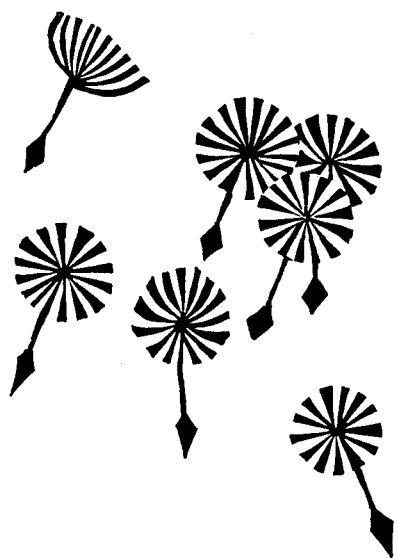


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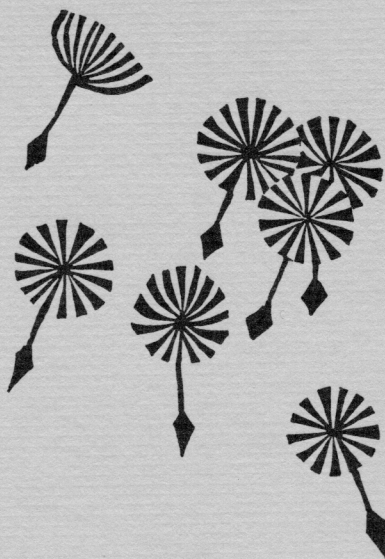


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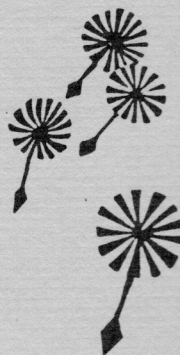
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## NOTHING DOING

OPENING A CHRISTMAS CRACKER a few months ago, I came suddenly into the possession of several trifles: a plastic top, a paper hat, and a motto. The temptation is to read such mottoes as if they were fortune cookie fillings, as signs of the times if not necessarily counsel for the future. Was it Fate or happenstance, therefore, that gave me a motto in the form of a riddle: “What is the most annoying thing in the world?” I forget the solution that was actually given on the curled pastel slip. I just remember regarding the question as Editorial Nemesis, and answered for myself: “typos.” Typos “annyo.” They can also embarrass, for they sometimes construct unintended messages; and though Malcolm Lowry, in his poem “Strange Type,” averred that the printers’ devils that cause mistakes occasionally construct “bitter” versions of truth, no author and no editor is happy unless the text being printed is error-free. Like other editors, I’ve had my share of failures, and had to try to mend fences with contributors whose work gets unintentionally mangled between manuscript and issue. In the matter of proofreading, as in some other endeavours (as the wag would have it), nothing succeeds like excess, I suppose, but even several pairs of eyes do not always see mistakes. I caught one error once before it actually appeared, when an article on a writer’s career “as columnist” got into galley proof investigating his career “as communist.” But then missed the large title capital letter mistake that misspelled Margaret Laurence’s name with a bold-faced W. Never mind, Laurence wrote me once on this subject; none of her works, she said, were printed error-free. Individually or collectively we may dream of the perfect text, but perfection eludes us, in a variety of ways. At the same time, we have to be wary that cynicism does not so completely replace the dream of error-freedom that we self-select mediocrity or failure. To the question “Do you *expect* an error-free text?” we may confidently answer “Nothing doing.” But that’s not the same as doing nothing, in editing or anything else.

\*

The recent republication of Rachel Carson’s *The Sea Around Us* should serve as a reminder of the need to respond actively to some things before nothing is all that is left. (The usual phrase in a sentence like this would be “timely reminder,”



but as time is one of the agents in the process of ecological mismanagement that Carson has examined, the need for “reminding” is already a confession of delay, and therefore of likely decay.) Purifying the sea is no mean ambition, but not the sole responsibility of an omnipotent Nature. Conserving trees, for the sake of the air around us, is likewise no mere act of faddish enthusiasm. (Propaganda in the service of conservation, as in the collective book of paintings, *Carmanah*, assembled by the Western Canada Wilderness Committee, can even sometimes rise to evocative artistry.) But how many trees are cut for cracker mottoes and cookie fortunes, one might ask, or for art books, or for literary journals, or for books on ecology? The usual response, faced with this challenge, is to justify one’s own job, praise art, and commend the necessity of exchanging information. But we indicate only that we know nothing (and have nothing to communicate) if we blithely accept that resources are readily renewable, that the seas will be inexhaustively able to absorb waste, that the air is immune to industrial pollution, that the contamination of food will have no effect on health — or that all industries are therefore bad.

In Canada we are altogether too sanguine about the St. Lawrence’s capacity to absorb contaminants, and seem both to ignore the impact that the Great River (as Mrs. Brooke once called it) — now fouled perhaps beyond reclamation, say some — must have, as it empties into the ocean, upon the fisheries and upon the health of all people who depend upon it for water. It is not the sole example of how skewed social priorities in Canada diminish the quality of life. Political authorities recurrently spend money advertising their most unpopular and unproductive moves, their complaints about expense, debt, and the cost of community; yet when it comes to saving, they repeatedly tax social well-being, cutting away at the very services that should generate productive lives. To diminish support for health, for example — by refusing to ensure clean water, clean air, and an equitable access to health systems across the country — is to guarantee a waste of human as well as environmental resources. To refuse to support equitable access to education is to perpetuate a different kind of expensive debt and plainly to mismanage nature. Those who design such schemes of social denial are thinking (if it can be called “thinking”) not clearly but with clearcut minds. They are able to dream of the future, but they imagine it as their private preserve, and they do not or cannot see the consequences of their immediate acts on the world that others share. Squanderers of human resources, they give lip-service to community, but every action they take works to undercut community in nothing flat.

\*

The disappearance of imagination seems to follow on a decay of language. For when the verbal institutions — radio, television, newspapers, journals (even while

praising the virtues of literacy) — take less and less care with words, a cavity forms where clarity once stood. Solecisms stumble from the lips. Approximations substitute for exact explanations and arguments. (If you know what I mean. If you catch my drift. You get the idea.) In political pronouncements, tautologies take the place of communication, and people wonder why they don't understand the world around them the way they think they used to. The pretence that tautologies *are* communicating something (more, that is, than the hollowness of those who utter them) stands in the way. Where there should be a kernel, there's only a pit. Substance and meaning are identified with image and presentability, and the refusal (or the reluctance) to distinguish between these two sets of categories constructs a system of values that elevates pretence and presumptuousness over thoughtfulness and thought. The communities that fail to make this distinction end up devoid of purpose. And when the vacancy rate is encouraged in people's minds — because it's politically expedient not to tell the truth plainly — it does not take long for communities to die. Whole nations can be given away in the name of some eloquent but ill-explained virtue — preservation, perhaps, or progress, or international success, corporate efficiency, order, or universal truth. None of these is “nothing.” But doing something that invites disintegration is generally worse than doing nothing, no matter what name is given it. People — “leaders,” even — can name without knowing, sign agreements without thinking, speak without connecting ideas. Know-nothings, they serve their society badly. But whole communities can be equally hampered by inarticulateness of desire. The society that does not mean what it says is vicious; the society that cannot say what it means is lost.

\*

Absence may make the heart grow fonder — or may not. Absences, like silences, certainly communicate, though what they communicate is sometimes difficult to define. Gaps can construct a myriad of meanings. Spaces can waylay. But refusals to act are not always negative, refusals to speak not always signs of suppressed rage or inarticulateness, nor are they necessarily inactive. Sometimes such refusals declare a stubborn faith in sensitivity, a sensitivity that lies beyond the grasp of crabbed conventions but not beyond the reach of relationship. Love does not have to be stated to be known. The not stating, moreover, is not nothing. But this same sensitivity can also recognize when love itself has gone missing, when the powers of understanding and appreciation have been co-opted by ambition, when desire and selfishness turn into one. What is communicated then? In the service of selfishness, language itself can be clearcut of meaning, and what's constructed is no mere typo of the heart. It does more than annoy. It kills. Emily Dickinson knew it best; it advertises emptiness, touches zero, at the bone.

W.N.

# ANCIENT BELIEFS

*Douglas Fetherling*

Here we do  
nor worship ancestors  
we treat them

for what they are  
part memory, part  
parasitic affliction.

As one cannot prevent  
them, neither can one  
be completely cured  
of other personalities  
which persist inside  
our own.

Specifically,  
we believe each  
of us to be  
a pool  
into which two streams empty  
acid and alkaline  
father and mother;  
it doesn't matter which  
is which, only  
that there be two

recombinant, variform  
fainter as we grow fainter  
on the one hand Simulacrum  
Recrudescence on  
the other —  
impressions of people  
who bequeathed us all  
the unused portions  
of themselves.

It is also our belief  
that what's not paradox  
is allegory.

# THE HABITS OF LANGUAGE

*Uniform(ity), Transgression and  
Margaret Atwood*

*Lorraine M. York*

“Profanation in a world which no longer recognizes any positive meaning in the sacred — is this not more or less what we may call transgression?”

— MICHEL FOUCAULT, “A Preface to Transgression”

**N**EAR THE BEGINNING of Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, her heroine Offred conducts the reader on a miniature tour of the new republic of Gilead. “In front of us, to the right,” she explains, “is the store where we order dresses. Some people call them *habits*, a good word for them. Habits are hard to break” (24). Offred’s wry pun utterly transforms this seemingly innocent remark about the uniforms which denote social function in Gilead; language, that most tight-fitting garment of convention and usage, here shows itself capable of surprising elasticity. Indeed, uniforms of all description — civilian as well as military — betray this remarkable elasticity in Atwood’s poetry and fiction; they gather around themselves, to be sure, associations with authoritarianism and male power, yet these associations are never entirely stable. Uniforms in Atwood are notoriously subversive habits, invoking notions both of class levelling and hierarchy, the past as well as modernity, difference as well as convention. But it is especially on the level of language itself that uniforms in Atwood bespeak the never-ending tug of war between convention and transgression — the very dynamic engaged in by reader or author and the text. Language, for Atwood, is, in Offred’s words, like a habit, hard to break — but it can always be twisted and transgressed.

The transgression which one may see operating in Atwood’s texts is that which Michel Foucault describes at length in his “Preface to Transgression.” There, Foucault takes pains to show that transgression is not merely the opposite of limi-

tation; rather, he argues, “Transgression is an action which involves the limit, that narrow zone of a line where it displays the flash of its passage, but perhaps also its entire trajectory, even its origin; it is likely that transgression has its entire space in the line it crosses” (33-34). This distinction has particular value for critics of Margaret Atwood who have tended to see her work in terms of transcendence; Barbara Blakely, for example, has commented that Atwood’s poetry is “moved by the drive toward transcendence of the sexual circle game, through description of its contours, through projection of alternate consciousness, and through transformation of eye, body and word” (Grace and Weir 38). But does one transcend through description? Atwood’s works have tended to feature an inevitable — though often enlightened — return to the systems and games one is trying to escape; as Robert Lecker has observed of the narrator of *Surfacing*, “She cannot help but speak about her pressing need for speechlessness” (Davidson and Davidson 190).

Some readers of Atwood have seized upon this necessary distinction between transgression and transcendence. As Sherrill Grace has argued, “[T]o read Atwood correctly is to understand her as breaking imprisoning circles, not as resolving (cancelling or transcending) polarities altogether” (Grace and Weir 13). Lorraine Weir has come to a very similar conclusion; she sees in Atwood’s work a gradual development of the Foucauldian notion of transgression *within* the limit. In “Atwood in a Landscape” she links Atwood’s well-known fascination with boundaries and lines to Derridean and Darwinian observations of the human will to limit, to classify, and she concludes that by the time Atwood writes *Two-Headed Poems* she has redefined the “earlier dyadic relationship between the poles of transcendence and limitations in association with earth and world. In a movement homologous to that of the narrator of *Surfacing*, liminality is taken as vehicle of *communitas*, which is to say, after Victor Turner, that those who exist on the margin of a structure move through transgression of its codes and norms into an apprehension of the sacred” (Grace and Weir 150).

So many of Atwood’s speakers and heroines find themselves on the margins, saying along with the speaker of *The Circle Game*,

I move  
and live on the edges  
(what edges)  
I live  
on all the edges there are. (24:53-57)

The present study seeks to show that for these Atwood heroines living on the margins, on the edges, it is often the uniform which signals their movement “through transgression . . . [to] apprehension.” The uniform, which, as we shall see, invokes both limit and departure, becomes a potent symbol of their — and Atwood’s — journey through transgression.

**B**AD THINGS ALWAYS HAPPENED to the clothes of my heroines,” muses the pulp fiction writer Joan Foster in *Lady Oracle* (132). But Joan herself is a heroine who has just bundled up the clothes she was wearing when she staged her own mock suicide and buried them under a house. Clothing doesn’t fare much better in Atwood’s texts than in Joan Foster’s, though uniforms are less likely to have “bad things” befall them than to cause “bad things” to happen to those who are unfortunate enough to inhabit them. Indeed, for several of Atwood’s characters, to enter the world of uniforms is to enter a dark realm of experience and suffering. Lesje, the young paleontologist in *Life Before Man*, recalls the envy she once felt when she would glimpse workers at the Museum, “their lab coats . . . badges, of nationality, membership of some kind” (307). When Lesje herself finally enters this select company, she does not find the comforts of the far-distant past, the childhood of creation, so to speak, any protection against the pain of adult relations; it is through her work at the Museum, in fact, that she is drawn into the crumbling marriage of Nate and Elizabeth. The very opening of the last “Lesje” section of the novel tells this tale of innocence and experience with startling economy: “Uniformed in her lab coat, Lesje descends” (307). The adult world into which the heroine of *Bodily Harm*, the fashion writer Rennie, descends, is a political one, but it too is characterized by the presence of uniforms. Virtually the first sight to greet Rennie’s eyes when she descends the steps of the plane which has taken her to the Caribbean island of St. Antoine is an array of uniforms: one immigration officer and two soldiers. But the government official’s uniform seems, to Rennie, “like a soldier’s” (35), and we are thus prepared for her entry into a society wherein “government” and “army” are often interchangeable powers. It seems, in this context, quite logical that Atwood should come to write the tale of twentieth-century society as a whole entering the age of the uniform with a vengeance: *The Handmaid’s Tale*. When Offred tells us, in the very first passage of the novel, that in the early days of the regime she and her female cohorts in training “folded our clothes neatly on the stools at the ends of the beds” and wrapped themselves up in the “army-issue blankets, old ones that still said U.S.” (3), she is speaking for a whole society — a society which one day took off its old clothing of individuality and diversity and assumed the uniformity of a theological dictatorship.

More often than not, in Atwood’s texts, this traumatic entry into the world of uniforms takes place during childhood. In *Surfacing*, the narrator recalls the disruption of her early childhood by the news of war-torn Europe which her brother later obligingly offers up to her: “flecked grey newsreels I never saw, bombs and concentration camps, the leaders roaring at the crowds from inside their uniforms, pain and useless death . . .” (18). As an adult, the narrator witnesses pain and useless death first-hand; her own body becomes a personal battlefield when she

loses her child, and the only way that she can recover this lost ground is to strip herself of her human clothing and enter, for a time, the primal world, the world before uniforms. In *Lady Oracle*, this childhood entry into a world of uniforms is even more pronounced; Joan Foster's mother tries to squeeze her gargantuan daughter into dancing costumes, into the comforting uniform of femininity. "She'd followed the instructions," Joan recalls, "but she couldn't get them to look right" (45). Mrs. Delacourt has evidently "followed the instructions" to bourgeois living with unswerving precision; as Joan remarks, "My mother didn't want her living rooms to be different from everyone else's, or even very much better. She wanted them to be acceptable, the same as everybody else's" (70). And so, having encased herself in feminine uniformity, she proceeds to bestow the same favour on her resentful daughter.

The most tyrannical of childhood uniforms to be found in Atwood, however, is the Brownie outfit, with its lingering aroma of infant militarism. In *Lady Oracle*, Joan's tussles with dancing costumes pale beside her adventures with this childhood uniform. By now, Joan herself has internalized her mother's penchant for protective coloration; "at Brownies," she recalls, "you were supposed to try to be the same [as everyone else], and I was beginning to find this idea quite attractive. So I liked wearing the same baggy uniform with its odd military beret and tie, learning the same ritual rhymes, handshakes and salutes, and chanting in unison with the others . . ." (54). The association between Brownies or Girl Guides and female uniformity is a fascinating one to trace; glancing through the relevant sections in Elizabeth Ewing's study *Women in Uniform* (1975), I was struck not only by the uniform's eerie tendency to cross out female gender, with its buttoned-down breast pockets, thick belts and ties, but also by the relative lack of change in the uniform over several decades. The dress reflects a wish to reduce the diverse forms of female appearance and behaviour to a veritable international style; as Ewing notes, "With a membership of 6¾ millions in 91 countries, all linked by prescribed uniforms as well as by shared aims and activities, the World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts, formed in 1928, is probably the biggest female organisation in the world" (80).

The power to prescribe and circumscribe which Ewing hints at in this description soon displaces the comforting joys of "learning to say the same ritual rhymes." When three other members of this supposed bastion of female solidarity decide to tease and torture Joan on their way home from Brownies, they could scarcely choose a more fitting prop than the Brownie uniform itself, with its power to bind and control: they blindfold her with a Brownie tie. The other prop, used to fasten Joan to a post at the end of a bridge, is similarly redolent of stereotypical girlhood activities: a skipping rope. There is an analogous episode in *Surfacing*, though the differences are at least as telling as the similarities; there, the narrator remembers that "When the boys chased and captured the girls after school and tied them



up with their own skipping ropes, I was the one they would forget on purpose to untie" (72). From a study of male imposition of rigidity and uniformity on the female in *Surfacing*, Atwood has moved to an awareness of how the oppressed may themselves act as the co-opted messengers of oppression; in *The Handmaid's Tale*, the task of educating and indoctrinating prospective Handmaids is left to the charge of the "Aunts," who are, in Brownie and Girl Guide fashion, inordinately fond of wrapping their propaganda in repetition and alliteration: "Where I am is not a prison but a privilege, as Aunt Lydia said" (8). In Atwood's terrifying land of Gilead, one senses, Brown Owl and Tawny Owl are appropriately reincarnated as female concentration camp guards, dressed in brown.

**T**O ENTER THE LAND OF UNIFORMS is, then, for Atwood's heroines, to enter a minefield of constrictions: gender as a social construction, adult pain, even the nightmare world of history. But it is no less an entry into language. In this respect, Atwood investigates the basis of some well-known psychological theories of child development and acquisition of language — that is, that the child leaves behind an undifferentiated world, a world wherein the difference between self and non-self is not clearly distinguishable (Lacan's realm of the "imaginary"), and enters the realm of difference. For Atwood, entry into the social order and entry into language are analogous incursions into the frightening world of social uniformity (or what Lacan called "The Law"); as the speaker of one of the poems from *Power Politics* makes painfully clear, uniforms kill the organ of speech:

the doors are shut, you aren't talking,  
the chandeliers aren't talking, the carpets  
also remain silent.  
You stay closed, your skin  
is buttoned firmly around you,  
your mouth is a tin decoration (44.6-11)

This process of "uni-formalization" which begins in childhood can only be undone if the child-narrator ultimately realizes the possibilities for subversion hidden within the uniform — within language itself. And this is precisely what several of Atwood's poetic and fictional personae manage to do. Language, they may find, may free as well as constrain them; the trick, it seems, is to seize upon the subversive elements contained within these uniforms of society and language.

Subversion is possible, for instance, when one realizes the instability of the relationship which the uniform has with class and hierarchy. As we know, the uniform is often defended as a social practice for its enforcing of a compulsory equality, its supposed levelling properties; as Elizabeth Wilson points out, the uniform was "the

first type of mass produced clothing," born of the disappearance of "many of the old signs of rank" in domestic fashion (35). This social levelling mystique would later become the rationale for the much-hated school uniforms of our childhood. But as any survivor of a private school will testify, such uniforms, more often than not, actually reinscribe social hierarchies with a vengeance by shifting the locus of difference elsewhere — to accessories, for instance, or to the quality of one's required dress. As Alison Lurie observes, "Though the uniform is supposed to transform individuals into homogeneous members of a group, it can never do so completely" (18). In *Lady Oracle*, Joan's observation of the power structure of the notorious Brownies works within her a demystification of the concept of homogeneity which had earlier captured her sympathies; like members of a pack of a different sort, Joan's three Brownie friends aggressively assert their dominance over the weak individual in the group, and this allegiance to structures of power finds its expression in the anti-levelling, hierarchical elements of their uniforms: "They were ten, and almost ready to join the Girl Guides; 'flying up,' it was called. . . . Elizabeth was going to fly, no doubt about it: she was plastered with badges like a diplomat's suitcase" (56). Political and girlhood hierarchies meet in Atwood's simile; badges on supposedly homogeneous uniforms unmask the myth of social levelling in this pack — the upwardly mobile ritual of "Flying up" is itself a case in point.

The next liberating step for Atwood's characters is to move from this state of demystification to the active exploitation of this paradox of the uniform. Offred's close friend Moira in *The Handmaid's Tale* is prepared to take this next step, to seize upon the uniform as a subversive weapon; one day she attacks an Aunt in the washroom, steals and dons her characteristic uniform and parades past the guards at the gate of the handmaid training camp. "In that brown outfit," she recalls, "I just walked right through" (229). Moira has thus turned the uniform's supposed homogeneity to her advantage; the art of masking difference may have surprisingly revolutionary potential. Atwood produces a final ironic variation on this inversion of the signifying powers of the uniform; the next time Offred sees Moira, her friend has found her way into an illicit club for officers, a place where the powerful men of Gilead can escape for awhile from the rigidities of a theologically uniformed world. Here, the overturning of the regime's official dress code paradoxically marks the irrepressible drive of human beings toward the uniform; Moira's subversive dress, in this illicit place, is merely an old misogynist uniform recycled and recontextualized: the playboy bunny outfit. Through this wry use of paradox and inversion (themselves departures from literary uniforms), Atwood poses the problem: can subversion truly lead to a liberation from our need for uniformity or can we ever really escape the tyranny of the uniform?

One key to the overturning of the power which the uniform holds over us is to recognize the ambiguous relationship which it bears to power itself. In Atwood's

poetry, especially, the uniform is tied to authority, but the binding knot is never a secure one; the choices which the speaker of the poems in *Power Politics* offers her male lover reveal this tenuous link between the uniform and authority:

You refuse to own  
yourself, you permit  
others to do it for you:  
You become slowly more public  
in a year there will be nothing left  
of you but a megaphone

or you will descend through the roof  
with the spurious authority of a  
government official,  
blue as a policeman, grey as a used angel,  
having long forgotten the difference  
between an annunciation and a parking ticket . . .

. . . If you deny these uniforms  
and choose to repossess  
yourself, your future

will be less dignified, more painful, death will be sooner  
(30.1-12, 17-20)

The only power worth having, for Atwood, is the power to “repossess” oneself, a power one can only attain by relinquishing those artificial, socially constructed uniforms which appear to bestow power while actually robbing us of speech, leaving us only a hollow megaphone rather than a mouth. Note, though, that one does not escape uniforms entirely; Atwood’s speaker warns her lover that if he relinquishes these “spurious” social uniforms he will have to assume an organic uniform, the body, which seems to bring with it only weakness — a “less dignified, more painful” future, with death standing at the end of the road like an avenging angel. Nevertheless, the human body is, despite or perhaps even because of its frailty, the only uniform which one can possess rather than be possessed by; it is, at once, in Auden’s words, “Mortal, guilty, but to me / The entirely beautiful” (*Selected Poems* 50.9-10).

**I**F THE HUMAN BODY is the locus of resistance to the uniform and its devastating effects on the human psyche, the same might be said of the body politic. Uniforms, the first mass-produced clothing, embody the notion of mass culture — a notion which comes to have frightening consequences in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. When a theological minority seizes power and imposes its will on the populace, mass rituals become one way in which that minority may retain power

— by, in effect, creating a mass culture. Events such as the bloody “salvagings,” the ritual slaughter and dismemberment of wrongdoers, serve the dual purpose of ridding Gilead of troublemakers and of providing a cathartic outlet for the handmaids’ feelings of rage against the male power structure. Nevertheless, such attempts to forge a mass culture are bound to fail, Atwood suggests, because of the radical possibilities for subversion contained within these rituals and their assumptions. All handmaids must and do take part in these barbaric salvagings, but even in the midst of such a groundswell of hatred and group hysteria, individual difference is not erased; even though Offred places her hand over her heart in ritual fashion “to show my unity with the Salvagers and my consent, and my complicity in the death of this woman” (260), she is also aware of the subtle forms which ideological difference may assume beneath this uniform of group action: “It’s a mistake to hang back too obviously in any group like this,” she reflects. “It stamps you as lukewarm, lacking in zeal” (261). The regime’s project of devising the ultimate uniform, mass culture, is thus defeated by the never-ending operation of cultural sign systems; even when you create a mass rally, there is still a front and a back in every crowd, or innumerable other ways of signifying difference.

The same dynamic operates in Atwood’s political poem “Train Ride Vienna-Bonn,” from the collection *True Stories*, wherein the speaker moves from the stereotypic historical vision of a monolithic automaton-like German people to an awareness of difference:

It’s those helmets we remember,  
the shape of a splayed cranium,  
and the faces under them,  
ruthless and uniform

But these sit on the train  
clean & sane, in their neutral  
beige and cream: this girl smiles,  
she wears a plastic butterfly, and the waiter gives  
a purple egg to my child  
for fun. Kindness abounds. (58.1-10)

Ironically, the speaker reveals in her very first words the potential within herself to turn uniform, to think in terms of fascistic unities rather than progressive differences; she refers to the German soldiers in metonymic terms as “those helmets.” As that well-known chronicler of the symbolism of warfare, Paul Fussell, notes in *The Great War and Modern Memory*, there was a tendency in the poets and diarists of the First World War to envision the German enemy as faceless, to defend oneself psychologically from the thought of killing individual human beings by reconstructing those individuals as a mass of spiked helmets. This metonymic habit of mind holds equally true for the Second World War of Atwood’s poem — perhaps even truer, for during this war and its aftermath one had to reconstruct not only

an “enemy,” but one capable of the worst sorts of atrocities imaginable. For the speaker of Atwood’s poem, seeing the contemporary Germans sharing her train car as girls and waiters is, itself, a triumph of difference over uniformity, a hopeful sign that the salvagings of our recent past may not be re-enacted. Nevertheless, Atwood does not offer her readers this sort of smug North American closure; this poem has several segments in addition to the first one which I have quoted; the never-ending historical conflict between uniformity and difference is not so easily resolved. In a later section, she rewinds and replays this elemental historical struggle:

What holds me  
in the story we’ve all heard  
so many times before:  
  
the few who resisted,  
who did not do what they were told.

This is the old fear:  
not what can be done to you  
but what you might do  
yourself, or fail to.

This is the old torture. (61.1-10)

The conflict between uniformity and difference is here revealed as much more than a cultural conflict, with twentieth-century Germany on one side and a younger and wiser North America on the other; the pull towards uniformity and mass culture is lying, potentially, within us all, within our cultures and within the very systems of our language.

As this element of historical perspective in “Train Ride Vienna-Bonn” suggests, time itself is tied to the workings of uniformity and difference; if it was possible for men on the battlefield to reconstruct the enemy as a group of helmets and uniforms rather than as the human bodies which suggest difference and subversion, then the distance of forty or more years intensifies this process of mental uni-formalization. But time itself, or, more precisely, the concept of linear time, is yet another uniform which needs to be interrogated by the speakers of Atwood’s poetry and fiction; the uniform’s relationship to time, like its relationship to power and class, is ambiguous and shifting. Though uniforms are often meant to suggest the efficiently up-to-date, they also strongly suggest the stopping of time altogether, as I discovered during my survey of Brownie and Guide uniforms from the early twentieth century to the present. Like photographs, they are often described as trapped in the past; as Alison Lurie has observed, “official costume tends to freeze the styles of the time in which it was invented” (20), and Phillis Cunnington and Catherine Lucas, in their work on occupational costume in England, refer to uniforms as “sets of clothes stuck in an earlier period” (*Occupational Costume in England from the Eleventh Century to 1914*, 204). This sense of uniforms trapping

one in the past is repeatedly dramatized in *The Handmaid's Tale*; the new uniforms are, in Offred's mind and doubtless in the mind of other Gilead citizens, merely variations on the uniforms of the pre-Gilead past — the female domestic workers or Marthas are dressed “in dull green, like a surgeon's gown of the time before” (9), and, as our academic lecturer Professor James Darcy Pieixoto so helpfully if rather pompously points out in the “Historical Notes on *The Handmaid's Tale*,” the Gilead leaders borrowed the idea of the handmaids wearing red from “the uniforms of German prisoners of war in Canadian ‘P.O.W.’ camps of the Second World War era” (289). Of course, the reader at this point appends her or his own historical note to the learned discourse of Professor Pieixoto; the choice of various coloured uniforms for people incarcerated by a political system finds its own historical intertext in the assigning of various coloured badges to prisoners in German concentration camps. Rather than heralding the advent of a new regime, uniforms more often drag us back into the nightmares of history from which we are trying to awake.

WHAT WE HAVE SEEN SO FAR is the uniform's functioning as ideology, and how, in many instances, that ideology can be unmasked or subverted; such a pattern is indeed writ large when one considers the uniform's relationship to gender. As I suggested earlier, the uniform often seeks to cross out gender differences, and the rationale for this supposed erasure of sexual difference frequently involves the concept of androgyny; just as our class differences shall be erased by the uniform, so this line of reasoning goes, so too shall our gender differences be erased, leaving us in a position of unbiased equality. Yet, as the work of deconstructive and Marxist theorists has shown, the resolution of difference is not that easily achieved; indeed, the very project of resolving difference is, more often than not, a cornerstone of dominant ideology. For example, when I mentioned that the apparent project of the Brownie uniform was to cross out gender difference, the elements of dress which I specifically referred to as aiding this project were all stereotypically male articles of dress: buttoned-down breast pockets, ties, wide belts. This, of course, is not androgyny; it is the re-inscription of the dominant power. As many critics of the concept of androgyny have argued, the ideal of erasing gender difference could all too easily translate into the erasing of the female, into assimilation.

Atwood's poems and fictions unmask the darker sides of this drive toward gender uniformity. For her, the uniform is so closely tied to dominant ideology that any strategy which would involve adopting the uniform rather than subverting it seems suspect from the start. As the speaker of the poem “Song of the Worms” from *You Are Happy* (1974) explains,

We know what a boot looks like  
 when seen from underneath,  
 we know the philosophy of boots,  
 their metaphysics of kicks and ladders.  
 We are afraid of boots  
 but contemptuous of the foot that needs them. (35.11-16)

“Boots” here becomes the metonymic representation of what Barbara Ehrenreich has called “the oldest male elite . . . the Warrior Caste” (*Ms.* May 1987, 24). And, as Ehrenreich argues, the uniform, like the boot of Atwood’s poem, is its special territory and means of self-expression; writing of the testimony of Lieutenant-Colonel Oliver North before the American Congress during the summer of 1987, Ehrenreich claimed, “The main point — the only message of his silent testimony — was the uniform.” This member of a civilian government “had chosen to confront the public in a costume that proclaimed his license to kill” (24). The uniform is, for Atwood as well, a silent witness whose cultural assumptions speak loudly enough.

This is why, in Atwood’s poetry and fiction, the strategy must be to explode the myth of the uniform, the promises which it seems to offer to gender and class equality existing peaceably alongside the notion of rightfully invested power. Exploding this powerful myth involves embracing multiplicity and diversity, concepts which we have been taught not to associate with effective action, but rather with doubt and confusion. As early as *The Edible Woman* (1969), we see the first stage of this project in motion: the rejection of the female uniform. Marian McAlpin, the heroine of that first novel, is repeatedly cast as a mothering nurse figure; Duncan warns her that “every woman loves an invalid. I bring out the Florence Nightingale in them. But be careful . . . Florence Nightingale was a cannibal, you know” (100). Duncan’s rather bizarre advice proves surprisingly useful; later, when Marian and Duncan are discussing the possibility of going to bed, a situation which Duncan considers with his characteristic egotism, Marian thinks, “The situation . . . called for stout shoes and starched cuffs and a leather bag full of hypodermic needles” (190). By the end of the novel, Marian realizes, however, that the Florence Nightingale uniform of perpetual help produces not a cannibal woman, but a cannibalized woman. Joan Foster from *Lady Oracle* makes the same discovery when she beholds a statue of Diana of Ephesus in Tivoli: “draped in breasts from neck to ankle, as though afflicted with a case of yaws” (253) — the ultimate symbol of woman as nurse. On the spot, Joan decides that “Once I would have seen her as an image of myself, but not any more. My ability to give was limited” (253). Joan rejects the nursing myth, just as surely as she rejects her former lover Paul, a Polish count who happens to write nurse novels and who has appropriately confining notions of female deportment and potential. Indeed, she becomes, by the end of the novel, an anti-nurse: she brains a reporter with a handy



Cinzano bottle. Even so, Atwood cannot resist hinting at the continuing mystique of the female uniform; as Joan confesses about her newfound though unconscious friend, "I have to admit that there is something about a man in a bandage . . ." (345).

THE FEMALES IN ATWOOD'S POEMS, stories, and novels can only step beyond this uniform mystique once they have not only rejected the uniform but also actively transgressed it, turned it inside-out, as Moira in *The Handmaid's Tale* does when she steals the Aunt's uniform. This transgression of uniforms must be a more than superficial or gratuitous act; when the Royal Porcupine in *Lady Oracle* adopts an opera cloak and porcupine quill hat, he merely replaces one costume with another; as she says to Joan when they meet, "This is my dress uniform" (239). No wonder that he is soon transformed in Joan's eyes, from the exotic-sounding Royal Porcupine to ordinary Chuck Brewster, who wants both Joan and domesticity; as Joan finally cries in despair, "Was every Heathcliff a Linton in disguise?" (269).

Uniforms are truly transgressed and not merely replaced when the essential structure of power is changed thereby. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, when Offred begins to steal into her Commander's study to play illicit games of Scrabble, she transgresses the uniforms of Gilead; suddenly she is able to ask the Commander questions, to criticize and even to condescend to him. Appropriately, too, this social transgression is signalled by the transgression of a physical uniform; when the chauffeur Nick's hat "is on askew or not at all" (144), this is a sign to Offred that she may enter the study.

This transgression, short-lived though it is, is always associated for Atwood with language — in this instance, with the surreptitious games of Scrabble — a game in which the rules and conventions of language are sacrosanct, and in which the bible of language, the dictionary, proves the final arbiter. Nevertheless, as Offred discovers, there can be freedom even within the prison house of language: "Sometimes after a few drinks he becomes silly, and cheats at Scrabble. He encourages me to do it too, and we take extra letters and make words with them that don't exist, like *smurt* and *crup*, giggling over them" (197). How appropriate it is, for that matter, that the defiant message which Offred's handmaid predecessor has carved in a corner of her room is a virtual transgression of language — bastardized Latin: *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*. The uniforms of language, too, are surprisingly susceptible to violation and subversion.

This is Atwood's project in her poetry and prose: to build a language of transgression. In her poetry especially she repeatedly asks the same question: how do we enter language as poets or readers without losing our ability to transgress its

conventions? To be a writer, Atwood has said, “is to see one’s body in a special dress, relating to other bodies as a social entity” (*Second Words* 343) — but how does one ensure that one is wearing the dress, rather than being worn by it? One poem which demonstrates how this trick of transgression may be performed by poet and reader is “A Red Shirt” from *Two-Headed Poems* (1976). There, the speaker and her sister sew a red shirt for the speaker’s daughter — a shirt which holds, for the adult female makers, connotations of the female body, of violence against women everywhere. The young daughter, however, is, as yet, blissfully unaware of the associations which have been sewn into *her* female uniform, her body:

The shirt is finished: red  
with purple flowers and pearl  
buttons. My daughter puts it on,  
hugging the colour  
which means nothing to her  
except that it is warm  
and bright. In her bare  
feet she runs across the floor,  
escaping from us, her new game,  
waving her red arms  
in delight, and the air  
explodes with banners. (106.1-12)

We must each of us put on the uniform of language and culture in childhood; but, in Atwood’s world, there is always the marvellous possibility of running away, escaping, transgressing our uniforms — the possibility of playing a “new game.”

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## FOR THEIR WELLBEING

*Eunice Brooks*

Positively not godkin,  
 the virgin, mother, and crone,  
 lust, prudence, and wisdom,  
 are my selves.  
 The cauldron is my universe  
 and my uterus. I look into it  
 for reflections of women.  
 Comes the scent of sea culls,  
 oysters, mussels, and roe.  
 The common sense of women.  
 I name those who come to mind.  
 For their wellbeing, I speak  
 to my goddess within.

# GABRIELLE ROY AS FEMINIST

## *Re-reading the Critical Myths*

*Agnes Whitfield*

GABRIELLE ROY'S POSTHUMOUS AUTOBIOGRAPHY paints a surprising portrait of the artist as a young woman.<sup>1</sup> In *her* story, Gabrielle Roy was independent and adventurous, an enthusiastic member of a travelling theatre group, and an aspiring actress. In 1937, despite family opposition, she forsook the security of a traditional teaching position near her home in Manitoba, for the uncertainties of pre-war Europe where she eventually abandoned her dramatic ambitions for the equally precarious career of female journalist. Yet most critical studies offer a very different image of Gabrielle Roy, the writer, a portrait steeped in maternal virtues, gentle resignation, and tender humanism, all the attributes, in short, of traditional femininity. None of Gabrielle Roy's youthful spirit of liberation, it would seem, has found its way into her fiction. Critics can perceive no darker side to her traditional vision of women, which Phyllis Grosskurth has disparagingly called her "mother's-eye view of the world?"<sup>2</sup>

Paradoxically, Gabrielle Roy's novels and short stories belie this conventional interpretation. Not only are women and their social, economic, and sexual exploitation central issues, indeed, in her writing, but her point of view on all of these questions is also essentially feminist in the broad sense of the word. In a recent collection of essays subtitled "Feminist Approaches to Writing by Canadian and Québécois Women," Barbara Godard defines as feminist "any activity which seeks to place the female in a position of equality with respect to males in society and culture."<sup>3</sup> This definition implicitly includes Roy's denunciation of sexual inequality and could extend, as well, to her heroines' struggle for identity, which Elaine Showalter defines as the "female" phase of "self-discovery, a turning inward freed from some of the dependency of opposition."<sup>4</sup> The question to be asked, then, is why Gabrielle Roy is considered to be a traditionalist.<sup>5</sup>

The answer to this paradox lies in the way traditional critical approaches have, themselves, obscured feminist elements in Gabrielle Roy's writing. In part, the reasons for this are circumstantial. Certainly, in the 1950s, 1960s, and even early

1970s, when most of the major studies of Gabrielle Roy's fiction were written, criticism in general showed little concern for, and often misrepresented, sexual difference. However, the critical myths engendered by such criticism remain extremely tenacious. More seriously, they have become persistent obstacles to new feminist approaches to Gabrielle Roy's fiction and a better understanding of the values and tensions which permeate her work. It is therefore imperative to identify the critical myths surrounding Gabrielle Roy's "traditionalism," to examine how these myths have developed, and to deconstruct the critical inconsistencies and contradictions which a feminist perspective could well illuminate.

Much early criticism of Gabrielle Roy's novels and short stories has relied heavily on the author's own declarations of intention. Gabrielle Roy's compassionate and sometimes idealistic humanism has often been quoted in the context of a non-differentiated appreciation of her portrayal of "man's" condition or the "artist's" mission,<sup>6</sup> or more recently, with reference to her refusal to join ranks with radical Quebec feminists on linguistic questions.<sup>7</sup> Traditional interpretations of her fictional mothers inevitably invoke Gabrielle Roy's admiration for the maternal role. Of course, reference to the author's intention to determine artistic meaning is, in itself, a very dubious critical procedure. Whatever a writer's conscious aims, his, or her, text may in fact reflect quite different preoccupations, or be read in divergent ways. In the case of Gabrielle Roy, however, it is striking that the intentional fallacy is consistently used to legitimize a traditional interpretation of her fictional women. The implicit values of the critical approaches to her fiction have simply been extended to her own comments on women.

How selective critical interpretation of authorial intention has been, is best revealed by two interviews — one presented by Alice Parizeau in 1966, and another prepared by Gilles Dorion and Maurice Emond in 1979 on the basis of a questionnaire sent to the author. Although Gabrielle Roy stresses her humanistic view of life in both interviews, she is also explicitly preoccupied with sexual difference and its aesthetic consequences. The 1979 interview contains a brief evaluation of several well-known heroines conceived by male authors. Roy's denunciation of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* is categorical: "that character seems to me to have so obviously come from a radically male brain that . . . I have difficulty in lending her any credence."<sup>8</sup> She concludes this judgment, strongly worded for her, by appealing to Virginia Woolf's theories of sexual difference in writing.<sup>9</sup> Clearly, Gabrielle Roy is concerned with a question much debated in current feminist criticism: do women write differently from men?<sup>10</sup> What Roy retains from Woolf's often contradictory declarations is equally significant. Rather than the biological imperative, or what Michèle Barrett calls Woolf's tendency to "essentialism," the belief in "intrinsic differences between the male and the female author in terms of the language they use,"<sup>11</sup> Gabrielle Roy stresses the notion of equality for men and women within an androgynous creative act.<sup>12</sup>

WHILE SUCH NEGLECT of Roy's interest in feminist aesthetics might be considered an oversight, interpretation of her comments on motherhood is more obviously tendentious. Roy's statement, in her 1966 interview with Alice Parizeau, that the final justification of the *couple* is a child<sup>13</sup> has been taken to imply that she considers reproduction to be a *woman's* ultimate *raison d'être*.<sup>14</sup> In the same interview, however, Roy decries women's "slavery" and criticizes the Catholic Church in Quebec for its oppressive stance towards women. Her admiration for the maternal role, while clear, is also voiced as social criticism, through her insistence on society's depreciation of motherhood and children.<sup>15</sup> By today's standards, Roy's concern for sexual equality and her conviction that women's biological role should not lead to social oppression are by no means radical feminist opinions, although they unfortunately retain their relevance. Understood in their historical context, they reveal a feminist consciousness incompatible with Roy's traditionalist label.

Other critical approaches to Gabrielle Roy's fiction have lent credence to the intentional fallacy and its misconstruction of her vision of the female condition. Sociological criticism has interpreted Gabrielle Roy's condemnation of the harsh fate of French-Canadian, native, and immigrant women in the broad framework of social, economic, and racial injustice.<sup>16</sup> Such criticism has seen women characters not as a group in themselves, but as representatives of other minorities. Certainly, one can not dispute Gabrielle Roy's condemnation of social and economic oppression. Undoubtedly, critical emphasis on this general point of view has led Jeanne Maranda and Maïr Verthuy to suggest that Gabrielle Roy's social criticism "is not aimed at a phallogocratic society but at a political situation, and an economic structure which are perceived as oppressing the whole Quebec nation, rather than one particular segment of it."<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, in the absence of a serious analysis of the reasons for the particular exploitation of women in Roy's fiction, such a conclusion would appear to be founded more on current critical myths than close textual scrutiny.

Studies of *La Rivière sans repos* (translated into English as *Windflower*) illustrate the problem admirably. Although this novel describes the rape of a young Inuit girl and her subsequent pregnancy and motherhood, critics have been oddly euphemistic. "In a lyrical evocation of the plight of the Eskimo in our century," writes Lorraine McMullen, "Gabrielle Roy returns to her recurrent theme of devoted motherhood as the central focus of the narrative."<sup>18</sup> Michel Gaulin identifies "man and the meaning of his destiny"<sup>19</sup> as the essential theme of the novel. However, to his credit, he does relate the problematic conception of the heroine's son (the word rape is not used) to white man's values.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, Jeannette Urbas considers *Windflower* to be a "novel of social criticism, continuing some of the

questions raised in *The Tin Flute* and *The Cashier* . . . the significance of technological advances and . . . the validity of modern life."<sup>21</sup>

Curiously, even those rare critics who discuss the heroine's rape are unable to develop their analysis. Paula Gilbert Lewis considers Elsa "the ultimate victim, raped by an unknown American G.I.,"<sup>22</sup> but quickly re-integrates the heroine's reactions within her own perception of the traditional values of Roy's female characters: "As a typical Royan female of a novel, she accepts what has happened to her as perfectly natural."<sup>23</sup> When Lewis attempts to sustain this interpretation through reference to the character's psychology, however, the result is unconvincing: "The formerly happy young woman is . . . transformed into a sad and morose individual, although predictably, she appears to be resigned and even indifferent to or apathetic about her destiny."<sup>24</sup> Decoding Elsa's implicit revolt is also problematic for Terrance Hughes who equates the young Inuit girl's nostalgia for the past and tendency for day-dreaming with the maternal resignation characteristic of Gabrielle Roy's fictional mothers.<sup>25</sup> Although he stresses both Elsa's marginality and her maternity, Hughes cannot relate the two, the first being perceived as cultural, the second as universal and immutable.<sup>26</sup>

UNDOUBTEDLY, the greatest focus on Gabrielle Roy's female characters has been within the context of psychological criticism. Many thematic studies can also be grouped under this heading, as the themes examined in Gabrielle Roy's fiction often have emotional connotations. Not surprisingly, given its sheer quantity, such criticism provides both the most problematic, and the most insightful, analyses.

Historically, interpretation of Gabrielle Roy's female characters has centred on the mother figure, perceived in the context of conventional values and morality. Early French-Canadian reviews of *The Tin Flute*, mostly by clerics, seem to have set the tone. Rose-Anna Lacasse was extolled as the incarnation of traditional values. Her unmarried daughter Florentine, and her unwanted pregnancy, of more dubious moral exemplariness, were ignored.<sup>27</sup> In a survey of the critical reception of *The Tin Flute* in French Canada from 1945 to 1983, Carole Melançon suggests that this preoccupation with traditional values gradually subsided in the fifties, giving way to more innovative analyses of aesthetic and thematic questions.<sup>28</sup>

Although such may be the case generally, interpretations of Gabrielle Roy's female characters, both inside and outside Quebec, have remained profoundly conservative. In Quebec, the publication in 1964 of a thesis by Sister Sainte-Marie-Éleuthère did much to fuel the myth of the heroic and prolific French-Canadian mother, ever loyal to paternal authority.<sup>29</sup> Such was the power of the myth that it structured opposition to it, as well, contributing to the difficulty in perceiving female



sexuality within, as well as without, the maternal orbit.<sup>30</sup> Certainly, more studies began to focus on Gabrielle Roy's fictional daughters, where the themes of frustration and revolt appear to crystallize. Emphasis on the generational continuum, however, soon returned the unhappy daughters to the maternal fold, victims of a feminine fatalism.<sup>31</sup>

Studies of Roy's fictional women thus continue to be inconsistent, as critics try unsuccessfully to reconcile character psychology and the myth of maternal resignation. Hugo McPherson, for instance, provides the definitive stereotypical description of Rose-Anna Lacasse, "the universal *mater dolorosa*, the infinitely loving mother whose "poverty of spirit" will inherit the world."<sup>32</sup> While he considers Florentine as the novel's heroine, McPherson reduces her revolt against maternal resignation to the whim of a "yearning, empty-headed little fool."<sup>33</sup> Not surprisingly, Rose-Anna's total commitment to "unpremeditated giving" is seen, in contrast, as "more reassuring," and her unhappy yearning to return to the land of her childhood,<sup>34</sup> as irrelevant.

Nor has the maternal stereotype been seriously challenged by more recent, and more nuanced, studies of Gabrielle Roy's heroines. Even Paula Gilbert Lewis, one of the rare scholars to insist upon Roy's ardent advocacy of women's independence, finds it difficult to extend this notion to her female characters. Roy's desire to re-evaluate the importance of the maternal role in society is simply equated with traditionalism: "it was this more traditional side of the author's beliefs that . . . shaped the lives of her female characters, essentially representing martyrdom, while extolling the virtues of motherhood."<sup>35</sup> In her latest article, however, a successful application of the theories of Nancy Chodorow and Carol Gilligan to Roy's portrayal of relations between mothers, daughters, and grandmothers, Lewis softens this judgment, at least with respect to the author's short stories.<sup>36</sup>

Gabrielle Pascal has examined another current theme in feminist criticism, namely the tension between attachment and autonomy. In her opinion, the role of teacher enables some of Gabrielle Roy's heroines to reconcile their quest for independence with their maternal desires, sublimated in the pedagogical relationship. However, adopting a somewhat prescriptive view of feminism, she concludes that "if, from a feminist point of view, the teacher figure represented progress at the time when *The Tin Flute* was written, . . . it has no mobilizing effect for women today."<sup>37</sup>

Ironically, critical response to Gabrielle Roy's male characters has been, at once, more controversial, and more revealing, of sexual issues. Men are perceived to play a subordinate role in her fiction. Generally speaking, this perception has been more troubling for male than for female critics. "Where are the fathers, the men?" laments E. A. Walker. "They have virtually disappeared [after *Street of Riches*], but this is hardly surprising, for they have always had a tenuous foothold in her universe."<sup>38</sup>

More problematic than their absence is the inferior status of Roy's fictional men. In its most attenuated form, this concern has been expressed as aesthetic criticism, Roy's fictional men being seen as less successful, less rounded,<sup>39</sup> than her heroines. For those few male characters to receive critical acclaim, such as Alexandre Chenevert and Pierre Cadorai, praise has been for their compelling allegorical or symbolic value, rather than their psychological depth.<sup>40</sup> More frequently, however, such criticism focuses on personality and power, the more recognizable attributes of the traditional patriarch. "All her males are weak or unsympathetic,"<sup>41</sup> writes Walker, a judgment echoed by Michel Gaulin in more specific terms: "Gabrielle Roy's women characters have really only one fault; they are so strong that they crush, albeit unconsciously, the personality of their husbands."<sup>42</sup>

On the whole, female critics have been less judgmental.<sup>43</sup> Where they have been critical, their values also appear to reflect traditional male stereotypes. "Gabrielle Roy's error was to cut short Emmanuel Létourneau's psychological development," writes Annette Saint-Pierre. "Military training has above all the advantage of maturing a soldier; Emmanuel remains weak and too impressionable."<sup>44</sup>

That the issue is, indeed, the problematic nature of patriarchy in Gabrielle Roy's fiction is confirmed by two unusual attempts by male critics to re-evaluate Gabrielle Roy's fictional men. Reference to the male stereotype of strength and decisiveness leads Maurice Cagnon to defend Jean Lévesque as "the sole character [of *Bonheur d'occasion*] to act upon his principles and act out his personal victory against mediocrity and futility."<sup>45</sup> Similar values underlie Adrien Thério's energetic riposte to Michel Gaulin, in one of the rare articles to be dedicated exclusively to Gabrielle Roy's male characters. Thério rejects the contemporary critical tendency to represent Quebec society as matriarchal. In a meticulous analysis of family politics in *The Street of Riches*, he sets out to prove that the father, despite his frequent absences, is, in fact, the central authority figure in Gabrielle Roy's fictional family.<sup>46</sup> Paradoxically, the vehemence of Thério's defence of patriarchy provides a telling indication of the extent to which Roy's fiction can be, and was perceived to be, anti-patriarchal.

During the 1960s, sexual politics in Roy's fiction was the explicit object of three particularly insightful articles. In a structural study of *Bonheur d'occasion*, André Brochu suggested that central to Gabrielle Roy's world vision was the conflict between the male and female universe, a conflict which Brochu expressed in geometric terms as the opposition between the circle and the straight line.<sup>47</sup> Jacques Allard pursued this question in an article on *Where Nests The Water Hen*, speculating that Luzina's annual pilgrimages to deliver yet another child form a possible reconciliation between the masculine and the feminine, through the maternal appropriation of the male theme of travel.<sup>48</sup>

In a series of controversial psychoanalytical studies, Gérard Bessette shed new light on Gabrielle Roy's masculine protagonists, notably Alexandre Chenevert and

Pierre Cadourai, by suggesting that the equivocal themes and images associated with these characters were grounded in the author's psychological projections. Although Bessette did not explicitly address the question of transsexual projection or identification between author and character,<sup>49</sup> his hypothesis nonetheless enabled him to re-interpret textual imagery with reference to the author as woman.

Unfortunately, these articles have not led critics to re-examine the myths surrounding the issues of patriarchy and matriarchy in Gabrielle Roy's fiction. Like the more conventional psychological studies I have examined, most thematic criticism has simply been oblivious to sexual difference. Rather than seek inconsistencies in this form of criticism, however, it is more useful to point out how feminist perspectives could illuminate some of the important thematic tensions in Gabrielle Roy's fiction.

MANY CRITICS EMPHASIZE the fascination that Gabrielle Roy's characters feel for "the open road"<sup>50</sup> and their conflicting, homeward-bound search for security, a dilemma summed up in the title of McPherson's article, "The Garden and the Cage,"<sup>51</sup> and re-articulated by E. D. Blodgett in "Gardens at World's End or Gone West in French."<sup>52</sup> To these spatial tensions may also be added the urban/rural dichotomy in Gabrielle Roy's fiction, best illustrated by the alternation between novels about Montreal, *The Tin Flute* and *Alexandre Chenevert*, for instance, and such works, set in small-town or rural Manitoba, as *Where Nests the Water Hen*, *Street of Riches*, and *The Road Past Altamont*. Although these tensions have been related to universal themes, such as man's conflicting desire for security and liberty, for the warmth of intimacy and the exhilaration of exploration,<sup>53</sup> they may also reflect Gabrielle Roy's conception of the particular constraints of the female experience.

As Shirley Foster writes in an article on early twentieth-century American women novelists, not without relevance to highly traditional French Canada, female writers have often been compelled by external ideological pressures to use "artistic devices which voice their unease without obviously challenging literary or sexual conventions."<sup>54</sup> Other tensions or ambiguities can arise in their writing, pursues Foster, from "their awareness of the complex often contradictory nature of female aspiration."<sup>55</sup> In her autobiography, Roy returns time and again, with deep regret, to her conviction that her sisters, thrust into the more conventional lives of home-bound mother or nun, had little opportunity to develop their exceptional talents.<sup>56</sup> Although this cannot be taken as an expression of artistic intention, more fodder for the intentional fallacy, it nevertheless indicates a consciousness of the limitations of traditional feminine roles which could well find echoes in Gabrielle Roy's fiction.

On the formal rather than psychological level, this argument finds support in two recent articles which relate Gabrielle Roy's writing to particular literary canons or conventions. Sherrill Grace shows how Gabrielle Roy's use of "urban/rural codes" transcends literary convention by deconstructing the "sexual stereotyping of city and nature . . . usually viewed as female."<sup>57</sup> Examining the publication and reception of the writer's earlier novels, François Ricard suggests that Gabrielle Roy was well aware of contemporary expectations and sexual polarizations with respect to literary *genre*. In his view, the relative failure, in France and Quebec, of *La Petite Poule d'eau* (translated into English as *Where Nests the Water Hen*) in comparison with the overwhelming success of *Bonheur d'occasion*, was perceived by Gabrielle Roy as an indication of the critical depreciation of the more personal, autobiographical, in short, more feminine, type of writing which she, herself, most wanted to explore.<sup>58</sup>

Other frequent themes in Gabrielle Roy's fiction may also lend themselves to similar sexual de-construction. For instance, the nostalgia for innocence and childhood so often felt by her heroines could be read as a desire to return to the undifferentiated world before the sexual fall of the female adolescent. Certainly, in the case of the rape of Elsa in *Windflower* and the quasi-rape of Florentine in *Bonheur d'occasion*, to mention only two examples, Gabrielle Roy's fiction presents a negative view of sexuality, linked to male domination. The most erotic scenes in her writing, however, are found in *Children of My Heart*, in the highly charged relationship between a young teacher and her adolescent pupil, Médéric. Sexuality here is gentle and shared, although never consummated. Significantly, it is Médéric's father, the tyrannical patriarch, par excellence, abetted by village gossip, who ultimately puts an end to his son's friendship, by imposing his sullied view of exploitative sexuality.<sup>59</sup>

Three recent studies have pointed out the importance of themes related to spectacle in Gabrielle Roy's fiction. Analyzing visual imagery in *The Hidden Mountain*, Jean Morency relates the importance of perception and colour in the novel to the larger aesthetic questions of the artist's vision and the artist as visionary. His mythological interpretation of the artist-hero's quest proves problematic, however, for visual imagery suggests two contradictory models, artistic creation as a Promethean struggle, or an initiation rite.<sup>60</sup> E. R. Babby also insists upon Gabrielle Roy's "marked preoccupation with the act of looking" in her structural study of the "spectacle construct" and its relation to "narrative technique and literary illusion"<sup>61</sup> in Roy's fiction. The viewed, not the viewer, is the object of Antoine Sirois' article on clothes, make-up, and jewellery in *Bonheur d'occasion*.<sup>62</sup> Sirois examines how Gabrielle Roy uses appearance to portray inner aspirations. Taken together, all three studies suggest the importance in Gabrielle Roy's fiction of appearance and perception for creation, artistic or personal, and identity, themes particularly poignant in women's writing, as the eternal "other."

Deconstructing critical myths is always an imprudent adventure; it can lead as often as not to new visions no less totalitarian. To replace Gabrielle Roy's traditionalist label with a feminist banner would be equally confining. Nor should one reject all traditional criticism of her fiction simply because it has been, in general, insensitive to sexual difference. However, the particular misconstructions which pervade critical studies of Gabrielle Roy's fiction, as well as their tenacity, demonstrate a compelling need to re-examine her writing from new feminist perspectives. In the meantime, the traditionalist label which haunts her work should be seen for what it is, a critical construct — subject, like all constructs, to revision.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Gabrielle Roy, *La Détesse et l'enchantement* (Montréal: Boréal Express, 1984).
- <sup>2</sup> Phyllis Grosskurth, "Gabrielle Roy and the Silken Noose," *Canadian Literature* 42 (Autumn 1969), 7.
- <sup>3</sup> Barbara Godard, "Mapmaking: A Survey of Feminist Criticism," in B. Godard, ed., *Gynocritics, La Gynocritique* (Toronto: ECW Press, 1987), 29.
- <sup>4</sup> Elaine Showalter, "A Literature of Their Own," in M. Eagleton, ed., *Feminist Literary Theory, A Reader* (Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 13.
- <sup>5</sup> This judgment is explicit in some recent articles on Quebec feminist writers. See Karen Gould, "Setting Words Free: Feminist Writing in Quebec," *Signs* 6:4 (Summer 1981), 617-42; Jeanne Maranda and Maïr Verthuy, "Quebec Feminist Writing," *Emergency Librarian* 5 (September/October 1977), 2-11.
- <sup>6</sup> One of the most curious phenomena associated with such undifferentiated studies of the artist in Gabrielle Roy's fiction occurs at the end of Annette Saint-Pierre's *Gabrielle Roy sous le signe du rêve* ([Winnipeg: Editions du Blé, 1975], 130), where the critic uses the masculine pronoun to refer to Gabrielle Roy as author. Although possible grammatically, since the French noun for author is masculine (a fact which has recently led to the creation of the feminized forms "écrivaine" and "auteure") this option is not by any means necessary on those grounds.
- <sup>7</sup> Paula Gilbert Lewis quotes Gabrielle Roy as viewing "much contemporary feminist literature as hermetic and tedious" (*The Literary Vision of Gabrielle Roy: An Analysis of Her Works* [Birmingham, AL, and Lawrence, KS: Summa Publications, 1984], 2). Lewis's recording of her conversation with Gabrielle Roy shortly before the author's death has been somewhat controversial, although the element most disputed is Roy's imputed desire to be remembered most as a storyteller (see Richard Chadbourne, "Essai bibliographique: cinq ans d'étude sur Gabrielle Roy, 1979-1984," *Etudes littéraires* 17:3 [hiver 1984], 603-04).
- <sup>8</sup> Gilles Dorion and Maurice Emond, "Gabrielle Roy," in *Romanciers du Québec* (Québec: Québec français, 1980), 170.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>10</sup> For an analysis of some of the American options presented, see Eagleton, 200-37.
- <sup>11</sup> Michèle Barrett, "Virginia Woolf on the Female Literary Tradition," in Eagleton, 224.
- <sup>12</sup> Dorion and Emond, 170.

- <sup>13</sup> Alice Parizeau, "Gabrielle Roy, la grande romancière canadienne," *Chatelaine* 7:4 (avril 1966), 122.
- <sup>14</sup> See Paula Gilbert Lewis, "Feminism and Traditionalism in the Early Short Stories of Gabrielle Roy," in Paula Gilbert Lewis, ed., *Traditionalism, Nationalism and Feminism Women Writers of Quebec* (Westport, CT, and London: Greenwood Press, 1985), 29.
- <sup>15</sup> Parizeau, 122.
- <sup>16</sup> Ben-Zion Shek's work is exemplary of this approach: see *Social Realism in the French-Canadian Novel* (Montreal: Harvest House, 1977), 87-88.
- <sup>17</sup> Maranda and Verthuy, 2.
- <sup>18</sup> Lorraine McMullen, "Introduction" to Gabrielle Roy, *Windflower (La Rivière sans repos)* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1970).
- <sup>19</sup> Michel Gaulin, "La Rivière sans repos de Gabrielle Roy," *Livres et auteurs québécois* (1970), 27.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>21</sup> Jeannette Urbas, *From Thirty Acres to Modern Times* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1976), 57.
- <sup>22</sup> Lewis, 73.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>25</sup> Terrance Hughes, *Gabrielle Roy et Margaret Laurence: Deux chemins, une recherche* (Saint-Boniface: Editions du Blé, 1983), 116.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.
- <sup>27</sup> Carole Melançon, "Evolution de la réception de *Bonheur d'occasion* de 1945 à 1983 au Canada français," *Etudes littéraires* 17:3 (hiver 1984), 463.
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 466.
- <sup>29</sup> Soeur Sainte-Marie Éleuthère, *La Mère dans le roman canadien-français* (Québec: Presses de l'Université Laval, 1964). The author deals explicitly with the traditional nature of Roy's fictional mothers (171-92).
- <sup>30</sup> Jean Le Moyne laments the power of the maternal myth in Quebec fiction: "la mère investit la femme de nos fictions . . . Ou plutôt, elle l'empêche d'être. Il n'y a plus de femmes, il n'y a que des mères dont on n'a jamais qu'à dire un mot: tabou" (*Convergences* [Montréal: Editions HMH, 1962], 105). However, if female sexuality is in part revalidated, it remains exterior to the maternal function. The end result echoes the approach of Soeur Sainte-Marie-Éleuthère, for instance, who describes Rose-Anna Lacasse's attraction to her husband in terms of a shared imagination (173-74), avoiding the question of physical attraction.
- <sup>31</sup> See, for instance, André Brochu, "Thèmes et structures de *Bonheur d'occasion*," *Ecrits du Canada français* 20 (1966), 192; Maurice Cagnon, *The French Novel of Quebec* (Boston: Twayne, 1986), 41; E. A. Walker, *Profiles in Canadian Literature 1* (Toronto and Charlottetown: Dundurn, 1980), 107; Jeannette Urbas, *From Thirty Acres to Modern Times*, 47-48.
- <sup>32</sup> Hugo McPherson, "The Garden and the Cage," *Canadian Literature* 1 (Summer 1959), 52.
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>35</sup> Lewis, *Literary Vision*, 64-65. In fact, Lewis has difficulty maintaining a coherent interpretation of Roy's "traditionalism." Her discussion of Roy's "feminine humanism" (95) is a good example of her inability to resolve this issue.
- <sup>36</sup> Lewis, "Trois générations de femmes: le reflet mère-fille dans quelques nouvelles de Gabrielle Roy," *Voix et Images* 10:3 (printemps 1985), 168.
- <sup>37</sup> Gabrielle Pascal, "La femme dans l'oeuvre de Gabrielle Roy," *Revue de l'Université d'Ottawa* 50:1 (janvier-mars 1980), 61.
- <sup>38</sup> Walker, "Gabrielle Roy," 107.
- <sup>39</sup> See Gérard Bessette, "Bonheur d'Occasion," in his *Une Littérature en ébullition* (Montréal: Editions du Jour, 1968), 237; Réjean Robidoux and André Renaud, "Bonheur d'occasion," in their *Le Roman canadien-français du vingtième siècle* (Ottawa: Editions de l'Université d'Ottawa, 1966), 75-91; Jacques Blais, "L'unité organique de *Bonheur d'occasion*," *Etudes françaises* 6:1 (1970), 25-50.
- <sup>40</sup> See François Ricard, "La Montagne secrète," in *Dictionnaire des oeuvres littéraires du Québec*, Tome III, 592-95, and Paul Socken, *Myth and Morality in "Alexandre Chenevert" by Gabrielle Roy* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1987), 8-9.
- <sup>41</sup> Walker, 108.
- <sup>42</sup> Michel Gaulin, "Le monde romanesque de Roger Lemelin et Gabrielle Roy," in *Archives des lettres canadiennes*, Tome III (Montréal: Fides, 1977), 149.
- <sup>43</sup> Jeannette Urbas, for instance, invokes the difficulties of the Depression to justify the behaviour of Azarius Lacasse (46). Paula Gilbert Lewis associates the perceived problematic status of Gabrielle Roy's male characters with the author's aesthetic aims, namely the priority given to female characters (104). She also praises Alexandre Chenevert as one of Gabrielle Roy's "most powerfully developed literary creations" (104).
- <sup>44</sup> Saint-Pierre, 27.
- <sup>45</sup> Cagnon, 36. Annette Saint-Pierre offers an interesting confirmation of this masculine view of Jean Lévesque. In an analysis based on Bachelard's theories, she suggests that Jean Lévesque's behaviour is more easily understood if one recognizes a "lack of harmony in his androgyny [the animus, anima dynamic]. He demonstrates an excess of masculinity" (*Gabrielle Roy*, 24). This raises the question whether male reticence to the character is due to the unfavourable, egoistical presentation of masculinity.
- <sup>46</sup> Adrien Thério, "Le Portrait du père dans 'Rue Deschambault' de Gabrielle Roy," *Livres et auteurs québécois* (1969), 237-43.
- <sup>47</sup> André Brochu, "Thèmes et structures de *Bonheur d'occasion*," 163-208.
- <sup>48</sup> Jacques Allard, "Le Chemin qui mène à la Petite Poule d'eau," *Les Cahiers de Sainte-Marie* 1 (1966), 57-69.
- <sup>49</sup> Gérard Bessette, *Trois romanciers québécois* (Montréal: Editions du Jour, 1973), 181-237.
- <sup>50</sup> Paula Gilbert Lewis, "The Incessant Call of the Open Road: Gabrielle Roy's In-correctible Nomads," *The French Review* 53:6 (May 1980), 816-25.
- <sup>51</sup> McPherson, 52.
- <sup>52</sup> *Essays in Canadian Writing* 17 (Spring 1983), 113-26. Paula Gilbert Lewis provides an interesting variation on the same theme in "Female Spirals and Male Cages: The



Urban Sphere in the Novels of Gabrielle Roy" (in *Traditionalism, Nationalism, and Feminism*, 71-81) although the sexual opposition developed in the article is not always consistent with the title.

- <sup>53</sup> François Ricard discusses several interpretations of this polarization in *Gabrielle Roy* (Montreal: Fides, 1975), 31-32.
- <sup>54</sup> Shirley Foster, "The Open Cage: Freedom, Marriage and the Heroine in Early Twentieth-Century American Women's Novels," in M. Monteith, ed., *Women's Writing: A Challenge to Theory* (Sussex: Harvester Press; New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), 154.
- <sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>56</sup> Gabrielle Roy, *La Détresse et l'enchantement*, 135-36.
- <sup>57</sup> Sherrill E. Grace, "Urban/Rural Codes in Roy, Laurence, and Atwood," in Susan Merrill Squier, ed., *Women Writers and the City* (Knoxville: Univ. of Tennessee Press, 1984), 194.
- <sup>58</sup> François Ricard, "La Métamorphose d'un écrivain," *Etudes littéraires* 17:3 (hiver 1984), 441-55.
- <sup>59</sup> Gabrielle Roy, *Ces enfants de ma vie* (Montréal: Alain Stanké, 1977), 169-77.
- <sup>60</sup> Jean Morency, *Un Roman du regard La Montagne secrète de Gabrielle Roy* (Québec: CRELIQ, 1986), 73.
- <sup>61</sup> E. R. Babby, *The Play of Language and Spectacle: A Structural Reading of Selected Texts By Gabrielle Roy* (Toronto: ECW, 1985), 4, 19.
- <sup>62</sup> Antoine Sirois, "Costume, maquillage et bijoux dans *Bonheur d'occasion*," *Présence francophone* 18 (1979), 159-63.

## BIRDS

*John Pass*

Prisoners of the small head  
and frantic heartbeat  
contemplation thou never wert

but of outer world, vacuous  
and flighty. Suburban budgies beeping zip  
of interest fly

and are shredded  
for their hour in true trees.  
Mum watched ducks

and with a lucky f stop got some, smudges  
duck-like silhouettes against prairie sunsets.  
Even the magnificent eagle is somewhat one-dimensional.

For every flash and stoop and glide and wing-  
thrummed intimation  
of empyrean pride

witness countless of the glass-stunned tribe  
jays a-jabber over dog crunchies  
and those twits and thrushes that scabble  
about interminably in salal.

But I like the sociable sapsuckers  
who go noisily grubbing on high  
while I'm working under the old cedars  
and am sorry for the part that died

in my fish-net fencing, swooping  
into it oblivious. In a word

here's that scarlet fleck of hummingbird perched  
at the tip of the maple opposite: brilliant.  
And a snowy owl

is an exception. Once  
I stood by goalposts at the local school  
and watched one watch the hard white field  
from the crossbar, utterly unruffled, at home

and extraordinary there, a genius  
of moonlight and the small hot shadows, of quickness  
subtleties, exquisite contrasts.



# A CYCLE COMPLETED

## *The Nine Novels of Robertson Davies*

George Woodcock

GLENDOWER: I can call spirits from the vasty deep.

HOTSPUR: Why, so can I, or so can any man,  
But will they come if you do call to them?

GLENDOWER: Why, I can teach you cousin, to command  
The devil.

HOTSPUR: And I can teach thee, coz., to shame the devil  
By telling truths: tell truth and shame the devil.

(William Shakespeare, *Henry IV, Part 1*, III.i.53-59)

# W

ITH THE PUBLICATION in the autumn of 1988 of *The Lyre of Orpheus*, Robertson Davies has completed the third of his fictional trilogies, each centred on a different Ontario town, and each dominated by a central group of characters through whose varying perceptions and memories the current of events that characterizes the trilogy is perceived.

The completion of the triple triad is, as Davies has undoubtedly recognized, an event that stirs a multitude of numerological, folkloric, and mythological echoes. Nine was one of the three mystical numbers of the Pythagoreans, and though three was a perfect number which Pythagoras made the sign of the deity, nine had its specific significance as a trinity of trinities, the perfect plural. For Pythagoras, and later for the great classical astronomer Ptolemy, the universe moved in nine spheres. In various contexts we find the number particularly associated with inspiration and imagination. There were nine Muses, nine Gallicenae or virgin priestesses of the Druid oracles, and nine Sibylline books transmitted from Cumae to Rome. Echoed constantly in Davies' novels is the ancient concept of a nine day's wonder: as the old proverb has it, "A wonder lasts nine days, and then the puppy's eyes are open." But most relevant of all in considering *The Lyre of Orpheus* as the last Davies novel to date — and perhaps the last of the kind to which we have become accustomed since *Fifth Business* appeared in 1970 — is the role which nine plays in music, for nine was the Pythagorean *diapason*, man being the full chord, or eight notes, and nine representing the deity, ultimate harmony.

*The Lyre of Orpheus* is not merely a novel about music; it is a novel about the nature of art in general and its relation to reality and time and the human spirit. But the main plot carrying this theme concerns a musical event, and in doing so it takes us back with striking deliberation to the first group of Davies novels, the Salterton series. For, like the last of that series, *A Mixture of Frailties* (1958), *The Lyre of Orpheus* is built around a family trust which offers a phenomenally generous grant to a young woman musician from a Philistine background, and finds itself sponsoring a controversial opera, so that a contribution is made to the art of music in a general way at the same time as the young musician, aided by wise teachers, undergoes an inner transformation that opens to her what in Davies terminology one might call “a world of wonders”; in Jungian terms she is taken out of the anonymity and personal incompleteness of common life and achieves individuation.

There are indeed important ways in which *The Lyre of Orpheus*, written thirty years later, goes beyond *A Mixture of Frailties*. While Monica Gall in the earlier novel is a singer whose talents are trained by inspired teachers, and the opera in which she becomes involved is the original work of another — a wayward modern genius — in *The Lyre of Orpheus* we edge nearer to the creative role, for the musician, Hulda Schnackenburg (generally called Schnak), is a composer engaged not in an original composition but in a task of inspired reconstruction. She is making an opera, *Arthur of Britain*, out of scattered fragments left by E. T. A. Hoffman (better known as a Gothicist tale-teller than as a musician) of an opera he was unable to complete before his early death from the nineteenth-century endemic, syphilis. At the same time the priestly scholar Simon Darcourt (one of the narrators of an earlier Davies novel, *The Rebel Angels*) constructs the libretto around which the score that Schnak develops from Hoffman’s fragments is built up. Schnak and Darcourt, with their various collaborators, manage to recreate an authentic sounding early nineteenth-century opera which pleases the spirit of E. T. A. Hoffman who makes a ghostly appearance in the comments from the underworld that appear as interludes between the narrative chapters.

Related to this major plot is a strikingly similar sub-plot devoted to the visual as distinct from the audial arts. As well as acting as pasticheur-librettist, Simon Darcourt is engaged on a biography of Francis Cornish, the celebrated connoisseur and art collector whose bequest has funded the preparation and production of *Arthur of Britain*. Darcourt stumbles on the clues which reveal to him what readers of *What’s Bred in the Bone* already know, that Cornish was actually the painter of a famous triptych, *The Marriage of Cana*, done so authentically in the fifteenth-century German manner that it has been plausibly attributed to an unknown painter working five centuries ago who was given the name of the Alchemical Master.

Simon Darcourt manages to convince everyone involved, including the owners

of the painting and the reluctant mandarins of the National Gallery to which it is eventually given, that a work done sincerely and without intent of fraud in the style of a past age is not a fake and can be as authentic as the best work in a contemporary manner. The argument put forward by Darcourt's colleague Clement Hollier, an expert on myths, is not only interesting in itself but important for what it tells us about Davies' own attitudes towards the arts and about his own literary achievement. Here is Darcourt's paraphrase of Hollier's statement:

If a man wants to paint a picture that is intended primarily as an exercise in a special area of expertise, he will do so in a style with which he is most familiar. If he wants to paint a picture which has a particular relevance to his own life-experience, which explores the myth of his life as he understands it, and which, in the old phrase, "makes up his soul", he is compelled to do it in a mode that permits such allegorical revelation. Painters after the Renaissance, and certainly after the Protestant Reformation, have not painted such pictures with the frankness that was natural to pre-Renaissance artists. The vocabulary of faith, and of myth, has been taken from them by the passing of time. But Francis Cornish, when he wanted to make up his soul, turned to the style of painting and the concept of visual art which came most naturally to him. Indeed, he had many times laughed at the notion of contemporaneity in conversation . . . , mocking it as a foolish chain on a painter's inspiration and intention.

It must be remembered . . . that Francis has been brought up a Catholic — or almost a Catholic — and he had taken his catholicity seriously enough to make it a foundation of his art. If God is one and eternal, and if Christ is not dead, but living, are not fashions in art mere follies for those who are the slaves of Time?

In musical terms the chapter in which these matters are resolved can be regarded as a coda, a concluding passage after the main pattern of the work has been developed and completed; it states the theme of the novel more definitely and succinctly than in early renderings. *Arthur of Britain* has been completed and successfully launched as a new work in the operatic repertoire, Schnak had found herself and her career, and now, three years later in a chapter free of the ghostly voice of E. T. A. Hoffman (a ghost now actually laid), we can consider what is the meaning of it all, assisted by our reflections on Francis Cornish's strange master work. And so, just as *The Lyre of Orpheus* as a whole, with its deliberate reordering and retelling of the plot of *A Mixture of Frailties*, completes the circle of Davies' mature fiction, so this final chapter of the latest of his novels acts, I suggest, as a veiled *apologia pro vita sua*, a justification for the uncontemporary aesthetic underlying Davies' life work.

**G**EORGE ORWELL ONCE REMARKED ON the striking fact that the best writers of his time — and among them he included the great apostles of literary modernism — have in fact been conservative and even reactionary in their

social and political attitudes. This is certainly true of most of the great moderns in the Anglo-American tradition; Eliot, Pound, and Wyndham Lewis were all to be found politically somewhat to the right of old-style Toryism, and James Joyce failed to join them only because of a massive indifference to anything outside his own linguistic experiments.

Robertson Davies has not spoken of his political views in any detail or with much directness. I have no idea how he votes, though it is clear that he has the kind of Tory mind which judges politics ethically; his treatment of Boy Staunton's political career in *Fifth Business* suggests that he probably has little patience with what passes for a Conservative cause in late twentieth-century Canada.

What distinguishes Davies from the reactionary modernists is that his Toryism runs into his art as well as his political ethics. He is an unrepentant cultural élitist. "There is no democracy in the world of intellect, and no democracy of taste," he said in *A Voice from the Attic* (1960) and he has not since shown a change of attitude. He has never posed as an avant garde writer of any kind. In spite of occasionally expressed admiration for *Ulysses* as a great comic work, he has never followed Joyce's experiments in language, and despite a loosely stated interest in Proust, he has never tried to emulate Proust's experiments in the literary manipulation of time and memory. Indeed, in this respect he has been far less experimental than other writers we do not regard as particularly avant gardist, like Margaret Laurence and Marian Engel. Though in his two later trilogies he may view the same sequences of events in different novels through different eyes, he still tends within each novel to follow a strictly chronological pattern, with effect following cause, whether the causes are the inner ones to be dragged out by Jungian analysis or the outer ones which we see a character's social ambiance and physical environment imposing on him.

Not that, even taking into account the clear, serviceable and declarative prose that Davies writes, we should regard him as a plain realist. If he is a realist, it is not in the documentary sense, but in the theatrical sense of wishing to give plausibility to the implausible, in his early novels to farce and in his later ones to melodrama. There is always in his writing a heightening of the use of language that goes beyond the demands of ordinary realism, and, given his special interests, Davies might justly be called a magic realist rather than a surrealist. It is true that he shares with the surrealists a preoccupation with depth psychology and its resources of imagery, but while most of the surrealists tended to put their faith in Freud, Davies has found Jung a richer source.

Just as his magicians are technicians of illusion rather than true thaumaturges, so Davies himself takes a pride in artifice, yet he is too conservative a writer to fit in with the postmodernists, metafictionists and destructionists of our own day. Far from being destructionist, indeed, his novels are as Edwardianly well-made as Galsworth's Forsyte novels or Arnold Bennett's fictional chronicles of the Five

Towns, while among his contemporaries the one novelist he has regarded as undeniably great, and whom he has admitted to be an influence, is Joyce Cary, whose virtues lay not in his experimental daring, but rather in a zest for the language, "a reaffirmation of the splendour and sacredness of life," and the same kind of restless and active erudition as Davies displays in his own fiction.

While recognizing that a novel is a work of artifice in which verisimilitude is part of the illusion, and often using contrived fictional devices, Davies manifests little of that preoccupation with the relationship between writers, readers, and the work which has led metafictionists ever since Cervantes and Sterne in their smoke-and-mirror games with reality. He is too didactic, too much concerned with developing lessons about life, and with displaying knowledge and expertise, to subordinate the central narrative, the line of purpose in his works, to any speculative process that might seem to weaken its validity. He is, essentially, a novelist in the central English tradition of Fielding and Dickens and Cary, intent on using artifice to entertain and to instruct. He is brilliantly inventive and has an extraordinary power of assimilating information and presenting it acceptably. But he has little formal originality, little of the power of imaginative transfiguration, so that his novels are still influenced by the conventions of the theatre where he began his writing career, and large sections of them are dominated by the kind of didactic dialogue we used to associate with Bernard Shaw and his disciples. Art comes, when it does, at the end of the process, in the accidental way which also accords with the main English fictional tradition. The kind of deliberate artistry that distinguished the main French tradition from Flaubert onwards, and the tradition of deep social criticism that distinguished the central lineage of Russian fiction from Turgenev onwards, find no place in Davies' books.

Nor, for that matter, does one find much in common between Davies' novels and those of the writers, like Hugh MacLennan and Sinclair Ross and Margaret Laurence, whom we regard as most faithful in their projection of the climate and character of Canadian life and its relation to the land. Davies' novels are restricted geographically to a tiny fragment of Canada — Toronto and the small towns of western Ontario — and to a restricted social milieu of Old and New Money, of the false and true intellectual and artistic aspirations of the middle class, and working-class people are introduced only for comic relief, as in the case of the Morphews in *Leaven of Malice* or the elder Galls in *A Mixture of Frailties*, or on condition that they become transformed and find their way into the cultured bourgeoisie, as Monica Gall does in *A Mixture of Frailties* and Hulda Sckneckenburg seems about to do at the end of *The Lyre of Orpheus*.

Davies did indeed define his attitude to Canada in an interview in *Maclean's* in 1972, two years after *Fifth Business* was published, when he replied to the complaints he had heard that "my novels aren't about Canada."

I think they are, because I see Canada as a country torn between a very northern, rather extraordinary mystical spirit which it fears and its desire to present itself to the world as a Scotch banker.

Davies and his critics tend to use the term "mystical" in a rather loose and general way which has nothing to do with the genuine experiences of mystics like St. John of the Cross or Jakob Boehme, but if we interpret this statement to mean that Canadians hover between an intuitive acceptance of their environment which leads them to see their history in mythic terms, and a grey and materialist attitude in everyday life, I think we have perhaps a good point at which to begin a reconsideration of the triple fictional triads of which *The Lyre of Orpheus* represents the conclusion.

LOOKING BACK AT *Tempest Tost* (1951), the first of the early novels of manners which Davies set in the small town of Salterton (Kingston transmogrified), we notice how limited is the range of situations in Davies' novels, for here already we have the theatrical producer, Valentine Rich, coming into a Canadian town to direct the amateur actors of the Little Theatre in a production of *The Tempest*, just as in *The Lyre of Orpheus* the formidable Dr. Gunilla Dahl-Soot will descend on Toronto to preside over the Canadian metamorphosis of Hoffman's *Arthur of Britain*. And in the very choice of the play that is produced in the earlier novel — *The Tempest* — we have the favourite Davies theme of the interchangeability of life's pretences of reality and art's frank and open illusionism.

The main satirical device of *Tempest Tost* is a relatively simple one: the effort to find among the inadequate citizens of Salterton the types who will adequately project Shakespeare's characters. The results of the casting are ludicrous: Prospero is played by an arrogant and insensitive pedant, Professor Vambrace, Ferdinand by a young army officer whose aim in life is to seduce as many girls as he can, and Gonzago by an owlish middle-aged schoolteacher, Hector Mackilwraith, who falls lugubriously in love with the rich man's daughter Griselda Webster, who is half his age and plays Ariel.

As this is a novel of manners, people are rarely illuminated from within, but are seen usually as they react to each other in social situations. At this stage Davies was still obviously much affected by the theatrical world in which he had recently been so closely involved, and the dialogue reads like a cross between that of early twentieth-century English farce and — when ideas are uppermost — that of Thomas Love Peacock's conversational novels. All the Davies novels give off a perceptible whiff of Peacock, though I have been unable to find any reference that might show Davies took a direct interest in him; the way of transmission may have been through Aldous Huxley, whom Davies certainly read with attention, since in



*The Rebel Angels* — with oblique acknowledgement — he made extensive use of W. H. Sheldon's theories linking temperament with physical types which Huxley had already introduced extensively into his later books.

The disadvantage of this kind of dialogue, as Hugo McPherson pointed out in an early issue of *Canadian Literature*, is that it reveals very little of the private as distinct from the social personalities of the characters, and this creates an extraordinary formal awkwardness, since Davies then saw no other way to reveal his people in depth than to explain them in long narrative passages; in one instance, twenty pages of narrative are spent giving the history of Hector Mackilwraith so that we know how this amorous clown — the would-be lover of Griselda — came to be what he is. The shallowness of this approach to characterization ends in simplistic contrasts; Valentine Rich strikes us as being much too good and Professor Vambrace much too bad to be true.

Yet *Tempest Tost* prefigures in its own way much of the later Davies: the pre-occupation with mystery as illusion, with art as artifice and — personified in those who variously court Griselda — the absurd complexities of the emotional life — with love and sex as rich sources of comedy.

Like *Tempest Tost*, *Leaven of Malice* anticipates the later novels with the kind of display of practical knowledge that often makes one think, while reading a Davies novel, of Zola and the naturalists. Davies is not so brutally obvious as Zola in presenting his characters as the products of material circumstance; even in his later novels when he shows his characters strongly conditioned by childhood experience and social ambiance, he allows them ways of liberation for which the iron determinism of the naturalists left no space.

But he does share with the naturalists the urge to present very circumstantially the activities and interests in which his characters become involved; it is part of the verisimilitude on which convincing illusions depend, as his magicians constantly insist. He began — and this perhaps shows the caution of a writer who is craftsman by intent and artist by good fortune — with areas where he already had knowledge through experience. His involvement in the theatre — both professional and amateur — gave him the background for *Tempest Tost*, and his occupation of editing a newspaper, the *Peterborough Examiner*, gave him that for *Leaven of Malice*, which combines a satirical picture of small-town feuds with the tension of a rather mild detective mystery, for the plot centres on a false and maliciously placed newspaper announcement of the coming marriage of Sollie Bridgetower and Pearl Vambrace. Like the Montagues and the Capulets, the academic families of Bridgetower and Vambrace are ancient enemies, and the notice results in splendid histrionics as Professor Vambrace threatens legal action in all directions. However, in the end all is well, since, by the kind of glib twist that was common enough in London West End comedies at the time, Solly and Pearl fall in love during the

feuding process, and after the perpetrator of the hoax is discovered the malicious announcement is in fact fulfilled when they marry.

*Leaven of Malice*, though a more tightly constructed book, is flawed in the same ways as *Tempest Tost*. The satire moves at the surface level of manners, so that the characters are two-dimensional, and the didacticism of the book is largely unassimilated; Davies will break up the action for several pages at a time to give — say — a disquisition on who reads newspapers and why. Thus the novel moves haltingly as a series of dialogues and slapstick encounters interrupted by essays. At best it and *Tempest Tost* are reasonably good entertainment, but like most mere entertainment they seem very dated a third of a century after writing.

*A Mixture of Frailties* is an altogether more satisfying book — and much more of a real novel — than its predecessors, as Davies himself seems to suggest by repeating its essential situation in *The Lyre of Orpheus*. There are several reasons for this. First, though satire is not absent, it is given depth by the comparison of two worlds of manners and taste, those of Salterton and those of Britain. Then, through the concentration on the training of Monica Gall and the emotional adventures that accompany it, we are shown for the first time not merely a character getting wise to his own inadequacy, as with Hector in *Tempest Tost*, but the awakening and development of a whole personality as her various masters introduce Monica to the splendours and miseries of life and art. In the process a deeper and less facile element of romance enters into *A Mixture of Frailties*, and the tension between satire and romance, between comedy and the tragedy that eventually breaks in, gives the narrative an element of dramatic *chiaroscuro* and a depth of perspective that the earlier novels lacked. *A Mixture of Frailties* broadens because of its multiplicity of locale, and deepens psychologically because we are no longer seeing people merely in terms of their behaviour, but as individuals who feel deeply and speak their feelings. They also speak their knowledge, and sententious in a sub-Wilde way as Sir Benedict Domdaniel may be when he talks of life and artifice and art, his aphorisms are an improvement on the interpolated essays of the earlier works.

WITH *A Mixture of Frailties* in 1958 Robertson Davies seemed like a novelist who after some clever failures was really beginning to find his way, and yet he waited twelve years before publishing his next novel, *Fifth Business*, in 1970. During the intervening period he moved from the newspaper world into that of academe, becoming Master of Massey College at the University of Toronto in 1961 and shortly afterwards he began to teach dramatic literature as a graduate study. During this interlude his writing was very scanty and almost entirely journalistic. Whatever the reason for the silence, it was a productive one. The world changed, and Davies changed his mind with it. He paid attention to

the deep theological and political debates of the 1960s, and though he became no easy convert to any novel doctrine, he quietly modified his attitudes to life and kept his mind open to anything he might be able to use when he returned to fiction again. It was a time of rapidly growing permissiveness both in behaviour and in the ways in which people expressed themselves, and though Davies was too conservative at heart to make any great changes in his use of language, he was ready, by the time he came to write *Fifth Business*, to write openly of things he had not even hinted in his earlier novels, so that while both *Tempest Tost* and *Leaven of Malice* were devoid of any active sexual irregularities, and *A Mixture of Frailties* contented itself with a little heterosexual living in sin, such hitherto unmentioned pursuits as sodomy began to find their place in later Davies books, and invariably as negative manifestations of the quasi-Gnostic dualism that had turned the novels from 1970 onwards into the skirmishing grounds of good and evil.

Good and evil, truth and falsehood, reality and illusion — the oppositions continue through the rest of Davies' novels, and there has never been a resolution of the struggle. There is much calling up of "the vasty deep," much conscious and unconscious seeking for God, but, as Dunstan Ramsay admits in *Fifth Business*,

I had sought God in my lifelong . . . preoccupation with saints. But all I had found in that lifelong study was a complexity that brought God no nearer.

In practice, Davies' characters are much nearer to Hotspur than to his own fellow Welsh sage, Owen Glendower; they too seek to "shame the devil, and tell the truth." In fact the whole of the so-called Deptford trilogy (which extended so far beyond Deptford), beginning with *Fifth Business*, is an attempt by three different people, Ramsay himself, David Staunton (the son of his friend Boy Staunton), and Paul Dempster, to discover the truth about themselves and about the strange series of events in which they are involved. All their enquiries proceed on a human level. The wonders that occur among them, at the hand of Paul Dempster metamorphosed into the magician Magnus Eisengrim, are man-made illusions, not supernatural marvels. Mary Dempster, the "fool saint" through whom Ramsay seems to get a whiff of the divine, is in fact a woman turned half-witted by misfortune, and the miracles he attributes to her are not such as the church would accept. In the end the wise and eccentric old Jesuit, Father Blazon, calls upon him to abandon his quest for saintliness if not for saints.

Forgive yourself for being a human creature, Ramezay. That is the beginning of wisdom; that is part of what is meant by the fear of God; but for you it is the only way to save your sanity. Begin now, or you will end up with your saint in the madhouse.

Similarly, when the devil appears to Ramsay, it is in the form of a human being, the rich Swiss woman Liesl who is Eisengrim's impresario and eventually becomes Ramsay's friend.

In all this, Davies is not suggesting that the good represented by the saints or the evil represented by the devil do not exist. What he tells us is that — unless we belong to the privileged and scanty ranks of the mystics who have been vouchsafed the ecstatic vision of deity — we see both the divine and the diabolical in fleeting manifestations in our human existence, hinted rather than stated in dreams, in myths, in puzzling personal encounters. That is why Ramsay, like Clement Hollier in the third trilogy that begins with *The Rebel Angels*, will operate as a scholar in the interface between history and myth; why Jungian analysis with its underworld of archetypal beings mysteriously residing in the collective unconscious which we all share, will play such an important role in the novels; why the illusions that Marcus Eisengrim creates by mechanical means will shadow forth a different “world of wonders” as mysterious and inaccessible as the world of Plato’s Forms. In the end, one is left after reading Davies’ later novels with a sense of the enormous ambivalence of one of the key phrases of the religious quest: “Seek, and ye shall find.” Davies’ characters, or at least the significant ones, seek and indeed they find, but what they find is not the Grail of which they have gone in search. If they are fortunate they find self-realization, and often it is in some way self-realization through creation. The individual may not find God in the whole and all-consuming way of the great mystics, but he will realize the fragment of God, the creative spark, that is within himself.

All this represents an enormous thematic advance on the early Davies novels, and it is clear that the twelve years of literary silence were spent in much study and thought. Still, in the last resort the success or otherwise of the novels lies not in what they tell us, which an intelligent tract could probably do as well, but in how they tell it. And here also *Fifth Business* is a great advance on even *A Mixture of Frailties*. Indeed, there are some who say it represents the peak of Davies’ achievement, the best of all the nine novels, and, as we shall see, there is some justification for such an opinion.

In *Fifth Business* Davies departs from the old-fashioned form of third-person narrative with somewhat theatrical dialogue which he used in the Salterton trilogy. Now he uses a direct and rather aggressive first-person approach as Ramsay, a retiring master at Colborne College, protests to the Headmaster about the patronizing farewell notice accorded him in the *College Chronicle*. His letter of protest extends into a whole book, but once we accept this basic implausibility we find ourselves involved in the account of a strange life told with a becoming idiosyncrasy and with a vigour of language and imagery, and a grasp of the grubby glory of life, that is quite beyond anything in the Salterton stories. What makes the book so successful is a remarkable unity of tone which extends into an appropriateness of speech to character and character to action that rarely lapses.

With the ingenuity of a dedicated mythographer, Ramsay traces how a mis-aimed snowball, intended for him and wickedly loaded with a stone, set the three

main characters of the novel, and of the rest of the trilogy, on their often parted but always interweaving paths in life.

The stone-laden snowball, intended by Boy Staunton for Ramsay, knocks down Mary Dempster and brings on the premature birth of her son Paul. It also results in her permanently losing her reason and becoming what the local Catholic priest calls a “fool saint,” eccentric in her behaviour and indiscriminating in her generosity, up to the point when she scandalizes the town by giving herself to a wandering tramp, whom the trauma of their discovery by a search party in the local hobo jungle turns into a missionary in the city slums.

Ramsay, whose evasion of the snowball resulted in Mary Dempster’s misfortune, not only feels a lifelong guilt towards her, but, in observing actions he can only interpret as saintly, is started on his career as a high-class hagiographer, tracing the various kinds and conditions of sainthood, and treating the phenomenon of hagiolatry as one of the points where myth and history most illumine each other and where illusion may lead to the recognition of truth.

Ramsay’s other boyhood passion is the deceptive magic of conjuring; himself too ham-handed to succeed, he passes his knowledge on to young Paul Dempster who has the necessary manual facility. And when Paul has endured enough of his Baptist minister father’s fundamentalist disciplines, and of the mockery to which his mother’s actions subject him at the hands of Boy Staunton and the other Deptford children, he lets himself be seduced into a freak show by the homosexual conjuror Willard, one of Davies’ most chilling personifications of evil. After years of virtual slavery during which he learns his art, Paul falls in with the formidably ugly and intelligent and also very rich Liesl Naegeli, who establishes him as the internationally famed magician Magnus Eisengrim. Meanwhile, Boy Staunton, the author with his hard-centred snowball of all these strange metamorphoses in the lives of others, goes on blindly with his self-obsessed career as financier and politician, impervious to the sufferings of others until, in a fatal encounter where he and Paul and Ramsay for the first time come together as a trio, he gains a kind of enlightenment into the emptiness of his life, goes off with the stone which Ramsay has religiously preserved, and dies mysteriously, drowned in his car with the stone in his mouth.

It is the single, consistent, idiosyncratic, eloquent voice of Ramsay that gives *Fifth Business* its impressive and convincing power and unity, which neither of the later volumes in the trilogy projects to the same degree. Bizarre as much of it may seem to him, the reader is aware of the essential, devil-shaming truth of *Fifth Business*, its authenticity as the account of a failed search for the divine. Ramsay’s letter, of course, is a piece of artifice, a literary contrivance, but it is a contrivance that we accept as easily as we might accept a magnifying glass as an aid to reading a difficult text. The character evoked by it seems to live with his own inner vigour, and so all that happens to him seems fictionally authentic.

In his trilogy Davies sets out to show the consequences of the snowballing from the standpoints of the three Deptford boys who were most affected, but in *The Manticore* he actually circumvents the problem of how to perceive and present the insensitive and monstrously self-conceited Boy Staunton by showing Boy's life through the eyes and feelings of his son, the brilliant and alcoholic lawyer David Staunton, "who had a dark reputation because the criminal world thought so highly of him, and who played up to the role, and who secretly fancied himself as a magician of the courtroom."

Realizing that the shock of his father's dramatic death has pushed him to the edge of a mental breakdown, David decides to subject himself to psychoanalysis, and it is this analysis, conducted in Zurich by the Jungian Dr. Joanna von Heller, that forms the frame of the book. It consists of conversations with Dr. von Heller, interspersed by sections of a narrative of the past which the analyst requires David to write. In the process we are given not only a picture of the kind of upbringing that by middle age had carried Boy Staunton's son to the verge of madness, but also a portrait of that startlingly soulless man, his father, who was evil by default of goodness.

But the framework is too rigid for events to move easily and too awkward to be evocative of character. Neither of the Stauntons stands in the mind's eye as a living person with the same kind of depth and complexity as Ramsay in *Fifth Business*. One of the reasons is that in *The Manticore* Davies is even more eager than in previous novels to perform as the Canadian latter-day Zola, exhibiting too painfully and at times all too dully his Jungian scholarship and his carefully acquired knowledge of the working of the Canadian legal system.

The third novel of the series, *World of Wonders*, tells of the transformation of Paul Dempster, the wretched Deptford boy, into the famous and accomplished stage magician, Magnus Eisengrim. Again there is a rather contrived frame, for the story is told when Eisengrim is playing the role of an earlier magical illusionist, Jean-Eugène Robert-Houdin, in a film directed by the famous Swede, Jurgen Lind. Evening after evening, at the urging of Ramsay who wishes to prepare an authentic biography of Dempster as well as the lying life of Eisengrim he had earlier written to give his friend publicity, the magician tells of the terrifying experiences in the lower levels of the entertainment world by which, like an ancient shaman being ceremonially reborn, he was transformed from a parson's tyrannized son into a wonder-worker. The framework gives the narrative a formality that does not always accord with the spirit of what is told, and acts as a kind of hobble to the narrative. Yet the content is so dark and compelling in its evocation of evil and so fascinating in its use of the illusory wonders of the magician's art to suggest by analogy the true wonders of existence, that the knowledge so broadly displayed of early twentieth-century English theatre and of the life and crafts of American show people becomes far more thoroughly assimilated into the narrative than happened with Jungian

analysis in *The Manticore*. In form, as in content, *World of Wonders* impresses one as a work of consummate artifice, in which the protagonist, Paul Dempster, is barely perceived as a human being through the multitude of bright mirror images and the endless argumentative evasions he displays in offering his conversational autobiography. One feels that this is Proteus, and that his creator has never really got him by the heels. At the end of the novel it is not Paul Dempster but once again canny old Ramsay who emerges as the one thoroughly convincing, because thoroughly revealed, character. Such are the perils to a novelist of entering too deeply and deliberately into the world of illusion.

A DIFFERENT KIND OF WRITER'S PERIL emerges in the third group of Davies novels, the Toronto campus trilogy as one might call it. For these books — *The Rebel Angels*, *What's Bred in the Bone*, and *The Lyre of Orpheus* — are partly at least *romans à clef*, based on Davies' experiences of educational and cultural institutions, so that readers in the know have had no difficulty recognizing some of the people whom Davies has embellished into often bizarre characters: John Pearson transmogrified into John Parlabane in *The Rebel Angels*, for instance, and Alan Jarvis made over into Aylwin Ross in *What's Bred in the Bone*. Such mergings of fact into fiction always arouse doubts in one's mind about the writer's motives and ultimately about the nature of his achievement. Is he playing metafictional games with the reader? Or is he lazily offering us memory half raw? As distinct from the youthful autobiographical novel, which is a *rite de passage* many readers undergo in the development of their fictional imagination, the *roman à clef*, in the hands of an experienced novelist, is always an equivocal achievement in which the power of imagination remains in doubt.

Still, the three novels are more than *romans à clef*; if the Deptford series is concerned with the relationship between illusion and reality as mediated by artifice, this later group tends to be dominated by the relationship between true art and artifice, played out, as in the earlier novels, against the shifting scenes of a stage where history and myth are seen as merging.

In a literal way the central figure is Francis Cornish, whose life is told in the middle novel, *What's Bred in the Bone*. Cornish is known to the world as a discriminating connoisseur and a voracious collector of art. In the first volume, *The Rebel Angels*, he has just died and left to three professors the task of sorting the great accumulation of objects he has acquired and of distributing them in accordance with his will. The narrative is a curiously divided one, part of it being written by one of the three professors, Simon Darcourt, as a gossiping journal of academic life he called "The New Aubrey," and alternating chapters forming a kind of interior diary of Maria Theotoky, a half-Polish, half-Gypsy graduate student; she

thinks herself in love with Clement Hollier, the second of the professors, a great mythographer who has seduced her in a fit of absent-mindedness. The third professor, the leading villain, is an unprincipled academic poseur, Urquhart McVarish, who steals from the Cornish collection a remarkable unknown Rabelais manuscript after which Hollier lusts academically.

These high eccentrics, consumed by scholarly passions and academic greeds, and reinforced by such colleagues as the sinister ex-monk John Parlabane, present academe as the terrain of such strange conflicts that one feels often Davies is trying to compensate for his frustration with the dullness of real Canadian academic life. The action mounts to a suicide (Parlabane's) and a bizarre murder (of McVarish by Parlabane) among sexual orgies as strange in their own way as anything in Petronius. The novel slides — as so many of Davies' do — into the serene harbour of a happy ending, out of tone with the rest of the book, in which Maria, having recovered from her infatuation with her professor, marries Arthur Cornish, the rich nephew of Francis and the real administrator of the Cornish estate.

Once again we are treated to displays of knowledge. There is a fascinating oddity about the arcane lore of gypsies rejuvenating and faking old violins which provides some of the most entertaining pages of the book. There is also an unfortunate bit of stale derivativeness when the Sheldonian theory of the effect of physique on temperament is warmed up in a weakly humorous scene when Ozias Froats expounds his theories on the qualities and virtues of human excrement. It is a more disunited novel than any of Davies' previous works; the central intrigue over the Rabelais papers is too weak to carry the burden of so many extraneous interests, and no character — not even wicked Parlabane or the brooding offscene presence of Francis Cornish is sufficiently realized to sustain one's interest.

Francis Cornish comes fully onstage in *What's Bred in the Bone*, which is really a classic *bildungsroman*, in form, language, and in the handling of the trilogy's central theme, the relationship between artifice and art. A whimsical structure, in which the chapters are interspersed with angelic conversations, does not disguise the fact that the novel is told in a very conservative third-person narrative. Cornish's life begins in Blairlogie on the Ottawa River, which is clearly a fictional presentation of Renfrew, where Davies spent much of his childhood, and the money that will eventually finance Francis as a collector comes originally from the destruction of the northern Ontario forests. Like Ramsay's, his childhood is dominated by an obsession, in this case with "the Looner," his idiot brother, the first Francis, whose survival has been concealed and who becomes one of the earliest subjects of the second Francis's pencil when he begins his lonely apprenticeship as an artist.

Following a picaresque line, the novel takes Francis to Oxford, where he falls in with the famous restorer of classical paintings, Tancred Saraceni; he eventually joins Saraceni at a castle in Bavaria where their task is to restore — and improve in the restoring — a cache of German late medieval paintings which are passed



on to the credulous Nazis in exchange for authentic Italian masterpieces from German collections. Here — and the opportunity is not lost for a display of the knowledge Davies has acquired of the methods of the old masters and how their effects can be reproduced in materials now available — Francis perfects his grasp of the technique of painting. When he has reached this point Saraceni proposes to test his aesthetic imagination by leaving him to paint — on an old ruined altarpiece — the work that will show he is a true artist as well as a fine artisan. The result is *The Marriage of Cana* which, when it surfaces before a commission established to send European paintings back to their proper homes, Saraceni proclaims to be an original by an unknown early painter, whom he calls The Alchemical Master; later Aylwin Ross publishes an analytical essay that seems to set the picture firmly in the political and social context of the times. What we — as readers — know to be the work of a modern man has been accepted by the artistic establishment as the work of a man five centuries before, and we enjoy the ironies that our knowledge allows us.

But Davies is after more than irony. There is serious business on foot here, as *The Lyre of Orpheus* reveals. I have already shown, in opening this essay, how in plot *The Lyre of Orpheus* circles back to the early Davies novels, as if to signify that a cycle is being closed, and how, thematically, it brings to a conclusion questions regarding the nature of literary art that are implicit in Davies' fiction from the beginning.

Here, in this most recent novel, the artistic conservatism of Robertson Davies is clearly displayed, in argument and in practice. Once again the narrative is a traditional third-person one, given a touch of metafictional contrivance by the introduction of the beyond-the-grave commentaries of Hoffman, which in fact deepen the conservatism of the narrative by presenting the views on art of a nineteenth-century musician, which the twentieth-century musicians in the novel are seeking to bring to fruition. The enthusiastic account of Schnak's dedicated toil in completing another musician's work abandoned so long ago is a clear denial of the cult of originality that has dominated western art and literature since the days of the romantics. Allied to the cult of originality is that of contemporaneity, the idea that the true artist must speak of his time in its own verbal or visual language; Darcourt's triumphal assertion of Francis Cornish's genius, which finds in *The Marriage of Cana* an expression that is neither original nor contemporary but is true to his talents and his life, is a negation of that doctrine too.

Thematically, *The Lyre of Orpheus* projects a viewpoint that is reactionary rather than classicist in formal terms, for, though Davies has adhered increasingly in his most recent English novels to the traditional methods of mainstream English fiction, his interests have placed him on the verge of Gothic romanticism in selecting his content, while his approach to characterization has brought him close to a comic tradition in fiction that, as we have seen, runs from Fielding through Peacock and

Dickens to Joyce Cary. In denying the importance of originality and contemporaneity he is in fact guarding his own territory, for he is neither a strikingly original novelist, nor, in the sense of representing any avant garde, a notably contemporary writer.

Here lie the main reasons for the popularity of Robertson Davies, which some critics have found offensive to their ideas of what Canadians should be expecting of their writers. It resembles the current popularity of realist painters like Alex Colville, Christopher Pratt, Ivan Eyre, and Jack Chambers. Most people, in Canada and elsewhere, are artistically conservative; only the avant gardes of the past are — though not invariably — acceptable to them. It is true that the permissiveness of the 1960s made the broader public open to certain kinds of content that were once unacceptable. But, as the totalitarians have always known, it is in the formal aspects of a work that the deepest rebellion declares itself, and it is at this point that general readers, feeling the boundaries of normal speech and perception slipping away, become disturbed; the nihilism of much of modern art and literature bewilders and repels them. They need reassurance, and the novels of Robertson Davies, which present no real formal challenges, and whose essential optimism is shown in upbeat endings, with quests completed, wishes fulfilled, evil routed, and villains destroyed, are admirably suited for the calming and comforting of uneasy Canadians. They exist on the edge of popular fiction, where Pangloss reigns in the best of possible worlds.

## ENVOI

*Fred Cogswell*

What is there of me in these words I write down?  
 Not a single one of them is my invention.  
 They all came to me from heard voices and read books  
 And their meaning was forged by my learning  
 How other men and women used them.  
 Even the order in which I put them  
 Is so much at odds with my volition  
 That I feel these poems are not mine at all  
 And that I am both medium and midwife  
 To an inexplicable birthing.

# LAKEVIEW

*J. D. Carpenter*

You are sitting on the stoop of your cabin,  
an ice-cream stand you've moved  
to a maple grove on your brother's land.  
You, poor relation, have the better view  
of the lake.

There is no one around.  
You think of the things you love.  
Late fall when the leaves are down,  
and Scotch Bonnet and Nicholson are clear  
across the bay. Birds. Faces  
of horses. Your children, at home  
with your wife, whom you love  
inextricably.

On the lake are more ducks grazing  
than you've ever seen. In the swamp,  
dry now as the season, your muskrat's houses  
lie abandoned, like cottages closed  
for the winter. Behind you,  
the windows you've come to shutter  
reflect sky clouds trees  
water.

You study your hands, your boots.  
You watch a swallow veer  
and fall. You hear the farmer's sheepdog  
moving through bush like a man rustling  
newspaper.

In the distance: a chainsaw,  
waves breaking.

Your life is not your own  
business any more. You're  
obsessed by paradox — a boy  
in a man's clothing hearing his dead  
father's voice in the conversation  
of waves, the whisper of trees;  
and his wife's, asking him to bring home  
his heart.

# THE IDEA OF ART\*

*Louis Dudek*

I AM ALWAYS ASTONISHED at the way chance events influence our lives, sometimes in order to turn us in altogether new directions.

A few years ago, Phyllis Webb at the CBC suggested that I do six lectures on “The First Person in Literature” for the program “Ideas.” This happened to fall right in the centre of my interest at that time, which turned on autobiography, and I was happy to get my ideas down on paper before they all disappeared.

When John Flood suggested a lecture on “Art and the Artist,” I had the same feeling of a predestined or accidental stroke of luck. It was just the subject I wanted to write about.

But not in the sense of the usual great thoughts, about the value and meaning of art, and the noble role of the artist. This is not a convocation address. Instead, I invite you to consider some rather disturbing truths about the situation of art in our time.

We’ve all heard of “the death of God,” as announced by Nietzsche — and death of the idea of God. What I want to consider here is the prospect of “the death of art,” the death of the idea of art which is being proclaimed today.

It’s a disturbing thought — I must confess that to me personally it is highly disturbing. All my work, my teaching for the past forty years, has been based on the idea of art, as something taken for granted, an absolute, a fact of unquestionable importance. This was the one unshakable reality, the permanent element in our changing lives, the firm touchstone of truth amid the ephemeral, the trivial and spurious, of which so much of contemporary life seems to consist. Art, enduring and timeless, was the one thing we could truly depend on, replacing heaven, replacing the soul’s immortality, replacing that God who was already dead, according to Nietzsche.

In fact, since the Romantic movement in literature, art has been the vehicle that has carried and contained these past glories: permanent beauty, the wisdom and

\* An address delivered at the Fifth Northern Literary Symposium, University College of Hearst, Kapuskasing, Ontario, October 2, 1987.

curative power of nature, the truth of human feelings, the virtue of distilled religion, the highest truths about our earthly existence.

Suddenly, in the middle of my late life, when I am least prepared to take such a blow, I find everywhere a disparagement of art as such, a contamination from doubtful sources, a complete silence about the real thing — in short, a lot of talk about “the end of art.” First there was “art for art,” an aesthetic over-concentration, that lasted for nearly a century, and then came, quite suddenly, *the end of art*. We have now the claim that popular junk is art, or as good as art; the segregation of genuine art to a separate shelf, as “high art,” away from what people are really interested in; and finally the expulsion of real art, or any reference to it, from the popular media of communication.

I will not make light of this. It is not a matter for satire or invective. It threatens the collapse of everything we believe in — everything, that is, on which our civilization rests. For we define a great civilization as one which leaves a permanent record of itself, for the ages, a record of artistic achievement. Anything else is mere anthropology. The end of art ushers in the total victory of that nihilism which Nietzsche dreaded, and which we have held at bay with the incontrovertible idea of art, that is, with the idea of artists as great men, and the idea of art as something that outlasts time, that conquers the eternal emptiness of space.

I say the incontrovertible idea of art, because art is visible and real, whereas God is an hypothesis, at best a belief. You may doubt in God, you may even say that God is dead; and just as no one has ever proved satisfactorily that God exists, so no one can really prove that he is “not dead.” God does not reveal himself. As Flaubert, a great sceptic, said of the artist in his work, “he is everywhere present and nowhere visible.” But this was first said about God, of course. Therefore you can deny that God exists.

But you cannot deny that Titian’s “Venus” is visible and real; that the “Primavera” is real; that Bach’s Partitas and Sonatas are real to the ear; that the poetry of Shakespeare and Keats, of Goethe and Whitman, is actual and real. Those objects and creations are present before us, to see, to hear, to apprehend, as witness of a transcendent and virtually superhuman reality, that we cannot shake off or deny. For there is something more than human in great works of art, more in any case than what we normally know as human. Some immense power, of awesome beauty, as in the shattering chords in the opening of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony; some deep wisdom, as in the poetry of Hölderlin, or Wordsworth; some wonder that seems to be everlasting, as in a tune by Eric Satie or a startling poem by Emily Dickinson.

And yet all this has been denied, expelled from the public sense in our time. It has been undermined, both theoretically, in the criticism of art, and practically, in the operations of our affluent society. Why? This is a question that deserves long and careful examination.

Students often ask, “What is poetry?” even as Tolstoy asked in his infamous tract *What is Art?* (Tolstoy, a disciple of Rousseau, is the first subversive voice of this kind among the artists.) Art is an idea. You can define it, with other words, and you can talk about it; you can even write a Ph.D. thesis about it — and not know what it is. For of course you can have an idea of it, as an abstract category referring back to many particulars, but you cannot know it except by knowing, or experiencing, some of the particulars, some examples of it. “Art” refers to the experience of contemplating particular works of art. The idea is a generalization, or an attempt at a generalization, about those particular experiences.

Obviously, the definition of art is never much good. It is the experience of listening to Bach’s Chaconne for the violin (sometimes described as the greatest single piece of music ever written), or seeing Botticelli’s “Primavera,” or Keats’ “Ode to a Nightingale,” that takes your head off and teaches you forever what art is. If you have never had your head taken off, if you have never stood in tears listening to the music of Mozart, or some analogous experience, you will never truly understand the idea of art, or even the paltry definitions that try to stand in for that experience.

And yet they say art is dead, or is dying. In trying to measure the meaning of such an overwhelming loss I must go back and ask myself how we ever came to value art to such a high degree, how we have come to place art in our civilization as the very highest category of human achievement.

It is a subject that has a long and fascinating history. To abbreviate it I will refer to R. G. Collingwood’s valuable book *The Principles of Art*, which first appeared in 1938, and which throws much light on the history of this difficult term. (I might say that this book has been my standby for many decades, it is a fundamental work.)

That lucid English philosopher points out that neither the Greeks nor the Romans, and certainly not the Egyptians before them, understood the idea of art, as art, in our sense. Art, to them, had the meaning of craft, *techné*, no different in kind from shoemaking or carpentry. *Techné* is only a means to something else, not a good in itself. (That is why Mozart, 2,000 years later, had a seat “just above the cooks.”) To arrive at the modern idea of art, says Collingwood, we had to separate it from the idea of craft.

“The Renaissance artists,” he points out, “just like those of the ancient world, did actually think of themselves as craftsmen.” And craft is of course utilitarian. “It was not until the seventeenth century,” says Collingwood, “that the problems and conceptions of aesthetic began to be disentangled from those of technic or the philosophy of craft. In the late eighteenth century the disentanglement had gone so far as to establish a distinction between the fine arts and the useful arts; where ‘fine’ arts meant, not delicate or highly skilled arts, but ‘beautiful’ arts (*les beaux*

*arts, le belle arti, die schöne Kunst*). In the nineteenth century this phrase, abbreviated by leaving out the epithet . . . became 'art.'"<sup>1</sup>

Collingwood is very good at telling us what art is not. It is not craft. So also, it is not "the art of imitation," as was long believed. Both Shakespeare, "holding the mirror up to nature," and Pope, hoping "to catch the living manners as they rise," reflect this old view which is partial and mistaken. Art is not mere imitation of the created world. It is not a copy, or a speaking picture. Neither is it magic, says Collingwood, nor entertainment. Art is not an amusement, though it may be amusing. And it is not reducible to moral persuasion, or the propagation of any particular idea, or body of ideas.

If art "is not" all these, what is it? Collingwood goes on, in the second part of his book, to define art as "expression of emotion" and as "imagination."<sup>2</sup> "By creating for ourselves an imaginary experience or activity, we express our emotions," he says, "and this is what we call art."<sup>3</sup> Or again: "The value of any given work of art to a person qualified to appreciate its value is not the delightfulness of the sensuous elements in which as a work of art it actually consists, but the delightfulness of the imaginative experience which these sensuous elements awake in him."<sup>4</sup>

All this is fine, but a bit vague. Collingwood is at his weakest when he tries to define for us what "expression" and "emotion" and "imagination" are. These things are by their nature ultimate and undefinable: they are like "redness," or "pleasure," or "negative charges of electricity." No one will ever define what they "are," beyond naming them as ultimate concepts of verbal construction.

However, in Part I of *The Principles of Art* he has performed a great service. He has told us that art, in the modern world, has emerged from the theoretical muddle of the past, where it was perpetually confounded and identified with something else, something lesser, and it has at last risen as something supreme in itself, as art.

We should also take note, in following this story, that it is possible for civilizations to create the greatest art without having the least idea of what art actually is. This should surprise no one. It's true of love, and sex, and board games like chess and backgammon: we have no idea of the depth of meaning that these things may bear, yet we practise and enjoy them for centuries. So it is of art. Not knowing may be helpful in producing the greatest art, as Schiller pointed out in his essay on the naïve and sentimental in art.

Art then is something in itself. Whereas in the past art could be harnessed in the service of orthodox religion (as in Dante, or Milton), or it could be made to serve the purpose of imitation, enacting the drama of life, as in Shakespeare, or in depicting contemporary society, as in the realistic novel, art is now seen as most truly itself in the concept of art-for-art, which emerged in the early nineteenth century, in Blake, Coleridge, and Keats, and culminated in writers like Baudelaire, Mallarmé,

Valéry, Pater, and Wilde, and early Ezra Pound and Eliot, or Cummings and Wallace Stevens.

This concept, of an identifiable entity, separable from morality, from religion, from politics, even from “human interest” and drama — essentially separable yet capable of including them (there’s the rub!) — an entity unique in itself, that was always the secret glory of human creation, in sculpture, in painting, in architecture, in music and poetry, and that has now been isolated for our understanding, as art, the true essential in all these works: this is the idea that has emerged from the Renaissance, with modern secularism, as the highest of human values. It is the measure of civilization. It is the measure, and the only measure, of the greatest men, the artists: Beethoven, Bach, Leonardo, Shakespeare, Goethe.

And yet it is just this concept, of art as the supreme human expression, the glory of all high civilization, that has come into question, that has come under attack, from critical theory, and erosion by mere commercial process.

THE IDEA OF ART reached its peak early in the present century. It permeated all the work of Marcel Proust, and inspired his novel *A la recherche du temps perdu*. It is the idea behind the immense construct of James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, the aesthetic “blaze of being” in that novel corresponding to Aquinas’ *haecceitas*, the “thisness” of God’s creation. It was the inspiration of Thomas Mann, from *The Magic Mountain* right on to *Death in Venice*, though everywhere in Mann the idea of art is already being brought into question. It is the source of the most luminous passages in the poetry of Ezra Pound, a supreme artist, despite his madness and his fanaticisms. All these men believed in the permanence of art, the one enduring artifact in time, that would last —

’Till change hath broken down  
All things save Beauty alone.

Edgar Allan Poe called it “Supernal Beauty”; Baudelaire sought for eternity in the “immortal sense of the beautiful”; Stéphane Mallarmé dreamed of “glorious fictions” (“*ces glorieux mensonges*”); Wallace Stevens echoed the same thought in his “supreme fictions.” But everywhere, it was the one criterion that somehow comprised all past human glory, all genius, all enduring achievement.

And yet this very idea has crumbled. It no longer holds the mind, in the marketplace or the university. In our popular culture it has evaporated from public view. This is the shame and poverty of modern culture.

The collapse has come on two fronts. First, art has been discounted at the level of general culture, in the media, in education, in entertainments. And second, it has been undermined in the very evolution of art itself, in critical theory, and in



the production of artists. There is also a connection between these two forms of decadence which we must try to uncover.

The first sort of erosion of art is one I have studied throughout my academic life, beginning with the realization as a young poet, convinced of the supreme importance of poetry, that in modern society the poet has no place, no income, no status, no effective outlets of publication, no proper recognition or understanding from critics or readers. I began to study the historic reasons for this, trying to explain the discrepancy between the vast importance given to literature in the history of our culture, in education, in books, and the utter insignificance of literary art in our actual society. The result was a historical study entitled *Literature and the Press*, which was published jointly by the Ryerson Press and Contact Press in 1960.

The argument of that book was that the mass production of printed matter since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, in other words through the mechanization of printing and paper manufacturing, had brought about, not an improvement in literacy and enlightenment, as might be expected, but an extraordinary degradation of literate values, a popularization of books, magazines, and newspapers, and an exploitation of the market, that has drowned the arts in a flood of trivia and journalistic entertainment. I argued that the profit motive, applied to the production and distribution of books, where it had never before held a dominant role, worked steadily at the erosion and degradation of literary values. I argued, also, that scholarship and criticism had proved deaf and blind to the decay of the media, for reasons which any reader may explore for himself. (Scholars are drawn to radical leftist ideologies, to spice up their lectures, but they are not so firm in the defence of the literary and civilizing values to which they ought to be professionally committed.)

Ideas like those in *Literature and the Press* have never caught on in a big way. Occasionally, some well-known writer will make a devastating comment on the state of print culture, but it passes by unnoticed. The media, and Madison Avenue, find Marshall McLuhan's speculations far more absorbing. After all, McLuhan decried "making value judgments" and cheerfully announced that they, the media themselves, are "the message." He found positive values in TV watching, showing how TV "alters the ratio of the senses" and so unifies the personality, and he made much of concepts like "hot" and "cool." Fads are more effective than prophecies, or realistic comment, in the world of media razzmatazz. Nobody wants to hear that they themselves are in fact responsible for the death of art, or the degradation of modern man. Instead, "We pause briefly for station identification . . ." or "We will return after this break" — an advertisement for Maxi Pads or Soap Suds. The gods can wait behind the curtain forever.

I have said there are always confirming voices. One of these is the historian Arnold Toynbee, who states the whole case succinctly:

Universal compulsory gratuitous education was inaugurated . . . in A.D. 1870; the Yellow Press was invented some twenty years later — as soon as the first generation of children from the national schools had come into the labour market and acquired some purchasing power — by a stroke of irresponsible genius which had divined that the educational philanthropists' labour of love could be made to yield the newspaper king a royal profit.<sup>5</sup>

This is quoted by R. P. Blackmur, in 1967, who thoroughly agrees with it. In fact he quotes further from Toynbee:

In the latter-day perversion of our Western Press, we see the 'drive' of Western Industrialism and Democracy being employed to keep the mass of Western Humanity culturally depressed at, or perhaps even below, its pre-industrial and pre-democratic spiritual level.<sup>6</sup>

You did not hear this from McLuhan, because he refrained from making value judgments. In medicine, if you do not make value judgments the patient dies. "By Golly, we did not realize that thing was a cancer! It looked like such an interesting growth."

As teachers in the humanities, dealing with literature and the arts, we must make value judgments. Show what we love. Show some scorn. This is what makes teaching dramatic, controversial, and helps to transmit the idea of a hierarchy that must be personal and newly defined.

But to return to our subject: concomitant with the degradation of art at the public level — of which the current craze of non-music and drug culture are familiar signs — we have the disintegration of art in the galleries and the schools of criticism. And there is of course a connection between the two.

Throughout the nineteenth century, as urban industrial society evolved, writers and artists began to shudder and pull away into a separate and superior self-isolation. This was in fact a movement of art becoming intensely conscious of itself, or "art for art" as it was then called. Coleridge, one of the key sources for the idea of pure poetry, already saw this separation in terms of "three silent revolutions in the history of England: 'When the professions fell off from the Church; when literature fell off from the professions; and when the press fell off from literature.'" And Flaubert, who despised the entire culture of the middle class growing up around him, turned to an intense and purely artistic sense of style and form in the novel, as a way of withdrawal from middle-class society. (The influence of Flaubert on James Joyce and Ezra Pound is familiar in literary history, but its deeper meaning is easily forgotten.)

The end result of this process of withdrawal has been the self-conscious idea of art, but it has also produced an inward-turning art and a mode of theorizing about art which have been devastating to the very idea of literature.

In two essays on this subject, "The Meaning of Modernism" (in the book *Technology and Culture*, 1979)<sup>8</sup> and "The Theory of the Image in Modern Poetry"

(in *Open Letter*, Summer 1981)<sup>9</sup> I show how the focus of art as an all-important subject *per se*, to the neglect of its social connections, led to an analysis of art as art, that is, to the question of 'What is art' with such an inquisitive persistence, that every art was broken down into its atomic constituents, so to speak, and these have been experimentally rearranged, to yield novel and shocking effects. This is the raccoon parade of the avant garde through the modern cornfield, until there is nothing left but noise, flea-market junk, and the separate letters of the alphabet as evidence that art had once existed.

It is a double-pronged story: the disappearance of art from the media of communication, from the culture of modern society, and subsequently, the disintegration of art itself in the hands of the artists and theorists.

In recent weeks, in the *Globe and Mail*, I have seen various art objects displayed and discussed in the Art section of that newspaper. In one of these, several black oil cans standing on some white tiles were offered as a modernistic work of art. In another, a rectangular box resembling a humidifier or a standard Xerox machine was shown as the Canadian offering at exhibitions abroad. In a third, a photograph of "a woman's hand wrapped around an erect penis" was displayed in the window of an art gallery and was confiscated by the police. A shocking case of "censorship" and denial of artistic freedom. Allan Bloom's book, *The Closing of the American Mind*, points out that freedom of thought was originally proposed in order to defend the voice of reason against fanaticism and other special interests, but that ironically it has now been turned around to defend the so-called rights of fanaticism and special interests — including those of obscenity.<sup>10</sup>

Associated with this we have the demise of literature as an academic study. Literature, as we must all know, has been infected with literary theory to the point that humane literary response is now hardly possible for most students in English departments. Linguistic analysis and theorizing — structuralism, post-structuralism, intertextuality — have taken the place of intelligent response and imaginative experience. After reading Roland Barthes and Jacques Lacan you do not try to understand literature on its own terms, least of all enjoy it; you undermine it, or you enter into the sub-text. Much of this French-derived theory is Marxist inspired and aims to destroy the humanistic and liberal premises of scholarship. The deconstruction of "texts" and of the artistic persona, as practised by Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes, is in fact neatly designed to eliminate from our culture the most resistant individualist, the artist, from the stage, and to destroy the rich educative effect of art, which maintains and nourishes the humane tradition. "The 'death of the author' is a slogan that modern criticism is now confidently able to proclaim," says Terry Eagleton.<sup>11</sup> Robespierre could not have said it better. (Eagleton is obviously citing Barthes' essay "The Death of the Author.")

The method called deconstruction is simply an immense elaboration of the old Marxist trick of reading, not what a literary work intends, but its so-called ideo-

logical implications. Men have been stood up against the wall, or sent to concentration camps, with this kind of criticism. It does not interpret, or read out, the meanings from a work, it reads them in. A highly complicated and pretentious technique of linguistic analysis, it is like making love, not by whispering in a lady's ear, but by examining her pores under a microscope and taking samples of her blood and mucus, in order to 'deconstruct' her — that is, to kill her. The intention is to destroy literature as such, and to replace it with a doctrine or a thesis.

This point is worth pursuing, to make it perfectly clear. It is common nowadays to sneer at "high art," and there is perhaps a deep justifying reason for this. What we think of as serious art, high art, has come down to us through the culture of gentility, the upper bourgeoisie of the nineteenth century, which in turn emulated and aped the manners of an aristocracy of that and earlier times. These are the people who attended the opera, the classic concert hall, the ballet, and frequented the art museums of the nineteenth century. The arts always have real people, a social class, to sustain them. With the collapse of that prestigious and moneyed class, the plutocracy of art patrons, the centre of interest and activity has moved in the direction of democracy. And therefore new claims are made for the popular arts of democracy, as having primary artistic value, over and above the high arts of the past.

Henry Pleasants' book *The Agony of Modern Music* argues that the tradition of classical music is now finished, and that the true music of the twentieth century is not so-called "modern music" — which he says is neither modern nor music — but jazz, or popular music. "The experiments of the twentieth century moderns," he explains, "are harmoniously disintegrative and destructive, and have been so for a hundred and fifty years."<sup>12</sup> Henry Pleasants offers a lively and provocative argument about the death of an art. It is well worth reading.

Leslie Fiedler's abominable book *What Was Literature?* puts forth a similar argument about literature, stating the case for every kind of popular trash, from comic books to popular romances. "What used to be 'literature,'" says Fiedler, putting the word in quotation marks, "divides us against ourselves; while what used to be called 'trash,' rooted like our dreams and nightmares in shared myth and fantasy, touches us all at a place where we have never been psychically sundered each from each."<sup>13</sup> In Circe's pigsty we share the same fantasies and desires.

**B**UT THERE IS WORSE TO COME. In the immense scepticism of modern thought — a philosophical doubt, where not only language but all human understanding, even perception, have been analyzed and remain under question, leading to a great abyss of silence, "mute, soundless, wordless" — it should be no surprise that "the destruction of the book has declared itself in all domains";<sup>14</sup>

that is, the destruction of art is one of the consequences. I am quoting from Jacques Derrida, in his book *Of Grammatology*.

Like McLuhan, Derrida in 1967 announced the death of literacy. "The end of linear communication (*écriture*) is clearly the end of the book."<sup>15</sup> Both Derrida and Lévy-Strauss write, of course, from a profound Marxist bias. The very origin of language, for them, begins in the exploitation of man by man.<sup>16</sup> Therefore the aim of Derrida, through deconstruction, is to send the whole edifice crashing.

Similarly, the English Marxist Terry Eagleton, in his book *Literary Theory*, presents a full-scale argument against the literary tradition, but in a much more direct ideological form. Not only the literature, but the criticism of literature goes. "If literary theory presses its own implications too far, then it has argued itself out of existence," he says. "This, I would suggest, is the best possible thing for it to do. The final logical move in a process which began by recognizing that literature is an illusion is to recognize that literary theory is an illusion too." But in the meantime these literary theories are to be used to demolish the liberal tradition: "Any method or theory which will contribute to the strategic goal of human emancipation, the production of 'better people' through the socialist transformation of society, is acceptable. Structuralism, semiotics, psychoanalysis, deconstruction, reception theory and so on."<sup>17</sup>

You could hardly ask for a more candid and open statement than that. Eagleton goes so far as to propose the abolition of English departments, although he writes within an English department and is published by a university press: "Departments of English as we presently know them in higher education would cease to exist."<sup>18</sup>

So we seem to be in a terrible muddle. One could indulge in Spenglerian prophecies of despair, or in cosmic pessimism like that which affected T. S. Eliot and his followers, or Céline and Henry Miller in the thirties of this century. There were also the revolutionary sixties. But we are now in the nineties, and a *fin de siècle* is approaching. Perhaps we are due for a change of heart.

How do you respond to this kind of thing? For myself, I have never been a pessimist, I've managed to affirm my own confident belief, after a time, against anything that contemporary reality had to offer. It's a matter of temperament.

A Samuel Beckett or a T. S. Eliot will groan no matter what you set on the table. A William Carlos Williams will find human joy and vitality even in a cemetery or a funeral. The twentieth century, if you read Paul Johnson's *Modern Times*, has been a century of terror, genocide, cruelty, and war. Some writers have recorded this with extreme revulsion, Louis Ferdinand Céline in *Journey to the End of the Night* or Henry Miller in *Tropic of Cancer*. Others have wept through tears and laughter: Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, or John Updike in his current book *Roger's Vision*. (Here a communications expert tries to prove by computer that God exists, while a theologian sceptically observes.) All this is a matter of temperament.

Some years ago I defined what I called “The *Dies Irae* Syndrome” or the “Doomsday Complex.” It is the belief that overcomes mankind periodically that the world is coming to an end, that things are so bad that soon they must blow up and everything will be finished for good.

This is a very natural state of mind. The Egyptians must have had it when the Hittites came. The Romans when they saw the Visigoths against the skyline. Certainly people thought the world would end around the year 1000. There have been many historic moments, throughout time, when a sense of doom possessed mankind. Many people now are in such a state. Others seem to carry on. These things tend to pass. The world never really ends.

And if the whole world should perish,  
do you think the powers that made us would fold up and die?<sup>19</sup>

Now, to return to our subject, there is no question but that the arts have moved from their home amid an aristocratic bourgeoisie to a more ramshackle domicile within democracy, at some risk. The great task of art today is to translate the tradition of art from the values of the past to those of democracy; to create a high democratic art. This is the best meaning of modernism, lost in the confusions of sham art and befuddling ideology.

But in addition to that, we need a context for our meditations. Perhaps poetry will do. The writing of poetry is a lot like being in love. It’s walking out in the soft night, in early summer, with the big moon out there, and lilac smells in the air, and the stars blinking overhead. It comes in waves, as a delicious impulse that leaves heaps of words; comes from a deep source, makes the hand shake and the lips tremble with words bubbling under your breath.

In other words, poetry — or any art may we speak of — is not easy to bring to a halt. It is a natural urge in man, like sex or appetite. If in our present society, in criticism, we fall into confusion with ideas of anti-art, if the artists go astray and write extravagant nonsense, if the world is what the newspapers tell us it is, a mad scramble for power and money, still we know that whatever motivates and underlies the creative impulse will remain and continue. The source of art is forever there.

In the face of the present assaults on the idea of art, assaults which are clearly part of a crisis in western civilization, a fateful and turbulent transition from the old monarchic-aristocratic past to a democratic present, what are we to do? Are we to throw up our hands? Assume that art and literature will no longer be possible?

There was a time, as recent as the age of Milton and Shakespeare, when men could see the past only as another kind of present time. As in *Star Trek*, you were “beamed down” into Caesar’s Rome or Hamlet’s Denmark, and nothing was changed but the language and clothing of the inhabitants. People in the past were exactly like people in the present.

In a fundamental way they are. But we now believe, or know, that just as overtones make a sound specific, and cause the violin to sound different from a whistle, though both play the same notes on the scale, men in another age felt, talked, and imagined differently from us. Knowing this, and trying to understand the difference, is what we call having "a sense of history." It is something that men came to perceive gradually with the birth of modern history, really only since the seventeenth century.

I would suggest that we need a sense of history in regard to the idea of art. Art too has a particular character in every age and period of time. So that the very idea of art, the meaning of art, seems also to change with time.

The drama of Shakespeare's day is not the drama of the Restoration. In fact Dryden and his contemporaries had to revise and adapt Shakespeare's plays to suit the art of their own time. Romantic art, after the French Revolution, is yet another aesthetic. And modern art of the twentieth century, with all its hysterical mimicry of the past, its collage and reassembly of an exploded tradition, is something else again.

We must try to study and to formulate the dynamics of changing art history, the hypertrophy or exhaustion of forms and styles, the process of boredom with specific forms (*Formermüdung* as one German theorist called it) that leads to innovation, and the incomprehension that develops between one period and another. We must realize that we are living in a time of great turbulence and change.

But we must also have confidence in the permanence and continuing resurgence of art. Art is a form of energy. (Even the word energy, I have heard, was at first applied primarily to the divine or to spiritual powers, to the Creator, and only later was transferred to man, and to physical nature.<sup>20</sup>) Man is a creature who lives and acts to survive, but who also makes superfluous objects and engages in behaviour which contains expressions of his deepest fears, strivings, and desires. These objects and actions guide and direct his future, they connect his past with his present, they make infinite possibilities actual and conceivable, so that he can meditate upon them and choose among them. The urge to make art, or to generate an expression beyond the real and the actual, is irrepressible in man, it was born with him at the dawn of time, and it will continue until the race expires, or man becomes something other.

That is why we need not despair about the death of art (or, for that matter, about the death of God). We need to ask, rather, what the new forms of art will be; that is, how the idea of art may change, to be reborn in a new form.

And to establish our balance, in this rocky culture of ours, we need to stand on first principles. Just as there is creativity in nature, so there is creativity in man. They are analogous, or perhaps the same. This is a matter of philosophy, or of faith, since the question of who we are, what kind of world we live in, lies at the root of modern art and its problems. The argument between science and religion has been

one of means, whether the creation comes out of blind atoms, which the scientists can barely conceive, or from an omniscient being; from randomness, or from hidden purpose. There can be no doubt that the universe has been created, and continues to be created, of itself, in mysterious ways that we cannot hope to explain. The world of inanimate and of living forms is there. And the mind of man contemplates that scene, in order to put forth a replica, or a net of meaning, or simply a song-accompaniment to the whole.

In other words, we will not properly think of man, or the art he makes, unless we can reconceive the creative process in nature from which art derives. If you cannot think the living world, with all its manifold forms, and the mysteries and complexities it contains, you will not experience the works of man, which are a mere echo and reflection of what is there.

But if you do grasp the relation of art to creative nature, you will have no fear that art will die, or that the making of art will come to an end. For it is precisely a failure at the level of thought that has led to the impasse of modern art. As evolutionary ideas led to Hardy's pessimism, as a religious dilemma tortured Eliot's poetry, and scientism made Lawrence hysterical, so the existential "nothingness" and the nihilist vision are what we inherit. And the way out of that impasse must be through "mental strife," for there is no other way.

The extreme arrogance of some modern artists, of Eliot in his young age, of Pound and Yeats — their anti-human tendency — was also part of this dilemma. They had withdrawn from mankind, and had risen superior to common humanity, in Axel's Castle of isolation. In fact they had excluded too much of toil and trouble from their art, in order to make it strut art-as-art. But the greatest art is not an act of withdrawal. It is one of surrender and of participation. The artist cannot be contemptuous, for the greatness of art has to do with the greatness of man — the greatness of every man. And the artist cannot be proud, for it is not he himself who has been the source of that greatness. It is something larger than his own ego, that is the source of power. He is only a voice, an expression of a larger nature.

What art needs, more than anything, is a return to its full subject matter. We cannot lose the idea of art as the supreme human achievement, and as the secret key to man's connection to the mysteries. But this high idea must not become empty of content, it must include whatever pertains to human life, and whatever the artist may need, no matter how strange or eccentric. It must include everything observed and everything imagined:

Poetry must be seen as poetry, but that does not mean it is without social, political, or other relevant meaning. In fact, it is the mark of a great culture to be aware intensely of art as art, and at the same time as the vehicle for civilized values and for the manifold energies of life.<sup>21</sup>

This is the unity to which we have to make our return. And yet there is no great hurry. The maelstrom of this present age is already hugely prolific, and rich with



possibility. There is no word more resonant, in the discussion of current affairs, than the word open. Open society, open mind, open form. We are open to every possibility. And if the present situation is a chaos, let us remember that it was out of the chaos of modernism, the collapse of nineteenth-century values, that some of the greatest works of art have emerged: in music Stravinsky, in painting Picasso, in fiction Thomas Mann, in poetry Ezra Pound and all the moderns. So, too, out of the chaos of the present, art will come: it must challenge this society of "Men Without Art" and of theories of anti-art, with new creation. It must be shining and triumphant. It must say "Yes" to existence, despite every obstacle.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> R. G. Collingwood, *The Principles of Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1938), 6.
- <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.
- <sup>5</sup> Quoted in R. P. Blackmur, *A Primer of Ignorance* (New York, 1967), 7.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.
- <sup>8</sup> *Technology & Culture* (Ottawa: Golden Dog, 1979), 78-96.
- <sup>9</sup> *Open Letter* (Fourth Series, Nos. 8-9, Spring & Summer, 1981), 261-82.
- <sup>10</sup> Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 261.
- <sup>11</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1983), 138. The full implications of this radical revolutionary involvement may be judged from the opening of Roland Barthes' *Le Degré Zéro de L'Écriture* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1953), translated by Annette Lavers and Colin Smith as follows: "Hébert, the revolutionary, never began a number of his news-sheet *Le Père Duchêne* without introducing a sprinkling of obscenities. These improprieties had no real meaning, but they had significance. In what way? In that they expressed a whole revolutionary situation." This opening is like a series of chords at the beginning of an orchestration. Later chapters deal with "The Triumph and Break-up of Bourgeois Writing" and "Writing and Revolution." Barthes writes with a marked contempt for "Literature" as such, which he sees as "abstract" — "a Utopia of language" — increasingly removed from social realities, and he has a preference for spoken language. He writes: "It is the existence of Literature itself which is called into question; what modernity allows us to read in the plurality of modes of writing, is the blind alley which is its own History." "For Literature is like phosphorus: it shines with maximum brilliance at the moment when it attempts to die." *Writing Degree Zero & Elements of Semiology* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1967), 51, 32. From the Marxist point of view all this is deducible from the ideology. After the revolution, if literature is not "dead" we may be sure the writers will be.
- <sup>12</sup> Henry Pleasants, *The Agony of Modern Music* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1955), 101.
- <sup>13</sup> Leslie Fiedler, *What Was Literature? Class Culture and Mass Society* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982), 140.

- <sup>14</sup> “La destruction du livre, telle qu’elle s’annonce aujourd’hui dans tous les domaines. . . . Cette violence nécessaire répond à une violence qui ne fut pas moins nécessaire.” Jacques Derrida, *De la Grammatologie* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1967), 31.
- <sup>15</sup> “La fin de l’écriture linéaire est bien la fin du livre.” *Ibid.*, 129.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 174-75.
- <sup>17</sup> Eagleton, 204, 211.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 213.
- <sup>19</sup> *Atlantis* (Montreal: Delta Canada, 1967), 27.
- <sup>20</sup> I owe this thought to Professor Antonio D’Andrea, of McGill University.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ideas for Poetry* (Montreal: Véhicule Press, 1983), 65.

## PERHAPS

*Robert Kendall*

There are bookmarks lurking among the pages of these premises.  
 Locked desks in the well-thumbed corners.  
 I wander from coffee machine to coffee machine, hoping to spill  
 a little on the place where you find out who did it. Sometimes  
 I can feel the breathing of those curled up in bed  
 late at night under their reading lamps.  
 All they’ll have to go on is a coffee stain, a few dead chrysanthemums.  
 When I pluck one from a secretary’s vase, she looks up, startled.  
     Always give them something to suspect.  
 The deed was done too long ago for anyone to remember, yet  
 the curtains in our voices could open onto it at any moment.  
 A colleague tells me of a place up north, describing mountains  
     released  
 into the blue squares of the bedroom windows when she woke alone.  
 She smiles, pretending to conceal the empty space beside her in bed,  
 but we all leave our clues like five-dollar bills carefully  
 half-hidden on cabinets. If the inexorable, winding trail  
     passes us by, there’s no second chance.  
 She tells me she likes chrysanthemums. I glance out the window  
 and am surprised to see the people who phoned in sick emerging  
 from the train station with their suitcases. I turn back  
 and my colleague is searching my face.  
 At that moment I can hear someone pull a blanket closer  
 while continuing to read far into the night.

# THE LOXODROMIC CURVE

*A Study of "Lunar Caustic" by Malcolm Lowry*

*Norman Newton*

I began the *Volcano* in 1936, the same year having written, in New York, a novelette of about 100 pages about an alcoholic entitled *The Last Address* . . .

(Letter to Jonathan Cape, 2 January 1946)

**I**N JANUARY OF 1987 an exhibition entitled "The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985" opened the new wing of the Los Angeles gressive lovers of twentieth-century non-representational art, unaware of its great dependence on ideas usually considered, to use two much-abused words, "occultist" and "reactionary."<sup>1</sup>

A major point was made by the curator of the exhibition and amplified by the critic of *Time* magazine, Robert Hughes. It is the surprising concession of an argument hitherto advanced only by the enemies of the *avant-garde*:

The good news, one might say, is that early 20th century abstract art, long regarded by a suspicious public as basically meaningless and without a subject, turns out to have a very distinct and pervasive one — the last mutation, in fact, of religious experience in the visual arts. The other news is that spiritualism is so arcane and culturally eccentric that it may make the paintings look even less accessible than when they were seen as "pure" form. Yet the timing of the show is brilliant. Like late Imperial Rome, modern America is riddled with superstition, addicted to gurus, Sibyls and purveyors of every kind of therapeutic nostrum. One does not need a planchette to deduce that an exhibition which demonstrates as clearly as this one how great painters like Piet Mondrian and Wassily Kandinsky conceived the art in terms of thought forms, astral vibrations and hidden cosmic symbolism is bound to attract a far larger audience than any orthodox show of abstract art.

"The genesis and development of abstract art," argues the show's curator, Maurice Tuchman, in an enormous catalog comprising essays by him and 19 other contributors, ". . . reflects a desire to express spiritual, utopian or metaphysical ideas that cannot be expressed in traditional pictorial terms." One typical preoccupation was with the idea that the universe, instead of being the vast agglomeration of

distinct things perceived by science or realism, was a single, living entity, pervaded by “cosmic” energies; these revealed themselves in “vibrations”, the formative agents of all material shapes. Hence the desire to paint archetypal forms, so that Mondrian’s rectangles and Kandinsky’s floating circles are to be read as a kind of sacred geometry, pyramid power in paint. Hence, too, the peculiar use of light by artists like František Kupka — a shuddering lyric vibration that implies the sublimities of landscape without describing them. Then there is the imagery of duality and paired opposites — light-dark, vertical-horizontal — and of synesthesia, whereby colours correspond to musical tones, or textures to tastes and so on.<sup>2</sup>

Here we have evidence not of a sudden discovery but of the end of a period of critical falsification. It was among the critics and popularizers that we found statements that abstract art stood “for nothing but itself” or meant “whatever you want it to mean.” The artists themselves, when they wrote manifestos or gave interviews, almost always spoke, obscurely or clearly depending upon their verbal abilities, of representing deep or essential order, an order which could usually be interpreted in materialistic but sometimes in supernaturalistic terms. They were not interested only in sensually pleasing arrangements of colours and forms, a characteristic of merely ornamental art. The writings of Klee, Gabo, Malevich, Beckmann, Mondrian, Le Corbusier, Ozenfant, Moore, Boccioni, Kandinsky, Gleizes, and Metzinger, to refer only to essays found in an easily obtained book,<sup>3</sup> emphatically bear this out.

Thus artists capable of or interested in verbal explanations of their methods knew perfectly well — and still know — the connection between twentieth-century abstract or formalistic art and the perception of the universe as “a single, living entity, pervaded by ‘cosmic’ energies.” This gave them a link to ancient philosophical traditions, not necessarily “spiritual” at all (it is only critics and journalists who assume that “ancient” and “spiritual” are synonyms, a corollary of the idea that materialism is “progressive”). Thus we find the frankly materialist composer, Iannis Xenakis, who may still be considered a modern figure though his music is now heard less often than it once was, relating his philosophy to that of the Ionian Greeks and quoting (from 1927!) Bertrand Russell: “Perhaps the oddest thing about modern science is its return to pythagoricism.”<sup>4</sup>

Malcolm Lowry was an artist of his time, and his attitudes were largely formed in the late 1920s and 1930s. He was not a visual artist, though he had very sharp eyes, so he did not speak in terms of visual form and colour; he was not a composer, though he often closely approached musical composition in his methods, so he did not speak of the transformational geometries of music; he was not a film-maker, though he had a cinematic imagination, so he did not speak in terms of the permutational geometry of successive “shots” in a time-continuum. Above all he was not a critic and had none of the pedagogical instinct or affliction. His Pythagoreanism was expressed in verbal imagery, probably the least obvious way of setting out pure formal relationships.

Because he was an artist of his time he was, to a very considerable extent, a formalist. It was then, as it is now, almost impossible to create without thinking art problems through in formal terms, since all ideas of what art is were then as now in question.

The idea that "all is number" had a dual face for the artists of the period. There was that love of abstract form which is natural to artists; but there was fear of the relentless system-mongering which led to tyranny and dehumanization. Le Corbusier and Ozenfant could argue eloquently that "mechanical selection," the process which leads to the improvement of machines, is as inevitable and natural as the processes of biological evolution,<sup>5</sup> but their argument led naturally to the question, "What if the machines turn predators?" High popular science contributed, as it had since the Renaissance, to literary Utopias and anti-Utopias. Works such as Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and Zamyatin's *We*, anti-Utopias developed by writers with scientific or technical backgrounds (Huxley came from a renowned scientific family and Zamyatin was a naval engineer) had a strong impact. These books were novels, narratives set in the future. But the representation of idealized or "core" social developments in the context of the future is only one form of many. One may also represent these developments as conditions underlying present phenomena, in a network of core imagery as emotionally experienced, and this (it is a truism) is what many poets have done, particularly in idealized cityscapes in a context of hallucination, dream or nightmare.

ONE SUCH WORK IS Lowry's "novelette of about 100 pages," County Museum. The show must have startled many of the more naïvely pro-*The Last Address* or, as we now have it, *Lunar Caustic*. It is far more than a story about an alcoholic; it is a miniature anti-Utopia, and this gives it qualities of great resonance.

The story was one of those which Lowry could not leave alone, a sure indication of depth of reference in his case. He had actually commenced writing it in 1935, in a version which has disappeared. The novella we have now is a conflation, by Margerie Lowry and Earle Birney, of two separate treatments or versions, one called *The Last Address*, the other *Swinging the Maelstrom*. Birney and Mrs. Lowry performed as conscientious a job as possible of following Lowry's written and orally stated intentions without, as Margerie Lowry stated, "adding a line."<sup>6</sup> Thus the story presents obvious problems. Though the words are all Lowry's we cannot be sure that he would have cut and conflated its many versions into the form that we now have. Also, his intention of expanding it into a novel must be taken into account. We have three possible forms here: a short story, what might be a large section of a novel, and what may be the dense inner plan of a novel,

perhaps to be teased out, infilled with additional material and rearranged on a different armature.

It is also difficult to determine whether any of these three possible forms is to be considered as thoroughly worked out in terms of character, plot, and verisimilitude, and here we are faced with two more conundrums.

We must first consider the biographical background of the protagonist, Bill Plantagenet. He is, as always, a projection of Malcolm Lowry and as such is a powerful presence; but we are also asked to believe that he was once a professional musician, and this is difficult. Plantagenet has an incompleteness similar to that of the lawyer Ethan Llewellyn in *October Ferry to Gabriola*, another unfinished work tidied up by Margerie Lowry. In *Ultramarine* Lowry had been able to draw on his own experiences as a seaman, but after that book Lowry had the greatest difficulty in imagining the world of work. One may speculate that, if he had finished *Lunar Caustic* and *October Ferry* to his satisfaction, he would have solved or at least covered up the problem as he did in *Under the Volcano*. In that book the protagonist is an ex-Consul whose alcoholism prevents his having a sequentially ordered memory of the past and who is so overwhelmed by images of frightening and cosmic significance that the question of what he had done during his active life as a minor diplomat never comes up. The book is full of political secrets which may convince us that the Consul was once a close political observer and yet his ineffectiveness in practical matters is obvious. Thus he is no mere bumbler; but his practical incompetence excuses us from asking such questions as "What did the Consul do with passport applications?" (he probably left them lying on his desk) or "How did he cope with visiting British businessmen asking about Mexican trade regulations?" (he was probably out of the office). Since Plantagenet and Llewellyn were both alcoholics a somewhat similar approach might have been used, though repetition of the device might unmask it as an evasion. Yet, in its unfinished state, *Lunar Caustic* does present us with a figure obviously unacquainted with the details of a professional musician's life. All we have is Plantagenet's vague statement to Doctor Claggart: "I just couldn't seem to hold the boys together at all. Damn it, I don't know just what didn't happen. Of course there were complications about unions, income taxes, a price on our heads —." We do not even know if he really was incompetent as a band manager: the picture is not filled in.

Nevertheless, we can only deal with *Lunar Caustic* if we assume that it is Lowry's work, concentrating on the strong elements and refusing to hold him responsible for weak ones. The temptation is not to tackle *Lunar Caustic* at all; but it must be resisted because the story is important as a bridge between the method of *Ultramarine* and that of *Under the Volcano*. We can be sure, at least, that the basic form and movement of *Lunar Caustic* is close to the 1935 version. In revising or improving a poem or poetic work of organic nature it is simply impossible to add material

which is not at least implicitly present in the original version, for all that it may be quite buried there; the result would be incongruity. For that matter, we have the statement of Day, who has examined all the extant manuscripts and drafts of this work, that *The Last Address* and *Lunar Caustic* are closer to one another, thematically as well as tonally, than either is to the middle term, *Swinging the Maelstrom*.<sup>8</sup> *Swinging the Maelstrom* differed from the others (minor details of names and personal relationships aside) in having an affirmative ending: Plantagenet “decides to join the crew of a Spanish ship which is about to sail in hopes of bringing aid to the Republican forces in the Civil War.”<sup>9</sup>

*Lunar Caustic* resembles *Ultramarine* and the story “June the 30th, 1934” in its conscious modernism: its use of abrupt and streamlined transitions, its vision of the city as a geometrical inferno and its cinematic *montage* of silent-movie type. Again we encounter Lowry’s virtuosic adaptation of the rhetoric of the public or mass-media arts, which he at once loved and hated — loved for their possibilities, hated because they had become (as he encountered them in the U.S. and Canada) tools of the “Claggart-mind,” used for mass brainwashing and social engineering. In the following fragment each sentence is a shot:

He enters another tavern, where presently he is talking of people he had never known, of places he had never been. Through the open door he is aware of the hospital, towering up above the river. Near him arrogant bearded derelicts cringe over spittoons, and of these men he seems afraid. Sweat floods his face. From the depths of the tavern comes a sound of moaning, and a sound of ticking.<sup>10</sup>

In the passage to be quoted next, the objective and visual representation of hallucination, which might almost be filmed as a dream sequence and reminds us of passages from *Ultramarine*, mingles with a style closer to that of *Under the Volcano*, in which hallucinatory elements are represented in a more sophisticated verbal continuum which embodies as well as pictures:

He was awake. What had he done last night? Played the piano? Was it last night? Nothing at all, perhaps, yet remorse tore at his vitals. He needed a drink desperately. He did not know whether his eyes were closed or open. Horrid shapes plunged out of the blankness, gibbering, rubbing their bristles against his face, but he couldn’t move. Something had got under his bed, too, a bear that kept trying to get up. Voices, a prosopopoeia of voices, murmured in his ears, ebbed away, murmured again, cackled, shrieked, cajoled; voices pleading with him to stop drinking, to die and be damned. Thronged, dreadful shadows came closer, were snatched away. A cataract of water was pouring through the wall, filling the room. A red hand gesticulated, prodded him: over a ravaged mountain side a swift stream was carrying with it legless bodies yelling out of great eyesockets, in which were broken teeth. Music mounted to a screech, subsided. On a tumbled bloodstained bed in a house whose face was blasted away a large scorpion was gravely raping a one-armed Negress. His wife appeared, tears streaming down her face, pitying, only to be instantly transformed into Richard III, who sprang forward to smother him.<sup>11</sup>

The autobiographical factor is more important in *Lunar Caustic* than in anything else Lowry wrote, except the naturalistic shipboard scenes in *Ultramarine*. The action of the book is based on Lowry's own experiences in the Psychiatric Wing of Bellevue Hospital in New York and the characters are directly based on patients and staff he met there. For this reason, there is a great temptation to psychoanalyze Bill Plantagenet, in the hope of discovering why Lowry drank and to suggest, as it were, a posthumous cure. Thus we have David Benham, in an article which contains many useful observations, commenting on *The Last Address*, where the protagonist is called Lawhill:

*The Last Address* is an often terrifying account of a man trying to raise himself out of the pit of self-absorption, but it is a work which leaves the reader dissatisfied. One of the reasons, I think, is that the onus of blame for Lawhill's failure is placed largely on the world outside him. His rejection by a man as unsympathetic as Claggart constitutes an evasion of a central problem — the extent to which Lawhill is able to bring himself to accept responsibility for others. Consequently the questions we want to ask — to what extent he has chosen isolation in the past, and to what extent he is continuing to choose it in the present — can never be answered. And because we cannot determine the validity of his observations of the world around him, we can attach no value to his final non-solution.<sup>12</sup>

And Grace comments on *Lunar Caustic*:

By blaming external forces for his inability to play jazz, to love, or to act, Plantagenet (like Geoffrey Firmin) tries to ignore the fact that it is his own inertia that is destroying him.

Bill Plantagenet is a failure. . . .<sup>13</sup>

This is to confuse the character Lowry made out of himself with some idea of the man Lowry, certainly an easy thing to do. But I fail to see how Lawhill/Plantagenet may be said to have chosen isolation, to be self-absorbed or to be the victim of inertia. He is painfully responsive to others and is a man who has no defences against the world, rather than too many; his absorption in the inner turmoil of the outcasts in the psychiatric ward is immediate. He is isolated only in the respectable world. His mind is a chaos of wild impulses and images, rather than an inertia. His rejection of the offered cure is not a mere evasion of responsibility. The intent of the kind of psychiatric help he is offered in Bellevue — or rather would be offered if the institution were truly a hospital and not a zoo — is to make him a functioning member of a society he abhors. The question of whether there is any justification for his finding the society abhorrent does not come up in Claggart's interrogation; it is simply assumed that any such reasoning will be made up of false "defenses," arguments to permit him to continue escaping reality. But what if he is facing the reality which includes Claggart, and it is this which has driven him to alcoholism and near-madness? Claggart's idea of adjustment reminds one, to take an extreme example, of the norms of Soviet mental hospitals, where political dissidents are



automatically assumed to be mentally disturbed. The protagonist is to be adjusted, not to human society as it has existed for millenia, but to a rational model of society, a totalitarian or quasi-totalitarian Utopia.

I am certainly not suggesting that any conscientious psychiatrist, no matter how understanding, would give Lawhill/Plantagenet (or Lowry?) a sort of ticket as a holy madman, saying "he is more sane than we are" and sending him out to prophesy in the gutter until he dies. Adjustment to reality — and even a rational model, once it is in place, is real — is necessary; it is called "endurance" or "courage." But must the character accept this reality as good? What the character needs is a degree of comfort and assurance as strong as his vision of horror, the office of religion rather than psychiatry, I admit. There is something much deeper here than mere maladjustment. It is even possible to regard the protagonist's alcoholism as the result of a doomed and terribly mistaken attempt at self-medication. Plantagenet/Lawhill's alcoholism, in this interpretation, is not a defence of the ego; it is an attempt to construct an alternate ego in place of the one which has been shattered. The character has no ego because he has accepted, with the terrible literalness of a young poet who will have fame at whatever cost, all the implications of Rimbaud's *Je est un autre*. He has bifurcated his soul and sent the inner "I," unprotected, on a cosmic quest, leaving the social "I" an undirected shadow. He has attempted to harrow hell, confidently trusting in his poetic powers, and he has found that these were not enough; the poet as solar warrior has been conquered by the demons. (In this context, that of a fictional character, the question of whether the demons are real supernatural beings or not is left in abeyance.) Modern psychology has no techniques to deal with the plight of the poet-shaman who has fallen into the power of his familiars, who has lost his sanity by playing too recklessly with it.

## WHAT ARE THE NIGHTMARES of Bill Plantagenet?

Let us look first at the character of Dr. Claggart, a key figure in these nightmares, almost a presiding triune god:

Sweltering, delirious night telescoped into foetid day: day into night: he realized it was twilight though he had thought it dawn. Someone sat on his bed with a hand on his pulse, and forcing his eyes he saw a waving white form which divided into three, became two and finally came into focus as a man in a white gown.

The man — a doctor? — dropped Plantagenet's wrist. 'You've certainly got the shakes,' he said.<sup>14</sup>

Dr. Claggart is the spokesman of a society which Lowry regards, rightly or wrongly, as totalitarian. He is an apparently benign American Anglo-Saxon version of those inquisitors we find in prison dramas set in the Soviet Union: he is the

voice of the party. The attitude he represents is so common in North America that it impresses us as normal and sane; Lowry saw it as hellish. Claggart's coldness is not a matter of necessary professional detachment: he is ideologically armed against the humanity of his patients (Claggart also has a bifurcated soul) and there is no salvation for them unless they accept his world-view. As Benham says, "He never admits that Lawhill's ideas have any kind of objectivity; they arise only from 'his own state'."<sup>15</sup> Indeed, it is worse than that. Claggart proceeds in two well-defined stages of the brainwashing procedure. First he throws all Plantagenet/Lawhill's arguments against the society of which Bellevue is the mad microcosm back in his face, treating them as mere justifications and excuses thrown up by his inner state of extreme alienation (though the character is possessed by the demons of others, not alienated). In this process, Plantagenet/Lawhill is being robbed of individuality. It is never for a moment conceded that he may have observed something which is objectively true, or that his view of the world can be anything but sick and distorted. Thus, Plantagenet/Lawhill is being pressed into the mould of a medical type, a case, and as such he is considered a sort of animal undirected by rationality. In the second stage, Plantagenet/Lawhill must accept this imposed identity and consent to be remade, to be refashioned from a case into a human being. There is a tortuous but effective logic here which by making all Plantagenet/Lawhill's perceptions invalid robs him of personality: he is only a twisted individual and thus his perceptions have no general validity; but as a twisted individual he is a psychological type or case and thus has no true individuality. The sum of this is that his perceptions have no validity and he is not an individual.

Whether this is a medically legitimate way to treat insane persons I cannot say; applied to sane persons it amounts to induced insanity and is a form of brainwashing. Plantagenet/Lawhill is an alcoholic and failed shaman and is thus in deep crisis, but he is not insane.

The procedure is well summarized in the following exchange. The protagonist is about to be released and is thus in no danger from Claggart; but Claggart is here revealing his technique:

"But good Christ, Doctor, in this place the people, the patients are resigned, resigned! Can't you see the horror, the horror of man's uncomplaining acceptance of his own degeneration? Because many who are supposed to be mad here, as opposed to the ones who are drunks, are simply people who perhaps once saw, however confusedly, the necessity for change in themselves, for rebirth, that's the word."

"If you're talking about yourself, all this is very helpful. If not, I don't think you have a grasp of the facts."<sup>16</sup>

Thus Plantagenet/Lawhill is supposed to be incapable of objective observation: even if what he says appears to be valid, it is objectively only a symptom of his illness.

The truth of Plantagenet/Lawhill's criticism of the hospital, which is pretty obviously Lowry's as well, is not really under discussion here, since it would take us too far outside the framework of the story. It could well be argued, for example, that those who cannot take care of themselves — hopeless alcoholics or the insane — must be treated, no matter how kindly, as children or idiots, since, in social terms, that is what they are. We might also argue that when they were poverty-stricken they were almost always, in the past, treated as such or even as animals, and that Bellevue is a great improvement over Bedlam. Claggart implicitly makes both these points. But this is not what Lowry is concerned with. The portrayal of the city, a microcosmic image of the society, as a hellish *system* means that these unfortunates have been created by the system, which has also created Claggart as their jailor. Lowry seems to be trying to put his finger on a form of totalitarianism hidden in "the American system," a totalitarianism which has not been given any other name and perhaps needs no other because the very word "system," so commonly used, implies a rigidly directed society.

The idea that United States society is totalitarian reminds us of the New Left of the 1960s, which used words like *Amerika* with portentous insistence but never defined precisely what they meant. Lowry had many attitudes in common with the New Left, simply because they had many attitudes in common with New Romantic anarchists, Trotskyites, and other radicals of the English 1930s, a number of whose ideas they had specifically inherited. But the New Left also owed a good deal to one of Lowry's favourite authors, Jack London. London's *The Iron Heel*, a powerful and prophetic book despite the author's awkward and melodramatic verbal style, depicts a peculiarly American form of totalitarianism. London pays homage to Marx but he does not regard *Das Kapital* as a sacred text; he owes as much to Herbert Spencer and Comte. In other words, London had devoted some attention to the Utopians of capitalism and had absorbed their message. As a result his thesis is, from the socialist point of view, ambiguous and depressing. Socialism may come and should come; but an alliance between state power and monopoly capital, supported by a "scientific religion" using the terminology and forms of Christianity, is capable of lasting for centuries. This alliance, he predicts, will reach perfected form in the United States, which will become master of the world.

When I speak of a "debt" in this case I speak of a largely unacknowledged one. The New Left of the 1960s had the most obvious American and Anglo-Saxon roots — in the American socialist tradition, in the "Wobblies," in the "muck-rakers" and "trust-busters," in all the left-wing thought which London summed up before the First World War. Yet it presented a picture of ideological confusion (just as Lowry's political thought does to some) because the accepted political language of the day was generally Eurocentric, and left-wing political language in particular was Marxist in vocabulary and centred on Russia or China. American and Anglo-Saxon roots, deep as they went, were not formally acknowledged; the language

was that of the international left. Thus we have a curious vagueness and ambiguity of language, in which terms seem undefined.

THE DIFFICULTY OF DEFINITION is pretty well illustrated by the following quotation from Norman Mailer's *Armies of the Night*, whose vague but strident hysteria witnesses to both real fear and inability to identify the cause of the fear:

Brood on that country who expresses our will. She is America, once a beauty of magnificence unparalleled, now a beauty with a leprous skin. She is heavy with child — no one knows if legitimate — and languishes in a dungeon whose walls are never seen. Now the first contractions of her fearsome labor begin — it will go on; no doctor exists to tell the hour. It is only known that false labor is not likely on her now, no, she will probably give birth, and to what? — the most fearsome totalitarianism the world has ever known? Or can she, poor giant, tormented lovely girl, deliver the babe of a new world brave and tender, artful and wild? Rush to the locks. God writhes in his bonds. Rush to the locks. Deliver us from our curse. For we must end on the road to that mystery where courage, death, and the dream of love give promise of sleep.<sup>17</sup>

One of the difficulties of definition must lie in the fact that in the United States all political movements, totalitarian or not, use the language of liberty, from the Ku Klux Klan and the Aryan Nations to the Communists, with the Democrats and Republicans in between. Such is the uniformity of vocabulary that it is simply impossible to detect an overtly totalitarian philosophy. Even traffickers in drugs and pornography defend themselves in the language of civil-rights groups. Proponents of nightmarish genetic experiments, hitherto practised only by Nazi scientists in the secrecy of the extermination camps, appear on television with the style of the caring doctors of the soap operas. In the work-place, which is the real political arena, and in the market-place which is its extension, the language is that of efficiency and progress. The result, paradoxically, is one of the most secretive and evasive political systems the world has ever seen, a sort of ideological Sicily where the government is underground, or submarine like Melville's own Leviathan, the white whale, who appears as a whale-shaped airplane in *Lunar Caustic*. In the following passage, which must be read with care, the white seaplane coalesces with a point O in the protagonist's mind. This point is like the point of Hilliot's death as an old man in *Ultramarine*. In pseudo-spatial terms it is the centre of the whirlpool; in the Dunnian geometry of *Lunar Caustic* (because this story is, like *Ultramarine* and *Under the Volcano*, a Dunnian construction) it is the point where stacked worlds meet. It is also a point of symbolic death, since (returning to the maelstrom image) Plantagenet/Lawhill is sucked into it and ejected into the outside world; it ends the hospital sequence:

There was a furious crash of thunder and simultaneously Plantagenet felt the impact of the plane, and whale, upon his mind. While metamorphosis nudged metamorphosis, a kind of order, still preserved within his consciousness, and enclosing this catastrophe, exploded itself into the age of Kalowsky again, and into the youth of Garry, who both now seemed to be spiralling away from him until they were lost, just as the seaplane was actually tilting away, swaying up to the smashed sky. But while that part of him only a moment before in possession of the whole, the ship, was turning over with disunion of hull and masts uprooted falling across her decks, another faction of his soul, relative to the ship but aware of these fantasies and simultaneities as it were from above, knew him to be screaming against the renewed thunder and saw the attendants closing in on him, yet saw him too, as the plane seethed away northwards like the disembodied shape of the very act of darkness itself, passing beyond the asylum walls melting like wax, and following in its wake, sailing on beyond the cold coast of the houses and the factory chimneys waving farewell — farewell —<sup>18</sup>

In New York the point O of the mind has become a darting *mechanical* point. The political ambiguity of a machine-based culture in which hope and terror have become one has fastened on the depths of the mind. This perpetual ambiguity — actually a binarism — also results in a twisting, a distortion of the sensual level of life. The New York of *Lunar Caustic* is a city perpetually shaking itself apart, caught in a moment of disaster which, because it is timeless and frozen, parodies order:

... he saw his dream of New York crystallised there for an instant, glittering illuminated by a celestial brilliance, only to be reclaimed by dark, by the pandemonium of an avalanche of falling coal which, mingling with the cries of the insane speeding the *Providence* on its way, coalesced in his brain with what it conjured of the whole mechanic calamity of the rocking city, with the screams of suicides, of girls tortured in hotels for transients, of people burning to death in vice dens, through all of which a thousand ambulances were screeching like trumpets.

He looked out over the huge nervous city above which the last blimp of the day was trailing an advertisement for Goodyear Tyres while far above that in still merciless but declining sunlight one word was unrolling itself from the wake of an invisible plane: Fury. He was afraid. He was afraid to leave the doctor and go back to the ward. He was afraid — “The horrors,” he said abruptly. “Well — do you see New York? That’s where they are. They’re out there waiting, the horrors of war — all of them — already — and all that delirium, like primitives, like primitives, like Christ’s descent into hell. And the tactile conscience, the lonely soul falling featherless into the abyss! I daresay you don’t know what I’m talking about.”<sup>19</sup>

On the level of language, not one character in the story is capable of making a truly coherent, effective, and meaningful statement: even Plantagenet/Lawhill and Claggart, educated men, confront one another with brilliant but disorganized images or ineffectual pleading on the one side and tired professional jargon on the other.

*Lunar Caustic* is a horribly sardonic vision of what has become of America. The

world which Melville once represented for the protagonist has become a jittery hell, a madhouse, a doomed ship, and Claggart, scientist turned jailor, is its master. Claggart is neither kind nor cruel, but a keeper of the half-human, with a tolerance which is only indifference (as one might be gentle with an animal). The vocabulary of love becomes, in his mouth, a denatured jargon: "Pity. I'd like to help you, if I could — you're an interesting case."<sup>20</sup>

Yet before he has his frustrating and depressing talk with him, Plantagenet thinks that Claggart perhaps has the cure for a "mischievous world":

My God, he thought suddenly, why am I here, in this doleful place? And without quite knowing how this had come about, he felt that he had voyaged downward to the foul core of his world; here was the true meaning underneath all the loud inflamed words, the squealing headlines, the arrogant years. But here too, equally, he thought, looking at the doctor, was perhaps the cure, the wisdom and vision, more patient, still. . . . And goodness was here too — he glanced at his two friends — yes, by what miracle did it come about that compassion and love were here too?

And he wondered if the doctor ever asked himself what point there was in adjusting poor lunatics to a mischievous world over which merely more subtle lunatics exerted almost supreme hegemony, where neurotic behaviour was the rule, and there was nothing but hypocrisy to answer the flames of evil, which might be the flames of Judgment, which were already scorching nearer and nearer. . . .<sup>21</sup>

There is a form, if an odious form, of order in the city; it is a binary order, the order of "jittering." The word occurs again and again, with words of parallel meaning: "his mind seemed to flicker senselessly"; "even Nature herself is shot through with jitteriness"; "the old men who were considered too jittery or too obscene to eat with the others"; "a medicable case of the jitters"; "I was also very jittery"; "something like a hope flickered in him"; "the whole mechanic calamity of the rocking city." Such imagery connects naturally with the shakes of the drunkard; but to assume that the protagonist is simply projecting his diseased condition on the world would be to take Claggart's point of view. The world truly shares his condition. Another reflection of the binary hell is found in the following passage, where we see one half of a binary pair forever robbed of its complement:

Where were all the good honest ships tonight, he wondered, bound for all over the world? Lately it had seemed to him they passed more rarely. Only nightmare ships were left in this stream. All at once, watching the strange traffic upon it, he fancied that the East River was as delirious, as haunted as the minds that brooded over it, it was a mad river of grotesque mastless steamers, of flat barges slipping along silent as water snakes, a river of railroad boats the shape of army tanks with their askew funnels appearing to have been built on to outriggers, or they were strange half-ships, preposterously high out of the water with naked propellers thrashing like tuna fish, with single masts out of alignment. This world of the river was one where everything was uncompleted while functioning in degeneration, from which as from Garry's barge, the image of their own shattered or unformed souls was cast back at them. Yes, it was as if all complementary factors had been withdrawn from this

world! Its half-darkness quivered with the anguish of separation from the real light; just as in his nightmare, the tortoise crawled in agony looking for its shell, and nails hammered held nothing together, or one-winged birds dropped exhausted across a maniacal, sunless moon. . . .<sup>22</sup>

Beneath the surface layer of this strange civilization, which represents, at the same time, chaos and the most rigid and simple (binary) order, there are strange operations and machinations going on — bloody yet antiseptic, almost beautiful in their toy-like neatness and manipulating all four quarters of the cosmos:

Plantagenet suddenly caught sight, through the bars, of four operations being performed simultaneously in the wing opposite in high sunlit rooms of glass, so that it seemed as though the front of that part of the hospital had suddenly become open, revealing, as in the cabin plans of the 'Cunard' or in charts of the human anatomy itself, the activities behind the wraith of iron or brick or shin; and it was strange to watch these white-masked figures working behind the glass that now glittered like a mirage. At the same time the whole scene that lay before them suddenly, like the looming swift white hand of a traffic policeman, reeled towards him; he felt he had only to stretch out his fingers to touch the doctor working on the right side of the table sewing up the incision, or the nurse plastering and binding the patient or placing the blanket over the body; and it seemed to him that all these dressings and redressings in these hours of north light were at the same time being placed, torn away and replaced, on a laceration of his own mind.<sup>23</sup>

This is the world of Dr. Claggart, of the Secret Masters of pop anti-capitalism of both left and right, of the great hand which from time to time arbitrarily removes the puppets in the drivelling Punch and Judy show which is put on for the entertainment of the inmates. Beneath the jittery chaos of New York, which is America, is a cosmos uniting a world of technology, science, and logic, a world in which healing and torture are horribly one.

It is, if anything is, the dual image of what might be an American totalitarianism, a system without inflammatory political slogans and mass rallies because it does not need them. An inner trinitarian world of technology emanated by science, which is in turn emanated by the pure and merciless logic of the machine. An outer world which is chaotic in appearance but which really has the orderly but terrible geometrical form of the spiral which is at once creative and destructive — the upward-moving spiral of exponential growth, the downward-moving spiral of the maelstrom. The system is not abstractly or philosophically analyzed but presented to us in pictures and images. We may recognize it as a form of "Totalitarian Pragmatism,"<sup>24</sup> where values are defined by how efficiently they work, where the idea of efficient work is defined by the machine and where the almost Platonically ideal machine is an immense structure of mathematical logic which, like the knife of the surgeon, can heal or kill with equal ease.

Lowry is not a sociologist, even a pop one; but surely the "more subtle lunatics" who exert "almost supreme hegemony" over his "mischievous world," to refer to an

earlier quotation, are not politicians, who are anything but subtle. They are a social group of education and power. This is the first sketch of the conspiratorial, hidden world of *Under the Volcano*, where the world is ruled by a power-mongering consortium of great businessmen, scientists who are really magicians, and their armed hirelings. In this world, political slogans, even the Communist and Fascist ones for which Lowry had a certain forgivable weakness, considering the time, mean nothing at all. The only explicitly political statement in the story is made by Mr. Kalowsky and it is utterly inane:

“Wake up, you brains! Brains of the world unite! My experience in the hospital is that the workers are against us more than the capitalists. I don’t believe in God. I talk too much Bob Ingersoll wisdom and that’s why Police Megoff wants to lock me up. Jesus Christ! If the workers will wake up and buy brains I won’t need to go to the hospital! Give the patients nicer to eat! Listen, once they pulled three teeth out of me, out of my mouth. That’s the capitalist system. I should have knocked the three teeth out of him.”<sup>25</sup>

Lowry’s vision of New York/America is certainly a New Romantic one. We may find analogies with the vision of London in David Gascoyne’s *Night Thoughts* and there seems to be an echo of Blake’s *America* in

... their lips would burst with a sound, partly a cheer and partly a wailing shriek, like some cry of the imprisoned spirit of New York itself, that spirit haunting the abyss between Europe and America and brooding like futurity over the Western Ocean.<sup>26</sup>

There are also analogies with the darker side of Hart Crane’s *The Bridge*:

The phonographs of Hades in the brain  
Are tunnels that re-wind themselves, and love  
A burnt match skating in a urinal —

No imitation or unassimilated influence is implied here; indeed Lowry’s vision of New York is also akin to that found in some Spanish poets he had almost certainly not read when he wrote this story: to Lorca (*Poeta en Nueva York*), to Alberti (*New York* in the collection *13 Bandas y 48 Estrellas*), to León Felipe (*Elegía* in the collection *Versos y Oraciones de Caminante, Nueva York*). New York was simply one of the typical subjects of the late 1920s and 1930s, the “city of the future.” This image was evoked by a recent show (December 1986) in the Brooklyn Museum, also reviewed by *Time*’s Robert Hughes, whom I quoted earlier. His review recapitulates many of the themes already discussed.

The concise and mighty industrial-based forms of American building, conceived by architects from James Bogardus in the 1850’s to Louis Sullivan in the 1890’s and by the engineers of a technology whose emblematic climax was John and Washington Roebling’s Brooklyn Bridge, were among the prototypes of European avant-garde thinking before and after World War I. Even to the Russian con-



structivists, “Americanism” was something infinitely desirable: it stood for electricity, progress, a society knit together and made transparent by fast communication . . .

Their country, wrote the photographer Paul Strand in 1922, was the “supreme altar of the new God”, a trinity formed by “God the Machine, Materialistic Empiricism the Son, and Science the Holy Ghost.” Its factories, thought Strand’s colleague Charles Sheeler, “are our substitutes for religious expression” . . .

. . . welcome to the dynamo, to the total plan, the slick shell housing, the fins and flanges, the didactic sheen of stainless steel, the Aztec-style bracelet of imperishable Bakelite . . .

. . . the skyscraper multiplied the site, extruding a patch of earth into a stack of pure property, the abstract universal sign of capitalism. The standardization of its floors invoked the image of the machine, like the use of bodies as mechanical parts in Busby Berkeley’s choreography or the precisely drilled production-line kicks of the Rockettes. Its soaring shafts, tapering setbacks and elaborate stacking (for this was the age of Rockefeller Center, not of the banal glass box) hinted at vastly over-sized Mayan temples; the contrast between glittering surface and deep wells and slots of shadow suggested exuberance and secrecy conjoined, the “metropolitan style” of Big Business. . . .<sup>27</sup>

LOWRY’S SENSE OF CONSTRUCTION and form has been seriously underestimated by those who have considered his early works. Sherrill Grace, it must be said, is a notable exception: in *The Voyage That Never Ends* she sets out with admirable clarity analyses which less confident critics would have enveloped in a maze of defensive ambiguities. This sense is fully apparent in *Lunar Caustic* and may be taken to be his, not the editors’.

The novella is dominated by two kinds of movement, the binary flicker or “jitter” noted earlier and a slow circling movement, most vividly represented by the treadmill shuffling of the inmates around the ward. This formal component, with the colour, tautness, and vivid imagery of the language, make it a true poem. A rather remarkable poem, one might add, because the naturalistic component of the story — and this is pure old-fashioned naturalism of the “Lower Depths” variety, reminding us of Zola, Dreiser, or Gorky — is fully realized. Lowry considered it a “masterwork,” undoubtedly with the proposed final version in mind. The present composite version cannot be called that, because it is incomplete in parts; but it contains a good many masterly passages and shows mastery in its formal outline. It is an extraordinary feat to combine poetic imagery of the most interior and in some cases avant-garde kind with such gritty naturalism, and one particularly rare in English-language literature. The novella is remarkable on this level alone.<sup>28</sup>

As indicated earlier, *Lunar Caustic* is, in its treatment of time and in its inner geometry, transitional between *Ultramarine* and *Under the Volcano*. The word “transitional” is not meant to imply that it is of secondary interest; the scheme, for

all our uncertainty about the elements of fine shading which would have emerged if Lowry had finished the story, is a beautiful one. In essence, the structure is musical, what is called, technically, "expanded ABA form."

The first of its three parts finds Plantagenet leaving a dockside tavern and gradually working his way towards the hospital. Here the main thematic elements are introduced: the image of the sea (the Drunken Sailor), the image of degraded and wasted humanity (the ashcan into which he throws a bottle, the alley, the cat which has lost an eye in a battle), the image of postponed death (the woman in black who keeps trying to post a letter, accompanied by a clanging bell), the image of the combination or confusion of eternal and mechanistic values (the heavenly wind blowing in the Elevated), the image of official propaganda and falsifications of truth (quoted headlines) and the image of profanation of the holy (Plantagenet's drinking in the church). This first part ends with a hell-harrowing image in Rimbaudian and also Pythagorean terms: he is to knit father (Kalowsky) and son (Garry) through himself, thus healing the horror of three by making a trinity:

"I want to hear the song of the Negroes", he roars, "Veut-on que je disparaisse, que je plonge, à la recherche de l'anneau. . . I am sent to save my father, to find my son, to heal the eternal horror of three, to resolve the immedicable horror of opposites!"<sup>29</sup>

The central part — the part set in the hospital — freely develops and expands these themes.

The third and concluding part begins with a recapitulation of the motive which ended the first, the reference to the "dithering crack" of the hospital door. Plantagenet is again in the outside world. In the third section the themes of the first are repeated in a different context and with different colouring.

*The Theme of the Sea (Drunken Sailor).* He buys a book of postage-stamps depicting exotic scenes from around the world and sends them up to Garry. He is not drunk but he is carrying a bottle.

*The Image of Degraded and Wasted Humanity.* The "faces of the patients were swarming about him"; he throws his bottle into an ashcan but changes his mind and retrieves it.

*Drinking in the Church.* He repeats this action.

*The Woman in Black.* She is kneeling in the church.

*The Elevated.* Again he stops to drink under the Elevated.

*The Headlines.* These are replaced by posters: "Business as usual during alterations: Broken Blossoms: Dead End . . ."

In the end he returns to the tavern from which he started. In the washroom,

. . . he finished his bottle. Glancing round for somewhere to put it he noticed an obscene sketch of a girl chalked on the wall. For some reason, suddenly enraged, he hurled the bottle against this drawing, and in the instant he drew back to escape the fragments of glass, it seemed to him that he had flung that bottle against all the

indecent, the cruelty, the hideousness, the filth and the injustice in the world. At the same time an atrocious vision of Garry flashed across his consciousness, and an atrocious fear. "It was only a little scratch," he had said.<sup>30</sup>

In other words, his symbolic act of decency is horribly suspect. Is he protesting the degradation of woman set out in the obscene sketch or is he "subconsciously" attacking the image in the sexually frenzied spirit of Garry, who had murdered a girl? No shred of decency is to be left him. The omniscient Claggart has conquered him and he is "being watched."

Returning to the saloon he picked out a secluded place to sit, where they brought him whisky.

But feeling he was being watched, even there, he moved later, drink in hand, to the very obscurest corner of the bar, where, curled up like an embryo, he could not be seen at all.<sup>31</sup>

It may be seen that quasi-musical ABA form offers here none of the comforting resolutions that musical form is usually associated with. The repetitions, variations, and transformations on which it is based evoke the circularity of despair.<sup>32</sup>

One of Plantagenet's statements to Claggart, referring to a "loxodromic curve," appears to be a bit of erudition without context, as if he (or Lowry) merely wished to impress Claggart (or us) with his knowledge. Claggart begins:

"How is it that you remember these things and yet forget — or pretend to forget — your own identity? Why have you never told us anything concrete about yourself? Why did you believe, or pretend to believe, you were a ship? . . . And if you don't forget, why the bogus brainstorm? If it is bogus."

"Why — I tell you this pained forgetfulness — somebody said it was like rain, and he remembered much of it — is the converse of trying to remember what happened the night after one has been really drunk."

"So, there have been occasions?"

"Well, Doctor, you remember everything up to a point of that conversation about Chagall or Hiroshige or the loxodromic curve or the marines; then everything is blank and the future drones disaster and there is only remorse left for the past, which is a romantic passion. . . . But you see I remember well the last few days before I came here and I was then drinking heavily, I remember every moment, every slow lurch, every place where I welched ten cents, every evil face, each bright one. Notices on walls, names of taverns, conversations about baseball, or heaven. Every man I met, whether paralytic or not, stands out in my mind with the clarity of a Durer. It is only of before that time that the memory is an abyss, like an imagined look backward before birth."<sup>33</sup>

There are purely formal ways of explaining the loxodromic curve, but probably the navigational definition is most appropriate. The following would not have earned me many points in one of the old Admiralty exams; but Lowry's use of the term is metaphorical rather than exact.

A loxodromic curve is a line like that traced by a ship when its course is so set that it cuts all the meridians of longitude at the same angle. It is in effect the same

kind of line we would get if we laid a ruler diagonally across a map on the Mercator projection. In this projection the real shape of the earth is distorted, a globe being laid out on a flat plane, and the meridians of longitude are represented as straight parallel lines criss-crossing the horizontal lines of latitude.

It would seem strange to call a “straight-line” course a curve but that is what it is in fact, that is, on the surface of the earth. This is because the earth is, again, a globe not a flat plane, and the meridians of longitude actually curve in towards the poles. Thus a ship preserving a constant angle to meridians of longitude is actually describing a curve.

The interesting thing about the curve thus described by our ship is that it is a portion of a geometrical or logarithmic spiral, sometimes called the “*spira mirabilis*” because of its beauty and widespread occurrence in art-works and natural forms.

There is another use of the word “loxodromic.” Loxodromic sailing, also called “oblique sailing” is used by ships sailing into the wind. Ships can only sail in the general direction of the wind by a series of tacks, first at an angle to starboard (right), then at an angle to port (left). (This is simply due to the mechanical inter-relation of sail-angle and wind-direction, which we need not go into.) If we imagine a line drawn to the ship from the point of the horizon the wind is blowing from, it can be seen that the ship is moving forward by zigzagging to each side of this line. In the days of sail the navigating officer had to determine by plane trigonometry the best angle his tacks should take on either side of this imaginary line of wind-direction, the best angle being that which would enable the ship to make the best speed through the water. He also had to determine, again by plane trigonometry, the distance the ship should run on each tack before it came about to the other tack. This was called oblique or loxodromic sailing.

Lowry, in his reference to the loxodromic curve, is giving us a clue to the structure and implications of his story. We do not have to take up this clue to enjoy the story, but taking it up does increase our appreciation.

“Loxodromic sailing” is reflected with considerable humour (Lowry is always throwing erudite or technical jokes into the most hair-raising or gloomy prose) in the second sentence of the story:

Soon he is running into a storm and tacking from side to side, frantically trying to get back. Now he will go into any harbour at all.<sup>34</sup>

Not only that, but the entire first section is a process of “tacking” towards the hospital:

Outside, again the pilgrimage starts, he wanders from saloon to saloon as though searching for something, but always keeping the hospital in sight, as if the saloons were only points on his circumference.<sup>35</sup>

In the hospital scenes, the zig-zag movements of tacking are referred to from time to time in descriptions of Plantagenet's mental state. For example, he identifies himself with a character in the puppet show: ". . . now he became Caspar, dodging absurdly from one side of the stage to the other."<sup>36</sup> And of course he is "pretending to be a ship" according to Claggart<sup>37</sup> and his responses to Claggart's questions are a form of mental tacking, in that they are continually evasive or deflecting.

In a more general sense the pattern of straight-line or zig-zag movement is continually set against that of circular movement, the circle here reminding us of the circle of the horizon. The patient spends most of the day circling the ward in a sort of grid pattern: thus any purposeful movement in the ward must follow either a straight line or a zig-zag. The "snakes and wheels" of *delirium tremens* are referred to. In the storm sequence the zig-zag of lightning and the cyclonic movement of the wind ("one leaf was spinning, another spiralled downwards") are both suggested, with a secondary evocation of the omnipresent maelstrom, which is a whirlpool or 3-D spiral.<sup>38</sup>

In Plantagenet's remark Chagall, Hiroshige, and "the marines" are associated with the loxodromic curve. The "spira mirabilis" is a constant of the visual arts, and forms derived from it are universal. It would thus be pointless to distinguish any two artists as noted for its use, and since it would be difficult to imagine two artists less like each other than the Russian Jew Chagall and the Japanese Hiroshige it would seem that their names are paired to suggest polarities, between which almost all art may be found. As to "the marines," the insignia of the United States Marines depicts, in the flat, a world globe set in front of an anchor. The shank of the anchor is invisible behind the globe, but clearly cuts across it at an angle of forty-five degrees. This would not be a loxodromic curve, but a great circle (I am not sure whether Lowry was unaware of this or was shifting to a reference to the circle).

Lowry seems to have been fond of the image of tacking or zig-zag motion inside a turning circle. We also find it in *Under the Volcano*, which is generally governed by the turning circles of time, but where the young Geoffrey Firmin first appears singing with the young Jacques Laruelle:

Oh we allll WALK ze wibberlee wobberlee WALK  
 And we alll TALK ze wibberlee wobberlee TALK  
 And we alll WEAR wibberlee wobberlee TIES  
 And-look-at-all-ze-pretty-girls-with-wibberlee-wobberlee eyes. Oh  
 We allll SING ze wibberlee wobberlee SONG  
 Until ze day is dawning,  
 And-we-all-have-zat-wibberlee-wobberlee-wobberlee-wibberlee-  
   wibberlee-wobberlee-feeling  
 In ze morning.<sup>39</sup>

The reference to the Marines and a hidden reference to their insignia in a sort of geometrical pun is not surprising, because Lowry was fascinated by all varieties

of heraldry and public signs and symbols. How specifically it is to be related to his image of pretotalitarian and quasi-totalitarian America, that "mischievous world" almost totally controlled by "subtle lunatics," is not clear, because the only other military reference is a pun of nomenclature. Claggart is of course the name of the brutal naval officer in Melville's *Billy Budd*. However, this analogy is not carried through except in terms of the story's general references to Melville, and in any case Claggart's ship is a British one. New York is an image of the chaos of war, but in a general sense, and we do not know if the seaplane shaped like a whale is a military or civilian craft.

Certainly, the choice of a single symbol to represent at once disinterested beauty, science, and world-dominating military force is common in Lowry and particularly in *Under the Volcano*, where such images occur throughout the book. Such composite symbols represent the theme, central to his work, of "the abomination standing in the Holy Place." The idea, more fully developed in *Under the Volcano*, is that modern civilization, for all its beauty and splendour (because Lowry could see such qualities in machine-based culture), is a profanation of the natural order, perverting deep knowledge of the cosmos to the uses of power and greed. Such a civilization inevitably destroys its Billy Budds, its pure and gentle souls, persons such as we may imagine Kalowsky and Garry to have been before the crimes which caused them to be committed.

I have called this essay "the loxodromic curve," though the phrase occurs only in an aside, because such mathematical images refer to a constant in Lowry's work, his idea of the work of the writer as analogous to that of the engineer, architect, or other technical worker.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For a wholehearted attack on avant-garde artists in general, see *Mona Lisa's Moustache*, by T. H. Robsjohn-Gibbins (New York: Knopf, 1947). The book is tiresome and coarsely argued, but makes some telling points nonetheless.

<sup>2</sup> *Time* (Jan. 12, 1987), 59.

<sup>3</sup> See *Modern Artists on Art*, ed. Robert L. Herbert (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1964).

<sup>4</sup> Iannis Xenakis, *Musique, Architecture* (Tournai: Casterman, 1971), 73.

<sup>5</sup> Herbert, 64.

<sup>6</sup> Douglas Day, *Malcolm Lowry, A Biography* (London: Oxford, 1974), 191.

<sup>7</sup> *Psalms and Songs* (New York: New American Library, 1975), 266.

<sup>8</sup> Day, 202.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Psalms and Songs*, 260.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 263.

- <sup>12</sup> In George Woodcock, ed., *Malcolm Lowry: The Man and His Work* (Vancouver: Univ. of British Columbia Press, 1973), 61-62.
- <sup>13</sup> Sherrill Grace, *The Voyage That Never Ends* (Vancouver: Univ. of British Columbia Press, 1982), 32.
- <sup>14</sup> *Psalms and Songs*, 265.
- <sup>15</sup> Woodcock (ed.), 59.
- <sup>16</sup> *Psalms and Songs*, 290.
- <sup>17</sup> Norman Mailer, *The Armies of the Night* (New York and Toronto: Signet, 1968), 320.
- <sup>18</sup> *Psalms and Songs*, 303-04.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 302, 289.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 286.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 279.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 299.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 270-71.
- <sup>24</sup> I do not mean, by the phrase "Totalitarian Pragmatism," to pass judgment on a philosophical school, something I am not equipped to do. I use the word "pragmatism" in the simple and vulgar sense, as it is defined in the dictionary. What I am trying to isolate is a strong but historically imprecise sense of a particularly North American form of totalitarianism which is a constant undercurrent in the literature of the 1920s and 1930s and is especially strong in the vision of Malcolm Lowry. This sense breaks through into inchoate political action in the New Left of the 1960s. The system is variously defined as an inner or secret control mechanism (by both fringe communists and right-wing radicals) or, more respectably, as a trend towards a system of control which may be realized but can be forestalled by rational action. External signs of this totalitarian system in the prewar period are links between American big business and European dictatorships of both left and right, various "speedup" mass-production methods which treat the worker as a machine, such as those of Frederick Taylor and Charles Bedaux (cf. Chaplin's *Modern Times*), and the growing sophistication of a business philosophy which sees man as an exclusively economic unit and which may truly be called a philosophy because it shows the capacity to absorb and adapt ideas on the highest mathematical and logical level.
- As to the use of the word "pragmatism," if any specifically North American form of totalitarianism is ever erected on the basis of "artificial intelligence," then the system of universal logic developed by Charles Peirce, to whom we owe the very word "pragmatism," will certainly be seen as a precursor.
- <sup>25</sup> *Psalms and Songs*, 300-01.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 262.
- <sup>27</sup> *Time* (Dec. 22, 1986), 46-47.
- <sup>28</sup> As an example of the beautifully paced prose of this story, read the paragraphs "Looking down from the high buildings . . . Farewell, farewell, life!" Note how this section builds by a "swinging" process: long periods followed by short; closely observed naturalistic and non-evocative descriptions followed by descriptions heavy with personification, allusion and other rhetorical devices; images of decay followed by images of hope; until in the end the whole binary process evaporates in mist, and the disparate parts of the city become smoky disembodied fragments in a com-

position of formal beauty — the image of death turning into a delicate and almost pretty “farewell to life.” This is not a detachable flight of fantasy: it is a gentle and insinuating presentation of the image of New York, more violent and horrifying elsewhere, as an entity shaking itself into chaos. The passage is found in *Psalms and Songs*, 261-62.

<sup>29</sup> *Psalms and Songs*, 260-61.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 306.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> The uncertain state of the manuscript does not allow us to go much further into the more delicate and smaller-scale aspects of form. It will be appreciated that one transposed paragraph can throw such a plan out and yield misleading results. I have found, though set forth in a rather shadowy fashion, what appears to be a subtle formal interplay between the number of days covered by the narrative and the number of separate sections of the narrative when it is divided in a schematic/thematic fashion. This promising scheme is interrupted by lacunae, intrusive matter and sections which appear either longer or shorter than they should be. I can only assume that, if the editors have not disrupted a scheme which was fully set out, Lowry was working towards a detailed ground-plan which he had not yet realized.

<sup>33</sup> *Psalms and Songs*, 296.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 259.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 260.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 279.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 296.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 298.

<sup>39</sup> *Under the Volcano* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1947), 26-27; see also Chris Ackerley and Laurence J. Clipper, *A Companion to 'Under the Volcano'* (Vancouver: Univ. of British Columbia Press, 1984), item 26.1.

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# HISTORY AND THE POETIC CONSTRUCT

## *The Modernism of A. M. Klein*

*Linda Rosmovits*

**P**ORTRAIT OF THE POET AS LANDSCAPE” presents A. M. Klein’s fullest poetic rendering of the story of the archetypical modernist. The elegiac treatment of the artist, hopelessly alienated from his society, invokes comparisons with *The Wasteland*, “Hugh Selwyn Mauberly,” and Rilke’s *Duino Elegies* and *Sonnets to Orpheus*.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, it is clear that Klein himself envisioned the poem in such archetypically modern terms, “Portrait” supplying his version of the modern story of “the poet [who] is so anonymously sunk into his environment that, in terms of painting, his portrait is merely landscape.”<sup>2</sup>

Yet while the poem has obvious and substantial significance as a modern testament, in a curious way it represents not modernism at the height of triumphant defiance, but rather modernism tottering on the brink. For the typically modern positions Klein assumes throughout “Portrait” are eroded, subtly but persistently, by an increasingly disintegrated sense of experience, one that seems to move the poem out of the realm of modernism toward the increasingly unsettled borders of the post-modern. My aim here is to understand something of the forces impeding Klein’s attempt to maintain a modern position — in effect, to understand why it is so difficult for him to be modern even at the height of his modernity. But in order to understand this powerful dynamic as it informs Klein’s poetry, it may be helpful first to understand something of the struggle of modern poetry at large to sustain itself in the face of its most powerful opponent, the unfolding of modern history. And in seeking to establish such a context, I propose to focus on the attitudes of the poet who not only most fully embodies the modern attempt to construct a poetic response to history, but who, as we will see, so strikingly influenced Klein, namely, Ezra Pound.

**E**ZRA POUND PERCEIVED the problem of modernity to be essentially a corruption of value. "The disease of the past century and a half," he wrote, "is abstraction,"<sup>3</sup> by which he seemed to mean an increasing tendency toward the "dilution of knowledge,"<sup>4</sup> through either a proliferation of untrue or useless information or an increasing social obliviousness to "true" value as expressed by certain great works of art. Pound argued that while in past centuries and civilizations "good art was a blessing and . . . bad art was criminal and [society] spent some time and thought in trying to find means whereby to distinguish the true art from the sham," in modern society, "we are asked if the arts are moral. We are asked to define the relation of the arts to economics, we are asked what position the arts are to hold in the ideal republic. And it is obviously the opinion of many people . . . that the arts had better not exist at all."<sup>5</sup> Simply restated, modern society had lost sight of truth and value as they had existed in the past and, as a consequence, was wallowing in mediocrity. Thus Pound's self-appointed mission was to restore a sense of value to society, a mission he hoped to fulfil by reviving the true spirit of the past, thereby ensuring the future by re-establishing some sort of positive historical continuity.

Many of Pound's poetic strategies are clearly related to this desire to cut through what he perceived to be the superficiality of modernity in order to get at life's underlying and enduring values. Consider, for example, Pound's definition of Imagism:

An 'Image' is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time . . . [and] it is the presentation of such a 'complex' *instantaneously* which gives that sense of sudden liberation; that sense of freedom from time limits and space limits; that sense of sudden growth, which we experience in the presence of the greatest works of art.<sup>6</sup> (emphasis mine)

The central impulse here is clearly one toward the "dissolution of logical or grammatical relations,"<sup>7</sup> which, like the technocratic and circuitous routes favoured by modern society, obscure the self-evident truths revealed in the instantaneous presentation of the image. Pound's attraction to the ideogram, and to vorticism, is similarly centred on an impulse to cut through the surface in order to get at the heart of the matter. Like the image, the ideogram presents a complex of emotional and intellectual content all in a single instant so that what is conveyed is not primarily literal meaning, but rather a more fundamental sense of the relationships between the elements comprising the complex. Vorticism, in seeking to cut through the boundaries between art forms and to locate the artist in the still point of an obsessively moving world, again moves beyond literal meaning to the more fundamental messages trapped beneath the surface: first, that there *are* such still points or vantage points of truth to be had, and, second, that in the cultural continuity existing across art forms we may catch a glimpse of the true continuity of history. But it is

through his most enduring strategy, the juxtaposition of diverse historical and cultural allusions, that the beliefs underlying Pound's poetic method are most apparent.

Expanding on the Orientalist Ernest Fenollosa's argument that the "Chinese written character juxtaposes images that fuse in the reader's mind, Pound argues by analogy that juxtaposing histories should shock the reader into recognition of the moral that unites them."<sup>8</sup> So the paradox at the heart of Pound's strategy for combating the ills of modernity is revealed: in order to save history one must effectively deny it. As William Harmon has argued, if Pound's aesthetic and consequently his social mission is dominated by any single element it is precisely this sense of the "unreality of historical time."<sup>9</sup> Just as Pound argued that through imagism one could escape the aesthetic limitations of linear presentation, so he argued about history that "all ages are contemporaneous,"<sup>10</sup> freeing the poet to move at will through space and time. Viewed from one perspective such a notion of history implies nothing more threatening than the familiar and often nobly entertained modern notion that poetry and perhaps poets were what was required to prevent society from being overtaken by a corrupt perception of value. But under more careful scrutiny, these ideas appear to be considerably more problematic.

For example, Pound's notion of history raises a number of epistemological problems, such as the disavowal of any distinction between history as a series of past events and history as it is recounted by the historian. Ordinarily, one might expect that the subjective processes involved in rendering a version of the past would, by definition, introduce some sense of self-consciousness or doubt about the validity of the enterprise. For Pound, however, precisely the opposite is true: neither the subjective vision of the poet-historian, nor the potentially fictive vehicle of language (especially highly metaphoric language), contributes to uncertainty about the claims being advanced. Rather, the arts provide us with "lasting and unassailable data regarding the nature of man" in a classically scientific way."<sup>11</sup> Thus, while the debate may continue with regard to specific elements of Pound's theory of poetry, it is clear that he had tremendous confidence in the ability of poetry to respond to and indeed to transcend the unfolding of history.

While it may seem contentious to invoke Pound as a model for Klein, the two are, in fact, significantly connected. Despite Klein's unequivocal animosity toward Pound, it is clear that in many ways Klein was deeply influenced by him. Klein had more books by Pound in his library than by any other modern poet. As a lecturer in modern poetry at McGill University in the mid-1940s Klein had his students write parodies of Pound cantos, while he himself produced a brilliant example of such a parody in the form of a review of *The Cantos* in 1948. But most importantly, both Klein and Pound shaped their careers as a response to a shared set of historical circumstances so that while their politics were obviously violently opposed, Klein's

ideal of the poet-statesman bears an undeniable resemblance to Pound's definition of the social role of the poet.

Yet despite these compelling connections between Pound and Klein, ultimately nothing could be more different than their attitudes toward history and, consequently, toward modernity. As a poet who allows no substantial challenge to his modern sensibility, Pound is at liberty to suppose the problem of modernity to be a loss of value, to approach it as primarily aesthetic, and, indeed, to depend on the existence of art as an autonomous realm. For Klein the problem of modernity is not the loss of value but the problem of value assailed. As an unassimilated Jew, strongly attached to a multitude of living Jewish cultural and intellectual traditions, Klein's mission is not to reinstate the values of the past but to defend their continued existence in the present against the advances of dominant and hostile cultures. Jewish historical experience, epitomized through the first half of the twentieth century, never allows the poet to stray very far into an abstract sense of history. Thus while Pound may have felt free to construct a poetic theory based on the deniability of history, effectively recasting history in poetry's image, Klein cannot escape history's manifest undeniability. No matter how great his desire to believe in the effectiveness of art as an autonomous realm, Klein's poems simply cannot resist the historical onslaught. Invariably, history comes crashing through.

ONE OF THE MOST INTERESTING WAYS of approaching Klein's modernity in its relation to history is by considering his use of traditional poetic forms. Two forms in particular, the sonnet and terza rima, seem especially significant in this regard. Both are forms to which Klein returned repeatedly from the earliest to the latest stages of his career, and both are linked to weighty traditions and are often used by Klein to lend a sense of ritual and order to the poetic moment. Moreover, as structures formally implying their own closure, the sonnet and terza rima seem by their very nature to validate the notion of poetic autonomy.

At first glance, Klein's use of traditional forms recalls the modern strategies epitomized by Pound. Like Pound, Klein appears to be summoning tradition as an ally against the ills of modernity. But on closer examination it becomes clear that whether he is attempting to defy history through poetry, or to poetically represent the onslaught of history, Klein invariably chronicles the assault on the notion of poetic autonomy. Thus, far from offering us a Poundian affirmation, Klein's poems tend consistently to re-enact the failure of tradition.

"Out of the Pulver and the Polished Lens" provides an excellent example of Klein's efforts to fashion a poetic response to history. The poem recounts the excommunication of the philosopher Spinoza by the Jews of Amsterdam on charges of heresy. But viewed more broadly, it plays out an early version of the story of the

archetypal poet so central to Klein's entire career. Spinoza bears a striking resemblance to Joseph in "The Bible's Archetypal Poet," the poet in "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape," the wandering Melech Davidson, and the Jews, who as a people figured for Klein as a key example of the outcast poets in history. A truly creative individual, he is cast out by a society threatened by the unconventionality of his philosophy and while in exile realizes the secret of his own redemption. The poem ends with the image of Spinoza:

plucking tulips  
 Within the garden of Mynheer, forgetting  
 Dutchmen and Rabbins, and consumptive fretting,  
 Plucking his tulips in the Holland sun,  
 Remembering the thought of the Adored,  
 Spinoza, gathering flowers for the One,  
 The ever-unwedded lover of the Lord.

Invoking tradition in some of its most resonant incarnations — Renaissance humanism, Dutch painting, Christian chastity, the return to Eden — Klein redeems his hero in an irresistible flood of associations.

Perhaps even more remarkable, however, is the degree to which Klein relies on formal symbolism to reinforce the redemptive sense of tradition lying at the heart of the poem. "Out of the Pulver and the Polished Lens" is symmetrically constructed, consisting of nine sections, with four sections leading up to the climactic central point and four moving away from it toward the poem's resolution. The climactic section, section v, is significantly set as prose:

Reducing providence to theorems, the horrible atheist compiled such lore that proved, like proving two and two make four, that in the crown of God we all are gems. From glass and dust of glass he brought to light out of the pulver and the polished lens, the prism and the flying mote; and hence the infinitesimal and infinite.

Is it a marvel, then, that he forsook the abracadabra of the synagogue, and holding with timelessness a duologue, deciphered a new scripture in the book? Is it a marvel that he left old fraud for passion intellectual of God?

At first glance, the section appears to function largely as a narrative centrepiece conveying an encapsulated version of both the previous four sections and of the material about to follow. In fact, as several critics have noticed, the passage has formal significance beyond its structural importance as the centre of the poem. Klein's account of Spinoza's discovery of the "infinitesimal and the infinite" "out of the pulver and the polished lens" is in fact not prose but prose concealing a sonnet. Thus, what Klein has produced is not merely a description of Spinoza's moment of discovery, but a self-reflexive formal construct which compels the reader literally to emulate the poetic moment; as Spinoza discovers his truth in revealing the lens hidden in the unshaped glass, so the reader discovers the sonnet. And the

message underlying both Spinoza's and the reader's moment of discovery is clear: beneath the prosaic chaos of exile lies the redemption of hidden reason and form.

In its strong affirmation of the power of poetry to effect social change, "Out of the Pulver and the Polished Lens" is Klein's most Poundian poem. But having begun my discussion of Klein's formal strategies with this most persuasive and moving of his early works, I must now note that in terms of its affirmation of formal power, "Out of the Pulver and the Polished Lens" is virtually unique in Klein's poetic oeuvre. As Zailig Pollock has argued, the poem, while at first a favourite of Klein's, was one he eventually came to dislike.<sup>12</sup> One of the two poems selected to represent Klein in the *New Provinces* anthology, "Out of the Pulver and the Polished Lens" was excluded from all future readings and publications, including a *Selected Poems* typescript which Klein assembled in 1955. Moreover, Klein appears to have attempted to retract "Pulver" by replacing it with a short lyric entitled: "Spinoza: On man, on the Rainbow," which first appeared as a revision to section seven of the poem. To follow Pollock's reasoning, the later poem is essentially a dialectical rewriting of the first and is ultimately favoured by the later Klein, whose thinking was increasingly dominated by an interest in the dialectic. Considering the social implications of Pollock's argument, one sees very clearly that what Klein was rejecting was a poem which, however beautifully, valorizes the alienation of the artist from his community. For it is not the community or even the relationship between the community and the creative individual Spinoza redeems, but art and the artistic self. It is difficult to imagine Klein dismissing the community so unsympathetically or taking such a callow view of tradition later in his career. As we will see, it is a stance which finds little support elsewhere in his work.

A later poem, "Sonnet Unrhymed," displays rather a different attitude toward the dynamic between poetry and history. Hidden in its lack of rhyme, as the sonnet in "Out of the Pulver and the Polished Lens" is hidden in prose, "Sonnet Unrhymed" differs in that it is not simply disguised and awaiting discovery, but genuinely and deliberately formless. An unrhymed Petrarchan sonnet with fruitless copulation as its subject, the poem addresses the problem of form without consequence or the consequences of an undue emphasis on form. Coupling the notion of contraception with the use of the traditional form, the poem presents a striking inversion of the Poundian ideal. Rather than affirming the power of tradition to revivify the past, the poem rudely exposes the poet's self-serving activity, making him a contemptible object of study for the future generations whose existence he has prevented.

When, on the frustral summit of *extase*,  
 — the leaven of my loins to no life spent,  
 yet vision, as all senses, sharper, — I  
 peer the vague forward and flawed prism of Time,

many the bodies, my own birthmark bearing,  
 and many the faces, like my face, I see:  
 shadows of generation looking backward  
 and crying *Abba* in the muffled night.

They beg creation. From the far centuries  
 they move against the vacuum of their murder,  
 yes, and their eyes are full of such reproach  
 that although tired, I do wake, and watch  
 upon the entangled branches of the dark  
 my sons, my sons, my hanging Absaloms.

Condemned to the role of historical villain, the poet must endure the stress of the eternally unborn, the sonnet form standing here as damning evidence of the poet's wilful disengagement from history. Particularly resonant in this regard is the closing line of the octave where poetry and history collide in a single word. *Abba* is the Hebrew word for father, but it is also the rhyme scheme for the first quatrain of a Petrarchan sonnet — *abba*. Thus the muffled cry constitutes a dual lament, at once mourning the poet's betrayal of his social obligation to future generations and the emasculation of a poetic tradition as it is forced into an historical context that can no longer meaningfully support it.

**S**IMILAR TENSIONS ARE EVIDENT in Klein's use of *terza rima* in his poems; "Design for Mediaeval Tapestry" clearly displays this basic conflict. Like many of Klein's works, "Design for Mediaeval Tapestry" presents a series of related poems, which, from a variety of perspectives, examine a single subject, in this case, the persecution of Jews in a Medieval town. Framed by opening and closing material, the poem comprises ten sections, each of which offers a reflection on the experience of violent anti-Semitism. The effectiveness of intellectual or philosophical responses to history is thus centrally at issue in the poem as the unifying effect of *terza rima* is sharply played off against the speciousness or ineffectuality of the attempt to respond to chaos portrayed within each section.

Some of the poem's spokesmen seek viable responses to the violence of their situation. "Nahum-this-is-also-for-the-good" argues that

The wrath of God is just. His punishment  
 Is most desirable. The flesh of Jacob  
 Implores the scourge. For this was Israel meant.

Similarly, "Ezekiel the Simple opines":

If we will fast for forty days; if we  
 Will read the psalms thrice over; if we offer  
 To God some blossom-bursting litany,

And to the poor a portion of the coffer;  
 If we don sack-cloth, and let ashes rain  
 Upon our heads, despite the boor and scoffer,  
 Certes, these things will never be again.

In both cases, Klein's presentation of these solutions is clearly bitterly ironic. But in the latter instance, the naïveté of Ezekiel's belief is especially emphasized by Klein's use of the perfect formal ending of the verse. The single line, standing apart from the previous tercets, is meant to convey a sense of a final, grand affirmation. Clearly, however, the moment is not one of ideological triumph, but of terrible pathos, as the thrust of the poem as a whole simply demolishes this, as it does all of the poem's solutions.

Other sections of the poem convey the thoughts of those who have already been pushed beyond hope of a solution and who are effectively paralyzed by their sense of injustice. Daniel Shochet considers the unending displacement of the Jew:

The toad seeks out its mud; the mouse discovers  
 The nibbled hole; the sparrow owns its nest;  
 About the blind mole earthy shelter hovers.  
 The louse avers the head where it is guest;  
 Even the roach calls some dark fent his dwelling.  
 But Israel owns a sepulchre, at best.

"Isaiah Epicure," ostensibly mirroring the poem's dissatisfaction with attempts to philosophize away historical reality, is equally ineffective in his inability to move beyond the absolute material experience of physical suffering:

Seek reasons; rifle your theology;  
 Philosophize; expend your dialectic;  
 Decipher and translate God's diary;  
 Discover causes, primal and eclectic;  
 I cannot; all I know is this:  
 That pain doth render flesh most sore and hectic;

Most interesting, perhaps, is the treatment Klein reserves for those seeking literary solutions to historical problems. Solomon Talmudi, the scholar, seeks to win immortality through the explication of arcane religious texts. Claiming to have found the perfect textual unity, Talmudi posits the "simple sentence broken by no commas," which will render the teachings of scholars from Rashi to Aquinas obsolete. Ultimately, his inordinate belief in the power of exegesis is cruelly repaid when his manuscript, his "charm against mortality," is unceremoniously burned. An even crueller fate awaits the figure of Judith, who has based her expectations not simply on the presumed truthfulness of a text, but on a specifically literary model. In the section entitled "Judith makes comparisons," her faith in the chivalric tradition



collides violently with her real situation. While Judith expects the approaching knight to sing of “truth, chivalry, and honour,” she finds herself, instead, “wrestling” with a “cross-marked varlet,” who bears little resemblance to the knights of her literary experience. Here, Klein seems especially anxious to impress the reader with the dangers of Judith’s folly as the *terza rima*, otherwise regular throughout the poem, at this point begins to break down. The visual succession of tercets collapses into a single block, while the line “Judith had heard a troubadour” is ironically repeated, turning the rhyme scheme in on itself so that it regresses back to rather than progressing away from the original *aba*. The third tercet altogether abandons the prescribed pattern of rhyme:

Judith had heard a troubadour  
Singing beneath a castle-turret  
Of truth, chivalry, and honour,  
Of virtue, and of gallant merit, —  
Judith had heard a troubadour  
Lauding the parfait knightly spirit  
Singing beneath the ivied wall.  
The cross-marked varlet Judith wrestled  
Was not like these at all, at all . . .

Judith’s misfortune, brought on by her literary delusions, is so great that it seems to move beyond the poem’s predominant ironic strategy of interweaving perfect form with horrific content. Here, the bitterness is simply overwhelming, and the devastation of content precipitates the devastation of form. An even more striking example of the ineffectiveness of poetry as a response to history is provided by Klein’s use of *terza rima* in *The Hitleriad*.

Confronted with the contemporary horror of Hitler’s rise to power, Klein, in *The Hitleriad*, momentarily loses his sense of the limits of poetry in redressing the ills of modernity. Remarking to James Laughlin that he saw the poem as a summons to “the prophetic indignations of [his] ancestors,<sup>13</sup> Klein clearly sought to validate his position by association with the great literary traditions of the past. Thus relying heavily on the weight of traditional forms and unfortunately ignoring the lesson of “Design for Mediaeval Tapestry,” Klein here resorts to a recognizably Poundian strategy, but it is a strategy that he cannot effectively sustain. The extended use of such highly artificial forms ultimately trivializes the historical content and, in turn, reinforces our sense of the limits of literary satire. Rather than succumb to the formal persuasion of tradition and civilization, history simply shatters the formal strategies of the poem.

The glaring tension between the poem’s form and content is evident in section xxiv where Klein employs *terza rima* to describe Hitler’s self-declaration of godhood:

Nor did he merely wage his war on Man.  
 Against the Lord he raised his brazen brow,  
 Blasphemed His name, His works, condemned His plan,  
 Himself a god announced, and bade men bow  
 Down to his image, and its feet of clay! . . .

Here the ritual solemnity of the terza rima confronts the demagogic corruption of ritual perpetrated by Hitler in declaring himself a god. However, the terza rima, far from harnessing Hitler's evil, seems increasingly bombastic and ineffectual as stanza after stanza of evil is revealed:

The pagan, named for beasts, was born again.  
 The holy days were gone. The Sabbath creed  
 Unfit for slaves, superfluous to his reign,  
 Stood unobserved, the nine-month-littered breed  
 Traduced their parents to the Gestapo;  
 Adulterous, the stud-men spawned their seed.

In the final stanza Klein attempts to formally represent the collapse of civilization by allowing the metre to be overrun by the surge of the crowd as it roars its approval of the demagogue. In a perverse parody of the tripartite terza rima form, the final rhyme is reiterated three times, line after line, until at last it finds its resting place in an animal incarnation:

He raised aloft the blood-stained sword;  
 Upon the square the heathen horde  
 Roared.

But unlike the Judith episode in "Design for Mediaeval Tapestry," the gesture here is too calculated and facile. The overall effect is one of deluded self-satisfaction as the poem ultimately fails to address the material at hand in a serious way.

Yet despite its shortcomings, *The Hitleriad* ought not to be simply dismissed. Even with its strange mismatch of content and form, the poem foreshadows one of Klein's most masterful uses of a traditional form and, indeed, one of his greatest poetic achievements, "Political Meeting."

In "Political Meeting," a marked shift in Klein's sensibility becomes apparent, for while the familiar interplay between the poem and the event it describes is still evident, the strong binary oppositions characterizing earlier work are conspicuously absent. Good and evil, form and content, give way to complex and ambiguous social and poetic dynamics. For example, the dangerous idolatry, corrupt ritual, and mob rule of section xxrv of *The Hitleriad* all re-appear in "Political Meeting," but this time, insidiously, they do not bear the insignia of evil. Rather, the presence of evil suggestively pervades the poem, mingling invisibly with good. Like the priests, whose "equivocal absence is felt like a breeze that gives curtains the sounds of surplices," good and evil shimmer together, at once offering relief from the

stifling heat of the auditorium and exploiting the guilty vulnerability of the crowd overflowing into the street. Similarly, the orator, in sharp contrast to the figure of Hitler, exudes an unsettling ambiguity of intent. Rather than precipitate an obvious shower of evil, the ominous appearance of the orator — “The Orator has risen!” — unexpectedly shifts the mood of the poem to one of homey and comfortable intimacy. The orator is strangely familiar, yet at the same time he is clearly not one of Klein’s obvious demagogues. Not a self-appointed idol but a publicly acclaimed one, he is “Their idol,” “Worshipped and loved, their favourite visitor, / a country uncle with sunflower seeds in his pockets.”

Suggesting a compelling connection to the episode in *The Second Scroll* where the strangers from Ratno appear at the narrator’s home, the moment is one which gravitates toward a disturbing confluence of familiarity and evil. Like Houde, the European strangers overcome their unfamiliarity by producing sunflower seeds from their pockets, a gesture which, the narrator tells us has the power to evoke his entire childhood.<sup>14</sup> But as in “Political Meeting,” the understated intimacy of the moment is soon followed by evil, in this case, by news of the recent pogrom in Ratno. Unable to resist the childlike desire to accept sunflower seeds from an outstretched hand, one is faced with the realization that, at best, the offering is meant to serve as an amulet against evil and, at worst, as a lure toward it. In any event, until the evil itself has been revealed, one motivation is indistinguishable from the other.

THIS SIGNIFICANT MOVE AWAY from binary oppositions is equally evident in Klein’s use of terza rima in “Political Meeting.” In the poems we have previously examined, Klein’s formal strategy is clearly based on a strong sense of social order and disorder. Whether employing tradition and poetic regularity earnestly, as in “Out of the Pulver and the Polished Lens,” or ironically, as in *The Hitleriad*, Klein establishes a clear opposition between order and disorder evident in the formal order or disorder of the poetic structure. Formal poetic disruption, or an ironic use of form, is used to signify a more broadly significant set of social conditions. But in “Political Meeting” quite a different strategy is employed. Unlike earlier poems which tend to move from formal regularity to symbolic disruption, “Political Meeting” offers us no such unmistakable oppositions. While the poem maintains its regular succession of tercets until the climax of the poem, the rhyming pair of lines within each tercet is irregular.

One interesting consequence of this loosening of structure is a paradoxical reinforcement not of certainty but of uncertainty in the poem. Rather than simply reinforcing a sense of order, the traditional form here conveys a compelling sense of the ideological confusion experienced by the crowd assembled in the hall. Like

the priests, who are at once there and not there, and the orator, who is both hero and demagogue, the *terza rima*, in its tentative incarnation, at once validates and subverts the ritual being played out in the poem. Like the *alouette*, the traditional Québécois anthem of community, the *terza rima* is invoked in an appeal to tradition. But as the bird is “snared” and “plucked,” “throat, wings, and little limbs,” it becomes clear that nervous appeals to tradition here yield unexpected results. Despite the apparent “jocularity” of the hall and of the poet’s manipulation of form, startlingly, the people and the poet both find themselves in the midst not of rituals of unification but rather of dismemberment. Even more paradoxical, however, are the revelations which await the poet’s move toward formal regularity at the poem’s close.

Viewed from a social perspective, “Political Meeting” addresses a number of Klein’s deepest and most enduring concerns. Most obviously, it has as its subject, the ideological exploitation of the Québécois by corrupt political leaders during the 1940s and the consequent aggravation of alarming fascist sympathies. But even more broadly, the poem plays out the social paradigm which so consistently dominated Klein’s thinking. Basically, the poem represents the unification of a community experiencing great historical strain. Unfortunately, however, the version of the dynamic we see played out in “Political Meeting” is a dangerous parody of the communal unification Klein ideally envisioned. The orator, appealing to values dear to both the Québécois and to Klein, manipulates the assembly, engendering a false and dangerous unification:

The whole street wears one face,  
shadowed and grim; and in the darkness rises  
the body-odour of race.

Significantly, it is in building toward this conclusion that Klein chooses to redeem his lost rhyme scheme, conveying the parodic transformation of a community into a hostile mob in perfect *terza rima*. What then are we to understand by this unequivocal and violent inversion of the modern idealization of old poetic forms?

Clearly, it is in “Political Meeting” that poetry and history at last come face to face; in the orator the poet has met his match. Like the poet, the orator is full of “wonderful moods, tricks, imitative talk.” And, indeed, at this point one can hardly avoid wondering who is imitating whom. Using the very strategy that was meant to constitute a prescription against the ills of modernity — the appeal to tradition — the orator has transformed the poet’s remedy into poison. Klein’s chronic discomfort with the claims of modernism suddenly becomes acute. In “Political Meeting” it becomes an undeniable fact that poetry and history do not exist in isolation from one another and that positing art as an autonomous realm may delay but will not indefinitely postpone a confrontation with history. Moreover, the poem insists that we recognize the impossibility of constituting an effective

poetic response to history, for if it teaches us anything it is that despite the alluring claims of Poundian modernism, history and the poetic construct are ultimately inseparable.

One final poem, "Sestina on the Dialectic," moves us even beyond the striking revelations of "Political Meeting" to Klein's most radical transformation of a poetic tradition. As Klein was well aware, the sestina is "one of the oldest forms of verse."<sup>15</sup> Consisting of six stanzas of six lines apiece and a concluding three-line envoy or *tornada*, the sestina derives its structure not from rhyme but from a manipulation of the end words of each of the six lines comprising the opening stanza. The form was invented by the medieval poet Arnault Daniel, but more importantly, as Klein himself noted, one of the few poets to attempt the form in English before him was Ezra Pound.

For a number of reasons, it is clear that in alluding to Pound, the sestina Klein had in mind was Pound's highly reputed "bloody sestina," properly titled "Sestina: Altaforte." Noting with regard to the form of the sestina that "the second stanza is a folding of the first, and the third . . . a folding of the second . . .," Klein directly echoes Pound's own description of the sestina as "a form like a thin sheet of flame folding and infolding upon itself."<sup>16</sup> Additionally, Klein's remark that Dante had Arnault Daniel [*sic*] "justly placed in Hell" is clearly a confused reference to the Epigraph of Pound's poem: "Dante Alighieri puts this man in hell for that he was a stirrer-up of strife," which in fact refers not to Arnault but to Bertran de Born upon whose poem Pound's sestina is based.

Pound's rendering of Bertran's poem, like the original, is a glorification of war:

The man who fears war and squats opposing  
My words for stour, hath no blood of crimson  
But is fit only to rot in womanish peace  
Far from where worth's won and the swords clash  
For the death of such sluts I go rejoicing;  
Yea, I fill all the air with my music.

And though Pound tentatively admitted that the "shrill neighs of destriers in battle . . ." were "more impressive before 1914 than . . . since 1920,"<sup>17</sup> like Bertran, he perceived a sense of social order in the field of battle. It is out of conflict, Pound argued, that civilization will arise:

Better one hour's stour than a year's peace  
With fat boards, bawds, wine and frail music!  
Bah! there's no wine like the blood's crimson!

"May God damn for ever all who cry 'Peace'!" As Peter Brooker has noted, in writing the sestina Pound, characteristically, "revivifies Bertran through his contemporary Arnault."<sup>18</sup> But what precisely does Bertran represent for Pound, and what perceptions and values attend his revivification?

For Pound, Bertran's importance exceeds his contribution as a poet. Bertran appears as an archetypal hero, a man "who sang of his Lady Battle, as St. Francis [sang] of Poverty . . ." <sup>19</sup> and whose "passages on the joy of war . . . enter the realm of the universal." <sup>20</sup> Bertran appears in Dante's inferno holding his "severed head by the hair, swinging in his hand like a lantern," <sup>21</sup> reflecting the crime of having incited the schism between Henry II and his brother Richard the Lionhearted. <sup>22</sup> But interestingly, for Pound, the headlessness of the hero does not signify defeat. Rather, the strange duality paradoxically bears witness to the unyielding spirit of monolithic figures, who engage courageously against one another. Unlike King Richard, whom Pound mocks by referring to him in his rendering of Bertran's poem as "yea and nay," Bertran is a hero in that he bears his dividedness, his severed head, as a symbol of illumination. "Thus," declares Bertran, "is the counterpass (law of retribution) observed in me." <sup>23</sup>

These same values are reflected in Pound's formal rendering of "Sestina: Altaforte." In applying the rigour of the sestina in "translating" a poem not originally written in that form, Pound reinforces the notion of formal poetic rigour as an emblem of courage and rigour in the world at large. Except for very minor deviations, Pound adheres faithfully to the difficult form, choosing end words that boldly proclaim his purpose: 'peace,' 'music,' 'clash,' 'opposing,' 'crimson,' 'rejoicing.' As a form which functions essentially by juxtaposition, as a fixed set of terms are presented and re-presented in a variety of arrangements, the sestina provides the ideal vehicle for Pound's idiosyncratic historicism.

In Klein's sestina one finds no trace of either literal or metaphorical monoliths; here there is only the dialectic, "braided, wicker and withe," so pervasive that "there's not a sole thing that from its workings will not out." Again, the difference between Pound's perception of the problem of modernity and Klein's comes to the fore. Pound sees "the standards gold, vair, purple, opposing," while for Klein:

. . . dynasties and dominions downfall so! Flourish to flag  
and fail, are potent to a pause, a panic precipice, to a  
picked pit, and thence — rubble rebuilding, — still rise  
resurrective, — and now we see them, with new doers in dominion!  
They, too, dim out.

But even beyond the obvious contrast of the political right versus the political left, fundamental differences between the poets' attitudes prevail. Klein does not simply seize Pound's mocking "yea and nay," transforming it into "yes yeasts to No, and No is numinous with Yes." For although Klein is clearly appealing to the dialectic as a way of making sense of history, here, as in the other poems we have examined, history cannot be mediated by the poetic construct. In Klein's hands, even the dialectic becomes subject to its own process of transformation, yielding not synthesis but perpetual uncertainty:

. . . O just as the racked one hopes his ransom, so I  
 hope it, name it, image it, the together-living, the  
 together-with, the final synthesis. A stop.

But so it never will turn out, returning to the rack  
 within, without. And no thing's still.

The formal difficulty and obscurity of the poem reflect this sense of the uncontainability of history. Indeed, in a sense, Klein's very choice of the sestina form verges on the absurd. The poem is so thoroughly enjambed and the defining end words so inconspicuous — 'with,' 'a,' 'to,' 'out,' 'so,' 'still' — that the form is effectively unrecognizable. Like "Out of the Pulver and the Polished Lens," "Sestina on the Dialectic" constitutes a response to Poundian poetic strategies. But unlike the sonnet in "Pulver," which adopts the Poundian strategy by depending on a notion of truth as poetic revelation, the "Sestina," also a poem set as prose, attacks the Poundian view, arguing rather for truth as poetic dissolution.

At this point we may re-approach "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape" with a new sensitivity to the uneasy modernity it displays. For while the poem presents itself in unmistakably modern terms — as a confrontation of the troubled relationship between the artist and society — it also consistently undermines its own defiance. Perpetually threatened by the forces of history and thus never truly at ease with idealizations of art or the artist's role, Klein, even in this, his most archetypically modern poem, is ultimately unable to sustain a modern stance.

The most obvious dynamic in "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape" is that of the dialectic which, although it has its negative aspect, eventually transforms the poet from alienated outcast to "n<sup>th</sup> Adam" in a poetic Garden of Eden. Moreover, in moving from the pandering "ventriloquism" of the false poets to the "naming" and "praising" of the "first green inventory," the poem appears to redeem both the poet and the social status of his whole "declassé craft." But while one might thus characterize the mood of the poem as one of guarded optimism, another equally forceful dynamic undercuts the first, throwing its optimism into serious doubt. Progressively, the forces of fragmentation erode not simply the triumph of the poet, but, indeed, the very notion of dialectical historical progress, until, ultimately, with both the poetic individual and his sense of experience under attack, the context of the poem tips over from the social and modern to the epistemological and post-modern.

Increasingly, the poet "thinks an imposter . . . has come forward to pose / in the shivering vacuums his absence leaves." It is a vacuum filled by various identities throughout the poem: "the corpse in a detective story," "a Mr. Smith in a hotel register," "the Count of Monte Cristo"; the n<sup>th</sup> Adam is merely the last in the parade of "schizoid solitudes." And what of the poet's role? Does not the "naming" and "praising" "item by exciting item" bear a disturbing resemblance to the disintegrating experience of the false poets? While they "court angels," he "makes a

halo of his anonymity." They "stare at mirrors" and he at his "single camera view." They go "mystical and mad"; he seeks new senses, new life forms, new creeds. The poet may "love the torso verb, [and] the beautiful face of the noun," but does he himself not "mistake the part for the whole, curl [himself] in a coma . . . make a colon [his] eyes"? And what of the dialectic, Klein's model of history itself? For although it is on the upward swing of the pendulum that the poet climbs, "the better to look . . . upon this earth — its total scope," it is equally along this great arc of modernism that he descends, "wiggled with his laurel," until he finds himself, at last, alone, "shin[ing] like phosphorus. At the bottom of the sea."

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Zailig Pollock for suggesting this Rilke connection to me and for his generosity in sharing his unpublished work.
- <sup>2</sup> Cited in *The Complete Poetry of A. M. Klein*, ed. Zailig Pollock (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1990).
- <sup>3</sup> *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. T. S. Eliot (Norfolk: New Directions, 1954), 59.
- <sup>4</sup> Pound, *Essays*, 60.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.
- <sup>6</sup> Ezra Pound, "A Few Dont's by an Imagiste," *Poetry Magazine* 1:6 (1913): 200-01.
- <sup>7</sup> Alan Durant, "The Language of History in The Cantos," in *Ezra Pound and History*, ed. Marianne Korn (Orono, ME: National Poetry Foundation, 1985), 25.
- <sup>8</sup> Maud Ellmann, "Ezra Pound: The Erasure of History," in *Post-structuralism and the Question of History*, ed. Derek Attridge et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1987), 246.
- <sup>9</sup> William Harmon, *Time in Ezra Pound's Work* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1977), 3.
- <sup>10</sup> Ezra Pound, *The Spirit of Romance* (London: Peter Owen, 1970), 8.
- <sup>11</sup> See, for example, Ian F. A. Bell, *Critic as Scientist: the Modernist Poetics of Ezra Pound* (London: Methuen, 1981).
- <sup>12</sup> Zailig Pollock, "From 'Pulver' to 'Portrait': A. M. Klein and the Dialectic." Unpublished paper.
- <sup>13</sup> Cited in *Complete Poetry*.
- <sup>14</sup> See *The Second Scroll* (New York: Knopf, 1951), 11-13.
- <sup>15</sup> Cited in *Complete Poetry*.
- <sup>16</sup> Pound, *Spirit of Romance*, 27.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.
- <sup>18</sup> Peter Brooker, *A Student's Guide to the Selected Poems of Ezra Pound* (London: Faber, 1979), 44.
- <sup>19</sup> Pound, *Spirit of Romance*, 44.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.
- <sup>22</sup> See *Inferno*, Canto xxviii.
- <sup>23</sup> Pound, *Spirit of Romance*, 45.



# TOBOGGANING

*Stephen Brockwell*

The slope was too steep to climb easily.  
Even though we reached the summit, one of us  
could lose a foothold on the ice and, laughing,  
pull the other down.

We went alone  
down the hill on blue plastic carpets;  
thrilled by the bitter cold of the wind,  
we ignored ruts in the surface of snow  
that would later reveal themselves,  
dark circles on the surface of our arms.

And we went down together on a borrowed  
toboggan. We were surprised by the speed.  
You screamed halfway down, your face  
glowing in the rush of snow. We stopped  
before the bushes, at that charmed moment  
when we hoped for a perpetual glide.

I scared both of us with foolhardiness,  
went down alone in a spin; not looking,  
rebounded from a tree. The laughter  
in your eyes became comfort of your hands  
when you untied the ropes from my neck.

We had most success in our snow pursuits:  
snow cracked like rice under your boots  
as you ran under the branches of trees  
too difficult to recognize in winter,  
their leaves pressed under the season's duvet.  
Falling together was what you had in mind.



# “OTHER TIMES, OTHER PLACES”

## *Narrative Displacement in Ray Smith’s Writing*

Colin Nicholson

[R.S.] “Scratch a Nova Scotian and within three sentences you’re back to The Clearances; one more sentence and you’re back to Bonnie Prince Charlie, The Covenanters and Mary Queen of Scots. The Campbells and the Macdonalds still don’t speak to one another. The grievances of the past live on, as well as the glories and the memories.”\*

I  
N RAY SMITH’S FICTION, senses of the past are problematized. In a body of writing seemingly concerned to abolish traditional historical time-frames and collapse conventional apprehensions of narrative temporality, we encounter gaps rather than sequences. Wary of predetermined connections, Smith is a writer who might initially appear to be in flight from his origins. His fluent, disconcerting prose engages the reader in an exploration of linkage rather than in its traditional, realist embodiment. His apparently discrete collocations suggest subterranean, tangential, or implied kinships and correlations. And in this process history, inevitably, returns to play its part. History, it could be argued, together with stories of origination, were never absent from Ray Smith’s writing project, but as he considers the story of his place of origin, Smith, who now lives in Montreal and first came to prominence as one of the Montreal Story Tellers Group, recognizes elements of difficulty for his own writing.

[R.S.] “First of all, Nova Scotians carry around their history as if it were a big knap-sack, and I always had the sense that others were aware of certain things about Nova Scotia. One was that in the year of Confederation, 1867, Nova Scotia was a great and prosperous place. I have heard it said that Nova Scotia was the third or fourth largest shipping power in the world — just after

\* This article incorporates an interview conducted with Ray Smith during his visit to Edinburgh on the writer-exchange scheme jointly funded by the Canada Council and the Scottish Arts Council. Smith’s responses are signalled thus: [R.S.]

Britain and America. But although conditions at present are not too bad, all during the years that I was growing up there it was a depressed place. What happened, I guess, was that at Confederation all the money, all the manufacturing went to Ontario.

“So. Nova Scotians live with that ‘glory of the past’ — also a very Scottish thing. We also live with the fact that we came there from The Clearances: so whenever you run into a Nova Scotian, you immediately have this background of economic greatness, of glory, of a possible future that never came. And, of course, you have Scotland. Now. I couldn’t deal with that in my writing, and in fact I left Nova Scotia the morning after I graduated. I’ve always found the ‘Nova Scotianness’ in me a very difficult thing to write about. I can write about Venice, France, Germany; But I haven’t been able to write about Scotland. And I may not be able to, because it’s too personal. I may be coming round to it, but I still haven’t dealt with my own history. I have to displace it all the time.”

Displacement becomes a significant feature in Smith’s fiction; living in the interstices of a history either perceived as effectively over, or felt as happening elsewhere, in his writing Ray Smith might, paradoxically, be producing aspects of an identity and relationship with and for a region of origin, the Maritimes, that has been characterized as “everyone’s half-forgotten past and no-one’s future.”<sup>1</sup> Though it may appear to be the most arcane of reversals, the very absence of beginnings, the lack of direct treatment of Nova Scotian experience, the paucity of Canadian reference inscribes a return of the repressed, providing for his fictions an historical base and cultural definition against all surface appearances.

RAY SMITH’S FIRST COLLECTION of stories, *Cape Breton is the Thought Control Centre of Canada*,<sup>2</sup> quite apart from its jesting, titular announcement of the revenge of the geographically remote and the economically peripheral, explores in its first piece “Colours” a displacement of narrative continuity within a ‘*reductio ad absurdum*’ of the questing hero, which already heralds an antic disposition towards causal effect. “Ah well,” this first story ends, “the details did not matter. In the end there was only the search and, with luck, the pattern. It made you think. Gerald yawned” (17). On the way, “Colours” post-modernistically encodes its own fictive procedures:

Why should the subject be resumed? If the episode arises naturally out of the main subject, then the main subject is . . . in (let us say), is in the episode. Or, say, let us examine the pearls one by one and surely we shall know of the string? Pearls are more interesting than string. (3)

Perhaps so. But there are other ways of looking at linkage, ways that may take us closer to the infrastructure of Smith’s literary techniques. And in his ironic *Author’s Commentary*<sup>3</sup> on “Colours” he uses the same image to point the way:

When a woman wears a necklace we do not see the string though we know it must be there. So I have tried to write a story composed of five "pearls". . . . The reader cannot see the string or plot, but he should be able to deduce it as a line through from the way the incidents hang together. (220)

[R.S.] "It seemed to me that the way of getting to a little bit of the truth was to take one thing and say it as clearly as you possibly can, and its own little truth would hold there. Give that to the reader. Then you take another thing which seems to be true, which may or may not contradict the first — they may even have no apparent relationship. And the connection between them, well, that's where the truth happens. The lightning between the places is the real meaning. It's by no means a new idea. It's at least back to imagism, at the turn of the century, and heaven knows it goes back further than that."

It goes forward, in Smith's fiction, to the last section of *Century*<sup>4</sup> and the historical Harry Kessler's reply to the fictional Kenniston Thorson:

"You know perfectly well epigrams are amusing and useful as glimpses; you also know they are not the whole story. The truth is to be found in the way many different things fit together in relation to one another. In a sense, because the relationship, not the parts, has the truth, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts." (145)

One way of approaching Smith's juxtaposings is through a phrase he introduces in the title story of his first collection: "Recently a friend conned me into explaining my interest in compiled fiction, an example of which you are now reading" (121). In his essay "Dinosaur"<sup>5</sup> Smith describes two of these stories as

part of a body of work called 'speculative fiction.' Generally ironic in tone. Aesthetic in approach; which means, I suppose, an indirect approach to the many social and political problems of the world around us. . . . I should emphasise, or repeat, that spec fic doesn't ignore the world, but approaches it somewhat indirectly. (206)

At any rate, compilations is what some of these fictions are, and in the "Cape Breton" story itself, the technique produces a witty interrogation of the nature of Canada's cultural identity in the year of its centennial celebrations.<sup>6</sup> In a deft series of concatenations, the depredations suffered by Poland at the hands of any number of invaders, and Canada's economic penetration by the monetary mammoth to its south spark a set of voiced and unvoiced connections both comic and unsettling:

Consider the Poles. They have built a nation which, if not great and powerful, is at least distinct. . . . Analogies are never perfect, but the Poles do have what we want. Consider the Poles; consider the price they have paid and paid and paid. (21)

As he shores fragments against various ruin, Ray Smith habitually has recourse to a history not his own. Time and place become the subject of his fiction, often in ways that signify uncertainty, jeopardy. It can only be the accident of design that the story called "Peril" curves around the doings of three characters called Passquick, Period, and Purlieu; motion, time, and place.

**L**ORD NELSON TAVERN<sup>7</sup> traces the permutations and cross-pollinations of a group of Haligonians from undergraduate excess to various stages of age and maturity. But the first sleight-of-hand, conjuring cross-textual definition and intra-textual uncertainty is the fact that nowhere in *Lord Nelson Tavern* is the tavern named, nor its location near Dalhousie University in Halifax given. This information is contained in “The Galoshes” from *Cape Breton*, and its absence from Smith’s second book creates conditions of spatial uncertainty in keeping with a blurred chronology. Time-frame in any conventionally accepted narrative sense is abolished, so temporal connections are anyway attenuated. Smith had realized early that he was faced with the problem in writing *Lord Nelson Tavern* that the book looked like going on for a fair while, but he had already set the beginning in the late fifties, with characters who were his contemporaries.

[R.S.] “They graduated in about 1963 or ’64. So forty years on, what time is it? And to write a futuristic novel was crazy: after all, this was something of a social novel — a comedy of manners. Conversely, if they were going to be 65 years old in 1970, then when did they go to university — in 1920? So I said to myself, basically, I’ll leave out time-references as much as possible — no specific dates — and I’ll just assume, for my convenience at least, that it’s all happening in the 1960’s. Well, that’s the way I did it. To me it was a casual decision. It was simply the convenience you can have in a world of Borges and writers of that kind, who have broken enough rules to be able to say if you want to do it, do it.”

There is, of course, a more immediate sense in which Smith is doing nothing more than compelling attention towards aspects of narrative which challenge many of our more comfortable and unthinking assumptions. Towards the end of *Lord Nelson Tavern*, Gussie remarks to Paleologue (whose own name recuperates the ancient), “I was reading Herodotus again; I had forgotten how chaotic life can be” (154). Since modernist writing has long since shown us that conceptions of story-time as a linear succession of events are themselves only conventions, conveniences, Ray Smith’s usage has established precedents. Rimmon-Kenan makes the point:

Text-time . . . strictly speaking, is a spatial not a temporal dimension. The narrative text as text has no other temporality than the one it metonymically derives from the process of reading. What discussions of text-time actually refer to is the linear (spatial) disposition of linguistic segments in the continuum of the text. Thus both story-time and text-time may in fact be no more than temporal.<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps in keeping with this, *Lord Nelson Tavern* keeps us constantly aware of its own provisionality. Its penultimate paragraph explicitly registers different possibilities, foregrounding its fictionality and deconstructing any finality in its turn towards closure:

Get up in the morning, pull on yesterday's clothes, instant coffee in a dirty cup, smoke a cigarette. In other times, other places, Gussies acting, his poetry failed: she became a whore, a druggie, he died of disease and failure. But those were other places other times. (160)

It may, then, be a hazard of hindsight that there seems to be an inevitable sense of progression towards Ray Smith's latest book. *Century* is a novel of sorts about members of the Seymour family. The novel is divided into two novellas — "Family" and "The Continental." "Family" is itself composed of four stories, and "The Continental" of two. While a carefully disordered genealogical chronology connects characters, a more congruous sense of thematic relationship is suggested by the fact that, from its title onwards, *Century* figures history itself as a central concern. Displaced from Nova Scotia, but not from Canada, the spirit of history which pervades this text is, with one crucial and defining exception, uncompromisingly European, lending point and definition, perhaps, to a remark made by one of the characters. "At work abroad, I was always pleased to say: I am a Canadian; I am nobody; I am everybody" (46). The ease of passage and transferral thus facilitated is eminently preferable to the militarizing nationalisms adumbrated in the narrative.

Running beneath a newly discovered suppleness and lyrical fluency in the writing, is a ghostly sub-text of horror and violence as Europe reaches decisive turning-points in its historical development. What we conventionally call text-time, unfolding a linear presentation of information about things, and necessarily progressing from line to line and page to page, is subverted by a march in time which, from 1983 in the opening story about the suicide of Jane Seymour, and after a sideways step to her brother Ian in the next story, moves backwards to explore first her father in "The Garden of the Hesperides," then her mother Gwen, in "Serenissima." In the book's second half, we move firstly to the France of the Belle Epoque before closing with Weimar Germany.

The first story, "In the Night Heinrich Himmler . . ." emblemizes some of Smith's concerns, in a study of his contemporary character Jane Seymour haunted (in nightmare? — in fantasy? — in historical memory?) by the erotic attentions of Hitler's henchman. And if, as figure, Jane is historicized by Tudor associations, then past and present flow in Heraclitean flux. Characteristically, Smith foregrounds his authorial role and focuses uncompromisingly on the fictionality of his creation, though again with the teasing resonance of Tudor precedent: "Does it matter that there was not a real Jane Seymour? I don't think so, but I hope you found her convincing. And I'm afraid you almost certainly know one woman like her" (25). When Jane's father Bill later reflects upon his dead wife, "and that is why I wept" (54), he links back to Smith's authorial presence here: "When I think of their sufferings, their struggles, and for some, their suicides, I weep, as I weep now for Jane" (25). Similarly, when Bill remembers his wife "as perhaps serene or self-

absorbed" (52), he looks forward to her lyrical, if elegizing resurrection in Gwen Seymour's own story, the heart of the writing in *Century*, "Serenissima."

Having decided that Venice was the appropriate setting for her impending death, Smith proceeded to steep himself in reading about the city before arranging for a visit to look at the place for himself.

[r.s.] "I got back toward the end of January and I started to write. I wanted to get right into the story. Gwen's having a bath. O.K., we'll start the thing by sending her to a hotel reception on the first night, and something's going to happen to her there. So she gets out of the bath, 'serene was she as she stepped' — and I could hear it happening with those repeated 's' sounds: this is a sensuous story. I looked at the bath-tub, and what was it — 'from the foam of her bath onto' — what did the floor look like when we were in Venice? — 'sea-shell patterned tiles.' Well, 'but then Gwen felt again' — and I wondered where the syllables and cadencing were coming from. She steps out of the bath and there's a stitch in her side. First of all it was just a stitch, for about two seconds, that is, that she 'took as a threat, a foreboding.' And then the whole damn story was there. Gwen started to walk, and all I had to was follow."

Gwen's voracious sexual appetite is in part an inheritance from her mother Constance whose secret name Gwen couldn't remember. That sexuality forms part of the libertine make-up Gwen passes on to Jane who opens the book; and Constance, in the opening lines of the book's last chapter, changes her name to Lulu. The brothel in which we first meet Kenniston Thorson, consort of Constance/Lulu and as such Gwen's putative father, seems the natural terminus ad quem for such habits and attitudes, though again chronologically pre-dating them. Smith is at further pains to lend fibre and linkage to his attenuated chronology. When Toulouse-Lautrec, in "Red Velvet, Black Lace" says "France is a mother to us all, but Paris is as much a harlot as the girls at Madame Eugenie's" (112), the echo takes us back in the text and forward in time to Gwen Seymour (whose own mother, Constance/Lulu has already been described as "a whore" [77]) listening to her husband discuss with a Frenchman and an Englishman sexual perceptions of "La Serenissima Repubblica di Venezia":

"You see," began her husband, "if Venice really is feminine . . ."

"Then," continued the Frenchman, "the Venetians have never been better than pimps . . ."

The Englishman concluded softly: "And Venice is their whore." (81)

Thorson tousles Lulu's "Titian-red hair" (130), and the resonance returns us to Gwen's Venetian rising from her bath onto "sea-shell patterned tiles" (71). And when Lulu concocts a tale about an Easter egg that "was of red enamel and had a portrait of me and one of cousin Nicky and there were tiny pearls that were his eyes . . ." (132), the phrase from *The Tempest* evokes the moment before Gwen's

crushing humiliation in Jean-Claude's hotel room: "Yes, the isle was full of noises, sweet sounds and airs that gave delight and hurt not. Was it not so?" (86).

**T**HIS CROSS-WEAVING of interior designs produces some spectacular effects. As the book ends, Thorson and Lulu, about to board a train at Munich station, meet the composer Alban Berg, one of several historical figures who wander in and out of this fictional world, who shows them a copy of his opera *Wozzeck*. Berg, then, whose next opera is to be *Lulu*, meets her textual incarnation, and as they part addresses a remark to her in German. She asks for a translation, and Thorson obliges:

He said: A soul on the other side . . . in Paradise, I think we'd say . . . who rubs the sleep from her eyes. I expect it's a quotation. (159)

Indeed it is: a quotation not only from the Wedekind play which Berg adapted into operatic form, but something else too. When Gwen, wandering around Venice eighty pages earlier, comes upon the sea for which she has been searching, we read: "She stepped slowly through the frame, into the light, a soul in Paradise, rubbing the sleep from her eyes" (79).

The phrase "in Paradise" carries us further back again, to the textual presentation of *Century's* main Canadian figure. Gwen's husband, Bill Seymour, after a lifetime's dedication to international altruism, retires Candide-like to cultivate his own garden. If the text as a whole proposes possible correlations between person and place: Gwen and Venice, Lulu and Weimar Germany; then in the figure of Bill Seymour a partial element of Canadian identity finds purpose in location, a place to stand on, "here on the coast of British Columbia" (43). Having witnessed something less than success in the effects of international aid, particularly in Africa, he seeks consolation in smaller compass: "A failure as an angel in the great world, I shall try my hand as a god in this little one" (43). Bill muses upon etymological relationships: "Our word *paradise* can be traced back to the old Persian *pairidaeza* meaning an area walled around or enclosed" (49). But other realms, beyond the safely circumscribed, keep intruding: "now when I contemplate living in my paradise, I am tormented by the spectre of those degraded multitudes, and all delight is gone from my garden" (51).

Counterpointing its gaps and elisions, these intratextual motifs of doublings, echoes, and repetitions lend depth and bonding to the writing. And as part of this connecting fibre, in a text suffused with threat, exploitation, and global violence, *Century* encloses historical event within its realia of discourse. Or, the reader's safe confinement within the realm of fictive narration, inside its walled garden so to speak, is threatened, jeopardized by intrusions into that world of elements from



other realms. In its progressive imbrication of the real with the unreal, *Century* composes a Canadian textuality out of the displacements and indirections which are everywhere its characteristic devices.

For it is a marked feature of the second part of the novel, "The Continental," that its historical detail strives for verifiable accuracy. The brothel upon which "Red Velvet, Black Lace" opens is an apt setting for the prostitution of diplomacy and for private avarice, as World War I looms:

Recently for example, a most obliging gentleman friend from the Quai d'Orsay had given Fifi warning of an impending "incident" in North Africa which together with hints Madame had gathered about adjustments in Austro-Hungarian naval policy had enabled the ladies to make a tidy profit in German armaments shares. (98)

Into this house of pleasure step Arthur Balfour and George Wyndham, gleaning whatever information they might, along the way.

Earlier, Kenniston Thorson absent-mindedly watches opera-goers milling about in front of the Café de la Paix:

Through this chattering, gesticulating crowd strode three army officers, artillery by their insignia. They sounded a jarring note, the cocky tilt of their Kepis, their nonchalant shrugs suggesting an impatience with these aimless civilians: Sedan would never be far from their thoughts. (111)

Inevitably linking forward to the young A. J. P. Taylor's question addressed to Kenniston Thorson, "would France ever forgive Verdun?" (136), the incident of the three officers has a different significance. One of them, although not named as such, was in Smith's creating imagination the young Alfred Dreyfus: an intriguing example of historical detail absolutely denied to the reader.

**A**S RAY SMITH ELIDES THE BOUNDARIES between historical personality and fictional character, "The Continental" section of *Century* incorporates a debate upon aspects and functions of art. Toulouse-Lautrec proposes while Frank Harris disagrees, and the famed of Parisian cultural life in the 1890s flit across the page. In a conjunction at once glittering and disturbing, the production of art and the gathering clouds of war merge in uneasy coalescence. Lautrec, pronouncing upon balancing and unbalancing in art (115-16) seems to speak directly to A. J. P. Taylor's remarks upon "the balance of power" (136) in international relations. Either way, the boundaries of fiction are blurred. Far from being well defined and sealed off, fictional borders appear to be variously accessible, sometimes easy to trespass, obeying different sorts of constraints in different contexts. American intertexts with an international ambience locate and connect *Century* in a variety of ways. When we read that "[Comtesse Amalie's] voice

stuttered into silence in the violet twilight" (*Century* 110), lines from *The Wasteland* are conjured:

What is the city over the mountains  
Cracks and reforms and bursts in the violet air  
Falling towers  
Jerusalem Athens Alexandria  
Vienna London  
Unreal.<sup>9</sup>

Both texts refer back to an earlier North American visitor to Europe, himself re-composing an identity from many recognitions dim and faint:

Two or three of the windows stood open to the violet air; and, before Strether had cut the knot by crossing, a young man had come out and looked about him. . . .<sup>10</sup>

In *The Ambassadors*, too, in a remark made by Miss Barrace, we find a measure of the purpose behind this kind of allusive web:

"We're all looking at each other — and in the light of Paris one sees what things resemble. That's what the light of Paris always seems to show." (128)

The last chapter of *Century* precipitates a series of intertextual relations which correlates Smith's fiction with a range of relevant discourses. Apart from the obligatory "if April is cruel" (152), among the travellers are E. M. Forster's Miss Schlegel, "only connecting" (131) and Isherwood's Arthur Norris "changing trains" (142). We meet Harry Kessler and a seventeen-year-old Alan Taylor. From Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* echo a "Princess of Thurn & Taxis" (herself a historical figure incorporated into fiction) and "Countess Tristero" (134); then, three pages later, "Richard Wharfinger."

In *Century*, Ray Smith constructs an intertextual zone where only a Canadian character — Bill Seymour — is at home. In keeping with his string-of-pearls image, Smith invites the reader to recognize the relations between two or more texts, or between specific texts and particular historical periods. As part of this process, he incorporates characters from another text or from the historical record. The transmigration of characters from one fictional universe to another enables the producing text to claim for them, in Umberto Eco's phrase, "transworld identity."<sup>11</sup> It is an identity given concrete definition in the episode when Thorson is telling the young Taylor a story he had heard from Percy Grainger — another historical figure — "an Australian, studied in Germany, has collected a great deal of English folk music, but . . . [whose] passion is for the North" (136). The textual indirection of a story told and retold combines with the geographical displacement of one of its tellers. But this is then compounded and resolved when Thorson tells Taylor how the Norwegian composer Edvard Grieg had complimented Grainger on one of Grainger's Norwegian suites. "Now you will notice," Thorson continues to

Taylor, "the essential generosity of that story: a native of country A generously composes something for country B and the greatest native composer of country B generously praises him for it" (137). Contrasted with this internationalism is the small-minded enclosure of Thorson's home in Indiana, where domestic ignorance and prejudice bloodily inhibits even local relationships. Thorson's story concludes, though, with an allusion to *The Crying of Lot 49*: "when that matter was settled to the satisfaction of all concerned, it reminded one of a curtain scene from Thomas Kyd or Richard Wharfinger" (137).

We are, then, perhaps justified in attending to the series of verbal echoes from Pynchon's second novel contained in the closing pages of *Century*. In both texts railways figure as communications system and as metaphor. Oedipa Maas feels the network of relationships she thinks she has discovered to be a threat to her stability:

She stopped a minute between the steel rails, raising her head as if to sniff the air. Becoming conscious of the hard, strung presence she stood on — knowing . . . how these tracks ran on into others, others, knowing they laced, deepened, authenticated the great night around her.<sup>12</sup>

Moving in darkness, Oedipa's paranoia increases the more she considers the scope and range of the interconnections in which she feels enmeshed. All of which is distinctively different from the perspective of Ray Smith's American, Kenniston Thorson. With a clear-eyed awareness that the alternatives are random contingency, chance and brute process, and moreover, in an episode which is followed by a compelling and memorable evocation of human cruelty in Eliot's wasteland, Thorson considers "the switchman for the small branch line who must remember to pull that lever . . . for forty-five years without a mistake. . . .

Is it enough that he is part of something, part of the network, the system, the idea that is bigger than him and his little hut, but encloses them, the idea which comes on silvered rails that stretch to Munich, to Vienna, to Istanbul, to Baghdad? (152)

The questions continue, and in terms of novelistic resolution, *Century* proposes no answer. But its technical attributes, inscribing many varieties of relatedness, and foreshadowing the possibilities of many more, suggest a knowing, if partial, assent.

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> W. H. New, "Maritime Cadences," *Canadian Literature: Special Issue on the Maritimes* No. 68-69 (Spring/Summer 1976), 3.
- <sup>2</sup> Ray Smith, *Cape Breton is the Thought Control Centre of Canada* (Toronto: Anansi, 1969).
- <sup>3</sup> Smith, "Author's Commentary," in *Sixteen by Twelve: Short Stories by Canadian Writers*, ed. John Metcalf (Toronto: Ryerson, 1970).
- <sup>4</sup> Smith, *Century* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1986).
- <sup>5</sup> Smith, "Dinosaur," in *The Narrative Voice: Short Stories and Reflections by Canadian Authors*, ed. John Metcalf (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1972).

- <sup>6</sup> The story first appeared in 1967 and is subtitled "A Centennial Project."  
<sup>7</sup> Smith, *Lord Nelson Tavern* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1974).  
<sup>8</sup> Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (London: Methuen, 1983), 44.  
<sup>9</sup> T. S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems & Plays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), 73.  
<sup>10</sup> Henry James, *The Ambassadors* (New York: Signet, 1960), 62.  
<sup>11</sup> Umberto Eco, "Lector in Fabula: Pragmatic Strategy in a Metanarrative text," in *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of the Text* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1979), 223.  
<sup>12</sup> Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (London: Picador, 1966), 124.

## LANDSCAPE WITH SNOW

*George Amabile*

It came again in the night, just when we thought  
we couldn't live any more with the view, the shack  
and its broken dock, the bleached-out driftwood caught  
like snapped bone in the rocks, and it softens the shock  
of day, this immaculate poultice of cold scum  
crystallized from clouds infected with chem-smoke  
where the sea breaks down each radioactive drum  
like a large mind probing a dense joke.

And we're free again to clothe ourselves in slogans.  
We remember why we are here. We rummage for bargains  
like tireless mice in fifty acre malls  
where the young lounge and wander, safely adrift,  
dreaming of power and stealth, believing in kraft  
food stuffs, video rock and lottery windfalls.

# ROYAL GARDEN HOTEL

*Colin Morton*

yesterday's snow storm on the 401 and today's  
rhododendrons on English Bay erect cones of  
blossoms on the chestnut trees what is between  
them but the distance I travelled without telling  
you the distance we travelled together the  
place we called home the place we went toward even  
if it wasn't there until we got there if I say  
remember when we drove in fog even if there was  
fog with the snow yesterday on the 401 even if fog  
hung over English Bay this morning obscuring the  
mountains you will remember the New Year's we  
skied in the mountains returning through fog so  
thick I stopped the car in the driving lane of the  
TransCanada and walked forward knowing I would  
still see nothing unless it was a ditched car and  
walked back thinking this is the stupidest thing I  
have ever done any minute another car may  
explode out of the fog and this morning another  
H-bomb sank to the bottom of the ocean and  
something fell out of the sky and landed on the  
car beside me I walked up and down the corridors  
looking for ice in this hotel where the soap  
disappears after every use and I wonder if this is  
assurance the H-bombs too might disappear I mean  
the ones on the ocean floor the distance too the  
distance I travelled without you the distance too  
might end on the ocean floor where it never  
freezes and there is no fog nor light



# ONDAATJE'S METAMORPHOSES

“*In the Skin of a Lion*”

Michael Greenstein

“He who first proclaimed in architecture the dynamic equilibrium of the masses or first constructed the groined arch brilliantly expressed the psychological essence of feudalism. . . . In the Middle Ages a man unconsciously recognized the plain fact of his own existence as service, as a kind of heroic act.”

— OSIP MANDELSTAM, “François Villon”

**R**OBERT ALTER'S DESCRIPTION of contemporary fiction captures much, but not all, of Michael Ondaatje's prize-winning novel, *In the Skin of a Lion*: “there is a cultivated quality of rapid improvization, often a looseness of form; love of pastiche, parody, slapdash invention; a wilful neglect of psychological depth and subtlety or consecutiveness of characterization; a cavalier attitude toward consistency of incident, plot unity, details of milieu, and underlying all these a kind of despairing skepticism, often tinged with the exhilaration of hysteria, about the validity of language and the very enterprise of fiction.”<sup>1</sup> What this description fails to take into account are the historical and political dimensions of certain postmodern texts, such as *In the Skin of a Lion*, but for those categories we may turn to Ihab Hassan: “in the question of postmodernism there is a will and counterwill to intellectual power, an imperial desire of the mind, but this will and desire are themselves caught in a historical moment of supervention, if not exactly of obsolescence.”<sup>2</sup> Hassan goes on to list various criteria distinguishing modernism (design, hierarchy, totalization, centring) from postmodernism (chance, anarchy, decreation, dispersal); according to these, millionaire Ambrose Small and Commissioner Rowland Harris would be masters of modernism in Ondaatje's historical novel, while most of the other characters pitted against them would constitute counter discourses of post-modernism. Or, to put the matter more precisely in Jonathan Arac's terms: “this new Marxism and postmodernism share the conviction that literature and theory and criticism are not only contemplative, not mere superstructure, but active; they share commitments to human life in history.”<sup>3</sup>

Like many other postmodern texts, *In the Skin of a Lion* opens with multiple epigraphs, dedications, and acknowledgements that signal its intertextuality. The first epigraph is taken from *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, a Babylonian legend of creation: “The joyful will stoop with sorrow, and when you have gone to the earth I will let my hair grow long for your sake, I will wander through the wilderness in the skin of a lion.”<sup>4</sup> These words are spoken by Gilgamesh, the godlike builder, after the death of his friend Enkidu, a wild or natural man. In Ondaatje’s allegory, Patrick Lewis and Nicholas Temelcoff, two heroic builders and men of nature, lament the death of Alice Gull. With all the melancholy of Ecclesiastes, this passage points to a levelling that pervades the novel — political, economic, and cultural stooping from High Modernism to the horizontals of late-capitalist post-modernism. Moreover, what Ondaatje further emphasizes in the course of his narrative is a process of allegorical metamorphosis from high to low as he progresses from Ovid through Kafka and beyond.<sup>5</sup> And if his first epigraph deals with an ancient epic or high mimetic model, his second epigraph from John Berger, Marxist postmodernist, goes a long way to undercut any sense of epic totality. “Never again will a single story be told as though it were the only one” reminds us of multiple perspectives and fragments for reader and writer wandering through a verbal wilderness.<sup>6</sup>

Aside from their internal relationships to the rest of the novel, these introductory quotations serve as markers of postmodernism in contrast to less accessible (Latin or Greek) modernist epigraphs in Eliot’s *The Waste Land* or Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Joyce’s *Portrait* alludes to Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*: “Et ignotas animum dimittit in artes” — a picture of Daedalus applying his mind to obscure arts. Where High Modernism courts obscurity as in Stephen Dedalus’s aesthetic theories, postmodernism treads a middle course on human ground and remains equally skeptical of heights and depths. “It is important to be close to the surface of the earth” (141), and equally important, the surface of the text. In place of Daedalus’s labyrinthine artifice we find ordinary workers on straight bridges, in tunnels, or in tanning factories. Ondaatje deflates the hubris of modernism in his pastiche of labourer as a young man, and artist as cityscape. The incident of a nun falling from a bridge parodies traditional myth: during the fall she is described as a “black-garbed bird” (32), and after the fall the process of bridge building continues as if nothing had occurred — “a giant bird lifting one of the men into the air” (31). Man and machine are extensions of one another, while Alicia the parrot domesticates and completes the parody of the entire incident. Like the parrot in Sheila Watson’s *The Double Hook* and like Ondaatje’s workers, Alicia hangs in its cage in the Ohrida Lake Restaurant (itself an ironic descendant of Greek culture even as Cato is transformed from Roman statesman to union fighter, and Caravaggio from Renaissance artist to another kind of painter and honest thief). Just as this parodic parrot develops a language, so the nun assumes her name when she is transformed into Alice Gull, actress *engagée*, removed from convents to the

Parrot Theatre in her postlapsarian identity. Robert Scholes comments on this type of projection of a cultural fantasy onto an allegorical scene: “[post]modern fabulation, like the ancient fabling of Aesop, tends away from the representation of reality but returns toward actual human life by way of an ethically controlled fantasy.”<sup>7</sup> From *pseudacris triseriata* (66) to *homo sapiens* in this book of beasts, Hazen Lewis calls “Birdie fly out and the crow fly in, crow fly out and give birdie a spin” (185) around a decentering square dance.

**F**ROM THE OUTSET, an inset passage frames the text, calling into question the relationship between inner and outer, structurally and thematically, when we consider how an outsider like protagonist Patrick Lewis comes to inhabit a lion’s skin. “This is a story a young girl gathers in a car during the early hours of the morning.” Reader, writer, and rider together gather Ondaatje’s story, participating in a dialogic process. But who is in the driver’s seat — Hana Gull or Patrick Lewis? In this opening frame Hana is the passenger, but at the novel’s end Hana drives, adjusting the rear-view mirror to her height while Patrick, luxuriating in the passenger’s seat, talks the gears to her. In this early morning drive, reader and writer shift gears, exchange positions, and adapt that rear-view mirror to reverse history’s mimetic process, as Patrick “brings together” and Hana “gathers” corners of an elliptical story. In response to his opening question, “Do you see?” Patrick concludes the novel with “Lights” to focus cinematically on an unbetrayed countryside and an equally betrayed history, to highlight horizons of inner and outer, and to examine metamorphoses. Through her looking-glass along the roadway to Marmora, Alice Gull’s daughter reviews Toronto’s past in fact and fiction.

“Little Seeds” begins in the third-person present tense, a historic present occasionally switching to past even as spatial shifts from window to window create a cinematic, surrealistic effect in the early dawn. “If he is awake early enough the boy sees the men”; this conditional announces the awakening of Patrick Lewis from nameless boyhood to manhood, a coming of age parallel to Toronto’s growth earlier this century. Like David Canaan in *The Mountain and the Valley*, Patrick window watches as a procession of loggers passes his farmhouse as if in a Michael Snow montage. Like Ondaatje’s political direction in this novel, they move from right to left, just as Patrick must soon move outside his fenestrated cocoon to join a larger community of workers. When these unnamed men place their hands on cows’ warm flanks to receive heat, they participate in more than thermal exchange, for “hands” symbolize manual labour as well as a bridging with humanity, nature, and art — bovine and textual black and white. (Pastoral and industrial worlds intersect later in the novel when Nicholas Temelcoff tries to “shepherd the new ribs of steel onto the edge of the bridge” [40].) These thirty loggers constitute a



“strange community,” a “collection of strangers” who do not own land around Bellrock. “It takes someone else, much later, to tell the boy” (8) their identity, but for now these estranged immigrants remain an enigma to Patrick and his uninitiated reader.

If we have to wait later for revelation, then we have to read earlier to locate Bellrock, not on a map of Ontario, but in an earlier poem by Ondaatje. “Walking to Bellrock” describes two figures “in deep water,” wading through the silt of history: “The plot of the afternoon is to get to Bellrock.”<sup>8</sup> If this poem has a plot, then the later novel contains a poem about history. In terms of intertextual literary history, we witness Ondaatje’s metamorphosis from the germ of a poem to “Little Seeds,” a prose poem where boundaries between fact and fiction, lyric and narrative break down in dialogues between texts. And this dialectic of boundaries, which parallels postmodern levelling of hierarchies in class and culture, carries through toward the end of the novel when Ambrose Small retreats to Patrick’s birthplace. Indeed, the last two sections, “Caravaggio” and “Maritime Theatre,” present alternating versions of loosening structures and zones. Painting the tin roof of the Kingston Penitentiary blue (not the modernist hue of Wallace Stevens’ guitar but the more improvised “spider blues” of jazz), Patrick and Caravaggio become uncertain of clear boundaries so that the painted painter becomes indistinguishable from the sky. Through this metamorphosis the prisoner gains his freedom and comments, “Demarcation. . . . That is all we need to remember” (179). And the reader remembers these instructions when Caravaggio later makes Patrick invisible in preparation for dynamiting the tunnel. “Demarcation” (228), Caravaggio repeats, and we get the sense that it means its opposite — an effacement of all distinctions in air or water, fire or earth, four elements for a dynamics of making and destroying.

Similarly, Ondaatje plays with notions of horizon in his cinematic levelling and dissolving. Patrick’s entry to Toronto is marked by a sign in Union Station — HORIZON — at some distance from Sinclair Ross’s prairie town. “Horizon” seems to imply “barrier”; Patrick’s relationship with Alice has a horizon (137), and he becomes aware of his own inner horizon beyond which he cannot leap (157). Caravaggio, instructor of demarcation, sees and feels no horizon when attacked in his cell, while the millionaire thief Ambrose Small constructs separate high walls so that his lover Clara Dickens cannot see the horizon that holds him together (213, 215). Ondaatje opens horizons to admit history and politics from a newer perspective that endlessly questions: “questions about how ideologies are formed, the process whereby conventions are developed, the need for individuals to exercise their own imaginative and linguistic powers lest these powers be co-opted by others.”<sup>9</sup> Left-hand lyrics, narratives, and photographs with open lens expose the horizontal tricks of men walking in another march of history.

FROM HIS FIRST DESCRIPTIONS of Bellrock's winter, Ondaatje switches immediately to summer, this seasonal metamorphosis pointing to the loggers' evanescence, their absence filled by summer's insects. At night Patrick studies his geography books, "testing the names to himself, mouthing out the exotic" (9), his apprenticeship reflecting his author's larger concerns for a self-reflexive naming of place and history through an oral tradition that combines exotic Nepal with ex-centric Bellrock. A postmodern reader of surfaces, Patrick closes his book and brushes it with his palms, "feeling the texture of the pebbled cover and its coloured dyes which create a map of Canada" (9). Just as a book's coloured dyes create Canada, so the dyers' hands at Wickett and Craig's tannery recreate an unwritten history of Canadian labour. "They had leapt into different colours as if into different countries" (130). Patrick moves from place to place, book to book, window to window — a horizontal shape shifter who exchanges roles so that other readers or insects may temporarily assume the role of protagonist during a summer night's inquiry.

From his early unmediated vision in Bellrock he will proceed to the cultural mediation of Toronto's Riverdale Library to learn the real names of these hoppers and moths. "There will suddenly be order and shape to these nights" (9), provided that the reader remains open to Patrick's epiphanies and books, fictional and formal titles, imagination and documentary. Examining these prehistoric creatures up close he haunts them, even as they haunt him, and even as Ondaatje enters the skin of history's previously unexamined: "He wants conversation — the language of damsel flies who need something to translate their breath the way he uses the ocarina to give himself a voice, something to leap with over the wall of this place" (10). Ondaatje's dialogic imagination gives voice to these dainty monsters, transforms lyric into narrative, privileges the underprivileged, and ultimately transcends all boundaries in his postmodern leap into history.

No sooner does he describe these summer nights than he shifts back to a winter scene in his nameless region where Patrick and his father Hazen rescue a cow that has fallen through the ice. This levelling act of salvation will be repeated in different forms in the rest of the novel, but in this section of "Little Seeds" as soon as Patrick returns home he imagines himself through winter and into midsummer when he helps his father set fire to caterpillar tents. These caterpillar flames are a prelude to mightier ignitions: Hazen practises blowing up an outline of his son's body before dynamiting the landscape around Bellrock. Chopping into hemlock, Hazen imagines levelling the entire landscape; the idea of an explosion strikes him as an epiphany, so the abashed father, like his son, becomes an explosive artist, a liberator of landscape for the transformation of pulp from tree to text. Hazen works at surfaces, unearthing a hidden history, following the horizontal zig-zag

of fuses. He is meticulous in washing his clothes every evening in case of remnants, "little seeds of explosive on his apparel" (19). Like these superficial bits, little seeds of knowledge spark Patrick and little seeds of narrative surprise the reader who follows Patrick and some lightning bugs to the river in winter. Out of season fireflies must be some kind of *ignis fatuus* belonging to carnivalesque loggers — "a coven, or one of those strange druidic rituals — illustrations of which he had pored over in his favourite history book" (21). Ondaatje's favourite game challenges the master narrative of history books with little seeds of fire and passion. "(Years later, Clara making love to him in a car, catching his semen in a handkerchief and flinging it out onto bushes on the side of the road. *Hey, lightning bug!* he had said, laughing, offering no explanation [20].)" No explanation is required for this dissemination of white dwarfs just as no explanation is needed for the procession of fire on ice. For the eleven-year-old's *rite de passage* a "tree branch reached out, its hand frozen in the ice" (21), while he longs to hold hands with these skaters under bridges, past boundaries. "But on this night he did not trust either himself or these strangers of another language enough to . . . join them" (22). Later, with the evolution of little seeds, Patrick will join the hands of immigrants and translate their other language. "Little Seeds" is a world without women or speech: no mother for Patrick, no wife for Hazen or the loggers, silence for skaters of another language awaiting germination and engendering.

From 5 A.M. and the fire of Bellrock we move to fire at 5 A.M. in Toronto, scene of "The Bridge." Just as the loggers do not own the land they traverse, so these tarrers of the Dominion Bridge Company "don't own the legs or the arms jostling against their bodies" (25), for they are alienated labourers (*bitumiers, bitumatori*) without a voice in history. Like one of Turner's cityscapes, the "bridge goes up in a dream," as Ondaatje lends his lyrical imagination not to nature but to the mechanical: a "man is an extension of hammer, drill, flame" (26) involved, like an artist, in the process of building bridges. Four thousand photographs from various angles of the bridge in its time-lapse evolution confirm John Berger's theory of pluralism, not modernism's single story but the multiplicity of postmodernism. Wordsworth's view from Westminster Bridge belongs to Romanticism, Hart Crane's "The Bridge" to modernism, and Ondaatje's Bloor Street Viaduct to postmodernism. Crane poses the question, "Whose head is swinging from the swollen strap"? Ondaatje answers; both could write "Chaplinsque" or "The Moth That God Made Blind" or "The phonographs of hades in the brain / Are tunnels that re-wind themselves." With its historical revisionism, *In the Skin of a Lion* focuses on political ceremonies, not from the point of view of politicians but from the perspective of an anonymous public. Thus, a cyclist, "a blur of intent," beats the officials across the bridge, but even he is not the first to claim it, for the previous night the workers carried their candles across "like a wave of civilization, a net of summer insects over the valley" (27). Ondaatje's similes and metaphors bridge history,

democracy, horizontal voids, nature, and a post-Romantic organicism from section to section of his novel. The metaphor of the Text, according to Barthes, is that of the *network*.<sup>10</sup>

Even when he presents the official version from Commissioner Harris's viewpoint, Ondaatje challenges traditional historical accounts. "Before the real city could be seen it had to be imagined, the way rumours and tall tales were a kind of charting" (29). To map history, a tall tale follows: five nuns march across the bridge, one is blown off, disappears yet is saved by Nicholas Temelcoff, unsung hero and artist. The structure of Prince Edward Bridge or Bloor Street Viaduct is the structure of society with its various levels; and the nun's fall initiates a levelling metamorphosis when she abandons her habit to emerge as Alice Gull. Just as Temelcoff saves Alice, so Ondaatje rescues him from archival oblivion. "Again and again you see vista before you and the eye must search along the wall of sky to the speck of burned paper across the valley that is him, an exclamation mark, somewhere in the distance between bridge and river. He floats at the three hinges of the crescent-shaped steel arches. These knit the bridge together. The moment of cubism" (34). A metafictional exclamation mark on paper and an intertextual reference to Berger's "moment of cubism" place *In the Skin of a Lion* squarely in the tradition of postmodernism. Like Patrick and his father, Temelcoff is a solitary artist bridging the century, knitting modern to postmodern; like Bertha in Leonard Cohen's *The Favourite Game*, he is a spinner linking everyone, for Ondaatje has gone one step further than Cohen who had placed Breavman temporarily in a foundry.<sup>11</sup>

INDEED, WITH ITS DEDICATION and four epigraphs, Berger's essay "The Moment of Cubism" serves as a kind of blueprint for *In the Skin of a Lion*. Intertextual bridges span Arnold Hauser's "There are happy moments, but no happy periods in history" and El Lissitzky's "The work of art is therefore only a halt in the becoming and not a frozen aim on its own."<sup>12</sup> Hauser's remark carries backward to the sorrowful *Epic of Gilgamesh* while El Lissitzky's Bergsonian line leads directly to Ondaatje's aesthetics. Ondaatje's cubistic moment arises out of Berger's description of an unhappy period earlier this century. "An interlocking world system of imperialism; opposed to it, a socialist international; . . . the increasing use of electricity, the invention of radio and the cinema; the beginnings of mass production; . . . the new structural possibilities offered by the availability of steel and aluminum."<sup>13</sup> Ondaatje displaces an interlocking system with his cinematic intertext replete with poststructural possibilities coursing through metallic surfaces. Cubists may have imagined the world transformed, but Canada's post-cubist imagines the very process of transformation, running through the family of mankind,

coming through slaughters of animals and labour, questioning the Enlightenment's progress with later process.

Consider once again the metamorphosis of a silent nameless nun into Alice Gull, vociferous political agitator. Abandoning her habit, she saves Temelcoff with her veil, an exchange of skins. From the radio's lyrics, from the Macedonian bar, from Temelcoff's injured skin, she learns a new language. "Now the parrot has a language" (37), "Words on the far side of her skin" (38), the zinc counter's surface an edge of another country, not Homeric Hellenism but Macedonian immigration with its difficult language — all of these problematize the texture and flux of language. Alice's penetration of society, her fall from an established church order, parallels Nicholas's absorption into Upper America, for they both learn new languages. When silent film metamorphoses into talking picture, North America receives a language that lights the way for immigration. Fairy tales, tall tales, translation dreams, and oral insinuation prepare for transatlantic adjustment. Alice and Nicholas twin: with his shears she cuts strips of her black habit to make a skirt for the street, while he sees Parliament Street from her point of view, the landscape transformed. He hangs like a bird, releases the catch on the pulley, and slides free of the bridge. Man and woman have been caught and liberated by the bridge joining east to west, outsider to insider, premodern to postmodern.

Like Nicholas Temelcoff, Patrick Lewis comes to Toronto as an immigrant and searches for Ambrose Small, but meets his mistress, Clara Dickens, instead. With his "brick" of a name, he falls in love with "the complex architecture of her past" (66), the historical and archi-textual structure of *In the Skin of a Lion*. When she accuses Patrick of having no remorse, he replies, "A strange word. It suggests a turning around on yourself" (67). This character trait transforms into the textual title of the second section of Book 2, "Remorse," suggesting self-reflexiveness. Character in print or person turns on itself, transforming representation and self-referentiality so that oral sex extends dialogue and little seeds: "He took it, the white character, and they passed it back and forth between them till it no longer existed, till they didn't know who had him like a lost planet somewhere in the body" (69). Interception and interruption characterize two ways of proceeding through Ondaatje's text: narrative pushes the reader forward while lyrical imagery turns around on itself. Vying with this white dwarf are the grey peacock or surplus figure attached to Small, and the green tree frog attached to the window of their room. In their erotic history Clara puts her mouth to this green belly against glass while Patrick slices Ambrose vertically in two with his penknife to exorcise him from Clara's mind. Ambrose is missing, Patrick disappears into Clara who got lost in piano music, Nicholas looks for his absent nun, and the reader becomes another searcher refilling historical absences with Ondaatje in the camouflage of Ontario's postmodern lightning bugs and off-white characters.

Patrick's oneiric trick with his penknife belongs within a pattern of cutting the epidermis of sensibility. Loggers emerge from their torso-sized windows (their skins of vision) to skate on blades made of old knives transforming the domestic into the cutting edge of the exotic. Ondaatje's postmodern utensils slice into fragments for pastiche. Hazen has always taught Patrick to save rope: "Always unknot. Never cut!" (14), yet he uses his knife to slice rope in an outrageous, luxurious act. Hazen's philosophy instructs the reader in strategies of reading — join with the writer wherever possible, but severing instead of bridging may also be necessary. Hazen cuts timber before graduating to dynamite. When Caravaggio quits the bridge after a year he cuts the thongs with a fish knife, thereby severing his nexus to labour and bridge. Temelcoff assembles rope, but Alice uses his wire shears to cut her habit. Artist, baker, and acrobat, "Nicholas is not attached to the travellers, his rope and pulleys link up only with the permanent steel of a completed section of the bridge" (40). Concrete poetry takes on a different meaning when he begins "to sing various songs, breaking down syllables and walking around them as if laying the clauses out like tackle on a pavement to be checked for worthiness, picking up one he fancies for a moment then replacing it with another" (42-43). Deconstructing language, the poststructural *bricoleur* juxtaposes its parts in metonymic sequences for the reader to reconstruct; that is, the reader builds real and fictional structures with character and author. Reader's, writer's, and Nicholas's "eyes hook to objects" (42) and to language — the double hook of making and destroying, connecting and breaking, representing and self-reflecting.

Clara Dickens's father uses a cow razor to shave his hounds to the skin, transforming and naming them with paint on their surfaces. Clara and Alice slip into tongues, impersonate people, and cut paper with draper's scissors to perform their spirit paintings, a parodic process. Denied access to the feminine earlier in his life, Patrick awakens to the magic of Clara and Alice. "He feels more community remembering this than anything in his life. Patrick and the two women. A study for the New World. Judith and Holofernes. St. Jerome and the Lion. Patrick and the Two Women. He loves the tableau, even though being asleep he had not witnessed the ceremony" (79). Incident transformed to art: New World and new age demand a different kind of canvas, inserting the past yet repainting the palimpsest with communal lyricism — *In the Skin of a Lion* sans St. Jerome. In his confrontation with Ambrose Small, Patrick uses his knife to cut open his burning coat and to cut Small's shoulder. After this accident Clara shaves him, wiping the razor in the quilt. "This was the way to know somebody's face" (98), for the skin of character or the surface of a postmodern text exposes itself through the pigments of pentimento. "She wanted to paint his face, to follow the lines of his cheek and eyebrow with colours. Make another spirit painting of him. He was less neutral now, his skin like the texture of a cave that would transform anything painted on it. She lathered his face, wanting to sculpt him" (98). Postmodernism transmutes

the primitive, probes surfaces and contiguous lines, and leaves traces: “discovering even the print of her hand perfect on the wallpaper, a print of blood on the English flowers” (100) — palimpsest of body against paper in the skin of a line.

Searcher turns tunneller turns tanner with his pilot knife slicing the hides in straight lines. The artist’s manual dexterity serves Patrick well: “Their knives weaved with the stride of their arms and they worked barefoot as if walking up a muddy river, slicing it up into tributaries. It was a skill that insisted on every part of the body’s balance” (129), like the loggers balancing on the Napanee River. Having spent his whole life learning tricks with a knife, Patrick saves Caravaggio whose throat has been slit in prison, but in the final section, “Maritime Theatre,” he cuts his own throat tunnelling through to Harris. Patrick’s curved pilot knife boomerangs in remorse, turning in on itself, another contradictory emblem of freedom and destruction, self-referentiality and realistic representation.

**K**NIVES CHANGE SHAPES, but there are other instruments of transformation in Ondaatje’s repertoire on the bridge from modernism to post-modernism. Shifting points of view, manipulation of perspective, or sleight of hand over surfaces also cause transformations. From the beginning of the novel when Patrick moves from window to window with no women in sight, we later move to Alice, striding from one frame of glass to another, watching Patrick depart for the train station. Ondaatje’s montage immediately juxtaposes Patrick’s vision against the train window, so cold after the previous night’s warmth. “Hungry for Clara, he thinks about Alice as if he has not focused on her before, as if Alice being touched by Clara has grown magically, fully formed” (78). Or fully transformed, as Patrick’s vision connects beyond himself and a *ménage à trois* into the visionary company of feminism and Marxism. Searching for Alice with a flashlight after her political performance gives Patrick additional insight. “What had been theatrical seemed locked within metamorphosis” (120). To unlock metamorphosis is to break down boundaries between drama, poetry, narrative, and cinema, and to unmake faces when Clara shaves Patrick, Patrick wipes paint from Alice’s face, and the boy Al unmask the painter Caravaggio. “Palace of Purification” shrinks under a microscope to “an eye muscle having to trust a fingertip to remove that quarter-inch of bright yellow around her sight” (121). Even at this minuscule level of metonymy, hand-eye co-ordination is paramount to establish communal feeling. A translator who himself undergoes transformations, Patrick is a “chameleon among the minds of women” (128) who leave him in custody of a blind iguana, while Nicholas Temelcoff, bridge builder turned baker, participates in the “metamorphosis of food” (149).

At the centre of the novel, "Palace of Purification," the longest section, focuses on the metafictionality of metamorphosis from "Little Seeds" to "Maritime Theatre." Arthur Goss's camera receives the image of two men in the tunnel under Lake Ontario; in receiving this image, the reader simultaneously participates in and distances himself from the labour of tunnelling. For every empathetic push of representation there is a surface alienation of self-referentiality to emphasize the workers' alienation and exploitation. Like his secret sharer, Nicholas, Patrick separates himself from the others only to reinsert himself in the unfinished choreography of 1930. Similarly the play (within the play) at the waterworks invites participation and paradoxically objectification; the illegal gathering acts as a *mise en abyme* for political subversion, for rewriting twentieth-century Canadian history by focusing on a disenfranchised minority. A community of immigrants oppose Harris's single-minded modernist design: populism contests palatial hubris, the underprivileged rise to privilege, putrefaction challenges purification, postmodernism goes after modernism. After dusk disappears into the earth, the multitudes, who had disappeared into the earth all day throughout history, arrive in silence. At this party and political meeting they trespass in response to the ways history has bypassed their efforts to construct a different society. Forty puppets on stage in costumes of several nations surround one life-sized puppet, the central character of this carnivalesque performance. If their stage is a "dangerous new country" (116), then this play re-enacts or caricatures an entire culture where distinctions between people and puppets break down. "A plot grew" (117) — at once metafictional and insurrectionary. Defined by gesture and detail of character, the hero links them all in this favourite game that recalls Temelcoff's heroic linking on the bridge. Barriers between actors and audience dissolve in this parody watched by Patrick watched by the reader *en abyme*. Underneath the mask with the manic hand trying to gesture a language is Alice Gull, and when Patrick goes backstage to find her he feels like an outsider intruding on a king's court.

To these overdetermined presences of photography and allegorical theatre, Ondaatje adds the role of a painter who would likewise frame scenes of labour to distance and embrace in a newer mimesis. "If he were an artist he would have painted them but that was false celebration. What did it mean in the end to look aesthetically plumaged on this October day in the east end of the city five hundred yards from Front Street? What would the painting tell?" (130). Ondaatje's painting would retell history to open ends and expose truths in false celebrations. With Alice's help Patrick undergoes a transformation in Toronto's east end intricate with history and ceremony; "the irony of reversals" (133) displaces Macedonians and Finns from margins to the centre of Canadian society. Musicians and writers come to the aid of painters to convert Patrick from mere bystander to political activist, yet the act of writing *In the Skin of a Lion* underscores the irony of action: "If only it were possible that in the instance something was written down — idea or emotion



or musical phrase — it became known to others of the era” (133). A belated *In the Skin of a Lion* disseminates this oral history even as Bizet’s *Carmen* transformed another kind of oral history: “The rejected *Carmen* of 1875 turning so many into lovers of opera. And Verdi in the pouring rain believing he was being turned into a frog [Caravaggio into Randolph Frog] — even this emotion realized by his contemporaries” (133). To add to this pastiche of canonization, Alice invokes Conrad’s letters to convert Patrick: “I have taught you that the sky in all its zones is mortal. . . . Let me now re-emphasize the extreme looseness of the structure of all objects” (135). Conrad first brings the heavens down to earth, then loosens structures or deconstructs reality in preparing for a shift from modernism to postmodernism.

Patrick the searcher soon turns into a researcher haunting the Riverdale Library with his author and reader looking over his shoulder at books and photographs juxtaposed in metonymic pastiche. He tries to match a photograph from Hana’s suitcases with newspaper photographs. “In books he had read, even those romances he had swallowed during childhood, Patrick never believed that characters lived only on the page. They altered when the author’s eye was somewhere else. Outside the plot there was a great darkness, but there would of course be daylight elsewhere on earth. Each character had his own time zone, his own lamp, otherwise they were just men from nowhere” (143). Illuminated book within book within text — Patrick lives on the surface of a self-referential page, but goes beyond to a representational world replete with *petits récits* of history with their shifting multiplicities and mortal time zones *ad astra*. These texts take on a physical texture, the proximity and rub of skin: “All his life Patrick Lewis has lived beside novels and their clear stories. Authors accompanying their heroes clarified motives” (82). Readers accompanying novelists seek this clarity which Patrick discovers in an epiphany, not on olympian heights of solitude, but amid a street-band. Intratextual and extratextual, a self-reflexive protagonist “saw himself gazing at so many stories . . . knowing now he could add music by simply providing the thread of a hum. He saw the interactions, saw how each one of them was carried by the strength of something more than themselves” (144). An outsider among outsiders, Patrick the solitary joiner finds community and is transformed from mere observer into active participant in Ondaatje’s postmodern quest. “His own life was no longer a single story but part of a mural, which was a falling together of accomplices. Patrick saw a wondrous night web — all of these fragments of a human order. . . . the detritus and chaos of the age was realigned” (145). Falling to democratic-socialist horizontals and nocturnal webs of light from Finnish skaters to the drive to Marmora constitutes the fragments of *In the Skin of a Lion* which readers must realign to comprehend another kind of history — one that doesn’t turn a blind eye to detritus or writing on the wall.

Ondaatje’s narrator admires the American photographer Lewis Hine who be-

trayed official histories by locating evils and hidden purity, by realigning chaos and order. “His photographs are rooms one can step into” (145), but disadvantaged Patrick never sees these photographs nor reads Conrad’s letters, although he does step into rooms to gaze into a poetics of space in camera. As close as Patrick is to language, his creator’s irony distances him and his readers from it, teasing them through the touch of metafiction. “Her favourite sentence hovers next to Patrick as he awakens” (146). Alice’s post-Romantic sentence about celestial mortality seems as tangible as her rosary or sumac bracelet which are juxtaposed with Patrick’s cutting into leather. These, in turn, coexist on the same page with references to the eleventh-century’s Bayeux Tapestry, all of which requires authorial instruction as to how every novel should begin: “Trust me, this will take time but there is order here, very faint, very human” (146). Subverting Aristotelian hierarchies, this postmodern *énonciation* reverses didacticism insofar as it demands an *un*-learning of traditional strategies of reading. “Meander if you want to get to town” steps outside of the text only to reinsert itself in the wilderness on the road from Bellrock to Marmora. Again like his reader, Patrick “turns the page backwards” even as Hana looks into her rear-view mirror to understand her Canadian origins. “All these fragments of memory . . . so we can retreat from the grand story and stumble accidentally upon a luxury, one of those underground pools where we can sit still. Those moments, those few pages in a book we go back and forth over” (148).

**T**HAT COLLECTIVE “WE” — writer, reader, character — in our belated retreat from and retreatment of history reverse concepts of luxury so that we elevate detritus above ground, somewhere between tunnels and bridge. No longer grand inquisitors at the still point of modernism, we interrogate foreground and background from agitated cesspools to a mortal sky. Within a chain reaction or network of metamorphosis Patrick transforms Nicholas Temelcoff while Ondaatje shifts gears on readers’ habits. “Patrick’s gift, that arrow into the past, shows him [Temelcoff] the wealth in himself, how he has been sewn into history. Now he will begin to tell stories” (149). Ondaatje’s arrow whistles *petits récits* that invert wealth and heroism; Patrick sews Nicholas into history only after he has stripped Ambrose Small of his surplus figure of capital. While the likes of Small and Harris must be submerged in a postmodernist version of history, the community of fictional others rise to the surface. Alice describes a play to Patrick in which several actresses share the role of heroine: a powerful matriarch removes her mantel and passes it to minor characters. “In this way even a silent daughter could put on the cloak and be able to break through her chrysalis into language. Each person had their moment when they assumed the skins of wild animals, when they took responsibility for the story” (157).

As a decentering star breaks down in the sky's mortal zones, the structure on stage also loosens into multiple stories transforming chrysalis into lunar moths with linguistic mouths. Patrick and other outsiders assume responsibility in their skins within *In the Skin of a Lion*, and it is up to the reader to peel away each epidermal layer, not necessarily to arrive at a final essence, but to participate in the process of skinning. By the end of the metafictional "Palace of Purification" Patrick finds himself moving towards the centre of a field, but Ondaatje's technique of cinematically framing this scene creates an aesthetic distance compounded by shifts in all tenses. "When he was twelve he turned the pages always towards illustration and saw the heroes carry the women across British Columbian streams. . . . This is only a love story. He does not wish for plot and its consequences" (160). With a cavalier attitude toward consistency of incident or plot unity, Ondaatje illustrates his text without the consequences of plot.

As Patrick Lewis reads in the library, alongside him on the shelves sit Ondaatje, Atwood, Berger, Bowering, Cohen, Findley, Fuentes, García Márquez, Hawkes, Hutcheon, Hodgins, Kroetsch, Munro, Rooke, Rushdie, Scobie, Solecki, Watson, and other poets, novelists, critics, and readers. But the library is only a stone's throw from the bridge, Patrick's scene of action: "As the agent of action is dispersed, so is the possibility of voluntary intervention, hence politics; postmodernism of course knows that the absence of politics is political, and (sometimes) fears the consequences of aloofness."<sup>14</sup> *In the Skin of a Lion* intervenes between library and bridge as Ondaatje traverses Ontario's history from a perspective of *différance*. Turning pages, readers turn into others, shedding light and skin with chameleons, frogs, iguanas, and moths in their fables of identity or counter histories of the imagination where communal desire goes against the grain of reification. Another young man from the provinces has brought his seed catalogue to the city to rebuild after Gilgamesh.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Robert Alter, *Partial Magic*, as quoted in Charles Newman, *The Post-Modern Aura: The Act of Fiction in an Age of Inflation* (Evanston: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1985), 31-32.
- <sup>2</sup> Ihab Hassan, "The Question of Postmodernism," in *Romanticism, Modernism, Postmodernism*, ed. Harry R. Garvin (Lewisburg: Bucknell Univ. Press, 1980), 119. See also D. W. Fokkema, *Literary History, Modernism, and Postmodernism* (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1984).
- <sup>3</sup> Jonathan Arac, ed., "Introduction" to *Postmodernism and Politics* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1986), ix. In the same volume see Bruce Robbins, "Feeling Global: John Berger and Experience," 145-61. In the same series see Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, 1984). For further discussions see *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1983), which contains important essays by Jürgen Habermas and Fredric Jameson.

- <sup>4</sup> Michael Ondaatje, *In the Skin of a Lion* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1987). Future references are to this edition. For the best discussion of this novel see Linda Hutcheon, *The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of Contemporary English-Canadian Fiction* (Toronto: Oxford, 1988), 93-104. For important discussions of Ondaatje's earlier work, see Sam Solecki, ed., *Spider Blues: Essays on the Writing of Michael Ondaatje* (Montreal: Véhicule, 1985), especially those essays on postmodernism by Solecki, Stephen Scobie, and Dennis Cooley.
- <sup>5</sup> See Gay Clifford, *The Transformations of Allegory* (London: Routledge, 1974).
- <sup>6</sup> George Bowering has also been influenced by John Berger in *Burning Water* whose title coincides with Carlos Fuentes' *Burnt Water*, which deals with the paradox of creation and destruction. Similarly, Ondaatje's intertextual network extends to John Hawkes' *Second Skin* with its opening chapter, "Naming Names." Coincidentally, John Moss locates himself in Bellrock in *Present Tense* to disturb divisions between primary and secondary sources.
- <sup>7</sup> Robert Scholes, as quoted in Lori Chamberlain, "Magicking the Real: Paradoxes of Postmodern Writing," in *Postmodern Fiction: A Bio-Bibliographical Guide*, ed. Larry McCaffery (New York: Greenwood, 1986), 16. See also Alan Wilde on fluid and shifting horizons in *Horizons of Assent: Modernism, Postmodernism, and the Ironic Imagination* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1981).
- <sup>8</sup> Ondaatje, *There's a Trick with a Knife I'm Learning to Do* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1979), 81-83.
- <sup>9</sup> McCaffery, "Introduction," xxv.
- <sup>10</sup> Roland Barthes, "From Work to Text," *Image-Music-Text*. Essays selected and translated by Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 161.
- <sup>11</sup> Cohen has influenced Ondaatje in poetry and in *The Favourite Game* and *Beautiful Losers*. See Stephen Scobie, "His Legend a Jungle Sleep," *Canadian Literature* 76 (Spring 1978), 15.
- <sup>12</sup> Quoted in John Berger, *The Moment of Cubism and Other Essays* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969), 2.
- <sup>13</sup> Berger, 5. Also on Berger see David E. James, "Cubism as Revolutionary Realism: John Berger and *G.*," *Minnesota Review* 21, 92-109; Pamela McCallum, "Postmodernist Aesthetics and the Historical Novel: John Berger's *G.*," *Minnesota Review* 28, 68-77; and Joseph McMahan, "Marxist Fictions: The Novels of John Berger," *Contemporary Literature* 23:2, 202-24.
- <sup>14</sup> Masao Miyoshi and H. D. Harootunian, "Introduction," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 87:3, 388. See also Stephen Slemon, "Post-Colonial Allegory and the Transformation of History," *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 23:1 (1988), 157-68. On the notion of architecture and intertexture from Benjamin to Berger and Ondaatje, see James L. Rolleston, "The Politics of Quotation: Walter Benjamin's Arcades Project," *PMLA* 104:1, 13-27.

# OF YOUR LOVE

*Robbie Newton Drummond*

Of your love  
for beautiful women  
sing no more

Speak to me  
of the fantail dragdance  
of pigeons

Gross city birds  
on sewer grates  
or high on the tarshingles

Ruffle  
coo and  
bellybloat

They mate straight out  
and no pretty words  
for their ragged flurry



## DOUBLE DISCOURSE

DAPHNE MARLATT & BETSY WARLAND, *Double Negative*. Ragweed/Gynergy, \$9.95.

FRED WAH, *Music at the Heart of Thinking*. Red Deer College Press, \$8.95.

WHEN MARLATT AND WARLAND read from *Double Negative* at Mrs. Dalloway's Books in Kingston, they explained the book's origin as a way to share the experience of travelling from Sydney to Perth along the railway line that contains "the longest stretch of straight railway in the world." Each wrote two poems a day and then they exchanged, discussed, and revised the results — at first with no thought of publication. Although Marlatt's poems alternate with Warland's, whose poem is whose is not clearly indicated, only one of the violations of convention in this collection:

walking into the diner  
'are you ladies alone'

'no'

'we're together'

Here are the two female negatives that make a positive, two Lesbian lovers who rewrite the train from inside as a womb, rather than from the outside as a phallus thrusting through the "empty" desert, which, since there was "nothing there," could be used for nuclear testing. This writing is a "word to word fight for defining / whose symbolic dominates whose." The "negative" images of women and of Lesbians are reclaimed on the train by two poets "thriving outside The Gaze," who have turned the gaze around, looking out through the moving window as through a camera lens at the outside world, but also realizing that the world looks back at

them as "night turns the lens around," the gazes of emus eyeing them. The film image is repeated in Cheryl Sourkes' three negative collages which superimpose words, photographs and aboriginal images. The collages divide the book into three sections. Reel 1 consists of poems, each titled by the name of a place along the line and the time the train passed through. The next section, called Crossing Loop, is a three-page conversation written after the trip about both the experience and the difficulties of rewriting the world from a feminine perspective. Here Warland talks of finding the desert a site for Lesbian rewritings, as in Jane Rule's novel *The Desert of the Heart*. The third section, Reel 2, consists of prose passages, relating the reel to the "real," bringing in more social and political concerns. The desert, in male economic terms, is "not worth developing." But the book reiterates that the boundaries that divide worthwhile from worthless are artificial, arbitrary signs of power:

"Welcome to Western Australia" the sign  
said

the desert on either side  
identical

Words are our boundaries, "but what if the boundary goes walking." Women have been the negative that defines the positive term "man" for too long, and now go walking in the desert, getting off the train, at first blinded by 360 degrees of light, but recovering

then a gradual sensation  
of the Great Wheel rolling under us  
of the Great Womb we call earth  
not solid not still  
but an ever turning threshold

The train journey is over, but the poem still unreels, unreeling the world we've taken for granted for so long.

Fred Wah was one of the founders of *TISH* in 1961; Marlatt's association with that magazine began in 1963. Both, influ-

enced by the poetics of the American Black Mountain School, are interested in the corporality of language and in pushing at the limits of syntax. The formal difficulty of Wah's *Waiting for Saskatchewan*, which won the Governor General's Award in 1985, was eased by its theme, the search for father and ancestors typical of many prairie writers. *Music at the Heart of Thinking*, as the title suggests, is much more theoretical. In it Wah is grappling with an issue at the forefront of literary theory — how to use reason when it has been implicated in so much that is negative about Western culture. "Scientific objectivity" has been discredited, as has a "male" rationality that represses "female" emotion. What will replace it (whose symbolic will dominate whose?) is in the process of being worked out. Thus he begins, "don't think thinking without heart." Instead he is developing, as he puts it, "a critical poetic that sees language as the true practice of thought." Thought, if theorized as separate from the world, can be hallucinated as "pure," "absolute," "disengaged"; Wah resists, seeing language as material, irrevocably in the world, tangled in a web of etymological, intertextual, and social connections, touched by all the forces that move people, including their hates, their loves, their delusions. What Marlatt has said about her own work fits Wah's: "I had definitely abandoned the textbook notion of sentence as the container for a completed thought, just as writing open form poetry had taught me the line has no box for a certain measure of words, but a moving step in the process of thinking/feeling, feeling/thinking." This is the way Wah puts it:

SENTENCE THE TRUE MORPHOLOGY  
OF SHAPE OF THE

mind including a complete thought forever  
little ridges little rhythms scoping out the  
total  
picture as a kind of automatic designing  
device

or checklist anyone I've found in true  
thought  
goes for all solution to the end concatenates  
every component within the lines within the  
picture as a cry to represent going to it with  
the  
definite fascination of a game where the  
number  
of possibilities increases progressively with  
each additional bump Plato thought

Occasionally, this becomes hard to bear: I was at first irritated, but later fascinated by Wah's constant refusal to stop dislocating his own meaning, "or as you say in this story / you rip up your own street." He does occasionally pander to old-fashioned tastes:

Now I know the names to measure  
in this language stream:  
whatever rhymes with no sense  
keys the dream.

Ultimately, however, what Wah writes can, more easily than what Marlatt and Warland write be co-opted into an avant-garde tradition that has little ultimate impact, however revolutionary its ideas. Perhaps this difference is simply the sheer scandal of their position, their need to ground their writing in their bodies, to oppose the conventional at every social level, not just at the level of language. As Shirley Neuman has said of Lola Lemire Tostevin's work, "one of the great strengths of the double discourse of feminist writing . . . [lies in] the difference it introduces into the dominant literary discourse [which] is not so much one of style — male writers use many of the same rhetorical strategies and women writers often learn from them — as one of ideology, an ideology of difference."

MARGERY FEE



## AMBIGUITIES

LOUKY BERSIANIK, et al., *La Théorie, un dimanche*. Editions du remue-menage, \$17.95.

JUDITH MESSIER, *Jeff*. Editions Trityque, \$13.95.

IT WOULD BE AN interesting exercise to read these two books together; the one an agonized attempt to theorize aspects of feminist writing, the other a light account of a "post-feminist" way of life. Perhaps the heroine of *Jeff* is living out a few of the ambiguities the women's movement has created, some of which are documented in *La Théorie, un dimanche*, an anthology of theoretical texts on the problematics of writing with a "feminist consciousness." The two texts are, however, better read separately, for the confusion between the inscription of woman-as-subject in *La Théorie, un dimanche*, and the curious lot of the woman-who-thinks-she's-subject-but-is-in-fact-object in *Jeff* would, in the end, be inappropriate.

In *La Théorie, un dimanche* six well-known feminist writers (Louky Bersianik, Nicole Brossard, Louise Cotnoir, Louise Dupré, Gail Scott, and France Théoret) have contributed texts they developed as a result of bimonthly conversations. Each theoretical text is followed by a fragment of unpublished work that generally resumes the themes raised in the preceding passage. The collection is held together by a very practical approach to writing with a feminist consciousness. Although this book in no way attempts to universalize women's experiences (plurality is stressed throughout), the basic premise obtains that "Chaque femme est amenée à recevoir dans sa chair et sa subjectivité, comme autant de paroles méprisantes et de gestes humiliants, suffisamment de données pour initier sa révolte."

Both Anglo-American and French theorists have addressed such issues over the last twenty years, and many of these Que-

bec texts are echoes of their predecessors. Yet certain aspects of language (English, French, or Catholic discourse) and of reception (the powerful male critic in a rather insular literature) are perhaps peculiar to Quebec feminist concerns. Moreover, in the words of Louise Cotnoir, feminist discourses need to be repeated, and become ritualized engrams (memory-traces) of women's experiences.

The inscription of "la femme-sujète" as more than just an element caught in the forceps-grip of the parentheses is the stuff of this anthology. Nicole Brossard identifies three components necessary to this type of conscious women's writing — motivation, decision, and concentration — all of which can only be gained in separation from the male culture. Gail Scott, the only anglophone writer in the group, problematizes the "tragic" female hero. In her view, the tragic has not only gone the way of linear discourse and been trivialized by contemporary usage, but in fact excludes the female hero. The female body gets in the way. For the moment feminist discourse must be a carnivalesque excess of language, and an ironic distancing from images of women in our culture. Louise Dupré's piece, too, is concerned with images — the a-morphous and anamorphous view of women — and it problematizes our current "post-feminism," a state in which the adolescent daughters of feminists are wary of the rigid postulates of feminism. Louise Cotnoir and France Théoret develop the question of language; for Cotnoir a dead and deathly language must be transgressed to incorporate "l'intégrité-femme." Théoret posits women's narratives as fundamental to an "idéal du moi" that transcends the "moi-actuel" and may eventually coincide with the "moi-idéal." Bersianik's contribution finally constitutes an attack on the traditional male critic who possesses neither the language nor the consciousness to do justice to feminist



texts, and thus seriously damages feminist projects. Bersianik's text paradoxically makes numerous references to the most recent generation of *male* French theorists (Barthes, Lacan, Lyotard) to support her arguments, thus exemplifying a problem that haunts much current feminist theory.

There is nothing quite so complex about *Jeff*. The book is a lively, sometimes amusing, more often pathetic, account of a somewhat uneven relationship between an older (35) Outremont writer, once proud of her independence and competence, and a younger (27) punkish man, whose true identity is not revealed until he has abandoned her. Mathilde's gratitude at the attentions of this anonymous younger creature is clear from the beginning: "Pourquoi, au milieu de toutes ces filles, la choisit-il, elle, une femme de trente-cinq ans?" The six-month relationship, marked by sensual pleasures and daily humiliations, and especially by her anxiety about his predictable departure, ends with Mathilde frantically searching through the bars and hang-outs of Montreal for a sign of the lover she knows only as Jeff.

Montreal, its bars, cafés, and discos, forms an interesting and colourful part of this book. The language is partly street-slang, partly high-French, since Jeff has spent time at various universities in France and other parts of the world. The book is amusing, but also annoying. Reading it with a "feminist consciousness" is disastrous.

However, I think that it touches a sore point in "post-feminist" discussions — specifically the "separatist" aspect of 1970's feminism. We see in this text, for instance, that some women need and seek more than just women's company and that the heterosexual world is an important domain. Mathilde's descent into compromise, humiliation, and dependency may be a symptom of a general

malaise with feminist dogma and theory. Or could it be a return to the masochism we thought we left behind?

LUISE VON FLOW

## JUST RELATIONS

JACK HODGINS, *The Honorary Patron*. Douglas Gibson/McClelland & Stewart, \$24.95.

"WHAT ELSE WAS the twentieth century about, if not an attempt to recover from Einstein's blow?" rhetorically asks the eponymous Jeffrey Crane while trying to avoid being either honoured or patronized near the beginning of this extraordinarily witty, moving, and "connected" novel. And where else does he ask it but in Zurich, "the city of clocks," and of whom but a revenant from another time, another space, another country (of a wench who is not dead). A novel about relativity we may suppose. And about reverence, reference, referentiality, relativity, relations, relating, revision, return, reclamation, referentiality.

Knowledge and its agent memory are subject to forcible and farcical revision throughout the novel. Jeffrey Crane, comfortably removed from the source of his memories for forty years, finds himself "dragged," "lured," "persuaded" — "going back" is a problem for language, too — back to Vancouver Island to become Honorary Patron of the Pacific Coast Festival of the Arts by that revenant, his former lover, Elizabeth Argent. Even there, he is (for a time) the psychological counterpart of Einstein's resisting force. He resists the "connections" that his one-time lover, his one-time boyhood enemy, his one-time home, his one-time dialect attempt to make with him and, in doing so, attempts to avoid a narrative of exile and return, a narrative of reclaiming roots, a narrative of the grateful prodigal,

a narrative of innocence lost in Europe. In resisting the past he resists (and falsifies) the present. More assertively, the bully of his boyhood, Blackie Blackstone, makes an impulsive mirroring trip to Europe at the novel's end — "I paid a fortune for this trip. I wasn't sure I wanted to make it, but I'll tell you this, goddammit: now I'm over here I want the works!" The novel tells of the space between those two travels and the extent to which Crane himself gets all that *he* paid for with many of its own evasions and lacunae.

For *The Honorary Patron* is, of course, a book about relating stories as well as relating to place and being in relationships and being a relation. His story (like history) is not what *is* but what is *told*. And Jeffrey Crane tells (some of) his story to Franz, his Zurich friend, by way of reclaiming his birthplace from European constructions and representations of it. He also becomes involved with a group of street actors during the Festival and becomes a part-time Lear, a role which echoes in all sorts of ways within and without the text (he meets one of his fellow-travellers in an argument over Fuseli's *Lear Banishing Cordelia* in Toronto). But the actors continually re-site their performance, remake Shakespeare in a way that is a distinctly post-colonial re-making. The novel is concerned in that distinctive post-colonial way with the referentiality of culture, with the intertextuality of writing in a way that contests the power of those relations.

*Lear* is just one of the many texts out of the European tradition which *The Honorary Patron* re-writes. Cast as Lear, a man who comes back after surrendering the Imperial source of power to seek a spurious relation with a false daughter, Crane finds that the text can be constantly revised, that he need not be trapped in the text of history. Like the novel itself (which ends with the report of a news-

paper account in which an essential piece of information is "still unknown to reporters at the time of writing"), Crane's story escapes becoming a narrative.

Re-placing, even mis-placing, is one of the tropes of the novel. Elizabeth Argent keeps imagining that she sees fictional characters in the streets of a Europe constructed for her in texts ("Having taught *The Lord of the Flies* ten thousand times, I don't know where I find the courage to board a plane full of students!") at the same time as she fears having lost her own (more physical) baggage; Einstein re-emerges as a personal motif in the work of a talented young painter for whom Jeffrey embarrassingly fails to be a true patron; Crane/Lear is eventually stripped bare during a protest to save a nudist beach; Blackie Blackstone feels "out of place" at the theatre; Nanaimo becomes part of "the world" when one of its sons is found to have provided a device to blow up a plane and its passengers; a young parachutist loses his way; audience and actors constantly intermingle. But these re-sitings are for strategic, not comic, effect: they serve to produce new relations, to re-announce relativity.

It is the relativity that derives from the necessary provisionality of accepting the difference in space-time of his various locations. Despite a strong temperamental inclination to do so, Jeffrey Crane learns no universal truths. The return to Vancouver Island is, of course, a return to times *and* places. He finds that his own childhood home is literally disappearing into the ground. He cannot re-connect with his sister, though she turns out to be more tenacious than he ever knew. The Dutch grandmother with whom he argued about the Fuseli *Lear* cannot quite connect with her son in the radical vegetarian commune in the hills but becomes a Vancouver Island sound-poet; Anna-Marie cannot find in Jeffrey the father she has lost, nor he in her the daughter he never

had or the lover he has lost in Elizabeth. But while the text has its fair share of Hodgins' proprietary Vancouver Island comic chaos, the komos, like the rest of the story, is (as usual) about the rearrangement, not the destruction, of connections. Indeed in this novel there is no single comic resolution, no single chaos, but a loose federation of them. It is a story that declines to end.

There is about *The Honorary Patron* a complexity of manner that exceeds that of Hodgins' earlier prose fiction. That is not to say that it is a difficult book to read — far from it: it is a sheer delight, a good read, compelling in character, plot, and voice. But the excess is in the form's refusal to confirm itself rather than in the excess of narrative invention or of utterance. There are echoes, verbal relations, to, perhaps, Faulkner, Patrick White — “even my most conservative instincts are to imitate somebody else who is breaking the rules” Hodgins said in an interview he gave Stephen Slemon and me in Brisbane. That delight in subverting the formal expectations of genre is the source of greatest pleasure in this book — the freedom that Crane aches towards in escaping the demands of imposed narratives is also the pleasure that the reader finds in the subversion of generic expectation and the rule(s) of imposed culture.

ALAN LAWSON

## MODERNISM & AFTER

DAVID PERKINS, *A History of Modern Poetry: Modernism and After*. Belknap/Harvard Univ. Press, \$35.00.

ONE CERTAINLY CANNOT fault Harvard professor David Perkins for a lack of ambition: this is the second of a two-volume study (the first, *A History of Modern Poetry: From the 1890s to the High Modernist Mode*, appeared in 1976) and, like

its predecessor, weighs in at over 600 pages. *Modernism and After* is divided into three sections — The Age of High Modernism; The Resurgence of Pound, Williams, and Stevens; and Postmodernism — and gives major consideration to the poetry of some seventy-five poets while briefly mentioning over one hundred others. As Perkins notes in his preface to this volume, “A major hope, in writing these volumes, has been to widen the canon of modern poets.”

This volume is bursting with analyses of poets from T. S. Eliot to James Merrill. Given Perkins' committed scholarship and obvious enthusiasm for modern poetry, I have to admit that I feel somewhat ungracious and ungrateful, having, as I do, serious reservations about his book.

As a Canadianist I am disturbed by the almost total absence of Canadian poets from this study; perhaps I would be less disturbed if there were *no* Canadian poets whatsoever, and the book's restricted focus upon American and British poetry was made more apparent. Canadian poetry is represented in *Modernism and After* by E. J. Pratt, Al Purdy, and Margaret Atwood, each of whom receive a critical assessment of a paragraph's length. Bliss Carman and Robin Blaser are mentioned in passing. Aside from these entries, Canadian poetry is nowhere in evidence.

Perhaps I will be considered a bit thinned-skinned by some if I complain that, in a study of 694 pages covering modern poetry of the past sixty years, Canadian poetry comes in for two pages of coverage. It strikes me that this weighting reflects one of the major crises of Canadian literature. How is it possible that a national literature, read and taught extensively within its own borders, can have so little international standing? (Or should I say in the U.S. and Britain? One *does* have the sense that in the past ten years Canadian fiction has begun to find an audience in the European academic community.)

I find it appalling that such important Canadian poets as F. R. Scott, A. M. Klein, A. J. M. Smith, Dorothy Livesay, and Earle Birney should have as little standing in Britain and the United States as their absence from Perkins' study suggests. One is left wondering whether, in the international community of arts and letters, Canada is perceived as a minor league franchise. Or whether (given the total absence of New Zealand and Australian poets in Perkins' study) it is political world-standing that establishes the relative value of a national literature and its individual authors. One longs for Perkins' study to discuss the *best* Modern poetry written in English worldwide; instead we get all the minor ins and outs of American and British poetry detailed, with virtually no attention paid to English-language poetry written anywhere else.

What also disturbs me about this book is that, for all of Perkins' talk of widening the canon, he has a penchant for stratifying it. The underlying structure of *A History of Modern Poetry: Modernism and After* is hierarchical rather than panoramic and descriptive. The status of Eliot, Pound, Williams, and Stevens is a given, and Perkins works his way out from there, raising and lowering reputations according to his own lights. Throughout the book we are always aware of being in the presence of an intelligent and enthusiastic reader of poetry who cannot resist turning his likes into virtues and his dislikes into vices. I also sense a conservative love of tradition, and am reminded of T. S. Eliot's reinterpretation of the British canon based upon his own philosophical, aesthetic, religious, and political beliefs. While I enjoy being informed by Perkins about the various poetic movements and aesthetic orientations, I am distrustful of his interpretations as to what these things *mean*.

I can best illustrate my misgivings by citing two examples. I am intrigued and

disconcerted to find the poetry of Robert Penn Warren discussed in the section on Postmodernism. After reading twenty pages into this section, one realizes that what Perkins means by Postmodern is Post-War. Therefore we discover that Theodore Roethke, Richard Wilbur, Robert Lowell, R. S. Thomas, Patrick Kavanaugh, and others are also positioned as Postmoderns. This is certainly *not* how most American and Canadian critics would understand or use this term.

I am also dismayed to find that, of the fourteen chapters devoted to postmodernism, only *two* deal with the poets found in Donald Allen's and George Butterick's anthology of American poetry, entitled *The Postmoderns*. The radical poetries of the past thirty years are discussed by Perkins under the rubric of what he calls "the countercultural ethos: . . . the social ideal of these poets might be described as communalism or tribalism. . . . Such groups were, in their eyes, good communities within the evil society of industrial-imperialist America." What is disconcerting is Perkins' view of these poets' questioning and re-evaluation of American life and culture as aberrational behaviour. Perkins' voice is the voice of orthodoxy, and all perceived "heresies" are consigned to the periphery.

When Perkins comes to put forward his three candidates of the contemporary era for elevated positions in the canon — an undertaking the assumptions of this book insist upon — he offers us John Ashbery, A. R. Ammons, and James Merrill. With little understanding of Ashbery's humour, Perkins declares Ashbery "difficult" and attempts to explicate his work; the result is not satisfying. Ammons he declares to be a "meditative" poet of great power, then undermines his argument by stating: "Ammons' meditative poems vary enormously in length, quality, and style. Some take just a few lines; others are book length. . . . Many passages are eloquent

and vital; others are extremely uninteresting."

But what left me dumbstruck was this assertion about James Merrill's *The Changing Light at Sandhover*, found in the book's last paragraph:

Merrill's trilogy is an enormous achievement with enormous limitations. In grand themes, scale and complexity of design, mythopoeic power, human intimacy, wit, charm, sensory vividness, and metrical brilliance, the trilogy surpasses any long poem written in English since the Second World War. At the same time, however, its vision of things is ultimately incoherent, it suffers from the limitations of the fantastic as a genre and from the embarrassments of the Ouija board, and its polished, richly implicative phrasing lacks the speed, force, and sudden illumination of major poetry.

If Perkins truly believes that Merrill's phrasing "lacks the speed, force, and sudden illumination of major poetry," and that his vision is "ultimately incoherent," how can he recommend Merrill's poem as major poetry? After all, how great is a literary work that is "an enormous achievement with enormous limitations"? This conclusion leads me to question the entire hierarchy Perkins has mapped out.

*A History of Modern Poetry*, however, is an interesting survey of British and American poetry of the past sixty years, "a" history of *some* of what has been written in English during that time. It's an "enormous achievement with enormous limitations."

KEN NORRIS

## ABBREVIATIONS

MARK FRUTKIN, *Atmospheres Apollinaire*. The Porcupine's Quill, \$12.95.

GUILLAUME APOLLINAIRE, according to Gertrude Stein, "was extraordinarily brilliant and no matter what subject was started, if he knew anything about it or not, he quickly saw the whole meaning of the thing and elaborated it by his wit and

fancy carrying it further than anybody knowing anything about it could have done, and oddly enough generally correctly." After Apollinaire's death in 1918, serious divisions set in among the avant-garde artists of Paris, divisions which Stein believed Apollinaire could have prevented: "It was the moment just after the war when many things had changed and people naturally fell apart. Guillaume would have been a bond of union, he always had a quality of keeping people together, and now that he was gone everybody ceased to be friends."

Stein's tributes (drawn from *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*) offer testimony not only to Apollinaire's importance in the art world of Paris in the "heroic" early years of this century, but also to his ubiquity, his capacity to be everywhere, to know everything, to make a contribution in whatever field he touched. Apollinaire was a great poet, true; but he was also a great impresario, a great publicist, a great fixer, a great faker. He was ready to talk on any subject, says Stein, whether he knew anything about it or not — "and oddly enough generally correctly." His extensive art criticism is, for the most part, pretty bad; he very rarely says anything particularly intelligent or illuminating about a particular painting — yet he had impeccable taste. Out of the hundreds of struggling painters in Paris before 1910, the ones who have survived are precisely the ones that Apollinaire picked out and championed. Almost by accident, he named the two most important movements of the time, Cubism and Surrealism; the fact that they are so dissimilar (one might say, diametrically opposed) illustrates again the breadth of his taste as well as its accuracy. He could have kept people together, says Stein, because he was friends with everyone. He was a social chameleon, all things to all people in everything except his poetry.

And so he presents something of a problem to a historical novelist. On the one hand, there is an embarrassment of riches: a plenitude of detail, of anecdotes, of historical facts and recollections, above all of Apollinaire's own voluminous writings. On the other hand, there is a kind of blank at the centre, a sense that Guillaume has disappeared, or never was present; that he remains unknowable within his own creations: Guillaume Albert Wladimir Alexandre Apollinaire de Kostrowitzky.

Certainly, this is the sense that one gets from Mark Frutkin's book. It is very strong on the "atmospheres" which surround Apollinaire. Aided by a superb collection of Atget photographs, the book evokes the appearance and ambiance of Paris in those mythic years when it was truly the City of Light, when the greatest art of modernism was being born in its streets, its studios, and its cafés. And all the stories about Apollinaire are here, from the Rousseau Banquet ("afterward, no one was able to recall what happened, all their versions differed") to the crowds on the Boulevard St-Germain yelling "à bas Guillaume!" (referring to Kaiser Wilhelm) outside his window as he lay dying. Frutkin lays special emphasis on the tragicomic saga of Apollinaire's involvement in the theft of some African statues, and his subsequent arrest on suspicion of being involved in the disappearance of the Mona Lisa. Frutkin takes this incident, quite plausibly, as the central emblem for Apollinaire's feelings of insecurity, his sense that he was always marginal to French society, likely to be rejected at any moment.

But in a sense Apollinaire is marginal also to Frutkin's novel. The richness of the "atmosphere" surrounds him, but Apollinaire himself is never truly present. The episodic nature of Frutkin's presentation contributes to this effect: we keep on getting *moments*, many of them quite vividly

realized, but there is no sustained narration, plot, or characterization. Frutkin's habit of referring to his central character as "A." is at first only an annoying mannerism, but gradually it seems to sum up the shortcoming of the book as a whole: this Apollinaire is only A., abbreviated, a sketch, a shorthand note, an unfinished beginning.

As I have noted, this may be as much because of the peculiarly undefined nature of the historical Apollinaire's character as it is to any failure of Frutkin as novelist. The site where Apollinaire comes most clearly into focus for us is of course his poetry, and Frutkin wisely quotes very sparingly from the originals. It is much easier for a writer to describe an artist in another medium, such as painting or music, than it is to describe another writer; thus Picasso, on the whole, emerges more forcefully from this account than Apollinaire does. But even Picasso, one might argue, is evoked more than imagined, presented more than re-presented. Frutkin is, after all, dealing with figures of major genius, and it is an almost impossible task to re-create them, for any artist to refashion them in his own terms. (Even Stein herself chose to approach *her* great subject obliquely, through the imaginary persona of Alice.) Frutkin's is a creditable try at a project which is in the end, and necessarily, beyond him.

STEPHEN SCOBIE

## GREEN LINNET

HUGH HOOD, *Tony's Book*. Stoddart, \$14.95.

THIS IS THE seventh novel in Hugh Hood's *New Age* series, whose purpose is to present a comprehensive fictional portrait of Canadian life in the last third of the twentieth century — a national epic, in fact. Like the trilogies of Robertson Davies, *The New Age* blends history with

imaginary events, and creates imagined Canadian towns and institutions. Both Hood and Davies use painting and the theatre as central images to explain Canadian culture. Both are theological allegorists. In other respects they are different, especially in their sense of structure. *The New Age* does not break down into neat, self-contained units, and each novel must be considered first on its own terms, and then in its relations to the whole sequence to date.

The major characters in *Tony's Book* have all appeared in previous novels. At the centre is Matthew Goderich, a passive observer of his own life, though his credentials as an art historian entitle him to make authoritative comments on the Canadian scene. In the earlier novels Matt has been the only first-person narrator, but in *Tony's Book* the story is told by four voices: Tony, Matt's younger brother, a successful writer; Linnet Olcott, an English actress who was Tony's lover for a decade; Matt's wife Edie, a painter; Matt himself. The central action in this novel is Tony Goderich's cuckolding of his older brother. Tony, it turns out, has been in love with his brother's wife for twenty years, and Edie has been longing to escape from a dull marriage and a stalled artistic career for almost as long. Suddenly the marriage that Matt has portrayed as ideally happy in the earlier volumes crumbles to nothing. The four narratives that recount this event are both confessions and rationalizations, for these characters are not happy about what they have done to each other.

Hood has always been successful at showing nice people overtaken by disaster. Characters with good hearts and clear intentions — they are not always so clear about their own motives — are dismayed to discover that their best qualities cannot protect them from the passage of time, changed circumstances and their own weaknesses. These stories are not exactly

tragic (is dismay a tragic quality?): sadly comic, perhaps, or even farcical.

The setting of *Tony's Book* is wider and more realistic than in the earlier novels. There is a satisfying resonance between plot and subplot and social background. In the earlier novels in the sequence, motifs, such as the cultural significance of modes of transportation, or Canada's role in world affairs, tended to overwhelm the narrative. Here the themes are subordinated to plot and character: the novel is more tightly constructed than its open-ended predecessors.

The structure of *The New Age* cycle is not schematic, but *Tony's Book* would appear to be one of its focal points. *A New Athens* inaugurated the idyll of Matt and Edie's marriage. *Tony's Book* destroys that idyll and moves the characters to contemplate different experiences of loss. Hints dropped in the earlier novels are explained here (now we can see why Edie's fortune cookie in *The Scenic Art* warned, "A dark man loves you from a distance"). New hints are dropped, to be picked up later in the series, and on the whole this is a satisfying novel.

Even so, *Tony's Book* is not immune to the criticisms that have been raised against the other novels in the *New Age* series. Essentially these criticisms come down to doubts about Matthew Goderich's right to make authoritative pronouncements, and to discomfort with Hugh Hood's own self-proclaimed role as both a realist and a transcendental allegorist. Robertson Davies' commentators derive authority from their flamboyance, but good, dull Matt makes us doubt his words.

How well can allegory consort with realism? In the opening pages of *Tony's Book*, Linnet Olcott remembers how she would lie in her pram in the autumn of 1940, listening to the sounds of the nearby river, blending these sounds with the drone of German bombers overhead, and

watching the dogfights of German and British aircraft with innocent delight. This passage is a *tour de force* of emblematic description, like the vision of the ghost ship in *A New Athens*. To achieve these effects Hood must distort the realistic element: he rearranges the dates of the Battle of Britain, and he assumes preternatural awareness of her surroundings by an infant only six weeks old. Yet this opening is essential to the novel. Linnet, named for a Wordsworth poem and conceived in Racedown cottage, is a child of Romanticism, “fostered alike by beauty and by fear.” Her poem is “The Green Linnet,” and she wears a green dress as a child. Green is the liturgical colour of hope, so that Linnet figures in a Christian allegory as well as in a Romantic one: “Never despair,” she says to Tony. Like it or not, such chains of allegorical association are integral to Hood’s art, and it is with sensitivity to these that he demands to be read.

PETER HINCHCLIFFE

## LOCAL POLARITIES

SUSAN COPOLOFF-MECHANIC, *Pilgrim’s Progress: A Study of the Short Stories of Hugh Hood*. ECW Press, \$15.00.

THIS BOOK IS a sincere, informed, and exhaustively thorough attempt to explicate the vision informing Hugh Hood’s six collections of stories. Unfortunately it often fails in its purpose. Two major problems prevent Copoloff-Mechanic from engaging her audience or her texts more cogently: a reductive thesis, and consequently, a discussion which is repetitive on several levels.

At the outset, Copoloff-Mechanic’s argument seems promising. She intends to demonstrate that Hood’s short fiction is not, on the one hand, simply documentary, journalistic, or mimetic; on the other

hand, it is not only allegorical fiction. But in her “Preface” Copoloff-Mechanic begins to show herself too quick to construct her argument on undefined oppositions: “While critics continue to dispute whether Hood’s works should be approached as fact or fiction — realism or allegory — they do, however, agree that he is preoccupied with their structural cohesion.” To align “realism” with “fact” and “allegory” with “fiction” so badly (or to accuse others of doing so), and to suggest further that these sets of terms are simply *opposed*, does not augur well for the ensuing discussion. Copoloff-Mechanic’s major contention, however, is articulated more precisely a few pages later:

For Hood, experience can be ordered by discerning divine harmonies that resonate through it. It is this belief that inspires him to search through the ordinary articles of daily life for evidence of this supreme order. The result is a fictional universe in which Hood mixes the sacred with the profane, infusing his work with its own carefully crafted order. It is impossible, then, to separate Hood’s documentary impulse from his moral imagination — the cataloguer of social minutiae from the visionary who shapes them in terms of a cosmic drama.

While it is true that she diversifies this approach in each of her six chapters, the book almost reduces Hood’s stories, and Copoloff-Mechanic’s analyses, to a series of formulae. The difficulty begins with the way in which Copoloff-Mechanic expounds her thesis: most often, she does so through brief plot summaries of the stories under discussion, framed within a variation of her thesis that governs each chapter. Frequent repetitions intrude upon the discussion. In the first chapter — “Strategies for Immortality: Romanticism Revised in *Flying a Red Kite*” — Copoloff-Mechanic excerpts a suggestion made by Anthony Harding (1982) that Hood has “embarked upon a major revisionary reading of Romanticism.” In the next three and a half pages, “revisionary read-



ing of romanticism" is quoted another four times, for a total of five times between pages 20 and 23.

Another distracting repetition occurs in the oppositions Copoloff-Mechanic identifies in Hood's fiction. Too often, we are told of the oppositions resolved in Hood's fiction between the "sacred and the profane," the "timely and the timeless" (or the "temporal and the timeless"), the "daily and the divine," between "locale and universe, community and continuum." Copoloff-Mechanic may be tempted to see oppositions operating in these ways because at times she sees the stories themselves as abstract arguments: "The first page of 'The Holy Man,' analyzed here in full, is a delicate and ordered representation of how the connection of opposites within the locale promotes the fusion of local polarities."

Most distracting of all is the repetitiveness of Copoloff-Mechanic's sentence structure. Many of her structures predicate rigidly causal relationships between sets of propositions, characters, settings, themes, or triads of stories. So a proliferation of constructions such as "On one hand/On the other hand," "Just as/so does," "That the . . . suggests" marches the reader through the discussion with rarely a glance to another writer or to wider, more inclusive frames of reference.

Clearly, Copoloff-Mechanic has read Hood's stories, and criticism of Hood's stories, very carefully. All the more pity, then, that she did not widen the scope of her argument or make her analysis more accessible.

NEIL BESNER



## NATURAL CONNECTIONS

KINYA TSURUTA & THEODORE GOOSSEN, eds.,  
*Nature and Identity in Canadian and Japanese Literature*. Joint Centre for Asia Pacific Studies, n.p.

IN MAY 1989, a major conference entitled "Literary Relations: East and West" was held in Kyoto, Japan, jointly hosted by Ryukoku University, the University of Hawaii and the East-West Center. The conference, and the quality of the speakers it attracted, testified to the growing academic interest in East-West comparatism. So the appearance of Kinya Tsuruta and Theodore Goossen's collection of essays, *Nature and Identity in Canadian and Japanese Literature*, is timely. The collection also sets a precedent, for it is the first study to compare in detail the literatures and cultures of Canada and Japan. But 'contrast,' perhaps, would be a better word than 'compare,' for as Tsuruta and Goossen point out in their introduction, "historically, geographically, economically, racially . . . the two countries seem to occupy opposite ends of the spectrum." These differences are reflected in the attitudes expressed towards nature in their respective literatures; but while it may once have been possible to make a schematic division between the predominantly *alienative* function of nature in Canadian literature and its contrastingly *restorative* function in Japanese literature, this distinction has been problematized by a shift of emphasis in post-war Japanese writing from the projection of an "ideal of man at one with the universal rhythms of nature" to an embittered realization of spiritual loss. In fact, claim Tsuruta and Goossen, a better distinction can be made in the modern era between those responses towards nature in Canadian literature which work towards an "ideal of autonomous selfhood" and those

in Japanese literature which despairingly express the dissolution or nullification of personal and/or cultural identity. As Tsuruta and Goossen are well aware, such generalizations are potentially misleading; the attempt in the collection to draw attention to "broader patterns of meaning and form" is therefore offset by specific textual details which emphasize the flexibility, and in some cases the tenuousness, of those patterns. The approach is unequivocally thematic, but the real link between the otherwise loosely connected essays in this collection is their unquestioned assumption of a liberal humanist outlook expressed most clearly by Tsuruta, for whom "literature is literature anywhere, for it depicts what it means to be human." While the editors apparently consider this universalist view of literature as one of the strengths of their collection, it is actually one of its principal weaknesses. For despite its promising title and the wealth of material available to its contributors, the collection is marred by an inability to come to terms with either "nature" or "identity" as contingent social and cultural *constructs*. The thematic relation between 'man' and 'nature' in Canadian and Japanese writing is bound up in a process of changing circumstances and conventions; an obvious point, no doubt, but one which is unfortunately overlooked in much of the collection. A classic case is Takao Hagiwara's contrastive analysis of Ross's *As For Me and My House* and Shiga's *A Dark Night's Passing*. In the former, claims Hagiwara, "nature in its wild state . . . is held at bay by . . . stifling social conventions." Fair enough, but "nature in its wild state" is *also* a convention; Hagiwara seems to have missed the point that Ross's novel is less about a search for identity where "nature is pitted against man and thereby helps him to grow into an independent and mature individual" than about the search for an aesthetic where the artistic

representation of nature is shown to be the product of socially and culturally constructed values, attitudes, and perceptions. The failure to account for social and historical specificity gives rise to further problems, most noticeably a tendency in many of the essays to resort to such catch-all categories as "the Canadian mind-set," "the Japanese sensibility," or, still worse, "the Eastern worldview." An additional tendency to view the relationship between "man" and "nature" in universalist terms loses the collection what might have been its most valuable opportunity: to examine both terms within the context of the changing politics of cultural representation (involving, for example, such issues as the construction of race and gender). This would, of course, be a massive project and would require a more clearly defined focus than is given here. But despite the limitations which arise from its conservative tendency to view literary/cultural comparison in terms of a transcendence of national boundaries rather than an interrogation of (mono)cultural assumptions, the collection registers an important point of departure and provides a worthwhile, if flawed, contribution towards the growing familiarity between two very different but by no means incomparable cultures.

GRAHAM HUGGAN

## SCANDINAVIAN

ÓLAFUR GUNNARSSON, *Gaga*, trans. David McDuff. Penumbra Press, \$12.95.

KNUT ØDEGÅRD, *Bee-Buzz, Salmon Leap*, trans. George Johnston. Penumbra Press, \$9.95.

PENUMBRA PRESS issued two interesting works in translation in 1988. They are a collection of poems by the Norwegian poet Knut Ødegård, *Bee Buzz, Salmon Leap*, and a novella, *Gaga*, by the Icelandic writer Ólafur Gunnarsson, with excellent

illustrations by Judy Pennanen. Both books are handsomely and tastefully produced and both, while quite short, are filled with delight and suggestiveness.

*Gaga*, which is translated from the Icelandic by George McDuff, is about a man who wakes up one morning thinking he is on the planet Mars. He marvels at the cleverness of the Martians in managing to make his surroundings look like an exact replica of his home town of Reykjavík, Iceland. They have reproduced everything — interior rooms as well as streets, houses, districts, down to the last detail. He tries to call their bluff to let them know he is not fooled. When he meets a woman in the town cemetery he tries to convince her he is a Martian. She brushes him off as a weird fellow. He makes a telephone call, visits a café, takes a taxi, breaks into a house, steals money from his own business, all in order to get the better of the clever Martians. In the end he boards an airplane and demands to be taken back to earth and the real Reykjavík at the speed of light. The pilot blithely agrees to do so and switches to the speed of light.

This is the story of someone who is suddenly at odds with his surroundings through a simple error of the imagination. We have here the effects of a perceptual flaw or a misapprehending of reality. As the publisher points out on the cover, "*Gaga* is a variation on the Don Quixote theme." The protagonist is, in so many words, crazy — or "gaga" in Icelandic — presumably because he has read too much science fiction: that connection is never made explicit, though it may be inferred from the details of the Martian environment which the protagonist has at his disposal. It is also a variation of themes played out in the works of Kafka, for example *The Trial*. This theme builds on a sudden isolating of the main character by some incomprehensible means. Neither the reader nor the protagonist knows how

it happened, but the man in question finds himself severely at odds with his whole world and nothing falls into place. In *Gaga* the man knows nothing about how he got there or why he is there, but he knows — in his own view — that the world is suddenly hostile. For him the explanation is simple: it is hostile because he has been unconsciously transported to another planet for reasons of trickery. As in "The Metamorphosis," for example, the whole mental state that is being probed begins to function as a metaphor for something we all experience in the quiet of our own minds. Because of this metaphorical possibility, the work, which was simply witty, clever, and at times hilarious, assumes a profounder and psychologically truer aspect.

More accurately, perhaps, *Gaga* is a variation on the more realistic portrayal of isolation found in the works of Dostoyevski. It is *Notes from Underground* that immediately comes to mind, where the protagonist is sure everyone is against him. He ventures out on occasion to rectify the situation, but ends up making a total fool of himself every time, embarrassing everyone. In *Gaga*, similarly, whenever our hero speaks to anyone, he renders his hearer stunned and repelled. People react to him exactly as they would to a completely crazy idiot. We end up witnessing a protagonist — whom we dislike more as the story goes on — figuratively bash his head against the wall of his misperception and tangle himself more and more in the web of his mistakes. When the hero — or antihero — of *Gaga* resorts to murder in order to be taken seriously, the story has stepped over into a very real apprehension of the human psyche. Those who engage in murder and suicide may often do so for precisely this reason: because they want to be noticed and they want a sympathetic ear. *Gaga*, therefore, is a penetrating portrait of a state of mind, masquerading as an enter-

taining fly-by-night comedy. It is a tour-de-force and very much worth reading.

*Bee Buzz, Salmon Leap*, translated from the Nynorsk by George Johnston, is an entirely different kind of book. Aside from being a different genre because it is poetry, this book has a personal tone which tries to embrace all of the poet's sensibilities and capacity to remember. This is Knut Ødegård's seventh volume of poetry and his second with Penumbra in George Johnston's translation. The poems speak of the narrator's childhood memories and milieu, giving pictures and portraits of Norwegian village life and its many characters. We also get the young boy's perspective on, and feelings about, what is being described. There is a hint of a resemblance in some moments to the recent Swedish film "My Life as a Dog" in the way the village is seen through a boy's eyes. Yet there is an overview that is more mature and sustained overriding the many impressions offered in the poems.

Ødegård writes with compassion, wit, and love for his subject. He loves the sound of the words that describe a scene deeply lodged in his consciousness — the way we love to describe our own happiness. In "November Storm" he speaks of a storm that lashes his town when he is fifteen:

November. The storm came and tore loose  
a roof that whirled off into the night, at an  
angle  
it flew and fifteen cows stood bawling in the  
snow.  
A hen-house was carried up into the sky  
and sent a noisy crackling down over us.  
Church bells rang a water-fall; the ringer  
hung  
in the ropes and lines; from the sea someone  
was blowing  
dark fog horns.

It is a simple description, but through it one detects the youth's sense of awe, inspiration, and affection. The picture is dark and almost Chagall-like in the portrayal of all things flying in the air, at an

angle and upside down. Yet, like Chagall, there is implicit poetic commentary in such a scene. The commentary says: it was a world full of incredible surprises where all things stood on end and there was tragedy with it because cattle had to be slaughtered and hens beheaded. Yet it was a world full of wild joy.

Other poems in this collection retell old stories of the region and show a young person's first impressions of the deeply emotional implications of the Christianity he grew up with — and which he grew up to absorb. There are also lyric poems of a love that merges with the sensuality of nature, as well as very descriptive pieces on fear and apprehension — the kind experienced looking out the window into a dark, foggy night, knowing there is human suffering outside somewhere. With a highly refined sensibility, these poems combine passion, humour, sensuality, and compassion, all in a few fleeting moments and all very gently handled with words that seem to be made of glass. Perhaps the poem that best describes the book is "Clocks," which comments on the timelessness produced by the euphoric state of mind experienced by the poet in the midst of his reflections:

Suddenly I stop in the poem  
and I see that all the clocks  
have stopped too: . . .  
. . . [the clock] hangs  
unwound, unmoving, hands like those of a  
dead man over the bed's edge . . .

. . . . .

. . . Outside  
the dark stands still and all  
lights out.

Only a light wind in the tree tops  
do I hear, a wind that  
slowly blows nearer, stronger.

These are poems that repay close attention and lingering reflection. The subtleties they express seem to be admirably sustained in the translation. Both

books, *Gaga* and *Bee Buzz*, *Salmon Leap*, are welcome additions to the Canadian arena of the literature of Scandinavia, which is full of life, vitality, perceptiveness, and good humour.

KRISTJANA GUNNARS

## ADULTERINE

TIM WYNNE-JONES, *Fastyngange*. Lester & Orpen Dennys, \$15.95.

THIS IS AN intriguing novel, a fantasy with elements of metafiction and of the psychological mystery story. Alexis, a young woman from Toronto holidaying near Glastonbury, gets involved with an old castle called Fastyngange and pursues its secrets as though on a quest. But instead of the Grail, she finds in the keep a different kind of orifice, a mysterious hole that seems to have swallowed up over the centuries a number of men and women who appear to Alexis.

The hole converses with her and displays a rather sophisticated nature, both playful and slightly sinister. In fact, as one of the ghosts insists, the hole is a trickster, a trait that makes ambiguous its stories and reassurances to Alexis. Our position as readers is equally problematic, for the hole is in fact the narrator of most of the book. The novel begins with a derelict in an alley in Toronto: he puts twelve stones in a circle, thus recreating the lip of the hole and empowering it to tell him (and us) the story of Alexis. This arbitrary narrative device is revealed as metafictional by the hole's self-conscious attitude toward its tale, which it calls a romance. Whenever its derelict auditor questions how the hole knows so much of Alexis' life, the hole offers rationalizations or resorts to literary terms like *omniscient*. In short, the hole functions both literally as narrator and emblematically as the tale itself.

The story told by the hole contains a critique of the narrative process, and one of its themes is that "we need to make into fiction what we cannot *fathom* about the facts of our lives" (my italics). This statement and a number like it bear on Alexis' psychological quest, as well as on the image of narrative as a deep hole. At the end, Alexis descends many fathoms into the hole.

The hole tells Alexis that it was originally constructed in front of a *oeil-de-boeuf* window. "To peek through it one must stand directly over the oubliette," and thus disappear down the hole, or in French "to forget, to be forgotten." Like the cover of this novel with its appealing "Hilly scene" by Samuel Palmer, literature offers its readers an initial pleasing illusion to draw them into its pages: there they can forget the dull or stressful facts of their lives. But once they fall down the hole, readers begin to project their own emotions into the fiction. After Alexis is first intrigued by the hole, she becomes a prey to subjective fears: "Then her own mind . . . conjured up a monster. . . . She let it crash down . . . and swallow her whole." The image of being swallowed by the hole is frequently repeated in the novel.

Among other games the author is playing, one is with Freudian theory. Not only does one character unconsciously put on *id* while "staring down into" the "depths" of the hole, but the hole's relation to its victims has sexual overtones. These are most overt in its intimacy with Alexis. In a paradoxical reversal, she saves the hole, when the keep is being dismantled, by swallowing it. As the hole describes it, "She opened her body to me. I rushed into her, the full length of me. . . . She was delirious. Perhaps my own ecstasy was mingling with hers." Inside of her, the hole is carried to Toronto.

The middle third of the novel takes place on shipboard. Alexis discovers that

the ghosts have followed her, still seeking the oblivion of entry into the hole, an entry denied them at the castle and, at first, on the ship. One ghost pleads with Alexis to allow them to be "reunited with our proper darkness." She, however, refuses to give up what she has taken in. "I will carry it to term," she insists, suggesting she has been impregnated, but also suggesting that she has a psychological process to go through. She finally discovers that that process is best served by disgorging the hole so she can enter it.

As a metafiction, *Fastynge* is haunted by intimations of the factitious. Not only do the ghosts of part one reappear in the characters of part two, but two key characters from part three have the same name and function as two different characters in part one. Which is real and which counterfeit? Two of these characters are called Dr. Troubridge; both emphasize the word *adulterine*, i.e., unauthorized, spurious. One doctor, a psychiatrist, terms the hole a "simulacrum" which he defines as "a deceptive substitute, a shadowy likeness." This definition will also serve to characterize a fictional narrative, either the one readers of this novel are lured on by or the one that Alexis has made up and told herself because she cannot face reality. But the opposition of truth and illusion is not so clear as common sense would indicate. The first doctor, an antiquarian, tells Alexis, "Fiction has its place in history," while the second doctor confesses, "Psychoanalysis itself is a fabrication." Finally Alexis decides on her own to descend into the darkness of the hole where she encounters her illusions and brings back truth. What she returns with is unfortunately a detective's solution, less lurid than that in a Hitchcock movie, but just as pat and unenlightening.

Nevertheless, I found this an enjoyable metafictional fantasy. The first and third parts are largely successful, though to my

taste the middle is less so. But the writing is usually deft, and offers a pleasing combination of understated allusions and self-conscious ironic ones. The author is obviously a trickster to watch out for.

ELLIOTT GOSE

## CALLAGHAN

MORLEY CALLAGHAN, *The Man with the Coat*. Exile Editions, \$13.95.

MORLEY CALLAGHAN, *A Wild Old Man on the Road*. Stoddart, \$19.95.

THE APPEARANCE OF *The Man with the Coat* (originally published in *Maclean's*, 16 April 1955) and *A Wild Old Man on the Road* is a reminder of the continuing strength of their author's hand and points to many of the reasons why Morley Callaghan has occupied such a notable position in our cultural milieu for over five decades. An unerring sense of human nature (realistic and compassionate), a capacity to capture character and to suggest nuances of speech and movement — the very characteristics which marked the early novels and became especially memorable in *Such Is My Beloved* (1934) and *They Shall Inherit the Earth* (1935), for instance — are present in the latest book, just as they are in *The Man with the Coat* from the mid-1950's.

Indeed, *The Man with the Coat* is utterly compelling, a short, tense novel, set in Montreal, which has as its central figure one Harry Lane who suffers rejection for his actions at the fraud trial of his sometime friend Scotty Bowman (who commits suicide in jail) and who obstinately continues to wear a suit with ruined (ostensibly faulty) lining made by ex-fighter, tailor, and Bowman-supporter Mike Kon. The questions of responsibility and consequent guilt, the problems of misunderstanding and lack of communi-

cation permeate the story, which ends in Lane's sudden death in a scuffle with Kon, the latter's subsequent clearance on a manslaughter charge, and his pathetic attempts, in conversation, to square accounts, as it were, with Lane's memory. The cast of characters is relatively small, but vivid and varied and always relevant in some way — the focus is intensely urban but the light falls on Callaghan's involved circle; the lack of diffusion, of digression to any detailed consideration of a wider scene, adds to the impression of concentrated power.

*The Man . . .* served as a basis for an expanded and slightly different story, *The Many Coloured Coat* (1960). Here Lane survives and refuses, in the end, to appear at Kon's trial for assault. As in *The Man . . .*, the Bowman incident and death precipitate matters, and the coat with its embarrassing lining serves as the central irritant in the continuing conflict. But *The Many Coloured Coat*, with all its strengths, is neither a better nor an inferior book. And it is not what *The Man . . .* should have been in the first instance. Both novels stand firmly on their own ground, neither one suffering by comparison with the other. That this should be so is a reflection of the Callaghan craft, that sense of the justness of the narrative and control of material.

The qualities which mark *The Man . . .* and its later transfiguration are also to be found in *A Wild Old Man on the Road*. To say that this is vintage Callaghan is to do it justice and not to deride it as literary wine which is past its prime or, indeed, which is less interesting because our palates have become dulled by over-indulgence. It concerns what is essentially a spiritual quest for the aging writer and early-day idealist Jeremy Monk and the attempt of young Mark Didion, hero-worshipper and luster after Monk's wife, Cretia, to come to terms with his own character and with what for him are in-

explicable changes in the philosophy of his idol, Monk. Like *The Man . . .*, this is an urban narrative, but it reaches beyond our shores to find settings in Paris and in Rome. It is a cosmopolitan piece — in the best sense — and its shifts in venue never cause disintegration of structure but, rather, serve, in this case, to enhance the interest and tension of the narrative. As in earlier novels, the dialogue is central to character development, and handling of voice is absolutely sure: temperament and age are impeccably and consistently reflected. Further, like *The Man . . .*, *A Wild Old Man on the Road* has a splendidly visual quality, a deftness of character and scene-painting that is as remarkable for its economy as for its resultant realism.

In their own ways both books are about truth — about assumptions, evasions, about appearances and realities, about charity and the folly of ill will. They speak of human nature, of our society and parts of its sometimes seemingly tangled fabric. And if they speak of truth, they speak of human nature truthfully. What more could we want from fiction in its best moments?

BRYAN N. S. GOOCH

## BEGINNINGS

*New Works 1*. Playwrights PS, n.p.

*New Works 1* is the first publication in an ambitious undertaking by Playwrights Canada. Their new series of play anthologies intends "to celebrate the best new work being undertaken in the country, and hopefully to encourage further production and recognition." As such, this series will be an important new addition to the canon of published Canadian Drama in English. As a sample of this effort, *New Works 1* is promising. These are well-crafted plays that artistic directors and audiences will accept without a whimper. Each playwright has benefited

from production experience as is clear in the simple production values, small casts and familiar settings. This reflects the current state of theatre in Western Canada where restricted production budgets are common. Each play is inoffensive in content and language. Conservative subject matter is popular in theatres struggling to draw wide audiences. From a practical perspective, publication should encourage the production of plays such as these which suit the current climate.

Yet, the restraint of these plays is their major disadvantage. Except in Patrick Friesen's *The Shunning*, language, character, and theme seldom rise beyond the mundane. This is a volume of plays emphasizing competence over depth. While they will be unlikely to send patrons running from the theatre, they will rarely offer inspiration or enlightenment.

*Visiting Hours* is a good example. A family pulls together in the face of a crisis: the mother's illness. The characters are familiar. The plot, or rather the family's past, unfolds smoothly and moves inexorably to the inevitable conclusion. However, these qualities are precisely the problem. The ending is predictable, the character revelations are prosaic, and the theme is banal. The play never rises above the level of a television medical drama.

Nick Mitchell's *House* is an over-written thriller flawed by contrived dialogue and archaic plot devices. Angela barges into Roger's living room in his "well-preserved Victorian house in the heart of Winnipeg" to escape a mysterious stranger she claims is following her. Throughout the following action the threat of violence continues and increases as though the house itself influences the couple. Unfortunately the shallow and predictable characters quickly become tedious as they argue, whine, and jockey for dominance. As our sympathy for Roger and Angela dwindles so does our interest in their fate.

Unlike *House*, the characters in Michael D. C. McKinlay's *Walt and Roy*, Walt Disney and his brother, Roy, make this a very compelling play. McKinlay's manic portrayal of Walt Disney holds focus throughout with his flights of fancy and his cruel manipulation of Roy. The action takes place in 1936 at Disney's animation studios in Los Angeles. The night before an important meeting to arrange backing for the film *Snow White*, Walt has a crisis of faith. McKinlay portrays Disney as a self-centred, insecure artist who abuses and bullies his businessman brother. Walt and Roy are such opposites there seems no possibility of a resolution between them. The compelling way in which McKinlay sustains this conflict, finally reconciling the brothers, makes for an absorbing and fast-moving play.

Of the five plays the richest, most evocative work in language and theme is Patrick Friesen's *The Shunning*. The script is an adaptation of Friesen's long poem of the same name. Much of its strength comes from the earthy imagery and colloquial tone of his poetry. His use of language illuminates his characters and allows a cinematic flow of action from scene to scene within a minimal setting. Tragedy often explores the struggle of the individual to reconcile his conscience with the demands of his community. Here the tragedy is that of a Mennonite farmer, Peter Neufeld. He insists upon his right to interpret the Bible. The Rev. Loewen opposes him, seeing Neufeld's questioning as a challenge to him as spiritual leader. He reacts by having the community shun Neufeld. Friends and neighbours must cut off all contact with him. Even his wife must ostracize him in obedience to the Church. To avoid betraying his community and his family Peter Neufeld must betray himself. The strain proves too much for him and leads to death. His tragedy is a parable of the individual



shorn of his traditions and beliefs by his own rational investigation.

In contrast to the sombre world of *The Shunning*, Lyle Victor Albert's *The Prairie Church of Buster Galloway* is a much lighter view of rural life. Set in the Office of the Alberta Grain Co., in Walken, Alberta, the play examines "small town Alberta." It focuses on Mac Johnson, the local grain elevator manager; Kenny Mullen, his young assistant; and their wheat farmer customers. Conflict over Mac's theft of grain from his customers serves to highlight their attitudes, hopes, and ideals. Although the plot is thin, the attention to detail in characterization and language offers a sense of sincerity and humour throughout.

*New Works 1* is a promising beginning. The variety of material in this anthology is representative of drama being produced across the Prairies. Theme and content are no longer dictated by geography and climate. Playwrights are free to explore the entire spectrum of Western life. Yet while this anthology gives recognition to skilled craftsmen it points out the need for true artists. Publication of such plays can only add further impetus to their development.

JEFFREY GOFFIN

## LINGUISTICS & TRANSLATION

HENRY G. SCHOGT, *Linguistics, Literary Analysis, and Literary Translation*. Univ. of Toronto Press, \$25.00.

THIS INTRODUCTION to a three-fold problematic does not place linguistics, literary analysis, and literary translation on an equal footing; the progression from one term to the other reveals Schogt's main end:

the main purpose of this book is not to give an exhaustive description of a linguistic or a

literary model for text analysis, but to investigate what the implications of certain features of different models are for the translator of literary works.

This sentence implies that the translator's task is the *ad quem*. However, a different sort of imbalance between the three fields characterizes this book: the bulk of the text, and certainly of its most interesting contributions, concern linguistics, although the author seeks to indicate what each of the three fields can contribute to the others. The limits of such co-operation are emphasized, and the book leaves the impression that they are more numerous and important than the possibilities. For example, it is inherently difficult to apply linguistics, given its preoccupation with the general, to literary translation and analysis, which deal with always unique literary texts. Schogt does not deny the interest of contemporary literary analysis and theory in the general, but notes that the appearance of community between these disciplines and linguistics may be deceiving, as the former have borrowed many terms from the latter but use them to name concepts very different from those which these terms cover in linguistics. Caution paradoxically leads to too much of a good thing: the author demonstrates somewhat excessive intellectual tolerance as he declines to define his theoretical positions, except in a sweeping statement that reduces his research (and, it would seem, all humanities research, in his view) to the status of unscientific stumbling about in the dark: "no theory is good enough to be pre-eminent over all other theories dealing with the same problems." Yet surely the "opinion" that each model can make important contributions and shed new light on some aspect of linguistic or literary analysis" does not preclude choosing, on argued, intellectual grounds, the theory which seems best, and using it to structure one's explorations and demonstrations. Taking a clearer the-

oretical stand would have enabled Schogt to write an even more interesting, thought-provoking book.

Schogt's book is rich in information on linguistics, much of which may be unfamiliar to many literary analysts and translators. Canadian writing on translation understandably concentrates on English and French, so Schogt's many Russian and especially Dutch examples are particularly refreshing. Their valuable contributions deal with the problems involved in translating sound expressiveness and dialects (the passages explaining the difficulties involved in translating dialect features, especially anglicisms, in French-Canadian texts are particularly interesting). The remarks on literary analysis seem weaker than those concerning the other two fields. Schogt's criticism of Barthes and other literary analysts seems to stem from his opposition to their using terminology borrowed from linguistics (which rarely deals with units larger than the sentence) to analyze texts. Yet had not Barthes and others developed such a grammatology, literary theory and analysis would not have been the intellectually exciting, creative fields they have over the last twenty years, and our appreciation of literature would have been immeasurably poorer.

This book is much more interesting than its very modest conclusions (their modesty corresponding to the theoretical timidity):

- (a) Even if not all questions can be answered it is worth while to look for solutions and for new approaches outside one's own field.
- (b) A dialogue with the other disciplines makes one realize that many of the problems are shared.
- (c) By realizing that some questions the other disciplines ask fall outside the area of one's competence, one becomes aware of the possibilities and limitations of one's own discipline.

The originality of the book lies more in the choice of its problematic than in what it says about it. The lack of any reference to relevant work (i.e., dealing with relationships between at least two of the three fields Schogt's title highlights) by J. Lyons, R. Roberts, M. Pagnier, and K. van Leuwen-Zwart is surprising. Nonetheless, this delightfully jargon-free introduction should be read by translators and literary analysts for its information on pertinent aspects of linguistics.

NEIL BISHOP

## THEATRE ATLANTIC

*The Proceedings of the Theatre in Atlantic Canada Symposium*, ed. Richard Paul Knowles. Centre for Canadian Studies, Mount Allison Univ., \$9.95.

IN THE SPRING OF 1986 Richard Paul Knowles, then director of the Canadian studies program at Mount Allison University, organized Theatre in Atlantic Canada, the best integrated Canadian theatre conference I have attended. In a short two days he produced five formal theatre performances, of which the text of Marshall Button's one-man play *Lucien* is here published, as well as other theatrical events; papers on Atlantic Canada dramatists, theatre companies, and theatre history; panels on theatre in education, theatre funding and the future of theatre in the region. People taking part were a balanced mix of playwrights, performers, theatre directors, scholars, students and bureaucrats. As much as possible that conference has now been committed to book form.

The book as a whole confirms that the regional approach to the study of Canadian theatre and drama is still fruitful, even though the designation of Atlantic Canada as a single region is, of course, too broad (owing more to federal bureaucratic convenience than particular cultural realities). To advocate a regional

interpretation is not necessarily narrow and parochial, but a response to Canadian geographical and historical reality. The regionalism evoked here is characterized by a familiar Canadian dichotomy sometimes identified as the tension between centre and margin and echoed in such theatre terms as 'mainstream' and 'alternative.' Thus the proceedings of *Theatre in Atlantic Canada* show how the problems of working regionally — with regard to theatre funding, training facilities, and critical attention, for example — are often more evident than the satisfactions of participating in a national tradition of regionalism. One is reminded by the nineteenth-century theatre history papers that the original Canadian cultural dichotomy was colonial in nature. Nowadays it is the resistance to modern forms of colonialism (e.g., from Toronto or Montreal rather than New York, London, or Paris) that keeps indigenous regionalism well in Atlantic Canada, noticeably among the smaller theatres such as St. John's Resource Centre for the Arts, Guysborough's Mulgrave Road Co-Op, and Caraquet's le Théâtre Populaire d'Acadie; also among such writers as Antonine Maillet, Christopher Hyde, Hermenegilde Chaisson, and the collective creators of Newfoundland.

Since a collection of proceedings by its very nature lacks the coherence and comprehensiveness of a monograph, one must view it for the interest of its separate parts. This volume divides into three general categories: drama and theatre criticism, current theatre activity, and theatre history. Although the choices in the last mentioned are bound to seem piecemeal in the context of the contemporary emphasis of the other two, each of these studies in its own way advances the recovery of Canadian theatre history initiated over twenty years ago with Murray Edwards' *A Stage in Our Past*. Mark Blagrove documents the amateur community

theatre in Saint John during the inter-war period, while Edward Mullaly and Denis Salter explore the contrasting careers of two actor-mangers in the first half of the nineteenth century. Mullaly's wry account of Henry W. Preston depicts the positively melodramatic professional trials (particularly in Saint John and Fredericton) of an indefatigable Irish-American of modest talent who tried in vain to establish a successful Maritimes and Newfoundland theatre circuit during the late 1830's and 1840's. Interestingly, this is the one paper that alludes to theatre activity in all four provinces comprising modern Atlantic Canada.

Salter's work on Halifax-born William Rufus Blake offers a gentler and more complex tale. Blake was a Nova Scotian of considerable attainment in "the gentlemanly art of comic acting." Although New York and other eastern American cities were his main venues, he actually began his career in his native Halifax with an apprenticeship to a visiting American company in 1818. Salter's study is admirable, not only for its exhaustive reconstruction of the facts of Blake's active life in the theatre (including two seasons in the Halifax of the 1830's), but also for its perceptive analysis of Blake's developing acting style, which has much to say about the changing conventions of performance in the period.

Each of the three critical papers on drama in contemporary Atlantic Canada in some way connects with presentations on theatres. Terry Goldie's exploration of the Newfoundland theatre's preference for collective creation over the "literary" play provides a general context for Alan Filewod's "The Life and Death of the Mummer's Troupe." The latter is a lucid analysis of Chris Brookes' political uses of collective creation and of the internal and external cultural politics that led to the demise of Newfoundland's first indigenous professional theatre in 1982.

Michele Lacombe's reading of Antonine Maillet's *Evangeline Duesse* as a modern play of Acadian exile set, and initially performed, in the location of exile (Montreal) anticipates Zenon Chiasson's account in "Le Théâtre en Acadie et les enjeux d'une société minoritaire" of New Brunswick successors to Maillet. In addition, the play *Lucien*, a comically poignant depiction of the sterile life of a mill worker in northern New Brunswick, provides an anglophone dimension to contemporary Acadian characterization. Denise Lynde offers an analytical survey of the plays of Nova Scotian playwright Christopher Hyde, in which she also deplores the difficulties of securing national and sometimes even regional production of a local writer. Hyde himself, in the panel discussion "The Next Decade," confirms his personal commitment to the latter.

The presentations on theatre in education are widely informative, including Alex Fancy's use of theatre as a vehicle of "expressivité" for French language instruction at Mount Allison University, and Tim Borlaise's account of play-making and performance in the scattered school districts of Labrador. Accounts of school touring are provided by Graham Whitehead, artistic director of Mermaid Theatre, Wolfville, N.S., and Eugene Gallant, of Cooperative de théâtre l'escapouette, Moncton, N.B. Rose Adams describes the use of popular education techniques "as tools of analysis and action" for adult audiences by the non-professional Popular Projects Society of Halifax; of special interest is her description of their contemporary revival of the famous banned agitprop play of 1933, *Eight Men Speak*.

Cultural politics is a recurring motif of the volume, beginning with John Gray's acerbic keynote address "Learning How to Fail," a battle cry against the educational systems that to our peril ignore Ca-

nadian history, literature and the arts, and the funding institutions that sustain imported over indigenous culture in the large theatres. The absence of representation from two out of three of what Gray calls "the big Regionals" seems to reinforce his second point, as do the sometimes controversial particulars of federal and provincial funding procedures aired in the "Theatre and Funding" panel discussion. Indeed, Ed McKenna, business manager of Mulgrave, was forced to edit his original remarks for publication because of the "displeasure" of the Nova Scotia Department of Culture, Recreation and Fitness at the time of the symposium. A major concern expressed here and in "The Next Decade" discussion is over the issue of "funding policy that supports political objectives as much as artistic," one of the factors said to discourage artists from remaining in the Atlantic region.

While the closing prognostications offered for the next decade are predictably mixed, Cindy Cowan, playwright and performer at Mulgrave, expresses the best hope for a mature regionalism in the theatre when she speaks of a developing taste among young people "for a very particular style of theatre which is our own — which is Nova Scotian — and also happens to be happily Canadian."

DIANE BESSAI

## DIVIDING LINE

JANICE KULYK KEEFER, *Transfigurations*. Ragweed, \$12.95.

DIANNE WARREN, *The Wednesday Flower Man*. Coteau Books, n.p.

THE TITLE STORY IN *Transfigurations* is deceptively simple in its referentiality, in its meticulous description of a beauty salon in rural Nova Scotia, in its vivid portrayal of employees and customers. The

story never foregrounds its artifice, never draws attention to itself, and yet the realistic surface is as unconvincing as the rayon flowers that adorn the salon. The diction, while not overtly disrupting the realism, constantly reminds the reader of a carefully constructed duality. If the story seeks to explore the private fantasies and barely concealed vanity of its characters, it also informs the reader about the process of writing, about the complex relation between fiction and reality.

"Transfigurations" is a difficult story to classify. Terms such as "realistic," "modern," or "metafictional" somehow seem inadequate to describe the texture of the stories. A strong sense of setting and cultural context, of Cape Breton, Toronto, and Vancouver, of baby showers, Christmas decorations, marriages and divorces provides a frame for the stories, while the prose, often metaphoric and dense, draws the reader away from the plot and sequentiality.

Stories such as "Musée Acadien," "A Small Dark Cloud," and "Transfigurations" are perhaps more overtly symbolic in that they de-emphasize plot, almost ignore sequentiality, and rely on texture to create meaning. The others are more challenging and typical in that they preserve the pretence of reality while drawing the reader into subtle layers of meaning. "Christmas without Snow," for instance, with its portrayal of a failing marriage, a bewildered child, and petulant grandparents, explores familiar themes of betrayal and alienation. Juxtaposed with the incessant arguing and bickering is an emphasis on silence, on half-uttered sentences, on thoughts that can find expression only through symbols. Along similar lines is "Two in the Campagna," perhaps the most memorable story in the collection, which reveals the author's capacity to exploit the resources of the short story form. Constantly reinforced by Browning's poem, the story ex-

plores the themes of sexuality, of repressed and primal desires. Kulyk Keefer uses powerful symbols and a carefully structured prose to tell of two academics trying to achieve a mutual understanding that transcends the narrow morality of their colleagues. Like Browning, the story poses the complex question, "As earth lies bare to heaven above / How is it under our control / To love or not to love?"

Unlike Keefer, Dianne Warren is at her best in stories that deliberately distort the referential surface. In her successful stories, she begins with a verifiable context, with characters whose conflicts are familiar, who speak a language that is representational, and then moves into a world where logic no longer seems to apply and the dividing line between reality and fantasy becomes increasingly unclear. The stories suggest that one needs to go beyond realism to explore complex layers of reality.

"The Winter Road," "The Wednesday Flower Man," "Dead Rabbits," and "Miracle Nightly" — her more experimental stories — are "difficult" in that they create both a "real" world which the reader can relate to and an "alternative" world which accommodates the unreal. "The Winter Road," for instance, is episodic and open-ended, and often reads like a dream sequence. Yet the imagery and pattern of repetition provide the basis for understanding the experience. "The Wednesday Flower Man" parades its artifice more insistently with its disruption of chronological sequence, contradiction, unexpected events, and the underpinning of a detective thriller or murder mystery. It is a story without a conclusion, without a single focus; but themes of alienation, of pain, of the need to break away from the monotony of existence permeate the story. The mode is ideally suited to a story that deals with characters who are on a futile quest and whose hold on reality has become increasingly tenuous.

The more conventional and realistic stories like "The Elite Cafe," "Sukie," and "Come Daylight" are powerful explorations of the pressure of reality seen mainly, though not exclusively, from the perspective of women trying to cope with loss, disillusionment, alienation, and loss of hope. Both "Sukie" and "Come Daylight" are memorable because the landscapes they portray and the characters they create point to complex depths of meaning. "Come Daylight," for instance, is a description of a failed reunion — the capricious daughter, the stubborn father, and the suffering mother are conventional figures. The story's richness lies in the technique of "arresting" time: the characters, despite their determination to control the present and shape the future, are still prisoners of the past.

C. KANAGANAYAKAM

## COMING OF AGE

COLLECTIF DE L'ÉCOLE DE TRADUCTEURS ET D'INTERPÈTES, *Bibliographie du traducteur/Translators' Bibliography*. Univ. of Ottawa Press, \$39.95.

KATHY MEZEI, *Bibliographie de la critique des traductions littéraires anglaises et françaises au Canada/Bibliography of Criticism on English and French Literary Translations in Canada*. Univ. of Ottawa Press/Canadian Federation for the Humanities, \$19.95.

THE UNIVERSITY OF Ottawa Press has recently published two reference works of significance to professional and student translators and to serious observers of the translation act. These bibliographies, the sixth and seventh titles to appear in the Collection "Cahiers de traductologie," launched in 1979 by the university's respected School for Translators and Interpreters, attest to the growing prestige and visibility of translation in Canada. Both cover material written in French and English and, while only one is exclu-

sively Canadian and literary in focus, both suggest avenues for scholars and critics of Canadian literature to explore.

The first, compiled by teachers at the translation school itself, is primarily a translators' resource guide, although it provides no annotations and is content to merely cite. It is a revised version and an extension of Jean Delisle and Lorraine Albert's 1979 *Guide bibliographique du traducteur, rédacteur et terminologue/Bibliographic Guide for Translators, Writers and Terminologists*, now out of print. Its first aim has been to gather together for the student and practitioner references to essential tools of the craft/profession: encyclopedias, monolingual and bilingual dictionaries, manuals on grammar and usage, glossaries of specialized terms. Originally French and English in perspective, it has been expanded to include a section meeting the needs of translators working in the Spanish language. Also greatly expanded is the section on "Specialized Domains," which now fills close to one half of the book's 332 pages, a reminder of the awesome responsibility translators (and their educators) bear in an age of narrowing specialization and rapidly evolving terminologies. This bibliography aims to encompass the broad spectrum of translation activities — literary as well as technical-commercial — and it is therefore intended to be of interest to those growing numbers of reader-writers engaged in the translating of literature in this country. Most significantly (and herein lies the work's greatest originality), the authors have incorporated an historical and theoretical element into what is an eminently practical book. Accordingly, alongside sections on terminology and computer-aided translation, they include sections on literary translation, translation of the Bible, history of translation (with a subsection on the history of translation in Canada), and "Theory of Translation."

The latter is the opening heading of the book, the implication being that translators should not be oblivious to what is being said about them, that they should be aware of, perhaps even involved in, the theoretical discourse their act inspires.

There are models for such awareness and involvement in Canada, and the bibliography, international in scope but with a welcome Canadian emphasis, has indicated many of these. The journal *Meta*, for example, carries regular contributions by translators and is often cited. Among literary translators, there are several who have thought deeply about their work — names like Jacques Brault, Doug Jones, or Frank Scott spring to mind. The bibliography provides either direct or indirect access to their writings. The theoretical listings are extremely selective, but on the whole fairly representative of the diversity of approach that characterizes translation discourse. They offer in this regard an introduction, a “way in” to the vast body of accumulated theory and analysis.

The bibliography renders an immense service to the translators for whom it was primarily intended. It is a unique signposting of the complexities of the translation world — the practicalities all translators are concerned with and the realm of conscious observation and reflection to which some accede. It is at the same time an eye-opener for non-translators and a convenient starting place for anyone aspiring to make serious comment on the act of translation or a particular translated text. And this, as the second of the two bibliographies demonstrates, is something Canadian critics and scholars are more and more being called upon to do.

Kathy Mezei's bibliography is a co-publication. The Canadian Federation for the Humanities' collaboration with the Ottawa press is indicative of the scholarly status which translation studies have officially achieved. The work makes

annotated reference to critical material relating to the translation of Canadian literary texts and published in Canada between 1950 and 1985. It has sections on books, articles, reviews, theses, bibliographies, and — in order to make accessible translators' own attitudes — also cites interviews and translators' introductions and notes. In the thirty-five-year period covered, the volume of literary translation in Canada increased dramatically. Philip Stratford's *Bibliography of Canadian Books in Translation*, published in 1975 and updated in 1977 (a third edition is imminent and long overdue), first gave us the means of evaluating the quantity of translation done and its distribution (relative activity in French and English, choices of author and genre). Now Mezei gives us the tools to assess — quantitatively and qualitatively — the accompanying surge of critical response. For scholars of Canadian and comparative Canadian literature, the book offers a valuable sampling of cross-cultural receptions, of English- and French-Canadian readings of one another's literary works. (There is no attempt to be exhaustive here: The bibliography's focus dictated that only texts making substantial mention of translation would be included.) For translation's critics and practitioners, it gathers evidence of the gradual refinement of a critical apparatus for the study of translation as an act.

Critical awareness of translation is a recent phenomenon in Canada. In her introduction, Mezei notes the changes in attitude each decade since the 1950's has brought. She concludes that in the 1980's translation studies in this country are “poised on a threshold.” Many names stand out — names of critics like Sherry Simon, E. D. Blodgett, Annie Brisset, involved in the process of constructing models Mezei hopes will advance modern theories of translation and ultimately influence reviewers of translated works, al-

lowing them to go beyond the worn-out clichés (“does not do justice to the original,” “successfully captures the tone”) to perceptive comment on the choices and decisions a translator has made.

These bibliographies are landmarks. They signal Canadian translation’s coming of age. Each in its own way confirms the relevance of translation studies to the study of literature, although Mezei’s intentions are far more explicit in this regard. Her work makes abundantly clear not only that translation theories and theories of literature, language, and culture necessarily intersect, in Canada as elsewhere, but also that the very notion of a Canadian literature must henceforth be expanded to include that area of cultural interaction for which translation is the medium and the model.

BETTY BEDNARSKI

## HISTORY OF THE JEWS

RICK SALUTIN, *A Man of Little Faith*. McClelland & Stewart, \$24.95.

RICK SALUTIN’S *A Man of Little Faith* was the deserving winner of the W. H. Smith/*Books in Canada* First Novel Award for 1988. Salutin’s background as rabbinical student, journalist, and playwright all provide material for the book’s extraordinary scope. The novel becomes the history of the Jews, particularly the Jews in Canada, in the twentieth century. It ranges from pre-war Germany, with a cameo appearance of Martin Buber, to post-1948 Israel, with Golda Meier, to New York, to pre-war Palestine, to Alberta, to Zurich, to Paris, and always back to Toronto. At times, the book is almost a pastiche, with echoes of other Canadian Jewish writers as they express this complex history, braided, as it must be, into all the traditions of Jewish thought. Thus we get the shadow of Henry Kreisel in

the character side-swiped by the Holocaust, held in an internment camp in Canada. Adele Wiseman’s forthright sense that simply telling the story of a Jew must legitimate the entire people in the gentile reader’s eyes functions throughout, as does her web of allusions to the Kabbalistic tale of creation in the use of a “crackpot” main character — though Salutin’s Oskar is less appealing and transcendent than Wiseman’s redoubtable Hoda. A. J. M. Klein’s spirit hovers over Oskar’s visits to Israel, and the voice of Jack Ludwig is recalled in the reveries on sex.

For Oskar, Canada is an absurd diaspora, especially the Pillar of Fire temple — the Pill on the Hill — where he is principal of Jewish education. And Oskar is an absurd character, “the ugliest Jew who came out of Nazi Germany,” a historian manqué who never conceives of his job as a Jewish educator as being more than temporary. He is, after all, a man of little faith who declined to apply for a scholarship to rabbinical school in the United States when that would have been a passport out of Nazi Germany because he could not dedicate himself to the “parochial” life of belief. The scholarly study of history Oskar understands as a kind of assimilation — but he never goes back to the university for his doctorate. An unnamed narrator, identified primarily as a member of Oskar’s “Great Class” of the 1950’s, gives us the story in a self-consciously oracular manner, freely reconstructing Oskar’s inner thoughts and scenes the narrator did not witness. Only in the penultimate chapter does Oskar speak for himself, and at this point he is already dead, describing his own death and funeral.

Much of the middle half of the novel is tedious to read, devoted to Oskar’s struggles with the various brother/friend/rival figures who fill his world. The narrator’s voice is not always compelling enough to



rivet our attention on the details of Oskar's failed ambition, his jealousies, his compulsive masturbation in reveries of any woman he meets, even his doubts. The repeated references to Buber become stilted.

But none of this really matters. In fact transcending it all becomes part of the point when Oskar finally turns his attention away from Europe and Israel and impulsively flies west to the Prairies. Driving across Alberta in a rented car, he discovers "a place that has never yet been, and still somehow isn't." The flat, endless prairie represents for Oskar the pre-creation of the Kabbalists "Before that meddling God of the Bible got busy creating and precluded all possibilities except those He decided to make real." In this limitlessness Oskar discovers that he is literally accelerating on level ground. The gas pedal on his Dodge Dart is stuck and Oskar is propelled — bullseye — to the town of Blanton and the aluminum house trailer of Les Vanderveen, shop and history teacher.

Les fixes the car; Oskar comes to a history class in which he finds himself both guest and specimen Jew. What Les teaches is his own methodical belief in a sinister Jewish conspiracy to rule the world. Its success is measured by the fact that it is unrecorded: "the less evidence there is, the more *proof*." Les's theories, earnestly and benevolently taught his students — "The face of hate is rarely hateful" — deny every jumbled detail of Oskar's life just as they culminate in the denial of the Holocaust, and the wholesale conclusion: "Jews are responsible for debts and revolutions and everything else in the world today."

Oskar is bewildered by the mat of false information so tangled there is nowhere to begin. He is freed when he leans across the aisle and sees the misspelling in an eager student's notebook: Auto von Bis-

marck. History, Oskar realizes, is hilarity, especially in Canada, a country that will not take its own seriously. Freed from his own earnestness into a moment of grace, Oskar commandeers the class to give them the history of the Jews that he has been accumulating so ponderously throughout the book. He wins the children's acceptance and ends by thanking them and Les himself:

"I ask myself what if Adolf Hitler had been my teacher in a country school in Bavaria when I was young? He might have sounded exactly like you! Should I therefore find you sinister and menacing, or should I have found him ludicrous and inconsequential? I don't know. . . . I am grateful to you, for my meeting with you here has been extraordinary. It has been like walking into a mirror of my past and rearranging the reflection."

Indeed, Alberta is pre-creation. His experience in Blanton frees Oskar from the necessity of playing forever a survivor, the prototypic Jew, a role he feels a fraud at, since his beating at Oranienburg in the aftermath of *Kristallnacht*, however real, was not the life in the camps his Canadian colleagues have always wanted him to represent. He is not the starving survivor whose image haunts the world. Oskar has been a hero, the narrator tells us, precisely because he has not assumed the survivor's mantle. "However trivial — and also embarrassing — are the sorrows of his present, he prefers to live his life in their terms rather than those of a mythic past." After forty years of exile, Oskar is able to live wholly in Canada.

Oskar has freed the students of Blanton, Alberta, as well, and more fully than he had intended. "As he drives home toward Toronto, he hears on the car radio that a high school teacher in Alberta has been charged with spreading hate in his classroom. He will go to court, perhaps to jail. Oskar changes the station." Oskar's discomfort at the news comes not from gratitude to Les for having fixed his car

nor even from his historical perspective on the futility of using the courts against hatred. Rather, "all his adult life Oskar has told students and teachers, 'Go ahead, question. Don't be afraid. It's not a crime to be wrong!'"

Thinking counts, for Oskar. Asking questions is more than getting answers, and especially more than correct answers. Oskar recognizes that he would have been a man of strangeness even had he not been betrayed by history. Forgiveness and atonement are only temporary goals compared to the questioning that can lead to the pre-creation state of possibilities.

FRANCES W. KAYE

## BE WE SPIRIT

ELLEN SCHWARTZ, *Born a Woman*. Polestar, \$12.95.

To be born a woman, you quickly learn  
Your body will be their first concern.  
The media, they've done so fine  
Exploited our bodies and buried our  
minds . . .

So WRITES Rita MacNeil, providing the title for Ellen Schwartz's much needed examination of one of Canada's most often ignored literary groups, its women singer-songwriters. Specifically, Schwartz focuses on seven contemporary women who, she quite effectively argues, deserve to be placed alongside of today's most successful songwriters. The list is prudently chosen, ranging from the legendary matriarch of Canadian women singers, Sylvia Tyson, to Lucie Blue Tremblay, who likes to spray blue streaks in her hair when she performs. Included too are Saskatchewan's Connie Kaldor and Heather Bishop, Vancouver's reclusive Ferron, Montreal-born Marie-Lynn Hammond, and Cape Breton's Rita MacNeil, whom Schwartz justly describes as Canada's first feminist songwriter.

Though Schwartz's sketches are necessarily biographical, providing a general description of each woman's emergence as a singer-songwriter, she is wise enough to keep such facts to a minimum, choosing instead to allow her talented writers to speak for themselves, through their comments on their music and, most importantly, through their lyrics. Quite clearly, what sets Schwartz's seven performers apart from most contemporary singers is that these women write much of their own material. They are not simply singers; they are also poets who provide a remarkably full portrait of the varied roles women play in Canadian life.

Connie Kaldor writes of waitresses trapped in small town truck-stop cafés and of prairie weddings where jellied salad with miniature Kraft marshmallows is *de rigueur*. Hammond and Tremblay write of the difficulties of growing up in a bilingual culture. Ferron provides Yeatsian journeys with enigmatic metaphysical overtones, while Sylvia Tyson tries to make "small, daily statements of people's lives." Finally, there is Rita MacNeil, whose "Flying on Your Own" may well be the most penetrating and riveting feminist song ever written, anywhere, but who admits that she wrote the song simply to celebrate the first time she drove from Cape Breton to Halifax alone.

Schwartz argues in her introduction that it would be a mistake to categorize women's music as feminist. It would be equally mistaken to categorize her book as feminist. It, like the songs themselves, is written for "anyone who likes to listen to music that cares." My only criticism of Schwartz's book is that I wish she had included complete songs, more examples of this music that does so obviously care. But perhaps her point is that the last two pages of her text — the discography — are the most important. Above all else, Schwartz convinces her reader that these

voices deserve to be heard. As Ferron writes:

And by our lives be we spirit  
 And by our hearts be we women  
 And by our eyes be we open  
 And by our hands be we whole.

KIERAN KEALY

## RIEL

WOLFGANG KLOOSS, *Geschichte und Mythos in der Literatur Kanadas: Die englischsprachige Métis- und Riel-Rezeption*. Heidelberg: Carl Winter, DM 96,00 (paper).

TOGETHER WITH Susanna Moodie, Emily Carr, and Emile Nelligan, Louis Riel has become a Canadian cultural icon whose eccentric personality is said to reflect the elusive Canadian identity. Klooss explores Riel's mythic qualities, but he differentiates his understanding of myth from that of Northrop Frye. Rejecting myth as archetype, Klooss conceives of it as an entity subject to the influence of political and social forces. As such, this book not only presents a painstakingly researched survey of literary versions of Louis Riel, but also a major alternative to the mytho-poetic criticism of the 1960's and 1970's, the results of which were not always verifiable by historical fact. Klooss deliberately avoids a discussion by theme and proceeds diachronically instead, in order to trace ideological changes as they occur. He concludes that there is, strictly speaking, no such thing as a unified Riel myth, but a "series of myths," in which history and literature interact to bring about significant changes. Klooss has worked closely with such scholars as the historian Thomas Flanagan, whose editions of Riel's diaries and poetry have attracted new attention to the Métis leader.

Although a shortened version of Klooss's 1985 *Habilitationschrift*, this book on English-Canadian literary versions of Métis and Riel still comprises a hefty 384

pages, with substantial chapters on the history of the Métis and the opening of the West, on the enigmatic personality of Riel, and on literary responses to Riel in the nineteenth and in the twentieth century. There is also an extensive bibliography of both primary and secondary sources, but unfortunately no index.

Although the title suggests that the book restricts itself to sources in English, Klooss has also drawn on material in French throughout, and he comes to valuable comparative conclusions about a man to whom English- and French-Canadians responded equally strongly, whereas other mythic figures like Moodie or Nelligan appealed to one group only. In this sense, too, this study is exemplary because mythopoeic criticism frequently discussed French-Canadian work, if at all, because it was available in translation, and it imposed similar mythic patterns on both literatures without taking into sufficient consideration the different cultural forces which shaped them. Thus, whereas Riel was almost instantly elevated to the status of martyr in French Canada, the English rejected him and the Métis as a dangerous challenge to basic principles of imperialism—expansion and unification. Riel embodied an ethnic and ideological aberration which the Empire could not tolerate, and writers in its services activated ancient racial stereotypes to discredit such anomalies. Revealingly, most early literary versions of the myth are to be found in popular forms, romances and operettas, where such opportune prejudice was entrenched in large audiences, who swallowed it as part of harmless and predictable entertainment. In French Canada, by contrast, Riel figured prominently in patriotic songs and epic poetry, incentive to future independence and leadership. Here, Klooss confirms the importance of studying non-canonic literary forms and of making value judgements part of, not inimical to, the critical process.

Because of his outsiderism, Riel subsequently became an ideal focus for ethnic writers who perceived him to be a reflection of their own predicament. John Coulter, for instance, considered the plight of the Métis similar to that of his fellow Irishmen, while Margaret Laurence juxtaposed the fate of her own Scottish ancestors with that of Riel's men. This multicultural potential is also, so Klooss argues, responsible for the powerful revival and reinterpretation of the Riel myth in the wake of the Centennial. Much like the 1837 Rebellion, Riel was now endowed with positive qualities, even by English-Canadian writers, because he conveniently symbolized ethnic and regionalist diversity. Like many of the national symbols deliberately fostered by the Centennial, however, Riel remained more complex and controversial than the organizers had bargained for, and what was perhaps meant as the demonstration of a colourful past turned into a challenging programme for the future. This is an informative and inspiring book, and one can only hope that it will soon be available in translation.

EVA-MARIE KRÖLLER

## SECOND READING

EDITH IGLAUER, *Fishing with John*. Harbour, \$24.95.

HAVING READ AN excerpt from this book in the *New Yorker* a year or two back, I awaited its publication with some trepidation. Would it be as perceptive, and as beautifully written (albeit in the *New Yorker* style), in its entirety as it was in part? The answer after one reading was a definite yes. Accordingly I reviewed it enthusiastically when it first appeared. Until I reread *Fishing with John*, my review, like all the laudatory reviews about the book that have appeared, was just.

Edith Iglauer, a long-time *New Yorker* journalist and the author of several books about the Canadian Arctic, knows how to set the hook in an opening paragraph: "Each year, from spring through fall, a number of small vessels with tall poles stretched out on either side appear, like large birds, on the coastal water. . . . They seem to sit motionless on the surface, but they are moving gently at a speed of around two knots. They are trollers — with a lacework of lines and hooks hanging into the sea from their poles — searching for salmon. For the last four years of his life, I went fishing with my husband, John Heywood Daly, a commercial salmon fisherman . . . and I wrote, working part-time as his deckhand."

During the first reading the surfaces glittered so enhancingly, it seemed few writers had reached out to touch the realities of the B.C. coast so lovingly. It appeared obvious, too, that here was a book that belonged alongside Ballard Hadman's *As the Sailor Loves the Sea*, Betty MacDonald's *Anybody Can Do Anything*, Kathrene Pinkerton's *Three's a Crew*, and a half-dozen or so other books. These are the heart of a small but important western/Pacific Northwestern genre, in which women are interpreting their twentieth-century position on one of the last North American frontiers.

As Edith Iglauer is a writer who evokes by pyramiding sensations and insights, there are few passages that can be quoted out of context. Searching for these remembered images and scenes led to a complete second reading. This process demonstrated how badly caulked was the book's superstructure; then closer inspection revealed entire chapters that were rarely more than clusters of images, beautiful in themselves but leading nowhere. The reason for this is that, like John McPhee, Iglauer's fellow *New Yorker* writer, and Edward Hoagland, an equally perceptive essayist, Iglauer is only comfortable as a

journalist when she is outside looking in. That was her approach in the past, and it was one she returned to in *Fishing with John*.

In a recent book about Cornwall, the poet and historian A. L. Rowse described many of the authors of recent picture-books about Cornwall as "foreigners." Iglauer, Hoagland, McPhee are all professional foreigners — they write books about what it feels like to watch us, not books about how it feels to be us.

In the opening paragraphs of Iglauer's book we learn her beloved John will die in four years, that she was a Midwesterner and is well-educated, and had been for years a cosmopolitan and happy resident of New York. The first time around John's vitality, and his wife's love, prevent the text from going awry; a second encounter finds this journalistic approach, when one begins reading below the surfaces of the text, does not translate happily into a book-length work.

*Fishing with John* lacks the intimacy, the immediacy, the growing love and understanding of a place and a people of Hadman or MacDonald's work. Whether Iglauer's approach is a gimmick, an awkward but honest stance, or a stylistic necessity will depend on her readers' sympathies.

If the book is primarily a love story, such considerations will hardly matter. But the publisher describes the book as an "adventure"; many will also find similarities between *Fishing with John* and Hoagland's *Notes from the Century Before*. As almost everyone to write about *Notes* considers it a travel book, there is good reason to continue feeling uneasy about our almost immediate acceptance of *Fishing with John* as a western and small-c classic. Will it stand up alongside George Woodcock's *Ravens and Prophets*, for instance, and how does it compare to M. Conway Turton's *Cassiar*?

If we do not ask and answer these questions, *Fishing with John* can only be considered a beautifully written and perceptive book about looking at the British Columbia coast, and what it was like to be the wife of a quite exceptional man. Our acceptance of the book will have more to do with our Pacific-Canadian delight in looking at ourselves through a glass lightly, than with a knowledgeable response. We may be left with a brilliant and extended *New Yorker* piece on how curious life is outside Gotham.

CHARLES LILLARD

## GLOSSED

BARRY CALLAGHAN, *Stone Blind Love*. Exile Editions, \$11.95.

J. DOUGLAS PORTEOUS, *Degrees of Freedom*. Saturna Island Thinktank Press, n.p.

DOUGLAS BURNET SMITH, *Living in the Cave of the Mouth*. Owl's Head Press, n.p.

AS A WRITER Barry Callaghan is best known for his short story collection *The Black Queen Stories*, dealing with the little loves of downtown Toronto's racially and sexually mixed inhabitants. *Stone Blind Love*, Callaghan's third book of poetry, like its predecessors, mounts a sequence of lyrical poems on an unsubstantial situational frame. We are presented lyric moments in a young woman's conversations with her mother, often about her drowned father, interspersed with feverish lyrics from her clarinetist lover. Beautifully printed, the volume's poems appeal to the eye and to the erudite mind; there is little for the ear or the emotions. The dominating images are best given in an extract from Callaghan's first volume of poetry:

stone  
needs water.  
bone  
needs the beating  
of blood.

Unfortunately, *Stone Blind Love* is rather bloodless.

J. D. Porteous' title *Degrees of Freedom*, with its apparent promise of liberation from the system, suggests more than it delivers. R. Murray Schafer in his otherwise playful winter apocalypse *Music in the Cold* wrote: "Art within the constraints of a system is political action in favour of that system, regardless of content." Against such a totalitarian statement the degree of freedom Porteous offers in travel, fantasy, and love is rather small — an acute angle. Porteous has an infectious love of language: "Kebabbed" saints, "qutokaputplatz," and a tongue-twister to retire the industrious woodchuck:

How many stats could StatsCan can  
If StatsCan could can stats?

But the unpretentious fragments the poet offers from a lifetime wanderjahre are illustrative evidence of the very limited freedoms possible in an exploitative world.

Douglas Burnet Smith's *Living in the Cave of the Mouth* contains a few lyrics, including the sequence "The St. Andrews Meditations" on guilt and acquiescence in the Otherness of nature, but his main interest is the prose-poem. This is a form more common in France. Matthew Arnold praised the rhythm and natural magic of Maurice de Guérin's "Centaur." Baudelaire abandoned the exotic for the anecdotal and descriptive, Rimbaud moved to symbolist narrative and delirium. In Canada only a few poets such as W. W. E. Ross, Anne Hébert, and Margaret Atwood have written prose-poems, and the definitions remain uncertain. Is music by assonance, compression of thought, and evocative imagery sufficient? Or should the number of syllables between implicit and explicit punctuation pauses be weighed? D. B. Smith tends toward a balanced prose. Individual items

are brief, dream fragments sometimes apocalyptic, short descriptions evoking personal and literary allusions, whimsy. A good example of the latter is "Reading Late at Night, A Ladybug Lands On My Chest." Here the liability of the Rimbaud model, too abrupt a transition from grain of sand to infinity, is avoided. The prose-poem in English too often tempts the poet into the facile oracular. Smith is best when humour is the saving grace.

TOM MIDDLEBRO'

## SHAPING

ROMA GELBLUM-BROSS, *To Samarkand and Back*. Cormorant Books, \$10.95.

THIS COLLECTION SHOULD be studied in Canadian Literature courses along with Alice Munro's *Lives of Girls and Women*. Like that volume, *To Samarkand and Back* is a semi-autobiographical *künstlerroman* constructed as a short story cycle. Unlike Munro's work, however, Gelblum-Bross's is set in Poland and Russia during and immediately after the Second World War. Escape from Poland, arrest as suspected spies, and exile in the lovely but bewildering Samarkand add urgency and terror to the young Jewish narrator's experience and that of her family. The traumatic events of this period, and the effects of anxiety they have upon her parents, make the child incapable of maturing normally when the family returns to Poland. Her desperation finally made apparent, the girl and her parents are set to rights by the kindly intervention of a child psychiatrist. *To Samarkand and Back* also differs from *Lives of Girls and Women* in its resolution into a comedic structure. The wedding party with which the book concludes signals a return to social normalcy for all the characters and an achievement of mature self-confidence for the now-adolescent narrator. As an end to

a narrative marked by physical and emotional brutality, the hopeful resolution is a necessary healing. It indicates that for family and friends, but especially for the narrator, this is the real return, and that their human understanding has actually been deepened by the suffering of their recent past.

The overview I have given may suggest an overly simple narrative approach, but that is far from the case. By going back to a time and to recent events in world history that readers will know of and deplore, Gelblum-Bross effects a remarkably complex narrative focus that intensifies the impact of events on the reader. There are actually three narrative foci in *To Samarkand and Back*. The first is the eyes and mind of the child, naïvely noting every detail of sight and sound, but unable to understand events or their contexts coherently. The second is the mature writer, not only re-living and rendering through a younger self, but structuring the emotional reverberations of each episode around a significant core image, such as the shoes, the doll's house, or the crooked smile. This shaping consciousness invites the reader to experience with the child and simultaneously to understand in each story what she cannot. The complex horror enters with the third focus, which is the reader's knowledge of the history of European Jewry in the 1930's and 1940's. The reader's anxiety about what may well happen to the child reaches its climax in "The Stepmother," is allayed upon the family's return to Poland, but is provoked again, and amplified, in the conclusion to "The Doll's House." Kay Boyle aims at this sort of complex fear in the story "A Winter Night," but Gelblum-Bross's more extended treatment and surer control in *To Samarkand and Back* make this technique particularly persuasive.

Although she is seen only through the child's often hostile gaze, the mother remains, for me, the most striking figure.

Whether she is insisting on keeping her beautiful new shoes during the family's flight into Russia, negotiating with foreign authorities on behalf of herself and her child, aggressively establishing status for her family on their return to Poland, or sentimentally entertaining a lover lost during the upheaval of the war years, this woman's complexity and strength establish her as the principal survivor-heroine of the book.

To the child, however, the mother's firm views and quick temper ally her with the stepmother of the Cinderella tale, a repeated motif. The child-narrator and reader are jolted from fantasy into reality in the story "The Stepmother." The narrator resents the way her friend, Savo Djon, is treated by her stepmother Fatima, being taken out of school to sell in a Samarkand street market, not being allowed to eat with the rest of the family. The reader will agree until, following the whipping that kills her, Savo Djon's and Fatima's true story is told. In the Russia of that time, Savo Djon, as a leper, would be sent to a leper colony in the desert, there to die gradually and horribly; for the relatives who had harboured her, severe penalties would follow. Fatima emerges as a strong, resourceful woman who does what she must to protect *all* her family from the harsh law of the fatherland. The (step)mother is largely exonerated by the hard necessities to which she herself has been subjected. The fairy godmother arrives in the charming form of the doctor with a crooked smile. The magical transformation he works is the altogether ordinary sort that involves bullying the parents into noticing their daughter's needs, and persuading the daughter to assert herself.

The Cinderella tale may be undercut and rewritten, but, generally, the curative powers of the imagination and of stories are validated. The child loves to read, using the forms of the fairy tales to shape

her understanding of experience. In the end, she recites a poem of her own to the wedding party, and her mother is proud. *To Samarkand and Back* is very convincingly a *künstlerroman*, for it is organized around the narrator's developing perceptions of shapes and shaping.

A. C. MORRELL

## WRITER'S CRITIC

JOHN LENNOX & MICHELE LACOMBE, eds., *Dear Bill: The Correspondence of William Arthur Deacon*. Univ. of Toronto Press, \$37.50.

IN ONE OF HIS early letters, William Arthur Deacon (1890-1977) presented himself as "a very special kind of critic" and added that he "want[ed] to be an anonymous herald, announcing the great ones." In another, he added: "the intent of my work is educative; and the core of it is the development of taste and the literary enthusiasms."

During his long tenure as literary critic and editor, most importantly for *Saturday Night* (1922-1928), the *Mail and Empire* (1928-1936) and the *Globe and Mail* (1936-1960), Deacon had many opportunities to review the works of writers he admired and to give the Canadian public a varied, stimulating, and often spell-binding introduction to the appreciation of literature, a course which he also followed in literary essays such as *Pens and Pirates* (1923), *Peter McArthur* (1924), and the comic tour-de-force, the *Four Jameses* (1927). Deacon was also an ardent nationalist, and was able to influence directly the changing image of Canadian society through the publication of *My Vision of Canada* (1923).

But perhaps his greatest contribution to Canadian letters was known only to the many writers, aspiring writers, critics, and readers to whom he wrote thousands of

encouraging, helpful letters, giving advice on financial matters, acting as a go-between in dealings with publishers, and setting forth his own critical principles which were basically that the job of the critic is not to lecture the author, but to note the results obtained.

Since his death in 1977, Deacon's vast collection of books has been dispersed, but his papers were acquired by the Thomas Fisher Rare Books Library of the University of Toronto. Two major works have thus far been published by the University of Toronto Press, the first being the biography by Clara Thomas and John Lennox, *William Arthur Deacon, A Canadian Literary Life* (1982), the second this selection from the approximately 13,000 letters written by Deacon and received by him.

The most interesting of these letters are to and from writers such as Earle Birney, Morley Callaghan, Constance Beresford-Howe, Frederick Philip Grove, Germaine Guèvremont, Raymond Knister, Hugh MacLennan, W. O. Mitchell, Peter W. Newman, Lorne Pierce, E. J. Pratt, Thomas H. Raddall, Gabrielle Roy, Laura Goodman Salverson, and Duncan Campbell Scott, a veritable literary who's who of the period. But there are also letters from obscure or forgotten correspondents, which are often quite fascinating.

John Lennox and Michèle Lacombe have made many wise editorial decisions, the most significant being the equal importance given to the letters written and received by Deacon. Another is to have presented the material chronologically, rather than by correspondent. The reader is thus allowed access to a group of individuals, many of whom were interrelating, and is able to follow their development through a long period of time with one strong, opinionated man as their catalyst. Yet another is to have made a selection, rather than attempting to publish the whole. Certain files, especially the



very large ones dealing with the Canadian Author's Association, contain material which would have been of interest only to a very narrow range of readers.

One could wish, however, that other letters had been included, those of Gwethalyn Graham and Jean Bruchési, for example. But their names appear in the letters of others and they are thus part of the literary picture which emerges from this correspondence. In fact, most major writers of the period find their place, though their place is not always major. It is unfortunate that not all of the letters exchanged by Deacon and Judge Emily Murphy, who was one of the participants in the "persons" case, and Gabrielle Roy, whose works Deacon particularly admired, seeing her success in English Canada as a sign of rapprochement between the two founding groups, could be included. But this would have required many more pages, and though the stature of Canadian literature has increased markedly since Deacon began his work as a reviewer, the financial constraints of publication must still be considered.

William Arthur Deacon was a "reader's reviewer" and a "writer's critic" and the editors make it very clear that the material they are presenting "is concerned with the critic in this latter capacity, as literary advocate and letter-writer extraordinaire." The concluding paragraph of the introduction is a telling one:

The main thrust of the entire Deacon collection, as of this selection, reveals how no academy, no professional group, and no granting system, however necessary and beneficial, can entirely take the place of the nurturing of our writers by good reading, honest criticism, and personal encouragement through failures as well as successes, through bad times as well as good. Deacon had a talent for friendship which matched his enthusiasm and patience for a wide circle of correspondents. He became and remained for forty years one focal point in Canadians' recognition of themselves, their culture, and their heritage.

The present edition of the Deacon correspondence is preceded by a sixteen-page introduction and a four-page chronology, which owe a great deal to the preceding biography. The letters are annotated and the text is followed by a useful onomastic index, but one regrets the absence of a subject index which would have added greatly to the flexibility of the work.

*Dear Bill* is a major Canadian publishing event as it allows direct access to material valuable to specialists in Canadian literature, history and culture, and interesting to the general reading public.

MARIEL O'NEILL-KARCH

## ETHNICITIES

HILDE FROESE TIESSEN, ed., *Liars and Rascals: Mennonite Short Stories*. Univ. of Waterloo Press, \$14.00.

ED KLEIMAN, *A New-Found Ecstasy*. NeWest Press, \$18.95/\$8.95.

THE STORIES OF THE Mennonites and the Jews surely constitute two of the great epic tales to grace the Canadian family tree, and deserve to be prominently displayed in any literary treatment of the peoples who came here. The wanderings of the Mennonites in search of religious freedom, moving from northern Germany to Russia to the Canadian prairies, often via South America, is something of a shadow journey of the tale of the Yiddish-speaking Jews, who have had their territory staked out by such towering figures of modern literature as Sholom Aleichem, Joseph Roth, I. B. Singer, I. J. Singer, and Saul Bellow. Both groups moved in the course of hundreds of years from their German homelands to the apparent religious sanctuary of Eastern Europe, both maintained their Germanic languages while surrounded by Slavic speakers, and both would finally be driven by brutal force from their homelands of centuries in

the wake of the violence of the twentieth century. In Canadian literature, Jewish writers have been prominent. From A. M. Klein through Irving Layton, Leonard Cohen, Mordecai Richler, and many others, the extraordinarily dramatic and tragic story of the European Jews has been prominent in the fiction and poetry of Canadian writers. For the New World Mennonites, modernization and urbanization have just begun to allow the kind of critical creative literature which Yiddish writers began to force upon their orthodox co-religionists a century ago.

These two anthologies give a contemporary demonstration of the possibilities open to Mennonite authors, and a selection of short stories by Ed Kleiman, a writer who is trying to expand the area of interest beyond the previously explored Jewish community of Winnipeg. It would be remiss not to comment on the excellent design and workmanship which have gone into the covers of both these books; both cover illustrations emphasize the ethnicity of the stories behind them, although both collections contain stories which are not at all concerned with Mennonite or Jewish subjects. Perhaps that indicates an uncertainty on the part of the editors of just how "ethnic" the collections are meant to be. In the case of *Liars and Rascals*, this seems to be something of a problem, which is probably reflected in the contemporary Mennonite community itself. Twenty-two stories by thirteen authors are included in this generous anthology. While most of these stories deal at least to a large extent with developments in a rapidly changing Mennonite community, the two stories by Andreas Schroeder (after Rudy Wiebe probably the best-known of the anthologized writers and the only one to have been born in Europe) lie outside this context and add little to the reader's understanding of the Mennonite world, except the suspicion that

once you have left it, you lose all characteristics of it. The majority of the writers are from the Mennonite communities of the Prairies, and there is a definite concentration on rural prairie life and the problems faced by immigrants growing old among children whose values have changed. In the best of these, in the stories of David Waltner-Toews, Sandra Birdsell, Katie Funk Wiebe, or Victor Carl Friesen or the ironic anecdotes of Sara Stambaugh, there is a successful, often poignant use of an individual fate to suggest a universal truth. The less memorable works often tend towards the nostalgic. Only Rudy Wiebe, however, tries to control the epic tale of the Mennonites, but the excerpt which is included here from *The Blue Mountains of China* does not really lend itself to short story form.

None of these stories really do what the short stories of a master like I. B. Singer can do: tell an epic tale in miniature and suggest in a sentence that whole peoples have been exterminated or forced to flee across continents. Ed Kleiman tries this in the first two of his stories, "The Day World War II Really Ended" and "An Old World Wedding," in which live ghosts from a nightmare European past enter North Winnipeg. It may be unfair to wish that he had written more here on this theme, as he probably wishes to move on to other stories, but the rich and moving texture and the historical depth which he reaches in these "Jewish" stories are missing in the majority of the other stories which often have to do with the failure of modern marriage. In the unsuccessful attempts, stories set in England or Nebraska or on Lake Winnipeg, he uses clichés of easy adultery and shallow consumerism to suggest simple answers to complex problems. But in the best of them, "The End of the Summer Party" and "Class Reunions," which happen to take place in

Winnipeg, he demonstrates a superb control of story and imagery and may be one of Canada's best short story writers, and not just one of its best ethnic writers. Perhaps he will have to make a choice. Singer never strays from the world he knows intimately, and Kleiman does not (yet) convince me that he is familiar enough with the worlds of Nebraska or the Lake District or Gloucester, Massachusetts, to be able to use them in the multilayered way he can use Winnipeg.

PETER STENBERG

## BEYOND

LILLIAN GATES, *After the Rebellion: The Later Years of William Lyon Mackenzie*. Dundurn Press, \$29.95.

THIS BIOGRAPHY IS a learned and immensely detailed study of the post-rebellion years and career of William Lyon Mackenzie. It is, emphatically, a book for specialists in nineteenth-century Canadian history, not a volume with wide popular appeal as was, for instance, William Kilbourn's *The Firebrand*, his study of Mackenzie's role in the years leading up to and including the rebellion. As she demonstrated long ago in her *Land Policies in Upper Canada*, Lillian Gates is an indefatigable research scholar. She is an advocate for Mackenzie, but she neither idealizes nor romanticizes the man or his post-rebellion role in Canadian politics. In her words, again and again to the end of his life, "Mackenzie called upon the Reformers in Upper Canada to leave the safe shore, to push off and sail on until they arrived at the 'newer world' of his dreams. They would go no further than the safe harbour of responsible government." For him, responsible government as it developed in Canada was not enough; it did not satisfy the position he stated in January 1837, in the confused, immediate aftermath of the rebellion:

I wish to live long enough to see the people of this continent of the humblest classes educated and free, and held in respect according to their conduct and attainments without reference to country, colour or worldly substance.

It is, of course, impossible not to applaud that statement. Even Mackenzie's most violent political adversaries would do so. The trouble comes in its further definition and application: a man of the stature of George Brown, whom Mackenzie defeated in Haldimand County in 1851, certainly subscribed to that ideal, but his path toward attaining the goal was more middle-of-the-road and infinitely more tolerant of the party system as it then existed and evolved than Mackenzie's could ever be.

Truth to tell, Mackenzie was hopeless as a party man. To quote Fred Armstrong in the *DCB*, he was a "puritan with a mission." As a critic of the existing system he was tireless and often, certainly in pre-rebellion years, effective. But when, in December 1837, the forces of reform actually moved in rebellion, his actions were eccentric and ineffective. Similarly in the decades following 1837 he worked tirelessly for reform, but for *his* picked causes. He was not a leader of men in the day-to-day hurly-burly of practical politics, but rather a crusading gadfly in the journalistic sense, and often regrettably inept when he exchanged the editor's pen for grass-roots political activism.

It is good, however, to have a path through his later life and manifold activities charted as clearly and with as much attention to actual documents as Gates has done. Even in his own time the legend of Mackenzie threatened to eclipse the man. In ours, Kilbourn's dismissive and high-flown judgement has masked the reality of Mackenzie's later life's work: "In his old age he haunted the era of responsible government, an irrelevant nuisance, with his capering gestures of pro-

test, amid the church parade of progress." Gates is revisionist, but moderately so. She does not deny the qualities that made Mackenzie a self-defeating reformer, but neither does she subscribe to the cancelling out of his stubborn, life-long policing of the politics and politicians of his day. Perfect probity has never yet existed in any political system and certainly not in Upper Canada's noisy nineteenth-century arena. Mackenzie's ideals were doomed to disappointment, but, all the same, neither they nor he are to be despised or forgotten. Lillian Gates' work accords her subject full and fair treatment.

CLARA THOMAS

## HYPOTHERMIA

JOHN METCALF, ed., *Writers in Aspic*. Véhicule, \$15.00.

PETER O'BRIEN, ed., *So to Speak: Interviews with Contemporary Canadian Writers*. Véhicule, \$16.00.

THE BASIC PREMISE of John Metcalf's *Writers in Aspic* would seem to be commendable enough. The volume brings together the texts of eight contemporary Canadian short stories with critical essays on each, the essays providing a forum for consideration of the stories. However, as one reads Metcalf's Introduction, one begins to have doubts about the value of the enterprise. After making it clear that his selection of Canadian short stories for a special issue of *The Literary Review*, on which *Writers in Aspic* is based, was outside the "mainstream," Metcalf contends that Canadian literature is not yet ready for "general descriptive works," since "most people — including the academics whose job this is supposed to be — seem not really to understand what the writer has written." The book then implicitly presents itself as a vehicle for a critical approach which attempts to remedy this state of ignorance by paying particular

attention to formal issues and considering stories as "structures of words." Add to this Metcalf's approving quotation of W. J. Keith's remark that all the Canadianists to whom he has spoken admit to being aware "of a lowering of the intellectual temperature when they cross the boundary into Canadian studies" and a side-swipe which suggests that Canadian critics are narrowly nationalistic ("Critical writing on Canadian texts seems, in the main, the property of dull boys who are too busy doing giant jigsaw puzzles of the Fathers of the Confederation to come out and play") and one has a very definite sense that there is something rotten in the state of CanLit.

The charges of intellectual hypothermia and narrow thematic nationalism do not, of course, need to be answered, though they leave one wondering how Metcalf has missed the sea change that has taken place in Canadian criticism in recent years. Before the 1980's the latter charge might have been seen to contain at least a grain of truth, but with the recent emphasis on formalist and post-structuralist theory, it seems almost quaint to be levelling it now. On the other hand, Metcalf's inclusion of a fine narratological essay by Simone Vauthier (on Leon Rooke's "The End of the Revolution and Other Stories") suggests at least some interest in the contemporary critical scene. So perhaps this is an Introduction which is best seen as functioning like the preface of an eighteenth-century play, as sales-blurb which talks up the wares that are to follow. After reading the volume, however, one can only say that the hype is really, after all, simply not justified. The choice of stories is ex/ec-centric, some of the critical essays turn out to be primarily thematic and, all in all, one comes away from the volume wondering how it reflects the contentions made in the Introduction — not to mention wondering why an English-born writer (who includes a

story by himself with an English setting) should want to put together a *Canadian* anthology, while refuting the notion that national identity informs writing.

This is not to criticize Metcalf's contributors, whether they be the short story writers or the critics. The collection includes a number of fine stories, several of which relate directly to Canadian specifics, both regional (the setting of Keath Fraser's "Healing" in the B.C. interior) and discursive (the self-conscious use of small-town idioms in Alice Munro's "Walker Brothers Cowboy"), as well as offering a happy hunting-ground for the kind of formalist readings the book purports to offer, but only sometimes delivers. The best of the critical pieces are Louis K. MacKendrick's on "Healing," Robert Lecker's on Clark Blaise's "A North American Education" and the essay by Simone Vauthier. There is the odd blemish — Michael Darling's piece on Metcalf's own "Single Gents Only" seems particularly indulgent — but the stories and essays included make *Writers in Aspic* a worthwhile volume, despite the inflated and misconceived claims made in the Introduction.

*So to Speak*, a collection of interviews with eleven Canadian writers reprinted from the Montreal literary journal *Rubicon*, shares little with *Writers in Aspic* except the conviction that to attempt to categorize writers in terms of a distinctive national tradition in a country which today is "disparate, vibrant, democratic" is to impose an artificial straitjacket. Although there is a commitment to diversity similar to what one finds in *Writers in Aspic*, the eclecticism of *So to Speak* proves to be of a very different order; it offers no alternative manifesto, only the suggestion that interviews are becoming an increasingly important source for information about writers in an age when communications technology has rendered letter writing semi-obsolete.

The interviews are full and for the most part very good, though one or two of the interviewers have difficulty in prising their subjects open: Mavis Gallant is characteristically contrary and Leon Rooke characteristically elusive. There is a slight sense of *déjà vu* in the interviews with Rudy Wiebe and Margaret Atwood, but Wiebe's comments on history and formal innovation do not altogether duplicate his many previous remarks on these subjects and Atwood is interesting on the indissolubility of art and politics, the impossibility of expression beyond language (*pace* the position she seemed to be inclining towards in *Surfacing*), and in relating the dominant rhetorical style of Canadian discourse to Scots understatement rather than Irish hyperbole, which she sees as having been more important in the U.S. Jack Hodgins, who could well be seen as an exception that proves this particular rule, is most fascinating when he relates his Vancouver Island vision not simply to Ireland, but also to other "edge of the continent" places such as Newfoundland and Japan ("... the child's way of looking at himself would have been partly conditioned by the fact that there is only one side to his world"). Roo Borson also offers illuminating commentary on her own articulation of new regions — regions which can be strongly realized in physical terms, left abstract through the use of generic terms ("trees" instead of 'alders' or 'firs' . . . 'rock' instead of 'sandstone') or be mental topographies which dispense with landscape altogether. Perhaps the most valuable interview of all in *So to Speak* is with Christopher Dewdney: it provides considerable insight into the mysteries of his post-Heisenbergian poetic and the discursive fields (many of them located in terrain that would normally be considered "unpoetic") on which it draws. The other interviewees are Josef Skvorecky, Erin Mouré, Peter Van Toorn and Nicole Brossard.

Finally, one tiny quibble. Each of the interviews in *So to Speak* is precisely contextualized, with readers being given information on the specifics of how it has been conducted. In some cases this has been by post and yet, as one reads the text, the way questions and answers follow on from one another provides a sense of continuous dialogue. Besides wondering exactly how this was achieved, this reader was left asking whether such contrivance was really necessary. If interviews are to serve part of the purpose that writers' papers fulfilled in the past, is it necessary to maintain the illusion of oral dialogue? Perhaps it is, and in any case this is at most a minor criticism of a very useful book which, like several other recent Canadian volumes, demonstrates a sensitive concern with the aesthetics of the interview genre.

JOHN THIEME

## UNDERGROUND

BETTY LAMBERT, *Jennie's Story & Under the Skin*. Playwrights Canada, \$9.95.

BETTY LAMBERT'S DEATH in 1983 at the age of 50 cut short a playwriting career that, on the evidence of these two plays, was just coming into full blossom. Before the production of *Jennie's Story* (1981), Lambert had a rather obscure reputation as a radio dramatist, children's playwright, author of two undistinguished stage comedies for adults (*Squeux-de-Dieu* and *Clouds of Glory*) and an interesting novel (*Crossings*). The success of *Jennie's Story* provided some brief national exposure, but interest in her work seemed to wane with her death, and *Under the Skin* has rarely been seen since its 1985 premiere. The publication of this volume ought to draw renewed attention to this very fine writer.

Both plays focus on atrocities committed against women. They also have in

common a documentary base, a loosely feminist perspective, and a highbrow sensibility informing elemental social worlds. In *Jennie's Story*, uneducated prairie farm folk recite G. M. Hopkins; in *Under the Skin* Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky are cited by a blue-collar rapist. Lambert, an English professor at Simon Fraser University, wrote with a consistent literary and intellectual bias as even the titles of her two earlier plays suggest. But in *Jennie's Story* and *Under the Skin* she posed a serious challenge to those values. In the face of tragedy, is there any consolation to be found in the fictions of the educated mind? One play answers a resounding yes, the other a horrific no.

*Jennie's Story* is based on provincial statutes, unrepealed in Alberta and British Columbia until the 1970's, that allowed sterilization of a person without her consent if a case could be made for "multiplication of . . . evil by the transmission of the disability of the progeny." Jennie, a young Alberta farm wife, is sterilized under this law. The "evil," ostensibly her simple-mindedness, was in reality her natural sensuousness that proved irresistibly seductive to the local priest. Unable to stop having sex with Jennie, he talked her mother into consenting to the sterilization that he hoped would free him. At the centre of both these plays are men punishing women for the sexuality which obsesses and repulses the men. There are also women betraying women against their own better judgement in favour of a corrupt patriarchal order.

The gradual revelation of the truth leads to a melodramatic confrontation between Jennie and the fallen priest, and then to her suicide. But Jennie's story, as Lambert tells it, does not begin or end with her death. Balanced against the evils of religious hypocrisy, social conditioning, and bad human law is an immanent realm of natural goodness, spiritual health, and fertility. Its priest is Jennie's husband

Harry, an earthy man who also knows "God's Grandeur" and "Pied Beauty" by heart. At the end, consigning Jennie's body to a funeral pyre among ancient Indian rings, he takes another young girl to wife as a baby is born and spring returns to the wasteland. Recycled, Jennie's pagan spirit broods like a blessing over Nature that is never spent. The triumphant grandeur of Harry and Jennie's natural supernaturalism subsumes individual tragedy, taking the sting out of the *srieux-de-Dieu* administered by that other God's agent and making acceptance and forgiveness possible.

Distanced by its late 1930's setting, self-conscious patterning and literary allusions, *Jennie's Story* has the quality of an artifact. In contrast, *Under the Skin* is as painful and immediate as the scream of a tortured child. Combining a tense plot line, profound characterization, rich intellectual texture and acute emotional attack, it is one of the most powerful and satisfying plays of recent years.

*Under the Skin* is based on a terrible incident in a Vancouver suburb a few years ago when a young girl was held captive for months by a male neighbour in a secret room under his garage. Lambert must have asked herself, what if I had been that child's mother? What would it have been like not to know? The mother in the play, a university professor too, finds that liberal humanist values count for little when your child is missing. She loves her students: "All that, yes, sensuality, that sheer joy at being alive and being able to move and laugh and sing . . . [but] I would see them all go up in flames in the fiery furnace, just to have her back. I would see them torn to pieces. I would see the world go mad. I would bring down the sky."

Lambert also projected herself under the skin of the woman whose husband is the kidnapper and who, toward the end of the play, realizes the awful truth. A

mother herself, the woman is locked into a masochistic relationship with the man whose aboveground abuse of her emblemizes the underground (and offstage) horrors which we and she are left to imagine. These are ironically figured in the story of Anne Frank the child was fond of quoting. A complex relationship develops among the two women and the man, freighted with envy and friendship, class antagonism and sexual tension. But Lambert's final dramatic vision is dark and clear. In the end there may be salvation of a sort, but there will be no understanding and no forgiveness.

J. WASSERMAN

## HISTORIES

DON GUTTERIDGE, *St. Vitus Dance*. Drumlin Books, \$11.95.

H. R. PERCY, *Tranter's Tree*. Lester & Orpen Dennys, \$21.95.

J. J. STEINFELD, *Our Hero in the Cradle of Confederation*. Pottersfield Press, \$9.95.

TO JUDGE BY THESE vastly different novels, history continues to intrigue Canadian writers: Don Gutteridge blends history with fable in order to recreate nineteenth-century Lambton County, H. R. Percy invents a small town in Nova Scotia using both real and imaginary characters and events to show how richly the past informs the present, and J. J. Steinfeld writes anti-history in an attempt to shed the burden of the past in Charlottetown. Whereas Gutteridge's is a historical fiction in the romantic style, Percy's work features humour and a touch of the fantastic with sometimes bizarre results, and Steinfeld's novel combines irony and black comedy to anti-romantic effect.

Of the three books, *St. Vitus Dance* is the least interesting because it is structurally and stylistically the most conventional. Despite its length, and for all its

breadth of action and wealth of detail, the novel fails to integrate its historical and fictional aspects. Furthermore, the fortunes of the hapless heroine unfold in such embarrassing and melodramatic profusion that one is reminded of Mrs. Radcliffe's potboilers.

From the age of five, Lily Fairchild manages to captivate every male who comes near her; as unsophisticated as she is, Lily is possessed of such beauty and charm that she eventually comes to the lascivious attention of the Prince of Wales himself: "Lily reached up, seized the engorged sceptre with both hands and guided the royal seed-pod home." *St. Vitus Dance* chronicles Lily's burgeoning sexuality from young girlhood on in prurient detail, yet she always bounces back as perky as ever from countless misfortunes and miseries. Seldom has a more cloying character been created in recent fiction.

In contrast, *Tranter's Tree* is a sprightly and imaginative blend of historical, fantastic, and romantic fiction. In his third novel, Nova Scotian writer H. R. Percy brings to life over 250 years of that province's history and many eccentric characters, not least of whom is the work's hero, the mighty oak planted by Ned Tranter himself.

Ned Tranter's saga provides only one of the narrative threads in this densely woven tale. Episodes from his heroic life are handed down through the generations until they are finally consigned to paper by retired newspaper editor and would-be novelist Sniffy Jim Jordan. Interspersed throughout the novel, Mr. J's work-in-progress provides the historical background for the fight to save Tranter's tree and others from the march of progress. Ned Tranter's fictional exploits mingle with actual eighteenth-century events such as the expulsion of the Acadians from Nova Scotia by the British. Other authentic personages such as Joseph

Howe and imaginative blends of literary and historical characters the likes of Sam Slick Haliburton also mix with purely fictitious characters.

Canadian fiction is often criticized for lacking humour and an interest in the mystical: *Tranter's Tree* is refreshing because it freely combines fact with fiction and the fantastic using bold metaphors, innovative style, and a tone that ranges from the humorous to the poignant. Percy is an adventurous novelist; not only does he create a whole community of extraordinary characters but he also introduces supernatural — or at least inexplicable — elements into their midst. And the conflict between the townsfolk and those who would destroy the trees ends in black comedy — another mode rare in Canadian literature, but one most welcome here.

*Tranter's Tree* sometimes suffers from an excess of imagination and language. Still, Mr. J remains a delightful, inventive narrator: "Rex, having circumsmelled the tree, approaches, sniffs the shoe, consults her dogalogue of odours and stands with cocked head considering."

This novel provides an invigorating romp through history while making the suggestion that the present is not to be lived at the expense of the past. In *Our Hero in the Cradle of Confederation*, on the other hand, the protagonist works hard to disburden himself of an unhappy personal past. He makes a futile attempt to write himself out of his memories into a more promising present. This is a novel about the perils of novel-writing in stuffy P.E.I.; it details a few difficult months in the life of a would-be writer given to composing lengthy novels with provocative titles such as *The Incurable Stubbornness of God*. *Our Hero* presents a darkly comic view of the underside of life in quaint Charlottetown.

*Our Hero* is a 45-year-old who still dreams of making it big in the literary



world. Everything he experiences — from Sunday morning sermons to altercations with humourless officials — becomes fodder for his work; Our Hero also immerses himself in the lives of his sodden housemates in order to enrich his store of material. But Our Hero is no vulture feeding on others' misfortunes; he genuinely cares for his rummy neighbours — many of whom, like Our Hero, sport Kafkaesque epithets such as the Actor and the Screamer. These are the disadvantaged souls who are shunned by polite society, and whose nicknames serve to distance them from those they embarrass, whether on the streets or in fiction.

The distance between characters and reader is further maintained by meta-fictional commentary, which persists throughout the work but remains perfectly in tune with the unadorned style of the writing. We see Our Hero from within and without, and a satiric yet compassionate view it is: "No one can convince Our Hero that *The Incurable Stubbornness of God* is not destined to eclipse *Anne of Green Gables* and that his mail-sorting hero, Garth McGrath, is not destined to evict little freckle-faced, red-haired Anne Shirley from the hearts of Islanders." Our Hero not only muses about the difficulties of writing novels for a living, he also pronounces some amusing judgements on prevailing Canadian literary tastes.

During its short course, *Our Hero in the Cradle of Confederation* touches on history, politics, religion, sex, and death. The narrative suffers somewhat from the inclusion of an extraneous sub-plot in which the only characters with normal names are one-dimensional and uninspired. But Our Hero remains a truly sympathetic anti-hero. Despite his efforts to the contrary, Our Hero's life remains futile and absurd: "Is that his life, Our Hero thinks, a movie without action or special effects?" The novel succeeds as a

humorous social commentary. Its style is lively, and it portrays both the absurd and the poignant aspects of existence.

SUSAN WHALEY



IN *Kamouraska*, Elisabeth d'Aulnières shocks her maiden aunts by stitching rebellious red flowers into her petit-point needlework. Apparently she was not the only one to use this emblem of female submission to protest: an eighteenth-century child signed her sampler "Polly Cook did this, and hated every stitch she did in it." In chronicling the history of embroidery from a feminist perspective, Roszika Parker's *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (Routledge) cites many similar examples. Particularly illuminating are her accounts of transformations in the depiction of St. Margaret, patron saint of midwives, of mother-and-daughter relationships like that of St. Anna and the Virgin Mary, and of heroic women like Esther and Jael. More recently, embroidered banners served as an important strategy in the Suffragette Movement, and in the 1970's British correspondence art event "Feministo," pieces of embroidery were exchanged through the mails to reinforce communication among the participating women and offer them an alternative to existing hierarchies in art exhibition and art dealership. Parker provides extensive detail on the social context of embroidery; she records the esteem in which medieval embroiderers were held, but she also speaks with anger and compassion of the physical damage suffered by embroiderers who were often blind by the age of twenty. Canadian journalist Grace Denison, travelling through Brussels in the late nineteenth century, made similar observations, cursing fashion dictates that made such abuse possible. The book is extensively illustrated (unfortunately in black-and-white only) and contains a glossary and bibliography.

E.-M. K.

## NOTES ON D. C. SCOTT'S "ODE FOR THE KEATS CENTENARY"

THE SUBTITLE OF Duncan Campbell Scott's "Ode for the Keats Centenary" is its date of delivery at Hart House on the centenary of Keats' death: "February 23, 1921." The poem's importance for Scott is indicated by its appearance as the first poem in *Beauty and Life* (1921), Scott's favourite volume.<sup>1</sup> But the poem's critical status is by no means certain. For Raymond Knister, also an admirer of Keats, the ode is "a contribution hardly to be surpassed in English literature." For Desmond Pacey, it is "a very good elegy" flawed by archaisms and didacticism. For W. J. Keith, it is a prominent instance of "the embarrassing prevalence of stale clichés" in Scott's poetry.<sup>2</sup> I would place the poem in the second rank: it is not, like "The Piper of Arll" or "The Height of Land," one of Scott's major poems, but it is an interesting and revealing poem, with which anyone interested in Scott should come to terms. The purpose of this note is to discriminate the allusions from the clichés, and to offer some brief remarks on the poem's significance.

For E. K. Brown, who regards it as the "great poem" of *Beauty and Life*, the "Ode" "is not a Keatsian poem in the full and obvious sense in which Charles G. D. Roberts's mellifluous *Ave* is Shelleyan."<sup>3</sup> The point is apt, although Scott's extensive allusions to Keats are a form of stylistic retrieval. Moreover, Scott's poetry is in general Keatsian; as Stan Dragland argues, the "intensity and restraint" that O. J. Stevenson, Brown, and others detect

in Scott are the same virtues that Scott praised in Keats and other Romantics.<sup>4</sup> Scott saw Keats in terms of an Arnoldian moral-aesthetic, as is clear from his allusion to "The Fall of Hyperion" in "Poetry and Progress": "The 'miserics of the world are their misery and will not let them rest,' and while it is only given to the few in every age to crystallize the immortal truths, all poets are engaged with the expression of truth."<sup>5</sup> For Scott as for Arnold, Keats' quest for truth subsumes his appreciation of beauty.

The "Ode for the Keats Centenary" is a highly irregular and discontinuous ode, with lyric interludes, somewhat in the manner of "Lines in Memory of Edmund Morris." Scott begins by describing the austerity of the vocation of the poet — a fitting subject in a tribute to Keats, who was neglected during his brief life, by a poet who, as of 1921, was himself more neglected than his Confederation peers:

The Muse is stern unto her favoured sons,  
Giving to some the keys of all the joy  
Of the green earth, but holding even that joy  
Back from their life;  
Bidding them feed on hope,  
A plant of bitter growth,  
Deep-rooted in the past. . . .<sup>6</sup>

Hope, the artist's desire for enduring recognition, is "Deep-rooted in the past" because of Keats' version of literary history: in the third section, Scott extensively alludes to the letter in which Keats maintains that "one of the great reasons that the English have produced the finest writers in the world is, that the English world has ill-treated them during their lives and foster'd them after their deaths."<sup>7</sup> Keats gained some consolation from this theory, and from "the thought that he should be / Among the English poets after death" (ll. 17-18). But there is another reference to hope in the opening lines:

Truth, 'tis a doubtful art  
To make Hope sweeten  
Time as it flows. . . . (ll. 8-10)

Assuming that Scott is not careless with his capitalization, we are led to regard this "Hope" as the ideal form of the human virtue. Here as elsewhere in the poem and in Scott's canon, metaphysical possibilities flicker without growing into the light of conviction.

The one "archaism" to which Pacey specifically objects occurs in the first of the following lines:

What boots it that our age has snatched him free  
From thy [the Muse's] too harsh embrace,  
Has given his fame the certainty  
Of comradeship with Shakespeare's?  
(ll. 21-24)

This "archaism" is actually an allusion, and an important one at that, since it involves a landmark in the elegiac tradition. The allusion is to *Lycidas*, to the moment of the uncouth swain's near-despair: "Alas! What boots it with uncessant care / To tend the homely slighted shepherds trade . . . ?"<sup>8</sup> The swain's faith and right reason save him from Amaryllis' or Neara's too soft embrace; Scott's faith in Keats' ideals saves him from despairing of poetry. He adds, however, that he is uncertain if Keats can derive any comfort from a fame that he never lived to enjoy. Neither our "incantation" (l. 28) nor our "praise" (l. 30)

Will move the Shadow with the pensive brow  
To break his dream,  
And give unto him now  
One word! — (ll. 33-36)

Whether or not the "Shadow" is Hades, as Leon Slonim suggests,<sup>9</sup> its very existence implies that there may be another form of immortality than worldly fame. Similarly, the reference to Keats' "dream" raises the possibility of the survival of consciousness after death.

At the end of the third section, Scott again alludes to one of Keats' letters, stating that Keats would value his eventual fame as next to nothing relative to "the power / Of 'seeing great things in loneli-

ness'" (ll. 55-56).<sup>10</sup> If the poet's vision is its own reward, the poet should be indifferent to fame. In the succeeding lyric, Scott brings Keats' ideal to the Canadian wilderness, which combines beauty and loneliness as almost no other setting could:

Where, to the high tarn tranced and still  
No eye has ever seen,  
Comes the first star its flame to chill  
In the cool deeps of green; —  
Spirit of Keats, unfurl thy wings,  
Far from the toil and press,  
Teach us by these pure-hearted things,  
Beauty in loneliness. (ll. 73-80)

Scott would not agree with Margaret Atwood, D. G. Jones, and their followers that the Canadian wilderness and English Romanticism are incongruous. He knew that the virtues of "intensity and restraint" are not specific to any one country or region, and that any English-speaking poet anywhere should be able to read Keats with profit. Later in this "Ode," Scott recognizes and laments his distance from Keats, but the causes of that distance are historical, not national.

Returning to the earlier themes of the artist's loneliness and responsibility, and noting the similar plight of the scientist, Scott affirms Keats' faith in the imagination:

They brood alone in the intense serene  
Air of their passion,  
Until on some chill dawn  
Breaks the immortal form foreshadowed in  
their dream. (ll. 93-96)

Keats said that "what the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth — whether it existed before or not — for I have the same Idea of all our Passions as of Love they are all in their sublime, creative of essential Beauty."<sup>11</sup> For Scott, "the distracted world and men / Are no more what they were" (ll. 97-98) because they are changed utterly by those who are poets in the sense described in "Poetry and Progress": "I am thinking of that ele-

ment in the art which is essential, in which the power of growth resides, which is the winged and restless spirit keeping pace with knowledge and often beating into the void in advance of speculation." He then gives this passage a metaphysical dimension by adding that this "essential" element is "the flickering and pulsation of the force that created the world."<sup>12</sup> There is a similar dimension to his ode, which is written in the spirit of a partially restrained desire for transcendence.

After a second apostrophe to the spirit of Keats, in which Keats' wings are called "deathless," and modern life is called "wayward toil" and "vain excess" (ll. 99-100), Scott turns from Keats to the problems of the modern poet. The remainder of the poem has little reference to Keats as Scott turns to melancholy reflection, and his "suffering finds no vent in action."<sup>13</sup> In tone and substance, the rest of the ode resembles Matthew Arnold's poetry. "The minds of men grow numb, their vision narrows" (ll. 103-04), Scott states, later adding that "Beauty has taken refuge from our life / That grew too loud and wounding" (ll. 142-43). Beauty, like the scholar-gipsy, has fled "this strange disease of modern life."<sup>14</sup> This Arnoldian analogy must be carefully delimited, for it is misleading to situate Scott, as Tom Marshall situates him, as "wandering between two worlds."<sup>15</sup> Scott does not believe that the past is dead and the future is powerless to be born; rather, he insists, "But still is Beauty and of constant power" (l. 108). His tentative hopes for the future are based on a preservation of and return to the moral-aesthetic ideas of the past, so that

Then, nourished by quietude,  
And if the world's mood  
Change, she may return  
Even lovelier than before. (ll. 118-21)

He is closer to "The Scholar-Gipsy" than to "Stanzas From the Grande Char-

treuse": like Arnold in the former poem, Scott forms an ideal from the past and argues that the remoteness of modernity from that ideal is a measure of its "disease." For Scott, Beauty can survive modernity only by remaining apart from it. When modern voices cry for the return of Beauty, as Scott has been crying, "Beauty will tremble like a cloistered thing / That hears temptation in the outlands singing" (ll. 167-68). Scott is thus one of the "lone mortals" (l. 173) admonished by Beauty at the end of her speech. His own imploring voice stilled, he concludes with a double reference to dreams, a reference in which nature's silence and human aspirations are cross-compared, thereby emphasizing their mutual unfulfilment:

All the dim wood is silent as a dream  
That dreams of silence. (ll. 177-78)

The "Ode for the Keats Centenary" is strongly influenced by Keats and Arnold, and it is also, in its vision of the contemporary world as an "immense panorama of futility and anarchy," a poem of 1921. There is no contradiction here. As T. J. Jackson Lears argues, Modernism "was not an overnight result of post-World War I disillusionment but the outcome of gradual, almost imperceptible fits and starts of cultural change stretching back into the late nineteenth century."<sup>16</sup> As a revealing instance of these gradual changes, the poetry of Duncan Campbell Scott will be crucial for those who are now reappraising the related myths of a Modernist breakthrough and the Whiggish version of Canadian literary history as a triumphant progress from colony to nation.

## NOTES

I am indebted to D. M. R. Bentley and Stan Dragland for their helpful comments.

<sup>1</sup> A preference noted in Desmond Pacey, *Ten Canadian Poets: A Group of Biographical and Critical Essays* (1958; rpt. Toronto: Ryerson, 1969), p. 155.

- <sup>2</sup> Knister, "Duncan Campbell Scott," rpt. from *Willison's Monthly* (1927) in *Duncan Campbell Scott: A Book of Criticism*, ed. and introd. Stan Dragland (Ottawa: Tecumseh, 1974), p. 68; Pacey, *Ten Poets*, p. 155; Keith, "The Challenge of Duncan Campbell Scott," rev. of *The Duncan Campbell Scott Symposium*, ed. and introd. K. P. Stich, *Canadian Poetry: Studies, Documents, Reviews* 7 (Fall/Winter 1980), 89.
- <sup>3</sup> "Memoir," p. xxx. Brown argues (p. xxxi) that "Poetry and Progress (1922)" represents Scott's afterthoughts on the Keats ode.
- <sup>4</sup> *Scott: Criticism*, p. 5. See Stevenson, *A People's Best* (Toronto: Musson Book Company, 1927), p. 113; Brown, "Duncan Campbell Scott," rpt. from *On Canadian Poetry* (1943) in *Scott: Criticism*, p. 81. Brown's use of the phrase may be an allusion to Pater, who is cited at the conclusion of this chapter; *Scott: Criticism*, p. 93. In a discussion of "Hellenic generality or breadth," Pater writes that "in every direction it is a law of restraint. It keeps passion always below that degree of intensity at which it must necessarily be transitory . . ."; *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (1873; rpt. London: Macmillan, 1920), p. 216.
- <sup>5</sup> *Scott: Criticism*, p. 26. He alludes to Monet's speech, "The Fall of Hyperion," ll. 148-49. The original has no "their" before "misery." Arnold argues that Keats' "master-passion" is not "sensuous" or "sentimental": "It is an intellectual and spiritual passion"; "John Keats," rpt. from *Ward's English Poets*, IV (1880) in *Essays in Criticism: Second Series* (London and New York: Macmillan, 1888), pp. 105, 115. In "Poetry and Progress," Scott applies Arnold's critique of Romanticism to himself and to the poets of his generation: "My own complaint, if I have any, is not that we are too many, but that we do not know enough"; *Scott: Criticism*, p. 25.
- <sup>6</sup> *The Poems of Duncan Campbell Scott* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1926), p. 151, ll. 1-7. I have supplied the line numbers for subsequent citations.
- <sup>7</sup> "To Miss Jeffrey," 9 June 1819, Letter 128, *The Letters of John Keats*, ed. Maurice Buxton Forman, 4th ed. (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1952), p. 345. The next citation from Scott alludes to "To George and Georgiana Keats," 14-31 October 1818, Letter 94, *Letters of Keats*, p. 231. For locating some of these letters, I am indebted to Leon Slonim, "A Critical Edition of the Poems of Duncan Campbell Scott," Diss. Toronto 1978. Nothing would be of greater use for Scott criticism than the publication of this meticulously annotated edition.
- <sup>8</sup> *Lycidas*, ll. 64-65. According to Martin Burrell, *Lycidas* was one of Scott's favourite poems; *Betwixt Heaven and Charing Cross* (1928; rpt. Freeport, N.Y.: Books for Libraries Press, 1968), p. 255. Arnold has a similar allusion in "Stanzas From the Grande Chartreuse," ll. 139-44.
- <sup>9</sup> Slonim, p. 591.
- <sup>10</sup> "To Benjamin Robert Haydon," 22 December 1818, Letter 102, *Letters of Keats*, p. 271.
- <sup>11</sup> "To Benjamin Bailey," 22 November 1817, Letter 31, *Letters of Keats*, p. 67.
- <sup>12</sup> *Scott: Criticism*, p. 19.
- <sup>13</sup> The phrase is from Arnold's criticism of *Empedocles on Etna* in his "Preface to First Edition of *Poems* (1853)," in *Poetry and Criticism of Matthew Arnold*, ed. A. Dwight Culler (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961), p. 204.
- <sup>14</sup> "The Scholar-Gipsy," l. 203.
- <sup>15</sup> In "The Major Canadian Poets: Between Two Worlds, Duncan Campbell Scott," *The Canadian Forum* 57 (June-July 1977), 20-24. When he revised this article for inclusion in *Harsh and Lovely Land: The Major Canadian Poets and the Making of a Canadian Tradition* (Vancouver: Univ. of British Columbia Press, 1979), pp. 23-33, Marshall changed the title (to "Half-Breeds: Duncan Campbell Scott") but not the argument. Thus the chapter concludes with these words, which simultaneously rob the Indians of their specificity and assign Scott a minor role in a Whiggish literary history: "Still, he articulates more fully than the other poets the tensions inherent in the Canadian experience, especially in his depiction of half-breeds living between two worlds. It is a situation we are perhaps only beginning to leave behind" (p. 33).
- <sup>16</sup> *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture 1880-1920* (1981; rpt. New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), p. 160.

TRACY WARE



## LOUIS HÉMON'S TRANS-ATLANTIC DIARY

ON JUNE 24, 1913, Louis Hémon sent his typescript of *Maria Chapdelaine*, which would become one of the world's most enduring and popular best-sellers, to the Paris daily *Le Temps*, where it appeared in instalments in January and February of the following year. June 1988, then, marks the 75th anniversary of the completion of the novel, which was to have a significant influence on French-Canadian writing and on the traditional nationalist ideology for decades. The author, however, was never to see his work in print, for he died in a tragic accident on July 8, 1913, near Chapleau in northern Ontario, while walking on the wrong side of the railway tracks. Hémon was going to western Canada, which he had planned to visit before he actually wrote his famous book, in order to observe the opening up and development of the prairies — the journey which he took up again on that fateful day nearly three-quarters of a century ago.

The celebration of the centenary of Louis Hémon's birth in 1980 stimulated much critical and literary activity on both sides of the Atlantic, such as the publication of Nicole Deschamps and Ghislaine Legendre's edition of *Maria Chapdelaine, récit du Canada français*, the first to follow the original typescript and restore the original subtitle, as well as Deschamps's and her colleagues' signal study, *Le Mythe de Maria Chapdelaine*, on the reception of the work in France and Quebec, and its recruitment in the service of various nationalist (and sometimes extreme right-wing) causes in Europe and North America. In France, there were colloquia in Hémon's native Brest, in 1980, and in Quimper, where he also

lived, in 1985. An offshoot of this latter meeting was the publication of the *Itinéraire de Liverpool à Québec* by the Cercle culturel quimpérois.

In her *avant-propos* to the *Itinéraire . . .*, the author's daughter, Lydia Kathleen, refers to an earlier private printing of the travelogue (without mentioning any date, nor those responsible for its publication), citing the figure of fifty copies for that edition, and thus characterizing the new one as "quasiment inédit" (8). According to her, there is no trace of "l'autographe de la main de mon père," her sole source for the journal being "la photocopie du texte français original" which she received from "un chanceux vieil ami, québécois [*sic*] bibliophile, qui m'en a fait don" (*id.*). This latter benefactor, too, remained unnamed. As can be seen from these references, such as they are, the 1985 text of the travel journal is far from being a critical edition, lacking explanatory notes about the establishment of the text and other relevant data.

It is true, however, that Hémon's travel diary had already been mentioned, and quoted extensively, in Alfred Ayotte and Victor Tremblay's *L'Aventure Louis Hémon*, published in 1974. There it is referred to under the title *Au pays de Québec*, and described as a "sorte de journal de voyage rédigé par lui [Hémon] et adressé à l'éditeur Grasset en février 1912" (127). Since the authors of *L'Aventure Louis Hémon* are almost as mute on sources as the recent publishers, it is, for the moment, impossible to discern the original title of the diary. One can assume that Ayotte and Tremblay reproduced Hémon's probable, somewhat vague title, *Au pays de Québec*, a phrase which, of course, would turn up again in the central fifteenth chapter of *Maria Chapdelaine*, while the recent publishers have given the journal a more precise marker, *Itinéraire de Liverpool à Qué-*

*bec*, which is a somewhat expanded version of a subtitle (but whose?) for the travelogue's first section, "De Liverpool à Québec."

In any case, these genetic considerations are secondary to my interest in the relationship between the journal and the three mysterious voices that suddenly erupt in the novel's second-last chapter, "ordering" Maria Chapdelaine to shun the temptation of fleeing her harsh environment and, instead, to remain in the rugged Lac Saint-Jean countryside to perpetuate the life of pioneer-colonists which her parents had espoused.

Some years ago, when perusing Ayotte and Tremblay's book, I was struck by the relevance of many of the quotations from the diary for an understanding of the structure and thrust of *Maria Chapdelaine*. Now, after reading the entire diary text, this first hunch has been fully confirmed, and it is fascinating to see that Hémon already anticipated the ideological *dénouement* of his novel before he actually set foot on Canadian soil, or shortly after.

Before probing this relationship in detail, I wish to look at the organization and nature of the journal. The first section, as already mentioned, carries the subtitle "De Liverpool à Québec," and covers about a third of the journal's sixty printed pages. It follows a vaguely defined chronological order, except for its last six pages, which, set aside by a Roman numeral "II," is a sort of flashback to an earlier part of the voyage, in which the author analyzes the ethnic origins of the passengers, and shifts from a descriptive to an analytical mode. The second part of the diary, also covering about one-third, is entitled "Dans les rues de Québec," which (also beginning on a descriptive trajectory) shifts more and more to a moral commentary; in the short third section, "Sur la terrasse," the latter becomes dominant and is most important for an analysis of

the journal's relationship to the novel's resolution. There follows an equally short final section, "De Québec à Montréal," where once again the observational and the moral-ideological are mixed, with the final word going to the analytical in the journal's conclusion. (This alternation between modes reminds one of the deft analysis of the first chapter of Hémon's celebrated novel by Nicole Deschamps in *Le Mythe de Maria Chapdelaine*, in which she discerned an interplay between the descriptive and the meditative, and a dialectical relationship between realism and symbolism.)

One is struck at the beginning of the journal by the lack of calendar notations, which is highly unusual in such a genre. This characteristic remains throughout the diary, forcing the researcher to retrace the chronology by references to Hémon's correspondence with his family in Brittany (also published under Nicole Deschamps's direction). Thus we know from the correspondence that Hémon set out from the British port on October 12, 1911, and arrived in Quebec City on October 18. Although he intended to go on to Montreal the next day, he actually stayed in the Quebec City region for five days, not leaving for the metropolis until October 23. Thus the journal makes only the vaguest references to time, using such expressions as "octobre s'avance déjà" (32), "une demi-semaine encore" (36), "à cinq jours de Liverpool" (37), etc. (This absence of precise dates also marks *Maria Chapdelaine*, thus reinforcing that work's timeless quality, although the novel's chapters for the most part, are limited to a calendar month and follow the cycle of the seasons from the end of one winter until the completion of the following one.)

From the very first section of the journal, Hémon, hardly out of the port of Liverpool, begins to develop what one could call the heroic cult of the New World

(stressing the latter's distinct superiority to the old continent). (Nicole Deschamps has also studied this phenomenon through attention to the images Hémon uses for the two societies in the first chapter of *Maria Chapdelaine*.) Thus, through the imagined thoughts of his fellow passengers, he predicts that in North America they will find "surtout cette atmosphère de cruauté simple d'un pays jeune qui est en marche et n'a guère le temps de s'arrêter pour plaindre et secourir ceux qui tombent en route, n'ayant pas réussi" (34), a theme which also found its way into the novel, as in the incidents involving unsuccessful European francophone immigrants. As the ship, the *Virginian*, enters the Gulf of St. Lawrence, and the first land is sighted, Hémon writes: "mais ce qui marque cette terre-ci à nos yeux d'une grandeur émouvante, c'est surtout qu'elle est la terre canadienne, l'avant-poste du continent vers lequel nous allons" (40), and he continues: "le premier aperçu de la côte américaine dans le lointain réveille chez beaucoup de nous des âmes irrationnelles, anachroniques, d'aventuriers, et nous émeut curieusement" (41). The "courbe immense du Saint-Laurent" is contrasted with the "cours sinueux d'une petite rivière de France" (50), and quickly takes on a symbolic moral quality: "Ce fleuve n'a pas l'aspect asservi, humilié, des cours d'eau qui traversent des villes anciennement grandes depuis si longtemps qu'ils ont perdu leur personnalité propre [. . .]" (76); for that river is a "fleuve libre [qui] laisse l'impression que c'est bien un pays neuf, que l'homme n'a rien fait que d'égratigner [. . .]" (77).

Thus, Hémon seems to have been predisposed to seeing North America, and especially Quebec francophone society, in epic terms. It is clear, too, that his encounters with anglophone travellers on the trans-Atlantic trip also influenced his reading of the Quebec experience as a

conflictual, even military, one (terms of battle syncopate the entire novel, *Maria Chapdelaine*, and give it precisely an epic stamp) which favoured the beleaguered French-speaking outpost. Thus, he notes in the second section of the first part of the journal: "Sur le steamer qui va de Liverpool à Québec, steamer appartenant à une Compagnie anglaise et chargé de passagers presque tous anglais, où tout rappelle au voyageur qu'il vient de quitter un port anglais et se dirige vers un autre port dont il semble que ce ne soit qu'une porte d'entrée monumentale, sourvant sur une vaste colonie anglaise — le Canada français et la race qui l'habite ne paraissent être que des entités de second plan dont le rôle est fini, falotes, vieillottes, confites dans le passé" (47). The anglophone passengers, then, according to Hémon, see Quebec City as "une curiosité de musée" (55), "une vénérable ruine qui se tient encore debout par miracle [. . .]" (53), "une sorte de spectacle qui ne les touche pas de très près; une pantomime d'une troupe étrangère, dans un décor étranger" (48), writes Hémon, as if anticipating the linguistico-political tensions and conflicts of the next seven decades. This leads him to paint in glowing terms the stubborn perseverance of the francophones in maintaining their identity against overwhelming odds, and, in parallel, to depict pejoratively the various groups of immigrants who are non-French speaking: "Le sentiment qui englobe tous les autres [. . .] est une reconnaissance profonde envers cette race qui en se maintenant intégralement semblable à elle-même à travers les générations a réconforté la nation dont elle était issue et étonné le reste du monde; cette race qui loin de s'affaiblir ou de dégénérer semble montrer de décade en décade plus de force inépuisable et d'éternelle jeunesse en face des éléments jeunes et forts qui l'enserrent et voudraient le réduire" (51). And then, immediately, turning to the



new arrivals from Europe: "Les troupeaux d'immigrants anglais, hongrois, scandinaves, peuvent arriver à la file dans le Saint-Laurent pour aller se fondre en un peuple dans le gigantesque creuset de "l'Ouest [. . .]" (51). These immigrants are referred to also as "les hordes barbares" (52), the adjective announcing a negative turn of phrase similar to the "voix du Québec" in *Maria Chapdelaine*, which will finally overcome Maria's last vestige of resistance to her mystical mission: "Autour de nous des étrangers sont venus qu'il nous plaît d'appeler des barbares; ils ont pris presque tout le pouvoir; ils ont acquis presque tout l'argent [. . .]" (198). This sentiment would help perpetuate the Messianic myth of French Canada long after Louis Hémon had died.

Hémon, who described Quebec City in the journal as a unique site "où deux modes de vie se mélangent et se marient comme deux arômes" (61), was very conscious of the threat of anglicization. It is strange, though, that he did not take note of the stationery of the hotel where he stayed in Quebec City, near the historic Church of Notre-Dame-des-Victoires, which was entirely in English: "Blanchard Hotel, Notre-Dame Square, J. Cloutier proprietor," one reads on the letterhead he used to write his first letter to his mother in France (Ayotte, 192). In any case, we do know that he met a *père eudiste* — a member of the Congregation of Jesus and Mary — on the trans-Atlantic crossing; and it would seem that it was this priest, Jean-Marie Leventoux (a compatriot from Brittany and missionary on the north shore of the St. Lawrence), who — with his inspired accounts of the colonization movement in the Saguenay-Lac Saint-Jean area (Ayotte, 128-33) — diverted Hémon from his original aim of going directly to western Canada. Leventoux thus encouraged Hémon's venture into the region that lies at the heart of *Maria Chapdelaine*. It is also

possible that Hémon's redisposition to French-Canadian traditional nationalism was influenced analogically by his father and uncles, whose defence of Breton culture and language were described in the Quimper colloquium proceedings of 1985.

Be that as it may, when one arrives at the journal's second section, "Dans les rues de Québec" — with its explosion of sympathy, tinged with mysticism, for the continuity of francophone culture in Quebec against all odds — one cannot but be struck by the similarity of vocabulary and sentiment with those of the lyrical passages of "la voix du pays de Québec" in the last pages of chapter xv of *Maria Chapdelaine*. Over and over, Hémon repeats his impression that continuity has held all change in check: "[. . .] la race qui est venue se greffer ici, si loin de chez elle, il y a si longtemps, qui a si peu changé!" (70); "sa force de résistance à tout changement [. . .]" (49); "[. . .] ces ruelles apportent une sorte d'obstination à montrer une fois pour toutes [. . .] de quel pays venaient les hommes qui les ont créés, [. . .] et qui n'ont guère changé" (74). These phrases reappeared in the novel in this fashion: "[. . .] mais au pays de Québec rien n'a changé. Rien en changera, parce que nous sommes un témoignage [. . .] Au pays de Québec rien ne doit mourir et rien ne doit changer . . ." (198). The emotionally charged word "témoignage," too, is already present in the journal: "Les rues de Québec sont un témoignage" (74). And speaking of the bells of Quebec City's churches, which create for him a sort of epiphany, Hémon writes in the journal: "Leur voix témoigne que Québec n'a rien appris et rien oublié [. . .]" (81). In the novel one reads: "[. . .] car s'il est vrai que nous n'ayons guère appris, assurément nous n'avons rien oublié" (197).

But to return to those bells, Hémon writes in the diary: "Les cloches de Québec . . . On se rend compte tout à coup que leur *voix* était là depuis le commence-

ment [...] Il y a des gens qui disent avoir entendu dans la *voix* des *cloches* toutes sortes de choses délicates et émouvantes: [...] une répétition têtue, une leçon ressassée sans fin avec solennité, une affirmation persistante et qu'il ne faut pas discuter: '... C'est ainsi! ... C'est ainsi! ... C'est ainsi! ...' [...] Et la monotonie immuable de leur appel laisse une impression d'âge infini [...] Mais les *cloches* ne s'arrêtent pas un instant de se répondre d'une rive à l'autre [...]" (79-81); "Ensemble ils formaient une *voix* [...] obstinée et grave" (80). This reappeared in the novel thus: "[La *voix* du pays de Québec] vint comme un son de *cloche*, comme la clameur auguste des orgues dans les églises [...] Elle disait: 'Nous sommes venus il y a trois cents ans, et nous sommes restés...'" (197). (In the journal he had written: "Ces paysans opiniâtres [...] sont restés là depuis deux cents ans" (90); my emphasis throughout.) These examples could be multiplied, for the echoes of the ecstatic journal entries are found over and over again in the second-last chapter of the novel, just as many other words and phrases of the diary — "La silhouette du continent [...] menaçant et hostile" (36), "partout des bruns et des verts sombres" (44), "le devoir" (51), "piété" (81), "la campagne gelée et linceulée de blanc" (86), "le froid homicide" (91), "la lisière des grandes forêts" (89) — recur verbatim, or in recognizable variations, throughout *Maria Chapdelaine*.

Thus, Louis Hémon, in spite of his consciousness at the very beginning of his travelogue that one must avoid "des généralisations faciles" (31) in counterpoising the cultural traits of the two major peoples who created Canada, seems to have become in part a victim of his own myth-making, of the "âme[s] irrationnelle[s]" (41) which he himself noted in the journal, evoked by "le premier aperçu de la côte américaine dans le lointain" (*id.*) and which would lead him in his

renowned novel to the edge of chauvinism: "Nous avons apporté dans nos poitrines [...] le coeur le plus humain de tous les coeurs humains [...] Ici toutes les choses que nous avons apportées avec nous, notre culte, notre langue, nos vertus et *jusqu'à nos faiblesses*, deviennent des choses sacrées, intangibles et qui devront demeurer jusqu'à la fin" (198; my emphasis). This "lesson" would be well learned by the right-wing, clerical nationalist ideologists of French Canada who, in many ways, as Nicole Deschamps and her collaborators have pointed out in *Le Mythe de Maria Chapdelaine*, were at the antipodes of the man and writer, Louis Hémon. But Nicole Deschamps also admitted in an interview with *Le Devoir* (18 October 1980): "Si j'avais à faire l'autocritique de notre ouvrage, je me demanderais si nous ne sommes pas allés un peu loin sous prétexte d'arracher *Maria Chapdelaine* à cet écran qui a été fait par la propagande de droite, en présentant un Louis Hémon qui serait presque un être de gauche" (21). She was probably referring, among others, to her colleague Normand Villeneuve's claim that Hémon used the passage of the voices to criticize the dominant clerico-nationalist ideology in Quebec at the turn of the century (cf. N. Villeneuve, 195).

Louis Hémon's journal of his trans-Atlantic voyage and first days in the New World, then, as I have tried to show, reveals that such a tack is too simplistic to take account of the novel's contradictions and its *dénouement*, which is already clearly anticipated in *Itinéraire de Liverpool à Québec*.

B.-Z. SHEK



## CREATION MYTHS IN "LES GRANDES MARÉES" BY JACQUES POULIN

*Les Grandes marées* pits a modern, verbal, intellectual, and collective culture against a primitive, non-verbal, instinctive, and individualistic one. The first is inherently superficial and implies the victory of technology over humanism; the second is ostensibly at its mercy and rendered impotent. An initial reading, therefore, reveals a scathing satire of contemporary society. A closer examination, however, gives pause for further reflection.

The surface structure of the novel is clearly an ironic version of the biblical story of creation. There is also a deeper structure, a reprise of primitive non-biblical myths of creation, which suggests a second level of meaning.

The parallels to the biblical text are numerous and apparent. The general situation itself mirrors the biblical account: a superior — a man's boss — takes a certain young man by helicopter to an island he owns and leaves him there, alone, where he hopes his employee, called Teddy Bear, will be happy. The boss, known only as le Patron, comes from Le Soleil (a newspaper he owns). Eventually, he brings him a young female companion and, later, other people with whom he is to share the island.

The chapters are numbered, like the Bible story, and code names ("nom de code," p. 9)<sup>1</sup> and signs ("Des signes derrière le vitre," p. 9) suggest hidden meaning and invite interpretation. Names such as Matousalem, Hagar, and Eden (p. 149) are transparently biblical. The novel contains parables, like the Bible, in the form of a poem (chap. 40), and allegories

(the whale and the squid in chapter 39, and the treasure chest in chapter 26). The language, too, is biblical in tone ("Au commencement, il était seul dans l'île," p. 9), with many specific borrowings ("le paradis terrestre," pp. 14, 34; and "La Terre promise," p. 171). Finally, the novel ends with an exile, as the young man is banished from the island, echoing the Bible story of Adam's fall from grace.

What is striking about the novel, however, is not so much the similarities with the Bible, as the irony that creates a critical distance between the two accounts. The effect is to deflate the grandeur and majesty associated with the biblical text.

The boss is clearly not God, as he himself affirms: "Je ne me prends pas pour Dieu le Père . . ." (p. 54). The Patron's humble disclaimer is superfluous, as the narrator's description of him at the beginning of the novel had made abundantly clear: "Court de taille, pansu et chauve, il marchait à grandes enjambées, le regard fixé au sol, le visage empourpré, et il croisa son employé sans le voir" (p. 10). One of the later inhabitants of the island reverts to monkey language (pp. 151-52), which is a sophisticated irony, as it introduces a kind of reverse evolution into the "biblical" story. At the end of the novel, the employee is banished from the island, not by God, but by his fellow man (chap. 43). The Bible, like all creation stories, "describe[s] the creation of the earth as being accomplished before that of man. . . ."<sup>2</sup> The novel, here too, is at variance with the biblical text, as the focus is on man alone.

*Les Grandes marées* is, then, on one level, an ironic version of the Bible story. It is really a social, not a religious, document. The parody that results is the story of a destruction, not a creation, made all the more telling because it masquerades as the biblical creation. *Les Grandes marées* uses the ironic parallel with the Bible story as a starting point to parody modern

society. The intellectual, technological, collectivist and verbal aspects of modern culture are its targets.

Teddy Bear's companions on the island, all brought by "le Patron" to make him "happy," consist of a professor of cartoon strips from the Sorbonne, known as Professor Mocassin, an author from Montreal, an efficiency expert, a doctor, and a community organizer. None of them has a name, but rather, they are known by their generic titles.

The critique of the intellectual set is as humorous as it is biting. The author rewrites the first sentence of his projected novel, and does not know what his book is all about (p. 135). Professor Mocassin, he of the Sorbonne, plans to write the definitive book on human nature, based on the pattern of pathways on the island (pp. 138-39), but "ses travaux avaient abouti à une impasse" (p. 192), the pun on pathways and impasse adding a playful note. The futility of intellectual endeavour, its lack of focus and goals, are attacked with zest. The Patron's wife, known only as "Tête Heureuse," joins the group and offers herself, in turn, to the professor and the author. Both reject her in favour of their work, an ironic comment on intellectuals who supposedly reject life for their "art" (chap. 34).

The arrival on the island of both the "animateur" (p. 161) and the efficiency expert, called "l'Homme Ordinaire" (p. 124) — a modern version of Everyman? — is announced on the telex machine by "Fiches signalétiques." In this way, nothing of the person is first revealed to us. They are presented as statistics, facts, details, devoid of real humanity, as, indeed, they are shown to be.

The "animateur" has the "insulaire réunis" (p. 167) all sit in a circle so that each can feel the "bio-énergie" of the group. The author is excited momentarily as he claims to feel something. It turns out to be a "petite roche" he is sitting on

(p. 168). The cumulative effect of these portraits and scenes is to satirize and undermine the role and importance of intellectuals. When Teddy is informed that he is to leave the island, l'Homme Ordinaire says that "on a réfléchi tous ensemble . . ." (p. 196). This collective thinking is a form of tyranny which leaves no room for the individual. This is a story about a group of people that thinks it has all the answers, and one man, infinitely more appealing, who isn't even sure what the question is.

The satire on intellectuals can be seen as one element in a broader attack on the nature of society produced by an intellectual élite. Everything about the society imposed on Teddy Bear is rationalized, mathematical, technological, and dehumanized. Conditioned by the society he left, he is accustomed to attempting to accomplish things by rules and mathematical perfection. The result is failure. He attempts a recipe, following a mathematical formula: "Il s'était livré à des calculs inutiles et avait perdu son temps" (p. 43). Moving from one house to the other on the island is undertaken in exactly ten trips with accompanying lists ("16. Les Dix Voyages"). Tête Heureuse gives Teddy Bear a massage by following a precise list in her manual ("19. Le massage du sportif"). The "Animateur's" book claims that social relations depend on the first four minutes of two person's meeting (p. 166). All of this sage counsel comes from experts' books on the subject. In fact, all their knowledge seems to come to them from such sources: Teddy learns to play tennis from a book (p. 20) and his companion, Marie, learns about birds from a guide (p. 55).

The world of the novel, in which all knowledge comes in lists from guides and manuals, and in which everything is measured, counted, and quantified, is dominated by machines. Technology is king; or rather, prince. "Le Prince" is the name

of a tennis machine on the island whose game surpasses any human's: "Grâce à son cerveau électronique, le Prince avait un jeu dont la perfection dépassait les possibilités humaines . . ." (p. 107). Finally, Man is replaced by Machine. Teddy had been hired to translate comic strips for the Patron's chain of newspapers. He learns, near the end of the novel, that his translations had never been used. He had been replaced by a translating machine, Atan. Atan, one step beyond Adam, is the New Man, Machine-Man, the victory of technology over humanity.

Science and technology, in the form of helicopters, translating machines, tennis machines, and "experts" of all kinds, displace traditional values and signal a new, dehumanized order. The Patron prides himself on being called "Le poète de la finance" (p. 50). In the New Order, poetry is practical and quantifiable. Similarly, people don't have names, but animals and things do: "Pouchkine" is a ship (p. 68) and "Matousalem" is a cat. Jet Ranger, Puss'n Boots, Harrap's, Terry et les pirates, Dunlop, Wilson, Maxply, and Fred Perry are some of the names that are found in the novel. The dehumanization of modern culture is vividly and repeatedly depicted as proper names accumulate and attach themselves, not to characters, but to everything from comic-strip characters to animal foods. If people, in this novelistic world, have lost their individualism and, therefore, their identity, the manufactured items of a materialistic society gain instantaneous recognition and fill the void. One may even suggest that the latter displaces the former. In a novel about genesis and origins, Man is, ironically, seen to be surrounded by, and utterly dependent on, the products of technological existence, rather than on natural sources.

The dehumanizing nature of the New Order is powerfully rendered through the treatment of language in the novel. The

replacement of a conscientious translator, who capably weighs every nuance, as Teddy does, by a machine, constitutes an eloquent statement about modern, technological life and values. It is the most dramatic, but only one, of many uses of language to make the same point. Teddy Bear is obsessed by language. It is absolutely central to his life and to the life of the novel. He is concerned with questions of meaning and etymology (p. 34) and totally committed to finding an exact translation (chap. 18). In an exquisite irony, the world of men is shown to be dehumanized, whereas the words come to Teddy "comme des invités qui ont oublié l'heure; ils le tenaient éveillé une bonne partie de la nuit" (p. 15). In this inversion of values, it is the words that are his true companions.

Yet, in every other instance, language is seen to be inadequate, debased, and the object of ridicule. The author is portrayed as having nothing to say, and the professor, who is deaf, cannot stop talking (chap. 21). Communication through language proves futile. The author says "Fuck" and the professor hears "phoque" (pp. 97-98). L'Homme Ordinaire, the efficiency expert, calls "une séance de *dynamique* de groupe" a "séance de *dynamite* de groupe" (p. 166) and "des moyens *audio-visuels*," "des moyens *idiot-visuels*" (p. 188; emphasis added). The Patron buys the deaf professor a hearing aid, but the instructions are in Japanese, which no one understands (chap. 28). Once tried, the machine is found to be useless. A doctor is brought to the island to examine Teddy, but his vocabulary is so technical that he has difficulty communicating with his patient (chap. 33).

As a result, the novel points to a world beyond words, suggesting potential for profound non-verbal communication. Teddy and Marie do not speak a great deal with each other, but one of their most

meaningful encounters is "une conversation muette. Ils se parlaient avec leurs yeux et leurs mains . . ." (p. 73).

This silent, unspoken, and non-verbal truth is at the very heart of the novel. The satire of modern mores is only one aspect of this complex novel. An alternative reality is evoked, one which is more basic, primitive, and instinctive. Teddy defines for Marie what is important to him: "C'est quand, dans les yeux des gens, parfois, on voit passer quelque chose. Une sorte d'éclair qui brille, une sorte de chaleur. C'est une chose que j'aime beaucoup" (p. 176). The idea that there exists a profound meaning within, an inner life of real value, is suggested at various points in a number of different ways. Teddy had once told his brother that "les amis des chats avaient probablement dans leur inconscient une zone de sérénité totale, comme il en existait peut-être au fond de la mer . . ." (pp. 25-26). The island itself, on which the action of the novel is played out, is "grand comme ma main" (p. 116), if one does not count the interior which is "aussi impénétrable que la jungle de l'Amazone" (p. 116). This "forêt de l'intérieur" is described as "mystérieuse et sauvage" (p. 60). In addition, Marie quotes one of Van Gogh's letters in which he writes of "un grand foyer dans son âme et personne ne vient jamais s'y chauffer" (p. 84). The sea, the island, the people on it, and others, as implied by the reference to Van Gogh, possess a mysterious, unnamed, inner life, which is quite distinct from the society which is the object of Poulin's satire.

The world alluded to corresponds to the one associated with primitive man. Indeed, parallels with primitive non-biblical mythology can be found throughout. In the novel, in spite of the levity and satire, an atmosphere of high seriousness remains at the core. Basic questions are broached. Teddy and Marie discuss "[l]e sens de la vie et le sens du travail . . ."

(p. 95). The group decides that its members are neither French nor American, but the question, "Alors qui êtes-vous?" (p. 99), posed by the professor from the Sorbonne, is never answered. This gravity is perfectly in keeping with archaic myths: "Creation myths are of a different class from other myths . . . for when they are told there is always a certain *solemnity* that gives them a central importance; they convey a mood which implies that what is said will concern the basic things of existence. . . ."<sup>3</sup>

The presence of cats, too, is eminently reminiscent of the world of mythology. Both Teddy and Marie have cats. The cat is, at once, among the most prevalent, and the most mysterious figures, in world mythology: "Le symbolisme du chat est très hétérogène, oscillant entre les tendances bénéfiques et maléfiqes. . . ."<sup>4</sup> Immediately after the major revelation of the novel, that Teddy's translations have never been used (chap. 36), there is a one-line chapter (p. 174) announcing a litter of three cats. The number three is fraught with meaning for the archaic mentality: "In ritual, to repeat an action or phrase three times is to emphasize what is being done or said to the point of irrevocability."<sup>5</sup> In Greek mythology, too, the number is significant: "To the Pythagoreans, three was the perfect number because it had a beginning, a middle and an end. For similar reasons, it was the symbol of Deity as Creator."<sup>6</sup> The combination of the symbolism of the cat, with the number three, suggests a magical world that stands in stark contrast to the one satirized. In addition, it connotes a counterpoint to the biblical story of creation, a different tale of creation, less known and more mysterious.

The ritualistic number three is not limited to the litter of kittens. It is linked to another important mythological theme — that of food and cooking. Teddy meticulously gathers and arranges ingredients to

bake a pie. The recipe is divided into three parts and there are three ingredients for the crust (p. 41). The other ingredients must be boiled for three minutes (p. 45). Food is central to mythological man: "Toute alimentation est transsubstantiation... l'acte alimentaire confirme la réalité des substances. Car l'intériorisation aide à postuler une intériorité."<sup>7</sup> Milk and honey<sup>8</sup> are archetypal foods in myth and both are present in *Le Grandes marées*.<sup>9</sup> The idea of food as substantiating the notion of an inner reality coincides perfectly with the major thrust of the novel, as we have demonstrated. The search for and establishment of a truth beyond the one apprehended by contemporary culture lie at the very heart of the novel.

The omnipresence of water in the novel, and its prominence in the title, are related to the dominant motifs. Water is associated with creation and rebirth: "Si les eaux précèdent la création, il est bien évident qu'elles demeurent présentes pour la récréation."<sup>10</sup> In addition, bodies of water, as opposed to rain, are considered feminine: "l'eau première, l'eau naissante de la terre et de l'aube blanche est féminine: la terre est ici associée à la lune, comme un symbole de fécondité accomplie..."<sup>11</sup> The moon, indeed the full moon, and moonlight, are present throughout the novel (pp. 15, 16, 23, 117, 118, 124).

If water represents the themes of genesis and creativity in the novel, it also embodies the language of silence to which Teddy aspires: "L'eau est la maîtresse du langage fluide, du langage sans heurt, du langage continu, continué, du langage qui assouplit le rythme, qui donne une matière uniforme à des rythmes différents."<sup>12</sup> The presence of water everywhere — the action takes place on an island — suggests that this special kind of communication is accessible: "L'eau est aussi un modèle de calme et de silence..."

L'eau vit comme un grand silence matérialisé... Il semble que, pour bien comprendre le silence, notre âme ait besoin de voir *quelque chose* qui se taise; pour être sûre du repos, elle a besoin de sentir près d'elle un grand être naturel qui dorme."<sup>13</sup> Here, too, as with the symbol of the cat, the ritualistic number three, and the ceremonial food preparation, the water imagery evokes a hidden, primitive reality that is superior to the one portrayed in the novel. This alternative world is ancient and innocent, however, precisely because it is uncorrupted by modern man.

At one point, Teddy and Marie walk to a neighbouring island at low tide, only to be turned away by a man with a gun (chap. 13). At the end of the novel, when he is banished, Teddy swims to the same island, where he discovers the man: "Le vieux n'était pas vivant: il avait la peau dure comme la pierre" (p. 201). The novel closes with these words. Again, potent and mysterious symbolism associated with the world of mythology is presented. Teddy must clearly establish himself again on this new island, which is to say that his world must be recreated: "Settlement in a new, unknown, uncultivated country is equivalent to an act of Creation."<sup>14</sup> In addition, creation associated with death is omnipresent in world mythology: "It is not possible to create something without destroying something else at the same time..."<sup>15</sup> This relationship seems to be universally acknowledged: "... a violent death as a precondition of life reborn is a theme which runs through nearly all early religions."<sup>16</sup> The end of the novel, then, implies the beginning of a new cycle of creation:

The Germanic and Hindu concepts point to a cyclic event, namely that there is a constant rhythm of successive creation and destruction. Not much will be really changed; the beginning is always wonderful and towards the end this world slowly decays, evil and the forces of decadence slowly prevailing until the final catastrophe, and then

everything emerges again in the vernal beauty of a new possibility for life.<sup>17</sup>

The Judaeo-Christian world view, expressed in the Bible, is basically eschatological — tending toward an end of the world — where the “Germanic and Hindu” concepts are cyclical. The novel contains both, but prefers the second.

That the man’s skin feels like stone, too, is significant: “Dans la tradition, la pierre occupe une place de choix. Il existe entre l’âme et la pierre un rapport étroit . . . Ce n’est sans doute pas un hasard si la Pierre philosophale du symbolisme alchimique est l’instrument de la régénération.”<sup>18</sup> The union of the figure of death and of stone indicates a rebirth into a new life.

It may be implied that the new life, which is to begin, will be merely the setting into motion of another cycle that is destined to decay and die. There remains, however, Teddy’s implicit search for an alternate life of meaning based on a hidden, deeper, more fulfilling truth than sustains conventional society. Must that dream, associated with an instinctive, non-verbal, and primitive society, necessarily be subverted by a more “enlightened” view as society evolves? To that question, the novel responds with silence.

NOTES

- 1 Jacques Poulin, *Les Grandes Marées* (Montreal: Leméac, 1986). All references are to this edition of the novel.
- 2 S. G. F. Brandon, *Creation Legends of the Ancient Near East* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1963), 2.
- 3 Marie-Louise Von Franz, *Patterns of Creativity Mirrored in Creation Myths* (Dallas: Spring Publications, 1972), 5.
- 4 Jean Chevalier et Alain Gheerbrant, *Dictionnaire des symboles* (Paris: Seghers, 1969), 178.
- 5 Desmond Varley, *Seven: The Number of Creation* (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1976), 29.
- 6 Varley, 29.

- 7 Gilbert Durand, *Les Structures anthropologiques de l’imaginaire* (Paris: Bordas, 1969), 293.
- 8 Durand, 294, 296.
- 9 E.g., pp. 23, 34, 147.
- 10 Chevalier, 226.
- 11 Chevalier, 228.
- 12 Gaston Bachelard, *L’Eau et les rêves* (Paris: Librairie José Corti, 1976), 250.
- 13 Bachelard, 258.
- 14 Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return* (Princeton, 1974), 10.
- 15 Von Franz, 96.
- 16 Philip Freund, *Myths of Creation* (London: W. H. Allen, 1964), 55.
- 17 Von Franz, 221.
- 18 Chevalier, 600-01.

PAUL G. SOCKEN

## ON THE VERGE

DESPITE THE TITLE of Joyce Irene Whalley and Tessa Rose Chester’s *A History of Children’s Book Illustrations* (Murray, with the Victoria & Albert Museum), the book is somewhat emphatically preoccupied with British book illustrations. No foolish enthusiasm for the European community here! Thus, the authors proclaim, with nary a trace of irony, that “this aesthetic approach of the Europeans [of valuing original artwork over the book as a whole] is one of the negative aspects of international co-operation. However, the English tradition of integration is a strong and vigorous one, and while we respect those artists from abroad who honour our tradition . . . , most foreign artists still make little impact on the English public.” Walt Disney is swept aside with a haughty “without animation the designs exhibit only an undemanding vulgarity.” As a whole, the text is reference-work style, strong on informative historical facts, names, and styles, but not so strong on analysis. The book’s major attractions are its superb illustrations, many of them in colour. The cover alone is a stroke of genius: on a boldly coloured and textured background of red, blue, and white from Brian Wildsmith’s contemporary *Fishes*, it superimposes a delicate 1860 silhouette by Kay Frohlich. Unfortunately, the book does not say anything about Graham Rust who, after illustrating a very successful edition of Frances Hodgson Burnett’s *The Secret Garden*, has now also contributed exquisite images to a new edition of *A Little*



*Princess* (Michael Joseph). The beauty of the book almost makes one forget its extraordinarily dated social message and exploitation of exoticism.

E.-M. K.

\*\*\* MARIAN BOTSFORD FRASER, *Walking the Line: Travels Along the Canadian/American Border*. Douglas & McIntyre, \$24.95. "Nice-ness," writes Marian Fraser, is a "fine word for our compulsively tidy state of mind, all the dreams and dust and unpleasant bits thrown away or swept under." Not even in Woodstock, New Brunswick, "so close to the Americans, was the niceness tainted with exuberance or vulgarity or imagination, the things that I think of as American." But just as she continually finds that the physical boundary markers are not located exactly where map, or treaty language, or technologically precise measurement would dictate, so the events Fraser encounters in history and in driving back and forth across the border, and the people she meets, keep giving the lie to the cliché. Indeed the journey seems most charged at Detroit/Windsor, or on the Vermont/Quebec and Maine/New Brunswick borders where Fraser finds most cross-border person-to-person contact; it slackens in interest for most of the rest of the boundary's length where, at least to the itinerant journalist's eyes, the "cultures run more or less parallel, barely touching, not really connecting." Except for the strained intimacy of some imagined 'interviews' with historical figures, the book conveys energetically the brisk montage and terse anecdote of the informative CBC "Ideas" programme from which it derives.

L.R.

## LAST PAGE

CENTENNIALS OF AUTHORS' births strike up enthusiasms, sometimes. What 1988 did for T. S. Eliot studies I am not sure, but for Katherine Mansfield it was a year of passionate rediscovery. There were conferences; there were events; and there were prints and reprints. Cherry Hankin edited the *Letters Between Katherine Mansfield and John Middleton Murry* (Virago/Random House, \$29.95). Anthony Alpers' chronological, annotated edition of *The Stories of Katherine Mansfield* appeared in paperback (Oxford, n.p.). Vincent O'Sullivan valuably edited the *Poems of Katherine Mansfield* (Oxford, NZ\$19.95), assembling (among familiar poems) some that Murry did

not include in the previous "collected" — including the devastating "Et Après." Mansfield's dramatic sketches appeared in another volume, and stories were reprinted in a variety of selections and arrangements. Among the most accessible of books is Gillian Boddy's *Katherine Mansfield: The Woman and the Writer* (Penguin, A\$24.99). Part illustrated biography, part anthology, this work adds pointedly to existing biographies by Alpers and others, especially in matters of detail, and instructively it demonstrates ways in which Mansfield's stories derive from but also sometimes construct versions of her rebellious, defensive life.

Yet while these rediscoveries were taking place — and others: the Penguin reprints of C. H. Spence's 1865 *Mr. Hogarth's Will* (A\$14.99) and Mary Gaunt's *Kirkham's Find* (A\$12.99), the one concerning property and women's rights, the other the character of exploitation and "mercenary" marriage — so was a lot of new writing in the South Pacific, and accounts of new writing, both in anthology form and in criticism. Mark Williams' *The Caxton Press Anthology: New Zealand Poetry 1972-1986* (NZ\$24.95) selects sensitively from twenty-four poets, including Keri Hulme, Elizabeth Smither, and Greg O'Brien. Bernard Gadd's *I Have Seen the Future* (Penguin, NZ\$13.50) assembles New Zealand science fiction and fantasy stories (by Owen Marshall, Michael Morrissey, Russell Haley, and other exponents of the mysteries of text, as well as by several practitioners of the craft of Inter-galactic Communication). Marshall has a separate short story collection, *The Lynx Hunter and Other Stories* (John McIndoe, NZ\$19.95), which burns with quiet desperation; in these stories, old friendships suffer ungenerously through dutiful actions, people do not change for the better (and scarcely change at all), and if the old world gives way to the new, it does so only while serving to remind the observer that honesty is plain, and not always kind.

Four monographs (Amsterdam: Rodopi; distributed by Humanities Press International) examine Australian playwrights: Paul McGillick's *Jack Hibberd* (\$35.00); May-Brit Akerholt's *Patrick White* (\$35.00); *Louis Nowra*, ed. Veronica Kelly (\$29.95); and *David Williamson*, ed. Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt (\$45.00). Illustrated, with reference lists, guides to performance, interviews, and criticism, the first two provide surveys, the last two critiques by several commentators. Bill Manhire's *Maurice Gee* (Oxford, NZ\$10.95) surveys the New Zealand novelist's work, focusing on the Plumb

trilogy, and emphasizing Gee's skill at characterization.

Like these works, M. H. Holcroft's autobiographical *A Sea of Words* (Brick Row, NZ\$22.95) looks back over the past, explaining and justifying, interpreting and analyzing history and behaviour over thirty postwar years. One-time editor of the *New Zealand Listener*, Holcroft moved not always easily among literary circles; trying to design a private life, he asserts in this book a need to appreciate the power of loving. For other writers — Peter Cowan in *Maitland Brown* (Fremantle Arts Centre, n.p.) — history is the narrative of individual lives. For T. A. G. Hungerford, all genres direct inwards: *Stories from Suburban Road* reads autobiography as narrative, *Red Rover All Over* reads history as autobiography, and *A Knockabout With A Slouch Hat* (like the others, distributed by Fremantle Arts Centre Press, n.p.) constructs fictions of self to reconstruct the life and times of World War II and the years after. Cowan, too, writes fiction, as in *Mobiles* and *Voices* (both Fremantle Arts Centre Press, A\$9.50 and A\$12.95), but whereas Hungerford specializes in the relaxed vernacular, Cowan writes elliptical dialogues of suspicion and fear, in which the real events of history take place in the mind.

Written in 1936 but not published until 1987, John A. Lee's *The Politician* (Century Hutchinson, NZ\$17.99) demonstrates the degree to which an awareness of class distinctions did not necessarily erase notions of gender superiority. Maurice Gee's evocative and contemporary novel *Prowlers* (Penguin, NZ\$14.95; not covered by Manhire's survey) depends less on stereotype, yet it, too, is concerned with extending the dimensions of sensitivity; scientific notebooks, "tricks and stratagem," do not suffice, and the narrator muses to his nemesis, and in inference to himself, "you were as ignorant of love as a sandfly." It's a conventional discovery, not the less important for having been made before.

W.N.



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W.N.

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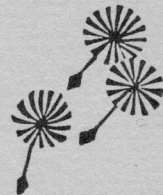
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