving like mechanical puppets, while England moved towards war.

Throughout his life, Lewis held the now unfashionable belief that the artist — the one who *sees* — has certain responsibilities. He must remain detached from fashionable creeds and dogmas, he must communicate reality as he sees it, and in this way, prepare people for the future which is rapidly being realized in the present. As Watson points out, Lewis offered his art as a blueprint for the future. Lewis was one of the last of the great literary pedagogues.

The ideal Lewisite — and Watson is one — is concerned with the cultural context of an artwork, its form and language, and its philosophical implications. She is a species of meta-critic, aware of the limitations of traditional criticism, who engages in dialogue with her reader. Witness Watson's essays on Swift (who, like Lewis, satirized satire itself), Carlyle (whose quest for the natural man, Wat-

son says, was a symptom of romantic confusion) and Ondaatje (a serious artist who understands how profoundly mechanical the "Freudian" unconscious has become).

These essays are hard to read because they are explorations rather than arguments. They proceed in leaps and tangents, not in lines. As Watson says of Lewis, it is the "complex interrelation of [his] statement which often baffles a reader."

Watson's stories are modern reenactments of old myths, written in formal, stylized language, very like the early Lewis. "Brother Oedipus" features an anti-modern thinker who spends his time cultivating roses and listening to the whispers of his unconscious.

> "I have," he said, turning from his rose bushes, "superannuated social consciousness and sent it to hook mats in the home for senior citizens. The individual unconscious is in tune with these [roses]."

Oedipus has an uncle called Daedalus, an energetic entrepreneur bent on furnishing the world with up-to-date labour-saving artefacts and selling them to reluctant buyers. Oedipus comments (and here he sounds like the early McLuhan):

> He's tried to persuade the world that he's made it jab-proof and hole-proof and scratch-proof, that it's crush-resistant and heat-resistant and stainless; but he ignores lemon juice and the Siamese cat. He forgets the catechism and original sin.
>
> ("The Black Farm")

Daedalus, it seems, is Puss's antimask, and he tries to turn him back to a simple pastoral existence, to persuade him to pursue truth and eternal varieties. The project backfires. Daedalus gets hooked on black magic, turns his farm into a fake (black) emblem of a vanished past.

The comedy of the stories resides in the tension between formal language and structures, and an ultra-modern frame of reference. They satirize modern myths — they are, if you like, meta-mythologies. Listen to Watson's comments on Lewis, and you'll see how she conceives her own satiric enterprise.

The function of satire, she suggests, is not to undermine civilization, hoping, as Carlyle did, that you'll uncover natural or "metaphysical" man. Nor should the satirist replace outworn dogmas with "a dogmatic return to inaccessible primitive ritual." The function of satire is to accommodate people to the present, to the future which is already here.

LOOKING HOMEWARD

D. G. Stephens

NORMAN LEVINE, *Selected Stories*. Oberon, 1975. $6.95 and $3.50.

FOR SOME TIME now the Canadian writer has been a considerable traveller. Adventure, war, desire to establish a reputation abroad and hence at home, a more traditional education, a wish to go away and then come back to Canada with fresh eyes, sometimes complete curiosity to see how the rest of the world lives, have all sent Canadians out from their own country. From these series of travels, Canadian literature has frequently profited, emerging with new experiences and on occasion with fresh insight. Two main streams can be seen in this literature. The most obvious has been in the statements about new lands and

experiences in writers otherwise as different as Callaghan and Glassco and Woodcock. The second appears in those writers who, placed in another country, turn their eyes and thoughts determinedly homeward. Norman Levine belongs in this category, and his *Selected Stories* reveals again that in Levine the Canadian short story has a master craftsman, a writer who looks back to find the meaning in his past yet without the sentimental nostalgia usually associated with the writer who looks back.

Levine has been living in England for thirty years, and though he does write about his life in England he is chiefly concerned with writing about Canada. He does not live in the literary capital of England, if London can still be called that; instead, he lives in St. Ives in Cornwall, a centre for artists who in the main go their own way, who put up with the tourists in the summer so that they can enjoy the wet and fog of the winter, and get down to work. And work is what Norman Levine has been doing all these years. With care, with grace, and with elegance, he has astringently given to short fiction a new nuance in the magic of memory. He investigates, in vignette, the past, a past that his mind has, almost of its own, recollected for him. There is no doubt that Levine knows that he cannot go home again, and he seems to wonder why. What happens is that his memory can lead him into something new and valuable. He discovers a new dimension as he searches for meaning in the past; like Phyllis Webb, he wonders who can tell the apparent from the real?

The rhythm and sound patterns of the Levine prose are noticeably intrinsic to his meaning. He can, in a few deft strokes, sketch a complete scene and its mood:

> Murray Street looked drab, empty, frozen. Solemn boxes with wooden verandahs. Brown double doors and double windows. Not a soul was outside. On King Edward the snow heaped in the centre had a frozen crust. It glittered underneath the street lights. And the houses, on either side, in shadow, appeared even more boarded up, as if you would have to go through several layers before you found something living.

The scene is compacted here; the sentences are as stark as the landscape they describe. He is at once the photographer with details that are precise, sharp, clear; yet the words have connotations, yet are not diffuse within the scalpel-like effectiveness of the figurative language. Here, too, the sounds evoke the scene, the crispness of that winter night. Levine not only forces his reader to fasten on the clear-cut primary picture that he presents, but also makes the reader's mind push onto another level of meaning. He aims for a texture in his prose, and the reader must participate in recreating the experience.

This process is done by the reader filling in the gaps. Levine has said that he can "always tell a bad writer by the words he leaves in"; with him, we know he is a good writer by the words he leaves out. In "Quebec City", the narrator has just left the bed of a girl who has sneaked him into her parents' house to make love in her bedroom, and for a moment it appears as if the girl's mother will discover them; yet again, there is the suggestion that the parents of the girl know all about it, and almost encourage the girl's liaisons, of which this is the fifth. He leaves just after five in the morning:

> It was snowing. Everything was white and quiet. It felt marvellous walking, flakes slant, very fine. I didn't feel at all tired. I heard a church bell strike and somewhere further the sound of a train whistle, the two notes like the bass part of a mouth organ. The light changed to the dull grey of early morning and the darker shapes of a church, a convent, came in and out of the falling snow.

Levine suggests so much in this. And it is so Canadian, not just because of the

landscape, but he captures that understatement that is so oral about the Canadian as he does describe a scene. The Canadian does not wax and wane when he reacts to his natural world; instead, he describes and lets the subtleties gauge in on their own so that the reader's response is individual and never stereotyped. It is much more than it appears to be on first glance.

The characters that Levine introduces to his readers present a similar situation. At first they appear to be stereotyped: the narrator who is often a young Canadian airman, on his way to England after or during basic training, a young man, often Jewish, on the make. There is the father, a typical Ottawa peddlar; there are the father's friends, all trying hard to make ends meet. There is poverty, there are slums. Yet something unexpected occurs with these characters, who could very well be the stereotypes so popular in stories preceding and during the war, characters emotionally stunted by the force of poverty and the desire for making it at the expense of someone else. Yet, they do not turn out that way. These people may be faced with all the temptations and acquisitiveness of a materialistic society, and for a while it appears that their capacity for happiness and love, for becoming mature and enlightened in their feelings toward others, is warped and poisoned in the bud. But they do not turn out that way; life is not joyless, hardship is not hopeless, premature old age is not a natural outcome. These people for the most part are able to reach out to the true natural world that contains their own identity. When one reads all of Levine's stories, it sometimes appears as if he were writing them from a political point of view, that the characters portray general types of social victims. Like Zola, Levine does use the technique of "realism" to dramatize a social condition. He does focus on representative faces in the crowd to bring the whole social condition into clearer perspective, but the types that Levine creates live, in the imagination, as individuals.

Nowhere does Levine strangle the characters because of some kind of social consciousness he wants to put across. Never are the characters forced and manipulated; never do I feel that the narrator's insights, or those of some of his characters, are obviously those of Levine. These are characters who are at once blameless and to be blamed, victims of society but of their own making, yet they are never lifeless automatons. We are not so much moved by what happens to them as we are exhilarated by their reaction to what happens. Levine appears to have added a greater depth in characterization than the short story form usually dictates. The characters are often memorable, as the three Mendels — Constance, Frieda, and Mr. Mendel — in "In Quebec City".

Levine has been accused of being closer to the English than to the Canadian idiom, and of an increasing tendency to rework the same themes. Though I feel that Levine does not need a defense against these criticisms, I also feel that it is important to disclaim them, mainly because some readers would get such impressions from some critics — and from general statements about his work, as in the Supplement to *The Oxford Companion to Canadian History and Literature*. In Western Canada we seem to be less concerned with whether a writer is too English or too American or not Canadian enough than we are with what he does as a writer. It is the universal in Levine's themes, the art with which he writes that is important. He may set his characters in Ottawa, Montreal, Quebec or in England, but their experiences are world wide, could happen to anyone anywhere. He takes the ordinary, and makes the reader see the ordinary in it, unlike

so many writers who look only for the extraordinary in human experience.

There is, too, a strong poetic quality in the writing of Norman Levine. He writes the short story frequently with the resources and the intention of the lyrical poet. The stories should not be read as simple narratives in the usual sense, though there is much narrative movement in many of them. Instead, Levine conveys the feeling of a situation, the humanity of what is going on, the idea that this is happening to people; the stories have all the unity and shape, the concentrated diction and implied emotion of a well-finished lyric poem. As with the lyric, the stories yield their full meaning only upon re-reading, when the reader can link the implications of section with section, implications that are not always obvious upon first reading. For this reason, I do not feel that the criticism against Levine that he reworks old themes is valid; instead, by similar themes in these *Selected Stories*, separate stories illuminate each other. What may be a fragmentary moment in one story is lighted by another fragment in another story; even the characters may be different, but the emotion is similar, and its significance is apprehended more fully when it is implied again another way.

The diction of Levine's short stories, with its evocation of mood and scene and its poetic use of implication is the most important part of the fabric of his work. Yet, there is nothing vague about these short stories. Levine is assured in his craft, very knowledgeable in his composition; he always uses the right punctuation mark in the right place. He writes with a precision, knowing full well what he intends, and achieving it in his best stories with an accuracy and rightness that puts him with the best of short story writers. And without ceasing to belong to the country where he was born, he is a writer who has branched out into his contemporary world — he has been translated into both German and Dutch — and become a man of his time as well as of his country.

TOWN OF HOPE

Ron Miles

The cedar, fir (and
mountains under) touch
and enter cloud as thick
as drugs. Cattle fatten
patiently, tracing spongy fields
again, their blunt legs
baffled by the wait.

Only river, dirtier than cloud,
folds and brushes itself
around bare spruce, beyond
the box that settlers chose
against the wrath of sun
the chance of sky.

books in review

CAVIAR AT THE BARRICADES

D. M. FRASER, *Class Warfare*. Pulp Press.

I RECALL, as a child, the first time I ever saw someone make an utter fool of himself; how excruciatingly embarrased I felt merely at having been a spectator to the incident. Much later came my discovery that the reverse is also possible, and that someone else's fine performance can sometimes make one feel almost as pleased as if one had had, similarly, a hand in it oneself. Reading D. M. Fraser's first collection of fictions, *Class Warfare*, was for me much the latter kind of experience; it's been a long time since I've so thoroughly enjoyed reading a book. (Much, I might add, to the disgruntlement of my cat which was spilled from my knees each time I swung in my chair with a delighted ha! or goddam! or similar perspicacious observation.) Unquestionably, Fraser has come up with a superb performance, much of it satire of the highest order and, taken in its entirety, a remarkably acuminate legend of the sixties and seventies. Or, in a larger sense, a virtual study of entropy. The sort of book which, just before we've finally blown ourselves up or smoked ourselves out, I'd want to be certain to have included in the time capsule we'll leave behind to explain ourselves to whatever follows. A collection of stories about two young idlers walking night streets; four young adults living dutiful lives in an old mansion; a bemused university professor sitting guard over a roomful of exam-writing students; Santa Claus after his retirement; a young woman revolutionary's tale; an eccentric executive who refuses to answer his mail; an absurdly flawless and sophisticated male culture-vulture; a political kidnapping, and a tired man's journey down to Lonesome Town.

Given its title, the first assumption readers tend to make about *Class Warfare* is that it's a political treatise of some kind, but this is only obliquely true. It is certainly not a political harangue, nor is it thinly camouflaged political pamphleteering. Fraser's observation of the political machinery clanking and clattering at the hub of the world has made him particularly aware of its effects on the society he lives in, and his awareness necessarily adds that dimension to his tales, but only two of the fictions actually deal directly with political issues. The first is the account of "Marie Tyrell", a revolutionary jailed by police and subsequently executed, whose *Nachlass* (a letter written from her prison cell to her confederates, excerpts from her childhood diary, her description of a dream, and the account of her meeting with a priest) is set down alongside the institutional report on her prison behaviour and the ruminations of her lover—the whole story thereby becoming, in effect, a set of *en face* court record of the trial of an epoch. The other is the title story, "Class Warfare", an account of a political abduction narrated by one of the members of the revolutionary "cell" which committed the act. It is in fact very reminiscent of the 1970 FLQ kidnapping of James Cross, and is one of the most lucid explications of the inner workings of such a

cell and the minds of its members that I have ever encountered. Unfortunately the sections which demonstrate this are far too long to quote, but there is Marie Tyrell's letter in the former story which demonstrates a similar insight:

> Comrades, there is less to tell you now than I would have thought, less to say, evidently, than you are prepared to hear. Often my mind is wholly empty, quiet, a room vacated in anticipation of some catastrophe, which will come soon enough. I apologize to my brothers and sisters, for this. I understand what you expect of me, what you deserve, in this darkening of our history. You need something usable, a Statement, to ennoble our cause and shame our enemies, words to engrave, soberly, on the monuments you doubtless will not forget to erect to me. There was a time when I knew the words. I remember how they rang in our meeting-rooms, at our rallies, how they shone in my mind, when we spoke them together. I remember how I repeated them, for comfort's sake, again and again through the nights I lay in hiding, and when I was discovered and taken away, how joyfully I spat at my tormentors. They were good words, and I do not regret them, nor the end they led me to. Be certain of that. Now they have left me, as so much else is leaving me, and I have not the strength, nor the wish, to call them back. Let my memorial be silent, if you would build it. More blood than mine will be shed, before you do.

The rest of the stories incline more toward the socially satirical, and here the narrative voice is articulate, urbane, lightly understated — I was reminded of a carefully adjusted phonograph tonearm set at precisely the right tracking force and pitch. Yet it is rarely self-indulgent for all that, and when it is, tends to be so with a self-mocking grin:

> In any event, our work is apparently serious, and we take it seriously. We are constrained to be outlaws, desperadoes, the stuff of an incipient mythology. My own weakness is that I am small and squirrelly, much given to moony brooding, inchoate inspirations (to violate the boundaries of our monumentality, embrace the poetic ladies, bare myself before the multitudes), and a not always manageable disposition to tears. Such behaviour is not respected here; I must dissemble often; I await, with dread, the inexorable moment of self-betrayal. I am unworthy of Masterpiece Avenue. Spiffy knows: I catch in her cool Angloid eye, in passing, a glint of — what? Recognition? Commiseration? Warning? And: *We must all be careful*, Ambrose whispers, polishing his glossy blade, nibbling wisely at his moustache. And whose toothpaste was it that spelled out, on the bathroom mirror one midwinter morning, the words of our sentence? — THIS IS A GOOD LIFE, WE ARE CONTENTED THEREWITH.

In the story ("Masterpiece Avenue") from which the above quotation is taken, Spiffy, Janey, Ambrose and the narrator live in an old mansion of obscure historical significance, "on sufferance", the narrator informs us, "by the grace of the Landmarks Commission, to provide 'continuity, the sense of a still-viable tradition, an ongoing ambience'." The four live together gravely, tactfully, trying earnestly if not always entirely successfully to live up to the stylistic demands of their historical landmark; to be gentle anachronisms in gracious tableau. Similar mockery carries the story "The Sweetness of Life", in which an insufferably accomplished young man

> . . . is having supper tonight with the Empress of India. They will fry prawns in exotic sauces; the table will be set with linen, rough-textured stoneware, candles, dried reeds in a brass bowl. They will drink a virtuous red wine, in moderation, sniffing the bouquet critically; he will tell her, not without irony, about his childhood, his first car, his early sexual terror, now happily abated. "What an oaf I was," he will say, reminiscently. Later, he will play his guitar for her. There will be muffled applause, cries of "Bravo!" and "Wow!" The sun will set discreetly behind the grape arbor; elsewhere the moon will rise. Everything will partake of the sweetness of life.

As is characteristic of the best literature, the best stories in this book are also the most difficult to talk about, possibly because they address themselves so persistently to that chameleonic puzzle known as the human condition; such stories seem never to be precisely about this or that, but somehow about it all; the kind of story one has the initial impulse to describe as being nothing less than "about itself". "Marching to Pretoria" is such a piece, its approach prismatic, purposefully ambivalent; the theory of relativity demonstrated on Main Street (or any street) by two young men drifting through wet evening neon, looking for anything to change their luck. A lone woman approaches. The narrator of the two speculates; the woman is who she is, they are who they are: the possibilities are endless. Perhaps they will accost her, perhaps she wants to be accosted, perhaps she does and they won't or she doesn't and they will — the contingencies build, become elegant formulae in ontological ambience, just as anger and misery can be geometrically endlessly intriguing — but possibly, just possibly, the most fascinating ideas are only fascinating because we're still too cold in the world, still too uncomfortable here, and to maintain at least a modicum of warmth, have to keep throwing fascinating ideas on the low fire before us and rub our hands and foreheads in continual puzzlement to keep the blood moving along — for what, finally, does it all matter the moment these two can manage to come in out of the rain, to surround themselves with the far more efficient warmth of love, power, acceptance or peace? But that, of course, isn't what this story is about, not entirely at least; the lady passes, unaccosted, and how is that to be valued? Is the incident (or non-incident) more important than the evening, the street, the purpose of the evening walk or the second lone woman now approaching the two? And if she, too, passes them by, has anything been lost? Not sophistic questions, these, but questions of orientation; how can we know where we are if we don't even know where we've been? What do we really want, and how do we discern our options? The second woman passes, with a kindly smile.

The most ambitious story in *Class Warfare,* entitled "Lonesome Town", is unfortunately also the most ungainly — a 14-part saga of Jamie McIvor's journey down to Lonesome Town, that place on your interior roadmap to which you temporarily retreat when youthful energy and optimism, the fascination with world, wife, and dreams, and your confidence in your own invulnerability finally sag. It's to Fraser's credit that, having established the basic metaphor in the first several sections, he virtually ignores it for the rest and proceeds simply to build and populate the town with all the streets, hotels, beer parlors and citizens one might expect to find in any of a thousand depressing small North American communities that have somehow managed to acquire only the worst byproducts of the technological age. However, in order to make this 70-page-long and generally unhappy tale digestible, Fraser finds himself having to shift tactics often, coming at his story from as many different directions as he can manage, trying to keep the story from dragging. While he does this with admirable skill, the final result is not entirely satisfactory. The last four sections of the saga contain the most troublesome spots, these generally being the ones

in which Fraser steps back slightly from his story and speaks to his reader *about* it rather than *through* it; the effect is that of a storyteller somehow lost in his own tale, a tale that became at some point too long and consequently somewhat unmanageable.

But there's certainly no doubt that *Class Warfare* wins its stripes despite such relatively minor difficulties. There's not even any need to give it the special consideration first books often get at the hands of reviewers; *Class Warfare* holds its own quite self-sufficiently.

ANDREAS SCHROEDER

SCREAM OR SPEECH?

BP NICHOL, *love: a book of remembrances.* Talonbooks.

BP NICHOL, *Konfessions of an Elizabethan Fan Dancer.* Weed Flower. $3.50.

STEVE MCCAFFERY, *Dr. Sadhu's Muffins.* Press Porcepic. $4.95.

IN AN INTERVIEW with bp nichol (*Alphabet*, No. 18 & 19, 1971) George Bowering alludes to "... a poem by Lionel Kearns in which he talks about the long scream the Indian in the movies makes as he's going off the long cliff. While Lionel talks about it, you seem to be producing ..." And nichol answers, "... producing the long scream! Right!"

Donald Hall recently said (*Ohio Review*, Spring 1974, p. 68) that a poem "uses *language* and the unconscious does *not talk*: sometimes we speak of surrealist poetry as if it were the unconscious actually speaking. Language and syntax are cerebral, coming from the cerebral cortex. Language is not something bears and alligators use. Once something speaks, that thing is not the unconscious ..."

OK. My problem in attempting to evaluate, to deliver, to make more accessible these three collections is to try for a balanced perspective somewhere between the two positions posited above in nichol and Hall. I am beginning to think that there isn't one. Either you embrace one or the other. I find myself annoyed by the necessity to take an extreme position.

Raw or cooked. Unbuttoned or buttoned down. Dionysian or Apollonian. Traditional or experimental. Linear or exploded. Sequential or simultaneous. Ideational or spontaneous. As I look over these contrasted positions, I can see how the impulse is to favour the bold, new, revolutionary, free approach. Even these words seem pale by comparison: rational, limited, straight, barriers, boundaries, traps (as in "language" traps or "logical" traps). Lie to us! Dance us back to the dawn? Naked! Primal!

Above all the attraction is to newness, against staleness. Take chances! Dare! Away with the usual, the everyday, the safe. Of course, these language experiments are not all that new. Dadaist antirationalism is at least as old as the century. Gertrude Stein's experiments with automatic writing date back to the same era. For some reason, each generation seems to forget this fact and treats each new experiment as if it were pristine. Welcome to the barbarian who will shake us out of our comfort and complacency! If we fear the barbarian, or suggest that it isn't all that radical, however, we are self-condemned to the realm of stuffy formalism.

Let me make an attempt anyhow, and try for a neutral position. Approaching Steve McCaffery's *Dr Sadhu's Muffins* as if it were a stone found on the beach. Never seen one before like this.

No use, I know too much. Besides, he reveals his method in a "note on the method of composition" at the back of the book. Primarily, he uses a random method. "in most cases," he says, "the word selection for any one poem was determined by a non intentional reading among a supply-text chosen at random from whatever happened to be on or near my desk when i was working: a concise oxford dictionary, the works of shakespeare, the poems of john donne, an i-ching, newspapers, life magazine, scientific american, abandoned drafts of several of my own poems etc . . ."

The emphasis is on random selection and unconscious composition, or at least a kind of low-level involvement, process in the making, and a collaboration in the creating of the poem between poet and reader.

bp nichol offers nothing in either *love* or *fan dancer* in this manner as a clue to his method of composition such as McCaffery has. But he has often spoken in favour of random creation elsewhere. ("George Bowering: Would you be satisfied if we ran this tape backward? bp: Maybe, maybe. It would depend how it sounded." *Alphabet* interview.) He has also spoken elsewhere of the "language trap".

nichol's *love: a book of remembrances* contains "ghosts" which are pencilled approximations of forms, like doodles, some almost becoming letters of the alphabet, but not quite, others approximating test patterns on tv. These are followed by "frames" which are surreal comic book panels which could be read sequentially, although I suppose it is perilous to do so. The book goes on with "love poems" which are in nichol's typewriter composition style, probably his most widely familiar format. The book ends with "allegories" which are like Robert Crumb cartoons gone serious, hallucinatory, even menacing.

Konfessions of an Elizabethan Fan Dancer originally appeared in 1967 under the Coach House logo. It is a collection of typewriter poems, concrete poems.

I notice that I am concentrating on forms and strategies. This is because I think it is fraudulent for a reviewer to look for meaning in a poetry which takes such pains to avoid ratiocination.

Also, the end results of language experimentation, such as these three books, are impervious to coherent review, in the sense of ideational language which attempts to make literature more available.

Going back to the polarized positions: they are equally self-defeating. The rationalist, or traditionalist or rhetorical stance, if tough, will not admit that the experiments should be allowed out in public: let the experiment stay in the lab. And a hard experimental line would keep rhetorical poetry locked up in anthologies. There is a little too much emperor's new clothes about a lot of the experimentation, a bit too much hard sell, snakeoil salesman pitch. There is equally too much snide elitism in ignoring or attacking experiment. What we need, and lack, is a method, a position, a strategy. And that's where I began. I still haven't found it.

EUGENE MCNAMARA

NORTHERN POEMS

JIM GREEN, *North Book*. Blackfish Press, $4.95.

UNTIL RECENTLY there have been few books of poems from the Arctic. The traditional Eskimo songs (collected initially

by Knud Rasmussen and Diamond Jenness) have been brought together by several editors, although the most important edition is Lewis' *I Breathe A New Song* (1971). Only a few modern Eskimos have written poems in English and as yet none of them has produced a collection. Published poetry by southern-whites about the Eskimo-North has been appearing in D.I.A.N.D.'s *North* magazine for fifteen years, but only two books of note have appeared: Al Purdy's *North of Summer* (1967) and J. Michael Yates' *The Great Bear Lake Meditations* (1971). To this, now has to be added Jim Green's *North Book* which, like its predecessors, taps the experience of a white man in Canada's Eskimo-world.

Green's northern poems are not of the sort that present-day literary theorists would consider "modernist". To be sure, they *do* utilize most contemporary techniques, but Green is not concerned with the breath-stop lines and the journey into the interior of the mind essential to modernists like Newlove and Atwood. This poetry utilizes the external world as something visualized and felt for itself; like his mentor, Al Purdy, he begins with the outdoor experience and only comments upon the inner mind in an associative fashion. In fact, in many ways *North Book* reads like an updated version of Purdy's *North of Summer*, including the "Postscript" rationale which each poet has felt necessary for southern readers. Nevertheless, Green's poems move into new areas of experience, and he extends our understanding of the North in a way that Purdy, a brief summer visitor, could not.

Green has two strong points as a poet. First, he has the ability to create evocative sense impressions of the land and its inhabitants that are almost wholly imagistic (and thus, similar to most of the traditional Eskimo poems). In fact, one of the longer poems is subtitled "ten images from a seal camp" of which the following is an excerpt:

Dog opens eyes
one then the other
in bright light
of false dawn
stands shakes
in the cold wind.
He yelps
is silenced stunned
when his cry echoes
once twice
right back at him,
lies down
curls up
mumbling.

The second strength Green has is his ability to handle the colloquial language of people around him, and to deal colloquially with experiences that demand a less formal language. In the poem called "TD1" that outlines a white man's attempt to discover an older Eskimo's age, Green captures the following:

then he starts slow at first
a steady flow of sound then faster
he gets his arms swinging
eyes flashing and really talking
abruptly he stops
looks to the young guy to translate
he does

"That man he say he born round here
and that same day he born
his father kill two white bears that time
that man he say he old as that"

The poems in this volume are divided about evenly between imagistic evocative poems and social commentary; the evocative poems are the best. Green's empathy with the Eskimo way of life and his bitterness about southern-white impositions is evident throughout. One of the best poems re-interprets the Eskimo legend of

how the white man was created when an outcast Eskimo woman mated with a dog. This poem concludes as follows:

But the girl
mated with the dog
whelping two ordinary dogs
two dogs with men's heads
two men with dogs' heads
and two men
with white skin.

At best the dog is an animal.

Beware of the dog.

Other poems are more directly political as Green laments the white man's arrogance as he builds his "dreams on the blade of a bulldozer."

Alden Nowlan once commented about poetry that

the best you can do
sounds like a cheap trick when you re-read it.

The chief fault of the poems in Green's book is that many of them employ "cheap tricks". One short poem of this kind runs:

HOW TO DO IT
OUTSIDE
IN THE WINTER

quickly.

Other poems set up ice-men in order to shatter them abruptly by the ending.

I was frozen
shaking,
wet to the waist,
with another hour
of open water
still to go.

The old man sitting
legs straight out
on the canoe ribs,
eyes loving every inch
of grey coastline
"good day"
he shouts over
the engine roar.
and I think "Yea"
"Well me,
I'm new here."

These endings sometimes work, but overuse of the device weakens the impact of *North Book.*

The illustrations by Nauya, an Eskimo artist, though excellent, are not integral to Green's book. The drawings emphasize a mode of life shifting into the Eskimo past, and are thus romantic in conception; in contrast, Green's poems, though on the romantic fringe, deal with a contemporary reality in which Coleman stoves, oil drums, and pop cans intervene.

Because he has made a home in the North, Green is more visually involved than any previous southern-white writing about the North with the environment around him. He doesn't have to reach back into his white-cultural bag of metaphors, but utilizes the North as it is, and, therefore, doesn't impose sluggish words upon an alien landscape. Like Patrick Lane, whose poetry his sometimes resembles, Green has lived the land and the life he dynamically describes.

GORDON P. TURNER

MIXED BAG

West Coast Plays, ed. Connie Brissenden. New Play Centre-Fineglow.

WHAT IS a "West Coast play"? The New Play Centre's anthology of one-act plays inevitably raises the question by its title and its Introduction by Pamela Hawthorne, managing director of the Centre, with its claims to be fostering "a strong Canadian identity" and "the excellence of B.C. writing". The answer, however, is far from clear. The five dramatists

represented in the collection come from various parts of Canada and from other countries; their plays are set in Paris, London (England), Western Ontario, a mansion, and a room; their subject matter has nothing at all to do with the West Coast. A reader coming to this volume in search of indigenous material will be disappointed. But a reader looking for interesting short plays, original in style and yet clearly within the main stream of contemporary theatre, will find here, if not God's plenty, at least some quite stimulating work — written by people who happen to be currently living in or near Vancouver. Most of these plays are, to some extent, derivative; the authors know and sometimes echo Beckett, Pinter, and Genet. Some of the playwrights experiment with form while others tread familiar paths. They vary in verbal and theatrical skill. But they are certainly worth paying attention to.

Leonard Angel's "Forthcoming Wedding" is a sophisticated soap opera or a drawing room comedy, according to its director, Jace van der Veen, and the Centre's Pamela Hawthorne, whose "Dialogue" with the author is printed before the text of the play. They find much that is sinister in the play, in the apparently incestuous relationship of father and daughter and in the murderous attack by the father on the daughter's fiancé. Angel himself sees the characters as nothing more than "perfectly frank" with each other. Such disparate views raise important theoretical questions about the interpretation and production of plays as well as aesthetic questions about a play's quality. The New Play Centre has done its readers a valuable service by including for each play various introductory materials by the author or director, though they would possibly have done better to print the introductions after the plays instead of before, where they tempt one to read them first.

Thomas Cone's "Cubistique" shows, as the title suggests, multiple facets of its two female characters as they reflect and interlock and trade places with each other. Tom Grainger's "The Helper" has a dedicated anarchist printing paper money on his old hand press, true to his faith in the League, while an intruder accidentally discovers and then cleverly exploits the printer's faith and skill. Margaret Hollingsworth's "The Operators" experiments with flashback techniques as three women eat lunch together during the night shift in the factory and try to discover or avoid truths about themselves and each other. Sheldon Rosen's "The Box," in the wittiest language to be found in this volume, pits the fantasies and the realities, the different compartments of mind, of two very different men against each other in a verbal and psychological dance.

If these plays have anything in common it is a general concern with the nature and presence of illusions — illusions the characters have about themselves, about each other, about their relationships, about whatever else they may believe in. From the strongest plays ("The Helper" and "The Box") to the weakest ("Forthcoming Wedding"), surfaces resist and crack, truths appear and disappear — some illusions shatter and a few hold firm. It's the modern world.

In this volume the New Play Centre, despite its claims, has done little to advance the Canadian or West Coast sense of identity. But the Centre does provide the most valuable of services to the practicing dramatist — the chance to be seen

and heard. All the plays in this volume have been professionally produced under the Centre's auspices, presumably after going through their exhaustive process of criticism, dramatic reading, and other workshop testing. The Centre itself, then, is partly responsible for the revised, final form of each play as it reaches the public in the theatre. And it is good to see some of these plays reaching the wider audience and greater permanence provided by publication. West Coast playwrights, however defined, deserve this added form of encouragement offered by the New Play Centre.

ANN P. MESSENGER

BETWEEN THE LAKES

W. D. VALGARDSON, *God is Not a Fish Inspector*. Oberon Press. $3.50.

WITH HIS FIRST COLLECTION of short stories, *Bloodflowers*, W. D. Valgardson established himself as a careful craftsman who writes with sensitivity, power and sublimity. *God is Not a Fish Inspector* has the same subject matter—the life of Manitoba's inter-lake region, the same themes —the passage of time, the impermanence of human existence, and it is as good as *Bloodflowers*, if not better. Once again, the carefully written description of landscape and of characters establish an atmosphere that is cold, hard, bitter, almost primeval. The imagery is precise, accurate, and yet rich in meaning. Near Fusi Bergman's house the breakwater "loomed like the purple spine of some great beast guarding the land from a lake which seemed, in the darkness, to go on forever." The image suggests the ominous force of land, water and life against which Bergman struggles. Man's role in this struggle is expressed by the comparison of the town to images cut from "purple construction paper".

These are not merely a series of short stories about a small group of people living in Manitoba. Their excellence consists in the depth of their descent into the archetypal patterns that flow through a truthful chronicle of an insular way of life. The title story, for example, is both an account of Fusi Bergman's condition and that of man himself, struggling feebly against time and environment to continue with dignity. Man, like Fusi, and so many of Valgardson's other characters, is old, selfish, weak and ultimately defeated and deflated. Indeed, few of Valgardson's stories in either book end with hope. Even when a character returns to religious faith, like Melissa in "Saved", the story ends with a sense of loss and inhibition. Melissa is separated from her husband by the locks and laws of the Church.

Furthermore, an extraordinary number of the inhabitants of *God is not a Fsh Inspector* are crippled. Bergman has a bad leg and shoulder; Hermann has no legs; Valdi has a heart condition; Elliot has mental problems in addition to being an Indian, and Albert is retarded. Other characters are incapacitated by poverty, environment, emotional sterility, or old age. When Darlene Melouish, in "A Private Comedy", says: "We're all cripples, I guess. On some it shows more than others", she is not referring merely to herself and Hermann.

Still, though time and environment are victors in Valgardson's stories, man is very often the hero. Fusi Bergman's resistance to old age and his attempts to maintain his dignity elevate his stature to heroic proportions, despite his deflation at the end of the story. The same might

be said of Carl's practicality in "A Business Arrangement". There is little laughter or overt happiness in *God is not a Fish Inspector*; there is often joy, of the kind that has ancient, tragic, glittering eyes. And there is love as well. One story, "The Novice", even provides the bare essentials of hope. Obviously ignoring Darlene Melouish's assertion that "Nobody can save you except yourself", "The Novice" shows us three men clinging to a foundering raft — in the archetypal situation — coping with the brutality of life and death by means of love and mutual help. *Bloodflowers* was an exciting piece of writing, and *God is not a Fish Inspector* is no less so.

DANIEL LENOSKI

CONTRASTING VIRTUES

JOSEPH SHERMAN, *Chaim the Slaughterer.* Oberon Press. JOE ROSENBLATT, *Dream Craters,* Press Porcepic.

THERE IS an impressive intensity and coherence in Joseph Sherman's first extended collection. The poems move from a quizzing and uncertain "I" ("I am Jonathan/ Or could have been . . .") to the passion and real eloquence of the long title-poem, with which the book concludes. In this movement the uncertainty of familiar roles (Jew, Jewish boy, Poet/Observer, Husband, Father) dissolves in the externalized ritual persona. There are less directly self-illuminatory poems, such as "The Hired Help Hotel Indian" and "Changeling", while "Poems for My Unborn Child" rehearses the role of father and husband Sherman fulfills in "Faces" and the fine love-poem "Not the Horned Flesh". "Chaim the Slaughterer" finally bows the head of man and boy before a powerfully felt religious imperative never wholly masked by Sherman's sometimes obliquely sardonic manner.

Sherman will suffer badly from thematic criticism. His opening poem has already been quoted by reviewers: "Ask a jew/ to define a Canadian/ he will laugh" ("Problems of My Own"). But a certain inevitability of theme does not necessitate predictability of effect:

> for anyone I know, certainly for me
> he had no words wise or other, no secrets
> no expressed or implied regrets
> no skeletons or ghosts save one, though it was Sam
> and Sam only who remained in the intervals of following
> the ablutions of each game and each departure of the man,
> only he to whom the darkness and its urinous diffusions
> formed a complete and never-changing world,
> a world intact with its own single sun moon and star all in one.
>
> ("What We Look For, What We Find")

Control of the verse-paragraph is a rare skill; here Sherman moves from the simplistic and anecdotal to denser feeling and dark finality with an elegant rhetoric of repetition and phrasal variation ("no . . . no," "Sam . . . Sam," "only . . . only," "world . . . world") concluding with the entirely symbolic "all in one".

I must neglect the title-poem, which deserves reading rather than summary. It is a sustained and subtle work in which Chaim's introspective dignity enriches the personal anxieties of autobiography. In itself it ensures that Sherman will be read again by those who experience this first collection. I would like to end by illustrating the flexibility and precision of which

he is capable. ("semiticelt" — Sherman's wife is Welsh):

Diminutive semiticelt
horseshoe of life

you breathe already
in such a way
as to send fish scurrying
to an unexplored sea

little fish yourself
kicking when we forget
and consider ourselves

with a whale's cry of loneliness
going nearly unheeded
lost
in the throat-parching ocean

its beaches
the rind of your world

("Poems for My Unborn Child")

Generically, Joe Rosenblatt is a very different kind of poet from Sherman. *Dream Craters* works with fantasy and personal obsession, image breeding image:

o
sleepwalkers
walk carefully
back
into my poem
into
the zero
the clean
zero
of blue
flames

("Sleepers Walk Carefully")

It is poetry of process, the poem itself often the subject. But Rosenblatt achieves many lucid ironies:

the cat wears
a face
a kind face
for the birds

("Suicide Notes")

There is a characteristic transformation of primal organic images into technological horrors which give a consistent central logic to many poems:

When the ether of the psyche rises
in the blanched house of my skull,
I hear the scratching of rat feet
& and teeth grinding on fake protein.

("Free Travel to Soya Fields or the Inflated Price of Meat")

Above all, Rosenblatt is at risk in this volume; at worst the images rot at birth:

around a lake of sunny mood singing
offshoots
of deeper hues of mood, of wooden mood,
dried
toadstool mood on a mound of dead moods,
or
mood rotting into forests of green
pornography.

But the risk is amply justified elsewhere. So much surprise, so much energy, and lest I give the impression only of wild profusions it should be said that a large proportion of these poems satisfy by an unsentimental delicacy of statement:

Love is deep as a freshly killed bird
stroked by scimitars, measured by a whisker.
On everybody's doormat
there is a sleeping bird.

We want to forget
but still feel the warmth. It hops on one leg
or hangs on a branch
with a broken wing.

("Love Poem for Faye")

PETER THOMAS

PRAIRIE AND POEM

E. D. BLODGETT, *Take away the names.* Coach House Press, $3.95.

DESPITE their surface simplicity, E. D. Blodgett's poems are examples of a difficult, intellectual kind of writing that requires close attention. While a poem, like "River", can be read and enjoyed by a child, we soon become aware that we are in a realm of complex artistic creation and of a poetic vision more cerebral than much of the prose-like verse written today. I am suggesting that Blod-

gett's verse is close to the purity of an absolute poetry, a lyric of the word. Mallarmé comes to mind.

The book is prefaced by a Latin epigram from the Christian apologist, Minucus Felix, "Take away the addition of names and you will perceive its clarity." The title of the collection, then, is meant to suggest the problem of the ambiguity of language. The poem, "Je suis un renard, dit le renard," is a further hint of this idea. The French is an allusion to the foxy fox in Saint Exupéry's fable *Le Petit Prince*. The multiple meanings of speech and our perception of reality is questioned again in "L'alouette nous ment." If the lark who announces dawn is lying, is the *alba* we see real? The Italian verse at the end of this poem implies that only time will tell us if *alba* is false. In "Albespis" the hawthorn, and the pun on thorny dawn bring us into the double reflections of springtime. The Greek quotation from Sappho, "The herald of spring is the lovely-voiced nightingale," may again be proclaiming a false start. Canadians, especially in Alberta, are familiar with false springs. There are several spring poems and *alba* or dawn poems in the book which use these ancient conventions to explore the *double entendre* meanings of language and perception. The harbinger bird appears and re-appears metamorphosed as swallow, crow, dove and phoenix.

"Se dall'inferno arrivo a qualche quiete" is an allusion to the Italian hermetic poet, Ungaretti, and reminds us of the spiritual transformations that the poems also explore: the twilight zone between death and resurrection in "Easter even", dead waters in "Doors" and "Alba", and madness in "Flowers". But the words of Heraclitus, "Change is a kind of rest," in "Places", make us ask if we are progressing along the "cammin di nostra vita" or stagnating like "aigues-mortes"? Blodgett perceives a world reified by the artistic act. Within this aesthetic transformation the ambiguous abstractions are anchored to concrete objects: the chair, the mirror, the window, a bird, the tree, the wave of water, the prairie grass. But is not our perception of these objects also writhing with double vision?

From these objects there emerges a sense of place. This feeling for a physical locus is not regional or so distinct that one could say that "Margins of Morinville" reminds us of Georges Bugnet's French Alberta. Rather this sense is a merging of past and present, the prairie, the Atlantic coast and Provence, the New World and the Old. Part four of the book begins with the trappist epigram, "It is important to know where you are put." Here we have a poet who, struggling with the ambiguities, has reached a profound sense of history, a sense of our place in time and space — most unusual in English Canadian letters.

This impression is the result of the juxtapositions of a mind immersed in the traditions of western civilization. From the bones of Egypt in the first poem, "Voice", we later move to the Alberta bush in "Anne", where "poplar trees slant toward the lazy window," and still later to the Albigensian fortress of Montségur in the poem by that name. The simultaneous perception of different locations reaches a climax in the poem, "Places", where the landscape of the prairie is super-imposed upon scenes from the Trojan war:

> now is the long withdrawal of birds
> where winter mounts the watch upon the towers.

no word upon prairies for brides:
hanging upon a northern wind.

The birds' withdrawal echoes the earlier scene of the departure of the Greek ships and the towers suggest the towers of Ilium. With the repetitions of history and the seasons we remember Heraclitus' observation on change and rest.

Blodgett is a Mediaevalist by inclination and training and his references to Provençal literature in "Song" and "Montségur", to Dante's *Inferno* in "Alba" and to Petrarch's sonnet 320 in "Sento l'aura mia antica," are all natural to the poet's sense of history, the way he perceives, thinks and writes. The verse shows us a mind with a breadth of knowledge uncommon in our world of specialists. In many ways the poems remind us of the work of Ezra Pound who also begins with the ancient culture of Provence and moves freely within the other literatures I have mentioned.

In *Take away the names* the vastness of the prairie comes to represent the incomprehensible expanses of time and human history: Arabic culture, classical literature, Canadian landscape. The prairie, like time, demands the intellectual perspective since it cannot be physically tamed but rather, like time, must be transcended by the creative act, the deliberate placing of the word. The word may be ambiguous but its power lies in its function: to name and give new reality to the thing. In the poem, "Names", the poet addresses the first name giver, Adam:

o the wind, adam,
the spring lies
speechless in your hand.

The measureless silence is ended with creation; this process is repeated in re-creation, the ritual of the poet. In "Orfeo", addressed to the father of music and the lyric, the poet recalls this primeval period, empty of word or note:

brave boy, your hushed
horizons, bright birds of no name, and dim
water where waves where sand and the deep
fall of fish contend.

But while Orfeo comes to represent the creative drive of man in art Achilles comes to symbolize the destructive one in war. Thus we are plunged again into the ambivalence of man's activities: the war dead of the *Kriegsgräberstätte* or the sanctified lovers in "Trio".

The Latin quotations, the Greek script, the Provençal epigrams, the French titles and Italian verses all reach back into the ancient impulse of the word, an impulse as old as that of music. The rhythm of the poems captures this impulse too. If we are not always able to follow the imaginative leaps of the poetry we can enjoy the verses for their rhythmical sound. The lyrical movement of "A mountain air" is just that. I find though that in these musical qualities Blodgett is at his best in the longer, more elaborate poems rather than the shorter, more sparsely worded ones. Thus "L'alouette nous ment" and "Epilogue" are more appealing to me than "Other actaeon" and "Windflower".

The success of such hermetic verse does not rely on sound alone but also on sense. To achieve comprehensibility *Take away the names* depends on the knowledge and intelligence of the reader. While the reader may easily respond to the rhythms he must share with the poet an eclecticism not always found among the enthusiasts of Canadian letters.

JOSEPH PIVATO

TISH IN PRINT

IT IS THE DESTINY of magazines whose name outlives their time to appear in more resplendent guises as the desires of collectors overtake the secondhand supplies of back issues, and now *Tish*, which little more than a decade ago seemed to end as a falling rocket of student high spirit, appears — published by Talonbooks of Vancouver — in a handsome volume and in actual letterpress, so that it is hard, unless one has the copies on file, to remember just how rough and at the same time exciting the original mimeographed sheets, with their faint residual smell of Gestetner ink, seemed at the time when they appeared in the early 1960's. Since then *Tish* has been incorporated into the hasty historiography of Canadian writing, partly because several of its contributors remained practicing poets and became somewhat tendencious critics — Frank Davey and George Bowering in particular. And the legend has been built up, notably fostered by Warren Tallman, of the powerful way in which *Tish* brought to bear on Canadian poetry the influence of American post-modernism. Not everyone will agree with such a historical placing of this very lively magazine; we do not ourselves. But it remains one of the vital Canadian poetry journals, not so important perhaps as *Contemporary Verse*, but having its place in the tradition more through the continuing productivity of so many of the poets it introduced than because of the poetic theories its editors somewhat heavily enunciated.

G.W.

WIND DOG

for Grover

Tom Wayman

Someone let the wind into the City in the night
like a big old Dog that usually has to stay on the porch
and it bumped into the house coming in
so the building shook and rattled the windows
and it pawed at the vents at the top of the airshaft
so they banged, and pleased at being inside
it swung its tail back and forth
and cleaned off the top of a coffee table
— in this case, the street: old tin cans
went jouncing and rolling down the pavement
together with scraps of paper and a few of last fall's leaves.

The last I saw of it was in the morning
standing on its hind legs in a phone booth
— though it didn't have a coin —
ruffling the pages of the open telephone book
looking for somebody to call.

opinions and notes

THE TIN FLUTE: A NOTE

IN HIS INTRODUCTION to the New Canadian Library edition of *The Tin Flute* (the English version of Gabrielle Roy's *Bonheur d'occasion*) Hugo McPherson makes the statement, "The focus of the story is the Lacasse family (the name means 'box' or 'locker')." He considers the choice of name aptly symbolic, for it illustrates the point that the family is "trapped" by the poverty of its existence and its inability to escape beyond the boundaries of the harsh St. Henri slum.

Naturally, the name's suggestion of entrapment is attractive to a literary critic who wishes to interpret accurately the spirit of the book but one wonders if McPherson possibly confused "la casse" with "la caisse" which is the word for "case" or "box." It is true that a French-English dictionary will tell you that "une casse" is, among other things, a compositor's box, but it is unlikely that Gabrielle Roy would have selected such a specialized meaning of the word in order to create a symbolic effect. There is a much more obvious significance in Roy's choice of name which McPherson ignores; one of the novel's important episodes makes that significance explicit.

In the second chapter of *The Tin Flute* Jean Lévesque, a youth determined to succeed in a materialistic world and leave his impoverished background behind him forever, is attracted to the young waitress in the dime store, Florentine Lacasse. Moved by both "pity and scorn" for the girl who has responded too eagerly to his casual advances, he writes her name on a piece of paper and contemplates what he sees:

> Jean turned to his work once more, but after setting down an equation or two he found his pen tracing the name of Florentine. Then, hesitantly, he added the word "Lacasse" and almost immediately crossed it out angrily. Florentine was a youthful name, joyous, spring-like, but her last name had a common turn, an air of poverty that ruined all the charm of the first. She herself was like her name no doubt, half common, half gracious springtime, a short springtime, quickly faded.

If one accepted McPherson's interpretation of the name, Jean Lévesque's action here would be puzzling if not incomprehensible. What Hugo McPherson seems to overlook is the "common" meaning of the word, the one which Jean Lévesque without a doubt had in mind and which prompted him to obliterate Florentine's unfortunate surname.

In common parlance or slang "la casse", which literally means "breakage", is used to imply wreckage of an unpleasant type. It can, for instance, refer to "viande médiocre"; "être bon pour la casse" means "to be ready for the dump". There are other distasteful connotations when the verb "casser" is used: "ne rien se casser" means "not to amount to a row of beans"; "casser du sucre" means "to fall on one's butt". No wonder Jean Lévesque wanted to concentrate on the name "Florentine" which he considered "joyous, spring-like" and ignore "Lacasse" which "ruined all the charm".

This understanding of the significance of the surname "Lacasse" is essential, for Gabrielle Roy's use of the word illuminates the novel and makes the reader aware of the richness of its texture. The sociological commentary, for example, is clear. The entire St. Henri area is "bon pour la casse".

> A few minutes' walk brought her to Workman Street, so appropriately named.

> Work, man, she thought, wear yourself out, suffer, live in filth and ugliness.
>
> Rose-Anna picked her way past the gray-brick tenements, a solid block of houses with identical windows and doors at regular intervals.
>
> A swarm of ragged children were playing on the sidewalks in the midst of refuse. Thin, sad-looking women appeared at evil-smelling doorways, blinking at the sunlight that lay among the garbage cans. Others with listless faces sat at the windows, giving suck to their babies. Everywhere there were shrill voices, the wailing of infants, or cries of pain coming from behind tight-closed shutters.

Monique Genuist, in *La Création Romanesque Chez Gabrielle Roy* (1966) puts it this way:

> Dans *Bonheur d'occasion*, Montréal nous montre un autre visage [from the one revealed in a later Roy novel, *Alexandre Chenevert*], la ville apparaît plus en détail, bâtie sur un contraste. En haut, les quartiers riches, salubres et paisible autour de la Montagne; en bas, de plus en plus serrés près du Saint-Laurent, les quartiers pauvres, populeux et lépreux, et parmi ceux-ci en particulier, le quartier Saint-Henri . . .

The underlying social causes for the wreckage which characterizes the area and its inhabitants are clear as well. Azarius, whom some critics dismiss as a kindly though garrulous, irresponsible dreamer, once experienced pride in his work as a carpenter ("un menuisier"); Rose-Anna had been a competent seamstress ("un modiste"). Changes in economic patterns and a period of economic depression have broken the lives of individual artisans. People like Azarius are forced to work at jobs for which they have no skill or inclination or, as an alternative, to be idle and go on relief. In the novel the stench of economic and social decay is as strong as the stench from the smoky, soot-covered St. Henri streets. (It is ironic that war, the most powerful of all destructive forces, provides for many St. Henri citizens their only hope for survival.)

The Tin Flute, however, is primarily a character novel and when one looks at the members of the Lacasse family, the author's choice of name demonstrates her subtle stylistic deftness as strikingly as her precision of description illustrates her skill as a naturalistic novelist. As individuals, all the members of the Lacasse family are wrecks — all, that is, except Rose-Anna who, strictly speaking, is not a Lacasse at all. Some of them, the children especially, are pathetic wrecks — Daniel, who is too young to have any sense of values and who does not understand the depth of his mother's unselfish love; Yvonne, who compensates for material deprivation by being abnormally obsessed with penance and self-sacrifice. Florentine, Azarius, even Eugène, arouse the reader's pity; some of their characteristics — Florentine's determination, Azarius's gentleness — are admirable. But compared with Rose-Anna (and surely this is the main point of the novel) they are all "trash". Hugo McPherson sees Rose-Anna as "a truly great figure . . . absolutely committed to a way of life in which compassion and love are the fundamental values." In this statement he is absolutely correct. The Rose-Annas of this world will never be "bonnes pour la casse."

JANIE WAGNER

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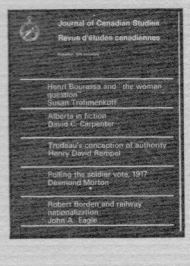

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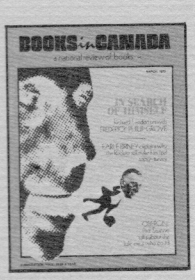

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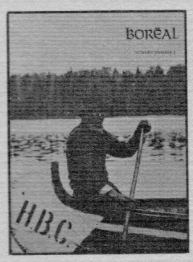

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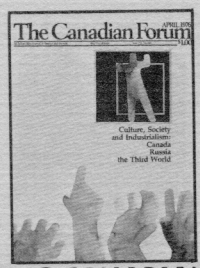

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