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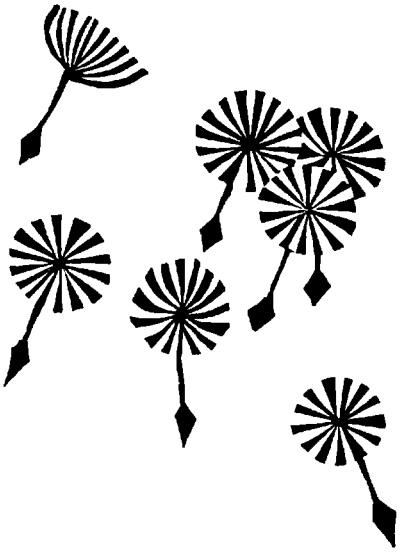

SOUTH ASIAN CONNECTIONS

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PAPAYAS AND RED RIVER CEREAL

REVIEWING MICHAEL ONDAATJE'S *Running in the Family* in *Quill and Quire* in 1982, Bharati Mukherjee observed that the book "may help ... destroy the myth that the Canadian imagination is the sole property of liberated Ontario W.A.S.P.s and lacerated Quebec Catholics. It is nourished on papayas as well as Red River cereal." Setting aside the other myths that this generalization relies on — the Central Canada binarism, the geographical dislocation of Selkirk's Red River — her phrasing remains effective. Although it is well to be cautious about the implications of "effectiveness" — and hence the appeal of this particular phrase — Mukherjee's observation *is* a useful reminder that European vicissitudes are not the only influences that have been shaping Canada, and that the two official languages are not the only arbiters of variety open to national cultural understanding.

Just how accurate any "understanding" can ever be is another problem — but "accuracy" is less in question, probably, than the political function of image-making. Plainly, cultures make up images of other cultures, as well as of themselves: sometimes by accidents of cultural history, sometimes by deliberate political ploy. "North America" (as Mukherjee's *Jasmine*, B. Rajan's *Too Long in the West*, and the stories in Rohinton Mistry's *Tales from Firozsha Baag* all testify) exists in the "South Asian mind" as a place of ambitious corruption, of promise and abundance, and of naive aimlessness. Likewise, "South Asia" has worn numerous imaginative identities to Europeans and others. The island of Serendip has been located there (a circumstance that Ondaatje makes much of); it has surfaced in reportorial discourse as The Subcontinent (a term as portentous as it is vague); it has been equated with the Raj (Kiplingesque with burden), and been glimpsed as the Jewel in the Crown and the cradle of Gandhian passive resistance. It has been constructed as a hippie haven and as a tourist's dream of uncountable riches (or nightmare of teeming poverty). And Canadians have participated in this process of political conceptualization. From Sara Jeannette Duncan's Anglo-Indian ironies to Earle Birney's "The Bear on the Delhi Road," from Elise Aylen's reli-

gious quests to those of James Leo Conway's *The Christians of Malabar*, from the romance of Janette Turner Hospital's *The Ivory Swing* to the adventures of Craig Grant's *The Last India Overland*, and from the political comedy of Frank Davey's *The Abbotsford Guide to India* to the political revisionism of Sharon Pollock's *The Komagata Maru Incident*, Canadian writers have been, if not exactly obsessed with South Asia, at least cognizant of the imaginative relevance of "India" to their own lives.

But that there has been a lively literature written by South Asian immigrants to Canada since the earliest settlements at the beginning in the twentieth century — a literature in Punjabi and Gujerati and more recently Hindi, Tamil, Marathi, and English — is less widely appreciated. That Canadian critics should now be paying attention to the many connections between South Asia and Canadian literature is therefore less surprising than that it should have taken so long. Such poets as Surjeet Kalsey, Rienzi Crusz, and Suniti Namjoshi are among many who have been attracting attention. These and others are represented in Cyril Dabydeen's 1990 anthology of "Asian Canadian Poetry," *Another Way to Dance*. And Mukherjee is not alone in observing the power of Ondaatje's prose — or that of Mistry, M. G. Vassanji, and Ven Begamudré, to name only three other contemporary writers of fiction.

Begamudré's *A Planet of Eccentrics*, a collection of ten stories, recurrently confronts Canadians with versions of India — and with fluid versions of themselves. Racism and the limitations of multicultural policy lie behind the multiple perspectives of "Masaic," for example; other stories depend on culturally variable images of garden, colour, family, and "illusion." Throughout, the language of the stories shifts eloquently from one sensibility to another. Vassanji's style, in *No New Land*, is plainer, aptly matched to his no-nonsense portrayal of race, power relations, job hunger, gender inequity, opportunism, uncertainty, and opportunity among the immigrant communities of urban Toronto. Of East African origin himself, Vassanji writes briskly about the Indian diaspora; his social realism is concerned with "exorcizing" the past so that newcomers can find the confidence to consign lost or rejected opportunities to "another and unknowable world," and consequently "take on the future more evenly matched."

Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey* is verbally much more complex, an allegory of Indian/Pakistani/Bangladeshi relations during the wars of 1971, with hints of Rushdie and lashings of Dickens and a nod in the direction of Hindu holy books. The mixture works. To read this book carefully is to participate achingly in the anguish of loss, love, despair, and dislocation. And discovery. A tale of an ordinary middleclass Parsi Bombay bank worker named Gustad, whose seemingly placid family life is suddenly beset by quarrel and illness at the same time as it is abused by municipal bureaucracy and by the illegal machinations of longtime friends and an erstwhile government, the novel probes the family's efforts to

resolve their crises. In the long run, it solves some problems only to confront others. It refuses easy romantic conclusions, and it's fair to say that not all readers will be enamoured of its earthy maleness, the marauding sexuality that the narrator acknowledges, does not always approve of, but learns to interpret as a sign of loneliness, fear, anger, and a desperate insecurity. Different kinds of desperation lead to different shapes of violence here, and it would be easy to have allowed hyperbole and caricature to take over the narrative. One of the strengths of the book, however, is its refusal to apologize for ordinariness. Human frailty is not always admirable; Mistry just asks that it be acknowledged as *human.*

Gustad's quiet triumph — for he retrieves joy from his memories and his experience, as well as grief — derives from his rejection of the easily sentimentalized roles of martyr and self-proclaimed victim. After he abandons his Job-like lamentations, he also begins to give up any blind faith in the "miracle" of magical or divine political intercession. He gains dignity, instead, by coming simply to recognize the essential (though not always obvious) dignity of the other human beings with whom he shares the world. In a novel only indirectly and allegorically about war, politics, and the rhetoric of praise and blame, Mistry's lesson applies more widely than to Bombay in 1971. While it does not intrude, the moral here is abundantly plain: social divisiveness is only avoided by the active will to reject it, and to reject, with it, the fear that it depends on, and the susceptibility to the appeal of easy solutions.

Critics have been addressing these texts — from reviews (Edna Alford praising Begamudré; Clark Blaise praising Vassanji; Michael Ondaatje praising Mistry; Wilson Harris praising Cyril Dabydeen's *Dark Swirl*) to longer articles. Writing in *Ariel* in 1991, Michael Thorpe spread a wide net, surveying all of South Asian writing in Canada. Vassanji, and Arun Mukherjee — in *The Toronto South Asian Review* and elsewhere — have worked within a more selective range of commentary. Cogently and deliberately they have reflected on some of the theoretical issues that bear on this body of writing (the politics of racism and feminism, for example); coincidentally, they have also probed the political bitterness of many an immigrant individual and group. While Canadian critics have been thus provoked, attention has been turning in India, too, to the Canadian connection, as the instructive essays collected in Om P. Juneja and Chandra Mohan's 1990 volume *Ambivalence,* or in John Hill and Uttam Bhoite's *The Tropical Maple Leaf* (1989), indicate. These are all signs of an active current engagement with an increasingly large group of writers.

Yet there is a dim danger of treating all works that relate to South Asia as though they formed a cohesive unit; this practice would suggest that devising *a category* for them would actually *deal* with them, whereas such a mechanical tabulation would merely count them. A convenient category could still exclude them from the narrower versions of the Canadian mainstream. It becomes clear

that generalizations repeatedly construct predicaments: the language of universal platitudes is a refuge, both for the unready and the unwary. But so is a preoccupation with the minutiae of difference. Good criticism, like a productive society, still struggles to say *more* rather than *less* than the obvious, to read *more* rather than *less* than one of the lower common denominators of prejudice or opinion. Neither "ethnic" nor "multicultural" should be allowed to become a term of abuse: that way violence lies.

Writing about Ondaatje, Bharati Mukherjee tries to indicate how Ondaatje's very particular prose functions. To do so she reaches yet again for an image. She claims that "He works by suggesting the final unknowability of the world. He disrupts comforting pieties and surrounds his characters with an almost absolute darkness." But does the single image in use here *locate* or *dislocate?* "Darkness" is a loaded term. "Almost" and "absolute" come close to logical blows. And while "unknowability" is a suggestive word — it is Vassanji's as well as Mukherjee's — it by no means circumscribes Ondaatje. Nor will it do — to extrapolate beyond Mukherjee's review — as a description of "India," or of "spirituality," or of "*the* South Asian perspective" on life in Canada: just as, ultimately, "papayas and Red River Cereal" will not do as social analysis, but satisfy only as metonym. Therein lies a further problem. For image-making creates as much of a potential for misunderstanding as for resolution. The cast of mind that defines by claiming universal truths — and that then sustains these "truths" by excluding "messy" alternatives — appears to enjoy the neatness of categories, and perhaps relaxes in the associative, generalizing appeal of metonymy. Yet real life — and any literature that has anything to do with real life — persistently defies and escapes such organized restriction. Messy alternatives constantly intrude into prepackaged order and ostensibly "coherent" design.

Perhaps it's because order nonetheless does appeal that the comforting pieties of *criticism*, as well as those of spiritual aspiration and political desire, also persist. If they, too, consequently plead to be disrupted, that's in part a sign of another need: the need to recognize and genuinely *appreciate* diversity in a world where statistics count too readily as truths and enigmas pass too fervently as answers.

W.N.

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A PASS TO INDIA

Ian Iqbal Rashid

I take it with me
along with my bundle of belongings
that soon will seem to float beside me constantly,
an absence of metaphor
which my parents live with/out
—no dreams of snow—
home is a place without light
the dark continent
prize won for a victor for whom they mediated
a prize which mediates my narrative,
this place of my birth which
after it was conquered conquered
so they had to leave as I leave now
carrying the papers of a man whom I imagine
might vanish, becoming a man like the men
I've never known, disappeared;
trying to finish a story
suggested by a gaze at history,
stories told by old photographs
and older women trying
to compensate for early acts of elision,
stories which hold me often
like a fist—snake tight—
except to caress me now and again, now,
God(dess)-like, serpent embrace,
mocking peninsula which a cruel obsession
might call victory.

And I leave
reading an epic poem
in a plane that will zip open the sky like a myth
exposing its soft little-boy's belly,
leaving stiff vestments behind; leaving an anger behind
with the buildings that we are tunnelling by with a roar,
leaving for a place as impenetrable as a cell
under attack from a virus.

GREETINGS FROM BANGALORE, SASKATCHEWAN

Ven Begamudré

WE HAVE A SAYING in the city of my birth: "Those born in Bangalore can never live anywhere else." Much can be read into this, much that is mystical and romantic and rife with metaphor, but its origin is straightforward. The saying refers to climate. Bangalore lies on a plateau of the Deccan Peninsula, an imperfect catenary dangling between the Arabian Sea on the west and the Bay of Bengal on the east. (Completing this picture is Sri Lanka, a teardrop-shaped pearl fixed off-centre.) At 1000 metres above sea level, Bangalore boasts a pleasant year-round climate. People move there from across India. As a result, Bangalore has become one of India's fastest growing cities, with all the problems such growth brings. These things happen.

Around the turn of the century this American tourist was taking the train across Canada to go see the Rockies and it stopped in this prairie city. So she gets down to have a stretch and asks a porter, "Excuse me, y'all, but where are we?" The porter says, "Regina, Saskatchewan." So the tourist says to her girlfriend, "Ain't that cute? He don't speak English." I heard this long before I settled here. I came for a month in 1978 and stayed. That first winter was especially cold; temperatures often hit minus 38 degrees Celsius. It was the first time I saw ice coating the inside of windows. Robert Service might as well have written of me in "The Cremation of Sam McGee." Was it only coincidence that he was called "the Canadian Kipling"?

On a map, Bangalore can be found between 75 and 80 degrees east longitude. Regina can be found near 105 degrees west longitude. One is roughly halfway around the world from the other. Much can be read into this, much that is mystical and romantic and rife with metaphor. Here are random notes—greetings—from my true home: Bangalore, Saskatchewan.

On Homelands and Blood

Like a satellite unable to escape the gravitational pull of the earth, my life continues revolving about my father's district of Nanjangud. This is not meant to be a complaint; it is merely an observation. Indeed, an American tour operator told me, while reminiscing about his quaint midwest town, "You cannot go home again."

> Why anyone would wish to do so, I cannot guess. And yet I know it is foolish to attempt to leave the past behind, for however long ago or far away that past may feel, it remains with us always.

My own life, like that of the unnamed narrator of this story,[1] also continues revolving about India. Not all of India; only the South, and that's why I claim to be from South India. India is a subcontinent, after all. To say I'm from India would be like an Austrian saying he's from Europe; it would be true but not specific. From the South, then. Which part? All of me, of course.

Another joke, yes, but not really. My father's family is from a state now called Karnataka (once Mysore); my mother's family is from a state called Andhra Pradesh. I'm Kanarese on one side, Andhra on the other. Caste? Brahmin on both sides, my mother's a higher sort of brahmin than the other; my father's side more orthodox and so more proud. There's more. On my father's side we're not simply brahmin but Madhva brahmin, nominal followers of Madhva Acharaya (Madhva the Teacher), who lived in the thirteenth century. Like him we're Vaishnavites, followers of Vishnu, the Protector among the three great gods who compose the Hindu Triad. And still more. Though we're from the South, we're lighter-skinned than some Southerners because we're actually of mixed blood. Dating back farther than the thirteenth century, it's true, but still mixed: Aryan on the one hand, Dravidian on the other; light on the one, dark on the other.

Can any of us truly say what we are? It depends on the time, on the place, on the context. It depends on who asks the question and why.

On Exile and Entrapment

It's uncomfortable becoming an exile after one's parents adopt a new home — in my case, Canada. I won't romanticize the lot of exiles because there's nothing romantic about it. I used to bemoan my lot; now I revel in it for it allows me to view my homeland with detachment. For example I've learned that India, like Canada, is less a country than a construct; that even the name *India* was given to it by non-Indians, who couldn't pronounce names like *Bharat*. Alberto Manguel best describes the exiled artist's task in a book of photographs by Rafael Goldchain, a Latin American photographer who now lives in Canada. Manguel writes,

> The exile's task is twofold: to procure for himself an image of the absent country that will allow him a constant point of reference, and to procure for others an image of that same country that will not lend itself to easy clichés and mere local color.[2]

How to procure those images? Here we come to the task of a writer. It's a common task whether one hails from India or Canada.

The last time I attended a function in Regina's Indian community, someone said, "Your father tells me you write stories. What do you write about?" "Some-

times about India." "How old were you when you came over?" "I was six." The man looked at me then and said, "Oh, well, but you're not a real Indian then?" My first thought was, "Good for you; you're as bigoted as the rest," meaning other Canadians. Not a generous thought, that. Now I realize he was genuinely bewildered. How *do* I write about India? I do it the same way one writes about anything. Not all writers; those who make traditional fictions.

I write about what I know. What I don't know I research. What I can't research I make up. Even when I'm doing this, I try to make sure I'm writing about things I understand. There's much I don't know about my heritage, but I'd like to think there's much I understand; that even if I don't understand something, I shall always be willing to acknowledge this. My belief in genetic imprinting helps. Even this belief is inherited. Once a Hindu, always a Hindu.

Here's a story of a different kind of exile, one as uncomfortable as it is permanent. It's a retelling of a legend in which we can read much that is mystical and rife with metaphor:

TRAPPED BETWEEN HEAVEN AND EARTH

Trishanku, King of Ayodhya, wanted to enter heaven in his mortal form. He wanted to live there like a god or a sage and so he asked his guru, Sage Vasishta, to help him.

Vasishta claimed Trishanku's dream was hopeless for he was a mere king — neither god nor sage. Vasishta was a brahmarishi, a brahmin sage who had pleased the gods with austerities and worship. He knew much.

Trishanku travelled south to the hermitage of Sage Vasishta's sons. Since their father had refused to help the king, so did the sons. He declared he would seek the help of some other sage.

Furious with the king for turning his back on their father, Vasishta's sons changed Trishanku into a chandala, an outcaste. Black and ugly, he wandered along confusing paths through desolate lands until he came upon Sage Vasishta's rival, Visvamitra.

Now Visvamitra had his own dream. He wanted to become a brahmarishi like Vasishta. But Visvamitra had been born a warrior and become a king and so he had become a rajarishi, a noble sage, inferior to one born brahmin. Visvamitra decided that if he could gain Trishanku a place in heaven he, Visvamitra, would be hailed as greater than Sage Vasishta.

And so Visvamitra's disciples invited all the pious and learned men to a great sacrifice. Only the sons of Sage Vasishta refused to attend. They said being near a chandala would defile them. Visvamitra cared nothing for this. He officiated at the rites and poured ghee into the fire until it began to smoke from the butter and oil.

"Oh, devas," Visvamitra called to the gods, "come down from the skies and lead the great King Trishanku into heaven!" No gods appeared even after Visvamitra repeated his prayer; even after he poured so much ghee on the fire it sent up pillars of smoke. He decided to lift Trishanku into heaven with his own powers.

Such power Visvamitra had! While everyone watched open-mouthed, Trishanku rose into the sky, up through the clouds, and past the clouds to heaven's very steps.

Indra and all the gods stood firmly in the way. Indra said, "Heaven holds no place for a king cursed by his guru's sons. Fall — to the depths of the earth!"

Trishanku fell off heaven's steps. He fell back toward the clouds. Even as he fell, head downward, he cried for help.

Visvamitra could not admit defeat; not even by the gods. "Stop where you are!" he called.

Trishanku stopped halfway between heaven and earth, just above the clouds. He hung there upside-down.

"I shall create a heaven around you!" Visvamitra declared. He created around the king the Saptarishis, seven stars. They circle the earth to this day.

You know them as the seven stars of Ursa Minor, the Great Bear.

On Reading Others

Ruth Prawer Jhabvala is, to my mind, the greatest Indian writer of the 20th century. She's not a "real Indian," though what makes a real Indian is clearly debatable. She was born in Germany of Polish parents and moved to England when she was twelve. She's likely best known for two things: her novel *Heat and Dust*, which received the Booker Prize in 1975; and her numerous screenplays for such films as *Shakespeare Wallah* and *The Bostonians*. What makes her Indian? She married an Indian, calls her children Indian, and has lived in India for most of her adult life.

Other writers have affected me more strongly than she has. In the novels of R. K. Narayan I rediscovered an India I thought I had lost; I began accepting that maxim "Once a Hindu, always a Hindu." Among my contemporaries, Rohinton Mistry holds a special place. His short-story collection *Tales from Firozsha Baag* marked a turning point in Canadian literature precisely because most of it is not set in Canada. Without meaning to, he gave other writers of our generation permission: not to write about Canada yet be Canadian writers. Perhaps there were books before *Tales from Firozsha Baag* which unwittingly gave us this permission. None I'd read were by a fellow Indian.

And yet it's in the novels and short stories of Ruth Prawer Jhabvala that I find most pleasure, emotional and intellectual — especially novels like *The Nature of Passion* and *The Householder* and short stories like "A Course in English Studies." In the introduction to her book *How I Became a Holy Mother and Other Stories*, she writes this:

> Sometimes it seems to me how pleasant it would be to . . . give in and wear a sari and be meek and accepting and see God in a cow. Other times it seems worth while to be defiant and European and — all right, be crushed by one's environment, but all the same have made some attempt to remain standing. Of course, this can't go on indefinitely and in the end I'm bound to lose — if only at the point where my ashes are immersed in the Ganges to the accompaniment of Vedic hymns, and then who will say that I have not truly merged with India?[3]

On Language

Here is an excerpt from a work-in-progress, a nebulous (as in vague or confused) rendering of my visits to India. It's written in English since that's the language in which I think, read and write; yet it contains an occasional passage like this, a "found poem":

MARKETTINALLI

"Badanekayige bele enu?"
"Badanekayi kiloge aivaththu paise."
"Badanekayi chennagideya?"
"Chennagideri!"
"Ardha kilo kodu."
"Thegedukolli."
"Gorikayi bele enu?"
"Gorikayi . . . eppaththu paise."

What happens if a writer doesn't speak his native tongue or tongues? Since my father had decided I would be raised North American, he arranged for me to speak English first. And so, although I didn't come here until I was six, I quickly forgot my father tongue, which is called Kannada, and my mother tongue, which is called Telegu.

When I started writing seriously about India, though, I discovered I didn't speak the languages my main characters spoke. I wanted to use Kannada and Telegu in my Indian fiction — not to add local colour, which Manguel warns us against, but to preserve my heritage. And not to preserve it like some dusty artifact but to preserve it because my ashes, too, will one day be immersed in a river. Using Kannada and Telegu hasn't been a problem in the work I've done these past ten years. I used my memories and phrasebooks. Here's a translation of what appears above:

IN THE MARKET

"What is the price of eggplant?"
"Eggplant is fifty paise per kilo."
"Is the eggplant good?"
"It is good, sir!"
"Give me half a kilo."
"Take it."
"What is the price of bean?"
"Bean is . . . seventy paise."

As a writer of traditional fiction my job is, among other things, to invent or re-invent characters and situations so they *seem* real. A difficult task in itself which needs no complications. Then recently one of my cousins by marriage asked, "How can you truly understand village and townspeople unless you speak their language?" He meant I needed to understand such people because, although our families had

lived in cities for much of this century, our roots are in villages and towns. It's not a matter of inventing some bucolic past; it's a matter of history. He and his wife started teaching me Kannada. We laughed a lot but, by the end of the afternoon, I wandered about practising phrases like "Snana madtiya?" It means, "Do you want to make a bath?" Not *take* a bath; *make* a bath.

No matter how conscientious I am about learning Kannada, though, I'll keep losing it in the same way as I've lost so much of my French. What to do? A French-speaking writer unwittingly offered a solution, or at least a compromise. The Québécois poet Madeleine Gagnon once told a largely American audience, "Listen to the music of the language." She went on to say that if we did this we might begin understanding the person who spoke it.[4] This made me wonder: do I really need to learn the native tongues which were never truly mine in the first place? What if it's enough to remain open to Kannada and Telegu rhythms; to listen to the music of the language?

Of course it's debatable how authentically we can write about the people we left behind without speaking their language. If I were a poet, I would invent a new language. Even that's not necessary. Whether one is in rural or urban India, Indians don't speak some rarified, pure form of their native tongue; they speak a language full of phrases from other tongues, especially English. Witness the term "kilo" in that marketplace dialogue.

The South Indian novelist Rajo Rao faced a somewhat different problem. Let me quote at length from his 1937 foreword to the classic novel *Kanthapura*:[5]

> The telling has not been easy. One has to convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is one's own. One has to convey the various shades and omissions of a certain thought-movement that looks maltreated in an alien language.

He is asking how a person can write about his own culture in a language which lacks enough words to describe that culture. He continues:

> I use the word "alien," yet English is not really an alien language to us. It is the language of our intellectual make-up — like Sanskrit or Persian was before — but not of our emotional make-up. We are all instinctively bilingual, many of us writing in our own language and in English. We cannot write like the English. We should not.

This is a bold statement but hardly a surprising one, coming as it did from an Indian nationalist. Yet he immediately surprises us by saying:

> We cannot write only as Indians. We have grown to look at the large world as part of us. Our method of expression therefore has to be a dialect which will someday prove as distinctive and colorful as the Irish or the American. Time alone will justify it.

Time has justified it. At the 1989 PEN Congress in Toronto, Anita Desai spoke of her attempts to convey everyday shoptalk in her novel *Baumgartner's Bombay*.

She called her attempts an experiment, with all the hope and trepidation the word implies.[6] Even as she spoke it amazed me: how much groundwork our predecessors have laid, so we who are writing now can take such experiments for granted; so we can mix English and other languages freely and think little of it. Let me end these random thoughts — these greetings from Bangalore, Saskatchewan — with another piece from that still nebulous work-in-progress:

TECHNICOLOUR

I am discovering speech under equatorial skies. My father lives in America and plans to raise me there, so he asks my grandmother to teach me English instead of their mother tongue. That's why when I later live with my mother, while we wait to rejoin him, she takes me to only American movies. Dumbo learns to fly. The Swiss Family Robinson races ostriches, battles pirates. The Sleeping Beauty sleeps under blue American skies. But I want to see an Indian movie, a film. What happens in films? Swearing me to secrecy, my grandmother takes me. The film is in her mother tongue. It's in black and white. In one scene, Lord Krishna reclines on a window ledge and plays his flute. Villainous guards vainly swing their swords at him, perhaps even through him. In the final scene warriors on horseback assemble in a courtyard while the evil king, mortally wounded, crawls to his death. The warriors cheer their new king, and fireworks burst over the palace. White fireworks in a black and white sky.

NOTES

[1] "A Planet of Eccentrics" in *A Planet of Eccentrics* (Lantzville: Oolichan Books, 1990) : 22.

[2] Alberto Manguel, "Rafael Goldchain: The Memory of Exile" in *Blackflash*, Saskatoon: The Photographers Gallery, 6: 3 (Fall 1988) : 6.

[3] Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, *How I Became a Holy Mother and Other Stories* (Markham: Penguin Books, 1984) : 16.

[4] Madeleine Gagnon, Reading at "The Literatures of Canada," University of North Dakota, Grand Forks, March 21, 1991.

[5] Raja Rao, *Kanthapura* (New York: New Directions Paperbook, 1967) : vii.

[6] Anita Desai, Reading at "The 54th World Congress," PEN, Toronto, September 24, 1989.

BOUQUET TO MY COLONIAL MASTERS

Rienzi Crusz

Gauguin's woman
    under another sun   raped.
Silence spills
    from this abattoir of tongues.

And you still show me
    your polished bannisters,
your country estates,
    green, columned and groomed.

How your freighters coughed black smoke
    then left chuckling,
brimming with coconut, tea,
    cardamon and cinnamon,
the sandalwood artifacts
    still leaking their exotic perfume
from their dark holds.

And through it all,
    I heard the siesta snore,
the civilized cooing
    of Englishmen
gulping their velvet whiskies
    as the brown waiters bowed and bent
to the evening noise
    of their masters.

So what was left to keep?
    Shakespeare!
a tongue to speak with,
    some words to remember.
Today,
    we are all poets
for having suffered the chains,
    for having learnt the language.

"THE SIMPLE ADVENTURES OF A MEMSAHIB" AND THE PRISONHOUSE OF LANGUAGE

Jennifer Lawn

"Here, you see, sir, all the chairs," stated the little baboo, waving his hand. "I must tell you, sir, that some are off teak and some off shisham wood. Thee shisham are the superior."

"You mean, baboo," said young Browne, seriously, "that the shisham are the less inferior. That's a better way of putting it, baboo."

"Perhaps so, sir. Yessir, doubtless you are right, sir. The less inferior — the more grammatical!" (64)

THIS EXCHANGE BETWEEN George Browne and a furniture-selling "baboo" in Sara Jeannette Duncan's novel *The Simple Adventures of a Memsahib* introduces the premise of this paper, that the normative, systematic principles of language provide a model for other social practices. The extract illustrates several systems: that of cross-cultural interaction implied in the forms of address ("sir" and "baboo"); the specific sub-language of bartering; and even the correct "grammar" of wood types. Within a few brief words, categories of status, buying power, and quality are established. I propose to explore the workings of such social "languages" in *Simple Adventures*, particularly in relation to issues of power raised by the colonial setting of Duncan's text.

The concept of "cultural grammar" is a sociological extension of the linguistic principles developed by the early structuralist theorists Ferdinand de Saussure, Edward Sapir, and Benjamin Whorf. Saussure first articulated the theory of language as a self-enclosed system, with language use being determined by convention rather than by any natural relationship between sign and referent. Members of a speech community are, however, "naturalized" to their native tongue and speak it unconsciously, forgetting its arbitrary nature. Saussure distinguished *langue*, the the sum of all linguistic rules, from *parole*, the individual utterance enabled by *langue*. *Langue* is always present yet never knowable in its entirety, and although it changes through time, it remains beyond the modifying power of any one individual.

Sapir and Whorf are, of course, best known for their "Sapir-Whorf hypothesis," the concept that "the structure of a human being's language influences the manner in which he understands reality and behaves with respect to it" (J. B. Carroll, qtd. in Robins 99-100). In consequence, language itself is the product of a social contract, for we "organize [nature] into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it this way — an agreement that holds throughout our speech community" (Whorf, qtd. in Knutson 67). Furthermore, if a language articulates an entire cultural universe, then "translation can literally involve the erasure of a shared mode of functioning in the world, and . . . the loss of a language can mean the destruction of an entire cosmos" (Knutson 67).

Subsequent critical discussion has differentiated a "strong" and a "weak" form of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, labelled, respectively, "linguistic determinism" and "linguistic relativity." The former espouses the idea that

> every language is a vast pattern-system, different from others, in which are culturally ordained the forms and categories by which the personality not only communicates, but also analyses nature, notices or neglects types of relationship and phenomena, channels his reasoning, and builds the house of his consciousness. (Whorf, qtd. in Robins 102)

Whorf's sometimes vague writings also embraced the concept of linguistic relativity, which holds that the structures of language influence cognition and thought processes to a certin extent, without determining them entirely. In either form, the hypothesis views language as a social institution of extraordinary power, circumscribing potentiality by providing some terms, and not others, for describing the world. Sapir's observation that "human beings do not live in the objective world alone . . . but are very much at the mercy of [language]" (qtd. in Hawkes 31) has found more extreme expression in post-structuralist theory. J. Hillis Miller, for example, asserts that "language is not an instrument or tool in man's hands, a submissive means of thinking. Language rather thinks man and his 'world'" (282).

The anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss applied the Saussurean linguistic model to cultural phenomena, such as kinship relations, myths, and even cooking practices. In the cross-cultural context provided by anthropology, the customs of one culture become denaturalized against the background of another, just as in *Simple Adventures* the institutions of the colonizing British system appear alien in the territory of India. Duncan's text thus foregrounds or "defamiliarizes" cultural systems at various levels. At the broadest level, the novel opposes West and East. Within western culture, there occurs a split between English and Anglo-Indian.[1] Further subdivisions emerge: "Calcutta" has its own class system or "tagography" (137), its own rules of fashion, interior decoration, housing location, visiting etiquette, religious habits, recreational pastimes. Viewed from this angle, *Simple Adventures* traces the ways in which one "gradually [comes] within the operation

of custom" (96). The agency of this clause is significant: it is custom which "operates" upon the individual. "Calcutta" itself, referring not to the geographical location but rather to the complex Anglo-Indian social network in that city, is personified as a woman whose decree is absolute:

> Calcutta, in social matters, is a law unto herself, inscrutable, unevadable. She asks no opinion and permits no suggestion. She proclaims that it shall be thus, thus it is, and however odd and inconvenient the custom may be, it lies within the province of no woman — the men need not be thought of — to change it, or even to discover by what historic whim it came to be. (104)

Calcutta thus acts as a *langue* which "speaks" its inhabitants. Those wilful or alienated individuals who do not conform are "ungrammatical," stepping outside the categories imposed by society.

DEALING WITH WHOLE species more than with individuals, *Simple Adventures* celebrates "the great British average" (129). The narrator, Mrs. Perth Macintyre, refers on several occasions to the ordinariness of the Brownes. She warns the reader "under no circumstances to expect anything extraordinary from Helen" (26), and declares that George is "undoubtedly ... very like other young men in Calcutta" (49). Altogether, "they were not remarkable people, these Brownes" (290). The characters' typicality focuses the reader's attention on the mechanism of the various systems which operate upon them; the text is a primer in cultural linguistics, a whimsical guide-book illustrating the subject-verb-object of Anglo-Indian society.

The customs associated with marriage provide a good example of a cultural system. The "syntax" of conventional western marriage consists of intimate acquaintance, engagement, and wedding. Any rearrangement of these elements — as in India, where engagement may precede acquaintance — is deemed unorthodox, "ungrammatical" in a British context. Likewise, any omission of one or more of the elements is socially distressing: hence Mrs. Perth Macintyre's defensiveness and embarrassment that her niece has failed to become engaged, despite innumerable opportunities for acquaintance (305). The marriage "sentence" also has a paradigmatic aspect: just as the subject of a linguistic sentence must be a noun phrase, the acquaintance must take place between a man and a woman. Since *langue* rather than *parole* takes precedence in *Simple Adventures*, it is not strictly important as to which individual is chosen from the axis of selection. The narrator comments, "I will go so far as to say that if Helen had not been there — if she had spent the summer with an aunt in Hampshire, as was at one time contemplated — one of the other Misses Peachey might have inspired this chronicle" (4-6). It is ungrammatical for "intimate acquaintance" to take place between a married

woman and an unattached man: hence Helen's concern, "in the interests of the normal and the orthodox," to encourage engagement between Jimmy Forbes and Josephine Lovitt and so break up a relation (between Jenny Lovitt and Jimmy) that was "too delicately adjusted to come under any commonly recognized description" (221, 219).

The marriage sentence of George and Helen proceeds perfectly grammatically, despite the slight blip of an unusual adverbial: the wedding takes place in India rather than England, but nonetheless Canbury sends hearty wishes for the future Brownes "as if they had behaved properly in every respect" (11). Helen and George, being natives of British culture, regard the whole marriage process as entirely natural. They fall in love "according to approved analytical methods," having "arrived at a point where they considered themselves indispensable to each other in the most natural, simple, and unimpeded manner" (4).

The Brownes naturally view their case of marriage as special, and Mrs. Perth Macintyre would risk a "good deal" of criticism from Helen to suggest otherwise (6). No doubt George, too, would be offended were he informed that his decision to marry was prompted, not by love, but by auspicious material prospects and the biological urge to mate. The narrator, however, implies the influence of such pragmatic and socially unmentionable factors by likening marriage to the wholly unromantic system of trade. On board ship Helen felt "that she ought properly to be in an air-tight box in the hold, corded and labelled and expected to give no further trouble. She realized, at moments, that she was being 'shipped' to young Browne" (28). Sexual slang frequently identifies women as goods; even in the nineteenth century Anglo-Indian women who returned Home without husbands or fiancés were known as "Returned Empties" (*Simple Adventures*, 305*n*). Although the issue invites feminist analysis,[2] men are also stamped and priced in the Anglo-Indian marriage market: "'Three hundred a year dead or alive'" was at one time "distinctly the most important quotation in the matrimonial market for India" (132-33).

Simple Adventures similarly dehumanizes many other social groups. For example, the Government treats functionaries of Empire as goods, as George cynically notes:

> The valuation of society is done by Government. Most people arrive here invoiced at so much, the amount usually rises as they stay, but they're always kept carefully ticketed and published, and Calcutta accepts or rejects them, religiously and gratefully, at their market rates. (106)

Other less striking examples occur. Pellington, Scott & Co. deal in "rice and coolies chiefly" (2). The narrator metonymically describes the women of the Viceregal Drawing-Room as "shimmering trains" (121) or "grey bengaline and gold embroidery and a cream crêpe de Chine and pearls" (145). Batcham is a "large red globe-trotter," suggesting a breed of dog (197); other animal images occur, such

as the likeness of both the Indian bearers and Mrs. Macdonald's "menfriends" to flies (262, 31). Thus systems — including that of the animal world — "cross-infect" each other, and deflating analogies defamiliarize cultural givens.

II

> The English are a sensitive people, and yet when they go to foreign countries there is a strange lack of awareness about them.
>
> — JAWAHARLAL NEHRU

POST-COLONIAL TEXTS, ACCORDING to the authors of *The Empire Writes Back*, are necessarily cross-cultural because they "negotiate a gap between 'worlds'" (39). Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin establish a model in which post-colonial culture — defined widely as "all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day" (2) — "writes back" against the imperial centre by replacing metropolitan "English" with local "english." This "remoulding" of language proceeds through "abrogation" and "appropriation," defined thus:

> Abrogation is a refusal of the categories of the imperial culture, its aesthetic, its illusory standard of normative or 'correct' usage, and its assumption of a traditional and fixed meaning 'inscribed' in the words. . . . Appropriation is the process by which the language is taken and made to 'bear the burden' of one's own cultural experience. (38)

Although Ashcroft *et alia* do not specifically address the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, they do reject the "essentialist" idea that "words somehow embody the culture from which they derive" (52). They reason that the essentialist view prevents any possibility of the changes in linguistic practice which have occurred in post-colonial literatures. Yet it is precisely the case that language use, if it embodies culture, will alter in accordance with cultural change; all language systems contain rules for such change, such as compounding, metaphoric extension, or new morphemic combinations. The authors go on to espouse the view that untranslated words in post-colonial texts "have an important function in inscribing difference" (53). They argue that language variance is metonymic of cultural difference: thus social, creating a "space," a "psychological abyss" between cultures (54, 63). This insight does not disprove the idea that "words embody culture."

An application of the model proposed in *The Empire Writes Back* illuminates several aspects of *Simple Adventures*. For example, Ashcroft *et alia* oppose the glossing of non-English words, for it implies a simple, one-to-one transference of meaning and negates the culturally-specific resonances of a word. It also "gives the

translated word, and thus the 'receptor' culture, the higher status" (66). The reductive nature of glossing is apparent in Duncan's text.[3] To translate "Raj" as "government" (227), for example, obliterates any connotations of domination or cultural imposition. Furthermore, the term "government" will evoke different images according to the nationality of the reader: Whitehall, Parliament Hill, and the White House vary markedly from each other, and all are inappropriate as equivalents of the Raj.

Duncan's novel resists the classification, established in *The Empire Writes Back*, between "colonial" and "metropolitan" texts. *Simple Adventures* is written by a Canadian but set in India, focusing upon British citizens in temporary exile.[4] The orientation of the text — the ethnicity of both the author and the projected audience — influences how we "situate" the work in a post-colonial context. Canada is a minority, "marginal" culture in relation to Britain, but a representative of the metropolitan culture in relation to India. Thus the occurrence of Hindustani words in *Simple Adventures* will have a different "message," for example, than the use of Parsi terms in the short stories of Rohinton Mistry.

DUNCAN'S ANGLO-INDIANS pepper their conversation with Hindustani terms. We may immediately dispense with the possibility that they do so to avoid the ethnographic pitfall of representing one culture in the language of another and thus "creat[ing] the reality of the Other in the guise of describing it" (Ashcroft 59). According to Mrs. Perth Macintyre, the memsahib has no concern for accuracy: "she gathers together her own vocabulary, gathers it from the east and the west, and the north and the south, from Bengal and Bombay, from Madras and the Punjab, a preposition from Persia, a conjunction from Cashmere, a noun from the Nilgherries" (227-28). Helen, the neophyte memsahib, eventually discovers that it is more "desirable" to speak like a memsahib than a native (232).

Hindustani, being the "tongue in which orders are given in Calcutta" (81), aids domestic and state administration in *Simple Adventures*. British administrators assert power by learning only those terms absolutely necessary for maintaining control — and learning them badly, at that. Even gentle Helen complains that she "[hasn't] the Hindustani to be disagreeable in" (97). Language misuse thus becomes a figure for cultural imposition. The authoritative colonizing power may pronounce decrees which have no correspondence to established native custom; similarly, in Mrs. Perth Macintyre's depiction the memsahib

> makes her own rules, and all the natives she knows are governed by them — nothing from a grammatical point of view could be more satisfactory than that. Her constructions in the language are such as she pleases to place upon it; thus it is impossible that she should make mistakes. (228)

The memsahib narcissistically congratulates herself when her order is obeyed: "the usually admirable result is misleading to the memsahib, who naturally ascribes it to the grace and force and clearness of her directions. Whereas it is really the discernment of Kali Bagh that is to be commended" (229). The Indians have thus accommodated far more than have the Anglo-Indians. Even the mallie has a perfect understanding with English flowers, which is "remarkable, for they spoke a different language" (165).

As for the sahib, he is "pleased to use much the same forms of speech as are common to the memsahib" (229). The "heathen mind" may manipulate, but it is the sahib, with his power of dismissal, who has the last word: "He has subdued their language, as it were, to such uses as he thinks fit to put it, and if they do not choose to acquire it in this form, so much the more inconvenient for them. He can always get another kitmutgar" (230). Thus the sahib learns only the familiar forms of address, for he has no intention of speaking to a native as an equal. He has a "vague theory that one ought not to say *tum* to a Rajah, but he doesn't want to talk to Rajahs — he didn't come out for *that*" (230). To wield authority, the colonizing power must never meet the colonized culture halfway; it is "the essence of the imperialist vision" that one world-view, one language — English — should reign supreme (see Knutson 79).

Despite George's warning to his wife, it is not true that "Anglo-India sanctions Hindustani for grim convenience only, declining to be amused by it in any way whatever" (233). Drawing-room conversation "scintillates" with Hindustanisms (231-32), and the narrator does not doubt that the native language even "creeps into the parlance of Her Excellency" (231). Such terms not only provide local colour for the novel, but also indicate that the Anglo-Indians themselves seek to "inscribe difference" against the metropolitan centre. They have developed a distinct lifestyle which resists some of the Mother Country's norms. After all, there are no sanctions against Sunday tennis in Calcutta. Furthermore, the use of Hindustani gives Anglo-Indians a measure of identification with the new territory they inhabit: not a desire for "indigenization," for they will forget the language when they "sail away from the Apollo Bunder" (232), but rather an indication of partial adaptation, the illusion of success in "translating" from one culture to another.

The Anglo-Indian abuse of Hindustani exposes the profound irony of the opening sentence of chapter twenty, with its mock formality: "for the furtherance of a good understanding between the sahibs and the Aryans who obey them and minister unto them, the Raj has ordained language examinations" (227). *Simple Adventures* in fact opposes the view implicit in linguistic relativism, that learning another language enables conciliation between alien world-views.[5] Batcham, a broad target for satire in the text, believes that language provides the only barrier to intercultural rapport: "'It's the terrible disadvantage of not knowing the language!' responded Mr. Batcham, in a tone which suggested that the language ought to be supplied to

Members of Parliament" (183). Mrs. Perth Macintyre's delicate comment on the collusion between Mr. Banerjee and Ambica Nath Mitter parodies Batcham's simplistic view: "Considering how discreetly Mr. Banerjee explained [Batcham's difficulty], the sympathetic perception shown by Ambica Nath Mitter was extraordinary. It might possibly be explained by the fact that they both spoke Hindustani" (185). In fact, Banerjee and Mitter "speak the same language" in more than one sense, both being tuned to the same profit-making wavelength.

DESPITE MANY SUCH laughable misunderstandings in *Simple Adventures*, the text does not suggest that translation between cultural systems is altogether impossible. Helen herself masters a new "language" in the course of her memsahib apprenticeship. She learns the techniques of bartering and commanding, becomes an initiate into the secrets of "social astronomy" (125), and even discovers the hierarchy of recreational pursuits ("tennis was certainly going out — everybody went in for golf now — links all over the place" 110-11). By the end of the novel Helen speaks memsahibese as if to the manner born, naturalized to the language so that she no longer notices its absurdities. She has even acquired the accompanying body language, having "fallen into a way of crossing her knees in a low chair that would horrify her Aunt Plovtree, and a whole set of little feminine Anglo-Indian poses have come to her naturally" (308). If anything, Helen has "acclimatised too soon" (247). As a result "she is growing dull to India":

> She sees no more the supple savagery of the Pathan in the market-place, the bowed reverence of the Mussulman praying in the sunset, the early morning mists lifting among the domes and palms of the city. She has acquired for the Aryan inhabitant a certain strong irritation, and she believes him to be nasty in all his ways . . . She is a memsahib like another. (310)

Helen's fortunes demonstrate that it is reasonably easy to transfer from one cultural system ("gentlewoman") to another parallel system still founded on a British world-view ("memsahib"). *Simple Adventures* is less sanguine about the possibilities of successfully transplanting British institutions into the soil of a wholly different culture. The wedding cake "certainly had not carried well: it was a travelled wreck" (37). The abortive effort to recreate the snug, homely atmosphere of a log fire with the kerosene stove illustrates "the foolishness of a sahib who tried to plant his hearth-stone in India" (155). Mrs. Week's attempts to transfer a set of religious beliefs reap no fruits other than the tentative question, "'*eggi bat*, would the memsahib please to tell them why she put those shiny black hooks in her hair?'" (240). These images present ludicrous aspects of the imperial endeavour itself.

Even within British culture, broadly defined, the class system inhibits social interaction. In chapter fourteen, geographical boundaries map out both cultural and social division. Like linguistic relations, social demarcations are arbitrary, but those caught within the hierarchy regard them as "natural" and do not question them. Edward Said notes the alienation which results:

> this universal practice of designating in one's mind a familiar space which is "ours" and an unfamiliar space beyond "ours" which is "theirs" is a way of making geographical distinctions that *can be* entirely arbitrary. I use the word "arbitrary" here because imaginative geography of the "our land—barbarian land" variety does not require that the barbarians acknowledge the distinction. It is enough for "us" to set up these boundaries in our own minds; "they" become "they" accordingly, and both their territory and their mentality are designated as different from "ours." (54)

A window separates Helen from her bustee neighbours: through it East and West may gaze at each other but never touch (162-63). The Brownes regard their boisterous, casual jockey neighbours even more wistfully. Because the members of the jockey household are white, their social estrangement seems less necessary: "[jockeys] belonged to the class Calcutta knows collectively, as a sub-social element, that nevertheless has its indeterminate value, being white, or nearly so, as a rule" (161).

Mrs. Perth Macintyre smiles at the type of the arrogant Royal Engineer: "we may even share his pardonable incredulity as to whether before his advent India was at all" (294). From a structuralist viewpoint, however, the Royal Engineer is not far off the mark. A major factor inhibiting any meaningful encounter between systems is the necessity to understand new experiences in terms of pre-existing categories. India is particularly prone to such preconceptions, as Sayter notes: "India is the only country in the world where people can be properly applied to for their impressions before they leave the ship" (140). Mrs. Peachey is captive within such a cultural "prisonhouse." She dimly realises "it was not likely that a little Bengali could be baited with a Bath bun," but nonetheless allows herself to "picture Helen leading in gentle triumph a train of Rajahs to the bosom of the Church — a train of nice Rajahs, clean and savoury" (12; 13-14). Batcham is the object of more severe criticism, in his self-serving determination to see only what he wishes to see:

> It was interesting to watch Mr. Batcham in the process of forming an opinion of Anglo-Indian society; that is, of making his observations match the rags and tags of ideas about us which he had gathered together from various popular sources before coming out. (193)

A more subtle illustration of the way in which established epistemological frameworks determine what is "culturally marked" occurs on the Brownes' honeymoon, in which they could "wander for miles in any direction over a country that seemed

as empty as if it had just been made" (42). The Brownes, with their English cultural blinkers, presumably regard cities, monuments, and neatly fenced farms as signs of an "established" country. Yet this criticism is by no means limited to the Anglo-Indians. We inevitably approach any text, whether literary or otherwise, with a mixture of knowledge, expectations, and preconceptions, just as Helen and other characters approach the "text" of India. India is necessarily "always-already-read" in Fredric Jameson's sense:

> We never really confront a text immediately, in all its freshness as a thing-in-itself. Rather, texts come before us as the always-already-read; we apprehend them through sedimented layers of previous interpretations, or — if the text is brand-new — through the sedimented reading habits and categories developed by those inherited interpretive traditions. (9)

III

> How little more than illustrations the men and women have been, as one looks back, pictures in a magic lantern, shadows on a wall!
>
> —*Simple Adventures* 129

SYSTEMS HAVE MANY sinister aspects. They can, for example, become mere impersonal mechanisms and subsume the individual completely. Indeed, Lord Cromer, England's representative in occupied Egypt from 1882 to 1907, imagined the apparatus of colonialism in such terms. Said comments:

> Cromer envisions a seat of power in the West, and radiating out from it towards the East a great embracing machine, sustaining the central authority yet commanded by it. What the machine's branches feed into it in the East — human material, material wealth, knowledge, what have you — is processed by the machine, then converted into more power. (44)

The same image of machinery is not obsolete today, for it turns up without evident irony in Geoffrey Moorhouse's recent history, *India Britannica* (1983). It also occurs in *Simple Adventures*, referring specifically to the central imperial authority:

> We tell our superior officers, until at last the Queen Empress herself is told; and the Queen-Empress is quite as incapable of further procedure as Mrs. Browne; indeed, much more so, for she is compelled to listen to the voice of her parliamentary wrangling-machine upon the matter, which obeys the turning of a handle, and is a very fine piece of mechanism indeed, but not absolutely reliable when it delivers ready-made opinions upon Aryan problems. (86)

This passage reduces human agency, so that even the Queen Empress herself must bow to a system which, like *langue*, is beyond modification by any one individual. Duncan never allows the novel's tone to darken, however. She has Mrs. Perth

Macintyre step back from such overt political criticism by identifying it as mere hearsay, a second-hand report of a casual comment ("At least I am quite sure that is my husband's idea, and I have often heard young Browne say the same thing" 86).

The danger of this mechanistic view is the very same feature which makes it so seductive for the bureaucrat: the fact that critics of any "wrangling machine" are unable to attribute blame for poor decisions to any one person. Incidents in *Simple Adventures*, however, suggest that canons of taste — both linguistic and cultural — do not emerge in such an inscrutable, impersonal manner. Members of a dominant group, or even particularly influential individuals such as Her Excellency, have the power of legitimation and redefinition. Returning to the passage which opened this paper, for example, it is young Browne who "corrects" the baboo's language usage. The term "baboo" itself is not neutral, for the former term of respect was "often used with a slight savour of disparagement" among Anglo-Indians (*Hobson-Jobson*).

Systems create hierarchies. The Anglo-Indians elaborately codified their own "social astronomy" in the Warrant of Precedence, "which was designed as an infallible guide to hierarchy in India, indispensable to the proper arrangement of [a] ceremony, conference or even of a mere dinner party" (Moorhouse 131). Even ostensibly "innocent" systems, such as modes of transport in Calcutta (119ff), are expressions of "power cultural," which establishes "orthodoxies and canons of taste, texts, values" (Said 12). To borrow the terminology of one of Janet Frame's characters, such norms can be "tippykill": typicality can "kill" the rebellious or marginalized individual who does not match any pre-fabricated mold. Duncan, however, depicts very few characters who stand opposed to social custom. The text is, after all, a prose version of the comedy of manners, in which serious emotional and interpersonal conflicts would jar. Mrs. Perth Macintyre does touch upon the way in which systems create "insiders" and "outsiders," but with a characteristic wry humour that excludes pathos. For example, in describing the Viceregal Reception she includes the detail of the "Mohammedan lady of enormous proportions" in crimson satin, who incites polite derisive convulsions from the inner circle, the ladies of the Private Entrée (123, 124). On board ship, even Miss Stitch, M.D., scorns the "foreign" woman who is "'about four annas in the rupee'" (32). And in a thoughtful mode, the narrator remarks upon the "cramping" alienation which Helen experiences in her own neighbourhood: "I mention the local isolation of these young people because it is typical of Calcutta, where nobody by any chance ever leans over anybody else's garden gate" (164).

Systematic categorisation tends to be restrictive and reductive. Again, the issue appears in *Simple Adventures* with a deft, humorous touch. The limitations of Mrs. Toote's trenchant distinction between the frivolous and the unfrivolous (112-14) become manifest with the next visitors: "Helen wondered in vain to which

of Mrs. Toote's two social orders [the Wodenhamers] belonged" (115). Duncan thus smiles at social practices which, even today, continue to oppress whole peoples. Said asks, "Can one divide human reality, as indeed human reality seems to be genuinely divided, into clearly different cultures, histories, traditions, societies, even races, and survive the consequences humanly?" (45). Om Juneja, in a curt and damning review of Duncan's oeuvre, writes, "India in her fiction is an exotic commodity meant for the consumption of white masters. Sara Jeannette Duncan is a typical Anglo-Indian novelist who reinforces the stereotypes of a Memsahib" (114). Juneja fails to note that stereotypes are the very stuff of the comic mode and that *Simple Adventures* abounds with "fixed" characters, both Indian and Anglo-Indian. By the end of the novel even Helen's character becomes calcified: "this will sum up her impressions of India as completely years hence as it does to-day" (310).[6]

Yet comedy as much as any other genre must confront the constraining effects of stereotyping, particularly in a cross-cultural context. *Simple Adventures* does raise the question as to whether it is possible to escape restrictive categorisation, to stand outside one's native culture to the extent that it seems a "foreign language." In this respect linguistic determinism is self-contradictory for, as Robins notes, "if we [were] unable to organize our thinking beyond the limits set by our native language, we could [never] become aware of these limits" (101). Robins thus rejects linguistic determinism in favour of relativism:

> Adopting a physical metaphor, it would seem best to liken language not to a tramline nor to an open road, as far as thought and categorization are concerned, but to sets of grooves or ruts, along which it is easier and more natural to direct one's thinking, but which with some effort can be overcome. (101)

The minds of most of the Anglo-Indians in *Simple Adventures* are firmly "grooved." Their cultural awareness is dismal. Mrs. Macdonald, for example, fails to realise that Hindustani sounds like English precisely because certain items did not exist in India until the advent of the colonisers ("It's awfully funny, how like English the language is in some words?" 231). A knowledge of one's own culture requires awareness of how social institutions *might otherwise be organised.* Anglo-Indian society, however, "inclined to be intellectually limp" (50), discourages inquisitive intellectual probing. Mrs. Macdonald assures Helen that she is "going the wrong way about it" in studying a Hindustani grammar to learn the language (230). Helen learns (the Anglo-Indian variety of) Hindustani by immersion, in the same way that she acquired her native language, and thus loses the comparative "objectivity" gained in a systematic approach. Once she has graduated to memsahibship, Helen "takes the easiest word and the shortest cut" (308-309), thereby following "the groove along which it is easier and more natural to direct one's thinking."

The Brownes initially think themselves above the petty social-laddering of Anglo-India (106, 129). As the acerbic Mrs. Perth Macintyre warns, however, this "tranquil" state is merely temporary, and the Brownes will lose their objectivity once they assimilate ("It is charming, this indifference, while it lasts, but it is not intended to endure" [106]). Sayter, like Mrs. Perth Macintyre, maintains a wry, ironic distance from Anglo-Indian culture, yet even his cynicism is a form of Anglo-Indian pose, available to those with sufficient social status. Sayter mocks, but does not fundamentally challenge, the foibles of Calcutta.

Mrs. Perth Macintyre credits herself with a superior, ironic stance, as one who still has "eyes to see" (129), claiming greater powers of observation than her fellow characters. Describing the scene in the Viceregal Drawing-Room, for example, she writes, "I have no doubt one wouldn't observe this to the same extent if one were amongst them" (124). The reader, however, must assess her reliability as a narrator. In some cases an additional layer of irony operates, in which the implied author and the reader snicker together behind Mrs. Perth Macintyre's back. For example, in the opening of chapter twenty-eight the joke is clearly on Mrs. Perth Macintyre, who sidles around the touchy issue of her niece's lingering state of singleness. The worthy narrator herself claims absolute fidelity to the facts of the fictional world. "It will be my fault if you find [Helen] dull," she writes, "I shall be in that case no faithful historian, but a traducer" (26). Conscientiously she cites her sources, explaining, for example, how she came to know the story of Mr. Batcham, Ambica Nath Mitter, and the six rupees (190). In the world of *Simple Adventures* however, any character's claim to truth is dubious. The reader doubts the accuracy of the gossip "coming straight from Jimmy Forbes" (216); servants' recommendations all have a "horrible mendacity" (74); Chua's law suit is a farce, with both parties bribing the witness (100); and the evidence which Batcham collects in pursuit of Truth is anything other than "unbiassed in every particular" (184). Mrs. Perth Macintyre herself does not escape from the snobbishness which she attributes to her fellow memsahibs. She spurns the Private Entrée ("everybody knows we wouldn't take it now" 124), but lets it slip that she is acquainted with the Viceregal couple: "can it be that circumstances — chiefly viceregal dinners — have thrown us more together?" (125).

THE UNCERTAINTY SURROUNDING evidence within the fictional world also obtains in the broader textual system of reader, implied author, and narrator. The extensive use of free indirect discourse in *Simple Adventures* creates difficulties for the reader in ascribing value judgments to either the "unreliable" sources of character and narrator, or the "reliable" source of the implied author, who provides the yardstick for the text's norms. The following description of the

dâk wallah, for example, reveals "orientalist" proclivities but leaves doubt as to whether they stem from Mrs. Perth Macintyre, the Brownes, or Duncan herself: "On he went, jingling faint and fainter, bearing the news of the mountains down into the valleys, a pleasant primitive figure of the pleasant primitive East" (280). The sentiment is not far removed from the narrator's sardonic comment that the travelling public in India sees only "an idyllic existence which runs sweetly among them to the tinkle of the peg and the salaams of a loyal and affectionate subject race" (147). The implied author similarly teeters between self-undermining parody and alliance with suspiciously orientalist views in respect of the travel narrative convention. Mrs. Perth Macintyre scorns travel journals and their creators (168), yet *Simple Adventures* itself contains four chapters of travel narrative, not including Helen's sea voyage. Such ambivalent, finely-balanced irony, typical of Duncan's narrators, has prompted contradictory responses even within the bounds of authorial reading. On the one hand, Juneja accuses Duncan of complicity with the colonial power; on the other, Misao Dean regards narratorial irony as a subversive strategy enabling Duncan to "covertly criticize the assumptions of the ideological centre without betraying her own or her reader's allegiance to them" (20). The latter view is far more alive to the wry subtleties of *Simple Adventures*.

Irony even pervades the title of the novel. Helen's "adventures" are scarcely "simple," for they raise profound questions about the operation of society. East and West alike are beleaguered by systems, and all minds, not only that of the baboo, "run in grooves" (200). Duncan herself maintains a discomforting ironic poise by refusing to "take sides" with or against her characters, so that *Simple Adventures* only rarely employs full-blown satire, which demands a clear moral standard on the part of the implied author. The machinery of systems will, above all, continue to grind, as each generation passes its traditions to the next. The narrator's last gesture for Helen is to donate her drawing-room furniture, and the novel closes as Mrs. Perth Macintyre's "sentence" as a memsahib reaches its term.

NOTES

[1] I use the term "Anglo-Indian" as it occurs in *Simple Adventures*, to describe any Indian resident of English origin.

[2] See Luce Irigaray's punchy essay "When the Goods Get Together" for an exposition of the patriarchal market in women.

[3] It is not clear whether the footnoted glosses appearing in the text were inserted by Duncan herself or by a subsequent editor. Tausky gives few bibliographical details, commenting only that his 1986 edition "reproduces a copy of the first American edition" [xxi].

[4] See Misao Dean, 3-18, for a discussion of Duncan's ambivalent national and political affiliations. Dean argues that "[Duncan] wrote as a colonial both committed to and different from the empire that created her" (18).

[5] Ashcroft *et alia* note the "widely held assumption that alien world-views might come closer if their linguistic structures were somehow meshed" (68) without further comment. They regard "interlanguage" and "syntactic fusion" as strategies of appropriation in post-colonial writing.

[6] Arguably, Mrs. Perth Macintyre also changes over the course of the novel as she reflects on her society.

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FAILED PRAYERS

from *St. Suniti and the Dragon*

Suniti Namjoshi

i)

If I could pluck out the eye of malice,
bury it deep, let it lie;
if freed of malice, I could breathe freely
(let earth resolve the luckless lie);
if I could watch a tree sprouting,
barren and beautiful,
and stand there casually while its golden apples
poisoned the air;
then I could say, "Ah, Malice worked.
Malice did it,"
as I walked away, breathe a sigh.

ii) She plucked iridescence ...

"This stone?" asked the angel. "Are you able
to rejoice in it?"
I stared at the stone. "Is it precious?"
But the angel missed
my cautious hint. "Well, then this feather?"
She plucked iridescence
from the casual air. Of course it was rare,
of course beautiful,
but would anyone else believe in it?
"In what?" asked the angel.
"In feathers falling from angels' wings."
The angel laughed.
"How shall I prove it?"
"What?" I ventured.
And the angel smiled — a bright, beatific,
bountiful smile,
"That your happiness matters, and that Angels can
prove very kind."
Well, I could have asked for a few thousand pounds
or a modern miracle;
but that's not how it works.

I bowed my head. "Thanks," I mumbled.
"It's not very often
that one meets an angel..."
but she looked crestfallen;
so I picked up the feather, and this time
I smiled.

iii)

Birds flickered in the branches.
Hoar frost covered the ground.
Suniti brought out bread crumbs.
It made her feel profound.
"A heart heavy with woe,"
she suddenly informed a sparrow,
"would make you fall, you know."
She imagined the fallen sparrow,
was aware of an intricate grief;
when the dead bird rose and flew,
and sang for disbelief.

A TRICK WITH A GLASS

Michael Ondaatje's South Asian Connection

Chelva Kanaganayakam

You tell me to pack up my bags and go
But where? I turn my face towards
Country after country
Silently I lip read their refusal
What do I call myself?
Exile, émigré refugee

Jean Arasanayagam "Exile II"

IN AN ESSAY APPROPRIATELY titled "Going Home," Zulfikar Ghose reflects on the experience of visiting Pakistan after twenty-eight years, of becoming aware not only of the transformations caused by successive governments but also of deep-seated ambiguities in the task of reclaiming one's past, of establishing a space within one's psyche that promises contentment through its unequivocal assertion of identity. He describes a visit to the Peshawar museum where the incomplete statue of the fasting Buddha compels his attention:

> The missing parts of the statue appear to have a vital presence: the starved, absent organs — shrunk, withered, annihilated — throb bloodily in the imagination; that which is not there startles the mind with the certainty of its being; it is an image of amazing contradictions, and illustrates the ambiguity of all perception: reality can be composed of absent things, the unseen blazes in our minds with a shocking vividness. (Ghose 15)

For the exile, the expatriate, the referential surface is not without significance, but it remains a part of a larger perception that seeks continuities, detects dichotomies and connections, and forces the imagination to transform what is seen to reflect and accommodate what lies below the surface. If the experience of exile inevitably involves division, it also affords the perceptions of complex connections that ques-

tion and subvert prevailing structures. As Aamer Hussein points out, "there is . . . a tremendous inherent privilege in the term, a mobility of mind if not always of matter, to which we as writers should lay claim: a doubling insead of a split." (Hussein 102)

Michael Ondaatje, in *Running in the Family*, returns to a country he left twenty-five years ago, and his perception of Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) is no less profound, no less complex, for it entails returning to a past characterized by the duality of being both "native" and "foreign," to a tenuous, middle-of-road position that served as a constant reminder to the British of the unfortunate effects of miscegenation; for the Sinhalese and the Tamils, the Burghers symbolized the residual vestiges of colonial domination, and therefore an extension of British, metropolitan culture. As Ondaatje puts it, "I am the foreigner. I am the prodigal who hates the foreigner" (79). The gap that separates the British finds expression early in Ondaatje's work:

> Everyone was vaguely related and had Sinhalese, Tamil, Dutch, British and Burgher blood in them going back many generations. There was a large social gap between this circle and the Europeans and English who were never part of the Ceylonese community. The English were seen as transients, snobs and racists, and were quite separate from those who had intermarried and who lived here permanently. (41)

The Burghers, by implication, are closer to the land than the British, but they too do not escape the stigma of alienation. The author mentions that Emil Daniels, when asked by a British governor what his nationality was, replied "God alone knows, your excellency" (41). Particularly as the country moved closer to Independence, the tenuousness of a community whose strength and its weakness lay in its cultural syncretism became increasingly apparent. As Ernest Macintyre, whose plays point to the loss of self in neo-colonial Sri Lanka and whose decision to emigrate to Australia underlines the problems of the Burgher community in the country, comments, the Burghers "were to enjoy an entire mortality of heightened unreality, a surreality because they wouldn't be provided with even a humbug of 'a tryst with destiny' at midnight in 1947 when Ceylon was given the legality of Independence" (Macintyre 315). Ondaatje's return to the country of his birth needs to be seen as a complex version of the familiar "been-to" situation.

To be refused a role in history is to be denied the very basis of identity. Hence the author's need to establish a niche for himself in Sri Lanka, which appears time and again with obsessive insistence in his work. His father claimed to be a Ceylon Tamil, an identity that the son treats with some scepticism. His own sense of origins is deliberately ambiguous:

> My own ancestor arriv[ed] in 1600, a doctor who cured the residing governor's daughter with a strange herb and was rewarded with land, a foreign wife, and a new name which was a Dutch spelling of his own. Ondaatje. A parody of the ruling language. (64)

The ironies are striking. The name, hardly recognizable as Tamil or Sinhalese, with minor changes, means, in the Tamil language "to become one." A far cry from the state of limbo that characterizes the Burgher community, a predicament that Derek Walcott's Shabine so aptly describes in *The Star-Apple Kingdom*

> I had a sound colonial education,
> I have Dutch, nigger, and English in me,
> and either I'm a nobody, or I'm a nation (Walcott 4)

The need to probe and resolve this duality, however, is obsessive. Ondaatje left early enough to avoid the gradual disillusionment that set in among the Burghers in the latter part of the 1950s and early 1960s following the introduction of Sinhala as the official language and the switch to Sinhala and Tamil as the languages of instruction. Speaking of the inevitable alienation and the desire to emigrate, Macintyre mentions the large-scale exodus from Sri Lanka to Melbourne, and of Ondaatje's family, "a small inner circle which had become far too used to their Ceylon fantasy to make that very real journey from Tullamarine airport to the suburbs of Melbourne" (Macintyre 316). Ondaatje himself chose to leave for Canada, but the need to return finds expression through dreams that encroach into his consciousness and through the marginal position of sleeping on a couch at a friend's home. The intertextual reference to Jane Austen's *Persuasion* is apt, for it underscores the hastiness of his departure from Sri Lanka and the need to re-live a romance that was once rejected. The return is not entirely euphoric, for images of claustrophobia constantly interrupt those of nostalgia. Dream and nightmare compete in the author's consciousness. The precariousness of the position is emphasized by the metaphor of balancing a glass of wine on his head while dancing. Ironically, it is while he is drunk, and most likely to stumble, that he acquires the art of balancing the glass. Now, tormented by the dreams that invade his mind, he loses the balance, the glass is about to tip over and the author says, "I knew I was already running."

The notion of "running" is particularly appropriate, suggesting as it were several alternative prepositions, all of which define the preoccupations of this work. *Running* is as much about running "in" as it is about "to," "from" or "against." The constant shifts in perspective, the foregrounding of textuality, the anxiety to belong and the need for distance, the awareness of history and the self-consciousness about historiography—all combine to create the effect of a complex quest in which the notion of identity needs to be explored in all its multiplicity. Probing one's identity is problematic in the best of situations, let alone in the case of one who is seen as both the agent and victim of colonial hegemony. As in Ghose's essay, there

is a constant awareness of the space that separates the real from the everyday, and the power of the imagination to transform the referential into a fictive construct that speaks more eloquently about the self than any preoccupation with meticulous detail. The objective is not without validity, but it remains only one of many possible representations. As Linda Hutcheon comments, "in all forms of narrating the past, the realization of the essential subjectivity of the enterprise has recently supplanted any positivist faith in objective representations" (Hutcheon 306). If the cold weather renders the people of Ontario "pink and frozen," the generations who constitute his ancestry stand out in memory like "frozen opera." To give them a meaningful reality is to transform them through the imagination: "I wanted to touch them into words."

The problematic and controversial aspect of the work becomes evident at the very beginning, in the section entitled "Jaffna Afternoons," which opens with a description of the governor's home in the Jaffna Fort, that impressive structure in the heart of Jaffna, overlooking the sea, an enduring symbol of subjugation and defeat. (It is significant that the fort, until recently, was used as a camp by the Sri Lankan army in their effort to overcome the Tamil rebels. According to recent reports, the rebels who have now secured control of the fort have begun to demolish it in an attempt to erase what they perceive to be a symbol of subservience.) Ondaatje's choice of beginning his work in Jaffna and not in Colombo suggests at least a partial recognition of his father's claim to be a Jaffna Tamil. Having done so, strangely enough, he isolates himself in the Fort, and hardly draws attention to the ethnic conflict between the Tamils and the Sinhalese during the past few decades. His reference his his uncle Ned as heading a commission on race-riots deepens the irony of seeking an elitist seclusion in the governor's home. Granted that ethnic violence in Sri Lanka did not escalate until 1983, the growing tension between the two communities was too obvious to be missed. Presumably, the author's intention was to distance himself from ideological issues that he did not feel strongly about. That writers like Jean Arasanayagam — another Burgher writer who decided to stay — chose to write about the ethnic conflict provides an interesting comparison with the apolitical stance of Ondaatje. This refusal to be drawn into issues that surface in any serious discussion of the country has been criticised, not undeservedly, as an example of solipsism. Arun Mukherjee's observation that Ondaatje "does not get drawn into the acts of living, which involves the need to deal with the burning issues of his time" (Mukherjee 34) can hardly be refuted, regardless of the author's angle of vision or aesthetic sensibility.

Even more significant is that Ondaatje visited Sri Lanka in 1978 and 1980, less than a decade after the 1971 Insurgency shook the country out of its complacency and forced it to confront issues it had chosen to ignore. Sri Lankan writers who for a long time had confined themselves to imitative writing, now responded to the pressure of the times, and several writers, including Punyakante Wijenaike, James

Goonewardene and Edirwira Sarachchandra wrote about the effects of the Insurgency. Ondaatje could not have avoided discussing the movement, for some of the bloodiest battles were fought in Kegalle, where his ancestral home was located. He refers to the insurgents in Kegalle and their project of going from house to house collecting arms to begin the struggle, but only to shift the emphasis into one of irony. Here is the description of their visit to his ancestral home:

> While all this official business was going on around the front porch, the rest of the insurgents had put down their huge collection of weapons, collected all over from Kegalle, and persuaded my younger sister Susan to provide a bat and a tennis ball. Asking her to join them, they proceeded to play cricket on the front lawn. (101)

The juxtaposition is hardly amusing or convincing. But when he speaks about the incarceration of the insurgents at Vidyalankara Campus, their graffiti poems that spoke of their hopes and anguish, he curbs the impulse to aestheticise the movement. The context in which this description occurs propels the narrative towards aesthetic distance, but the parallel with the graffiti poems on the rock face of Sigiriya, and the implied contrast between the love poems written to satisfy a despot king and the angry verses to defy a hostile government provide a saving sensitivity. The author concedes: "The works seem as great as the Sigiriya frescoes. They too need to be eternal" (85).

THE AUTHOR'S QUEST IS less ambitious than that of the insurgents, but it too involves history, a need to establish roots. Hence the excitement and exhilaration of seeing his name cut across the stone floor of a church:

> To kneel on the floors of a church and see your name chiseled in large letters so that it stretches from your fingertips to your elbow in some strange way removes vanity, eliminates the personal. It makes your own story a lyric. So the sound which came immediately out of my mouth as I half-gasped and called my sister spoke all that excitement of smallness, of being overpowered by stone. (65-66)

To have to be reminded of one's history in this manner is uplifting and painful, as he recognizes when he washes his hands and sees "the deep grey colour of old paper going down the drain" (68). The sense of inadequacy, the anguish of having been severed from history comes across in a wonderful statement that intertextually recalls Prufrock; the author comments:

> After the cups of tea, coffee, public conversations ... I want to sit down with someone and talk with utter directness, want to talk to all the lost history like that deserving lover. (54)

The combination of urgency and self-consciousness is central to the work, for it defines the elusive tone of the book, points to the difficulty of attaching labels —

"travelogue," "autobiography," "fiction"—all of which seem to be both true and false. That Ondaatje wanted to be truthful can hardly be doubted. In an interview with Sam Solecki, he speaks of having sent copies of the manuscript to various relatives before the publication of the book, to make certain that truth had not been misrepresented. He also mentions that "*Running* was difficult to write" (Solecki 331). The issue, then, is less with sincerity of motive than with representation of reality, of the manner in which a consciousness probes its own past. Ondaatje's work can hardly be entirely nostalgic or vituperative, and that explains the impulse to subvert expectations, mix genres and fuse a self-conscious narrative mode with a strikingly mimetic surface.

Ondaatje's preoccupation with history and the validity of what purports to be historical truth is evident at the outset. The two epigraphs with which the work begins, the first a statement by Oderic, a Franciscan friar of the 14th century and the second by Douglas Amerasekara in 1978 express the two ends of historical perception in relation to Sri Lanka. The first, clearly Orientalist and exotic, transforms the reality of a country into one that suggests myth and fable; the second, neocolonial and self-deprecating, expresses a world view conditioned by centuries of colonial domination. Myths persist to shape the present. Ondaatje draws attention to enduring misconceptions: "From Sellyan to Paradise is forty miles," says a legend, "the sounds of the fountains of Paradise is heard there" (81). However, for Robert Knox, who was held captive in the island for twenty years in the 17th century, the experience was one of desolation: "Thus was I left Desolate, Sick and in Captivity, having no earthly comforter, none but only He who looks down from Heaven to hear the groaning of the prisoners" (81). Ironically, his writings become a primary source for Daniel Defoe who then shapes his novel into a master narrative of colonial hegemony and binary structure. Ondaatje is aware that seventy years before him an Englishman called Leonard Woolf wrote a wonderful novel called *The Village in the Jungle* which avoids both the exoticism of traditional accounts and the colonial cringe of the more recent ones in its projection of a village gradually destroyed by nature and an uncomprehending British administration.

His own views must recognize these contraries. Ondaatje's tangential relation to this "wife of many marriages" requires a careful balancing act. He is the prodigal who is constantly drawn to the words "sea," "harbour," and "estuary" and who loves the song "Harbour Lights." He is aware that in the blistering heat that accompanies New Year festivities, people enjoy themselves climbing grease poles, throwing water on passing cyclists. For his family, the experience is very different: "But my kids, as we drove towards lowland heat, growing belligerent and yelling at each other to shut up, shut up" (80). Even what appears to be most "primitive" or "exotic" has its use, while the cultural allegiance of his community lies in far off cultures.

> The devil dances cured sickness, catarrh, deafness, aloneness. Here the gramophone accompanied a seduction or an arousal, it spoke of meadows and "little Spanish towns" or "a small hotel," a "blue room." (52)

On the other hand, when at Kuttapitiya, the author's daughter says, "if we lived here it would be perfect" (146) he wholeheartedly agrees. About the task of writing the work itself, he says, "I just had to say to myself that I thought I was writing the book with enough love, that if it was me it would be ok" (Solecki 331). It is the dual awareness of closeness and distance, of fictions that masquerade as truth and truth that hides behind fantasy that leads to the experiment of his work. The foregrounding of "architecture," of conflicting voices that cancel each other out, the juxtaposition of the public and the private, the claim to be universalist and representative and the insistence on the personal and the family are thus inevitable for one whose identities — Burgher, Sri Lankan, Canadian etc. — make the task of retrieving the past all the more complex. The work's singular achievement lies in the manner in which it projects the claims of both "History" in the national sense and "history" in the private sense to express what is at once a profound personal quest and a statement about the country that has chosen to remain, in many ways, oblivious of the realities that edge its complacent vision of itself.

The strategies that shape the narrative are subtle enough to maintain the precarious balance that this work requires. Thus a section like "The Honeymoon" says very little about the honeymoon itself, but provides a collage, a quick survey of information that resembles a skimming of headlines and column titles from a newspaper, possibly on a day during the honeymoon. The tangential relation between the two acquires depth through the manner of selection and the distribution of emphasis. The juxtaposition of "Fighting in Manchuria," and the films at the local cinema, namely, "Love Birds" and "Caught Cheating" drives home dichotomies that lie beyond the referential surface. Leslie Mundwiler's comment that "even if narrative deceives, offers entertaining illusions in contrast with the straight medicine of reality, there is a kind of narrative which can transcend this limitation" (Mundwiler 136) accurately defines the strategies that inform this work.

FOR A WORK THAT IS ostensibly linear in its overall conception of historical continuity, the structure is remarkably synchronic. Images, once they have been introduced, are abandoned for a period of time and then picked up at a later point, thereby drawing attention to the fictiveness of the construct and our perception of history. "Historical Relations," which, at best, is a superficial treatment of relatives then acquires a special significance in relation the memoirs of Robert Knox. The section on "The War Between Men and Women," hardly has anything to offer beyond an instance of perversion, but a later chapter focusses in-

tently on issues of gender in relation to the author's parents. Titles of sections, which at first seem deliberately misleading, gradually achieve their purpose of foregrounding the narrative, thereby asserting the fictiveness of both the literary construct and the episodes that are described. Such a process is of crucial significance in a work that seeks to decentre the "public" and install the "private" in its place.

The dense layering of intertextuality and self-reflexivity can hardly be missed in the work. References to Defoe, Shakespeare, Dickens, Lawrence and various other poets not only destabilize the realistic surface but also point to dimensions that are insistently personal and autobiographical. Dismissive of "anguished autobiographical novels," he records an instance of being bathed by a vicious woman named Maratina, and what might have accounted for childhood trauma hardly enters his consciousness. And yet the personal element is very much a part of the work. The ghosts of ancestors do not merely inhabit the governor's home in Jaffna. They are very much in the author's mind, for his journey to Sri Lanka is mainly a quest for his father, an attempt to exorcise feelings of guilt, of betrayal.

There is no attempt to sentimentalise or universalize the experience between the father and the son. The father is a dipsomaniac, a bully, a spendthrift. He is very much a colonial officer, who even in his drunkenness and moments of hallucination, perceives the need to be respectful to British officers. Recreating that history involves listening to unflattering accounts of his father's activities, visiting Sir John Kotelawala who refuses to refer to Mervyn by name and insists on calling him "that chap." But the dialogues of the latter part of the work change in tone to reveal a lonely, depressed and lovable man, who writes to his expatriate children that "he just wished that he could kiss [them] all once again" (178). To recognize such connections is to assert the significance of one's roots, one's ambivalent sense of belonging. It recalls for the author the predicament of Edgar, misunderstood and exiled, returning to make peace:

> I long for the moment in the play where Edgar reveals himself to Gloucester and it never happens. Look I am the son who has grown up. I am the son you have made hazardous, who still loves you. . . . I am writing this book about you at a time when I am least sure about such words . . . Give me your arm. Let go my hand. (180)

CLEARLY, ONDAATJE'S TASK in writing this work which straddles fiction and autobiography is to come to terms with a past that is both personal and collective. It involves looking back at a history that was formed three centuries ago and was all but terminated soon after the departure of the British in 1947. The work's weakness lies in its refusal to participate actively in the referential, in its reluctance to condemn or praise; in foregrounding the "narrative" at the expense of the "national," Ondaatje abandons a wonderful opportunity to

assert a much-needed sense of belonging. Those of his generation, the "Midnight's children," many of them exiles and expatriates, have felt the need to create experimental and metafictional structures. As Hussein explains, "our texts constantly explore the boundaries between fact and fiction, memory and imagination, individual and collective consciousness" (Hussein 107). And yet they never fail to confront the immediate and the political. Except for occasional moments, as in the discussion of the poetry of Lakdasa Wikramasinha, Ondaatje hardly ever shows signs of impassioned involvement with contemporary events. In his failure, Ondaatje shares the shortcomings of the majority of Sri Lankan writing in English which, for the most part, has stayed clear of the upheavals that have transformed a kindly, generous nation into a cruel and mindless battlefield.

Sri Lanka's current dilemma is at least in part a result of forgetting the past, of creating identities that owe their origin to Eurocentric or nationalist fictions, of steadfastly refusing to perceive truths that lie behind the immediate and subjective. Ondaatje's work is an attempt to articulate the complexity of a colonial inheritance, the need to transcend binary structures, to perceive dichotomies and continuities between the referential and the real. *Running* provides a salutary reminder of the need to see beyond fictions that take on the appearance of truth. His work is a far cry from the realism of Leonard Woolf, but it remains an authentic narrative, the voice of the expatriate, the exiled voice that it is both marginal and central, divided in its loyalties, but clear and unequivocal in its commitment to struggle with competing identities. As the author points out:

> During certain hours, at certain years in our lives, we see ourselves as remnants from the earlier generations that were destroyed. So our job becomes to keep peace with enemy camps, eliminate the chaos at the end of Jacobean tragedies, and with "the mercy of distance" write the histories. (179)

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WHY I CAN TALK OF THE ANGELIC QUALITIES OF THE RAVEN

Rienzi Crusz

Let's talk colors.
Start with BLACK,
that hallmark of the sun.
What else
is the eye of the hurricane, the colour
of magic night?
Is the Geisha, Geisha
without her black crown
against porcelain skin?
If the raven talks, listen.
It's God in winged disguise.

What's coloured
(blue, cinnabar, turquoise)
always throbs like a lover's heart.
The bougainvillea
under a Trinidad sun
holds the magic of metaphors,
sets off the quality
of our sunsets, our batik effusions,
our Gauguins, our murders.

As for WHITE,
read the instructions carefully:
FRAGILE HANDLE WITH CARE THIS SIDE UP
May be too precious
for ordinary use, ordinary pain;
the angelic colour
often overwhelms,
is much like strobe glare
over desert sands.

And what about BROWN
or its variants:
olive, beige, sun-burnt yellow?
they hardly preach, intrude,
refuse to wilt under the sun
and yet, could be
as lush and vibrant
as a Kandyan maid.

No; colour has nothing to do with it.
What you imagine
is all that matters.
The rest is too real
to be true.
The apple was only cinema,
so was the serpent, the woman.
What was real
was Original Sin,
Adam slapping God
on his cosmic ears.

ORIENTALISM RECONFIRMED?

Stereotypes of East-West Encounter in Janette Turner Hospital's "The Ivory Swing" and Yvon Rivard's "Les Silences du corbeau"

Graham Huggan

> Orient: Pour que ce nom produise à l'esprit de quelqu'un son plein et entier effet, il faut, sur toute chose, n'avoir jamais été dans la contrée mal déterminée qu'il désigne. Il ne faut la connaître par l'image, le récit, la lecture, et quelques objets, que de la sorte la moins érudite, la plus inexacte, et même la plus confuse. C'est ainsi que l'on se compose un bon matière de songe.
>
> Paul Valéry

> Orientalism is premised upon exteriority, that is, on the fact that the Orientalist, poet or scholar, makes the Orient speak, describes the Orient, renders its mysteries plain for and to the West. He is never concerned with the Orient except as the first cause of what he says.
>
> Edward Said

IN A SPECIAL ISSUE of the Montréal-based review *Liberté*, a group of Québécois writers take as their subject Valéry's celebrated description of the "fabulous Orient," whose untold mysteries provide the poet with "un bon matière de songe." The topic is a promising one, but unfortunately the contributions are largely remarkable for their tired reiteration of Romantic clichés. Here, for example, is an excerpt from a piece by Guy Gervais:

> L'Orient et L'Occident s'affrontent à tout instant dans notre chair. Est-ce le corps qui exaspère la vision ou la vision que relance le corps? Nuit dans la nuit. J'attends entre deux ombres l'ouverture sur le royaume où l'homme ne pénètre que dans la solitude originelle. (65)

And here is Jean-Pierre Petits:

> L'Orient [est une] mystérieuse et féconde boulangerie où fermentent les levains et cuisent les religions qui toutes finissent par nourrir l'imaginaire de l'univers. Au-

> delà de toutes catégories de pensées, de comportements, de sociétés, nous devenons, tous tant que nous sommes, L'Orient, l'éxotique, le mystérieux côté d'autres sociétés comme les rêves d'autres humains. (91)

Soaring flights of fancy such as these are brought rudely to earth, however, by Francois Ricard's more considered critique of Western writers' *recourse* to the Orient, which consists "à se donner l'Orient comme référence, comme mythe ou comme modèle, et à se prononcer ainsi non pas tant sur l'Orient, qui n'en a que faire, que sur l'Occident même auquel il appartient" (37). The attraction of these writers toward the Orient, claims Ricard, is not so much a mark of intellectual curiosity as one of intellectual pusillanimity which, at worst, involves "la négation de tout esprit d'examen, ce qui amène l'adepte à ajouter foi aux moindres fables susceptibles, comme il [l'écrivain] l'explique volontiers, 'd'élargir son champs de vision'" (41). Ricard's withering critique of an Orientalism characterised by the half-truths and pseudo-mystical visions of its feeble-minded disciples is mitigated, however, by his assertion of a deeper motive behind many contemporary manifestations of Orientalism, namely the *anti-Occidentalism* which inspires (often unsubtle) attacks on European privilege or on the self-serving mythology of the American Dream. The former, in particular, says Ricard, are prevalent in the intellectual tradition of Québec, whose separation from the Western (European) cultural mainstream makes it better disposed to an understanding of the East. Wisely, Ricard qualifies this last, highly debatable point. Perhaps, he concludes, the apparent predisposition of Québécois towards the Orient is better explained in terms of "la peur de la France, l'insécurité au sein de la culture, l'amour de la pauvreté, ou de la confusion . . . de l'intelligence avec le discours religieux" (43).

Ricard's argument is suggestive of the ambivalent attitude towards Europe which one finds so often in the history of both Québécois and Anglo-Canadian cultures, no less so in the history of their respective literatures. This attitude can also be found in two recent novels by Canadian writers which, although appearing initially to cross national boundaries in search of alternative cultural affiliations to those of (colonial) Europe, end up by charting the contradictions involved in a "recourse" to the Orient which paradoxically strengthens those traditional European ties. While both writers undertake a critique of stereotypical Western (European) attitudes towards the Orient, thereby implying their dissociation from the colonialist practices of Orientalism, the dissociation is by no means as complete as they might wish. Indeed, it is suggested that their apparent freedom to choose the nature and extent of their affiliation with the East is restricted, even conditioned, by their continuing dependence on the West. Furthermore, the postulation in their respective novels of alternative (non-European) forms of cross-cultural affiliation is shown to take second place to, and perhaps even to function as a pretext for, the articulation of a personal quest for freedom. The ironic treatment of this quest backfires: the real irony resides not in the two writers' critical exposure of Western

cultural suprematism but in their tacit acceptance of the intrinsic superiority of Western values. What sets out, in other words, as a *critique* of Orientalism eventually becomes its *reconfirmation*: the journey East is duly identified as the pretext for a specious rationalisation of Western anxieties.

THE TWO NOVELS I HAVE in mind here are Janette Turner Hospital's *The Ivory Swing* (1982) and Yvon Rivard's *Les silences du corbeau* (1986). Both received sufficient acclaim to win their respective writers prestigious literary awards (the Seal First Novel Award for Hospital, the Governor General's Award for Rivard). But as I shall demonstrate in this paper, both are seriously flawed, mismanaged to the extent that they end up by reinforcing the very prejudices they set out to undermine. Although dissimilar in design, the two novels are alike in being written both within and against the tradition of the Oriental quest novel. The formula is a familiar one: a restless Western writer takes temporary refuge in the East, hoping to find physical stimulation and/or spiritual enrichment there but discovering instead the limitations of his/her own culture, a culture to which he/she nonetheless returns, suitably "enlightened." In their own, self-consciously ironic adaptations of the formula, Hospital and Rivard employ similar motifs to underscore the central theme of cultural relativity. In Hospital's novel, the eponymous swing dramatizes the impossibility of choosing between two apparently exclusive, but actually interrelated, cultural systems, the East and the West; in Rivard's, the fateful crow periodically intervenes, disrupting the fluency of the protagonist Alexandre's thoughts, reminding him of the inefficacy of his philosophical quest, and implicitly ridiculing his attempt to understand (and apply to his own life) the concepts of a *non-dualist* world-view through the procedures of an habitually *dualist* analysis.[1] Both swing and crow operate at several different levels of discourse: in one sense, they represent the dilemma posed by aspiring to come to terms with the East without being able to renounce the standards of the West; in another, they embody the social and political conscience of a complacent bourgeois West exploiting an impoverished — if, in its way, equally class-conscious — East for the purposes of its own enrichment; in still another, they accentuate the interpersonal conflicts of the two protagonists, torn between alternative lifestyles and rival lovers, unable to choose which direction to take next.

More interesting, perhaps, than this tongue-in-cheek reprise of the standard fare of East-West encounter is the attempt in both novels to interrogate the cultural assumptions underlying Western (European) literary exoticism. Hospital's references to Maugham and Kipling, like Rivard's to Baudelaire and Valéry, belong to the ironic confession of a protagonist who is attracted towards India as an exotic "other"[2] but aware of the irresponsibilities of that attraction. In Hospital's

novel, the protagonist Juliet chides herself one moment for her susceptibility to exotic fantasy, only to find herself the next fantasizing once more. One example should suffice. Exhausted by the exertions of housework in the oppressive heat of southern India, Juliet drifts off into exotic reverie, imagining a scene in which her former lover Jeremy "came riding out of the West to cut his way through jungle walls and rescue her with a kiss from the drowsy tropics" (104). Juliet mocks her propensity to such ludicrous stereotypes of the "fabulous Orient," but she finds it difficult, nonetheless, to distinguish between these childish fantasies and her actual experiences of an India which often seems just as unreal to her as the fictive "Orients" of popular romance. Her grandiose vision of Jeremy riding out of the West is ironically deflated by the more humble sighting which follows it, of

> the mailman on his bicycle which bucked its way along the path between the coconut palms. He was a bizarre figure in his widely flared khaki "Bombay Bloomers." He also wore a khaki shirt and knee-length khaki socks and a pith helmet, and seemed to have stepped out of a Somerset Maugham story or an old movie of the British Raj. (105)

One form of exoticism is supplanted by another: Juliet resorts, once more, to the stereotypes which effectively preclude her from seeing India in terms other than those provided by a hyperactive Romantic imagination nurtured on the condescendingly "bizarre" images of colonial fiction. Not surprisingly Juliet, brought up on Maugham, old movies of the British Raj and assorted clichés borne of what she herself admits to be the "jejune lure of travelers' antique and brocaded tales . . . of tigers, elephants sandalwood and ivory" (17), is a thoroughly unreliable witness of and commentator on her new surroundings. Exasperated by her inability to reconcile two contradictory views of India, the one as a place of languid reverie and the other as a crucible of bitter political rivalries, Juliet is quick to project her failings onto others. The various one-dimensional Indian characters of the novel are largely the products of Juliet's lopsided view of the "Orient": pseudo-mythical or comic-strip inventions whose main purpose is to satisfy Juliet's self-serving desire for cross-cultural understanding or to act as expedient targets for her self-righteous wrath. They are allowed little or no development within the narrow context of Juliet's alternative views of India as paradisal retreat or tyrannical autocracy. Both of these views have a great deal to do with popular misconceptions provided and reinforced by Juliet's reading, but true to form, she projects these aesthetic limitations onto her husband David (in fact a much more careful "reader" of India than she is).[3] Juliet's dogmatic Western opinions are likewise projected onto others, so that cardboard characters such as Mr. Motilal find themselves "correctly designating" Westerners as "tourists, diplomats, hippies and university people" (21) — ironically, in the context of the novel, he is not far wrong — while the "villainous" landlord Shivaraman Nair frequently proffers such

opinions as "in the West . . . marriages are very bad because young people are choosing for themselves, isn't it?" (123) Far from being the broad-minded woman of the world she believes herself to be, Juliet is in fact a thoroughgoing Orientalist, a self-involved Westerner, convinced of the superiority of her "liberated" Western views, whose fictive version of the Orient is only temporarily demystified by the recognition that her persistent mythologization of others has contributed to the tragic deaths of her two imagined soul-mates, the put-upon servant Prabhakaran and the shackled widow Yashoda.

HOSPITAL'S IRONIC TREATMENT of her "liberated" protagonist in *The Ivory Swing* is matched by Rivard's wry exposure of the fallibilities of his soul-searching narrator in *Les silences du corbeau.* The novel is dominated by its narrator-protagonist Alexandre, both active participant in and supposedly "detached" observer of the excruciatingly self-indulgent activities of an ashram at Pondicherry, who permits himself the further self-indulgence of writing a journal about his experiences. Laced with sententious aphorisms and "deep" meditations into the meaning of Life (or, more often, Death), Alexandre's entertaining if irritatingly self-congratulatory journal represents a flagrant exercise in self-mythologization. As in *The Ivory Swing,* this self-mythologization is reinforced through the delineation of secondary characters whose main function is to shed light on the strengths and weaknesses of the protagonist. The Indian characters in Rivard's novel are of minor importance, with the possible exception of the "healer" Mère, whose tender ministrations in any case do little more than pander to the insecurities of her Western disciples. These latter, meanwhile, are superficial to the point of caricature, each a victim to his/her misty conception of the Orient as the panacea for a unanimous disaffection with Life. But the adoption in Alexandre's journal of an attitude of ironic detachment towards the antics of his spoilt Western colleagues does not prevent him from being one of them; indeed, Alexandre is well aware of the thin line separating the desire for self-annihilation from the license for self-indulgence. He is also aware of his own contribution to the absurd posturing of a group of affluent drifters whose encounter with the Orient, like their experiments with drugs and alcohol and their feeble attempts to "discover themselves" through the dubious media of astrology and "visionary" art, amounts to a reprehensible escape from their social responsibilities rather than a meaningful confrontation with their "inner selves."

Rivard's awareness that this contemporary instance of "East-West encounter" may be doing little more than recycling the stereotypical attitudes and perceptions of earlier literary manifestations of Orientalism is demonstrated in the intercalation into Alexandre's journal of a series of references to the exoticist poetry of Valéry,

Nerval and, particularly, Baudelaire. Alexandre's derision of the misguided attempts of his ashram colleagues to create "artificial paradises" explicitly recalls Baudelaire's eponymous collection, in which alcohol and drugs are described as having the capacity

> d'augmenter outre mesure la personnalité de l'être pensant, et de créer, pour ainsi dire, une troisième personne, opération mystique, où l'homme naturel et le vin, le dieu animal et le dieu végétal, jouent le rôle du Père et du Fils dans la Trinité; ils engendrent un Saint-Esprit, qui est l'homme supérieur, lequel procède également des deux. (387)

But Alexandre's mockery rebounds back on himself, for his "meditations" are no more uplifting than the antics of his colleagues. Over them all hovers the derisive presence of the crow, whose interjections stress both the futility and the inherent falseness of each of their imagined "paths to beatitude." Indeed, the novel is full of false mediators, none more so than the divine healer Mère who, as the wary reader has suspected all along, is really an unsophisticated recruit manipulated by the scheming Chitkara for his own gratification.

Probably the most telling incident in Rivard's demystification of Baudelaire's "Orient" is Alexandre's traumatic encounter with the decomposed corpse of a dog, washed up by the tide as if to provide the mocking illustration for a typically vapid meditation on the Eternal Return. Shocked, Alexandre flees back to the safety of the ashram and the more familiar sight (and smell) of a Western breakfast of toast and coffee. The incident provides a further ironic reminder of the delicacy of Alexandre's Western sensibilities; but it also recalls Baudelaire's notorious poem "Une Charogne," in which the poet uses the decomposed body of a dog as the subject for a perverse comparison between the eternal purity of love and the short-lived but consuming passion of physical desire:

> Alors, ô ma beauté! dites à la vermine
> Qui vous mangera de baisers,
> Que j'ai gardé la forme et l'essence divine
> De mes amours décomposés! (31)

Baudelaire's deliberately shocking contrast between the vileness of the symbol and the nobility of the idea it expresses is heavily ironic in the context of Rivard's novel, providing a reminder of the glibness of Alexandre's description of India (degeneration of outer forms, preservation of inner sanctity) and giving evidence through this description of his continued reliance on the polarizing rhetoric of European Orientalism. The unsolicited appearance of the dog alerts Alexandre's attention to the recycled Orientalist practices of his own writing, reminding him of the lingering cultural biases which contradict his pretensions to detachment and which vitiate his self-conscious play with the clichés and conventions of East-West encounter. These biases are all the more unfortunate in that they are brought to bear upon a

Québécois writer who is supposedly attuned to the self-privileging practices of French colonialism and to a European literary heritage in which his own country, like India, has frequently been designated in stereotypical terms.[4]

THIS LAST POINT IS worth pursuing further, for it demonstrates the ambivalent position of both Rivard and Hospital as post-colonial Canadian writers who incorporate the largely imaginary space of a non-Western "other" into works which not only question the principles upon which such — implicitly colonialist — representations are based, but which also challenge the ways in which these representations have historically been used to determine and maintain Canada's status at the margins of a European cultural mainstream. The debate is taken up more directly in Rivard's novel. An example is the argument between Alexandre and his English colleague Peter on the topic of the "sad demise" of the British Empire. Peter wistfully recalls "l'immense tristesse qui s'était abattue sur le pays [l'Angleterre]" but rallies that "si on leur avait laissé le temps, les Anglais auraient réussi l'impossible fusion de l'Orient et de l'Occident" (96). Alexandre scoffs at such starry-eyed idealism. Forster is singled out as a literary target: "comme toi," Alexandre warns Peter, "[il] croyait que 'c'est pour le bien de l'Inde que l'Angleterre la garde'; il rêvait, quoi qu'il en dise, d'élever l'Indien jusqu'à lui" (97). Alexandre's conclusion is equally snide: "il est plus facile à un chameau de franchir le chas d'un aiguille qu'à un Britannique de se retirer du royaume qu'il a colonisé" (97). Alexandre's display of self-righteous indignation is reinforced by the parallel between Forster's paradoxically self-serving dream of cross-cultural synthesis and Hugh MacLennan's attempt to reconcile the "two solitudes" of Canada and Québec.[5] But while Alexandre leaves us in little doubt as to his separatist leanings, he is less candid when it comes to assessing his own indebtedness to France. In fact, like Juliet in *The Ivory Swing*, Alexandre is much happier when railing against the prejudices of others: the elderly Frenchwoman he meets in Pondicherry, who has taken it upon herself to "educate" her admiring Indian lodger, is typically dismissed with the wry observation that "les colonies dureront aussi longtemps que les illusions qu'elles exploitent" (64). But as I suggested previously, Alexandre cannot be considered exempt from, and is indeed complicit in, these selfsame illusions; a connection duly emerges between the "colonial" Frenchwoman, nurtured on comforting myths of cultural superiority, who shuttles between her first home in Paris and her holiday home in Pondicherry, and the "post-colonial" Québécois, whose perceptions of the Orient are filtered through French colonial stereotypes, and who returns abruptly to his own country once he has realized that India can no longer sustain his dreams.

Like Alexandre, Juliet is shocked to find herself adopting the same attitude of cultural arrogance she so deplores in others. Juliet eventually comes to understand the damaging effects of her engagement with a culture of which she knows little but in which she is ready, at the least given opportunity, to interfere. But it is less clear if Juliet comes to understand her ambivalent status as a Canadian; indeed, there is the disturbing implication that Juliet looks upon her nationality as a mark of ideological neutrality. Juliet's naïveté is surpassed, however, by that of her free-wheeling sister Annie. In a contrived debate between Annie and the typecast Marxist student Prem, Prem accuses Annie of being one of those "rich imperialists [who] take pleasure trips to India" (195). Annie's response is trite, to say the least: "Prem, I care about these things. You should not hate me because I am a Canadian" (195). One wonders whether it would be permissible for Prem to hate her if she were, say, British or American; but whatever the case, Annie's nationality neither grants her immunity nor disguises the fact that she *is* on "a pleasure trip to India." Annie's introduction of Prem to the liberated ways of Western women results in a frivolous and irresponsibly "apolitical" encounter in which, while a full scale riot is going on around them in the city of Kerala, the two new lovers, "oblivious to the tempo of history, moved to rhythms of their own until daybreak" (204). As Matthew Zacariah has pointed out:

> Hospital is so taken up by the promise inherent in sexual liberation that she has completely missed seeing in Kerala the serious attempt of previously powerless groups of people actually achieving both political and economic power. Instead, she arranges for Prem, the student Marxist, to be cured of his radicalism with sex. (60)

I do not think that Hospital is as unaware of this contradiction as Zacariah implies, but there remains in the incident a disturbingly specious transcendence of material conflict which lends support to the view that Hospital has allowed an excessively narrow feminist agenda to cloud her political judgment. The most worrying aspect here is not Hospital's critique of the absolutist tendencies inherent in Marxist doctrine (however clumsily her point is made) but the implication that the liberation of women is an issue which can somehow be removed from the day-to-day operations of political and economic power. That different modes of cultural production (operating in specific political and/or economic interests) have served to justify and reinforce patriarchal ascendancy is surely not a point that Hospital would wish to dispute; why is it then that she chooses through her protagonist Juliet to address the question of women's liberation, not in terms of the uneven relations of power which maintain social and cultural hierarchies in both India and North America, but in the suspiciously ethnocentric terms of "basic freedom" (146)?

Like Hospital, Rivard addresses in his novel the problematic relation between sexual and political liberation. But his position, like hers, appears ambivalent. On

the one hand, the exposure in Alexandre's third (and final) notebook of the complicit activities of Mère and Chitkara reveals a connection between the fraudulent marketing of spiritual "guidance" and the commercial exploitation of women. Alexandre's recognition of the circumstances behind this particular instance of female exploitation does not prevent him, however, from falling back at the end of the novel on a stereotypical view of women. In escorting the abandoned, tearful Mère back to her village before himself returning to Montréal (presumably to confront his estranged wife Françoise) Alexandre appears finally to have awakened to his responsibilities. But has he really? The final image of Mère is as clichéd as the image which preceded it: the myth of the "divine mother" is supplanted by that of the "simple country girl." Mère seems to have been released from one form of servitude only to be delivered into another: her pledge of obedience to Chitkara is exchanged for the dubious promise of a scarcely less subservient lifestyle in her own village. Alexandre demonstrates once again his misunderstanding, or wilful ignorance, of the material conditions governing personal and social relationships in contemporary India. For it is by no means clear that Alexandre has managed to disabuse himself of his Romantic notions of the Orient, notions which allow him to gloss over the material context of social struggle and which culminate in the foolish justification of his indifference towards the cripples and beggars he frequently encounters in the streets of Pondicherry:

> Comment expliquer . . . mon indifférence à l'égard des nombreux infirmes et lépreux que je croise tous les jours, sinon par le fait qu'eux-mêmes semblent indifférents à leur propre malheur! Moi qui, à Montréal, ne peux voir un simple clochard sans aussitôt m'apitoyer sur son sort, je ne donne aux mendiants assemblés au temple de Ganesh qu'un regard plus ou moins distrait et parfois quelques roupies. J'ai beau me dire qu'il s'agit d'un mécanisme d'autodéfense (plus la misère est insupportable, plus on l'ignore), j'ai néanmoins l'étrange impression que personne ici, y compris les mendiants, ne désire quoi que ce soit. (91)

Alexandre's acceptance of, even admiration for, this "undesiring" state, which he assumes to emanate from a fatalistic Hindu outlook on life, no doubt makes it easier for him to return to his own country with a clear conscience. The hypocrisy is remarkable: surely Alexandre is not so blinded by his own self-importance that he cannot see that

> the overwhelming majority of Indians are poor because their ruling elites—Indians and their erstwhile as well as extant non-Indian associates—have perpetuated on them an enslaving economic relationship accompanied by a mythology which has rationalied that enslavement with concepts such as "dharma" and "karma."
>
> (Zacariah SC 138)

Using India as a temporary refuge from responsibilities "back home" is bad enough; marvelling at the "indifference" of the Indian poor is still worse. Having spent much of his time at the ashram scorning the complacent bourgeois attitudes

of his colleagues, Alexandre turns out to be just as complacent as, if not more complacent than, the rest.

I HAVE SUGGESTED THROUGHOUT this essay that Rivard and Hospital use varying degrees of irony to distance themselves from their respective protagonists. For both novelists, the stereotypes of previous fictions of East-West encounter are recycled as a means of exposing continuing Western biases and misconceptions and of revealing not only the intellectual pusillanimity, but also the social and cultural irresponsibility, of a "recourse to the Orient" in which India becomes a panacea for Western disaffection or a collective symbol for the contradictory aspirations of a divided Western self. Using India as a test to expose such insecurities and contradictions is not without its perils, however, and although both Rivard and Hospital are sensitive to a stylized representation of the Orient which ironically reflects the prejudices of their respective protagonists, neither writer succeeds in providing alternatives to the prejudices they so enthusiastically decry. The ironic treatment of Juliet in *The Ivory Swing*, and of Alexandre in *Les silences du corbeau*, can by no means be considered as a guarantee of authorial immunity. The inconsistency of Hospital's irony, and the lack of a clearly defined context against which her protagonist's fantasies might be offset, ultimately does little to dissuade her readers from viewing the novel's one-dimensional "Indians" in their pseudo-Indian context as merely latter-day variations on Conrad's "Africans": projections of European stereotypes, but also perpetuations of them. In Rivard's novel, a similar recycling of stereotypes implicates Alexandre in the self-privileging practices of European Orientalism without ever clearly dissociating Rivard from those selfsame practices. The ambivalent, rather than unreservedly ironic, treatment of Alexandre in the novel cannot help but suggest that Rivard has some sympathy for the plight of his narrator-protagonist: a sympathy which Alexandre's objectionable views on poverty and women, and his self-righteous belief in the inviolability of Québec, make extremely difficult to share. It is true, as Edward Said has pointed out, that the dilemma of abiding Western prejudices and misconceptions about the Orient is not "resolved" by issuing partisan decrees such as "only Orientals can write about the Orient," "only literature that treats Orientals well is good literature," or "only anti-Orientalists can write about Orientalism" (229). It is also true that neither Rivard nor Hospital is unaware of the difficulties involved in writing about the Orient as both "outsiders" to that culture and as "insiders" to the prejudices bound up in its European literary representation.[6] One of the risks they run, of course, is that, like their respective protagonists, they may end up by reinforcing the very prejudices they set out to attack. But this, I am tempted to conclude, is precisely what happens; for the combined

effect of their own (overt or hidden) agendas, however viable those agendas may be, and of their self-conscious delight in the depiction of Oriental stereotypes, however ironic that depiction may be, is to blur the intended operations of cultural critique to the extent that what emerges is not the vindication of an attitude of cultural relativism, or the advocation of a need for cross-cultural understanding, but the paradoxical reconfirmation of cultural bias.

NOTES

[1] The failed attempt to transcend these obsessive dualisms is brought out in an ironic recurrence throughout the novel of the figure three (three notebooks, the three women in Alexandre's life, the three girls/men encountered by Alexandre/Peter in the streets of Pondicherry, etc.). The ironic use of Baudelairean symbolism provides another example of this failure, as does the ineffectual dialectic employed in Alexandre's internal monologues and in his — often hilarious — "discussions" with his colleagues at the ashram. The most obvious example, however, is provided by the crow, whose inopportune interruptions and querulous silences do not so much disrupt the various "dialogues" of the novel (between "East" and "West," Alexandre and Mère, Alexandre and his alter-ego, etc.) as illustrate their fundamental mendacity.

[2] The "othering" process involved in the colonial subjectification of India has been well described by Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak. A tenuous "self-other" dichotomy is seen by Homi Bhabha as a basis for the operation of colonial discourse, and by Helen Tiffin as a springboard for the cultural critique implicit (or explicit) in post-colonial writing. Although both Hospital and Rivard are post-colonial writers, they employ in their respective texts an implicitly colonialist rhetoric founded on binary opposition and essentialist categorization. Their purpose, of course, is ironic, but the result is unfortunately even more ironic than the intended effect, for both texts indicate a self-contradictory allegiance to the very rhetoric they ironize.

[3] David repeatedly warns Juliet of the dangers of cultural arrogance, although he is by no means exempt from it himself. But at least his knowledge of India, curatorial and unproductive though it may be, is genuine, unlike Juliet's, which is based on wild assumptions and on contrived evidence which "proves" the integrity of her own opinions.

[4] Alexandre's reference to Hémon's *Maria Chapdelaine* (200) is hardly gratuitous. Hémon's novel reinforced patronizing European stereotypes of Québec which had persisted since Voltaire's notorious description of the colony as "quelques arpents de neige." Ironically, initial opposition to the novel in Québec weakened, and *Maria Chapdelaine* is widely regarded today as one of the major works of Québec literature. The irony, of course, is not lost on Rivard, whose protagonist's self-righteous denunciation of European cultural imperialism does not disguise his own partiality to the stereotypes of European (more specifically, French) exoticism.

[5] Hugh MacLennan, *Two Solitudes* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1945). Alexandre probably has in mind the homiletic conclusion to MacLennan's novel in which "even as the two race-legends [of Canada and Québec] woke again remembering enmities, there woke with them also the felt knowledge that together they had fought and survived one great war they had never made and that now they had entered another; that for nearly a hundred years the nation had been spread out on the top half of

the continent over the powerhouse of the United States and was still there; that even if the legends were like oil and alcohol in the same bottle, the bottle had not been broken yet" (411-12).

[6] More subtle approaches are provided here by writers such as Bharati Mukherjee and Michael Ondaatje, whose cross-cultural perspectives are enhanced by their experiences of living at an intersection *between* cultures rather than within a single, distinctive culture. Blaise and Mukherjee's collaborative memoir of India in *Days and Nights in Calcutta* and Ondaatje's hyperbolic account of his childhood in Sri Lanka in *Running in the Family* provide two examples of contemporary Canadian writing about South Asia which acknowledge the inevitability of cultural bias while seeking to counteract monolithic and/or onesided views of culture. In both cases, the choice of form is significant. *Days and Nights in Calcutta* employs juxtaposed — but often divergent or conflicting — memoirs to support its authors' shared belief in the relativity of cultural perception, while in *Running in the Family* an ill-fitting collage of tall tale and pseudo-scientific "record" conspires to provide a quirky celebration of Canadian, as well as Sri Lankan, multiculturalism. The alternating structure of Blaise and Mukherjee's text, like the polyphony of Ondaatje's, guards against uniformity of voice or perspective, countering the all too frequent tendency to treat "foreign" cultures as if they were pure, unchanging entities and eventually demonstrating the attempt to define the West to be as contingent as the desire to unravel the supposed mysteries of the East. So while the "real" Canada is shown in one sense to just be as illusory as the "real" India, its "reality" is also constituted within the multiple configurations of a plural society which, like India's, remains susceptible to the possibilities of change.

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three excerpts from

THUMBS

a poemnovel-in-progress

Ashok Mathur

• ONE breakdown in a dusky basement fearing holding shivered in pain and the statement, my statement, through tears past tears, looking down at brown hands and brown thumbs, hands and thumbs on untouchable whitenesses, brown miscegenating white, becoming a lesser(?) shade of brown, less brown, but still always brown, my statement, transcending this colour bar, fighting the impulse to discolour the self, coming at/from me in surprise, a wealth of new knowledge and feartalk, striking at me from my larynx, thoughtbreaths gushing out in unmediated fury
say
ing

I wish I was
white

ringing through bonestructure to innerear cataclymizing in sodium-ized liquid in throat and coating tongue, the voice articulating bodily desire to serpentine a way out of husky-dusky skin and into a purer driven-snowly reality that eases out squeezes out melanin drop a number 10 sunscreen on albinish-clean epidermis let it rest let it fade let it be, *aché*, Yoruba word for "so be it," co-opted and adopted by a black lesbian collective to empower its members, so here I go, *Aché*, it is so, let there be white.

• TWO Think back again to the bed and breakfast in a lumber and pulp mountain-town, to that lull in the conversation when the hostessly landlady asks me in that oh-so-familiar conversational inquisitive tone: and where are you from? Ah yes, that (any) Canadian town. And then the inevitable follow-up, allowed and insisted upon by the darkness before her: yes, but where were you born? You weren't born there, were you? I don't lie, this time, as I have before, I don't displace my birthplace artificially and say the Nova Scotian village where I learned to walk and talk was the place of my birth, or the Albertan city where I got all types of schooling, no, not this time, I tell her what she demands to hear, but not the *way* she wants to hear it. I don't rush through the word and say *Indya*, no, not this time: I stiffen her with a glance that goes inside her and says, along with my voice, the word she exotically requires (and I don't rush through and say but-my-parents-came-here-when-I-was-very-young to avoid the other inevitable statement of confirmation, how I speak the(ir?) language so well — don't they know, those fuckers, can't they tell, that I already speak the language better than they ever will?).

But no, this time I say *In-di-a*, and leave it, I say *India* and stretch it out into three distinct syllables but truncate the word at the end and allow a long enough pause that my listeners hear the trisyllabic sound snap back down into two syllables, clear and distinct in all their minds. Back to two. Not *In-dya*, but *In-dee-ah* — you've got to untriangulate your mind to see how three'll get ya two, two stretches into three then snaps back. Jolly ol' India.

• THREE And once again, at this desolate campsite near the peak of the Roger's Pass, too many white folk staring at me with their mole eyes and translucent skin shining their disdain. They return my funny glares saying, I'm sure, something about reverse racism. Appalled at my being brown. Despairing as they see the future in my skin, just you wait, I and my people will miscegenate the lot of you, infiltrate and tint/taint your blood stock, look long-hard in the mirror soulmates, 'cause your children will be darker than you and your children's children darker still. Race to the melanin-antimelanoma

set. The California girl of tomorrow is unfreckled unblonded unblue-eyed: smooth natural tan, brownhaired, browneyed brownskinned because you, you snivelling fearmongers, let too many of us coloured into your country. (Amazing, says Chris, a brown westcoast friend, how the product of a union between a white person and a coloured person is always considered coloured; even an amateur mathematician can tell you what that means a few dips further on down the genealogical pool . . .)

ACORN'S THIRD WORLD

Cyril Dabydeen

I give you Nicaragua
and all the other places,
I give them to you
where the sun shines naturally.

I give you the hinterland forest
where jaguars snarl
and leap from branch to branch
like playful kittens.

I give you Grenada,
—and all those islands
where sugar cane workers
plod from day to day —

Ash on their faces . . .
bodies bent, gnarled —
cane juice sticky on their arms,
legs, all day long.

I give you all other places
in Central America
where there's no calm . . .
and I tell you of others' survival

Which might be all that matters
as Bolivian miners
wheeze at nights,
still oppressed.

I give you this domain of land,
all that Canada is—
from East to West Coast...
Newfoundland not least;

BC forest workers,
and those in Northern Ontario mines—
all who one day will unite
(as you said).

Craggy-faced as you were (then):
and I still wanted to nominate you
Chairman of the League
of Canadian Poets

And to hear you, Milton Acorn, sing
louder from your innermost veins
now that you are truly
—at rest.

'SRI LANKAN' CANADIAN POETS

The Bourgeoisie That Fled The Revolution

Suwanda H. J. Sugunasiri

MICHAEL ONDAATJE'S *Running in the Family* has been characterized by an American reviewer as "a kind of travel book,"[1] and by a Sri Lankan critic as "telling nothing of the colonial experience."[2] But Canadian critic Arun Mukherjee's criticism of it for "exoticizing,"[3] however, is part of her criticism of Ondaatjee's poetry in general. In an article comparing him with the Caribbean-South Asian Canadian writer, Cyril Dabydeen, she lambastes Ondaatje for a series of what she sees as socioliterary offences: the absence of "any cultural baggage he might have brought with him," for "siding with the colonizer" and "glamorizing" them, for "history, legend, culture, ideology [being] beyond [his] ken," for remaining "silent about his experience of displacement or otherness in Canada," for being led away "from an exploration of his own realities," for being "trapped by a style and a way of thinking that perforce have to deny life in society," and finally for not having "a God, a cause, or a country" as Yeats would have it of a poet.

In this paper I will examine the validity of her criticisms, extending it also to three other Sri Lankan poets she deals with, namely, Rienzi Crusz, Asoka Weerasingha, and Krisanta Sri Bhagiyadatta.[4] Since Mukherjee's critique is based on Ondaatje's Sri Lankan origins, it is appropriate to begin with a sociohistorical understanding of Sri Lankan society.

From the time of Independence in 1948 up to the socialist revolution of 1956 led by S. W. R. D. Banadaranayaka, (then) Ceylonese society could be divided into two very broad classes, what I have elsewhere called the *composite elite* and the *masses*,[5] roughly fitting the typical Marxian distinction between bourgeoisie and proletariat, but with significant variations. Both classes, though the latter is

not so called, were composite rather than monolithic. The make-up of the elite may then be described in two sub-strata: political and socioeconomic:

Political

1. The Sinhalese Buddhist political elite, of which the better known members were Bandaranayaka himself (note how his name, Solomon West Ridgeway Dias, reflects his earlier Christian upbringing), Don Stephen Senanayaka, first Prime Minister of Independent Ceylon and Junius Richard Jayawardhena, later first President of Sri Lanka, and nicknamed 'Yankee Dickie' for his well-known American leanings. Perhaps surprisingly, but understandably, even the 'father of Marxism' Philip Gunawardhena and leaders of the Fourth International Trotskyite movement, Dr. N. M. Perera (mill owner) and Colvin R. de Silva (advocate) were of this social class (note their names), as was Dr. S. A. Wickremasingha (medical doctor), a co-leader of the Communist Party;

2. The Tamil Christian/Hindu political elite[6] among them S. J. V. Chelvanayagam (Anglican) and E. M. V. Naganathan (Catholic), president and secretary respectively of the Tamil Federal Party, the precursor to the later Tamil United Left Front, and C. Suntheralingam (Hindu), senior civil servant turned politician;

3. The handful of Muslim political elites, the best known perhaps being M. H. Mohammed who held several Cabinet portfolios.

Socioeconomic

1. *Eurasians* (known as Burghers), the miscegenous offspring of the colonizing Portuguese (1505-1656), the Dutch (1656-1815) and the British (1815-1948). While politically this community could count only one or two leaders — Pieter Keunaman, co-leader of the Communist Party, and Singleton Salmon, appointed M.P. to represent minority interests, perhaps being the best known — it had disproportionate economic clout through ownership of the tea, coconut and rubber estates and significant control of the urban commercial (service) sector. It became part of the elite simply by reason of European blood. Interestingly, the fact that the skin colour of the Eurasian community ranged from pink white to pitch black did not seem to matter, either in their own perception or that of the others;

2. *Professionals*, such as doctors and lawyers, trained in the country and/or abroad, under a British curriculum, with European religio-philosophical worldviews;

3. *Bureaucrats*, namely the 'government servants,' from the 'Permanent Secretaries' (= Deputy ministers) to peons;

4. *Catholic church hierarchy*, both Tamil and Sinhalese;

5. the *media*, with the Lake House Group (Sinhalese Catholic) and the Times Group (Tamil) controlling the print media, and the Ceylon Broadcasting Corporation being under government control;

6. the *English-medium educators* heading the Catholic, Buddhist and Hindu 'separate' schools of Colombo, Jaffna and other cities;

7. *English-speaking artistes* (writers, stage artistes, painters);

8. the Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim *trade union leadership*.

While each of these classes encompass a range from upper to lower levels of the composite aristocracy, not excluding some overlap with the masses, they can be characterized by one or more of the following: a regular and relatively high income; the (near) exclusive use of English; and a colonized mindset (e.g., a preference for things European over local). English was not only the 'high language,' in a diglossic situation (e.g., in government, parliament, and as medium of instruction), but also of personal interaction. Where not everybody in this motley group spoke English, there was at least one member of the family who did. Sinhala, and Tamil, for those who had any mastery, were for informal interaction and use with domestics, the exception here, by definition, being the Sinhala- and Tamil-medium journalists and writers.

Diametrically opposed in language and religion (Sinhalese Buddhist, Tamil Hindu, Tamil- and/or Sinhala-speaking Muslim), income level, life-style and worldview were the masses, consisting of no less than 90% of the population. This class was made up of the following:

1. Farmers and fishermen;

2. Small businesspeople;

3. Rank and file of labour force (e.g., harbour, railway, factories, and tea, rubber and coconut estates);

4. Buddhist monks and Hindu Swamis and average Buddhists, Hindus, Christians and Muslims;

5. Native *Ayurveda* "Science of Long Life" physicians, the backbone of the native health-care system.

6. Vernacular teachers (paid less than half the salary of English-medium teachers);

7. Sinhala- or Tamil-only speaking artistes (dancers, drummers, exorcists, etc.).

The sociocultural gap between these two broad classes was such that the composite elite and the masses literally lived their contiguous but non-contactual lives,[7] except when it came to government services, the relationship always being a dominant-subservient one. It would also explain the 'motley' nature of the poets

that Mukherjee refers to. While this rough profile, based on personal experience, should not pass for a rigorous sociological analysis, it does provide us with a broad, and I believe, an authentic picture of pre-1956 society.

WITH THIS BACKGROUND in mind, then, let me return to Ondaatje. While my own view of *Running in the Family* is that it is a picture without a frame, I would like to argue that it is a picture nevertheless, an accurate one at that. The drunken escapades of the men and women, eating snakes, breaking the necks of chickens, throttling mongrel dogs, running naked in tunnels are *not* unrepresentative of the Eurasian sub-stratum elite. Such behaviour must then be deemed not as a 'denial of life' as Mukherjee sees it, but as indeed a celebration of life, however decadent, colonial or counterdevelopmental it appears from the national point of view. The characters were celebrating their status — with the scantest of respect for anyone other than themselves. Indeed the Eurasian behaviour of *Running* must be seen as simply the first stage of a post-colonial Sri Lankan culture, the later stages of which can be seen in the increasingly consumer-oriented and westernizing contemporary Sri Lanka under capitalism. Seen from the perspective of this early stage, even the absence of a frame must be seen to reflect the contiguous but distant relationship between the elites and the masses.

But, in order to deal with Mukherjee's general criticism, we need to look to Ondaatje's personal history as well (isn't the personal the political?), to the extent that it can be reconstructed on the basis of public knowledge. Given the lack of contact between the masses and the elites, and the Eurasians and the rest in particular, the young Michael Ondaatje, leaving the country at age 10, would have had exposure only to his own community, and perhaps not even to the wider social class he belonged to. So when he says "My mind a carefully empty diary,"[8] he is indeed doing what Mukherjee accuses him of not doing: recognizing his 'cultural baggage." We note this acknowledgement as well when he refers to the country as Ceylon.[9] Belonging to the economic rather than the political elite, Ondaatje shared the Eurasian community psyche, remote from ideology and indeed from social reality! Ondaatje did not live long enough in the country of his birth to get the grasp of its society necessary to fill the pages of his diary differently.

Ondaatje's first stop as emigrant was the U.K. where he spent his years of intellectual maturing (from age 11 to 19), during which his creative imagination was probably first triggered. If the British literary tradition inspired him, British society couldn't have failed to show him how immigrants and immigrant writers, particularly of colour, had come to be treated. Coming to Canada in 1962, at age 19, young Ondaatje was soon to discover a society not unlike that of Britain, which valued, and admitted to its literary halls, only those of British sensibility. So when

he began writing, his attraction to western romantic poetry, to writing about poetry or the act of poetic creation itself (as Mukherjee points out) was not merely the safest but the most natural for him, given an apolitical personal and communal history.

This type of poetry allowed him to express his creativity without being committed to "history, legend, culture or ideology," which as Mukherjee rightly observes are absent in his works. It was safe because it did not force him to make any disclosures about his immigrant status, his 'otherness,' or his Two-Thirds World[10] associations. The British experience would certainly have told him how not to be a literary outcast! So when he says,

> Here I was trying to live
> with a neutrality so great
> I'd have nothing to think of

he must at least be given credit for being honest. The only way Ondaatje could have dealt with his personal reality was "just to sense/and kill it in the mind." Again, he unloads his personal cultural baggage, now coloured, and enhanced, with his British, and now Canadian, experience. And this very baggage, delivered with technical mastery, endeared him to the Canadian literary establishment. It is not to denigrate his poetic skill to observe that his Dutch-sounding name, the spelling of it, skin colour, appearance and connections developed through marriage also no doubt helped in the process.

So he cannot be accused of not writing poetry about his "displacement in Canada"; he experienced *no* displacement. Nor can he be said to be "siding with the colonizer." He *was* (through his community and class) the colonizer! The most valid criticism one could make of him, then, is the limited nature of the range of his poetry, namely his romance with deconstruction. The fact that Mukherjee's critique of Ondaatje fails to convince me is not to say that her criteria are invalid. It is simply that she has, because of an understandable unfamiliarity with Sri Lankan society,[11] generalized and extended from her own Indian society,[12] fallen into the trap of being ahistorical and acontextual, crimes she pins on Ondaatje. Where Mukherjee went wrong, then, is that she stereotyped Ondaatje, dressing him in a Sri Lankan garb simply on the basis of his birth, without reference to the sociopolitical context, and history.

But was she also perhaps blinded by an exclusive left-wing rhetoric? This seems a possibility when we read Mukherjee's assessment of the other poets, particularly Krishanta Sri Bhaggiyadatta, who are, in Mukherjee's opinion, everything what Ondaatjee is not. But it will be my attempt to show that the criticisms levelled at Ondaatje could equally be directed, more or less, against all the other Sri Lankan Canadian poets as well.

I BEGIN WITH RIENZI CRUSZ, a poet with four collections.[13] He has been hailed as "The only poet who sees East and West in one clear glance" (Books in Canada) and whose "poetry is rich with laughter and with irony" (The New Quarterly). In the words of the late Reshard Gool, "The rhythms [in his poetry] change faultlessly, tablas and sitars counterbalance with the poise of skilled acrobats, exotic metaphors spell out how dangerous the leaps between steep cliffs of mind have been, the verse rehearses grand risks, invention, resource."[14] The more important reason, however, is that, Rienzi Crusz, as the name indicates, comes from the same Eurasian background as Ondaatje.

To be fair, Mukherjee is less enthusiastic about Crusz than Gool. She refers to the "uneven quality" of his work, and observes that "like Ondaatje, Crusz seems to like writing poems about making poems." But "he has a good grasp of rhythm and word music, and knows how to evoke pleasing images," and his best poems are "rich both technically and thematically." She likes him, however, "because of the struggle that I perceive going on between his different voices," and "because of the authenticity of his struggle to forge a voice that will be able to tell the world about a black man's life."[15] True he writes, "Dark I am/and darkly do I sing,"[16] but judged from his poetry, Crusz is no more 'a black man' than is Ondaatje.

Crusz also writes a poem, "Immigrant," about himself in the Canadian context[17] and his poems are strewn with references to the sun, tropical fruits, birds and fish, and a local celebration or two. But these are also, by and large, the ones that any tourist would be attracted to. All this, unfortunately, is 'song and dance.' One would have to try hard to find evidence in his poetry of his ever having left the capital city of Colombo, psychologically if not physically, a rare example being a poem dedicated to "the children of the village of Boralesgamuwa" (a mere 20 kilometres from Colombo).[18] Even the life of the average man in Colombo is a rarity, the exception being when he writes of the commercial district of Pettah, lamenting that travellers don't speak

> of cardboard shacks
> crumbling in the rain,
> or the decaying breath
> of Pettah's alleys,
> or how sunburnt beggars
> limp with pariah dogs
> in search of the breath of rice.[19]

The most historical Crusz becomes is when he writes about his own miscegenic origins, 'conjur[ing] history from a cup':

> A Portuguese captain holds
> the soft brown hand of my Sinhala mother.

> It's the year 1515 AD
> when two civilizations kissed and merged,
> and I, burgher of that hot embrace . . .

Perhaps the most political he becomes about Sri Lanka is in the poem, "Dark Antonyms in Paradise" when (returning with the security of a Canadian passport), he bemoans ("O my beloved country") the changes that have taken place in the country as a result of the introduction of the Free Trade Zone to lure the foreign entrepreneur. While there are the occasional reference to "the stillness of a Buddha" (56) and "Karma" (6), it is the dedications that tell the true story. They are to John, Daphne, Maria, Dan, Anne, Michael, Cleta Marcellina, Nora Serpanchy (mother); these are certainly not Sinhalese, Tamil or Muslim names.

But could Crusz have helped it? I will let the poet speak for himself: "I came from a Catholic family and had parents who were deeply religious" and "I was often exposed to the Bible, especially the Psalms." "I do not claim," he continues, "a separate and special aesthetic. If one has chosen to write in Shakespeare's tongue, then one must live or die by its idioms and rules." If the first poems young Crusz was exposed to at age ten was Francis Thompson's "Hound of Heaven," at sixteen, he was "utterly enthralled by the story, the language of Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet." Further, "after [Dylan] Thomas, Hopkins, Yeats and Eliot..., I entered this magic world of Neruda [who "lived down the same street (that I had lived as a child) when he was Chilean Ambassador to Ceylon"], Vallejo, Paz, Lorca, Dario."[20]

The point, then, is not that Crusz is to be castigated for hailing from the same social class that Ondaatje comes from (something he cannot help) but that the sensibility reflected in his poetry, measured by the imagery, myth and symbol or the level of historical or political consciousness is only a very little different from that in Ondaatje's (and something he can be held responsible for). Unlike Ondaatje, Crusz was in his mid-thirties when he emigrated (1965). He had already had a university education in Sri Lanka, allowing him an opportunity to be with peers of all ethnocultural, religious, regional and socioeconomic backgrounds. He was also in the midst of the tumultuous changes that followed the Bandaranayaka revolution and as such would have been a witness to all the boiling political and sociocultural issues. Even if Crusz was of non-political bent, as most middle-class Sri Lankans of his (and my) generation were, literature and esthetics is not a field outside his interest. Yet he seems completely oblivious to the literary and cultural revolution that coincided with the political revolution. For example, Ediriweera Saracchandra's epoch-making dance-drama *Maname*,[21] produced for the modern theatre in 1956 reviving the traditional folkplay of *nadagam*,[22] was playing to packed houses around the country. It attracted not only the Sinhalese cultural elites, but both the English educated elites and the masses who had never taken the time to see a stage play. Lester James Peiris' films, a sharp contrast to the

earlier South Indian type films (with the stock characters of the beggar, snakes and lovers singing and dancing around trees), were being screened in Cannes to international acclaim. Martin Wickremasingha, the doyen of modern Sinhalese literature, had already completed his famous trilogy about the changing Sinhalese village,[23] and Siri Gunasingha had just introduced blankverse of the western type to the Sinhala reading public.[24]

Even if works in Sinhala were inaccessible to Crusz, Leonard Woolf's *Village in the Jungle* had appeared in 1913 and the lesser known William Knighton's *Forest Life in Ceylon* in 1854.[25] George Keyt, Mahagama Sekara and others were complementing each other on canvas in the art galleries of Colombo. And Amaradeva, who had completed his musical studies in Tagore's Shantiniketan in India as the top student, was creating and popularizing a genre of Sinhalese music based in local rhythm and Indian *raga* tunes over Radio Ceylon, which was to be followed by a generation of musicians. Yet, Crusz's poetry reflects none of these cultural developments that were so much part of the Sri Lankan middle class life of his time.

As to being black, when did Crusz, or the Eurasian community in general (or some members of it), become 'black,' or discover its 'blackness'? The first jolt of reality to hit them perhaps followed the 1956 revolution, when Eurasians applied to Australia for immigration, and after being asked to prove their '100% whiteness' by blood, were rejected for only being half-white.[26] In Canada, the realization probably came when, regardless of their fluency in English, European names and Christian background, they came to be called 'Pakis.' In sum, then, while Rienzie Crusz may not have hidden his immigrant status and seemingly identified with blackness, at least metaphorically, he is no closer to being Sinhalese or Sri Lankan, than Ondaatje, in his sensibility or rootedness. However nostalgic he may sound now, he is indeed the bourgeoisie who fled the revolution. Yet we find no such criticism of him by Mukherjee.

NOR INDEED OF Asoka Weerasingha, who with ten collections,[27] is certainly the most prolific of the poets I am discussing. While critics have noted the uneven quality of his works, he has been called a "genuine poet" (Thorpe) and "a master of nuance" (Freedman). "His language is . . . elegant" notes another critic (Gorman), although others have also noted that he takes too little time editing his work (Mukherjee; Thorpe). But there are "clever images, sound rhythms and well worked structures" to his poetry, observes the *Canadian Book Review Annual*.[28]

Weerasingha's latest collection, *Kitsilano Beach Songs* demonstrates a high sense of political consciousness, when he writes "Coughing Beothuck syllables / I try to

make you understand / I am part of you and affable, / wanting to be understood/ and be alive," or about the drought in Africa ("Drought," "Sahelia"), or about "Dev" in India "scrubbing hunger pains / of a shrunken stomach" as he sings "under a coconut palm / to a camel on burning sands, / for sweat-stained paisa / thrown from foreign hands." But his pain in relation to events in Sri Lanka is evidently more excruciating; His political stance begins with support of the Tamil cause: "I admired you without obvious fears / for my life, for your persistence to / live another thousand years." But he feels let down,

> when I saw big-bellied women
> lying dead on the floor
> bringing revulsion to my mind,
> and taunting my kind
> Buddhist heart to hate . . .

In "Sinha," he is angered at

> propping a
> lifeless torso strung
> onto a Jaffna lamppost,

the torso clearly being of a Tamil victim.

"The New Canadians" who, "funding the acts on the killingfields" cheer "from the sidelines . . . Safe in North America" troubles him, but he dedicates a poem ("Intimidation") to A. Amirthalingam, the leader of the Tamil United Left Front and strong supporter of separatism, killed by Tamil terrorists turning against him. If he has "the passion of a lion," a reference to the Sinhala people,[29] as a result of the transformation, he also engages in praxis: "performing the kiss of life / with words, words and more words."[30]

While these later poems would make Weerasingha fit the bill of Mukherjee's laudable 'Sri Lankan poet,' one writing with a political consciousness about the "million people who live in Sri Lanka," there is hardly any evidence in his earliest poems to show that he is any different from Ondaatje or Crusz — in his political consciousness, historicity, sensibility or rootedness. *Another Goodbye for Alfie*, his second collection published while still in England (1969), shows him writing about love, senility, snow, autumn, spring and flowers. But, even where he writes about his own appalling life in London — "I shared my bedsitter with house-bugs," and is critical of the land where a neighbour "is another beast / in a wilderness of convention;" or comments on the "need for a social conscience," there is no indication of his origins or about the suffering of the masses of Sri Lanka, or even of his own middle class. Nor do any specifically Sri Langan images, myths or symbols appear in his poetry.

These blanks can be understood from Weerasingha's personal history. Though educated in a Buddhist school, he, like his peers in Catholic schools, had learned

about John Bunyan, the tributaries of American rivers and the colonial victories in the conquered lands, but nothing of anything relevant to or significant of the native soil. Further, he left his country at the age of 20, to be further nurtured by the colonial mother, like many of his (and my) social class had done since the British occupation of 1815. Having left at the height of the social revolution (1956), the turmoil that followed was also, unlike the case of Crusz, not part of Weerasingha's personal experience. But if all this explains the apolitical and ahistorical nature of his early poetry, it also puts him, of Sinhalese Buddhist origins, squarely in the composite class to which Ondaatje and Crusz, of Eurasian Christian origins, belong, part of an English-speaking, (sort of) Sinhala-hating and culturally ignorant bourgeoisie that fled the revolution!

Despite his early class-associations, however, Weerasingha can be said to come closest to being a 'Sri Lankan poet' for two important reasons. The first is that we find him sensitive to the political, social and cultural realities of the land (at least by 1981), something not evidenced in any of the other poets. If the title, *Home Again Lanka*, and the artwork of the cover[31] prepares us for this new sensibility, the inside pages confirm it. In a poem titled, "The Birth of Insurgents," we find, for example, the poet writing, though ten years after the fact, about the uprising of the Sinhalese youth in 1971 which reportedly took 10,000 lives. Though tongue in cheek perhaps, he says "I was at home / when april showered / guns and bullets / ... while offspring of the guilty / book-pedalled in Paris and Oxford." He is here exposing his own feelings of guilt as he also takes on his own elite class. Local characters and situations, fauna and flora also enter his collection on a scale not evidenced earlier.

But the feature that makes Weersingha a 'Sri Lankan poet' in my opinion — the point missed by Mukherjee and other critics — is his attempt at the rhythms and the rhymes of Sinhalese poetry. No doubt his attempts are sometimes artificial — "Or is that I sense music, everywhere, / With your young presence without a care" — but they can be quite functional: "As you left behind a trail / of hair to form a lover's braille." ("Uncertain")

"Tikiri Liya" 'the dainty damsel' is particularly effective. Here is the end-rhyming quatrain in Sinhala, with a literal translation:

tikiri tikiri tikiri liyaa
kalet arang lindata giyaa
linda wata kara kabara goyaa
kakula kaapi diya bariyaa

the dainty dainty dainty damsel
with pot in hand went to the well
the *kabara goya* 'iguana' around
the well [protects her]

[yet] would you believe, the 'water
creature' *diya bariya* stings
[her] in [her] leg!

Weerasingha's composition, "Tikiri-Liya," runs as follows:

Tikiri, Tikiri, Tikiri-Liya
The bosomed, lissom, maiden fair
With a coveting smile on her lips
And hugging a pitcher on her hip,
Went down the path to the well
To fetch a pitcher of water.

Tikiri, Tikiri, Tikiri-Liya
When she arrived at the well
Frightened by a monitor lurking there
She ran around the well.

Tikiri Tikiri Tikiri-Liya
The bosomed, lissom, maiden fair
Drew a pitcher of water from the well.
From the water a watersnake fell
And slithered quickly around her foot,
And 'ouch,' stung her shapely foot.

The kabara goya is an ugly-looking lizard with a coarse skin, always around in the neighbourhood, and of which not even a child is afraid. The diya bariya, by contrast, is a smaller lizard, with a smooth skin; it is a water animal, rare on land, with a sting but no poison. The village well is, of course, the social centre, as well as where many a courtship begins. Even though Weerasingha has clearly missed the refined romance (though many a man hovered around her, a little unknown someone sneaked his way into her heart) and the mocking nuances of the folk poet who uses the literary device of suggestion (*dhwani, vyangya* in Sanskrit esthetics), he successfully retains the structural element of the number of beats (four) and the end rhyming.

Weerasingha's search for a local relevance comes to be reflected in other ways as well. He opens and ends 'Sinhala Love Song' (in *Home Again Lanka*) with the rhythm of a traditional dance (*thana tharankita/thana tharam*) even though he gets the rhythm wrong. And in 'Ceremonial Mask,' he draws upon the traditional folk dancing of the 18 masks, mocking it ("And in case you happen to die, / ... I would say, / "when asked to help you / it was just too late"), clearly suggesting the conflict between tradition and change. Weerasingha does not fail to see the ugly side of Sinhalese culture either, when he castigates the colonial mind of the villager who (like the composite elite, not untouched by the colonial experience) asks "kohomadha, lamaya sudhu parta tha?" (Is the infant fair-skinned?).

If then both Crusz and Weerasingha started out as the "bourgeoisie that fled the revolution," and sought in later years to search for roots, it is only Weerasingha who has made the socioculturally meaningful and relevant transformation. Perhaps it may be his Buddhist background, and later his critical praxis regarding the Tamil separatist movement that helped him recover his past even though in his mastery of technique he may not be up to par with Crusz (and Ondaatje).

KRISANTA SRI BHAGGIYADATTA must undoubtedly be characterized as a *born* poet. With only two books, four years apart,[32] he may not be a prolific writer, but, full of life and pregnant with meaning, his words come down hurling, "shaft after shaft," as Mukherjee observes,[33] as in a torrential downpour. His, no doubt, is a poetry awaiting full recognition. In the words of Mukherjee, his poetry is "markedly different not only from that of other Sri Lankan poets who continue to use the Western lyrical-meditative mode, but also from the kind of poetry so prolifically being written in Canada: personal, slightly anguished, mournful about the past, laden with memories of childhood." "What City? Ethnicity! or How to Make an Ethnic Newspaper," quoted at length by Mukherjee, is one that shows Bhaggiyadatta at his satiric best. Another taunts a sacred Canadian cow:

Multiculturalism
Multivulturalism

In this zoo
the animals only come together
when the keeper brings them out
in a caravan
to dance for the visiting citizenry
to throw exotic food at each other

Bhaggiyadatta also takes on colonialism:

Mama won't believe
papa's a rapist and
a pirate
no no no
he's a good father
sends all his money home.

and again:

poor hitler
he was an honest man
he was the true face of europe!
he spoke the truth
of the white man!

He sees the universe in one breath, pulling lands and times together, to provide a conceptual collage, as in "columbus's child":

> the cruise is the son of
> the V-2
> the nephew of auswitzch
> child of Hiroshima
> brother of apartheid
> cousin of forced starvation
> peace thru strength . . .

But despite Bhaggiyadatta's wide poetic recourses and his ability to handle them most dextrously, I would have great difficulty considering him any more "Sri Lankan" than any of the other three poets discussed. Not that a poet must wallow in his origins, but what does matter for our argument is that although Bhaggiyadatta closely resembles other Sri Lankan poets belonging to the composite aristocracy, Mukherjee sings praises of him as the epitome of an immigrant "Sri Lankan poet," and perhaps also suggests that he speaks the voice of the Sri Lankan proletariat.

Of course Bhaggiyadatta cannot be taken to task for not using, as poet, traditional motifs, myths and symbols, or not relating to the land, fauna or flora of his origins, because he is not, as Mukherjee points out, writing about his childhood, or mourning about the past. At first glance, such an ahistoricity may seem understandable for one who left the country at 16 (the age when Bhaggiyadatta arrived in Canada). How many young people of a democratic society do we know of who are politicized? Yet, the mid-1960s when Bhaggiyadatta left the country was no ordinary time of Sri Lankan history. The decade of social turmoil beginning in 1956 saw the Buddhist monk, local physician, vernacular teacher, farmer and worker[34] (that is, the 'five pillars,' and the real proletariat) break away not only from 500 years of colonial rule but from eight years of post-Independence Brown Sahib, and upper caste,[35] rule by the upcountry Senanayaka-Bandaranayaka clan, and the 'uncle-nephew party,' as the ruling United National Party had come to be called. The turmoil, which included leftist political parades involving millions, work stoppages at the harbour and in government services, nationalization of the public transportation system, a change of official language, and attempts at transforming the economy, the food distribution system and the educational system, could certainly not have left even teenagers untouched, particularly Sinhalese Buddhist. Unlike the Eurasians, who as a minuscule minority could have lived a class-and-culture-closeted life, no Sinhalese, of whatever age, particularly if urban, could have been blind to the ongoings around them.

But Bhaggiyadatta writes nothing of the society of the country of his birth prior to 1956, neither of the negative side such as the position of the Sinhalese and the Tamil masses (Buddhist and Hindu respectively), nor of the generally egalitarian

nature of society, and the generally amicable living among the Sinhalese and the Tamils.

He makes no reference either, to the post-1956 attempts at socialist change, such as the efforts to unify the bipartite educational system, or to abolish private medical practice, projects intended for the benefit of the masses. When Bhaggiyadatta writes

> A man is slapping your head
> After each strike
> he apologizes
>
> he then speaks
> of how civilized
> this is . . .
>
> the hand is the military
> the mouth is the press,

he certainly does not have the most apt case in Sri Lanka in mind where, the Catholic and the Tamil-controlled newspaper giants, publishing in English, Sinhala and Tamil held a hegemony over the news.[36] Finally, just as in the case of Weerasingha, Crusz or Ondaatje, I have yet to see Bhaggiyadatta (who, unlike the other three, would have had his schooling in Sinhala, following the change of medium of instruction after 1956) sharing his poetic and socialistic insights with the people who need it most, namely the Sinhalese, by writing in Sinhala.

Bhaggiyadatta's ahistorical inclination is not however limited to content. In sensibility, too, he is firmly rooted in the Sri Lankan composite aristocracy. For example, the intellectual source of his idealism is Marxism (visibly active since its introduction to the country), an ideology born in the context of a western and European culture. But Buddhism, which like Marxism, advocates egalitarianism and democracy, but without the violence of rhetoric or the practice of armed revolution, finds no place in his creativity.

In "Big Mac Attack!", in which the papers, neighbours, military and Pentagon said "they had no record" of the Vietnam war veteran who "shot 20 children and others / in a MacDonalds Restaurant," the poet says, "But we do / we know him well . . ." and goes on to place him in the Americas in 1492, in Sri Lanka in 1505, and in the present day, "Training thugs in Colombo." The reference is clearly to the Sinhalese thugs who, in response to the killing of 13 Sinhalese soldiers by Tamil terrorists, went on a rampage and killed innocent Tamils in Colombo. But any reference to the Tamil thugs is missing, thugs also trained by the same "agents of imperialism" if you like — Americans and Israeli,[37] thugs who killed Tamil political leaders such as Duraiappa, the Mayor of the Jaffna and Amirthalingam, as leader of the Tamil United Liberation Front.

The poet divides the world into good guys (leftists or underdogs) and bad guys (the white folk and "capitalists" presumably), thus confirming his class membership in the composite aristocracy governed by western dualistic worldviews, conceptually and esthetically. Despite his identification with the two-thirds world and the virulent criticism of all that is western, we see no internalization of the African consensual or the eastern communitarian or the Buddhist relational models in his poetry.

Bhaggiyadatta, like Ondaatje, Weerasingha, and Crusz, belongs to the Sri Lankan composite aristocracy, a member of the bourgeoisie that fled the revolution. One needs to note how much easier it is to be 'progressive' in an impersonal, overseas and capitalist society than in one's own land, with its more personal demands! The Sri Lankan Canadian poets may be, as Mukherjee observes, a "motley group," but they all were formed within a restricted class.

BUT WHAT IS the Sri Lankan historicity, sensibility and the worldview that our poets have been ashamed to own, or noticed only grudgingly? It is a 2000-year old Buddhist culture, literally, esthetically, culturally, socially, economically, politically and spiritually. If the Psalms of the Women Elders (*Therigatha*), a book of the *Tipitaka*, the Buddhist Scripture, serve as one of the earliest examples of poetry by women, and the Birth Stories (*Jataka*), also of the *Tipitaka*, as perhaps the earliest examples of short fiction,[38] the poetry written on the "Mirror Wall" of the Sigiriya Rock Fortress in the 8th century by average folk shows a high level of esthetic and literary participation across society,[39] a point well reflected in contemporary times in a high level of literacy, a vibrant theatre, literature and film industry.[40] The imposing Buddha figures (a recumbent one 46 feet in length), the seven-storey Brazen Palace, the designer "kuttam pokuna" swimming pool and the reliquary *stupas* up to 400 feet high built in the ancient capitals of Anuradhapura (2nd century B.C. to 10th century A.D.) and Polonnaruwa (10th to 12th century) speak to the cultural and esthetic levels achieved in early and medieval times. If a multi-tiered system of irrigation which collected and appropriately channeled rain water made the country the granary of the east, the several-mile long *yoda ela* "giant canal" with a gradient of one inch per mile shows its engineering skills.

As for the country's tolerance, we have the example of King Dutugemunu (161-131 B.C.) having a mausoleum, Elara Sohona, built in honour of the vanquished Tamil rival, Elara, requiring that travellers pay respect by getting off their vehicles. The minority Tamils, having a social advantage over the Sinhalese, are an example of this same tolerance; the recent turmoil is one of a handful of aber-

rations in a history of 2000 years of amicable living, with the Hindu Kovil finding a place within the premises of many a Buddhist temple even today.

As for other egalitarian values, British sociologist Robinson records two litigants seen in courts one day actually working side by side in the field owned by one of them the next; they are honouring the social obligation, under the traditional *kayya* system, of meeting one's social commitments (in this case, A working in B's field in return for a helping hand given A by B earlier), even if the participants to the social contract happen to fall out after it has been agreed upon.[41] A free weekly ration, free education from kindergarten to university and free health care in post-independent Sri Lanka, a practice abrogated at the behest of the International Monetary Fund, are recent examples of the nurturing and caring values that have governed society. That the women in Sri Lanka got the vote in the 1930s, and that over 50% of the student population at the University since its beginnings in the 1940s have been women serve as examples of gender egalitarianism; that the majority of the university student body belongs to the lower to middle class speaks to class egalitarianism.

While the orderly change of governments since independence in 1948 by ballot may be seen as a tribute to the British system, it can just as well be attributed to the egalitarian and democratic values taught by the Buddha. We have in King Asoka 3rd century B.C.), who after waging wars and uniting India embraced Buddhism, an example of the practice of such values in politics and government.[42] The election of Sir Chittampalam Gardiner, a Tamil, as the Ceylonese member to the pre-Independent Legislature is a more recent example. Further, every Cabinet since Independence has had representation of Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu and Christian.

WHAT MAKES THE LABEL "Sri Lankan" inapplicable to the poets of Sri Lankan origin, then, is not simply that they were a bourgeoisie that fled the revolution but, that uprooted in their own land, they are ignorant of the history, culture and myth of the land and its people, and seem unable to relate to such sensibility. The most justice we can do to the four poets is to see them as being hung at different points along several continuums. As craftsmen, with technical skills, Ondaatje and Bhaggiyadatta are in the same league: excellent, with Crusz and Weerasingha, sometimes catching up, but often falling behind. But as to being "Sri Lankan poets," the order is almost reversed, with Weerasingha running far ahead of all others, and Bhaggiyadatta not even being on course. To continue with the categories used by Mukherjee in her analysis of Ondaatje, Bhaggiyadatta would undoubtedly be the least "silent about his experience of displacement or otherness in Canada" while Ondaatje would be the most. For being led away

"from an exploration of his own realities," Ondaatje would no doubt lead the pack; even his latest and the most serious exploration of the immigrant experience, the novel *In the Skin of a Lion*, treats of some other community's experience, and that, too, European. As for being "trapped by a style and a way of thinking that perforce have to deny life in society," Bhaggiyadatta is no less guilty than Ondaatje if the society implied by Mukherjee is, as I believe it is, Sri Lanka. And as to "a God, cause or country," Bhaggiyadatta is again close to Ondaatje, if the benchmark is Sri Lanka, with Weerasingha running away with the trophy. But if international socialism is the cause, Bhaggiyadatta is no doubt the hands on winner with Sri Lankan socialism, however, not being within his ken at all.

But this is not the balanced way Mukherjee sees them. What is the "history, legend, culture, [and] ideology" she herself brings? Her ideological stance becomes amply clear in her chastizing Ondaatje and showering praises on Bhaggiyadatta and other poets of Sri Lankan origins. In this is she not guilty of a crime that she accuses Ondaatje of — being ahistorical? She fails to place them in the historical context of the country. But she is also siding with the colonizer in that the dualistic, Cartesian worldview she adopts is western in origin. She fails to show, or convince us, that this perspective is better, more helpful in understanding reality, than the one she inherits (Hindu, Buddhist or generally eastern).

Mukherjee is siding with the colonizer in another sense as well. There is not anything in her critique[43] that reflects her own Indian literary critical tradition, Hindu/Buddhist or Sanskrit/Pali,[44] nor other non-western traditions such as Chinese[45] or Japanese. It appears that she has been "trapped by a way of thinking that perforce denies" the validity or credibility of such non-western traditions. Not that a critic has to adopt her own critical tradition for the mere sake of it, but the least one could expect is for some evidence that in rejecting her own in preference for the oppressor's, she has at least explored its dimensions. Why is the *rasa* theory of Indian esthetics, for example, not valid in evaluating poetry,[46] and if valid, why hasn't she resorted to it? Why is Yeats her authority, and not Anandawardhana or any of the other literary critics from the 4th century B.C. (Bharata Muni) to the 12th century A.D. (Sangharaksita)? Given, then, that Mukherjee's gods are western, her worldview dualistic, and her critique out of balance, it is not without reservation that I could grant her an 'esthetic of opposition.'

NOTES

[1] Whitney Balliett, *The New Yorker*, 27 December 1982, 76.

[2] Qadri Ismail, *Kaduwa* (Univ. of Ceylon), 1 (1983), 44-5.

[3] See Arun Mukherjee, *Towards an Esthetic of Opposition* (Stratford, Ont.: Williams-Wallace, 1988), 32-51, 69-83. Originally in Suwanda H. J. Sugunasiri ed., *Search for Meaning* (Ottawa: Secretary of State, 1983).

[4] Three other poets, Tyrell Mendis, Siri Gunasingha and Suwanda Sugunasiri, also

receive mention in the paper, but are not dealt with here. Gunasingha, though a renowned writer in Sri Lanka and now Professor at the University of Victoria, has not written anything in Canada, or in English, and Mendis has not continued to write. Sugunasiri is yet to publish a collection.

[5] See Suwanda H. J. Sugunasiri, *Humanistic Nationalism: A language- and Ideology-based Model of Development for Post-Colonial Nations* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Ph.D. Thesis, 1978).

[6] Though the majority of the 13% Tamils (excluding here the non-citizen tea estate labour) were Hindus, 'Christian' is listed here first to indicate that there was a higher percentage, in relation to the population, of Tamils among the Christian *hierarchy* than Sinhalese.

[7] This can be shown with a personal example. All the services — courts, police, hospital, post-office, English-medium Catholic school — of my town were located in the 'western quarter' where also lived the local elites. The Eurasians, as a community, can be said to have had the least contact with the rest of the population. At the only club in town, not even the young Eurasians would relate to us, Sinhalese Buddhists of middle class background, even though we spoke English, attended the Catholic school and played tennis at the same club.

[8] Michael Ondaatje, *Rat Jelly* (Rat Jelly, 1973), 13.

[9] It is only fair, however, to recognize that other English-speaking Sri Lankans of my generation, Sinhalese, Tamil or Muslim, both in-country and overseas, continue to speak of 'Ceylon' even today, despite the name change to Sri Lanka in 1971, suggesting a general class attitude. For the average Sinhalese, the country was always 'Lanka," and to the Tamils 'Ilankai.'

[10] Given that two-thirds of the world's population lives in the poorer countries, this nomenclature, currently in vogue in private circles, is more objective, than the "Post-Colonial Nations" I have used (Sugunasiri, 1978), and indeed less value-laden than "Third World."

[11] I must perhaps take part of the responsibility for not drawing Mukherjee's attention to these points when she wrote her very first article on Sri Lankan poets for me as part of my study (Sugunasiri 1983, op. cit.).

[12] This is a common error made by many a scholar from or on India. A typical example: a Canadian professor at a conference, reading out the Indian statistics of rates of illiteracy, infant mortality and G.N.P., saying that it is generalizable to the area, not noting the very different figures for Sri Lanka in his very own handout, and the impact Buddhism has had over 2000 years.

[13] Crusz, *Flesh & Thorn*, 1974; *Elephant & Ice*, 1980; *Singing Against the Wind*, 1985; *A Time for Loving*, 1986.

[14] "Introduction," in Crusz, *A Time for Loving* vii. The other quotations are from the jacket of *A Time for Loving*.

[15] Originally in Suwanda Sugunasiri & A. V. Suraweera eds., special issue of *Toronto South Asian Review*, 3:2 (Fall 1984), on Sri Lankan Literature.

[16] *Elephant & Ice*, 90.

[17] *Elephant & Ice*, 38.

[18] *Elephant & Ice*, 68.

[19] *A Time for Loving*. The rest of the quotations are all from this latest work, being a collection of his best works.

[20] Crusz, "Talking for myself," *Toronto South Asian Review*, 6.1, (1987).

[21] See Sugunassiri & Suraweera eds. for the full play in English translation.

[22] See Ediriweera Saracchandra, *The Folk Drama of Ceylon* (Colombo: Ceylon, 1966).

[23] See Sugunasiri, "Introduction: Forces that Shaped Sri Lankan Literature" in Sugunasiri & Suraweera eds.

[24] Sugunasiri, "A Conversation" with Siri Gunasigha, in *Toronto South Asian Review*, 1989. 7:2 (1989).

[25] D. C. R. A. Gonetilleka, "Beyond Alienation: The Efflorescence of Sri Lankan Literature in English," in Sugunasiri & Suraweera.

[26] Sugunasiri, "Interview with Mr. Orchard," Oral History Collection, Multicultural History Society of Ontario, Toronto.

[27] See Sugunasiri, *The Literature of Canadians of South Asian Origins: an Overview and Preliminary Bibliography* (U of Toronto, The Centre for South Asian Studies & the Multicultural History Society of Ontario, 1987) for a complete list.

[28] Mukherjee. For others, see jacket of Weerasingha, *Kitsilano Beach Songs* (Ottawa: Commoners' Publishing, 1990).

[29] *Sinha* means 'lion,' with Sinha*la* meaning '(descendants) of lion's 'blood' (if written with dental /l/) or 'heart' (if written with a retroflex /l/).

[30] 'The Critics.' The reference here appears to be to his involvement with 'Project Peace,' the watchdog outfit he founded in response to the crisis, and through which he put out several research papers.

[31] The title and the author name in this work are written as if in typical Dewanagari (Sanskrit) characters and style, with a line connecting the letters at the top.

[32] *Domestic Bliss* (Toronto: Domestic Bliss, 1981) and *The Only Minority is the Bourgeosie* (Toronto: Black Moon, 1985).

[33] *Toronto South Asian Review* 3.2 (Fall 1984), 43.

[34] In Sinhala, 'sanga weda guru govi kamkaru. This was the slogan under which the father of socialism, Philip Gunawardhana in particular ran the campaign, Gunawardhena's Peoples's United Front (Mahajana Eksath Peramuna) being one of three Marxist groups of the political coalition led by Bandaranayaka, under a commonly agreed upon election manifesto. The significance of the pillars was that they individually and collectively symbolized the disenfranchised under European rule.

[35] Challenging the Vedic teaching that birth alone confers nobility status of a Brahmin, the Buddha taught that "By action alone, and not birth, does one become a Brahmin or a wasala) (of lowly caste)" (Dhammapada). Reflecting this teaching, Sinhalese society has no rigid caste system, but there does exist a thinly veiled one, somewhat based on the traditional form of livelihood: *goigama* based on farming, *karawa* on fishing, *navandanna* on jewellery making and *berawa* on drumming, etc. Of sociological interest here is the Buddhist twist: the caste that claims the topmost rank, farming, is by definition not the religious one as in Vedism, but the producer of food. Another aspect of the system is that the claim of superiority is granted, if at all, only grudgingly by the rest, particularly the fisher caste of the coastland who has a higher membership in the administrative services, universities and industry. In fact, some of the opposition to the election of the present president, Ranasingha Premadasa came from the fact that he does not come from the upcountry or the farming caste from which had come all the Prime Ministers and the first President under the new constitution, Jayawardhena.

[36] When all signs led to the possible victory of Philip Gunawardena's Mahajana Eksath Peramuna at one of the elections, the Sinhalese daily *Lankadeepa*, began front-paging, over the opposition of the editors, material damaging to him from his past political statements. It was also well known how the dailies in English, Sinhala and Tamil carried different stories and gave different twists (personal knowledge). As for the Buddhist Sinhalese *Dawasa* Group, its class interests became apparent when it opposed the abolition of private practice, the son-in-law of the main shareholder (publisher Gunasena) being a physician.

[37] "... the Sri Lankan government has accused Indian officials of arming and training the Tamils. They should be accusing the ?????," Clair Hoy & Victor Ostrovsky, *By Way of Deception* (Toronto: General, 1990), 130.

[38] See A. K. Warder, *Indian Kavya Literature* (India: Motilal Banarsidass), vol. 1-5, for a detailed analysis.

[39] Senarat Paranavitana, *Sigiri Graffiti* (Paris, Unesco), vol. 1 & 2.

[40] See Sugunasiri, "Introduction" in Sugunasiri & Suraweera eds.

[41] See Marguerite S. Robinson, *Political Structure in a Changing Sinhalese Village* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1975).

[42] See Trevor Ling, *The Buddha* (NY: Scribners, 1973) for a discussion.

[43] Mukherjee, *Towards an Esthetic of Opposition.*

[44] See Warder.

[45] James J. Y. Liu, *Chinese Theories of Literature* (U of Chicago Press, 1975).

[46] See Warder.

∀PCHRLNEEEIO

Jam Ismail

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HERLOINED LETTER

Jam Ismail

international feminist bookfair (montreal 1989). a woman from india asks, what does 'lesbian' mean? a woman from pakistan replies.

midnight blue in cafeteria, with gold border. terra
cotta & ecru, saris

'at first,' she mused, stroking her own face, 'it
meant you made love with women.'

steam billowed over our white styrofoam waddles.

'then,' she frowned, 'it meant you could make love
with men too.'

eyes narrowed, and widened, around table.

'then,' she didn't quite shake her head, 'you
didn't have to do either!'

we all laughed, as at magic.

'but now,' she reached for her cup, 'they seem to
be using it to mean *commitment*.'

we sipped our tea. sigh. back to normal

CHEERIO PLANE

Jam Ismail

ziggurat steps up beside stucco
leaves-still-on-tree did smart the eyes
dry flowrets & sashlock suggest window flute
sill mushrooms & rose acanthus surprise
respect the floors remember
a dew blues strummer of nyegatives
ya irate doorknobs i be back.
now lasso leaving home . . . love,
lover, lovest thy erasable bonds

LYRICS

Jam Ismail

to n. rimsky-korsakov, 'song of india,' op. 5, 'sadko'

sleep see two men inside this my new yard | i'm coming home
a sidewalk passerby | what speaks across the fence is dark, |
tall, twelve-footer, sleek, white-sheeted black doghead* |
woof, i look away, leave my voice courteous | to be spoken
to by such phenomenon might well be deemed by some flattering text |
east horizon big maple, creamy horsechestnut, roofs of red &
grey shingle | clouds billow & smoke up heavy grey air |
flaming fringe is seen above the schools south | Is it the
house where i used to call home | take me with you he is
beseeching | meaning by walky-talky hand. | & i nod or like
that in a hurry | & it's not my home that's oh fire (fly |
now crackle's corpsing up my eye |

*anubis

THE PAINTBRUSH AND THE SCALPEL

Sara Jeannette Duncan Representing India

Misao Dean

> To be a European in the Orient *always* involves being a consciousness set apart from, and unequal with, its surroundings. But the main thing to note is the intention of this consciousness: What is it in the Orient for? Said, *Orientalism* (157)

THE SERIOUSNESS WITH WHICH Sara Jeannette Duncan discusses the problems of the administration of India in her later novels (and the seriousness with which critics of her novels, myself included, have discussed them) often overshadows the fact that India and the Orient were fashionable in the late nineteenth century. "There was the virtual epidemic of Orientalia affecting every major poet, essayist, and philosopher of the period" (Said 51); one has only to think of Liberty's peacock print fabric, willow pattern china, Victorian wicker furniture and indoor ferns, botanical gardens, Kipling, the vague and titillating threat of opium dens and red silk, to realise that when Elfrida Bell (of Duncan's *Daughter of Today*) arranges her Buddha and her Syrian dagger in her London apartment, she expresses the height of rebellious chic. Oscar Wilde's *Salome* (and Beardsley's accompanying drawings) were the dangerous outer limits of the frightening sexual and gender liberty that the Orient suggested to the sophisticated reader of the 1890s; yet the tamer, unabashedly imperialist stories of Kipling also suggested "the exotic, the mysterious, the profound, the seminal" (Said 51) in the cultures of the Arab world, India and Asia, indiscriminately known as "the East." This fad for the Orient was an integral part of the discourse of British decadence as it surfaces in Duncan's early novels; decadence, emphasizing the aesthetic as opposed to the moral, the advances of science and the breakdown of traditional ideas of definition and order, provides an important intertextual referent for understanding Duncan's representations of India.

For Duncan's generation, even to be in India was to accept the imperialist assumption that India exists to do something for Europe, to be of benefit to Europe. Thus, when Said interrogates the texts about "the Orient" produced by that generation, the way he constructs the question is important — not, *why* is the narrator in India, but, what is she there *for*? The answer, in Duncan's case, is shaped by the discourse of English decadence. Duncan spent much of her adult life in India; on a personal level, presumably, she was in India to live with her husband.[1] But she also set nine of her books in India[2] and two more had significant Indian content; the narrators of most of these books are self-consciously writing about India, describing India, experiencing India, and later explaining India. To explain what they are in India *for*, they adopt two metaphors for fiction writing which were common to the decadents: to gain artistic "impressions," as defined by the aesthetic movement, and to analyse "material," using the techniques of scientific realism. These two metaphors, of the paintbrush and the scalpel, structure the representations of India and of Indians in the novels.

ARTISTIC "IMPRESSIONS" are the object of *A Social Departure*, a fictionalized book of travels relating the adventures of the narrator and her English companion Orthodocia. The novel was published in 1890, at the beginning of the decade in which the role of "impressions" in the ideology of cultural decadence would be elaborated. The leaders of the movement argued that since science seemed to prove "that nature was 'an unfeeling and pitiless mechanism'; religion, a 'nostalgic memory'; and love, a biological instinct for perpetuating the species" (Showalter, 169), the only real moral obligation was the refinement of the intellectual self and the appreciation of beauty. "Walter Pater became the father of this philosophy, writing in *The Renaissance* (1873) that 'our one chance lies in ... getting as many pulsations as possible into the given time'" (Showalter 170). Duncan's narrator in *A Social Departure* (identified with her own initials, S.J.D.) echoes this philosophy when she and Orthodocia explain the principle that guides them in their trip round the world: "being our first and probably our last trip around the world, we naturally wanted as many novel and original experiences and sensations as possible, the planet having become very commonplace ..." (SOC 281). Following the lead of the decadents, for whom European culture had become "commonplace" ("and we were opposed on general principles to the ordinary and the commonplace" SOC 203), the pair choose to try anything that seems novel in each "Oriental" locale they visit, from mangoes and custard apples to a rather wet trip in a Cingalese catamaran which has only the merit of being "an innovation" (SOC 203).

For these two characters, the Orient is predetermined as the location of the exotic, and the impressions it creates therefore have more force than those created by the exhausted cultures of Europe. Although the journey originates in Eastern Canada and ends in England, the descriptions of these locations comprise less than a chapter each. The reason for the lop-sided narrative lies partly in the argument that England, like the earlier empires of Greece and Rome, had reached the point of material excess and intellectual stagnation; only the barbaric places of the world could offer vibrant physical and emotional sensations. More immediately, however, Duncan recognised that in the present state of intellectual surfeit she had little hope of making her mark by commenting on the well trodden ground of European culture — "it was not in her to give an old thought a new soul" — what she needed was "some unworn incident, some fiber of novelty or current interest to give value to her work" (*Journalism* 9). She depicts the dilemma of the journalistic novelist in Elfrida Bell, the heroine of *A Daughter of Today*, whose deep philosophical articles are always refused by the major magazines because they lack both originality and logic; Elfrida must find, instead, something exotic to write about, as her editor Arthur Rattray advises: "you only want material. Nobody can make bricks without straw — to sell, — and very few people can evolve books out of the air, that any publisher will look at. You get material . . . and you treat it unconventionally . . . It's a demand that's increasing every day — for fresh unconventional matter." (DAU 184-85) "Fresh impressions," (*Journalism* 9) are required to make a book, and the narrator of *A Social Departure* finds them in a locale which is the definition of the exotic.

Such "impressions," as the choice of words makes clear, are structured by the preconceptions of impressionist art. Duncan had commented upon the Impressionist painters in her art reviews in *The Montreal Star* and her columns in *The Week*; the protagonists of *A Daughter of Today* and "The Pool in the Desert" are both impressionist artists, and she often uses terms from art criticism in her descriptions. "Impressionists" were reacting against the accumulation of photographic detail in all art in order to create "sensation by the shortest nerve route" ("Outworn Literary Methods" 450); they argued that while "a cabbage is a very essential vegetable . . . we do not prostrate ourselves adoringly" before it, but only before its representation as art, "where it is certainly the art we admire, not the nature" ("Bric-a-Brac" 2). "Impressions" emphasize the importance of the artist's vision, of the perceptions of the individual human as an apprehending subject, rather than the objective characteristics of the scene; as Duncan had written in *The Week*, the age itself had "a subjective cast in its eye" (3 March, 1887). The revaluation of the individual perspective in art appealed to Duncan as a liberal and a feminist, and had also been theorised as an effect of the gradual loss of purpose evident in the decadence of the Empire.[3]

Shortly before she left on the trip which would result in *A Social Departure* Duncan commented on the effects of these new ideas on travel literature: "Vastly changed . . . is the literature of travel. The spirit of modern art has entered into it, and we get broad effects, strong lights, massed shadows in our foreign picture, and ready impressions from it. The process of eternal word-stippling has gone out of favour . . . [The travel writer of to-day] writes graphically instead of the humanity about him, its tricks of speech, its manner of breaking bread, its ideals, aims, superstitions" ("Outworn Literary Methods" 450). Thus the narrator of *A Social Departure* avoids the sort of facts "Baedecker or Murray will tell you"; her description of Calcutta is an "impression," a broad and generalized description of the city, emphasizing effects of light and shade on the apprehending subject, and saving the exact detail for its inhabitants:

> there remains with me the picture of a great, fair city lying under a dusky yellow glory where the sun sloped to the west—lying low and level under it, piercing it with masts that seemed to rise round half her boundary, cleaving it with a shaft in the midst of a green *maidan*, reflecting it in a wide water-space darkling in her heart, breaking it softly with the broad, heavy clusters of the gold-mohur tree. . . . the throngs in the street were nearly all Mahommedans, bearded and wearing little white embroidered caps on the sides of their heads, or smooth-faced hindoos in turbans; all flapping nether draperies, all sleek of countenance and soft of eye. *Chuprassis* in long red coats that reach to the knee, and from that to their toes in their own brown skins, hurried hither and thither solemnly . . . *Baboos* in flowing white were ceaselessly in and out of the swinging doors of the great shipping and merchants' offices; and the streets swarmed with lower creatures. *Beestis* who watered them from black distended dripping goatskins, sellers of fruit, women hod-bearers, little naked children . . . (SOC 246-47)

CUSTOM MAY HAVE STALED this infinite variety, however. Ironic deprecation of the "impressions" of those new to India is the prevailing tone of Duncan's next novel set in India. *The Simple Adventures of a Memsahib* (1893) is narrated by Mrs. Perth McIntyre, the wife of the senior partner of the firm of McIntyre and McIntyre of Calcutta; her experienced eye both ridicules and regrets the young Helen Browne's "impressions" of Calcutta: "I have no doubt that the present Mrs. Browne would like me to linger over her first impressions of Calcutta. She has a habit now of stating that they were keen. That the pillared houses and the palm shaded gardens, and the multiplicity of turbaned domestics gave her special raptures, which she has since outgrown, but still likes to claim (MEM 36)." After a few years as the wife of "young Browne," Helen becomes jaded, and well enough aware of the disadvantages inherent in a life in the Orient: "She is growing dull to India, too, which is about as sad a thing as any. She sees no more the supple savagery of the Pathan in the market-place, the

bowed reverence of the Musselman praying in the sunset, the early morning mists lifting among the domes and palms of the city. She has acquired for the Aryan inhabitant a certain strong irritation, and she believes him to be nasty in all his ways. This will sum up her impressions of India as completely years hence as it does today" (MEM 310). Once a bright, observant soul, she has become "a memsahib like another" (MEM 310).

Despite the emphasis the idea of the "impression" throws on the perceiving subject, impressions in Duncan's work are nonetheless determined by the literary discourse of the Orient, and generated by the images of the Orient represented to English speaking readers and consumers of art by the conventions of Orientalism. By the 1890s India had been described and redescribed for English readers until it was "less a place than a *topos*, a set of references, a congeries of characteristics, that seems to have its origin in a quotation . . . (Said, 177). For Duncan's characters, a "choke" selling jewelry in Calcutta is a place "where, like Sinbad, one might drop a leg of mutton and pick it up again sticking with precious stones" (SOC 250). All the passengers on the P. and O. ship begin to recite the same missionary hymn, "From many an ancient river, / From many a Palmy Plain," (SOC 198) when the boat nears Ceylon; a Cingalese guide understands a line of the hymn, "spicy breezes / blow soft o'er Ceylon's isle" (SOC 216) as a request to be taken to the famous Cinnamon Garden. The Taj Mahal, seen first shining indistinctly in the moonlight, gains its meaning from the story of its genesis rather than its beauty (SOC 338-342). The legendary smells of the Orient are prominent, from the incense "weighing upon one's spirit like a strange Eastern spell" (SOC 237) to the olfactory offences created by the open "drains" of the "native quarter."

But there is also a significant dialogue between the textually produced images of "Eastern" mystery and squalor, and the discourse of realism, a self-conscious corrective to the romantic Oriental story. The mysterious splendour of the Taj Majal in the moonlight is destroyed by day, when, S.J.D. exclaims in disbelief, "the band plays there!" (SOC 348). One of the main techniques of early realism was the evocation of romance stereotypes and the subsequent assertion of their inadequacy as a description of reality; Duncan employs such techniques with skill in her "international" and Canadian novels.[4] Deflation of reader expectations is even more obviously appropriate in the Indian novels because the imaginative space is so overdetermined by a legacy of Orientalist texts. "To write about the modern Orient is either to reveal an upsetting demystification of images culled from texts, or to confine oneself to the Orient of which Hugo spoke . . . the Orient as "image" or "pensee," symbols of "une sorte de preoccupation generale" (Said 101). As a narrative realist rejecting the mere "pensee," Duncan propells her fictions by the technique of evocation and deflation of cultural stereotypes about the Orient.

"S.J.D."'s description of Orthodocia's encounter with a mango shows the inadequacy of the stereotype of the Orient as a land of natural, sensual abundance. She evokes Eden when she calls the mango "the ineradicable legacy of Paradise," and "the first interest and soul's solace" (SOC 205) of the Orient. She goes on to describe its flavour and the techniques for eating one in terms which suggest comic disappointment.

> The mango looks like a large corpulent green pocketbook, about eight inches long and four wide, and tastes like nothing else in the world, with a dash of turpentine. . . . I shall always remember Orthodocia and her first mango with emotions that time cannot mitigate. It was a very ripe fat mango, and looked as if it ought to be peeled. Orthodocia thought to peel it round and round with precision as if it were an apple. At the second round she began to hold it carefully over the plate; at the third she tucked her sleeve well up from the wrist; at the fourth she laid it down blushingly, looked round carefully to see if anyone observed her, made several brilliant maps upon her napkin, and tackled it again. This was too much for the mango, and it bounded with precipitancy into the lap of an elderly person across the table, who restored it with frigid indignation in a table-spoon. (SOC 206)

"Indian" fiction inevitably calls up other stereotypes, many created by Rudyard Kipling's Indian stories, as well as numerous works by Meadows Taylor, Flora Annie Steel and Duncan herself; the figure of the memsahib, who flirts with young men and "perform[s] miracles of self-sacrifice" (*Set In Authority* 9); the globe-trotting, interfering M.P.; the heroic sahib, who is "father and mother" to an adoring native population. Each of these stereotypes is shown to be inadequate as a representation of reality in Duncan's later Indian novels: Mrs. Biscuit of *Set In Authority* concludes that "the novelists simply were not to be trusted" (SET 36).

DEFLATION OF SUCH stereotypes leads to the creation of an alternative reality, full of colourful details and specifics in opposition to stereotypes and myths created by previous writers. Duncan's novels often comprise an analysis of the "world" of a little-known social or cultural group — Anglo-Indians, Indians — or indeed Canadians in *The Imperialist* (1904) or Americans in *An American Girl in London* (1891). Henry James and Joseph Conrad were two contemporary writers who were thought (by Duncan, among others) to take the same approach, defining and classifying social groups through an exploration of their similarities to and differences from an implied English reader. The "cultural insecurity" of the *fin de siècle*, "when there are fears of regression and degeneration," encouraged "the longing for strict border controls around the definition of gender, as well as race, class, and nationality" (Showalter 4), and fiction became part of that defining process. Thus a second common metaphor for popular fiction

written in the late nineteenth century was that of dissection,[5] of using the scalpel of the human sciences, (especially of sociology and psychology, both nascent and ill-defined as disciplines) to explain and catalogue human behaviour and social customs. The "novel of manners" and the "psychological novel" typical of Henry James, W. D. Howells and Joseph Conrad were often cited as typical of the movement, and Duncan makes the connection between these forms and scientific inquiry when she remarks in her review of Henry James' *The Bostonians*: "This novelist has a habit . . . of regarding humanity from a strictly anthropological standpoint and of tabulating the peculiarities of the individual specimens with rather less sympathy than is displayed by the average collector of beetles" (*Journalism* 105).

Mrs. Perth McIntyre, the narrator of *The Simple Adventures of a Memsahib* performs an anatomy of Anglo-Indian society in her account of Helen Browne's acclimatisation to her new home in Calcutta. Successive chapters are devoted to Calcutta's ideas of social precedence, to shopping in the bazaar, to domestic servants, to presentation to the Viceroy, and other representative aspects of middle class European life in the Indian capital. The "laws" that "mould" Englishmen into Anglo-Indians are analysed in the *India Daily News* article "The Flippancy of Anglo-India" and the issue of social precedence anatomised in "Social Feeling in Calcutta." In *Set in Authority* (1906) the narrator gives a similar anatomy of Pilagur, capital of the isolated province of Ghoom, describing the typical military wife in Mrs. Lemon, the "*chota-mem*" in the wife of an army subaltern, and the typical attitudes of a recently arrived junior civilian in "little [Mr.] Biscuit." The "club," the regiment, the subversive *munshi* (teacher) and the representative "educated native" are described as individuals and as representatives of types, and each given their level of precedence in the social whole. The narrator proclaims "this is not a study of an Anglo-Saxon group, isolated in a far country under tropical skies and special conditions, but only a story" (SET 205), yet the novel is, in a sense, such a study, for while "the individual human lot . . . disengages itself from the mass" (SET 197) in her descriptions of single characters, each is nevertheless representative of "the fate of anonymous thousands . . ." (SET 197).

The narrators dissect Anglo-Indian society from a complex position; they are in it and of it, yet they address an audience of outsiders. Mrs. Perth McIntyre tells the story of Helen Browne in *Simple Adventures* in order to show British preconceptions in collision with Indian realities, but she is herself wholly identified with Anglo-India; the twists of the plot in *Set in Authority* and *The Burnt Offering* prove their narrators right in deeming the "home view" in Indian matters to be "a matter of great indifference" (SET 205). Duncan takes the "colonial" position of explaining and justifying Anglo-Indian society from the point of view of one who is conversant with the values of the centre and of the margin. Yet this position is complicated, and finally inadequate, when she undertakes to dissect "native" society in India.

In anatomising Canadian, American, and Anglo-Indian culture, the narrators of Duncan's novels define themselves consciously in opposition to the definitions imposed by imperialist culture.[6] But as the narrators of Duncan's novels name to name those supposed to be incapable of naming themselves. To create an anatomy of a culture of which one is not a member "is to dominate it, to have authority over it." (Said 32). To define "the natives" is to bring them into existence for the English reader, who has no knowledge of them outside the text, and so to deny them existence in themselves, to deny them the power to name themselves. This is the essence of Orientalism, as Said defines it: "to divide, deploy, schematize, tabulate, index, and record everything in sight (and out of sight); to make out of every detail a generalization and out of every generalization an immutable law about the Oriental nature, temperament, mentality, custom, or type; and above all, to transmute living reality into the stuff of texts, to possess (or think one possesses) actuality because nothing in the Orient seems to resist one's powers. . . ." (Said 86). Duncan creates "laws" and typical examples for all the cultures she "anatomises," whether English, American, Canadian, British or Anglo-Indian and while as a technique, the "scalpel" of a cultural anatomy is in essence no different when Duncan uses it on Indian culture, the meaning is different because the power relationship is different. The "laws" of "American" life as revealed in literary texts are less likely to eventuate in serious public policy decisions than are the "laws" of "native" life.

Duncan's narrators self-consciously resist the power to definitively catalogue, and by cataloguing define. Lucy Foley uses the language of racist science when she refers to Bepin Behari Dey (in *The Burnt Offering*) as a type and defends measuring the skulls of the people of Bengal ("Why shouldn't we measure their heads? It doesn't hurt them" (BO 121)) but the novel also includes the dissenting voice of Joan Mills: "Why place him in a type?" she comments, and in response to the head-measuring project, "It only lacked that" (BO 121). Duncan undertook one social anatomy which was avowedly scientific — her article "Eurasia," on the mixed race European and native community, was published in *Appleton's Popular Science Monthly* in 1892. The Eurasians are defined not as individuals but as a "problem" (Said 207) for they refuse menial employment, are not preferred objects of charity and do not qualify for educational subsidies available to "pure natives," and yet are clearly a European responsibility. But the article also undercuts the stereotypes even as it reproduces them. It ridicules the Eurasian reluctance to lower their social status by marrying into the "pure native" community, implying that Eurasians refuse to accept the facts of their heritage — "The claims of that cousinship must be more than ignored, they must be trampled upon" (EURASIA 3) — but uses the exact same terms to describe the "white" reluctance to marry Eurasians — "The claims of that cousinship must also be more than ignored" (EURASIA 4). From a descriptive sketch of the narrator's Eurasian neighbour, whom it cites as a "racial type," it accounts for general characteristics of the

Eurasian community (many of which fit the general stereotype of the "half-breed" as less moral and less physically perfect than the "pure-bred" representative of either "race"). The article ends, however, by suggesting that the stereotype is inadequate: "In the heart of Eurasia — a heart which has yet to be bared to us by the scalpel of modern fiction — surely may be found much that is worth adding to the grand total that make humanity interesting" (EURASIA). More surprisingly, the article suggests that the stereotype is not founded upon fact and observation: despite the veneer of science, "we can not see" into that community, it states.

The novels avoid the problem of describing a society to which the narrators have no first hand access by describing only that part of Indian society they can literally claim to know well — servants, shopkeepers, and those "westernized Indians" who have a place in Anglo-Indian society, whether by virtue of their official position, wealth, or social connections. In *A Social Departure*, the narrator is a visitor to Calcutta society, and to her such people are still 'favourable specimens of pure natives on the very crest of the wave of progress that is lifting their race to the plane where men struggle and hope and pray as we do — specimens of the class that appreciates and lives up to the advantages of British rule, and is received and liked by the sahib and the memsahib accordingly" (SOC 292). Yet the later novels refuse to create "the typical native" as simply "either a figure of fun, or an atom in a vast collectivity designated in ordinary or cultivated discourse as an undifferentiated type called Oriental, African, yellow, brown, or Muslim" (Said 252). In *The Burnt Offering* (1910) when Lucy Foley is at pains to make up a dinner party of "just people" — friends who are not primarily official — she includes Sir Kristodas Mukerji and his daughter, Janaki, who are "less alien to the occasion" than the visiting British guests. Like many of the other "native" characters in Duncan's books, Sir Kristodas and his daughter have almost wholly forsaken "native" society — or been forsaken by it, because their decision to dine with Anglo-Indians and adopt English ways has led to the breaking of many complicated rules of religious caste. Their social life is almost wholly among Anglo-Indians, and so the narrator can claim to know its limits. Similarly in *Set In Authority* Sir Ahmet Hossien's choice of preferment in the English administrative system has meant a physical, emotional and intellectual separation from his family and his wife, who is popularly known to lack the "courage to take with her husband his alarming strides of progress" (SET 73).

ALL OF THESE CHARACTERS are within the purview of a fairly liberal Anglo-Indian, and while they sometimes partake of the stereotypes of Orientalist representation, they also depart from them in significant ways. Hiria, Helen Browne's ayah in *Simple Adventures* is sly, dishonest, insubordinate, yet

she is not defined solely as the "clever servant"; Mrs. Perth McIntyre describes her significant relations with her peers, mentioning her husband and a small business she has purchased through efficient management. Sir Ahmet Hossien, the "westernized Indian" is made individual by his religious beliefs, a personalised synthesis of different Hindu and Christian ideas; the two main characters in the novel, Eliot Arden and Ruth Pearce, find his friendship and his conversation more congenial than that of many of their own "race." Yet he is also a stereotypical "native" in his misunderstanding of the principles of British law, and his fear of displeasing the Viceroy. Sir Kristodas Mukerji eventually returns to the ways of his fathers, illustrating the Orientalist dictum that India and Indians are fundamentally unchanging. But his daughter is far from the "male power-fantasy" which characterises the representation of women in English texts about the Orient. If most "native women" in fiction "express unlimited sensuality . . . are more or less stupid, and above all . . . willing" (Said 207) Rani Janaki emerges as distinctly in opposition to such stereotypes, as an intellectual interested in Indian politics, women's rights and suffrage, and clearly a more suitable love-interest for the heroic white administrator, John Game, than the English woman he chooses. Lucy Foley makes no distinction of race among those who have a commitment to good government in Calcutta — those "who have made the place, and keep it" (BO 118) — the middle and upper classes of both "native" and English communities.

The "meaning" of "native" characters in Duncan's often allegorical narratives is much more difficult to construct when the novels depict them interacting only with each other, as the diversity of critical comment on the character of Swami Yadava in *The Burnt Offering* illustrates. Thomas Tausky finds he is "forced to serve two totally incompatible functions in the novel" as both a religious authority and a spy — "The absurdity of this role needs no further explanation" (*Novelist* 256). *But* (in answer to Tausky) Yadava only informs in order to pursue a goal which is perfectly consistent with his religious function — to maintain public safety and public order, for violence is sure to rebound upon the Indian people (as in fact it does, later in the novel, when Dey attempts to kill the Viceroy). S. Nagarajan finds Yadava sinister because he is activated by self-interest: "Yadava . . . wants the British to stay on though he knows that . . . as champions of the *status quo*, they will help to keep the old order intact with the Brahmin at the top" (80). But Yadava does see a place for the English in governing India — which Duncan also sees — and his belief in maintaining the traditional class system is consistent with Duncan's own views as expressed in many of her novels.[7] Yadava also represents the traditional belief that the imperial relationship is a mutually beneficial exchange between India and Europe, with "Indian culture and religion . . . defeat-[ing] the materialism and mechanism (and republicanism) of Occidental culture" (Said 115) and "Europe teaching the Orient the meaning of liberty" (Said 172); to that extent, he is a "good native," parroting what his imperial masters have

taught. However, his relegating the English to the second place in the hierarchy of caste may signal the conservative reader to perceive him as threatening. The mere fact of his talking to Kristodas and Janaki without a white person being there makes the scene threatening and difficult of interpretation for the target audience. It can be read all three ways, with Yadava representing a mistake in narrative technique, an enemy of Empire and progress, or a mouthpiece for the author, and this is significant, given that Duncan's narrators usually give such obvious directions to the reader that her work has been faulted for this very characteristic.

The narrators of Sara Jeannette Duncan's Indian novels, like the nineteenth century historical and creative writers Edward Said analyses in *Orientalism*, are not neutral observers of Indian life. By 1890, the year Duncan moved to India to join her English fiancee Everard Cotes, neutral observation of India had become impossible for a British subject — all the "facts" were framed by the layers of surmise, projection, history, sympathetic identification, racism, and foreign policy that comprise "latent Orientalism" (Said 206). Similarly, the metaphors of English intellectual life of the time, those of the impressionist paintbrush and the scientific scalpel, shape Duncan's representations of India. The paintbrush suggests the broad, personalized descriptions which characterise *A Social Departure* and other of Duncan's early Indian novels, heavily mediated by Orientalist texts and emphasizing the narrator's emotional responses. Subsequent representations of India use the scalpel of anatomy to provide the necessary "realist" undercutting of the romanticised Orient; however, the discourse of realism, itself created in response to the stereotypes, does not wholly escape them.

NOTES

[1] Despite Marian Fowler's interesting speculations based on the marriages depicted in Duncan's novels, there is no evidence that Duncan did not get along with her husband.

[2] *The Simple Adventures of a Memsahib* (1893), *Vernon's Aunt* (1894), *The Story of Sonny Sahib* (1894), *His Honor, and a Lady* (1896), *The Path of a Star* (1899), *On the Other Side of the Latch* (1901), *The Pool in the Desert* (1903), *Set In Authority* (1906), *The Burnt Offering* (1910).

[3] See Havelock Ellis, "A Note on Paul Bourget," *Views and Reviews* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1932) pp. 51-52.

[4] See Dean, pp. 19-40, and also Carole Gerson, *A Purer Taste*, pp. 58-65.

[5] "The standard image of the realistic novelist in fin-de-siecle France was the 'anatomist dissecting a cadaver.' A famous cartoon depicted Flaubert holding up the dripping heart he has ripped from the body of Emma Bovary. Zola, too, viewed his art in clinical terms, describing the writer as one who should "put on the white apron of the anatomist, and dissect, fiber by fiber, the human beast laid out completely naked" (Showalter p. 134).

[6] I argue this idea in the first two chapters of *A Different Point of View*.

[7] I give evidence for this position in Chapter Five of *A Different Point of View*.

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SOUTH ASIAN CANADIAN WRITERS FROM AFRICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

Frank Birbalsingh

NOT ALL SOUTH ASIANS NOW living in Canada came directly from India, Pakistan or Sri Lanka; many came from India, via Africa or the Caribbean, where their ancestors had settled in British colonies either in nineteenth century or the early twentieth. After most of these colonies gained independence from Britain in the 1960s, many of their Indian citizens immigrated to western countries such as Britain, Canada and the U.S. They immigrated for variety of reasons — economic deprivation, ethnic rivalry, political victimisation or sheer physical insecurity. Whatever their reasons, since many of these Indo-Caribbean or Indo-African immigrants were the children or even great-grand-children of Indians who had migrated from India, they could be regarded as migrating for a second time, and becoming thereby doubly displaced from India.

The first writing by South Asian Canadian writers[1] from Africa or the Caribbean was produced in the 1970s by Harold Sonny Ladoo (Trinidad), Reshard Gool (South Africa), and Cyril Dabydeen (Guyana). Ladoo wrote two promising novels—*No Pain Like This Body* (1972) and *Yesterdays* (1974)[2]—but this promise was cut tragically short by his murder while he was on a visit to Trinidad in 1974. *No Pain Like This Body* and *Yesterdays* are the first two works in a projected series of novels that Ladoo apparently planned to explore Indo-Caribbean experience. As such, these novels provide a foretaste of the essentials of Indo-Caribbean society—physical toil, economic hardship, pain, frustration, uncertainty, and entrapment; for Indians came to the Caribbean to replace African slaves who had been freed from British-owned sugar plantations in the 1830s, and Indians in Ladoo's novel still bear the marks of this plantation inheritance, as evidenced by the harsh and demanding circumstances in which his characters are forced to struggle for basic needs.

No Pain Like This Body and *Yesterdays* achieve success as robust narratives of local colour capturing the pungent speech idioms of rural Trinidad, together with

the violence, duplicity, and sprawling rawness of colonial deprivation. *Yesterdays* for instance, is so explicit about matters of sex and excretion as to give offence in more than one quarter. Implicitly, both novels indict British colonialism in the Caribbean, and *Yesterdays* mentions the imperialism of Canadian Presbyterian missionaries who, in the process of converting Indo-Trinidadians to Christianity, instilled in them western European cultural values that tended to replace their ancestral, cultural habits inherited from India. *Yesterdays* also expresses a retaliatory desire to send Hindu missionaries to Canada. Although this would have appeared ludicrous and utterly far-fetched in the early 1970s, it would no doubt please Ladoo to know that there are several Hindu temples in Toronto today. It would have been interesting to see how Ladoo's writing might have developed. In *No Pain Like This Body* and *Yesterdays*, at least, he has achieved a robustness not easily found among his Canadian contemporaries except in the early writings of Mordecai Richler.

RESHARD GOOL'S FIRST novel *Price* (1973)[3] portrays the society that he left behind in his homeland. This time the portrait is one of racism in South Africa, in the 1930s and 1940s. The novel successfully evokes mixed social conditions involving white racists, imperialists, and Marxists who fight among themselves and are equally corrupt. This historical portrait is heightened by the author's technique of employing frequent flashbacks and diary entries to emphasise the confusion and fragmentation in South Africa's social and political structure. *Price* has won more critical than popular acclaim, no doubt because of the novelty of its narrative technique. Gool's second novel *Nemesis Casket*[4] is even more experimental in technique, incorporating sections of diaries, notebooks, letters, and other materials in an attempt to reconstruct and probe the central relationship between the narrator and his wife. Not only does the social and political interest of *Price* give way to psychological issues of personal identity in *Nemesis Casket*, but the setting of the novel moves away from South Africa to Canada, indicating a pattern common among South Asian writers who deal with their countries of origin in their earliest work before moving on to Candian subjects or settings.

In the writing of Cyril Dabydeen there is a more continuous relationship between subjects taken from his homeland and those taken from Canada. Dabydeen is very productive — probably, to date, the most prolific of all South Asian Canadian authors — and his poems and stories furnish perhaps the most complete record in Canadian literature of subjects, themes, interests and approaches of writers from his ethnic cultural and regional background. Dabydeen's early volume of poems *Goatsong* (1977)[5] and his first novel *The Wizard Swami* (1989)[6] evoke colonial Guyana with its combination of physical squalor, poverty, and raw boisterousness,

within an environment of brightly variegated tropical colours and blistering heat. *Goatsong* describes everyday Guyanese scenes and childhood experiences, while *The Wizard Swami* exposes Indo-Guyanese, religious charlatanism in the fashion of V. S. Naipaul's *The Mystic Masseur*, the story of a Hindu priest turned masseur and politician.

Although Dabydeen's work considers specifically Caribbean themes of exploitation, resistance and mimicry, it also includes the concerns of immigrants who face hostility, racism or neglect in Canada. In *Goatsong* he writes:

> Walking along
> Heading for the Citizenship Court
> Kent Street/Ottawa
> I have been here seven years
> Yet the same question
> Where do you come from? (33)

Such feelings of displacement, anonymity and alienation become an increasing preoccupation in Dabydeen's work, and as the persona of another poem states:

> I yearn still for the buttressed
> domain of silk cotton
> and mangrove
>
> trade winds shouting familiar voices
> echoes all around[7]

The persona in this poem admits that, although he is impressed and engaged with his new life in Canada, he is still "mudbound in memory" and misses the familiar sights and sounds of his Caribbean past. As an immigrant he is caught by divided loyalties to his present home in Canada, and memories of his former home in the Caribbean.

This ambivalent nature of immigrant experience in Canada remains a constant preoccupation throughout Dabydeen's poems and stories. Some of his stories include Caribbean and Canadian characters living in Canada or the Caribbean. Some stories in *Monkey Jungle* (1988),[8] for instance, are set entirely in northern Ontario, while others, like the title story, describe the experience of a Canadian working on a cocoa plantation in the Guyanese forest. In many cases, especially in his poems, Dabydeen's persona may be pictured reflecting on his life in Canada, when suddenly, involuntarily, his/her thoughts may shift back to past experience in the Caribbean, or vice versa. This is the phenomenon of "here" and "there" that Dabydeen regards as an inescapable part of the subject of his writing — an almost Jungian predilection for thoughts and ideas welling up from one's racial or cultural subconscious and mixing freely with one's current thoughts.

Dabydeen's attempt to mediate between the competing demands of "here" and "there" affects the quality and tone of his writing. In the poem "New Life" in

which the persona has already been quoted as being "mudbound in memory," the effort to balance his Canadian and Caribbean experience takes a toll on the force of the emotions being expressed, whether they are grief, loss, confusion or nostalgia. The persona's feeling may be sincere or earnest, but it lacks urgency or force. Far from being torn apart by divided loyalties or competing passions, the persona appears to mediate between Canada and the Caribbean, and the result is one of detachment or accommodation. This does not necessarily reduce the artistic value of "New Life," but it gives the poem — and Dabydeen's writing in general — a sense of being inhibited, holding itself back, so that it fits most properly into a minimalistic category of literature, mainly concerned with the balanced or detached observation of reality within a deliberately selected small focus of human experience.

LADOO, GOOL AND DABYDEEN were succeeded (although Dabydeen is still writing) by a new batch of writers whose work began to appear in the 1980s. The Trinidadian Clyde Hosein is notable for his volume of thirteen stories *The Killing of Nelson John and Other Stories* (1980)[9] which vividly capture the mixture of dereliction, confusion and futility in colonial Trinidad, in the middle decades of this century. Like Ladoo, Hosein writes mainly of Indo-Trinidadians. In the first story "The Signature," the narrator recalls his mother's efforts to write in English, although she spoke and recited poetry in Bengali. If it is poignant when the thirteen-year-old narrator instructs his grown mother to write her own signature, or to count in English, it is positively heart-wrenching to learn that his mother bleeds to death from an accident in the cane fields where she laboured, leaving the narrator with one tangible memento of herself — a piece of paper torn from a brown shopping bag, on which she practised writing her name each morning, before readying herself for work in the fields.

The narrator of "The Signature" speaks of keeping this cherished memento of his mother in his wallet "even though so many years have passed and I am exiled to a far country." This sense of exile is not investigated because it is not relevant to the story; but since the events of the story are recollected in a "far country" not unlike Canada, it allows us to make comparisons between Hosein's recollections and those of Ladoo and Dabydeen. On the whole, the stories in *The Killing of Nelson John and Other Stories* are closer in tone and quality to Ladoo's fiction. This is not simply because Ladoo and Hosein are from Trinidad; it has more to do with their attitude to their subject which is more explicit than Dabydeen's, concentrating on the physical details of pain and adversity, and at least in some of their work, introducing a comic element that catches some flavour of the wit and humour of Samuel Selvon, and the irony of V. S. Naipaul.

DURING THE 1980S THE Guyanese Arnold Itwaru also began writing in Canada. So far he has produced *Shattered Songs* (1983)[10] a volume of poems, and *Shanti* (1990)[11] a novel, as well as other works of critical writing. Although Itwaru includes Guyanese subjects in *Shattered Songs*, his poems convey a sense of inertia, malaise and impotence that is more readily associated with contemporary life in the industrialised, developed world rather than with colonial Guyana. It is a mark of Itwaru's success that his favourite themes of entrapment, reversal and discontinuity flow with equal naturalness out of all the situations he describes. His persona, in almost every poem, conducts a never-ending, death-in-life struggle for survival or personal identity. But survival is found only in destruction, and identity in dissolution. Such is the sense of frustration and lack of fulfilment in these poems, and so pervasive are the images of violence and destruction, that *Shattered Songs* communicates, at worst, inert cynicism, and at best, a compassionate concern for mortality. Itwaru displays technical skill in many ways, for example, through staccato rhythms that reinforce feelings of truncation and loss.

From the global reflections of *Shattered Songs* Itwaru moves, in *Shanti*, to a more political story of imperialism and exploitation in colonial Guyana. The main victim is Shanti, an Indian girl, whose rape by a British overseer is symbolic of Britain's economic exploitation of all her Caribbean sugar colonies. Shanti is by no means a passive victim, but she cannot successfully resist against a system that is totally oppressive. The anti-colonial message of the novel emerges from the interaction of characters such as Shanti, the bright, spirited, but impoverished heroine; Booker, the British imperialist and rapist; Sergeant Reid, the ignorant and insensitive Afro-Guyanese policeman; and the Indo-Guyanese headmaster Sookraj, an embodiment of colonial toadyism and sycophancy. Perhaps the language of the novel aims at too consistently lyrical an effect. More interestingly, the language echoes certain phrases and images of established Guyanese writers such as Edgar Mittelholzer and Wilson Harris, suggesting some continuity of patterns in Guyanese writing. It should be interesting to see how such patterns fare in Canada.

RAMABAI ESPINET'S COLLECTION of poems *Nuclear Seasons* (1991)[12] is, in Indo-Caribbean terms, an original statement of feminist independence, enunciated in a tough, defiant, iconoclastic manner, that is yet open, caring, affectionate, and fortified by confidence and candour. The poems recreate familiar Caribbean scenes and activities, and include sensuous descriptions of the landscape as well as realistic glimpses of harsh poverty. They also attempt to cope with Canada, the new homeland:

This land is home to me
Now homeless, a true refugee
Of the soul's last corner
Saddhu days and babu days
And Mai in ohrni days
Lost to me — like elephants
And silks, the dhows of Naipaul's
Yearning, not mine (10)

Espinet's persona deliberately shuns the milder description of her condition as "exile," and calls herself a "refugee"; having lost her original Indian culture which was never truly hers anyway — because she is culturally part of the Caribbean as well — she is a true refugee, culturally dispossessed. Her passing shot at V. S. Naipaul does not merely acknowledge his importance to the Caribbean literary and intellectual tradition, but the fact that she belongs to the generation after him, and is to that extent, less Indian and more Caribbean.

Espinet's poem "For Patricia Deanna" reflects on the death of a young Caribbean woman who tried to escape from Canadian immigration officers, and fell to her death from the balcony of her apartment. Patricia's death is regarded as an unnoticed event since she was "pregnant, illegal and utterly alone." Espinet is a passionate spokesperson for women like Patricia, and other disadvantaged people. She movingly transmits the stark quality of Patricia's fear, terror and powerlessness as she is cornered, in her utterly desperate and panic-stricken attempt to escape from the immigration "Hunter-man." Espinet's passion gains power and intensity by being focused on one person and one incident. It contrasts with Itwaru's more generalized reflections and Dabydeen's muted tone especially in dealing with Canadian or North American subjects.

IF REGIONALISM IS AN ISSUE in Canadian politics and economics, it also affects literature, including the writing of "new Canadians" as freshly arrived immigrants are optimistically called. Since Toronto has become the cultural and commercial centre of Canada, it has attracted a huge immigrant population, including South Asians of every background. With the exception of Dabydeen and Gool, all the writers discussed so far have lived in Toronto, and their view of Canada is undoubtedly coloured by their experience in the huge metropolis. A third exception is Ishmael Baksh whose novel *Black Light* (1988)[13] is concerned with Indo-Trindadian Nazrul Khan, who, like the author, teaches in the department of education at Memorial University, in St. John's, Newfoundland. The novel explores Nazrul's efforts to cope with racism in an academic context where attitudes are more guarded and elusive. The hypocrisy of these hidden attitudes is

exposed when they are shown as the true cause of Nazrul's resignation from the headship of his department. As if this blow to Nazrul's professional reputation is not enough, his relationship with Elizabeth, a white woman, also breaks up about the same time; and it seems almost providential that he finds an Indo-Caribbean woman Shareeda, who offers solace and comfort. The final scene of the novel in which Nazrul and Shareeda narrowly escape what appears to be a racist attack on a secluded beach may be a somewhat gratuitous attempt to drive home the point about racism.

There is a provincial flavour of remoteness in *Black Light*. The academic milieu as a whole is unusual in writing by South Asian Canadians, the closest parallel being Saros Cowasjee's *Goodbye to Elsa* (1974)[14] a novel of uproarious wit and rollicking satire. In comparison *Black Light* is a workmanlike effort with descriptions that are correct rather than natural, and dialogue that could be more sharply differentiated between characters. Yet the novel offers a good study of an ethnic outsider's reaction to an enclosed academic community in Canada. The best sections are the chapters recalling Nazrul's childhood and schooldays in Trinidad. The dialogue in these chapters has a zest and vitality not matched in the rest of the novel, and the observation of Trinidad's feudalistic, class-conscious society has conviction and sureness of touch.

With two collections of poetry *Demerara Telepathy* (1988) and *Between the Dash and the Comma* (1989), and his novel *Dear Death* (1989)[15] the Guyanese Sasenarine Persaud has staked a claim as one of the more productive of the younger South Asian Canadian writers. Set within an Indian community in Guyana, *Dear Death* conjures up a Gothic atmosphere consistent with its rural environment and wild, rain-drenched, tropical landscape. Events are related through the consciousness of a boy Dalip whose aunt, mother and brother die in mysterious circumstances. Dalip himself has nightmares, from which he is only freed after exorcism by a Hindu priest. The novel as a whole is infused with a pervasive feeling of Hindu spirituality, pantheistic in essence, and philosophically centred on transcendence. There are similar preoccupations in Persaud's poems which also reproduce many of the social and political subjects dealt with by most Indo-Caribbean authors. In a Canadian based poem in *Demerara Telepathy*, he notes the ambivalence of an immigrant who comes to Canada "to enjoy fast cars and good lanes," but who also asserts:

> But I will not forget I'm a glad alien in
> Your seasonal land! (35)

The persona, like several of Dabydeen's, remains divided and unsettled in mind.

Of the writers mentioned so far, Dabydeen has made the greatest impact on the Canadian literary scene. Yet this impact is grudging, far from enthusiastic, and it would not be surprising if Dabydeen feels unjustly neglected. One writer who should have no complaints about being neglected is Neil Bissoondath from Trinidad. From the appearance of his first book *Digging up the Mountains*, (1985)[16] a collection of stories, Bissoondath has established himself as the most important South Asian writer of Indo-Caribbean origin, although he would reject such a label of himself, and claim that he is merely a Canadian writer. Since *Digging up the Mountains*, Bissoondath has written a novel *A Casual Brutality* (1988)[17] and another collection of stories *On the Eve of Uncertain Tomorrows* (1990).[18]

Bissoondath's writing stands out by its self-confidence and critical sharpness. The stories in his first volume, for instance, advance the view that after settling in the Caribbean for one hundred and fifty years, Indians may be forced to emigrate, in which case the Caribbean would have to be regarded just as a stop over for them, on their journey from India to other destinations. Stories such as "Insecurity" and "Digging up the Mountains" illustrate a real threat to Indian security in the Caribbean, and this is no doubt one factor motivating Indians to emigrate from the region. Obviously, this is not a view that would endear Bissoondath to Caribbean governments, especially those in Guyana and Trinidad.

But all the stories in *Digging up the Mountains* are not as political as this. "The Christmas Lunch" for instance, is set in Canada, and exposes the suppressed frustration and puzzlement of Caribbean immigrants when first confronted with some Canadian habits and customs. The result is a feeling of not belonging — to Canada, the Caribbean, or anywhere. Bissoondath reveals a similar feeling in stories involving East European and Japanese characters, the implication being that insecurity leading to emigration and a sense of homelessness are phenomena of modern twentieth century life. This is what links his fiction to that of his uncle V. S. Naipaul, whose writing provides perhaps the most complete fictional study of exile and homelessness in the post-colonial era.

Bissoondath's novel centres on Raj Ramsingh an Indo-Caribbean doctor who moves between Canada and the Caribbean, surrounded by events of violence and terror, and images of chaos and collapse. In the end, after the death of his Canadian wife and their son, he flees from his home island, which at that stage, is bracing itself for an apparent invasion by American forces similar to the American invasion of Grenada in 1984. *A Casual Brutality* has more overtly political implications than the author's short stories: its portrait of the Caribbean is one of decay and disintegration, and the recurrent images in the novel are those of brutality, insensitivity, forlornness and annihilation.

The stories in *On the Eve of Uncertain Tomorrows* offer further meditation on brutality and disorder leading to emigration and exile, except that the focus is on immigrants living in Canada. The immigrants come from equally inhospitable

backgrounds, whether of Caribbean chaos and brutality, or Latin American political persecution. For example, the title story recounts the interaction of several refugees — a Haitian, Sikh, and Sri Lankan, as well as a Vietnamese couple — living together in one house in a Canadian city. They are all forced into homelessness by a shared background of starvation, civil war, forced conscription and economic deprivation, and their common fate is summed up by the unnerving sense of loss, uncertainty and feeble vulnerability that consumes one protagonist, as he awaits deportation from Canada, and possible death in his homeland.

The story "Security" in Bissoondath's second collection is a sequel to "Insecurity" in his first. In the earlier story Ramgolam was living in fear of persecution and death in the Caribbean. In the later story he is an immigrant living with his wife and sons in Toronto. He is no longer in fear of his life, but he is bored at home, aimlessly watching television and burdened by thought about his sons being transformed by living in Canada into barbarians who eat beef and pork, despite being brought up as Hindus. The fact is that Ramgolam is just as insecure as he was in the Caribbean, only in a different way. His situation compares with that of V. S. Naipaul's hero Ralph Singh who, in *The Mimic Men*[19] escapes from the disorder of his Caribbean island to London, the supposedly stable centre of Empire, only to find "a greater disorder" there. Through characters like Ramgolam, Bissoondath illustrates the futility of immigration and the essential inadequacy of being human.

Among South Asian Canadian writers from the Caribbean, Bissoondath may be regarded as the most perceptive and skilled commentator on characteristic themes of disorder and persecution leading to flight or displacement, and ultimately to uncertainty or inner disorder. Bissoondath's success is due partly to an Atwoodian grasp of topical issues, an analytic intelligence reminiscent of V. S. Naipaul, and a technical fluency all his own. His stories are packed with authoritative detail presented with naturalness and conviction. At the same time, this very perfection of technique carries a touch of perfunctory professionalism. This is most true of some non-Caribbean stories, but it may also be seen in "Power of Reason" (in his second volume) in which we are given a wonderfully exact portrait of the West Indian protagonist Monica, including excellent descriptions of her jobs, personal relationships and domestic circumstances. Yet the power of the technique itself contributes to Monica's inability to cope, and her eventual victimisation: it makes it less likely that she will triumph over her circumstances. By the same token, it is the studied technique that increases the impact of stories like "Insecurity" and "Security."

IN M. G. VASSANJI, South Asian Canadian writing has found its most promising novelist so far. Vassanji combines an encyclopaedic memory with magisterial literary technique in his first novel *The Gunny Sack* (1989).[20] The

result is a work that has some stylistic resemblance to Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, but a more general resemblance to V. S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas*. What *The Gunny Sack* does for the East African Ishmaeli community, *A House for Mr. Biswas* has done for the Indo-Trinidadian community: presented a comprehensive view of its history, whilst eliciting the most significant factors that come out of history — cultural deracination and transplantation, multicultural coexistence, loss, exile, and homelessness. Yet Naipaul's irony makes his novel an altogether different work — more penetrating and rigorous; but less tolerant and accepting. This is Vassanji's achievement: that he objectively shows the Shamsis — as the Ishmaelis are called in *The Gunny Sack* — to be preoccupied mainly with survival, and therefore not greatly concerned with moral niceties.

The story is told by Salim Juma who recounts the consequences of the family's movement from India to Africa. His narrative, modelled on *The Arabian Nights*, carries an air of fairy tale romance, as Salim recounts his family's fortunes under German, then British colonialism, and finally under Julius Nyerere's socialism in independent Tanzania. It is a spirited saga of alliances, rivalries, successes and failures, always illustrating the Shamsis' ability to survive oppression, fragmentation, displacement or whatever else. In the process there are varied and colourful events, customs, conventions and taboos, all fulsomely recorded with humour and zest:

> It was now, not before, when Ushirika House was nationalised, that Hassan Uncle was wiped out. Not completely, shopkeepers are indomitable, Hassan Uncle had other assets, but positively his last. He had five children, three of them overseas, including Mehboob, who had shown Charlie Chaplin films on their bedroom linen in Msimbazi so many years ago, for ten cents a show per person. Mehboob, after several false starts in Toronto, had rediscovered his vocation; he showed Indian films, first in School halls on weekends, and later in a full-fledged cinema house. And with the new name of Mehboob Khan, he came to claim his parents, one of whom, my uncle, had suffered a nervous breakdown. (247)

Hassan Uncle's portrait illustrates the variety and zest of the narrative, and the author's relish in his characters, warts and all.

Vassanji's second novel *No New Land* (1991)[21] is something of a sequel to his first, not in the literal sense of following the same characters at a later stage of their lives, but in following members of the Ishmaeli community to Toronto and observing their initial efforts at settling in. This time there is no *Arabian Nights* aura of romance to mask or mollify the harsh realism of the narrative. The problem is that the new immigrants are regarded as "visible," which increases their difficulty of settling among people of different colour, manners, and conventions. The structure of the novel is circular, beginning with Nurdin Lalam living in his Rosecliffe Drive apartment in Toronto, after being charged with assaulting a (white) Canadian girl, then giving the history of Nurdin's family, mainly from the time they left

Tanzania for Toronto. The family go through the usual economic struggle, racial discrimination, cultural loss and uncertainty, until in the end Nurdin faces the humiliation of being charged with sexual assault.

What East African immigrants have done at 69 Rosecliffe Park Drive is to turn the whole apartment building into a miniature Dar es Salaam, the city in Tanzania from which they have come. There is nothing that you cannot buy from one apartment to another whether it is halal meat, toilet supplies or snacks:

> Sixty-nine Rosecliffe Park. The name still sound romantic, exotic, out of a storybook or a film. Sometimes it's hard to believe you are here, at this address, sitting inside, thinking these thoughts, surrounded by luxury: the carpeting, the sofas, the telephone, the fridge, the television — yes, luxuries by Dar standards — things you could not have owned in a lifetime. The CN Tower blinks unfailingly in the distance; the parkway is incredibly beautiful at night: dotted lines of glowing lights curving in the darkness of the valley. And when it's snowing there in the night, softly, silently, whitely, you wonder if it's not a childish Christmas card you are dreaming. But then you step out in the common corridor with its all too real down-to-earth sights, sounds, and smells, and you wonder: This, sixty-nine Rosecliffe? And you realize you've not left Dar far behind. (59-60)

Vassanji's excellent observation of detail enables him to capture an uneasy blend of human relations in Toronto involving immigrant frustration over job hunting, fear of victimisation by Canadian racists, and strategies for survival. All this is best encapsulated in the climactic incident where Nurdin attempts to help a young woman sitting on the floor of the Ontario Addiction Centre, where he has a menial job. With genuine solicitude, he puts his hand inquiringly on her shoulder only to be charged with attempted rape. The incident illustrates the uneasy contact of immigrant innocence with calculated hostility. It takes Missionary, a revered Ishmaeli figure from Dar es Salaam, and a repository of communal wisdom, to heal the bruised feelings of his people in Toronto and give them hope for the future.

No New Land follows the direction of most South Asian Canadian writers in gradually taking on Canadian subjects in their work. If Canadian literature is defined as literature written about Canada, most South Asian Canadian writers tend to become more Canadian the longer they stay in Canada. This has also been the pattern with Austin Clarke, Canada's major black writer, who is of Barbadian origin. Anglophone Caribbean writers who immigrated to England in the 1950s did much the same thing. Samuel Selvon, for instance, after two novels set in the Caribbean, devoted much of his writing to West Indians living in England. Selvon immigrated to England in 1950, where he established a reputation as one of the major West Indian authors. He moved to Canada in 1978, but he is somewhat different from most South Asian Canadian writers in not having produced much writing based on his Canadian experience.

THE SUBJECT OF LOSING one's native community and struggling to cope with the loss in an alien environment is a general problem faced by all immigrants. The South Asian Canadian experience of this problem, as described by the writers in this essay, is broadly similar to the experience of other immigrant groups such as Icelandic homesteaders in Laura Goodman Salverson's *The Viking Heart*, the Depression-hit Hungarians in John Marlyn's *Under the Ribs of Death*, Jewish people in novels by Mordecai Richler and Adele Wiseman, and even the lone Irish immigrant Ginger Coffey in Brian Moore's *The Luck of Ginger Coffey*. As a rule, most of these novels reflect a process in which immigrants gradually become integrated into Canadian society, whether they resist it strongly, moderately, or not at all. Resistance comes from those who believe that integration into Canadian culture entails the necessary loss of their own inherited cultural identity. White immigrants, for obvious reasons, integrate more readily than the visible minorities examined in this essay. These minorities have welcomed the official definition of Canada as a mosaic of cultures, and the accompanying policy of multiculturalism which professes to allow immigrants to retain their inherited cultural identity within the mosaic, while enjoying the rights and privileges of full-fledged Canadian citizens. The evidence of South Asian Canadian writers from Africa and the Caribbean suggests that the citizenship of their characters is less full-fledged than promised, partly because of their own reluctance to give up the cultural baggage they have brought to Canada, and partly because of the hostility or inhospitality they encounter here.

In a stimulating review of Vassanji's *No New Land*, Neil Bissoondath takes the author to task for what he sees as a "need to present the whole, to be a kind of literary ringmaster for the community circus."[22] Bissoondath is well known for his strictures against official multiculturalism which, he claims, promotes cultural ghettoes. His review argues that Vassanji's attempt to portray the whole Ishmaeli community in Toronto, prevents him from creating fully individualized characters. The review provides other critical insights, some of which are very perceptive, but its main argument is not justified, because Vassanji does create brilliant character sketches, even if his chief aim is to provide a cross-section view of the East African, Ishmaeli community in Toronto. If a wholly Canadian analogy may be used, *No New Land* is more like *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* than *The Stone Angel*, each excellent in its own way.

But Bissoondath also recognizes Vassanji's portrayal of significant differences between immigrants and their children in *No New Land*: the children appear more fully integrated into Canadian society. Far from promoting ghettoization, *No New Land* seems to show that integration/assimilation -- call it what you like — will take place, with or without multiculturalism. At its best, multiculturalism merely

provides a cushion to the more radical and painful adjustments that are inevitable, especially in the initial stages of the process of integration/assimilation. *No New Land* does not advocate anything. It offers a candid, realistic, informed and persuasive appraisal of the fate of South Asian immigrants in Canada.

NOTES

[1] The writers considered here are all of Indian descent, although born in Africa or the Caribbean. Other Indian writers who have written about Canada, for example, Saros Cowasjee, Rohinton Misty or Bharati Mukherjee are not considered, nor indeed the South Asian Michael Ondaatje from Sri Lanka. Even so, the essay does not claim to include every writer within its narrow margin.

[2] Harold Sonny Ladoo, *No Pain Like This Body* (Toronto: Anansi, 1972); *Yesterdays* (Toronto: Anansi, 1974).

[3] Reshard Gool, *Price* (Charlottetown: Square Deal Publications, 1976).

[4] *Nemesis Casket* was published by Square Deal Publications in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, under the pseudonym, Ved Devajee. It is undated, but appeared in the 1980s.

[5] Cyril Dabydeen, *Goatsong* (Ottawa: Mosaic Press, 1977).

[6] Cyril Dabydeen, *The Wizard Swami* (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 1989).

[7] Cyril Dabydeen, *This Planet Earth* (Ottawa: Borealis Press, 1979) 64.

[8] Cyril Dabydeen, *To Monkey Jungle* (London: Third Eye, 1988).

[9] Clyde Hosein, *The Killing of Nelson John and Other Stories* (London: London Magazine Editions, 1980).

[10] Arnold Itwaru, *Shattered Songs* (Toronto: Aya Press, 1982).

[11] Arnold Itwaru, *Shanti* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1990).

[12] Espinet Ramabai, *Nuclear Seasons* (Toronto: Sister Vision Press, 1991).

[13] Ishmael Baksh, *Black Light* (St. Johns: Jesperson Press, 1988).

[14] Saros Cowasjee, *Goodbye To Elsa* (London: Bodley Head, 1974).

[15] Sasenarine Persaud, *Demerara Telepathy* (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 1988); *Between The Dash and The Comma* (Toronto: 1989) n.pub.; *Dear Death* (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 1989).

[16] Neil Bissoondath, *Digging Up The Mountains* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1985).

[17] Neil Bissoondath, *A Casual Brutality* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1988).

[18] Neil Bissoondath, *On The Eve Of Uncertain Tomorrows* (Toronto: Lester & Orpen Dennys, 1990).

[19] V. S. Naipaul, *The Mimic Men* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1967).

[20] M. G. Vassanji, *The Gunny Sack* (London: Heinemann, 1989).

[21] M. G. Vassanji, *No New Land* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1991).

[22] Neil Bissoondath, "True Expatriate Love," *Saturday Night* 105: 5 (June, 1991): 44.

DEMETER I MISS YOU

Uma Parameswaran

Demeter I miss you more than I dare avow
Here where love for mother is suspect.

I sought you along the Aegean
In the very fields where Persephone
Danced the year long; I only found
The virgin enshrined in grottos

Over Aphrodites baring their bosom
To the gaze of men.

I hoped to find you weeping by the Assiniboine
here where Pluto holds her in throe
eight long moons;
Caryatids I see stretched on the sand
that burgeon into lycra-padded fronts
when it is time to gyrate
to dizzy drumbeats
ere supporting pillars of erstwhile stone.

Demeter I miss you more than I dare avow
In this breastless land forlorn.

Long ago I have seen you
On the banks of the holy river;
Ganga dripping down your dark hair
Unveiling you like dawn stripping the east
Of his mourning cloak;
The transparent cloth clings
To your broad hips, contours
Your childbirth mottled belly
And brings into sharp relief
Your breasts, cashew fruits
With giant seeds
Waiting to suckle.

DESTRUCTIVE CREATION

The Politicization of Violence in the Works of Michael Ondaatje

Christian Bök

MICHAEL ONDAATJE HAS repeatedly demonstrated a writerly interest in violent, male protagonists who exhibit aesthetic sensitivity. William Bonney in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (1970), Buddy Bolden in *Coming Through Slaughter* (1976), Mervyn Ondaatje in *Running in the Family* (1982), and Patrick Lewis in *In the Skin of a Lion* (1987), all play the role of violator, and often they resort to physical violence as an expressive outlet that is paradoxically both creative and destructive at the same time. Ondaatje's romanticization of such protagonists, however, suggests a potentially disturbing vision of the creative intellect, and little has been said by critics about the social implications of this motif. Ondaatje's texts actually appear to encourage the reader to forgive, if not admire, the protagonists for their violent excesses, and the texts appear to do so without adequately addressing the protagonists' degree of social accountability. Violence in Ondaatje's work represents an aesthetic virtue, but whereas Ondaatje's earlier texts appear to valorize violence enacted for purely idiosyncratic reasons, Ondaatje's later texts begin to reevaluate the ethics of such violence and suggest that it must ultimately serve a socially responsible end.

Exotic violence has indeed become a hallmark of Ondaatje's style: *The Collected Works* depicts a man eaten alive by mad dogs, "the hand that held the whip . . . left untouched" (62); *Coming Through Slaughter* portrays a photographer who deliberately immolates himself, "diving through a wave and emerging red on the other side" (67); *Running in the Family* cites the death of a jockey "savaged to pieces by his own horse" (25); and *In the Skin of a Lion* refers to a bridge-worker cut in two by a giant wire whip, "the upper half of his body found an hour later, still hanging in the halter" (41). Protagonists in these texts are especially exuberant in their violence: William Bonney, for example, goes into a frenzy and blasts away at rats drunk on fermented grain (18); Buddy Bolden uses a straight-razor to

mutilate a man in a barber chair (73); Mervyn Ondaatje goes into a drunken rampage and holds up a passenger train at gunpoint (148); and Patrick Lewis uses dynamite to obliterate a country hotel (167). Truly, Dennis Lee in *Savage Fields* is correct when appraising Ondaatje in terms of a cosmological space where "'[t]o be' is to be in strife" (11).

Stephen Scobie in "The Lies Stay In," however, asks (but does not answer) the crucial question: "Does Ondaatje luxuriate too much in these images of violence" (119)? Douglas Barbour in "Controlling the Jungle" responds to the calculated brutality of Ondaatje's earliest, poetic images by praising the poet's stylistic refinement:

> [Ondaatje] has a clear imaginative understanding of violence, yet this violence never overwhelms the poet. The poetry is not voluptuous in its violence; it is chiselled and carefully wrought. The old idea of decorum applies perfectly to these poems. . . . [T]he poet deals with varieties of physical and mental violence in an almost virginally pure style and manner. The result is a tremendous gain in imaginative force over most modern treatments of the theme. (113)

Eli Mandel in *Poets of Contemporary Canada* sees that Ondaatje's poetry is characterized by "the cold precision of a surgeon's knife" (xvi), and Frank Davey in *From There to Here* points out that, "[i]n a world as bloody and violent as Ondaatje perceives it, the poet can apparently never relax his self-control" (226). Ondaatje in effect receives critical acclaim for his ability to stylize violence, to endow it with aesthetic integrity through both technical precision and emotional detachment.

Unqualified appreciation of such aesthetically rendered violence, however, raises unsettling questions about the social ramifications of violence in literature — for within the aesthetic celebration of brutality lies the potential for desensitization to brutality; continued exposure to violence as an aesthetic virtue may serve only to naturalize it as a social phenomenon. Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse in "Representing Violence" emphasize this point: "To regard certain practises as violent is never to see them just as they are. It is always to take up a position for or against them" (9). Critical readers of Ondaatje's "Elizabeth," for example, are presumably expected to react with horror to the poem's aristocratic narrator who can witness a graphic, public execution and then immediately afterward "find cool entertainment now/with . . . nimble rhymes" (69); nevertheless, critical readers go on to praise Ondaatje for his ability to maintain a similar sense of aesthetic refinement in the face of the violence that he depicts. Ondaatje is admired by critics in part because he can fix his gaze upon violence without flinching: like the nameless driver who runs over two copulating birds in "Application for a Driving License," the poet appears to be quite capable of saying with breezy confidence: "nothing shocks me" (35). While this clinical detachment may

heighten the reader's horrified response, such detachment goes largely unquestioned by equally clinical academics: such detachment begins to replace emotional empathy as a measure of poetic talent. Ondaatje seems to focus more upon the individual glory of victimizers than upon the collective suffering of victims, and for this perspective critics reward him with what amounts to a wary appreciation of his sadistic visions. What remains paramount thematically in Ondaatje's texts then are the very dangers inherent in this glamourization of such violence.

ONDAATJE'S INFATUATION WITH brutality may at first glance seem completely idiosyncratic; however, the violence in his work may also arise directly out of the postmodern milieu in which Ondaatje operates. Linda Hutcheon in *The Canadian Postmodern* suggests that postmodern literature disrupts any naturalized assumption that tries to efface its status as an ideological construct (12). Such disruptive impulses in postmodern writing actually embody a strategy of *ostranenie* — or "defamiliarization": violence is in effect the bazooka of the innovative. Graphic depictions of aestheticized brutality not only attract the prolonged attention of an audience, but also shock an audience into a recognition of its own implication in violent, ideological processes. As with any strategy of defamiliarization, however, the unorthodox soon becomes *doxa*, a standard formula of representation that must in turn be dismantled violently: audiences soon become desensitized to shock tactics; consequently, more extreme strategies of defamiliarization are required to challenge reified structures. This "vicious circle" is violent, but not necessarily undesirable: the result is an expansion of discursive boundaries. Whatever has suffered violent marginalization because of oppressive ideology is in turn violently centralized.

Ondaatje's writing indeed addresses unpalatable issues, such as rape, murder, sadomasochism, and suicide; however, Ondaatje has in the past tried to disavow the sociopolitical implications of his writing. Ondaatje in the 1971 *White Pelican* interview describes himself as an "arch-romantic" (10), and indeed his early works appear to support Webb's claim in *Coming Through Slaughter* that "[a]ll suicides all acts of privacy are romantic" (101);[1] moreover, this romanticization coincides with the poet's own self-professed, political disengagement at the time. Ondaatje states during the 1972 *Manna* interview, for example, that *The Collected Works* contain no political significance or sociological meaning: "I'm not interested in politics on that public level. The recent fashion of drawing journalistic morals out of literature is I think done by people who don't love literature or who are not capable of allowing its full scope to be seen" (20). Ondaatje later admits in a 1975 *Rune* interview that he has an interest in "the destruction of social violence by

the violence of outsiders" (46) and that "[t]he whole political thing has been obsessing me this last year" (51); however, he tries at the same time to deny any alignment with a systematized, political philosophy. Ondaatje states in *Rune*: "I avoid reading books on ... politics. It's a funny thing, political theses I find impossible to read. I have to be affected emotionally or in a sensual way before something hits me" (51). Evidently, the early Ondaatje appears to agree with the sentiments of Patrick Lewis in *In the Skin of a Lion*: "The trouble with ideology ... is that it hates the private. You must make it human" (135). Ondaatje in *Rune*, however, goes on to betray a potentially embarrassing, political naïveté by confusing Trotsky with Marx (52) — a curious, educational blindspot, given that *In the Skin of a Lion* appears to exemplify a political sensitivity to the plight of the working-class. Ondaatje in the 1978 *Twelve Voices* interview reasserts his sociopolitical disengagement by saying "I certainly don't feel any kind of duty to society as an 'artist' at all" (142); however, Ondaatje tempers this rejection of the sociopolitical world later in the interview, when he says:

> I hate the term "artist," I hate the term "poet," it has so many connotations of someone who is separate from the real world, someone who supposedly "deserves" more, "knows" more, than the man on the street. It suggests someone who is superior to any other craftsman that exists around us today, and I think this is a real problem of artists. It's been created by artists who go around saying they are visionaries or they're prophets or they're noble figures. (143)

On the one hand, Ondaatje does not feel accountable to society; on the other, Ondaatje craves to reduce the separation between himself and the "real world," of which society is presumably a part. While the early Ondaatje appears to believe that great literature must be sociopolitically indifferent, the later Ondaatje appears to express a burgeoning tension between two conflicting, artistic impulses: the will to social retreat and the will to social contact.

ONDAATJE'S EARLY OBSESSION with the violent rejection of society is best expressed in his frequently anthologized lyric "White Dwarfs," where the narrator asks: "Why do I love most / among my heroes those / who sail to that perfect edge / where there is no social fuel" (70). Such heroes remain fascinating to Ondaatje because they "implode into silence" (71), retreat into "the perfect white between the words" (71), either the aphasia of death or the aphasia of madness. Ondaatje regards this kind of inward withdrawal into silence as the ultimate act of violence against society, perhaps because such aphasia represents a deliberate abandonment of language, the very means by which socialization is even possible. Ondaatje writes in *Coming Through Slaughter* that "[t]he mystic

privacy one can be so proud of has no alphabet of noise or meaning to the people outside" (64), and recurrently the poet suggests throughout his longer texts that artistic aphasia may stem in part from either an emotional pain harsh enough to silence the voice or a creative insight too profound to be expressed in words; moreover, the texts go on to suggest that perhaps this pain is itself the insight. Stephen Scobie in "The Lies Stay In" points out that, while "Ondaatje's first temptation is silence" (118), the poet resists this temptation through the very act of writing about it: whereas the hate-ridden narrator of "War Machine" admits that perhaps he "wd like to live mute / all day long / not talk" (14-17), the narrator of "White Dwarfs" admits that "[t]here is my fear / of no words of / falling without words / over and over of / mouthing the silence" (70). This infatuation with aphasia almost embodies a kind of artistic death-wish, a compulsion that suggests a pathological psychology; yet, the degree to which Ondaatje's violent characters represent possible states of the poet's own mind remains unclear.

Urjo Kareda in "An Immigrant's Song" points out that Ondaatje is admittedly terrified of violence and cannot account for the brutality of his own work (49). Kareda cites Stan Bevington, who wonders whether or not Ondaatje's lack of violent experience might actually lend the poet a certain "clarity" about violence (49). Kareda also cites Dennis Lee, who suggests that the tension between the gentleness of Ondaatje's nature and the violence of the writing represents not an "iron control," but a "knowledge of something imaginatively grasped that cannot be acted out" (49). Ondaatje appears, however, to identify with his early protagonists and admits to Kareda that the works in which William Bonney and Buddy Bolden appear reflect a "private world" (40), one fraught perhaps with the constant threat of silence. Ondaatje admits to Gretchen Pierce in "Canada Gives Writer 'Sense of Place'" that "[w]riting *Billy* was a catharsis and I learned more about myself" (30), and in the *Manna* interview Ondaatje discusses *Billy* and confesses: "I was writing about something that had always interested me, something within myself" (20). Ondaatje in *Coming Through Slaughter* even intrudes as the ostensible narrator, who appears to identify with Bolden psychologically:

> When he went mad he was the same age as I am now. . . .
>
> When I read he stood in front of mirrors and attacked himself, there was the shock of memory. For I had done that. Stood, and with a razor-blade cut into cheeks and forehead, shaved hair. Defiling people we did not wish to be. . . .
>
> What was there in that, before I knew your nation your colour your age, that made me push my arm forward and spill it through the front of your mirror and clutch myself? (133-134)

As Ondaatje says in the article "From Gunslinger to Jazz Musicians" by Adele

Freedman: "I put myself into the characters' situations for a long period of time. . . . A lot of my own world gets into their stories. It's probably a major illness" (1).

Ondaatje's apparent identification with such violent protagonists has prompted Robin Mathews in "Private Indulgence and Public Discipline" to describe Ondaatje as a self-indulgent writer who wallows in the "perverse titillation" of violence (40). Mathews believes that such self-indulgence cannot be "a means of figuring forth the internal turmoil . . . of the protagonist and . . . the author, in the face of a dessicated . . . culture which he or she must struggle to survive in"; instead, such self-indulgent authors are "often disconnected from the society except for artist/media connections, and are, . . . all-unconsciously, the most dominated by liberal ruling class ideology" (40). While Ondaatje does celebrate violent individualism in his early works from the position of a privileged class, he does attempt in his later works to reevaluate this aesthetic standpoint; moreover, violence as "perverse titillation" is perhaps an oversimplification of Ondaatje's use of violence. While his works may provide macabre entertainment to some readers, the violence is not merely embellishment, but appears to serve an integral purpose. Ondaatje actually appears to present a psychological argument in which the physical violence of his male aesthetes is in fact a pathological extension of a volatile creativity: in other words, the unmotivated violence of the characters parallels the chaotic intensity of their art.

William Bonney in *The Collected Works* and Buddy Bolden in *Coming Through Slaughter* exemplify the socially irresponsible hero: both characters act out the romantic myth of the isolated, male artist unable to function within society, in part because of his anarchic sensitivity. Just as the character Pat Garrett affirms that William Bonney has an "imagination which was usually pointless and never in control" (43) — an imagination subject to macabre hallucinations (10), so also does the character Frank Lewis affirm that Buddy Bolden "was tormented by order, what was outside of it" (37). Both characters stand as models of dynamic individualism. The outlaw William Bonney can "never remain in one position more than five minutes" (44); he possesses a "range for everything" (74); and he remains fascinated with "the same stress as with stars, / the one altered move that will make them maniac" (41). Similarly, the jazzman Buddy Bolden "thought by being in motion" (109); he moved "gradually off the edge of the social world" (64); and he "did nothing but leap into the mass of changes and explore them and all the tiny facets so that eventually he was almost completely governed by fears of certainty" (15). Within both texts, multiple voices articulate conflicting impressions about a protagonist who remains

impossible to define authoritatively: the protagonist is in fact defined paradoxically as something that escapes definition. William Bonney remains an enigma to his peers: "The rather cruel smile, when seen close, turned out to be intricate and witty. You could never tell how he meant a phrase, whether he was serious or joking. From his eyes you could tell nothing at all" (43). Similarly, Buddy Bolden asserts that "[a]s you try to explain me I will spit you, yellow, out of my mouth" (140), and indeed he remains inscrutable to his acquaintances: "Their stories were like spokes on a rimless wheel ending in air. Buddy had lived a different life with every one of them" (63). Such volatility informs the very art of both protagonists.

William Bonney, for example, describes the process of his own poetic writing as virtually random and automatic: "a pencil that shifts up and sideways / mapping my thinking going its own way / like light wet glasses drifting on polished wood" (72) — "a pencil [that] . . . / goes stumbling into dots" (85). Similarly, Buddy Bolden strives to create perfect, unsystematic music: "Every note new and raw and chance. Never repeated" (95) — a spontaneous music intended to appeal to an audience as ephemeral as a passing parade (93-94). Such art does not valorize a formalized technique: indeed, both the poetry of William Bonney and the music of Buddy Bolden are predominantly concerned with the quality of the creative process, not with the formality of the creative product. Fittingly enough, this dynamic aesthetic is reflected in the very form of the texts in which the two characters appear: just as William Bonney and Buddy Bolden do violence to social codes, so also do the texts themselves do violence to literary codes. Robert Kroetsch in "The Exploding Porcupine" writes that "[i]n our most ambitious writing, we do violence to form" (108), and indeed Ondaatje emulates the aesthetic sensibilities of his protagonist by violating generic boundaries with the same irreverence that William Bonney displays when drifting back and forth across the Canadian border (20). *The Collected Works* and *Coming Through Slaughter* each meander like the path in the Boot Hill cemetery: "the path keeps to no main route for it tangles / like branches of a tree among the gravestones" (9). The texts juxtapose unrelated fragments in the same way that Buddy Bolden mixes together "stray facts, manic theories, and well-told lies" (24) in order to produce his magazine *The Cricket*, and just as Bolden plays a conglomeration of blues and hymns, "mixing the Devil's music with His music" (81) in order to produce something stranger than both, so also does Ondaatje produce a hybrid of poetry and prose. The texts, like the characters depicted in them, violently resist definitive categorization.

Ondaatje does formalistic violence by breaking up the narrative syntax of his stories so that they are staged as a series of disordered, textual fragments. Such a writing style calls to mind the disturbing image of the crippled photographer E. J. Bellocq in *Coming Through Slaughter*, a character who defaces the pictures that

he takes and thereby acts out the artistic death-wish, in which "[t]he making and destroying come from the same source, same lust, same surgery his brain was capable of" (55). Ondaatje suggests through Bellocq that the creative impulse represents an unreliable exorcism of violence, that art represents a precarious means of sustaining the creative mind in the face of its own potential madness. Just as the objects of "violent beauty" made by the mute savage in "Peter" (5: 1) stem from the pain caused by the violent loss of his tongue, so also do Bellocq's gentle photos of prostitutes stem from his own violent misogyny that causes him eventually to slash his photos, "to romance them later with a knife" (55).[2] Moreover, just as Peter fails in the end to resist the temptation to rape a woman, so also does Bellocq in the end fail to resist the urge to kill himself. Ondaatje's depiction of Bellocq actually suggests that male artists are always potentially psychotic, that social integration for them is at best temporary if it is ever at all possible.

WOMEN AS ARTISTS IN fact do not appear to figure largely in Ondaatje's aesthetic vision;[3] instead, women appear to represent the passive victims of male volatility: Tara in "Peter" is brutally raped (5: 1-17), as is Mrs. Fraser in *The Man With Seven Toes* (16); Angela Dickinson in *The Collected Works* is shot in the wrist by a gunman (66); the "mattress whores" in *Coming Through Slaughter* lie beaten and mutilated, their ankles broken by pimps (118); and the woman depicted on the cover of *There's A Trick With A Knife* stands as the passive target of the male knife-thrower. Teresa de Lauretis in "The Violence of Rhetoric" points out that violence is almost always engendered as a male construct, that the relationship between the victimizer and victim is a gendered paradigm (240): "The discourse of the sciences of man constructs the object as female and the female as object. This . . . is its rhetoric of violence, even when the discourse presents itself as humanistic, benevolent or well-intentioned" (253). Such pornographic objectification of women by Ondaatje is certainly consistent with the kind of violence that he wishes to explore, but while he may faithfully depict this paradigm as an accurate reflection of modern reality, he often refuses to make explicit moral judgements about such patriarchal violence and seems unprepared to acknowledge effective alternatives to an art that requires some male gesture of extremism.

Ondaatje's romanticization of violent males does begin, nevertheless, to undergo some reappraisal in *Running in the Family*, a work in which the alcoholic father Mervyn Ondaatje is portrayed in a way that, although nostalgic, does little to glorify violent behaviour. Just as William Bonney and Buddy Bolden represent violators, so also does Mervyn Ondaatje deliberately flout established social codes; yet, unlike William Bonney and Buddy Bolden, Ondaatje's erratic father lives a life

of tragic humour through his "technique of trying to solve one problem by creating another." Ondaatje goes on to define this anarchic protagonist as "one of those books we long to read whose pages remain uncut" (200) — an enigma that is again defined paradoxically by its inability to be defined: "[W]e can only guess. Guess around him. To know him from these stray actions . . . told about by those who loved him" (200). Ondaatje also repeats the romantic motif of the male artist by endowing his father with qualities that suggest an isolated, hypersensitive personality: Mervyn, for example, suffers paranoid delusions about the poisoning of his family (199); he strips nude and runs madly into a train tunnel where he spends hours dreaming of suicide (149); and on one occasion, he runs away naked from the train, only to be discovered later holding up five ropes, with a large black dog dangling from each one, as though "[h]e had captured all the evil in the regions he had passed through and was holding it" (182). The text even begins with a dream of Mervyn "chaotic, surrounded by dogs" (21), an image that recalls the madman Livingstone in *The Collected Works* — a man who breeds a race of mad dogs and in the end gets eaten by them.[4] Mervyn actually follows in the footsteps of his violent, literary predecessors (albeit in a more subdued way) by retreating into "the well of total silence" (199) where he dies as a virtual madman.

Violence in *Running in the Family* is, however, qualitatively different from the violence in earlier texts: Mervyn never kills or maims anyone, despite his volatility. Mervyn's criminal behaviour is in fact not so much romanticized as pitied. Ondaatje in "Letters and Other Worlds" attributes the quality of "complete empathy" (46) to his father, even though Mervyn "edged / into the terribly acute hatred / of his own privacy" (46), and as Tom Marshall observes in "Layering":

> "[C]omplete empathy" is a rather more positive characterization of the poetic process so often seen in earlier poems as predatory or cannibalistic or suicidal. Perhaps this may even indicate the possibility of a new identification with the real that is now so close that it is no longer an imposition of [Ondaatje's] private myth of the world or a "suicide into nature" . . . but a reconciliation with the world—a balance that transcends the two poles of destruction and self-destruction. (87)

Just as Ondaatje suggests that the creative works of both Bolden and Bellocq stem paradoxically from destructive impulses, so also does Ondaatje suggest that the articulate emotion in Mervyn's letters stems from Mervyn's last anarchic years as a "silent drinker" (54). Mervyn in *Running in the Family* says: "if I revealed this world to you you would suffer for you had no knowledge, no defenses against it" (200) — and here again the implication is that an artist's severe retreat from the social world may ultimately arise from an unbearable degree of sensitivity to the violence of the social world. Susan Glickman in "The Emerging Myth of Michael Ondaatje" asserts that "[i]t is Ondaatje's recognition of the adolescent fatuity of the code 'White Dwarfs' addresses, its spurious glamour, which makes him deflate it even as he continues to explore its romance" (79), and she goes on to point out

(81) that in "Tin Roof" (published immediately in the wake of *Running in the Family*), Ondaatje admits the possibility that "solitude . . . / is not an absolute, / it is just a resting place" (37) — not necessarily a violent doom.

While Mervyn conforms to the recurring pattern of artistic aphasia, the socio-political implications of language and silence are broached more directly in *Running in the Family*, especially when Ondaatje discusses the colonial history of Ceylon, a country "courted by invaders who . . . claimed everything with the power of the sword or bible or language" (64).[5] Subjected to a multilingual heritage, the country has, not surprisingly, cultivated a myth of language, a myth that reiterates Ondaatje's own motif of the artistic death-wish: the Sinhalese actually believe that eating the tongue of the thalagoya lizard endows "verbal brilliance" — the side-effects of which include "bad behaviour" and possible death (74). Ondaatje's attitude toward such creative self-destructiveness through the use of language, however, undergoes some reevaluation, for he realizes that the artist's ultimate "violence of silence" amounts to only a private form of social protest:

> When the government rounded up thousands of suspects during the Insurgency of 1971, the Vidyalankara campus of the University of Ceylon was turned into a prison camp. The police weeded out the guilty, trying to break their spirit. When the university opened again the returning students found hundreds of poems written on walls, ceilings, and in hidden corners of the campus. Quatrains and free verse about the struggle, tortures, the unbroken spirit, love of friends who had died for the cause. The students went around for days transcribing them into their notebooks before they were covered with whitewash and lye. (84)

Ondaatje begins to recognize that the privacy of silence can be defied via graffiti; such writing can be more than an autotelic act of violent transgression; such writing can also be a revolutionary statement of communal solidarity. Ondaatje responds to the militant, political poetry of the Sri Lankan writer Lakdasa Wikkramasinha (85) by writing a "communal poem" that combines diverse fragments of graffiti found upon the fortress walls of a despot king (92-94). Ondaatje begins to acknowledge that art can be more than the solitary expression of an individual ego in the face of social adversity.

Elsewhere in *Running in the Family*, Ondaatje asserts that language is a metaphorical violence, that "[w]ords such as *love*, *passion*, *duty*, are so continually used they grow to have no meaning — except as coins or weapons" (179). Ondaatje breaks from his previous attitude toward the violence of language by stressing that the responsibility of writing is to "keep peace with enemy camps, eliminate the chaos" (179), to grant both order and meaning to the apparently disjointed textual fragments that comprise the very structure of his familial history. As in the case of both *The Collected Works* and *Coming Through Slaughter*, the anarchism in the content of *Running in the Family* is reflected in the fragmented structure, but whereas the shocking violence in the form of the earlier works repre-

sents a rebellious act that rejects social order and moves toward isolation, the subdued violence in the form of this later work represents a revolutionary act that reclaims social order and moves toward integration. Unlike the violence depicted in *The Collected Works* and *Coming Through Slaughter*, the violence in *Running in the Family* is valued only in conjunction with some ordering principle that can channel such volatile energy toward a productive end.

ONDAATJE IN EFFECT does not reform his politics so much as qualify his romantic ethos. This subtle shift in attitude becomes most explicit in *In the Skin of a Lion*, a work that does not romanticize aesthetes who passionately reject social integration in the name of aphasia, but instead romanticizes aesthetes who passionately serve the social interests of the oppressed. Whereas William Bonney, Buddy Bolden, and Mervyn Ondaatje move away from all social gesture toward silence, the proletarian worker Patrick Lewis moves in the opposite direction and finds in a newly discovered language some sense of social communion and social purpose. Patrick, like his literary predecessors, has "always been alien, the third person in the picture" (156) and can "hear the rattle within that suggested a space between him and community" (157); however, the politically active character Alice chastizes Patrick for demonstrating the very characteristic that Ondaatje has until now admired: "You believe in solitude, Patrick, in retreat. You can afford to be romantic because you are self-sufficient" (123). Such individualism is seen to be inadequate. Patrick cannot immerse himself in the alienated environment of the Macedonian immigrants until he tries "desperately to leap over the code of language between them" (113), until he abandons his deliberate aphasia.

Although a violent outsider as hypersensitive as William Bonney and Buddy Bolden, Patrick does not conform to the psychological pattern of heroes commemorated in "White Dwarfs." Whereas the early Ondaatje apparently admires the spontaneous chaos prevalent in the aesthetic sensibilities of the outlaw, the violator of boundaries, the later Ondaatje in *In the Skin of a Lion* now insists: "*Only the best art can order the chaotic tumble of events. Only the best can realign chaos to suggest both the chaos and the order it will become*" (146). As Ondaatje emphasizes to Kareda in 1983: "Writing is trying to make order, to understand something about yourself. Orderless situations are, for me, the most interesting things, and I tend to write about the finding out of order" (49). Admittedly, Ondaatje has always been fascinated by sustaining the delicate equilibrium between order and chaos in art, an equilibrium vulnerable to the "one altered move"; however, his earlier works suggest that any attempt to achieve

this unstable balance is self-justifying, while his later works begin to reevaluate the autotelic nature of such an aesthetic. Whereas his earlier works emphasize the chaotic variable in the artistic equation, his later works begin to emphasize the ordered variable in the artistic equation.

Ondaatje's usual motif of creative self-destructiveness is in fact suggested only once in *In the Skin of a Lion* through the figure of Patrick's father, Hazen Lewis, a man "withdrawn from the world around him, uninterested in the habits of civilization outside his own focus" (15) — a man as silent and as introspective as Ondaatje's own father, Mervyn. Hazen's talent as a dynamiter is described in poetic terms that endow it with aesthetic integrity — like art, it becomes a craft of timing and precision; nevertheless, Hazen has destructive fantasies that recall Bellocq's own nightmares:

> [Hazen] was sullen even in the company of his son. All his energy was with the fuse travelling at two minutes to the yard under floorboards, around the trunks of trees, and up into someone's pocket. He kept receiving that image in his mind. Could he do it? The fuse stitched into the cloth of the trouser leg. The man sleeping perhaps by a campfire, the fuse smouldering horizontal into his shirt pocket, blowing out the heart. (18)

Unlike similar images of violence in Ondaatje's earlier works, however, such fantasies of unmotivated destruction are never fulfilled in this work. Whereas the protagonists in *The Collected Works* and *Coming Through Slaughter* exercise violence indiscriminately, often against the innocent, the protagonist Patrick attempts to exercise violence against the exploiter, against Commissioner Harris and his waterworks, his "palace of purification" that represents a cathedral-like monument to alienated labour. The kind of destructiveness seen in earlier works is now endowed with social purpose.

Ondaatje begins to demonstrate a more profound awareness of the sociopolitical implications of silence. Whereas his earlier texts deal with a silence that individuals impose upon themselves in order to escape social ideology, *In the Skin of a Lion* deals with a silence that social ideology imposes upon individuals in order to prevent them from exercising power. Within such a context, silence no longer becomes an act of sociopolitical rebellion, but an act of sociopolitical surrender. Aphasia loses its power to be an effective means of violent protest. Immigrant workers in *In the Skin of a Lion*, for example, perform illegal, agit-prop drama that allegorically mimes their own essential powerlessness resulting from their silence, from their inability to articulate injustice, to speak out effectively with their own voice against official ideology (116-117). Whoever controls discourse, controls official truth, and any socially sanctioned attempt on the part of the oppressed to break their silence implies the possible loss of their own native voice. While the immigrant Nicholas Temelcoff observes that, "[if] he did not learn the language he would be lost" (46), his attempt to learn English from popular songs

on the radio implies a possible willingness to engage the popular ideologies of an imperial culture on their own terms: "He loves his new language, the terrible barriers of it" (43). Non-verbal aggression becomes the only apparent recourse for the immigrant worker who wishes to speak in anger without succumbing to the ruling-class language. *In the Skin of the Lion* thus appears to reject the romance inherent in the "violence of silence" and opts instead for the romance of an art that centralizes the plight of the politically impotent. Whereas Ondaatje's earlier works reject discourse in the name of private protest, this last work attempts to wrest discourse away from its controllers in the name of social revision.

According to John Moss in *Sex and Violence in the Canadian Novel*, "[v]iolence may be trivial, demeaning, horrific or heroic in fiction, but, whatever, it demands a moral response to the conflict that generates it" (12). Critical readers who see that, like Pat Garrett, the early Ondaatje can "come to chaos neutral" (47) may simply decide that Ondaatje leaves the moral reckoning to others; after all, the early Ondaatje, like the narrator in "Billboards," appears to claim that "[h]ere was I trying to live / with a neutrality so great / I'd have nothing to think of" (33-35); and indeed, such neutrality cannot possibly accommodate moral judgements. Moreover, the early Ondaatje does not seem prepared to elaborate upon the kind of tantalizing comment that William Bonney makes: "A motive? some reasoning we can give to explain all this violence. Was there a source for all this? yup —" (54). While Ondaatje hesitates to broach the sociopolitical ramifications of his writing, he sees no reason to apologize for his depictions of violence and defends his work in the 1978 *Twelve Voices* interview by saying:

> I don't think I'm a particularly violent poet. . . . I think I have a vision of reality that is totally normal to me. . . . The thing is it's a very real world to me and if people don't want to see [violence] as part of the real world, then they're ignoring it. It's been said that violence is normal in our lifetime just as good manners were normal to the world that Jane Austen created. You know, it's a reality. (135-136)

Ondaatje defends his case by alluding to the socially conscious playwright Edward Bond, who also tries to justify the violence of his own work in the "Author's Preface" to *Lear*:

> I write about violence as naturally as Jane Austen wrote about manners. Violence shapes and obsesses our society, and if we do not stop being violent we have no future. People who do not want writers to write about violence want to stop them writing about us and our time. It would be immoral not to write about violence. (v)

While Ondaatje admits in a recent *Paragraph* interview that he no longer trusts "[n]ovels that give you the right way to do things" (5), he does stress the importance of exposing violence, especially the kind that official history tries to ignore: "If there was a kind of direction in [*In the Skin of a Lion*], it was making sure that something got said, to write about that unofficial thing that was happening. There were a lot of strikes, just as violent and extreme as anywhere else, but you hardly ever read about that in Toronto history" (5). While Ondaatje has always emphasized that artistic innovation does not occur without some act of violent intensity, of extreme defamiliarization, he no longer appears to value such intensity purely for its own sake or for its privileged ablity to generate a private vision that turns its back upon generalized oppression; instead, he values such intensity for its ability to energize a collective, social vision that resists specific forms of ideological authority.

NOTES

[1] "Privacy" here, and elsewhere, refers to any individual disengagement from societal interaction.

[2] Linda Hutcheon has pointed out that photography implies an act of violence: "Taking pictures is a way of both certifying and refusing experience, both a submission to reality and an assault on it. . . . Cameras can engender in the photographer both aggression and a passivity born of impotence" (47).

[3] The female artists in Ondaatje's *corpus* of work include such characters as Clara the radio-actress, Anne the writer, and Alice the mime, all in *In the Skin of a Lion*; these female artists are either exploited by men or marginalized by patriarchal society.

[4] Livingstone's impulse to create something, no matter how grotesque, can only provide an unstable outlet for his latent insanity: "[H]e never showed any sign of madness or quirkiness. As if he left all his madness, all his perverse logic, behind that fence on his farm" (61). Livingstone's death becomes a metaphor for the Frankenstein complex, in which the male artist, the creator, is destroyed by his art, the thing created.

[5] Douglas Amarasekera's epigraph to *Running in the Family* emphasizes Ondaatje's concern with the power of lingual imperialism: "The Americans were able to put a man on the moon because they knew English. The Sinhalese and Tamils whose knowledge of English was poor, thought that the earth was flat" (9).

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THE CIDA POET WRITES OF GUYANA

Cyril Dabydeen

Here there's no Orinoco, Demerara,
or darker rivers—
but journeys, sinuous; no recalling
Botanic Gardens, sidewalks of manatees,
snake slithering in dry grass...

Only flamboyant trees lining a roadway,
your face ruddy, remembering
a wife's death and yet smiling at love
as your son conjures up Africa's past,
visions too obscure to truly remember...

Making territory out of ancestry—
mutterings of other languages
with false accents, a tongue's
twister I say—

Other memories, boundaries,
hard clay, alluvium of unpredictable
soil, such politics . . .
heaving at the edge of the ocean, throbbing
with seawalls. More words really,
Seymour's rim of sun in your eyes . . .

Angles of a country gone haywire . . .
and you recover with love, bringing
the sidewalks, the stench, the garbage . . .
hopes in sewers, the ramshackle hospital,
further aid without strings . . . making a snapshot
and video out of poverty . . . muttering with other
Ottawa memories while perpetually skating
down the Rideau Canal—
always our tropics' winter.

CLARK BLAISE AND THE DISCOURSE OF MODERNITY

Richard Lane

IN A DIDACTIC ESSAY, Clark Blaise details his theory (based in practice) of beginnings.[1] A number of lessons should help the reader to comprehend the Blaise text. Structurally, the beginning is given priority over the ending, the latter being a construct, a "contrivance," "artistic and believable, yet in many ways predictable." (*TB* 417) The beginning, however, is based upon "faith" (*TB* 415), it is "mysterious" (*TB* 417). What purpose does this meticulous construction of an opposition serve? In a strategic fashion, Blaise's essay pre-empts and defines the role of criticism (a strategy I shall return to in the portrayal of "self"). The writer has the power of an authority derived from his practical experience: "What I propose is theoretical, yet rooted in the practice of writing and of reading-as-a-writer." (*TB* 415) He has authority through labour — real work — further repeating this statement: "My own experience, as a writer and especially as a 'working' reader"; he is not a parasitic critic who does not work, who has to rely upon those who come first. Such an opposition (beginning/end) is thus not without value. Beginning is priorized and subjugates end. But there is more. The ending is stated to be a contrivance, and "criticism likes contrivances, and has little to say of mysteries." (*TB* 417) Thus, the critic is somehow unhappy with mystery, with difference, while the writer has direct access, through "genesis," through creation, to those very things. Blaise is positing a metaphysics of presence (and mastery) here, where the author labours with the self-present, creative moment of mystery and writing that transcends poetry. The critic, however, is removed from the creative act with his or her secondary powers, and prefers to talk about easy endings having been denied the "powers of horror" (Kristeva). This separation of creation and criticism, with the devaluation of the latter, clearly awards the author with enlightened status — in advance. Yet my argument will not be a defence of critical discourse, since I am writing from a post-structuralist perspective where the oppositional hierarchy proposed by Blaise becomes highly problematized.

I will argue that the beginning is as much a "contrivance" as the ending, that is simply all writing is a construction. My statement thus rejects the transcendental status awarded to "the mysterious part of the story" which is said to be "that which is poetic yet sets it (why not?) above poetry." (*TB* 418) In many respects, this brief essay will be an answer to the "why not?" contained within parenthesis, also indicating the narrative intrusions and directions that continuously return the Blaise narrative to notions of self, autobiography and the interplay of 'external' and 'internal' representation. However, the opposition continues; the beginning is stated to be "the purest part of the story," an originary egg and "the unruffled surface perfectly cast" (*TB* 418), the place which Blaise would like to keep above those critics or "dogs" snapping and snarling away at the text,[2] as preserved, inviolate proof that the author can reach a point of transcendence, can write the perfect sequence of signifiers above and beyond critique. In his rejections of "hundreds of my own" beginnings, Blaise has obviously achieved this un-dated concept — without time because in this metaphysics it is beyond linearity — prior to and above the linearity of the first 'then,' the introduction of a soiled spacing that will distance prose from poetry from beginning. The beginning "can exist utterly alone," yet has the mysterious powers of kinship (with poetry) and force (with prose). The beginning is both isolated from and connected to the world, yet it is not solely defined by difference. It is not arbitrary, signifying its own inherent beauty and standard that needs no Other for self-estimation. *A priori*, the beginning exists before dialogue, before interaction, recognizing its intrinsic value, superiority and aesthetic permanence. If we were merely those idle critics, we would be forbidden access to this mysterious, marvelous world. We would be left with the dreary, gray contrivance of an articulated prose, plodding along, either attempting to fulfil the promise of the beginning or destroying, violating it. No matter, the beginning transcends our world, we cannot touch it.

Constructing the a priori

The beginning as a pre-empting critique is a strategy that can be found in a series of statements made in part one of *Days And Nights In Calcutta*,[3] in particular concerning the writing of 'self.' This direction of experience toward 'self,' in a wider sense, has been regarded as characteristic of "modernist culture and modernity in general,"[4] where another perspective upon this is to see "self-consciousness" invading "experience." Thus Steve Connor writes how the modern sensibility "is characterized by a sense of the urgent, painful gap between experience and consciousness and the desire to replenish rational consciousness with the intensities of experience."[5] The narrator of part one of *Days And Nights* embodies and clearly recognizes this desire. But, in relation to cultural transformation, any level of naiveté must be removed. This functions, once more, to pre-empt criticism and takes place

by the use of parody of those who "go to India to have [their] . . . instincts roused." (*DN* 138) The list that follows ridicules and aims critical laughter and derision at these feeble positions: "Marxists, Vedantists, Jungians, rock groups, suburban youths, Californian librarians, all the unmended victims of Western repression: we go to India to check on our groovy karmas, we go for nothing less than transcendence and transformation." (*DN* 138) In a curious flattening of difference, and a conflation of identity, along with the self-parody that follows (positioning a younger, earlier, less mature narrator in this series), the critical gaze is directed away from the narrator's own transformation where, although the "voyage to understand India would stop ridiculously short of its goal," the narrator states that "what I would see clearly for the first time was that whole bloated, dropsical giant called the West, that I thought I knew profoundly." (*DN* 138) Thus the narrator does not consider himself involved in a quest for instinct arousal; rather, the quest is one which would reinforce a modernist conception of reason and knowledge. The "unmended victims of Western repression" could clearly be fixed through the power of reasonable knowledge, a power which has been derived in the text through a parallel experiential trip at a more balanced, liberal level.

The strategy of pre-empting criticism has extensive implications. It is quite clear that the narrative of the fire, accidents and the effacement of the material "evidence of a personal history" (*DN* 7) which is prefaced by the visit to a fortune-teller in Baroda, is designed to legitimate the narrator's construction of a myth: that of the clean slate or 'free soul,' a *tabula rasa* upon which 'India' will imprint itself. Thus the narrator states: "from the moment we landed India conspired to write this journal." (*DN* 10) This is the position from which the constructed reader can accept a myth of a detached, semi-neutral observer whose materialist values have been swept away, cleansed by 'ritual' fire. The latter is a purification rite, a rite of passage into or onto something new, a change of status and a legitimation of the more 'open-minded' self about to approach a challenging cultural structure. I will argue that what follows (and precedes) this effacement is actually a Hegelian metanarrative that functions to ". . . subordinate, organize and account for other narratives; so that every other local narrative . . . is given meaning by the way it echoes and confirms the grand narratives of the emancipation of humanity or the achievement of pure self-conscious spirit."[6] To examine this perspective further I shall explore those locations in the text that appear not to echo and confirm the "grand narratives."

Juhu Beach and Howrah Station are locations in the story that have both parallels and differences; both can be left by the narrator, but this is one function of Howrah (among others) which, for a moment, is not so for Juhu Beach: "It was the only time in India that I felt that curious *this-is-125th-street-but-I-must-be-in-Harlem* terror of a New York tourist about to go under. At no other time in India, despite steep trails, dark nights, and devious alley, did I feel that unspoken

danger." (*DN* 43) The alliteration of this last sentence foregrounds a sense of security among 'familiar' dangers that can be safely represented, transformed into a literary experience and language. The narrator captures the 'ineffable' in representation by forming one more oppositional set to add to the binary The West/ India. The narrator operates with "a theory which itself continually projects the categories of its own discomfiture,"[7] but unlike postmodernism and the pull "towards the sublime in destroying form itself,"[8] here the narrator constructs, paradoxically, a position of mastery through representation, without "a will-to-undoing."[9] The narrator cannot collect shells because of the smell, but still, he can collect scenes. The people who live on the beach are not only imaged as an "undertow" — a depersonalisation — but they are also described as "Revolutionaries of the future." (*DN* 43) Would this align them with those Marxists concerned with "transcendence and transformation" (*DN* 138)? Or, is the conflation now seen as a confusion of not only identities, but aims?

What is foregrounded in this passage is not only the representation of extreme differences in living conditions between the West and India, but also the threat to the Western Self, to a whole tradition that purports to understand the Other but ends with Graphocy, "the rule of the literary elite."[10] The threatened narrator links ghetto with a potentially revolutionary undertow, and the density and paradox of Howrah station with the possibility of teleological defeat. In this construction of "Hell," I would suggest that the end of reason is more frightening than the abject poverty:

> Howrah is the centre of life and the end of hope . . . it is Calcutta at its densest and most paradoxical. It is where village India arrives every day by the uncountable thousands and where others manage to return but not escape. It is more like a circle of hell than any place on earth that I can imagine." (DN 297)

I absorbs Other

The beginning as a creative act is for Blaise always to "begin again" (*TB* 417). Robert Lecker notes how Blaise, in his absorption of the myths and rituals of India reveals: "the need he feels to re-create himself so that his aesthetic project will endure, so that he will be forever '*in creation*,' the perpetually reborn subject of the fiction he lives to tell."[11] Lecker thus charts for the reader Blaise's modernist ethos, placing Blaise firmly at the centre of his own de-centred universe. Like the modernist artist, Blaise's discourse enacts a "repeated absorption of that which is extrinsic to the Western high-art tradition, largely in pursuit of renewal and reinvigoration."[12]

For Lecker, the self-reflexive strategy of Blaise's narrative undermines itself to reveal and "re-affirm the fundamental honesty at the heart of his vision."[13] Perhaps this ground of honesty, this fundamental revelation of the Blaise narrative belongs to the transcendental space 'beyond' and 'before' criticism that was briefly examined

in my introduction. This space would be a position from which the texture and design can be represented "without distortion" (*DN* 18). It is the space that enables the author to delimit the boundaries of Western representation: "For a Westerner there is enough unknown on the steps of the Air-India Building, or with friends and family, and especially on the streets of any Indian city, to satisfy all his tastes for texture and design. To seek more is greed . . . Trust only texture." (*DN* 19) Thus "texture" can only be trusted through an implicit trust in the narrator, a belief that the narrator can occupy this privileged site that regulates the act of representing the unknown. Clearly, here is a voice that performs a role of Enlightenment authority, "that of defining the conditions under which the use of reason is legitimate in order to determine what can be known, what must be done, and what may be hoped."[14] A voice which can be heard, amplified a thousand times, in Kant's prefaces to his first critique.

Lecker's study of Blaise is a product of a determined critical method that reads the text on its own terms; terms that I am deliberately problematising with the reference to the discourse of modernity. For Lecker, this closely guarded, privileged mode of speaking, not only enables Blaise to "transcend the North American education that informs his early story,"[15] but situates him as a paradigm, supposedly, of "the author, as reader, as other."[16] This paradigm of the divided self — divided by language — I have argued, takes part in a metaphysics of presence where writing distorts the image of the self (as self-present), where writing is secondary in status to the residence of the author's creativity in the transcendent beginning. In Derrida's discussion of Plato's *Phaedrus*, which hinges upon the translation of the signifier "pharmakon," this secondary status of writing is examined where "The value of writing will not be itself":

> . . . writing will have no value, unless and to the extent that god-the-king approves of it. But god-the-king nonetheless experiences the pharmakon as a product, an ergon, which is not his own, which comes to him from outside but also from below, and which awaits his condescending judgment in order to be consecrated in its being and value. God the king does not know how to write, but that ignorance or incapacity only testifies to his sovereign independence.[17]

The Enlightenment narrator similarly regards all other narrative as a writing which comes "from below." Clearly, there is a division between my interpretation of discursive determination (re-initiated in a more powerful way with the concept of an *a priori* defence) and Lecker's interpretation of an existential freedom that enables Blaise to "heighten our perception of daily experience."[18] Where does this division arise?

Lecker states in his introduction that "Blaise provides us with a persistent and ongoing exploration of what it means to be a contemporary writer, and in exploring this role he grapples with some large issues that are central to contemporary thought."[19] This implies a project of self-reflexive criticism, the doubling of a

narrative that in exploring self clarifies problems of "contemporary thought." More than this, it implies a grasp upon meaning which is one of power-knowledge. I would argue that rather than the exploration resulting in any progress of knowledge, it serves to preserve the power of the same. Lecker goes on to argue that one of the central issues Blaise explores is "how we are to live in a world that some say is devoid of authors, subjects, consciousness, meaning, and finally literature itself."[20] This parody of postmodernist and poststructuralist thought, taking place at Lecker's introductory stage of his criticism, parallels Blaise's pre-empting strategy whereby any other critical perspective is ridiculed in advance. That is not to say that Lecker should not maintain, defend and clearly articulate his liberal humanist position —on the contrary— but, as a foretaste of the method which will be used to discuss this 'paradigmatic' author and 'contemporary thought' such a statement is strangely restrictive. Perhaps this parodic statement is not merely a rejection of such texts as Barthes 'The Death of the Author,' but also an objection to Foucault's suggestion in *The Order Of Things* "that the humanist subject 'man' is the product of the discourses of a particular historical moment."[21] This destabilizing shift thus includes analysis of those structures that enable a centred textual universe to continue.

In section thirteen of *Days And Nights* (part one), the narrator has a 'soothing vision' of India. Outside of the Ramakrishna Mission can be seen "gray-haired men gathering blossoms from gardens that could rival a Rose Bowl float. It is the great, benign, and enduring India, not the India of the half-men we have helped create." (*DN* 148) This vision is one of spiritual wholeness, rather than the fragmented "half-men" created by the West. However, a questioning of the narrator-reader construct here allows for a slightly more detailed discussion. The narrator is concerned with 'image' and the response it invokes for the Western spectator, that is, the response is shifted towards the implied reader. The images are as follows. First, the spiritual, "benign and enduring India"; second, the realisation that these participants are actually "middle-aged businessmen using the mission as a kind of hotel" (*DN* 149); third the further banal realisation that the men are different (once more). Prior to this third stage, the narrator-reader construct would "probably say of them (meaning it as a compliment), they're just like us." To which, in a didactic manner, the narrator responds — switching to the first person and excluding the reader — "No, they're not, I thought that morning, they're not like us at all. Good for them." (*DN* 149) The implied reader is thus brought back into the scene, but only after having been taught a lesson. What is this lesson? That difference is different? That spiritual difference is "great" and "enduring," where material gain is fragmentary and dangerous? That the reader should not be deceived by appearance and image (but if so, why not texture")?

The narrator states that "An open society is a beautiful thing, vigilant eclecticism is surely a sensible aspiration. Yet how can these men on the lawn of the Ramakrishna survive? Will we let them?" (*DN* 149) Once again, the reader is impli-

cated in this "we," in this voice of modernist concern, nostalgia for that which the I has no need to absorb. What is soothing about these gentle flower-gathering men could be called their proper vocation, proper in the sense that they do not disrupt, compete or claim the same discursive or economic space as the narrator. What seems improper is not their aspiration to modernization, but the damage imposed by modernization from the outside — perhaps it is the other way round? And so the narrator "loves the proper":

> . . . what is proper to himself, proper to the other, proper, that is, to the always singular thing, which is proper in that it is not dirty, soiled, sickening, or disgusting . . .[22]

Beginning as Frame

To further problematise the notion of beginning as before and above the text, I shall return to "To Begin, To Begin," resisting the latter's concept of stability and mastery. The narrator of Blaise's short-story states that "More decisions are made on the basis of the first few sentences of a story than any other part . . . ," and, "the story seeks its beginning, the story many times is its beginning, amplified." (*TB* 415) To capture an audience, a readership, this spatial location is obviously of the greatest importance. The question of "decisions" opens up a rapid list of structural relations, however, that goes beyond a single site of signification: the teleological narrative, the holistic "microcosm of the whole" (*TB* 415), the individual signature of style that is signed throughout the text, to name just a few. So far, I have playfully considered the beginning as a transcendental space which is also a position of defence, *a priori*, from critique.

In Blaise's final paragraph, the narrator concludes with a brief discussion of the "delicate interplays of action and description" (*TB* 418), where character is the mediating force between the two. The "purest part of the story," as noted, precedes this mediation, this interplay of life and death. The protagonist of *Days And Nights* (part one) is "Clarke Blaise," an overloaded signifier that could be replaced with "the narrator," "the author-function" or simply that vague concept "self" of autobiographic classification. The author as creator, as the labouring writer of transcendental beginnings which frame the narratives that follow, is thus both inside and outside the text. How is this so? How is the frame both inside and outside, instead of the boundary, border, the limit/break of discursive space? Does the frame function as an infinite regress? If so, the pure, inviolate beginning must be exploded. If not, then my series of questions must begin over again. In what follows, I shall use my questions as a guiding thread to discuss the beginning/frame as a power-effect which the narrator seeks to efface.

The narrator of section fourteen states that "India seems, simultaneously, a remote past and a distant future." (*DN* 151) The narrative frame makes up the

present (present space of representation). Is this frame ornamental, to use Kant's definitions, where *parerga* do "not belong to the whole presentation of the object as an intrinsic constituent, but only [as] an extrinsic addition . . . ,"[23] or, is this frame going to impair the reader's judgment by calling attention to its own 'finery'? In this section of *Days And Nights*, the framing narrative states that Calcutta is "unknowable": "Calcutta is like a moon, a satellite torn from the same molten mass as earth, obeying the same universal laws, but otherwise so changed in all its textures as to be unknowable." (*DN* 151) The language of "universal laws" signals once more the transcendental, where the following sentence equates the unknowable with the beginning: "Even the points of familiar contact, driving a car, mailing a letter, become infinitely rich and difficult." (*DN* 151) The space before articulation, before "then" is also supposedly "infinitely rich and difficult." This imagery of equation continues; the narrator "felt engulfed by enough raw significance at every moment to drive me mad." (*DN* 151) But raw significance, that which is not articulated or concluded, the stuff of beginnings, is also the material of reason, where madness is excluded or its powers contained and controlled. The narrator notes how "Everyone in Calcutta seems somehow purer, beyond analysis . . ." (*DN* 151), just like the beginning. The frame *is* Calcutta, Calcutta *is* the frame. How has this happened? As Derrida notes, ". . . the parergon is a form which has as its traditional determination not that it stands out but that it disappears, buries itself, effaces itself, melts away at the moment it deploys its greatest energy."[24] For the narrator, this is both the affirmation of the power of the frame where narrative and "texture" coincide, and the dislocation of the framing narrative, where "Like wood. It creaks and cracks, breaks down,"[25] because everyone in Calcutta is ultimately aestheticized, is "out of Balzac" (*DN* 151).

My parody of modernism must fold here, since up to now it has been reinforcing the stereotype of the West as one system or structure, one voice of Enlightenment authority. The West fragments, is fragmented; counter-discourse can criticize the West's structures from within. It is a counter-discourse that has enabled this criticism of the narrative position of the author-function Blaise, which involves the attack of "universal laws," "texture," the *a priori* defence, and so on. The narrator of *Days And Nights* states that ". . . in isolated moments we may grasp it ["India"] and escape ourselves in ways we never expected. All experience of India is a passage into myths that are still functional, rituals that still signify, art (like the classical dance) that is forever in creation." (*DN* 150-1) The beginning is forever in creation; the author-function as creative writer controls, alone, the beginning. The narrator arrives in India to discover he is already in control of the "unknowable," that Calcutta ultimately is as pure as the originary moment over and over again.

For the essential modernist process of continual absorption without the loss or downfall of the central sovereign subject, the beginning is an example of the attempt to stabilize, anchor, a system of differences which are not "devoid of

meaning" (Lecker), but where meaning is in excess. I would read the beginning as a signifier where "language's differing and deferring will always carry the play of meaning beyond any statically geometrical structure that would arrest [control, regulate, determine, map out] the production of meaning."[26]

The frame/narrative effaces itself through language. But language is always in excess of the frame; language reveals the strategy of the frame — how it is inside and outside, how it absorbs difference, how it legitimates itself, how it controls itself in advance — all this is revealed only if the reader does not accept the narrator's implied reader-position. Only through this resistance can the reader reposition her- or himself as the writer, not necessarily to replace in finality the narrator, but to break the frame.

NOTES

[1] Clark Blaise, "To Begin, To Begin" (*TB*). *A 20th Century Anthology, Essays, Stories, and Poems* Ed. W. E. Messenger & W. H. New (Ontario: Prentice-Hall, 1984) : All further references cited in the text.

[2] "A true critic in the perusal of a book is like a dog at a feast, whose thoughts and stomach are wholly set upon what the guests fling away, and consequently is apt to snarl most when there are the fewest bones." Jonathan Swift. *A Tale Of A Tub* in *The Oxford Authors: Jonathan Swift* Ed. A. Ross & D. Wooley (Oxford: OUP, 1989) : 110.

[3] Clark Blaise & Bharati Mukherjee, *Days And Nights In Calcutta* (*DN*) (Ontario: Penguin, 1987). All further references cited in the text.

[4] Steve Connor, *Postmodern Culture: An Introduction To Theories Of The Contemporary* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990) : 4.

[5] Connor, 4.

[6] Connor, 30.

[7] Connor, 30.

[8] Connor, 212.

[9] Connor, 19.

[10] J. G. Merquior, "Spider And Bee: Towards A Critique Of The Postmodern Ideology," in *Postmodernism ICA Documents*. Ed. Lisa Appignanesi (London: Free Association Books, 1989) : 44.

[11] Robert Lecker, *An Other I, The Fiction Of Clark Blaise* (Ontario: ECW Press, 1988) : 91.

[12] M. Newman, "Revising Modernism, Representing Postmodernism: Critical Discourses Of The Visual Arts," in *Postmodernism ICA Documents*, 100.

[13] Lecker, 24.

[14] Michel Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?", in *The Foucault Reader*. Ed. Paul Rabinow. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984) : 38.

[15] Lecker, 95.

[16] Lecker, 22.

[17] Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*. Trans. B. Johnson (London: Athlone Press, 1981): 76.

[18] Lecker, 23.

[19] Lecker, 23.

[20] Lecker, 23.

[21] M. Newman, 115.

[22] Jacques Derrida, *Signeponge/Signsponge*. Trans. R. Rand. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984): 30.

[23] Immanuel Kant, *Critique Of Judgment*. Trans. W. S. Pluhar. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987): 72.

[24] Jacques Derrida, *The Truth In Painting*. Trans. G. Bennington & I. McLeod. (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1987): 61.

[25] Derrida, *The Truth In Painting*, 75.

[26] Allen Thiher, *Words In Reflection, Modern Language Theory And Postmodern Fiction*. (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press): 88.

PARADISE LOST AND REGAINED IN THE NOVELS OF BALCHANDRA RAJAN

George Woodcock

IT HAS ALWAYS BEEN MY VIEW that the best writing in English to come out of India has originated in the Dravidian South, where the Brahmins since Sankara have also maintained what is arguably the highest Hindu culture in the country. Raja Rao was born in Mysore, and R. K. Narayan has written his splendid Malgudi novels there, though he was born in Madras, the early East India Company stronghold from which emerged other notable writers in English. Balchandra Rajan is one of them, for though he was born in Burma, he was brought up in Madras.

I have never come to a satisfactory explanation for this phenomenon, since some of the parts of the South where the teaching and writing of English most flourished, were native realms like Mysore and the Malabar states of Cochin and Travancore, ruled by enlightened Hindu princes, and their people had relatively little direct contact with the British. Indians in the South spoke their own Dravidian languages, such as Tamil and Malayalam. They had accepted Sanskrit as the senior language of traditional and religious learning, and in the same way they came to accept English as the senior language of liberal and secular learning. Indeed, when the central government in the 1960s attempted from Delhi to impose the northern language of Hindi on the whole country, the people of the Southern cities and towns came out on to the streets in protest. I well remember seeing walls in Trivandrum and Madurai covered with immense graffiti reading "English — YES. Hindi — NO." And though the ageing cliché of a love-hate relationship between Indians and the British Raj may be partially true of the North, it is not so of the South, where the educated classes have remained enamoured of English and consider the speaking and writing of it a desirable cultural accomplishment and not merely a political and commercial convenience as it is in the North.

This matter of the attraction of English culture — especially the language and the literature — finds a special example in Balchandra Rajan whose two novels

I am discussing in this essay. *The Dark Dancer* (1958) and *Too Long in the West* (1961) — though they also have larger schemes — are the stories of two young Indians, a man and then a woman, who spend years at foreign universities (Cambridge and Columbia) and return home to find themselves involved in traditional arranged marriages. How they overcome the problems the situations involve — tragic in one case and comic in the other — and retain or perhaps even recover their integrity is in each case the denouement of the book. Neither, we are led to assume, has been too long in the west, for somehow their life abroad had made them more fit to survive in the new independent India with its ancient poverty, its ancient ignorance and its deep divisions of community and caste.

Such situations are close to Rajan's own life. When I met him first he was living in England and editing an occasional magazine of English criticism and poetry called *Focus*. In Cambridge in the mid-1940s I used to visit him in his rooms at Trinity, where he became a Fellow and the Director of Studies. I did not think of him then as a potential novelist but rather as an excellent critic of modern English poetry. One of the issues of *Focus* was devoted entirely to T. S. Eliot. In the 1960s he published an excellent study of Yeats — *W. B. Yeats: A Critical Introduction*, that went into several editions. But his main study was always of John Milton, and in the end he became one of the world's leading Miltonists. The seventeenth century poet not only interested but also influenced him, and very often in the more ruminative passages of his novels about India one finds oneself moving in a strange interface between the *Upanishads* and *Paradise Lost*, while at times the very prose takes on a Miltonic sonorousness.

When I next encountered Rajan it was in Delhi in 1962. I had gone with Mulk Raj Anand to a celebration in honour of that venerable windbag, Rabindranath Tagore, and Rajan was there. He had left Cambridge for India in 1948, the year after independence took place, and almost immediately he entered the Indian Foreign Service. In 1950 he was back in the west, this time, like his character Nalini in *Too Long in the West*, in New York, where he served until 1957 on the Indian Delegation to the United States and later, until 1959, as Indian representative on the International Atomic Energy Commission. At the beginning of the 1960s he was again back from the west, as Professor of English, and later Dean of Arts at the University of Delhi. When I saw him yet again, early in 1964, he was already chafing at the problems which a serious scholar of English literature encountered in India, and plotting a return to a land of full libraries and scholarly connections. He was thinking of Canada, and I tried to get him an appointment at UBC, where I was then teaching. My efforts failed, and later in 1964 he went off to be a visiting professor at the University of Wisconsin. In 1966 he had found his Canadian perch, but at Western Ontario rather than UBC. In London, Ontario, he has remained, writing and talking of Milton. Long in the West indeed!

IT WAS DURING HIS SECOND PERIOD abroad that Rajan wrote his two novels, first publishing *The Dark Dancer* in New York in 1958 and *Too Long in the West* in London in 1961. *The Dark Dancer* appeared subsequently in London in 1959 and *Too Long in the West* in New York in 1962. The sequence has some significance, since *The Dark Dancer* was a strongly dramatic novel centring on one of the great crises of the period — the communal massacres in India at the time of partition. Thus it was on one level the kind of issue-oriented novel that appeals strongly to American readers, and it became a Book Society choice and was translated into several European languages. *Too Long in the West*, on the other hand, was the sort of comic novel (comic in the double sense of being happily resolved and being mockingly humorous) that appealed to British nostalgia about the Raj. Though it was not a book that ignored the issues of the time, it handled them with sympathy rather than tragic portentousness. Moreover, the satiric view of American life which it presented in various ways appealed to the British at a time when they were seeking any consolation for the diminution of their stature in the world.

On first reading, Rajan's two novels, despite their similarities of plot, seem strikingly unlike, not merely because one is a tragedy and the other a comedy, but also in mood — the one dark and ruminative, the other light and ironic to the edge of absurdity — and in didactic direction, for while *The Dark Dancer* seems to be telling us how simplistic Gandhi's teaching may have been in the light of Indian traditions and temperaments, *Too Long in the West* seems to be asserting that the wise woman will fulfil her talents and her nature in the most unfavourable circumstances, and so, by implication, can India, which in one of her aspects Nalini represents.

The Dark Dancer opens with Krishnan returning from an unusually long period in the west; he has stayed on in England because of the difficulties and dangers of getting home to India in wartime. He arrives during the tense months before the liberation of India, but his first preoccupation is not political, for his parents are arranging his belated marriage. And it is here that we are introduced to the satiric elements which make this more than an individual tragedy by emphasizing the characteristics of an ancient but damaged society that provides the tragedy's setting. For Krishnan's is a Madrasi Brahmin family, and despite their compromises with the Raj — Government Service is considered the best of careers even under the British — they observe their ceremonial life with great punctiliousness; they belong to the Saivite wing of their caste, and Siva, the god they especially worship, becomes in his manifestation as Nataraja the Dark Dancer of the novel, who presides over the orgy of death and destruction through which Krishnan will pass.

Krishnan has to choose his wife, and he picks Kamala, a girl of rather improbably self-contained and self-composed virtue, despite the opposition of his uncle, a fanatic for strict observance who declares that her horoscope promises misfortune. The uncle, a recurrently present and always pompous figure, is called Kruger, the result of a discreet act of defiance on the part of his parents when he was born during the South African War, and this name of a fundamentalist Christian Boer farmer-turned-rebel-leader seems a pungent comment on Kruger's orthodox Hindu excesses. The background cast is completed by Krishnan's father, whose parsimoniousness is always clashing with his piety, and his prospective father-in-law, one of those highly educated Madrasis for whom style has become an end in itself and who speaks, whatever the depths of emotion involved, always in perfect and silver-toned Augustan phrases.

Krishnan sticks fast by Kamala, and the wedding goes ahead, with its sacred fire and its ancient Sanskrit invocations and its four days of feasting (illegal under wartime regulations) attended by cadgers and beggars of all kinds and relatives by the score, from Government Service uncles (of whom much is expected) to seventh aunts and even remoter cousins. Immediately afterwards an incident happens that dramatically prefigures the tragic climax of the novel. Krishnan and Kamala and their friend the radical Vijayaraghavan attend a Congress demonstration on the beach at Madras. The British are still in power, and a peaceful march is planned which will of course provoke the violence of the police, and by the demonstrators' wounds will reveal the superiority of non-violence. But Vijaraghavan taunts the police and is brutally beaten, and Krishnan, infuriated, violently attacks one of the police officers. He in turn is beaten unconscious and then sprited away to a private hospital, his deed so well concealed that he finds his way into the Government service as planned and reaches Delhi in time for the partition of India in an atmosphere of growing hatred and violence as Hindus and Sikhs and Moslems are murdered in their homes and massacred on the trains which they hope will be taking them to safety in their own communities.

But for the time being Krishnan is not involved in this pattern, and as *The Dark Dancer* is a novel that moves with a slow and Miltonic dignity, we have a long journey through ruminative narrative as Krishnan ponders over his own fate and that of his country under the shadow of the Dark Dancer, Siva, who is also Lord of Destruction. Rajan has not in this novel mastered fully the skills of conveying personal crises and development through incident and dialogue, and so the story is largely internalized in long passages of mulling reflection.

The Dark Dancer continues like a kind of quest story in which the hero faces a number of tests which are also combats, and seems to fail in most of them. Arrived in Delhi, his days in the West are poignantly recalled by the presence of an English girl who was his friend when they were both students in Cambridge; she has turned into the kind of English beauty over whom Indian civil servants drool, but has also

developed a sharp and independent mind. Kamala goes away because her mother is ill, and Cynthia and Krishnan become lovers. When Kamala returns, that model of Indian wives (just a little too good, as Cynthia is a little too beautiful for belief in her to be easy) quietly accepts the situation and departs, leaving no clues of her whereabouts. Krishnan is thrown into a crisis of indecision, like Buridan's ass, and Cynthia contemptuously throws him out of her life. He has failed his tests twice again, as Hindu husband and as romantic European-style lover.

Now he learns that Kamala has gone off to dedicate herself to people suffering in the strife-ridden areas, and so he sets off for a refugee settlement ironically called Shantihpur (City of Peace) in the Punjab. On his way he is caught up in communal warfare when the train is stopped and all the Moslems on board are massacred by Sikhs and Hindus. As in other incidents of the book, Krishnan is removed from the greater scenes of horrors, where the Dark Dancer tramps in his orgy of death. He is shut in a lavatory with a panic-stricken Moslem disguised as a Brahmin, who slashes Krishna with a knife and threatens to kill him while the blood flows under the door from the massacre outside. Finally, a Sikh breaks down the door, slaughters the Moslem, and saves Krishnan from gangrene by soaking his wound in gin. (The Moslem is the only person we actually see dying in this novel, whose necessary violence is handled with classic indirection.) This test, during which he conducts himself with exemplary pacifism, Krishnan may be thought to have passed, for the Sikh takes him to the hospital where Kamala is working and they are somewhat pathetically reunited as Krishnan enters the realm of the M.O., perhaps the most fully though the most satirically realized character in the novel.

The M.O. (who is always unnamed) is a man filled with bitterness against the British yet intent on resembling the best of them in all that he does. He has taken up their code of self-discipline and "backbone"; he has assumed, though he mocks the very idea, "the white man's burden," showing his own superiority over his fellow Indians by dedication and decisiveness. He risks his own life and that of his bearer by bringing into the hospital Moslems who are also cholera victims, and when the crowd comes to murder these patients there is a scene that might have taken place in a film or novel about the Raj when, with Krishnan beside him and each armed with revolvers, the M.O. stands on the verandah of the hospital facing the oncoming mob, and, with luck more than marksmanship, wings the mob's leader and forces it to retreat.

The novel reaches its climax when Kamala, moved by some destructive influence (perhaps the Dark Dancer) insists on going out to walk in the streets of Shantihpur at night. She and Krishnan try to intercept a couple of Hindu thugs who are pursuing a Moslem prostitute. Krishnan is beaten unconscious, but as he goes down for the count he sees Kamala being stabbed to death. So, with the best of will, he has failed again. A Hindu might say that Kamala's karma has defeated him.

There follows a passage of dark satire, as the people of Shantihpur decide that Kamala was an incarnation of the goddess Parvati and try to profit by it, and Krishnan insists on taking the ashes to Benares, providing a rich opportunity for Kruger, in that place of fraud and exaltation, to show off not only his Brahmin learning but also the extremities of his fanatic folly.

But the novel does not end on the downbeat of tragedy; appropriately for a Miltonic author, it has a stark but positive conclusion. Krishnan has become free. He is liberated from the karma that drew him to Kamala. And refusing to marry again, he is freed from the circle of obligations that Hindu life imposes. The words of the *Gita* illuminate his mind:

> He who seeks freedom
> Thrusts fear aside,
> Thrusts aside anger,
> And puts off desire;
> Truly that man
> Is made free for ever.

He is like the survivors from the deadly battle of Kurukshetra setting off in the *Mahabharata* on their pilgrimage to Mount Kailas.

> He looked at the sun going down, crimsoning the river. In minutes the orange light would fade and the velvety oblivion flow in over the emptiness. The shadows were stretching, reaching out towards him. There was nothing behind him, and ahead of him only himself.
>
> He walked back to the strength of his beginning.

And now, at the end, we are reminded of yet another walking figure, Adam, who also had gained freedom through his failures, and goes with Eve into the exile that is also liberation.

> The world was all before them, where to choose
> Their place of rest, and Providence their guide.
> They hand in hand with wandering steps and slow
> Through Eden took their solitary way.

In *The Dark Dancer* it is the man alone who takes his solitary way. But in *Too Long in the West* it is a woman who makes her own terms with tradition, and we shall perhaps not be unjustified in seeing Nalini as a solitary Eve in a jungle Eden: Indian woman learning to command her world, and moving by acceptance and adaptation rather than rejection into a new freedom.

If *The Dark Dancer* has overtones of the Miltonic epic, *Too Long in the West* reminds one of another seventeenth century form, the comedy of manners. For it is indeed a novel of manners, mocking the ways and attitudes of

both North American and Indian societies with a satire light-hearted enough to move at times over the edge of comedy into farce. And its form and style, which differ greatly from those of *The Dark Dancer*, are essentially those of the drama, with its five chapters moving in orderly procession like five acts, and its reliance on episode and dialogue. Gone are the long passages of rumination. People reveal themselves in how and what they speak rather than in what they do, though what they can do can have dramatic consequences, for the characters here too have to undergo tests, though their results are likely to be absurd rather than violent. Everyone in the novel wins in the end, and perhaps all win what they really want.

Too Long in the West is set partly in New York, but mostly in a little South Indian village, Mudalur, lost in jungles and rainy mountains, and it is to Sambasivan, the self-created "squire" of Mudalur, that we are introduced as the book opens. The villagers are assembled, a double line of eccentrics and derelicts, awaiting him as his bullock cart makes its slow ascent from the nearest railway station. Already we are in what I suppose one may call Narayanland, that comic provincial India immortalized especially by R. K. Narayan, where an Indian society corrupted by inheritances from the Raj is shown going its absurd and pretentious way. The main difference is that Narayan's unforgettable Malgudi is a town evolving over a whole series of novels, while Rajan's Mudalur is a remote village seen briefly and perhaps therefore all the more vividly. But its corruption by alien values, largely personified by the returning Sambasivan, has gone just as far as that of Malgudi.

The villagers are in fact expecting not only their benefactor but also the main source of their cash income. Sambasivan, a pretentious, benevolent fool accompanied by a wife whose tongue the years have given the sharpness of the hottest Madras curry, is a former lecturer whose life was changed by winning a famous crossword puzzle twice in succession and becoming both rich and briefly famous. Instead of settling down in Madras or Madurai to enjoy his wealth and live in society, as his wife Lakshmi would have wished, he decides to spend every good season in the isolation of Mudalur, with its marvelous mangoes, and has been going there regularly after the monsoons for thirty-two years. He has built a circular house of sandalwood, and periodically he adds another circle of rooms, so that the house lies like a great and growing helix spread over the hillside. It is with these intermittent constructions, and with the making of unnecessary furniture to fill new rooms, and with the digging of wells and ponds and refilling them, and sundry unsuccessful plantation schemes (the coffee production of Mudalur is used up in a single party), that he occupies himself and spends his money and gives a kind of living for a few months to the 299 wretched inhabitants of the village.

This time his return is exceptional, for it will be followed shortly by the arrival of his daughter Nalini, coming home from her three years at Columbia. Her parents have decided that it is time for her marriage to be arranged, and Sambasivan —

much against the will of Lakshmi who would like the whole thing done in Madras — has advertized for prospective candidates to come to Mudalur and in their turn be inspected.

The second chapter opens with Nalini herself arriving at the little station down in the valley and immediately goes into a long flashback of her voyage to the west and her experience of the wonders of American life. Devoting a great deal of time to mockery of American manners and particularly of the excesses of advertising techniques, Rajan is most heavily satirical in this part of the book, yet he also shows how largely Nalini is changed if not reshaped by the experience, learning the importance of personal freedom and the need for a kind of behaviour that acknowledges equality of genders and persons alike. Yet she does so without shedding her indulgent respect for her parents or her deep love for the landscape of Mudalur where she has mostly grown up.

> She wrote to her parents regularly and fondly and when she took up her pen she was not often aware of the distance as an emptiness. Yet they belonged to a different life. And she was coming back to it a different person. She had to be ready for the shock of strangeness and not give herself up because the young always gave way; or rebel so violently that she trod on others' dreams. Yet she had been trained well and she would have to walk the tight rope.

Three suitors arrive. One is on the train with Nalini, not knowing that she is the prize of the contest, and he boastingly reveals that he is not really interested in getting married but in gathering material for a treatise on the arranged marriage. Of the two who arrive independently at the house, one is a man of pathetic desperation an orphan who, since he does not know his birth date, has no horoscope — an indispensable document in an Indian arranged marriage. The third is a maniac writer who desperately needs a good dowry so that he can buy himself a linotype machine to print all the imitations of classical poems he is writing to make the world familiar with at last the echo of the masters.

Two other figures appear independently and add themselves to the confusion at Mudalur. One is a cosmetician named Kubera, as oily as his preparations, who has heard of the famous mangoes that grow on a tree on the barren peak of Mahavir mountain, and wishes to use them for a new skin cream. And the other, making a dramatic entrance with a jeep that sends rattling down into the abyss behind it the only bridge uniting the village with the outside world, is the American doctor Ernest, whom Nalini knew at Columbia, and who now adds himself to the suitors, a force pulling her back towards the West. Ernest — who is running a malaria control operation — becomes the chief figure of the central chapter, "Seventy-five Per cent Wettable," a parody of western chivalry, with a film camera for a sword and his jeep for a steed as he rescues Nalini from a wild elephant in the jungle; he also ruins her reputation in the village since the jeep breaks down and they are lost in the woods for three hours.

Kubera meanwhile has organized an expedition to gather the mangoes on Mahavir mountain, but it ends with Guruswami, the village headman, breaking his leg, and this plays into the hands of Raman, the village barber, a political radical who has recently arrived in Mudalur. Raman persuades the villagers that they have become too dependent on strangers. An assault is mounted on the hillside house. The people only withdraw when Nalini agrees to make her choice the next day so that the village will be free of all these outsiders. Nalini, meanwhile, has handled the suitors with a flirtatious aplomb and a great deal of impish wit, rather like an Indian Millamant. But she reserves her real *coup de théâtre* for the day of choice — when she picks the barber Raman.

The fifth chapter is a kind of epilogue written around the report of a government servant who is about to defect to Mudalur. There has been a comic ending in every respect, in that everyone seems to have gained what he really wants. The poet has his linotype machine, and is flooding the world with plagiarisms. The scholar has his Institute of Social Involvement in which he gives courses on the Arranged Marriage and a redeemed forger teaches about Deficit Financing. Kubera is busily making his Attar of Darkness, and the man without parents is following the only respectable occupation open in India for a person without antecedents; he has become a holy man and runs his Institute of Social Renunciation. Raman is renowned throughout India as the most gentle of all piercers of noses and ears and takes the opportunity to whisper his subversive incitements to jewelled women of all classes. The people of Mudalur are their old eccentric selves, and have kept the bridge that links them to the outer world in a state of imminent collapse as they sustain themselves on the world's finest mangoes. It is said that "those who remained in Mudalur for five days stayed on for ever, to nod their heads inanely at visitors who asked questions."

And there, presiding over the place, is Nalini with her compelling eyes. It seems on one level a Circe's Island where men are enslaved and stupefied. Yet the last word of the novel is "Paradise," and perhaps we are not making too much of Rajan's Miltonism when we think of the novel as a mundane *Paradise Regained* in which the secret of innocence is rediscovered in the shape of a magic fruit. The mango returns to us what the apple lost us.

NOTE

This essay is not a continuation of or related in any way except its subject matter to a piece I wrote on Rajan's novels and published in a fairly long past issue of *World Literature Written in English*. I believe that critical insights depend on seeing anew, so I did not refer to that earlier piece and shall reread it, doubtless, with surprise. All resemblances between the two pieces are, as the libel paragraphs in novels say, accidental.

A WEDDING SONG

Uma Parameswaran

Spring came softly this year.

It was a long winter for the Assiniboine —
  with blizzards whistling across the prairies
  and snow steadily covering banks and water
  that had frozen with a sudden summer frost.

Under the snow and the long freeze
The river had felt earth's mother touch,
Felt the roots of the tree waiting, waiting,
And the sun's laser rays warming
Her deep waters into thawing, slowly thawing.

When Spring's deft fingers broke the ice,
The river was ready, and her waters rose —
  not with the flood of yesteryears —
But gently, gently, as the lotus rises
At Lakshmi's feet.

We who had seen winter come suddenly,
  had turned up our thermostats
  brought out our wintercoats
  and driven in gas-heated cars
  along the frozen river, our Assiniboine,
Had only distantly thought of the lonely swirling
Of her warm waters locked under ice unending.

But the tree waited, patiently waited,
For the river to rise
And feed his roots
That he may bloom.

THE SINGING METAPHOR

Poetry of Rienzi Crusz

Uma Parameswaran

RIENZI CRUSZ STANDS squarely in the English literary tradition of Shakespeare, Milton and the Bible. His mother tongue is English, and he speaks no other language. He is a Canadian poet, never having written poetry or any other kind of creative writing until he immigrated into Canada in 1965. The story of how he came to poetry is interesting. After working for thirteen years as research librarian in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), he came to Canada; as a single parent of three children, all under the age of ten, he was glad to take any job he was offered; he found himself appointed a cataloguer at the University of Toronto Library. The sheer boredom of having to churn out five hundred catalogue cards a day drove him to poetry. He sent four of his poems to Irving Layton with a note asking if Layton thought he had any talent or "should I collect postage stamps?" Layton replied, "Forget about postage stamps. The poems are very good indeed." Today Rienzi Crusz is the author of five volumes of poetry: *Flesh and Thorn* (1975), *Elephant and Ice* (1980), *Singing Against the Wind* (1985), *A Time for Loving* (1986) and *Still Close to the Raven* (1989). A sixth volume, *The Rain Doesn't Know Me Any More*, is due for publication in the very near future.

Rienzi Crusz was born into a burgher family (like Michael Ondaatje) on October 17, 1925 in Colombo. The burghers claim descent from European colonists who fathered children on Sinhalese women. In one of his poems, Crusz refers to "A Portuguese captain [who] holds / the soft brown hand of my Sinhala mother. / It's the year 1515 A.D." ("Roots" *TL* 69) His father was a mathematics instructor who, as Crusz says in a poetic tribute, "chased the ultimate equation / the something that flowed / from heaven to earth / earth to heaven." ("Elegy" *TL* 57) It was perhaps from him that Crusz developed his love for precision, for the symmetry and structure that permeate his poetry. His mother, Cleta Marcellina Serpanchy, from the three poems in which she appears that Crusz has said are biographical, seems to have been an efficient homemaker "squeezing out the shine / from veran-

dah chairs, the red cement floor / a mirror to your sweaty face." ("Elegy" *TL* 79) She was a devoted mother, feeding, "hectoring" and sacrificing all she had for her eight children.

Critics and reviewers have seen Crusz as mastering an alien tongue and culture. Arun Mukherjee, one of our most forthright critics of imperialism, speaks of third world Calibans who must perforce speak Prospero's tongue. Of Crusz she says:

> Like Yeats, he has created his own mythology and rhetoric because the available conventions of Anglo-Canadian poetry do not serve his needs. . . . The comfortable sense of tradition which a mainstream poet enjoys in relationship with the readers from a similar cultural background, and which performs half of our labour for us — familiar allusions, a shared past, binding conventions, is unavailable to Crusz for it, being alien, will only falsify his meaning.

Michael Estok, in a review article, says Crusz's work is "in the mainstream of Canadian culture" because immigrant sensibility that seeks to come to grips with the "extended wholeness of life" is mainstream sensibility, but he goes on to say that "unlike so much in the history of Canadian writing, Crusz is derivative of no one."

Though both critics are complimentary to Crusz, and have their partial relevance, their statements are not quite true. In the erstwhile British Empire, as I have noted in an earlier study (Vikas 1976) there were several generations of South Asians I call "native-aliens" whose language of proficiency was English and who excelled in all that British education had to offer but who oftentimes knew little about their own indigenous culture or language. Crusz shares the same literary experience as most Canadians of his generation that was closer to standard British school curricula across the Empire than the present generation is. He is derivative, not in any pejorative sense, of Milton, Dylan Thomas and the Bible, just as Margaret Laurence is. Landscape, and not sensibility or educational background, is the difference between Crusz and native-born Canadians. Reared a Roman Catholic, Crusz's childhood was saturated with psalm-singing and Bible reading. As Judith Miller says of his poems, "they carry a language of modulated rhythm and sonority, the language of oral poetry and of the King James version of the Bible."

Two sets of memories that he talks about in his public readings are: standing at his brother's door listening enthralled to a recitation of Francis Thompson's "The Hound of Heaven" and going to movie versions of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet* and *Julius Caesar*. Many of his poems echo Thompson's form and philosophy, and Shakespeare's cadence.

Like many others across the British world in the first half of this century, Crusz grew up with the poetry and sensibilities of the English Romantics and his poetry bears witness to his careful observations of nature's sights and sounds. His home stood a hundred yards from the beaches and ditches of Galle Face Green and Layard's Folly, and on the same road as the house of the Chilean ambassador

Pablo Neruda. During the last two decades, Crusz has enjoyed with the pleasure of recognition the Sri Lankan landscapes that appear in Neruda's works, and has been an avid and conscientious reader of South American writers, as evidenced by the epigraphs he selects for various parts of his volumes.

Crusz took an Honours degree in history and later received a Colombo Plan scholarship to study Library Science at the University of London. He earned his living as a bank clerk until 1965 when he left Ceylon for Canada with his three children, who figure in his early collections. He is now married to Ann, also from Sri Lanka, and lives in Waterloo, Ontario with her and their teenage son, who seems to have given a lighter touch to the later poems in his continuing dialectic of Sun Man and Winter Man, elephant and ice.

THE FIRST POEM IN his first collection, *Flesh and Thorn,* is typical of Crusz and representative of his poetics. It is carefully crafted, structurally balanced and thematically explicit. It is also a metaphor of his own poetic process; it says that considerable force has to be skilfully applied before an experience becomes a poem. Titled "How does one reach the sweet kernel?" it is a love poem on the first level. The metaphor of love is developed in three steps. The first stanza describes the husking of a coconut by a Ceylonese farmer, the second connects that to one kind of love, and the third contrasts this process to another kind of love. The description of husking a coconut is visual and violent. The coconut is pierced on a standing crowbar, the shell is cut with a machete and the sweet kernal "opens out like a womb." This simile with which the first stanza ends serves as transition to the second stanza which describes sexual force in visually explicit terms — "that hangs exotic and hard / like a bunch of king coconuts /on the palm of our dreams." The usage of "palm" is interesting. Along with a more literal image of the metaphor in progress, namely, the palm tree on which the coconut clusters hang, the possibility of holding something in the palm of one's hand is hinted. This echo of Dylan Thomas, or rather Thomas' technique of slightly varying familiar phrases to give a startling new effect, occurs frequently in Crusz.

The third stanza is short. It describes another kind of love, genteel and "tentative," clearly love that the persona finds repugnant. The contrast between the two kinds of love is expressed in the choice of fruits, coconut and plum. Everything about the plum is on the surface; there are no hidden delights, no struggle with thick fibres and hard shell before one can burst into the "kernel of the heart." Using a sexual metaphor, Eliot's Prufrock asks, "Do I dare to eat a peach?" Crusz overturns this analogy, showing that the peach-plum family of fruits is for toothless, anemic Prufrocks, not for full-blooded human beings. The double metaphor — of the process of love and of poetry — is unmistakable.

Crusz's preoccupation with poetics recurs in numerous poems. Of particular relevance in the present context is his own recognition that poetry revolves around metaphors. He says in the title poem of *The Rain Doesn't Know Me Anymore* (which I read in typescript): "I, who for so long / shaped the forgotten metaphor," know "a horizon that would never stand still." The visionaries whom he celebrates in "Truth," are also poets "the madcaps . . . who dared / to crawl up the volcano's rib / and balance on a rim of flame." In "Pardon My Muted Ways," when the woman asks,

> Why a Christ
> on every hair of your head,
> metaphors delicate as wind . . .
> from some prophecy of pain?

the persona replies,

> . . . once long ago
> a haunting face
> drained the Sun-Man to pale bone
> till night collapsed his eyes
> and love slept off its wounds.

His early poetry is suffused with the pain inflicted by that haunting face. Autobiographical details are never far from Crusz's poetry, and it might justifiably be said that *Flesh and Thorn* traces a period in the poet's life, a period that was dominated by two events — the breakdown of his marriage and his emigration from his native Ceylon. In his first volume, two poems, "Biography of an Elusive Cat" and "Karma," specifically record this experience. The cat in "Biography" is an analogue for his wife. She is a Persian cat, with "rich fur" that shines "blue ash or ash blue." The history of a broken marriage is succinctly conveyed — her refusal to be held in the persona's arms, her secret trysts elsewhere, and the intense hold she has on him even long after she disappeared into the night, a hold that reappears time and again in later poems. In "Karma," the same persona leaves the island one June day. The image of the gull lingering on the wet rock effectively fuses his tears and the hardening of his heart, and as the ship sails away, "the fluid horizon" shifts as does the mind, and "the healing sun sealed the hemophiliac flow." The fading smell of frangipani (red jasmine) is replaced by Jergen's Lotion, an anticlimactic kind of comparison to brand name commercial products that appears more often and more intrusively in later poems. As he starts his new life, the "slim Singhala girl" is still a presence in his bones, but the poem ends on a note of catharsis. Time has passed and "the vine hangs heavy . . . with purple grape."

In the first cycle of poems, various similes and metaphors are used to delineate the beauty of the woman who betrayed him; there is the haunting face, the elusive cat, the well-oiled gun, the foxy finger, but none sings more powerfully than the

ectoplasmic limbo-dancer of "The Night before my Birthday." The persona's children are growing up "lost/in the jungle of new apartments," and he himself is entering middle age, "forty four years of matured griefs." The poem evokes a nightmarish atmosphere of hospital wards drenched in Dettol, of empty houses and desolation. Then she "crawls / a fluid limbo-dancer / from under the slit of door" and asks after the children. All the panic and despair of the persona are packed into four words, "Fled, fled, I cry," followed by an awareness of the heritage that has also fled: Noah's doves seek the olive branch.

> And the Gods of Kataragama
> bleed in their shrines
> as a whiff of frangipani
> cuts through the antiseptic air
> and disappears. (*Flesh and Thorn* 4)

His lost heritage is further defined in "Little Brown Boy," where the son is a typical Canadian youngster "cutting rhythms, figurines / with knives under your shoes," but Singhala blood still runs in his body and in his racial memory, symbolized here by "those Singhala ears / that like the elephant / hear the woodapple fall." It is time for the boy to learn more about other losses as well — about his mother's betrayal "a long night ago / when cats wailed on the papapet wall." Through such recurring reference to felines, the poet periodically connects to the continuing life-story that underlies his early poetry.

CRUSZ'S USE OF Sri Lankan landscape and imagery has been noticed by every reviewer and critic, but with widely diverging response. Most Canadian readers perceive exoticism; some praise his work for this quality and others, like the reviewer of *A Time for Loving* in *Canadian Literature*, condemn it as artificial, "a colonial's dangerous nostalgia." Perhaps it is time to recognize that it is neither, that landscape of an immigrant's homeland is part of Canadian poetry, though it is never easy to educate a reviewer into revising his imperialistic and unfounded assumptions such as that the classic temples that dot Crusz's poetic landscape are "surely the product of massive conscription and social oppression?"

Reshard Gool looks deeper at Crusz's imagery; he says of the elephant symbolism, "He handles language three-dimensionally." Elephant imagery is so pervasively representative both of the original homeland of the immigrant and of the making of poems, that it becomes a continuing and expanding metaphor. The poet, at times a circus elephant, at times a king of all he surveys, at times a tired rogue finding his way to the clearing where "your brothers have always gone to die," always combines proverbial powers of memory with proverbial strengths of non-

violent assertiveness. This circles back to the elephant as metaphor for the South Asian immigrant.

Crusz's second volume, *Elephant and Ice* (1980) introduces the use of the dialectic structure that gets honed in his later volumes. The metaphor in the title is obvious, and many of the poems in the volume deal with the advent of the elephant to winterland. Can it survive? The old man in "Kamala" thinks not:

> Beyond
> lies a strange land
> where we can only wear
> a face of alien skin,
> and not finding
> the find of fish or salt of sea
> we'll die slowly within ourselves ("Kamala" *EI* 19)

But he is a lone voice, and he speaks only once. The Sun Man, who actually makes the move from Sri Lanka to Canada, traces the immigrant's path from apartment to suburbia and ends with ironic metaphors for Canadianization, but also with a note of thankfulness. The "rice-paddy lands," "the primal scream" and "words of angels under the sea" of Sri Lanka are lost in the perfections of vitamin pills, the silence, and the "Molson cool" sipped on "shaven grass" of Canada, but the persona ends on a thankful note:

> I AM perfect now.
>
> A brown laughing face
> in the snow,
> not the white skull
> for the flies
> in Ceylon's deadly sun. (*EI* 95)

I am reminded of a contrasting poem of my own where an old woman visiting her son in Canada says she wants to go back to India, "to sun and air / and sweat and even flies and all / But not this, not this."

The Sun Man in the new poems in the third volume, *Singing Against the Wind* (1985), becomes a little more aware of the racism that is directed at him but finds himself muted in this white land,

> the senses forged to iron silence,
> the mind trapped in a snowboot,
> I must hold my black tongue. ("In the Idiom of the Sun" *SAW* 10)

Crusz's insistent references to black, crow and raven pose some problems of connotative effects and effectiveness. Salman Rushdie speaks of the motivation behind the prophet's choice of a name in *The Satanic Verses*, that he intentionally "adopted . . . the demon-tag the farangis hung around his neck. To turn insults into strengths. . . ." (*SV*, 93) It does not succeed in the novel though the strategy has

a good chance of succeeding in the genre of fiction. In poetry, where each poem stands on its own, it is perhaps unrealistic to hope that such subversion would succeed, especially when these words are only occasionally used against the grain.

The title of Crusz's fifth volume, *Still Close to the Raven*, is an assertion of the poet's continuing affinity with the raven, a triple metaphor for his concerns about conditions in his original homeland, his ethnocultural sensibility, and his personal mythology of place within the Canadian context. However, a reader's reflex reaction to it might well be negative because instead of a tone of assertion one might hear a note of apology; or if it is of assertion, one might well ask why this closeness to a place one left half a lifetime ago? The poem, "why I can talk of the angelic qualities of the raven" is similarly ambiguous. The philosophical conclusion is that racism does not spring from colour-consciousness but from an attitude, the same attitude that made Adam slap God "on his cosmic ears." The subversion, for those who would like to see it, lies in the fact that the preceding stanzas use positive images for "black" and negative ones for "white," thus undercutting the placatory ending.

CRUSZ'S POEMS ARE not as overtly concerned with racism as are Cyril Dabydeen's and Himani Bannerji's among South Asian Canadian poets, but he is conscious of it in such poems as "Sitting Alone in the Happy Hour Cafe," and "In the Idiom of the Sun." Protest works more effectively for Crusz when he brings his gentle satire to accentuate his metaphors. Sun Man plans to defy suburbia by letting

> . . . his grass grow wild
> like the hair on his dog Bonzo
> . . . and dandelions laugh
> through their yellow teeth ("Sun Man in Suburbia" *SAW* 14)

Crusz's own position on colonialism (and the neo-colonialism of the Canadian scene) come through in "bouquet to my colonial masters." It could be considered a response to the current rash of Raj-nostalgia and glamorization that has erupted in movies and memoirs. It foregrounds the indisputable reality of imperialism, namely the rape of women and of the land. What seems exotic in Gauguin's South Seas island paintings becomes metaphor for the colonial exploitation and plundering the land of its wealth. British freighters coughed black smoke and took "sandalwood artifacts / still leaking their exotic perfume / from your dark holds." The image, though ostensibly listing spices and sandalwood, connects to the rape in the second line through "your dark holds." The poem also provides a very interesting example of the scrupulous care with which Crusz revises his poems. In an earlier version, the third and fourth lines read:

> Silence follows
> the dismemberment of tongues.

The revised "Silence spills / from this abattoir of tongues" is not only more denotatively correct (limbs not tongues are usually dismembered) but is more powerful in several ways. This is eloquent, articulate silence, and the choice of "abattoir" has a horrifying finesse that synonyms such as "slaughter" would not have.

The last stanza probably states Crusz's own position. Rape and plunder notwithstanding, he celebrates the legacy that the colonial masters left: "Shakespeare! / a tongue to speak with." These lines recall Derek Walcott's powerful lines:

> I who have cursed
> The drunken officer of British rule, how choose
> Between this Africa and the English tongue I love?

The agony of choice is not as acute in Crusz. As a native-alien, Crusz's repertory has little of the treasures of classical or contemporary Tamil and Sinhalese literatures that at least equal, and likely surpass, what Shakespeare, Milton or the Bible have to offer a South Asian Canadian writer. Crusz's literary heritage is first and last in the English language. His landscape, however, is equally Sri Lankan and Canadian.

Arun Mukherjee sees Crusz creating his own personal mythology. Michael Estock refers to the "myth of place" that underlies much of Crusz's work. Creating personal mythologies is a Canadian hallmark and Crusz's metaphors provide referential links as he charts and explores this myth of place. Irving Layton says, "I do think you've got something going for you, call it sensuous vitality if you wish, and certainly an un-Canadian intensity." It is intriguing that Estok and other "mainstream" readers tend to focus more on the place as *there*, from where the Sun Man came whereas South Asian Canadian critics such as Mukherjee, Cyril Dabydeen and myself, see the place created as *here*, in Canada. Mukherjee, in particular, thinks Crusz's best poems are those that delineate and comment on the Canadian reality rife with commercialization and racism. I think that his best poems are those that chisel metaphors about poetics and send them singing into Canadian literature to the sound of Kandyan drums.

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S.A.A.

Ashok Mathur

Hello. My name is Ashok Mathur. And I am a South Asian. I first became a South Asian in high school. At first, I was only a social South Asian. I did it to be accepted. Then, in college, things got out of hand. I'd start thinking about being South Asian on Friday afternoons and not stop until classes on Monday morning. Weekends were a South Asian blur. I'd lose track of time. I found myself wondering when I could have my next South Asian thought.

Then I began being a South Asian first thing in the morning. I admit, I needed it to make me feel whole — I need it.

I began finding it difficult to spend time with friends who weren't also South Asian. I witnessed the break-up of my family and marriage, all over South Asianness.

Oh, people tried to warn me, to stop me. They say my S.A. problem and tried to help me give it up. But I didn't listen. It was too late by then. Being South Asian was all-consuming. I started to dislike Kipling. I wrote anti-racist letters to newspapers — anything to affirm my South Asian habit. No, not habit: disease.

Then I stopped caring about my job, where nobody knew I was so desperately South Asian. It got worse, I'd sneak off to the bathroom when I could, cower in a stall and surreptitiously read the *TSAR*. Finally, I stopped caring who knew I was South Asian. I would sit at my desk and openly read Salman Rushdie, Rohinton Mistry, Surjeet Kalsey, laughing at all the parts that only true S.A.s could get. I'd rent Hanif Kureishi movies and talk to my co-workers about how Sammy actually felt and what he really got, exactly.

I know now that I will always be South Asian. I may learn to curb my S.A. intake, but I can never go back to being a social South Asian. I will always be thirsty.

books in review

BEYOND ORIENTALISM

DIANE MCGIFFORD and JUDITH KEARNS, eds. *Shakti's Words: An Anthology of South Asian Canadian Women's Poetry.* TSAR, $10.95.

SHAKTI IS THE female principle in Hindu philosophy, symbolic of power. In this collection of poetry by South Asian Canadian women writers, Shakti's words are indeed powerful. She speaks in many different voices, and appears in different guises from poem to poem. If there is a unifying theme to this collection, it may be most clearly expressed in Lakshmi Gill's "Me," where the speaker warns: "I defy your expectation." She mocks the need to categorize others from appearances:

> Ha, ha, the Oriental!
> and the mind clicks in all
> the notions of orientalese
> (like some disease)
> so very pleased
> to be comfortable.

The pat rhymes of stereotypical expectations clicking into place appear only as satire in this accomplished collection. Readers of *Shakti's Words* are taken beyond Orientalism and beyond comfortable expectations about the content and style of immigrant writing.

We may experience discomfort, as in Himani Bannerji's "doing time," where the speaker tries to show her uncomprehending liberal listener "the other side of freedom," but we are always challenged. Bannerji's refusal to compromise a polarised vision may strike some as bitter impatience, the poet admits, but she takes her readers beyond the easy dismissal, "How personally you take things," turning her rejection of this interpretation into an affirmation of an alternative way of conceiving of a personal life: "Yes, I have no personal life — but then again, don't I? I have become so many people."

Although each poet in this collection has developed a strong personal signature, each is also adept at becoming many people, thus discouraging attempts at the autobiographical readings so often foisted on immigrant writers, and turning attention instead to pleasure in the poet's craft, and often in her craftiness, in renewing the language. I do not know a poet more skilled at appropriating and reshaping classic myths and folktales from East and West than Suniti Namjoshi. Her enormous talent is here represented by thirteen poems that will set most readers searching for her complete works. Her sly humour and clever reversals, the combination of metafictional play and post-colonial anger, the integrity of her artistry and her feminist vision, make her a poet that, once discovered, one never tires of returning to. But there are many more pleasures in this uniformly strong volume. Surjeet Kalsey and Uma Parameswaran join Bannerji, Gill and Namjoshi as the collection's established poets, while Arzina Burney, Tilottama Rajan, and Nilambri Singh are introduced through a few interesting selections.

Surjeet Kalsey and Uma Parameswaran deal most explicitly but not exclusively with the immigrant experience, Kalsey exploring what she terms "crumbling self" and "the erosion of self," and Parameswaran recreating what her character Sharad calls a state in which all his words are questions. Their questioning, however, extends beyond adjusting to a new society and a winter climate to interrogating the meanings of the Air India disaster (Kalsey's "Voices of the Dead") and the Montreal Massacre (Parameswaran's "Vigilance"). These are poems of engagement, with the worlds of politics, art,

and philosophy, with language, and with the reader. While several of these poets place themselves against Indian and canonical English literary traditions, Lakshmi Gill plays with the Canadian poetic tradition, recalling the naked poems of Phyllis Webb in "Lyrics," the satire of F. R. Scott in "At a Dinner Party," and most ambitiously, rewriting Birney's "Vancouver Lights" in "Fredericton Highway Bridge."

TSAR is changing our understanding of the Canadian literary landscape through its innovative publications. This collection deserves a place in Canadian poetry courses across the country.

DIANA BRYDON

SONGS OF TRAVEL

RICHARD STEVENSON, *Horizontal Hotel: A Nigerian Odyssey*. TSAR, $8.95.

RIENZI CRUSZ, *Still Close to the Raven*. TSAR, $7.95.

CLAIRE HARRIS, *The Conception of Winter*. William Wallace, n.p.

"HALF A WORLD FROM HOME" — Claire Harris's phrase neatly circumscribes the geographical, cultural and psychological space shaping the perspectives common to the work of all three poets reviewed here. Richard Stevenson, a Canadian working as a teacher in Nigeria, records the insights — and the frustrations — of an expatriate attempting to come to terms with the radically unfamiliar complexities of African society. Rienzi Crusz, an Asian-Canadian employed as librarian at the University of Waterloo, writes of revisiting his homeland, Sri Lanka, twenty years after the immigration and stakes out the common ground of his experience between East and West. Claire Harris, a Canadian teacher of West Indian origin, responds to the regenerative power of an encounter with another culture on a summer visit to Spain. The intensity of such experience abroad leads all three to look again at their place in the world. Stevenson, reunited, joyfully if somewhat tentatively, with his wife upon his return, fuses African and Canadian experience in an arresting image: "In Nigeria an old blind man / — staff in one hand — rests / his other on his grandson's shoulder. / They go walking slowly / as you hold my hand / I read the braille of your spine." Crusz embraces the otherness of Canada, celebrating the conquest of a new — rejuvenating — world of imagery: "The monsoon rain / doesn't know me any more: / I am now snowbank child, bundled, / with snot under my nose, / white fluff magic in both hands." Harris imbues her experience of the delights of Barcelona with all the passion and self-discovery generated by a sexual encounter: "I seize this city as a woman seizes the man / she loves wandering through it / searching out its secrets pausing here / and there to seek reflections of myself."

All three collections, then, are "songs of travel," giving poetic expression to intensified experience. In their use of language and choice of imagery — Stevenson's experimentation with pidgin, Crusz' "forgotten metaphors" drawn from tropical flora and fauna, Harris's debt to a European cultural inspiration — they illustrate, and perhaps not least for the foreign reviewer, the enrichment of Canadian literature through both the variegated cultural input of recently arrived immigrants and through the literary transformation of a heightened consciousness gained not in Canada, but overseas.

Stevenson's "Nigerian Odyssey" is a memorable portrait of the Islamic north of a country once regarded as the white man's grave. Exploring the legacy of the colonial past, dissecting the racial attitudes of the indigenous population and the socially isolated expatriates, and hon-

estly monitoring his own vacillating reactions, the poet situates his acute observation of daily life within an awareness of the larger political and socio-economic issues that have shaped the country. He registers the contrasts typical of developing countries: of a billboard advertising macaroni he writes "The smile and dress, the pomaded hair / of the chocolate girl that wears them / belie the kwashiorkor bellies of / children playing in the dust below." He perceives the "funereal smoke / of white complicity / and guilt," which he and his fellow expats will not have to remain in the country to suffer, exposes the morality symbolised by "Detergents with phosphates, antibiotics in undated bottles sent from the West," knows why "this country has made prostitutes of us all." He castigates the smug racial arrogance of many expatriates, incarcerated in their air-conditioned rooms to "keep the rabble out." His own efforts to view Nigerian society through "nonprescription glasses," to adopt the advice read in the eyes of the customs official on arrival: "Wind down white folks" — a splendid formulation, that — to adjust mentally to vastly different social mores and "withhold my own / moral nuggets of reproof and disgust" when encountering public defecation ("Shit Alley") are sorely tried, however, by the sobering realities of Nigerian society — uncooperative bureaucracy, widespread bribery and corruption and horrifying violence. If Stevenson's themes will be familiar as the staple of the many stories to which visiting Nigeria seemingly inevitably gives rise, his poetic treatment of them will contribute greatly to the success of their presentation. For not only does he seek to expand his lexical range through an admixture of borrowings from Hausa and Arabic — "sannu bature," "baba riga," "hula," "almajiris" — (some additional footnoting would have been useful here), he also explores the poetic possibilities of Nigerian slang and pidgin ("You tink I no sabe dis your western / equality palaver, dis dem-o-cra-see ting") and delights in the humorous ambivalences of English uncorrected as in "Tender Lion Steak," or curiously applied, as in the title poem "Horizontal Hotel," where "the antimonies of life and death / acquire title and deed, / Whorehouse or morgue?"

Crusz' collection documents a poet's meditation upon his cultural and poetic identity, a progression from a Sri Lankan past to a Canadian present. The first poems, devoted to the immigrant experience, are structured in terms of metaphorical polarities, cultural dichotomies: they are at once suffused with haunting recollections of Sri Lanka, compellingly evoked through reference, exotic for the Western reader, to "the pingo man / his rambutans / sweet as jaggery," to "the Godambara roti man / his bell and smoking oil lamp," to "jambu, mango and magosteen," and increasingly encroached upon — indeed later supplanted by — imagery borne of a colder, northern world, of "winter," "icicles," even "self-propelled snowblowers." Here Crusz delights in the incongruities of his two cultures, often expressed through the juxtaposition of different geographical and climatic conditions, as in his description of an "old man / balancing on ice / as elephant the monsooned earth" or in his bidding the immigrant to "conjure peacocks from harvest cornfields."

A return visit to Sri Lanka in 1987 gives rise to a number of poems strongly evocative of rural life, as in "Dusk" with its images of brown boys driving water buffalo and elephant home, of "bare-bodied mahouts," "the beasts' howdah backs," the ubiquitous roti man. The few poems Crusz devotes to matters of political moment are, however, a disappointment. "Dark Antonyms in Paradise" criticises the soullessness of the island's newly created economic prosperity, while

three poems entitled "In the Shadow of a Tiger" deal with internecine racial warfare. Each is in the form of a postcard, whose message enthuses about the joys of holidaymaking, but with a P.S. alluding to the actions of the Tamil Tigers, as in "P.S. Guess what? Tamil Tigers blew up / some 300 people near the Pettah bus stand / with a powerful car bomb. Maybe we should call / Sri Lanka Beirut No. 2." While appreciating the effect the poet wishes to achieve through such discordance, I find this a woefully inadequate way of commenting on the conflict.

The final poems seek to reconcile the dichotomies within the poet. Here images of division and separation, of East and West, are resolved in harmony, "where the robin shall sing / with the voice of the paddy bird, / the oak wear the fruit of the jak." Now the poet can state: "I will not travel again / the separate paths of the sun / . . . Here on undivided ground, / we'll fashion our own mythologies." That ground, it would seem, is Canadian. Having, in the final poem, "The Rain Doesn't Know Me Any More," completed his journey, "circled the sun," with the old metaphors now forgotten and the dream of Sri Lanka "lost / in an orgasm of blood," the poet can embrace the new: "The white marshmellow land is now mine, / conquered, cussed upon, / loved." Claire Harris's collection contains two cycles of poems of very different character but with a unifying concern in the lives of women, their emotional experience, their longings, their determination to survive. The first is inspired by a holiday in Spain with two women friends, the second by the death of the poet's mother. These are densely textured poems which give up their meanings only slowly, poems to reread, to mull over.

"Towards the Color of Summer" captures the expectations and explorations of travel wonderfully well — yet the poet is aware that such a holiday is a suspension of reality, a transitory, dream-like illusion, essential to one's well-being, but soon to end in the return to problems, relationships, responsibilities left behind, as foreshadowed in the title poem ". . . here in this place in our determined joy / we find ourselves fearing the birth of winter." The opening poems, deploying imagery of "delight," "wonder," "mystery," "metamorphosis," and "transfiguration" and suffused with mythological references and Caribbean recollections, celebrate "the ebb and flow of excitement" as the three friends embark on their journey, a journey "into the uncharted self" whose map the poet draws herself, filling in observations of her companions and reaction to her unfamiliar surroundings. Poems as "postcards" strewn across the page provide snapshots of zig-zag streets, roof gardens, cafés, glimpses of back-alleys, hidden courtyards. But the fact that the Barcelona of Gaudi and Picasso is also the city of Columbus reminds us that for this reader this is also a journey from the new world to the old, a voyage of exploration in reverse, back to the origins of colonialism. Though in "Under the feet of heroes" her companions may stand beneath the statue of Columbus "in white wonder," admiring his "feats / of arms and passage," Claire Harris, who comes from the very islands he discovered, must needs place a different interpretation on his voyaging: "I see only the dead in black / mountains hear only / the high pitched keen / of raped women flaming / crosses I stand under / the feet of murderers / of sodomites."

The notion common to both sections of this collection is expressed in the opening lines of one of the poems: "to every woman / a season / and a pattern / OF SURVIVAL." This is best exemplified in the poems Harris was moved to write by the death of her mother. These poems are a celebration of her life struggle: the forti-

tude with which she confronted the deaths of sisters, brother, parents—"now deathbeds have become her womb," of a first husband "her heart secret around the first grief" and then of a second; the strength with which she sacrificed herself for others (which Harris records as a litany of woman's life: "she mothered / she cooked / she taught / she baked / she nursed . . ."); the courage with which she came to terms with her children's very different lives in "a new world of snow and difficult daughters." Sustained by her religious belief, a "mater Dolorosa," suffering "the stigmata of her woman's life," she dies "full of grace." These moving, personal poems of meditation and grief are glowing testimony to a mature poetic talent at the height of achievement.

GEOFFREY V. DAVIS

EYRE & ANGLOS

BHARATI MUKHERJEE, *Jasmine*. Viking, $22.95 US.

Jasmine IS BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S first novel in fourteen years; like her stories, it is highly crafted, impeccably understated, and virtually seamless in its unfolding. It is also, like many of her public statements and much of her writing, controversial. Like Atwood, Mukherjee has attracted a network of hecklers who pay more attention to her biography than her texts, and who delight in gainsaying as self-promotional Mukherjee's many observations about exclusionary racism and the Canadian literary scene. In this "word of mouth" category *Jasmine* has already gathered clusters of disagreeing admirers and critics. What for one reader is a startlingly intense "de-Europeanization" of the western/American novel (a hybrid mixture of romance, murder, and travel genres), is for another an opportunistic ride on the currently faddish postcolonial bandwagon. Just another novel about emigration, cultural difference, language, and racism. I mention this kind of extraneous networking because it is, to my mind, precisely the kind of detrimental gossip that would distort and ultimately disguise what I think is a very impressive and very important novel. *Jasmine* is a deceptively simple allegory which deliberately sabotages through rewriting. Consider.

On the simplest of levels this is a story about a young Indian woman who lights out for the new territories (which Mukherjee appropriates from her American sources with enviable skill). In sparse, symbolically condensed prose, amidst a series of time disjunctions and memory shifts, Mukherjee tells the life of Jyoti whose husband, Prakash, is murdered in India by a terrorist bomb during the partition riots. In rapid succession Jyoti smuggles herself to the Florida coast, emigrates to New York where she becomes a governess, and then to Iowa where she conceives a child with a banker who is confined to a wheelchair. Here she ultimately faces a moral choice of profound complexity. Along the way she becomes the adoptive mother of a Vietnamese refugee, changes her name from Jyoti to Jasmine to Jase to Jane, and witnesses first-hand the dereliction of the American Dream: the book is crammed with the violence of murder, rape, suicide, starvation and assassination.

In one sense, this story tells *the* paradigmatic "postcolonial" narrative; it is *the* story that "tells" Euro- and Americocentricity back into itself by reversing readerly (read Anglo-American) expectations, by including all that is usually excluded, by bringing inside what is usually left outside. Mukherjee's crippled American banker who falls in love with a Punjabi woman and who then adopts a Vietnamese son (both of whom, interestingly,

leave him to "rebirth" elsewhere and with others) develops into a resistant allegory that deconstructs the allure of American mythology. Horatio Alger may whisper from the wings, but he never steals the show. In fact, he is banished in short order.

But *Jasmine* is a "retelling" of considerably greater sophistication than this mere plot summary would indicate. Mukherjee writes with an almost surgical sense of irony (and indeed there is relatively little back-thumping humour to be found), an irony that subtly dismantles/unravels a history of oppressive positionings. I am thinking at this point of two comments by two very different writers: (1) Frederic Jameson, who so aptly remarks in *The Political Unconscious*,

> In its emergent strong form a genre is essentially a socio-symbolic message, or, in other terms, that form is immanently and intrinsically an ideology in its own right. When such forms are reappropriated and refashioned in quite different social and cultural contexts, this message persists and must be functionally reckoned into the new form ... the ideology of the form itself, thus sedimented, persists into the latter, more complex structure, as a generic message which coexists — either as a contradiction or, on the other hand, as a mediatory or harmonizing mechanism — with elements from later stages.

And (2) Margery Fee, who recently commented, "radical writing, by definition, is writing that is struggling ... to rewrite the dominant ideology from within, to produce a different version of reality." A strategy of reclamation and disclosure, this peculiar type of ironic recuperation is a means by which anti-colonialists might reappropriate the language so as to liberate both the worlds and roles suppressed by its official ideologues.

Significantly, Bharati Mukherjee writes in precisely this kind of ironically allusive/appropriative mode that sets up coexistent contradictions; for example, Jyoti recalls her childhood reading: "The British books were thick, with more long words per page. I remember *Great Expectations* and *Jane Eyre*, both of which I was forced to abandon because they were too difficult." The importance here is that Mukherjee also "abandons" both these Empire icons, not because of difficulty but because of her own need to "re-write" past literary and political wrongs. Both books (but especially *Jane Eyre*) echo and re-echo throughout *Jasmine* until Jane wearily and ruefully remarks, "I think maybe I am Jane with my very own Mr Rochester, and maybe it'll be okay for us to go to Missouri where the rules are looser and yield to the impulse in a drive-in chapel." Mukherjee not only echoes and then rejects the *Jane Eyre* scenario (Jane does *not* stay with her Rochester), but Mukherjee then replays Bronte's strategy of dividing the male lead into two distinct characters: the crippled Bud Ripplemeyer/Rochester and the professorial Taylor/St. John Rivers; ironically Mukherjee's Jane opts for the one learning Hindustani (but in a highly rewritten way!)

Jasmine is a tremendously interesting work, not simply because it foregrounds characters and situations and nationalities so often disguised or dismissed in the western/American tradition, but primarily because of Mukherjee's ironic nuance and sinewy revisionism. This is an important book not only for what it says, but also for how it says it. Mukherjee's is a revisionary, appropriative technique, one that "channels" deeply (to borrow from one of her rare comic scenes) into an existent literary landscape in order to excavate her own highly deserved space.

GARY BOIRE

PARALLAXES

Ambivalences: Studies in Canadian Literature, eds. Om P. Juneja and Chandra Mohan. New Delhi: Allied Publishers, n.p.

"UNLIKELY CONJUNCTIONS," is how Margaret Atwood in her Foreword characterizes the intersection (interruptions?) played out in this anthology of critical essays published by the Indian Association of Canadian Studies. The interaction is all the more productive for its unexpectedness: the "disconcerting perspective" of Indian scholars effects a defamiliarization in which the very presuppositions of canonical institutional fictions about Canadian literature are made strange. This is done through a recontextualization that places Canadian writers in a comparative frame and qualifies understandings of "Canadian" from the oblique angle of vision afforded from a different postcolonial situation. As a result, Canadian appears as a culture under siege rather than a settler culture. Consequently, the title *Ambivalences* foregrounds not only the problem in discourse that is Canadian — the ironies, paradoxes, doubleness that leads E. D. Blodgett to assert that "Canadian must always connote ambiguity" — but also the diverse perspectives on Canadian literature offered by the Indian scholars who have so enthusiastically taken up the study of Canadian literature in the last few years. Their effort is to shift the study of English in their country away from the London-New York axis to focus on the so-called "new literatures" in English.

Editors Juneja and Mohan in their introduction suggest this volume explores the new "international" status of Canadian literature where the need for apologetic proofs has yielded to "cultural maturity" in the last two decades. This collection weighs the claims of comparatism against those of identity politics. In "Perspectives," are gathered texts by a number of Canadian scholars who made the passage to India to lecture on Canadian literature. As the title of the concluding essay here by the lone Indian scholar, Chandra Mohan, asserts, these focus on "The Canadian Identity in Modern English-Canadian Fiction." Grounding his discussion in the fiction of Wiebe, Laurence and Atwood, Mohan suggests that identity is a complex and shifting concept varying according to time and region. Regionalism, he concludes, is not antithetical to a national literature: on the contrary, modern English-Canadian fiction draws its richness from embracing the differences of regional impulses. The other essays (previously published) explore other facets of identity: Patricia Morley examines the "Northernness" of Canadian writing as a metaphor for a spiritual vision that marries violence to restraint; Rosemary Sullivan expands this in a study of the shamanic vision of a "wilderness novel," *Surfacing*; Denis Duffy outlines the "Americanness" of Canadian writing in the (deplorable) canonization of *Fifth Business* in the United States through a linking of James' pragmatism to Jung's symbology; Robert Wilson takes an opposed stance in his discussion of the absence of the "essential American mode" of postmodernism in Canadian literature which has privileged nationalist, prairie regionalist readings of Kroetsch. The initial essay by Blodgett, "In Search of Canadian Literature," grounds the strategies of these essays within a critical and literary problematic that would discover distinctiveness through connections rather than specificities. This is, he underlines, a problem of imagination to develop patterns that would move beyond the frames of sociology and psychology which exemplify problems of "isolation" or "survival." It is also preeminently a problem of discourse — a problem of codes, an attempt to find a

language of metaphor in which to articulate the figures of Canadianness, to translate the silence of nature into fictional prospects and discourse, the problem of a settlement literature that draws its metaphors from the journey of discovery, whose gestures are those of "unnaming and renaming" in the "fictions that make us real."

Complementing these general perspectives on Canadian literature as problematic are studies of specific texts gathered in section three, "Analyses." Mainly the work of Indian scholars, they establish the ideological frame from which India views Canada. M. F. Salat's study of Kroetsch's narrative strategies and Frank Davey's analysis of Mandel's poetry stand apart here in their formalist approach. So too do the essays by Shymal Bagchee and Bruce MacDonald who address the "things of the spirit" in the "vitalism" of Purdy's poetry and the metaphors of Davies fiction. While this is the dominant concern in the second and comparative section, it is marginalized by the focus on gender politics in most of the essays that study feminist challenges to power structures of languages and institutions in the work of Livesay (Shirin Kudchekar), Atwood (Coomi Vevaina, Jaidev), Engel (Sumanan Sen-Bagchee) and Kogawa (Roshan Shahani). As Vevaina concludes in analyzing *The Handmaid's Tale*, this is a novel about power and the operation of power in an international context, hence its pertinence in many countries confronting international imperialism and/or bureaucratic tyranny. Drawing on interviews with Kogawa, Shahani focuses on the overlapping oppressions of gender and race. The struggles between racial groups within Canada appear as "archetypal" universals from the perspective of the complexities of ethnic and linguistic stratification in Indian society. These readings of Canadian literature within a variety of power hierarchies find amplification in two comparative studies, Sunaina Singh's comparison of the escape as strategy in novels by Atwood and Desai and E. V. Ramakrishnan's exploration of the deployment of space in poetry, psychological in the Canadian context of an "absence of order," political in the Indian context of "an ordered absence."

In the central section "Responses, Canada and India," is played out the ideological struggle at the heart of this volume: Orientalism, Canadian style. Canada and its Other. Against the narratives of the Canadian travellers from the hegemonic centres of European settler culture into the exoticism of Asia, inscrutable, mystical binary to their lived materialism, is juxtaposed Indians' attempts to claim them for their own, to domesticate these Canadians and their "Foreign culture," by isolating the "Indianness" of their work. In so doing, they effect a dislocation in the canon of Canadian literature as international best sellers, established in the other sections of the book, the successes of London and New York — Atwood, Davies, Kroetsch. The new canon is headed by Elise Aylen Scott, previously known as D. C. Scott's widow. As Juneja comments in his overview of this travel literature from Duncan and Gordon Sinclair through to Jeannette Turner Hospital and Frank Davey, Aylen is no "memsahib." Unlike earlier writers who see India as an exotic backdrop, Aylen has a "deep understanding" of India manifest in her fiction through the deployment of "myth, paradigmatic of the search." "India in this story is spiritual and pure — a land where everyone seems to be working for the growth of his soul . . ." India "remote," "unreal" and "forgotten," exists yet "mystically." The later writers, Juneja suggests, present more relativized and decentred views. He approvingly quotes Hospital's qualification of such Western ideals as "individual dignity" and freedom and praises Davey's parodic tech-

nique that focuses on the differences between the two cultures. Ironically, however, Juneja's own text privileges the universal in the figure of Aylen whose mysticism transcends particularities and national boundaries. R. L. McDougall unfolds the biographical details of Aylen's life and describes the novels she wrote in India that have been ignored in Canadian literary histories. S. Ramasany's essay on the autobiographical travelogue outlines the "Indianness" of Aylen's spiritual quest and gives the details of her "Shivatri," an encounter with Shiva as "the timeless principle of Consciousness and Auspiciousness," a journey that leads her to "unearth the permanent history of India." Here the Canadian merges with her mystical Other. While opening the way for Indian comparatism, this revalorizing of Aylen reinscribes the semiotic valences of Orientalism, as internalized by the Indian critic.

Oscillating thus between spiritual transcendence and micropolitical challenges, *Ambivalences* plays out the contradictions of post-colonialist discourse that constructs the bridges between these two different former colonies within the perennial problematic of Canadian literary discourse: universal/national, minus/plus Canadian. These questions will undoubtedly be raised with increasing force in the future with the growing internationalism of Canadian Studies, this newest of intellectual imperialisms, promoted so actively by External Affairs. I am writing this review from the oblique perspective of an Australian train, as another such imperialist intellectual traveller to the very country that pioneered comparative views of Canadian literature in which the "Empire Writes Back." European perspectives on Canadian literature have also been highlighted in *Gaining Ground*. To these global views of Canadian literature must now be added *Ambivalence*, which is more disturbing to our self-complacency because of the ironic perspective it gives on our complicity in imperialist symbolic practices and institutions. Blodgett suggests that the problem of Canadian literary identity has been a failure of imagination by critics who have not been "bold" enough to establish contexts that would make the literature significant to imaginations shaped within European culture. Perhaps, *Ambivalences* suggests, that absence of a plurality of contexts has also been a protective blindness to Canadian (in)difference to imperial norms.

BARBARA GODARD

MARGINALITÉ ET SOLITUDE

RÉJEAN DUCHARME, *Dévadé*. Gallimard/Lacombe, 24.95$.

ENTRE LA PUBLICATION de son premier roman, *L'Avalée des avalés*, en 1966 et celle en 1976 des *Enfantômes*, Réjean Ducharme s'est taillé une place des plus importantes dans la vie littéraire du Canada, voire le la francophonie. Récipiendaire de divers prix littéraires, l'auteur de *Dévadé* a failli remporter le Goncourt en 1966. Connu pour ses ouvrages romanesques et ses pièces de théâtre remarquables, Ducharme offre sans égal une vision existentielle conséquente dans sa nature, mais variable dans ses apparences. Nostalgie de l'enfance innocente, inventions langagières — dont jeux onomastiques et calembours des plus originaux — personnages marginaux, solitude et refus d'une société institutionnalisée: autant d'aspects qui caractérisent son oeuvre. Par ailleurs, Ducharme a également signé de nombreuses chansons, notamment certaines interprétées par Charlebois, ainsi que deux scénarios de film — *Les Bons débarras* (1979) et *Les Beaux souvenirs* (1981) — tournés par Francis Mankiewicz. L'oeuvre romanesque et dramatique de Ducharme

s'est fait couronner en 1990, quelques semaines avant la parution de *Dévadé*, par le prix de littérature Gilles-Corbeil, doté d'une bourse de 100, 000$. Premier lauréat du prix, Ducharme renchérit après un long silence sur le thème de l'évasion, sur celui du non-conformisme qui l'on est venu à associer à tous ses univers romanesques depuis celui habité par la jeune fille neurasthénique et hyperbolique, Bérénice Einberg, dans *L'Avalée des avalés* jusqu'à la vie fantasque menée par Vincent Falardeau dans *Les Enfantômes*, adulte qui ne peut se libérer des souvenirs à la fois tendres et traumatisants de sa mère.

En effet, la galérie de portraits extravagants qu'a créée l'écrivain s'est fait enrichir grâce à sa peinture de P. Lafond, protagoniste principal surnommé Bottom dans *Dévadé*. Si celui-ci se dit volontiers "le Mouvant perpétuel, le Fou fuyant, Monsieur le Prince de Personne" ou encore "[d]éficient social crasse, ivrogne trépignant," il n'en pas moins conscient de sa "facilité à verser dans la sentimentalité." L'autoportrait qu'il brosse indique toute l'angoisse ressentie par un individu jugé marginal, mais désirant ardemment se rehausser du commun des hommes:

> J'ai mal tourné. A dix-huit ans, je rêvais d'être un poids mort, un fardeau, petit peut-être mais qui y tient, de tous ses dérisoires moyens, sans jamais les perdre, comme il y en a tant, amers et timorés, rongés jusqu'au trognon. Je n'avais pas le choix; j'avais été compté, pesé et jugé bon à rien, aucun jeu de société. Je payais cher ma place qui n'en était pas une, assez cher pour la glorifier, l'occuper comme un trône, ne plus rien devoir à personne, surtout pas des excuses . . .

Agé de trente ans et sorti tout récemment de prison, Bottom entame une relation de symbiose avec "la patronne," fragile dans son fauteuil roulant et pour qui donc il accomplit quelques tâches domestiques entre d'autres. Les rôles se renversent par occasion pourtant: "Mais la patronne m'apporte tellement [sic] mon café, sur un plateau d'acajou tellement posé sur pauvres genoux, qu'on jurerait que c'est la grande estropiée qui sert le petit satyre découcheur, le taré tordu par la trotte." Si la patronne offre à Bottom le Quatuor en sol majeur de Mozart ainsi qu'un souper au champagne, cet "asocial endurci" n'en restera pas moins enclin à se contenter de ses six canettes de bière quotidiennes. Unis dans leur exubérance et leur angoisse respectives, la patronne et Bottom semblent avoir formulé un étrange accord tacite qui leur permet de tout oser ensemble. Consolation puisée chez l'un comme chez l'autre, chacun de ces êtres possède désormais un rôle défini par l'autre, ce qui rend possible l'évasion d'une solitude profonde, mais qui a également comme conséquence une privation de liberté, et ce surtout de la part de Bottom. Confronté à sa nouvelle vie, Bottom avoue à l'égard de la patronne avec une truculence inhabituelle: "La partie de son anatomie que je préfère, c'est son Oldsmobile." La patronne n'est pourtant pas la seule femme à exercer une influence sur Bottom. La vie sentimentale de ce dernier est effectivement perturbée par Juba, "la seule enfant de mon âge qui veut jouer avec moi," qu'il aime mais qui aime un autre, et par Nicole dont l'amant, un poète fou, est renfermé dans une maison d'aliénés. Ballotté sans cesse entre les créatures féminines, Bottom finit par prendre prise, une fois et pour toutes. Ainsi la boucle est-elle bouclée, car c'est nul autre que la patronne qui, à la clôture du texte, seule avec Bottom, lui tend sa main, acte symbolique puisque, ce faisant, elle prend sept pas chancelants, "des pas magiques dont on ne revient pas, les mêmes par le nombre et par la fragilité que les premiers du petit Bouddha, qui lui ont suffi pour mesurer le monde, le soumettre à sa pensée, son désir, son action."

Le dénouement annonçant une ouverture sentimentale, l'on s'aperçoit que l'ironie farouche dont se sont imprégnés

L'Avalée des avalés ou encore *L'Hiver de force* a cédé chez Ducharme à une ironie qui surprend, mais qui réconforte avant tout. Les dernières paroles du héros, "Tout est bien qui ne finit pas, va," dévoilent ainsi la continuité d'une oeuvre qui met en vedette des êtres marginaux vivant une solitude en apparence sans issue. Cette fois, par contre, l'unité du couple reste intacte dans sa cristallisation, mais non sans fragilité pour autant. Toute permanence continue donc à fuir le monde ducharmien. Toujours est-il que même dans son instabilité l'oeuvre de Réjean Ducharme ne cesse d'exercer une fascination qui ne manque jamais d'étonner.

KENNETH W. MEADWELL

SKVORECKY

JOSEF SKVORECKY, *The Miracle Game*, translated by Paul Wilson. Lester & Orpen Dennys, $24.95.

SAM SOLECKI, *Prague Blues: The Fiction of Joseph Skvorecky*. ECW, $16.00.

The Miracle Game, though written well before *The Engineer of Human Souls*, was translated much later. No doubt, *The Engineer* was deemed a more urgent task requiring prompt attention, as it was concerned to a greater extent with the Canadian reality of the 1970s.

Nevertheless, *The Miracle Game* was worth the translator's effort as well. For many reasons it is a work that competes with the *Engineer*. It is here that Skvorecky first ventured into a multi-layered narrative skipping back and forth in time, something that he used to even greater effect in *The Engineer*. The novels are related to each other also through the presence of the first person narrator, Danny Smiricky. The readers have watched Danny grow up ever since his sensational debut in *The Cowards* (written 1948, published 1958), that brought Skvorecky universal acclaim in Czechoslovakia and abroad.

The Miracle Game answers, among others, the question of Skvorecky's attitude to the eventful year of 1968. The rather complicated answer comes in a very good detective story. It is a story of an apparent miracle that occurred in a village church. The Communist authorities seized upon this miracle in their campaign of terror against the Catholic Church, trying to prove that both the miracle and the Church were fraudulent. However, the manner in which the authorities went about their "proof" complicated the issue even more, producing yet another miracle. Thus, the novel tries to unravel the mystery of the first as well as the second miracle. On the way, we get a frightening impression of the terrifying 1950s, Czech Stalinist variety.

During the liberating year of 1968, the question of the miracle is reopened, when it becomes possible to speak about the political crimes of the 1950s, and the case is re-examined by a group of witnesses and participants. But the Prague Spring of 1968 with its idealism and hopes was itself a sort of miracle. A question suggests itself: was it a genuine miracle or a fraud? Skvorecky's *alter ego*, Danny, muses when two young couples come to see him to get his opinion on 1968, but is unable to tell them that

> they had fallen for the sweet talk of the spoiled brats of revolution who had set the terrible machinery of the proletarian dictatorship in motion twenty years before, with no risk to themselves and as a great lark, and then, for a long time after that, had danced their circle dances on the same terrible machinery. And then when they began to grow old and to see through it all, they became nostalgic for the euphoria of revolution, and because they had never had to pay the price of their own enthusiasm they had begun beating Goliath with their tiny fists.

Sam Solecki's *Prague Blues* presents a very thorough treatment of Skvorecky's oeuvre, although the author had to rely on translations in English or French. Skvo-

recky's forte is his marvelous ear for dialogue, something that even the best of translators cannot adequately communicate. This shortcoming would seem to doom Solecki's project right from the start. But it did not and Solecki's work is a model of its kind.

One explanation might be that Solecki emerges as a more objective reader because he is treating texts which were "homogenized" by translation: his focus has necessarily shifted from the "medium" to the "message," and he has discovered an aspect of Skvorecky not often seen or appreciated by Czech critics. It is Skvorecky the man of ideas, the lyrical prose writer, and the humourist who emerges from Solecki's study.

Solecki's work is a model of organization, a judicious appraisal of difficult and controversial works. We are usually reluctant to use the word "definitive" for a study of an author who is still alive. If I do use it here it is because it is difficult for me to imagine a superior work coming from the pen of a Czech critic.

PETER PETRO

FEMINIST THEATRE IN QUEBEC

DOMINIQUE GAGNON, LOUISE LAPRADE, NICOLE LECAVALIER, and POL PELLETIER, *A ma mère, à ma mère, à ma mère, à ma voisine.* Les éditions du remue-ménage, n.p.

LE SHOW DES FEMMES DE THETFORD MINES, *Si Cendrillon pouvait mourir!* Les éditions du remue-ménage, n.p.

LE THÉATRE DES CUISINES, *Môman travaille pas, a trop d'ouvrage!* Les éditions du remue-menage, n.p.

LE THÉATRE DU HORLA, *La vraie vie des masquées ou ça finit comme ça commence.* Les éditions du remue-ménage, n.p.

THESE FOUR PLAYS from the feminist publishing house, Les éditions du remue-ménage, bring attention to the phenomenon of the women's theatre movement, an outgrowth of the women's liberation movement of the 1970s. These are *spectacles de femmes*, collective creations that rely on the experimental and improvisational techniques of Québec's *jeune théâtre.* Written, staged, and performed by women for female audiences, these works shared the common goal of dramatizing the real situation of women in Québec. The published texts are nicely illustrated and include introductions, manifestos, and notes that explain the politics and the creative processes of the plays.

The Théâtre des Cuisines, formed in December 1973, was a non-professional group with an avowed Marxist feminist orientation. Its goal was to use the theatre as an instrument of propaganda to denounce the exploitation of women. The group's first work, *Nous aurons les enfants que nous voulons* (1974), dealt with the issue of abortion. In 1975, they took on the question of payment for housework in *Môman travaille pas, a trop d'ouvrage!* This loosely structured piece focuses on three young housewives exhausted by household responsibilities. The first is a teacher who, after a full day at work, must deal with the demands of two young children and a husband who refuses to lift a finger to help around the house. The second is a welfare mother of three, deserted by her spouse, who struggles to make ends meet despite her humiliation, anger, and fatigue. The third woman stays at home, tending to four children and her husband. In scene 7, reminiscent of the "maudite vie platte" scene of Tremblay's *Les Belles-soeurs*, the three women unite, sing a song of revolt, and go on strike. The bosses, politicians, and husbands conspire to force the women back to their housework, but they hold firm in their demands for daycare centers, school lunches, health clinics, equal job opportunities, equal pay, and shared housework. In the end, the women have

made themselves happier by lightening their workload and establishing solidarity with other women.

Si Cendrillon pouvait mourir! grew out of group discussions sponsored by the Thetford Mines Committee on the feminine condition during 1975, the International Year of the Woman. In the "Introduction" to the published text, writers Louise Cotnoir and Louise Dupré, who were members of the collective, explain the gestation of the play: "Du foyer, de l'école, du bureau, nous sortions enfin de notre isolement pour exposer l'oppression que nous subissions toutes dans notre quotidien. . . . nous nous rassemblions pour nous permettre de dégager ce qu'il y avait de commun dans notre vécu." In a series of tableaux, songs, monologues, and variety numbers, the show presents the oppression and exploitation of women by the family, the education system, the media, and other forces of the dominant traditional ideology. From the Bible's version of the creation and fall through fairy tales to modern advertising, the message to women is that their role in life is to be pleasing and subordinate to men. Because of these negative signals and their own fears, generations of Cinderellas have waited passively for Prince Charming. The play's "Epilogue" laments the passivity and insecurity of women, wistfully looking forward to the day when women will wake up and change their lives.

La vraie vie des masquées is a collective creation that grew out of amateur theatre workshops in Saint Bruno. Improvising on the theme "les femmes-bungalows," the seven women dramatized the disappointing reality behind the dream of life in the suburbs. The *masquées* of the title are the suburban housewives who disguise their boredom, frustration, and solitude behind the masks of their social and sexual roles. In a series of songs, the women describe the monotonous routines of their lives and their attempts to distract themselves with television, shopping, bingo, volunteer work, night courses, and so on. Despite their material comfort, they are lonely and unhappy; they need to come together, throw off their masks, and talk about themselves. The vehicle they have chosen to communicate their feelings is the play itself. In the second part of the play, the women take off their masks and talk about their unsatisfactory relationships with their husbands and children. The play ends with the hopeful message that women can overcome their problems if they band together.

At the same time these amateur groups were dramatizing their lives, professional theatre women were beginning to work together to produce plays that dealt specifically with the female experience. *A ma mère, à ma mère, à ma mère, à ma voisine* was a collective creation by four women from the Théâtre expérimental de Montréal who later founded the Théâtre expérimental des femmes. The *spectacle* is a loosely-structured series of tableaux that came out of consciousness-raising discussions, free word association exercises, and improvisations. It begins with the violent revolt of daughters against a powerful mother figure who tries to force them into fear and submission. The daughters succeed in destroying the formidable mother, but they must contend with other forces of oppression: the taboo surrounding female sexuality, marriage, maternity, the fetishization of the female body, and so on. The daughters rebel against their social conditioning, sounding a battle cry in the eighth scene. The warrior women of this final tableau take possession of their own bodies, demonstrating their strength and determination to liberate themselves. Having exorcised the stereotypes of female inferiority, they call on women to create a new vision of the mother and of women.

While drama critics may dismiss these feminist collective creations as lacking in

plot or character development, drama historians should find them interesting early attempts to reject female stereotypes. They bear witness to the need to dramatize women's experience from women's point of view and to create a female dramatic discourse.

JANE MOSS

REVOLUTIONIZING ART

WILFRID WATSON, *Plays at the Iron Bridge, or The Autobiography of Tom Horror*, edited by Shirley Neuman with an introduction by Gordon Peacock. Longspoon/NeWest, $18.00 pa.

THE PUBLICATION of Wilfrid Watson's major plays is an important event for this country. Here, for the first time, we have five plays from his creative period in the sixties as well as a reprint of his stunning *tour de force Gramsci* x *3*, which first appeared in 1983. The only event that could be more important than this publication would be a new mounting of these plays (first produced in the 1960s by Edmonton's University of Alberta Studio Theatre) by a director and an ensemble equal to the task before a Canadian audience ready to jettison all its comfortable assumptions and conservative expectations. And if I sound a strident note of urgency mixed with irritation about the reception of these plays (whether as texts or as theatre), it is for reasons I shall try to explain.

Sixty years ago, a Toronto playwright, who is now all but forgotten, developed a truly innovative *avant garde* vision for a modernist Canadian theatre. He called it "symphonic expressionism" and, in the plays he wrote and on the stage where he could workshop and produce them, he demonstrated how all the arts — music, language, dance, choral chant and movement — together with a dynamic use of the stage and lighting could combine to create a moving, symbolic "theatral" experience. It is our loss that Herman Voaden's plays were forgotten in the clamour for a more realistic, entertaining theatre product. He was ahead of his time, just as Watson was in the 1960s when he wrote the first five pieces in *Plays at the Iron Bridge*. My point, however, is not that Watson's work is like Voaden's (though parallels might be drawn beyond the obvious fact that each is an innovator and iconoclast), but that as Canadians we keep reinventing the wheel, mistakenly believing that the new and outrageous could not have happened here before and, therefore, doesn't really belong here. Instead, we should embrace these plays and applaud this kind of revolutionary theatre, making a firm place for it in our repertoire and in our understanding of what theatre can be and do.

Where Voaden's work in the 1930s showed us a modernist Canadian theatre, Watson's plays are, in certain ways, postmodern. *Cockcrow and the gulls*, set in Nanaimo, is an allegory of death, judgement and salvation in the mixed form of farce, music hall slapstick and medieval morality play (including the deadly sins). Its language is a fine ironic pastiche of stage Irish, Shakespearean blank verse and a myriad of other more recent echoes, literary and historical. *the trial of Corporal Adam*, as its title might suggest, is a serious parody of a morality play in that it exploits the devices (and the Vices) of its forerunners while exposing Humanity's ugliest present: Mephistopheles is an evil punker; Corporal Adam is a war criminal, "Alias Reich-Fuhrer Jederman" and the "Master-monster ... of the White House." *another bloody page from Plutarch, O holy ghost DIP YOUR FINGER IN THE BLOOD OF CANADA and write, I LOVE YOU*, and *let's murder Clytemnestra according to the principles of Mar-*

shall McLuhan are all flamboyant, extravagant deconstructions of theatre convention and dramatic form which blend erudite allusion with farce, ancient history with the most fashionable present, and Jacobean murder and mayhem with stately choral rhetoric, on a stage where television monitors, projection screens and cameras seem as natural as the card-board caricatures themselves: Sappho and Ariadne, Dr. Fergal Nolan Amadeus Psi and Pajamas! Wilfrid Watson's characters make George Walker's look boring — and safe.

My favorite play from the *Iron Bridge* is *Gramsci* x *3*, perhaps because I already knew it from its 1983 publication. One does need time to learn how to read Watson, especially when there are so few opportunities to see his plays performed. At first glance, the most striking quality of the *Gramsci* text is the rhythmic, contrapuntal organization of speech which must present a tremendous challenge to the director and actors. Watson's model here may be Glenn Gould, whose experiments in contrapuntal radio called for a similar polyphonic voicing. The Gramsci trilogy, however, is more readable than the earlier plays in that it has a familiar historical context, story and characters. It is also a more conventionally dramatic play that stops just this side of tragedy, one that uses a chorus, music and surrealistic caricatures, without completely deconstructing the theatrical moment or dehumanizing its subject. *Gramsci* × *3* returns us to language and ritual, to poetry and myth, to the very origins and roots, in fact, of theatre.

Sixty years ago this was Herman Voaden's aim. So before we forget again, let's dip our fingers in the blood of Canada and murder the popular stage according to the principles of Wilfrid Watson. It's better than re-inventing the wheel, and more fun.

SHERRILL GRACE

CONVERSATIONS

JUDITH RUDAKOFF and RITA MUCH, eds. *Fair Play: Conversation with Twelve Woman Playwrights.* Simon and Pierre. $22.95.

EARL G. INGERSOLL, ed. *Margaret Atwood: Conversations.* Ontario Review Press. $14.95.

"BOOKS DON'T SAVE THE WORLD" is the first surprising statement one encounters only three pages into this series of literary interviews, surprising because the speaker is Margaret Atwood, who, in addressing Amnesty International, has insisted that it is necessary for writers to have a social conscience. Such surprises are liberally sprinkled through this collection of interviews, and constitute one of its chief delights.

Conversations is a collection of previously published interviews, ranging from 1972 to 1989, and thus spanning nearly two decades of Atwood's work. The book is worth reading for the spectrum of views it gives us of Atwood, of her responses to a wide range of questions about her work, her influences and her concerns. The editors designate the book a "sort of 'biography'." To Atwood, the idea of a biography is ridiculous, for "writers' lives are boring." Although that may be, readers are usually interested in writers' thoughts about life and art, which in Atwood's case are far from boring. *Conversations* cannot, its editors acknowledge, replace literary criticism, for many of Atwood's comments on her own work are deliberately vague or evasive; it can, however, act as an illuminating introduction to Atwood, her nationalism, her humanism, her hard-edged humour, her deep seriousness.

Atwood is adamant in insisting that interviews are fictions in the same way as any other creation, and states a number of times that she has no desire to be a critic of her own body of work. She indicates a preference not to think too closely about her writing: "There are a lot of things that I just would rather not know about

writing, because I think that if you get too curious about it and start dissecting the way you work, you'd probably stop." Although she is, on the whole, quite patient in attempting to answer questions of why and how she writes, she staunchly refuses to engage in literary explication. She prefers, she says wryly, to leave that to the Ph.D. students.

A very shrewd interviewee, Atwood refuses to respond to impossibly vague questions (and this book has its share, unfortunately) and deconstructs the assumptions of her interviewers with a ready wit. For example, when asked whether she thinks it significant that so many of the interesting Canadian poets of the last two to three decades have been women, she responds that the question resembles "When did you stop beating your wife"; as a rebuttal to the "so many" she points out that women poets comprise about one third of most Canadian anthologies and observes that the whole question "assumes that if it's more than about two it's a remarkable, freakish situation."

The book permits the chance to compare Atwood's responses, over an eighteen-year period, to the same questions. Some of the most interesting of these responses center on the political and social intent of literature, a subject on which Atwood speaks well and at length. In general, Atwood is most interesting when she talks about subjects other than her own books, such as her early education in the bush, the influence and support of her family, her working habits, the way she collects material for poetry and prose, her thoughts on Canada's victim mentality, the state of Canadian literature in the 1950s when she began to write, her wariness of labels such as "feminist," and the tendency of reviewers to misquote and to misread.

For readers interested in the creative process itself, *Fair Play* offers a source of critical commentary. This collection of twelve interviews with Canadian woman playwrights aims to "fill a vacuum": in their introduction, interviewers Judith Rudakoff and Rita Much lament the "distinct and distressing lack of reliable material ... on Canadian playwrights" and express the hope that their study will meet the needs of "students and teachers of theatre, members of the profession, and the general theatre-going public." An accessible and informative study, this timely book successfully balances scholarly and popular concerns, providing both a rich source for the theatre scholar and a readable introduction for the general playgoer.

When compared to the Atwood interviews, this collection is perhaps most striking for its tone, which is cooperative rather than combative. Perhaps because these playwrights have had fewer painful interview experiences than Atwood has had, they are very happy to talk about their work at length; they probe and articulate the mystery of writing with great clarity and insight, even while admitting its essential unknowability. Some of the most exciting moments in the interviews come when the playwright discovers something, a pattern of action or a thematic preoccupation in the plays, that she hadn't previously been aware of. The interviews are less question and answer sessions than processes of discovery.

Such discovery is only possible when the interviewer is able to facilitate dialogue rather than interrogation. Perhaps because they know theatre so intimately, Rudakoff and Much consistently ask sensitive and intelligent questions. Much less frequent here are the impossibly sweeping generalizations Atwood has to field. And aside from a few standard questions, such as whether being a woman makes it more difficult to have plays staged, and why woman playwrights tend to use humour as a vehicle for serious messages, the questions are personally suited to the playwright, so that *Fair Play* chronicles a variety of approaches to in-

terviewing itself. Most importantly, the interviewers are flexible in their patterns of questioning, willing to explore the issues the playwright wishes to, and not restricted by preconceived agendas. At points, the roles are delightfully reversed: for example, playwright Linda Griffiths asks Judith Rudakoff "what through-lines" she sees in her three plays. The *Fair Play* interviews are productive exchanges, characterized by warmth, honesty and mutual respect.

JANICE FIAMENGO

MULTIPLE PARADIGMS

GEORGE WOODCOCK, *The Century That Made Us: Canada 1814-1914*. Oxford Univ. Press, 1989, n.p.

JURGEN HESSE, ed. *Voices of Change: Immigrant Writers Speak Out*. Pulp Press, 1990, n.p.

FOR "CANADA" AND "US," read English Canada" and "Anglo-Canadians." *The Century that Made Us* is a collection of essays that study the social history of Canada during the chosen period. Informative for the non-historian, it also avoids losing that reader in jargon and dry statistics. Woodcock maintains that "any writing not acceptable as literature is also not in the full sense history, since it has lost the power of speech." And yet as historiography and "literature" meld with a subjective stance in the author's "wish to engage interest in [his] ideas and impressions rather than [his] research," what is striking is who, rather than what, is deprived of the power of speech.

The first two chapters describe the blending of mythography and historiography in the writing of the war of 1812. The next three deal with political change and class relations in Canada, contrasting our process of "rebellion and reform" to that of our more revolutionary neighbors to the South. A more subtle us/them dichotomy structures the following three chapters which detail "the evolution of [whose?] attitudes towards submerged groups in Canadian society": women, natives and ethnic minorities. The final three chapters describe "the mystique of the land" and its influence on painting and literature.

The first chapter concludes by stressing that contrary to myth, the end of the war of 1812 did not mark the emergence of a Canadian nation or identity. However "the former and future Quebec was the one region in Canada whose culture was already shaped and defined and defended...." Obviously then, the century about to be discussed did not make them. Yet a separatist stance is not taken; Québec society remains an important object, but not subject, of discussion. This strategy becomes increasingly obvious in the use of quotations by which the author's "observations and insights are firmly related to people of the time" (back cover). The overwhelming majority of writers quoted are British. Québec society is described by Lord Durham and a French writer named André Siegfried. The attitude of the *Durham Report* toward Québec is well-known. As different quotations from Siegfried are introduced, he evolves from an "astute observer" "whose Protestantism enabled him to look rather objectively at Quebec and not unsympathetically at English Canada," to "an untypical Frenchman who was often sharply critical of the French-Canadians." Québécois speak for and of themselves only in the limited space alloted them in the chapter on "Neighbors and Strangers."

The presentation is almost as lopsided in the chapter on Native peoples, which contrasts British and aboriginal descriptions of their encounters. Such is also the case with regard to the Slavic, West European and Asian immigrant groups treated briefly in "Neighbors and Stran-

gers." The attitudes discussed and quoted are predominantly those of Anglo-Canadians toward the other groups.

On the other hand, many women are given voice, and they are not only confined to their own chapter. When the discussion does turn specifically to women's roles in society, it is a welcome surprise to find that "Pioneers! O Pioneers!" deals with unmarried and career women as well as wives and mothers. And yet without exception these women are British. Native women are described by men, and not a "Canadienne" is to be heard from.

The last three chapters rewrite the myth of the opening up of and attitude toward the land. The "mystique of the land" that would later form "a genuine Canadian tradition" is stated here to be "quite different from the 19th century French-Canadian preoccupation with the land." It is no surprise, then, that the final two chapters, dealing with painting and literature, focus entirely on British landscape painting and writing in English.

One might counter that this book avoids the danger in revisionist histories, which in giving attention to previously ignored groups may obscure the history of oppression or injustice. That history is certainly not obscured in *The Century that Made Us*; nor is it confronted. The reader is also assumed to be familiar with British art, literature, history and geography as evidenced by the analogies used to illustrate points. While the subjective approach may explain this, had the historiographer's "I" not been male, white and British, it is doubtful that it would have come to stand for the rest of "us" Canadians.

Voices of Change: Immigrant Writers Speak Out only begins to challenge works such as that of Woodcock. Fifteen interviews are presented, each accompanied by a photograph and bio-bibliographical information. Of the writers interviewed, 3 are women and 11 (plus the interviewer) live in the Vancouver area. The choice of writers is not addressed. Are we to assume that women who immigrate to Canada rarely have the opportunity to write and that the large majority of immigrant writers in Canada live on the West Coast?

While the collection gives space and draws attention to writers whose works obviously deserve more recognition than they have as yet received, reader interest is sparked more by what is said around, than in answer to, the interviewer's questions. The questions in each interview follow a similar pattern. The first might be summarized as: What is your life story and how did you end up in Canada? Some dramatic tales result. Hesse's assumption here is clearly stated, and most of the writers agree that immigrants' experiences are more interesting than those of Canadian-born writers. Immigrants are therefore "far better writer[s] than if [they] had been born into tranquil, peaceful and serene Canada." However, "one must be lenient with Canadian-born writers because [...] they really don't have anything much to write about." Both the assumptions that exciting life experience is linked to good writing and that life in Canada is boring beg questioning. It is also unfortunate that the editor is (admittedly) unfamiliar with the Canadian literatures and portrays them, stereotypically, to have originated and remained in small-town WASP Saskatchewan. The second major question fosters some interesting points that could often have been taken further. It addresses the difficulties and possibilities of working between languages, the conscious choice of which language to write in and the consequences of that choice, as well as the crossing over and mixing of languages. Third, Hesse asks these writers how they think immigrant writers influence Canlit. There is some rehashing of debate over that vague term "Canadian," but most of the writers agree

with Woodcock: "Canadian" refers to those born in Canada of Anglo-Saxon descent. In this, although the book claims to move from a binary (Anglo-Franco) to a multiple paradigm, it sets up another opposition between immigrant and Anglo-Canadian literature. Once again, Québec is not even excluded as a separate case; its literature is mentioned briefly, but the extremely complex issue of immigrant (and/or ethnic minority) writing in Québec — a very different situation from that in the rest of Canada — is ignored. Hesse also deliberately avoids aboriginal writers, British immigrant and other ethnic minority writers. Although the book represents a multiplicity of cultures, it functions within a simplified oppositional structure.

Finally, Hesse addresses these writers' views on Canadian nationalism and often linked to that, their experience of racism. The issue of discrimination in government granting agencies and consequently in the publishing industry is also confronted, but notably only by writers from Asia. Here there is finally some indication that the hierarchy is far more complex than an opposition between immigrant and Anglo-Canadian writers, and there is an ever so subtle hint that not all of these voices are equally heard. However the interviewer's agenda ignores chances such as this for a more radical critique of Canadian literary institutions and power structures. *Voices of Change* confronts institutions such as that of George Woodcock, but it remains within its confines.

DAWN THOMPSON

COMPLEX ART OF THE MOSAIC

SKY LEE, *Disappearing Moon Cafe*. Douglas and McIntyre, $24.95.

SAAD ELKHADEM, *Canadian Adventures of the Flying Egyptian*. Translated with a critical introduction by Saad El-Gabalawy. York Press, (bilingual edition), $6.95.

BOTH OF THESE BOOKS describe the immigrant experience in Canada, and both take bold steps stylistically to tell their stories. One presents itself as the shattered fragments of a now-deceased author's master plot outline; the other shows a Chinese-Canadian woman's simultaneous attempt to reconstruct the history of her family since their arrival in Vancouver in the late nineteenth century and to make her vocation the telling of that story.

Canadian Adventures purports to be the posthumously published account of an author struggling with the outline, plot, motivations and events of a novel for which he has received a grant from the Canadian government, "to write about the immigration of Egyptians to Canada." It is to be "a story brimming with hope, success, and achievement. . . ." For the year is 1967 and Canada, in celebration of its centennial, has eased travel and immigration restrictions. It is also the year of the Six Day War, which seems to the novelist Nasser's ultimate betrayal of the Egyptian people. And so the novelist flees his "poor and senile country . . . to freedom, joy, and security . . . [in a] youthful, rich, and dynamic country." The transplant, however, is not successful, for he experiences "class hatred and racial persecution"; and by the end of his stay, in 1970, he is witnessing the explosion of the Quebec Liberation Front and the imposition of the War Measures Act.

Indeed, it is just these rich ironies and revealing juxtapositions that are the heart of the work, so timely now after the col-

lapse of Meech Lake. It is important to hear how the newest Canadians feel, and to hear the questions they are asking about the future of the country. We can also hear first hand the attitude of members of the impoverished Arab states toward their newly oil-rich brethren, such as the Kuwaitis.

All this, and much more, is conveyed through an intriguing stream of consciousness, with the narrator revealing the tragedies of his life on the one hand, and on the other hand struggling to fictionalize his experience, to make it less autobiographical, to give it shape and, thus, meaning. Interlarded are the pompous editorial notes of his posthumous Egyptian editor, a Ministry of Culture factotum who thinks the novelist almost as heretical as Salman Rushdie. The editor explains foreign words and concepts, and attempts to provide notes for the novelist's more obvious allusions, usually unsuccessfully.

Yet is it this comic relief, most particularly, that makes one wonder who the audience for this work is meant to be. The present edition appears to be the first, in either English *or* Arabic. Jokes based on the "editor's" ignorance of Canada presupposes the knowledge of it, yet how many readers of Arabic *do* know about Bill 101? On the other hand, there seems to be a debate in the book about the use of colloquial rather than classical Arabic — something that escapes translation. In a sense, this is a true polyglot work, a product of what Elkhadem himself calls "the complex art of the mosaic."

Like a cross between Günter Grass's *Headbirths* and Hanif Kureishi's *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*, *Canadian Adventures* seems to invite cinematographic treatment. The work's power remains chiefly in its ideas for montage, which are far too little developed in the less than forty pages the author has devoted to them. There is a marvelous work inside here, but the present piece hardly does it justice, enjoyable as it is.

Disappearing Moon Cafe, despite the whodunit format of its narrative, is actually a meditation on motherhood or, more properly, the traditional Chinese definition of woman-as-womb. The narrator, a very professional Chinese-Canadian investment research analyst ("the token,... ethnic woman; act cool, powdered, inhuman"), has just given birth to her first child, and she is considering refusing a very prestigious and lucrative job to stay home with her child and, more importantly, to become a writer. This change sends her back to consider how in the past the women of her family had been valued solely for their ability to bear children, and to review the insanity they were driven to when unable to fulfill this role. This meditation and family history become, in turn, the narrator's first work as an author.

The inside jacket of *Disappearing Moon Cafe* likens it to "traditional Chinese story-telling and popular theatre," describing it as "intensely melodramatic ... told in a mixture of pungent, colourful peasant language and the wry self-awareness of modern speech." And it is precisely the use of these registers of speech that may trouble the reader. For instance, Sky Lee has opted for a kind of literal translation when her characters speak Cantonese, so that, although she is able to convey the character of colloquial Cantonese and its expressions, her characters' speech verges on pidgin.

The story itself is told in a highly episodic fashion, flashing back and forth from the 1890s to the 20s, the 50s, and the narrative present of 1986, sometimes within a matter of paragraphs. Like the first of her characters introduced, the author is collecting the bones of her family's history, but rather than attempting to reassemble them into distinct skeletons, she leaves it for the reader to connect them,

while she handles and rubs each one individually in brief vignettes that switch from character to character. Although the fragmented vignettes create a kind of jigsaw puzzle for the reader, there is curiously little suspense in either the discovery or the writing of the history itself: the narrator already knows her family's "dark" secret(s), long before her mother "reveals" them to her (in the hospital, after the delivery), and the inclusion of a famous 1924 Vancouver murder case, where a Chinese man was accused of slaying a white woman, is actually a red herring. At the bottom of all this, underneath, is the narrator's struggle to decide to become a writer—but this is underdeveloped and not presented in a way calculated to involve the reader: the narrator already knows herself to be an "*artiste*" (her word), and is something of an heiress.

Nonetheless, there is a roughness and vigour in this work that is more pleasing, in its way, than similar works. Sky Lee eschews both the delicacy and the nostalgic return to the homeland that one finds in *The Joy Luck Club*. Indeed, the line between China and Canada (with Hong Kong firmly in the middle) is much more permeable than the American immigration-as-conversion-experience would allow. *Disappearing Moon Cafe* is a uniquely Canadian and uniquely feminine consideration of the Chinese immigrant experience.

JOSHUA S. MOSTOW

MYTHICAL METHOD

NINO RICCI, *Lives of the Saints*. Cormorant, $22.95.

Lives of the Saints is Nino Ricci's first novel. Comments on its dust jacket enthusiastically welcome the young Torontonian as "a new voice in fiction writing," and such large claims are endorsed by established writers: Janette Turner Hospital calls the novel a "rich and wonderful tapestry," and Timothy Findley claims that "Ricci belongs on the shelf reserved for writers such as Chatwin, Ondaatje and Flannery O'Connor." Quite a reputation to live up to.

Lives of the Saints is told from the point of view of Vittorio Innocente, who was seven years old during the events depicted. He recalls his mother's extramarital pregnancy in a remote Italian mountain village in the early 1960s and their exodus to the New World. Like many neighbours, Vittorio's father, Mario, has left his family in order to earn money in "America," but a scar in Cristina's face suggests that this may not have been the only reason for which he left. Staying in the home of her father, a village patriarch since Mussolini, Cristina herself is an outsider in her community. Her affair with a mysterious foreigner (a *communista* even) that results in her pregnancy is only one of the ways in which she rebels against traditional values and superstitions which date back much further than Christianity and Catholicism. The villagers' suspicion is roused especially when her pregnancy coincides with a snake bite. Although only Vittorio actually saw her lover on the fateful day, rumour knows about the liaison. The family as a whole is shunned as a result of Cristina's infraction against the written and unwritten rules of her community; her father resigns as mayor, and she decides to leave Italy for Canada. Probably, however, she will not join her husband but rather her lover, as is suggested by her abrupt decision to leave only when she receives a neatly written letter reminiscent of the one she received on the day of the snake bite. Her striving for emancipation would actually make the New World the right haven for her, but she dies on the boat after having given birth to a daughter. Vittorio, who undergoes a bout of pneumonia after his moth-

er's death, reaches the promised land with his sister, and after an encounter with his mother's lover during his illness, he joins his father in order to start a new life.

Since the novel's perspective is often limited to the young boy, many conclusions about the importance of details must be drawn by the reader. Impressions are recorded but not interpreted. Another intriguing formal feature is Ricci's "mythical method." He uses the Christian legends from *Lives of the Saints,* an adaptation by Giambattista del Fiore of the medieval *Golden Legend* (that is, Jacobus de Voragine's *Legenda Aurea*) in order to structure his plot. *La maestra* reads these legends to Vittorio after school, and in them he finds comfort in a world where he is an outsider. As his mother's pregnancy coincides with the appearance of the snake, Vittorio is naturally attracted by legends dealing with snakes. His village has renounced St. Michael, the dragon-slayer, as its patron saint, preferring the *Madonna.* Santa Cristina, who survived being "thrown into a pit with a hundred venomous serpents" and is taken directly to heaven when thrown overboard by her enemies, is obviously the mirror image of his mother, though Cristina herself is finally buried in the sea. Together with the evocative names of characters and places, this parodic incorporation of Christian legends into the novel makes for a complex web of allusions.

Lives of the Saints is fluently and carefully written and provides suspenseful reading. For the most part, *Lives of the Saints* is a remarkable first novel, and I can only agree with Timothy Findley's and Janette Turner Hospital's assessments. Whatever style Ricci is going to pursue in his future career, I am looking forward to reading more.

MARTIN KUESTER

TRAVERSÉE DU DÉSERT

NICOLE BROSSARD, *A tout regard.* BQ Editions, $7.95.

SYLVIE MOISAN, *Le coeur net.* Quinze Editions, $15.95.

INUTILE DE PRÉSENTER Nicole Brossard qui a publié depuis 1965 une trentaine de textes, aussi bien en prose qu'en poésie. C'est une grande écrivaine qui, dans son dernier recueil de poèmes, *A tout regard,* ne manque pas à sa réputation. Quant à Sylvie Moisan, l'auteure d'*Le coeur net,* elle accomplit un doctorat en création littéraire à l'Université de Laval et signe, avec cet ouvrage, son premier roman.

Aussi différentes qu'elles soient l'une de l'autre, ces deux oeuvres retracent cependant une épopée féminine qui se présente comme une traversée du désert. Si la quête de Dominique, la narratrice de S. Moisan, se termine après multes péripéties sentimentales dans les lieux communs (*"Maintenant, j'en ai le coeur net: il n'y a rien à comprendre à l'amour,"* sinon qu'il *"est un peu comme une auberge espagnole* [. . .]"), ou encore par la découverte du carriérisme et de la justesse des conseils parentaux, l'itinéraire de N. Brossard est tout autre. Pour cette auteure il y a précisément quelque chose à comprendre (sur soi), à condition de s'investir sans compromis dans l'écriture. Ce n'est qu'au bout d'une longue et rigoureuse ascèse qu'à tenter de dire l'extrême, l'auteure trouve un horizon, sort de son désert et qu'elle "[. . .] *oblique du côté/des arrivages somptueux*" pour enfin "[. . .] *disposer/des grands terrains vierges/en bordure du cortex.*"

Au moment donc où N. Brossard émerge du no man's land qu'en anachorète elle s'est imposée comme discipline, Dominique, l'héroïne d' *A coeur net,* semble surprise qu'en ce qui la concerne, le désert lui tienne toujours lieu d'horizon. Il est vrai qu'il y a de quoi se lasser des *"beaux*

specimen" épinglés sur son tableau de chasse, et même du godemiché qu'elle acquiert par révolte et provocation dans un quartier mal famé de Québec pour ensuite l'oublier assez rapidement dans un tiroir. On assiste un peu médusé à un inventaire tristement répétitif de prouesses qui ne sont ni amoureuses ni même sexuelles: pas un mot sur le Sida, pas un mot sérieux sur la question de la jouissance féminine, pas un mot sur l'équivoque lesbien, pourtant présent, même pas de fantasme, en bref pas de sexualité, ce qui est assez elliptique pour un roman qui, nous dit-on en quatrième couverture, *aborde la question des nouveaux rapports hommes-femmes*. Après avoir rompu avec de riches parents haïs et un mari "*qui portait sur le front l'étoile de la réussite*" Dominique, en fin de parcours, a "*entièrement flambé le fric*" des premiers et est "*presque devenue[s] carriériste[s]*." En la quittant, on se demande encore dans quel domaine l'héroïne peut faire carrière, la perspective professionnelle n'ayant jamais été abordée.

En tombant par hasard sur *Femme fictive, Femme réelle*, de Suzanne Paradis (un ouvrage écrit en 1966 et présenté par l'auteure comme un panorama psychologique du roman féminin canadien français), je lis la conclusion qui concerne les années 1961-1965: "*A compter de 1960, le roman féminin, tout en maintenant l'homme dans une demi-incarnation de personnage secondaire, épisodique — et dont on change souvent — n'a amélioré le statut humain de la femme.* [...] *On assiste, un peu ahuri, à la liquéfaction de l'héorïne féminine. Privé de la sécurité, la jeune femme s'affranchit en quelque sorte, de cet instinct séculaire, pour se dissoudre dans un univers sans contours, sans consistance ni résistance.*" Peut-être ai-je mal compris *A coeur net*, et que le roman se veut tout simplement une caricature de certains récits des années 60-70.

Initiatique, le parcours de N. Brossard est d'un abord plus difficile. L'auteure transite par un certain nombre de topoi qui structurent la méditation. L'itinéraire commence par un état des lieux (Domaine d'écriture), à l'instar des fameuses "propriétés" de Michaux. Sidéral, le paysage qui se profile fait penser aux Dépaysages d'Irena Dedicova: il est de seconde nature, presque indéchiffrable et d'une "*beauté neuronale*." Abstraite et épurée, l'écriture atteint la rigueur d'un langage mathématique pour sismographier directement le mouvement de la pensée, pour enregistrer la structure physique de l'activité cérébrale et montrer sa puissance de conception. Cette quête de la connaissance s'inscrit sous le signe du cogito cartésien, et c'est une méditation sur la fiction (La fiction sur le qui-vive) qui dénoue l'équation du désir et du plaisir. Dans Aviva le dédoublement que permet la fiction donne à la voix son vis à vis et sa réplique parfaite. Par le biais de la fiction, comme fantasme, on atteint le domaine des applications non seulement parce que le sujet s'applique un corps, un objet du désir, mais aussi parce qu'une théorie s'exerce (l'utopie lesbienne).

Les pages bilingues illustrent et traduisent la thématique du passage chère à Brossard. Elles fonctionnent au sein du recueil comme liaison entre l'invention quasi-scientifique et déprésentative d'une énonciation féminine, et son application (d'abord décalée, puis en miroir) à la réalité qu'elle se réapproprie. Mais c'est dans Eperdument qu'on assiste à l'achèvement de l'édification du sujet féminin. Le recueil comporte d'ailleurs un "autoportrait à la lettre L" (Character/Jeu de lettres), un abrégé d' art poétique (Si sismal) qui fonde symboliquement la parole poétique, tandis que Loin pose la première pierre d'un roman pour entériner le passage à l'existence et à l'action. Après avoir trouvé un "*paradoxical équilibre au bout de l'utopie*" (Dans les villes au toucher), l'écrivaine amorce son entrée dans la

réalité. Cette superbe et difficile traversée des signes et du "*corps étymologique*" prend fin dans D'apaisement: comme au sortie d'une expérience mystique, Brossard trouve foi et assurance, nouvelle certitudes: "*exister est chaud.*" Il se peut qu' après sa propre traversée du désert, Descartes, quant à lui, se soit dit qu'il l'avait échappé belle . . .

ALINE BAEHLER

NEW PLAY CENTRE ANTHOLOGISED

JERRY WASSERMAN, ed., *Twenty Years at Play: A New Play Centre Anthology*. Talonbooks, $18.95.

IN HIS INTRODUCTION to *Twenty Years at Play*, editor Jerry Wasserman speaks of the play development and production programme at Vancouver's New Play Centre, for many years under the directorship of Pamela Hawthorn, as "one of the best-kept theatrical secrets in Canada." In the 20th anniversary year of the organization Wasserman undertook to break that silence with a collection of eight full-length plays premiered at NPC between 1975 and 1989. Subscribing to the view of NPC as "a model for moving locally created arts from margins to mainstream," Wasserman gathers under one cover familiar plays by Tom Cone, Sheldon Rosen, Margaret Hollingsworth, Betty Lambert, Tom Walmsley, and John Lazarus, all dramatists who began their careers at the NPC in the 1970s. More recent writers are Ian Weir, and Alex Brown. Each is introduced with a comprehensive account of the production history of the play, in Vancouver and elsewhere, and a career synopsis of the playwright. The volume concludes with a useful chronology of all works staged at NPC up to 1990.

As a collection, *Twenty Years at Play* aspires both to contemporaneity and historical perspective. In the first two titles the emphasis is on contemporaneity of text. Thus the earliest of the plays, Tom Cone's *Herringbone* (1975) and Sheldon Rosen's *Ned and Jack* (1977), are both published in their most up-to-date versions. The former, in its original one-act version first performed solo by Eric Peterson with accompanist-composer John Gray, is famous in Canadian theatre history as the stylistic precursor of *Billy Bishop Goes to War*. Now, in its third life (its second was an extension into full-length) the work has new music and a new plot twist developed for American production in 1982. The eight year-old Herringbone is no longer pressed into vaudeville by his Albeesque parents in the guise of a thirty-five year-old midget. Instead he is possessed by the spirit of a murdered hoofer called Lou whose adult propensities lead the young Herringbone on a merry, sometimes bizarre, show-biz chase to the Hollywood of 1929. Its theatricality as a one-man show is still its strongest feature.

Retrospection on American show business, although in a realistic mode, is also the subject of Rosen's *Ned and Jack*, a dramatisation of the friendship of playwright Edward Sheldon and actor John Barrymore. A successful two-hander for two seasons at Stratford, here it is published with the addition of the character of Ethel Barrymore, revised at the suggestion of Colleen Dewhurst for New York production in 1981. The play imagines a crucial turning point in the lives of the protagonists, an evening when Sheldon is coming to terms with the debilitating illness that will drive him into obscurity and Barrymore, under his friend's influence, has just proved his greatness as a tragic actor in a Broadway opening of *Hamlet*.

The other plays are all contemporary in setting, each one notable in some way as

an important break-through in subject matter (and in one or two cases style and structure) in the on-going development of a modern Canadian drama. Sexuality and sexual identity are prominent themes in five plays. The West Coast region as an organically shaping element — that is beyond the mere localism of place names — is evident in only one.

For Pamela Hawthorn at NPC, Tom Walmsley was the comparable discovery of raw talent that David Fennario was to Maurice Podbrey at Centaur in Montreal. Perhaps more shocking to the audiences of 1978 than to the readers of today, *Something Red* nevertheless still stands out as a landmark in "Uncanadiana" with its brutally naturalistic study of sado-masochism, both in language and action. However, in its present context, Walmsely's sometimes turgid and irritable play also resonates with certain Wasserman selections from later seasons. As a study of macho sexual aggression it compares with Betty Lambert's feminist play *Under the Skin*, posthumously produced at NPC in 1985. The Bobby of Walmsley's play, ex-street boy and petty-criminal-in-hiding at the expense of his acquiescent girlfriend, is not unlike Lambert's suburban John, whose secret sexual life is equally perverse and whose partner is even more compliant. In addition, *Something Red*'s incitements to male violence between friends, ostensibly over a woman, are echoed in a schoolboy manifestation by John and Joa Lazarus in *Dreaming and Duelling*, 1980. Here two teenagers play out their troubled sexuality through D'Aragnan-like fantasies arising from their skill in fencing class — in effect a juvenile version of Bobby and Alex's attempts at Russian roulette. In another vein, *Something Red* also finds echoes in Ian Weir's *The Idler*, 1987, although the latter is a far sunnier version of unemployment and contempt for work as a characteristic of the modern male condition.

Contrastingly, the two women playwrights here represented, Lambert and Margaret Hollingsworth, both offer feminine perspectives on gender roles in a male-dominated society. Hollingsworth's *War Babies*, premiered in 1984 as *War Baby* (in a joint production by NPC and Belfry Theatre, Victoria), explores the uneasy efforts of a middle-aged professional couple expecting their first child to resolve the inevitable inequities of birthing and parenting in advance. Esme, a playwright (who abandoned her first child, of a previous marriage twenty years before), finds some relief from her innate sense of inadequacy and resentment through the play-within-the-play she begins to write during her last weeks of pregnancy. Her "play" is a parodic distortion of the actual characters of *War Babies*, in which the protagonists Esme and Colin, her war correspondent husband, are performed by other actors. Its action is a melodramatic projection of a worse-case scenario of their future as spouses and parents. In essence, Esme is secretly working through her problems by imagining the well-intentioned Colin in a position of powerlessness and victimization comparable to the darkest fears for her own changing situation.

While the interplay of "real" and "imagined" scenes makes *War Babies* the most intricate dramatic structure of the collection, the naturalistic *Under the Skin* is the most intricate psychological study. A compelling play of hidden truths, *Under the Skin*, Lambert's last work before her death in 1983, is an important precursor of contemporary feminist drama. Primarily it probes female vulnerability in both marital and parental roles. It also explores feminine complicity in its own oppression, both unwitting and suppressed, as well as the troublesome contradictions of female friendship. Based on a true story — a young girl is abducted and raped by her next door neighbour,

who, seemingly undetected, imprisons her in his workshop basement for six months — the play focuses on the volatile triangle of the man, his intimidated wife, and the independent-minded single mother of the lost child.

Alex Brown's *The Wolf Within*, 1989, complements the feminine emphasis on sexual and social roles with the difficult matter of male sexual preference. Father Pines, an upright Roman Catholic priest on the verge of becoming a bishop, struggles to come to terms with his homosexual inclinations. Caught between hypocritical institutional pressures and an intensifying relationship with a young parishioner, in the NPC version of the play he succumbs to neither. In a second ending, written for Edmonton's Phoenix production in 1990, he rejects the church and accepts the love of the boy. Wasserman includes both endings in his text to illustrate his playwright's evolving attitude towards sensitive material.

In a graceful (rather than profound) new comic sub-genre that might be dubbed lotus-land-absurd, native British Columbian Ian Weir's *The Idler* is the one work in the collection that actually builds out of a sense of the society and the locale of Vancouver itself. The quirky protagonist, J. J. Davenport the young unemployed philosopher-dreamer, along with his side-kick the aging drunk and would-be Boswell, Wilfred Grimshaw, together make a virtue of daring to be useless in the new era of the educated unemployed. Other "men of welfare" (subsidized by parents or pogie) are less idealistic about "the limitless possibilities" of the "unemployed generation" — or perhaps are less deluded. These provide the comic foils to J.J.'s rather touching eccentricity, especially when his falling in love with Susan temporarily threatens a turn-around from dreams of the "New Renaissance" towards the dangers of upward mobility.

One might speculate that the intention beyond the editor's stated purpose of this anthology (that is a celebration of the work of the New Play Centre) is to augment the current college and university course resources for the study of Canadian theatre and drama. Several features of *Twenty Years at Play* would seem to serve such an intention: Wasserman's attention to period; his choice of representative work by established playwrights of national reputation who have not been previously anthologised; and his evidence, through choice of play, that the NPC's play development and production policy has served the transient as much as the indigenous playwright.

DIANE BESSAI

WOMEN RHETORS

KARLYN KOHRS CAMPBELL, *Man Cannot Speak for Her. Volume I: A Critical Study of Early Feminist Rhetoric.* Praeger, $14.95 paper; $39.95 cloth. *Volume II: Key Texts of the Early Feminists.* $17.95 paper; $65.00 cloth.

WOMEN'S SILENCE IS A historical (or hysterical) phenomenon which has been recognized and criticized most effectively by those women who have shattered it in their own lives and works. Those who challenge that silence by articulating it have also begun to shape and define women's voices, as does Nicole Brossard when (in her 1977 work, *L'amèr ou le chapitre effrité*) she draws attention — by its absence — to the "silent," feminine "e." Over 150 years earlier, Jane Austen's Anne Elliot claims: "Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands."

The definition of woman's world as one of isolated "silence" and man's world as one of public "persuasion" foregrounds

Karlyn Kohrs Campbell's recent work, *Man Cannot Speak for Her*. Kohrs Campbell begins her discussion of American women "rhetors" of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with an indisputable assertion: "Public persuasion has been a consious part of the Western male's heritage from Ancient Greece to the present." The resuscitation of powerful female voices is Kohrs Campbell's project; confined to "extant rhetorical evidence," she nonetheless succeeds in restoring an important chapter in women's history.

Karlyn Kohrs Campbell structures her work as two volumes which serve as "companions" to each other. She divides Volume I, *A Critical Study of Feminist Rhetoric*, into twelve chapters which provide biographical details of important women rhetors of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in the context of the various "movements" in which they involved themselves. Volume II, *Key Texts of the Early Feminists*, is a rich collection which provides the reader with transcripts of the speeches and addresses themselves — a total of twenty-six rhetorical acts spanning the years 1832 to 1920.

By providing, in these two volumes respectively, both analysis and anthology, Kohrs Campbell has made these important texts both accessible and — in many cases, for the first time — available to her audience. The author has structured each volume with a strong sense of chronology, thus effectively depicting what we now call "feminism" as a gradually developing movement, encompassing, at times, causes such as those of the Abolitionists, the Women's Christian Temperance Union, and, of course, the Suffragists. Prominent in Kohrs Campbell's analysis are such gifted speakers as Ernestine Potowski Rose and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who argued, essentially, that "women must take up their own cause because education had made man incapable of understanding woman or legislating for her." In her analysis of the lives and works of Susan B. Anthony, Ida B. Wells, and other notable women, Kohrs Campbell transmits a clear picture of these women in their social and historical milieux. Although she never overtly praises these women, the author conveys a strong sense of her admiration of their rhetorical techniques and abilities.

If Kohrs Campbell is guilty of any lapses, they are the moments in which her tone borders on the apologetic or the excessively modest. She seems to regret the "limited" scope of her work, in that it focuses on national (to the exclusion of regional) concerns, and thus accuses herself of "slighting" the rhetoric of many able women. Indeed, she has done well to incorporate the diverse work of the fifteen women she has chosen; frequently, as in her chapter on "The Coming of Woman Suffrage," she does discuss the regional implications of national trends. Moreover, she tends, in her analysis, to emphasize the historical significance of what she has presented less than she does its rhetorical significance; in fact, although her study of these texts as rhetorical acts is both exciting and convincing, these volumes are just as valuable to the student of nineteenth-century women's history as they are to the student of rhetoric. In reading the texts themselves, one realizes that their rhetorical efficacy is inseparable from their historical value.

To the reader's delight, Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, a Professor of Speech-Communication at the University of Minnesota at Minneapolis, reveals herself in *Man Cannot Speak for Her* as adept in both the theory and practice of effective rhetoric. The very title of her work is charged with meaning: her selection of "Man" as the first word parallels her assertion, in the first sentence of her introduction, that "Men have an ancient and honorable rhetorical history." Here, "Man" indicates a male presence, while

retaining its traditional connotation of subsuming women by referring to the human race as a whole. The primacy of that noun in Kohrs Campbell's title contrasts sharply with her relegation of the female presence to the position of a pronoun which is, significantly, in the objective case. By concluding her title with that indication of female presence, Kohrs Campbell suggests that although the first word is His, the last word is Hers.

DEBORAH BLENKHORN

SHE WALKS ON WATER

ILDIKÓ DE PAPP CARRINGTON, *Controlling the Uncontrollable*. Northern Illinois Univ. Press, $28.00.

ALICE MUNRO IS CLEARLY now in the prime of her career, and one might expect a number of studies to appear, intent upon discovering the secret of her art. Ildikó de Papp Carrington can lay claim to being the first to place Munro's writing within a Freudian frame of reference. Like other readers before her, Carrington is struck by the play of paradox in Munro. Where this is most evident for Carrington lies in Munro's "consciously ambivalent attempt to control the uncontrollable, to split in half to control a suddenly split world." This splitting is analyzed on the levels of language, the use of narrative time, character psychology, and distancing through various manipulations of point of view. The impetus for such a splitting is found in the recurrent motifs of shame and humiliation in Munro, which are perceptible in the act of writing itself.

Because of the specific character of her thesis, Carrington has organized Munro's corpus into four major groups. The first group shares "the common element [of] the eruption of either deliberate or accidental violence"; in the second, eruption takes the shape of "terrifying powers loose in the world"; the third and largest group is marked by "ambivalent characters struggling for power, primarily the power to control sexual encounters"; the final group centres "mainly on mothers and daughters" in order to "examine the humiliations caused by the loss of control" and "the emotional freedom they seek." In such a schema, whose main principles of organization lie in the use of metaphor and theme, overlaps are bound to occur, but the occurrence often works to the advantage of the critic, who can re-examine texts already considered but in a new light. The central theme is the process of empowerment in a world that continuously endeavours to work against self-responsibility and freedom, especially in women. Munro's situations are of a kind that play upon the vulnerability of narrator and character, notably through drowning and other forms of helplessness that, as Carrington argues, "must be controlled."

One might ask: What is Munro, the author, endeavouring to control? One answer to this question is Munro herself. Because, as Carrington observes, "[t]he repeatedly relived tragedy of her mother is also intrinsically connected with Munro's dual nature," it is not surprising that much of her work is displaced autobiography. This may be true, but to use such an inference as a frequent entry to the work poses certain critical problems. How is the reader to distinguish author, narrator, and characters presented as artist-figures who easily merge with the artist-author? This kind of blurring is evident in the concluding pages of Carrington's book. Because of Munro's frequent self-glossing in interviews and other texts to which Carrington often refers, the devoted reader of Munro cannot help but sense the author's hand at work. But au-

thorial control of the text is not exactly the same as the kinds of control exercised by narrator and character. Perhaps, however, the blurring is part of the critic's own project to master the text and author to guarantee Munro's authority as woman and writer, which is a problem often raised in discussions of Munro's work. If that were so, it is curious that Carrington, increasingly in the second half of her book, offers no comfort to feminist readers of Munro, who remains "ideologically independent."

To assert that Munro is ideologically independent is valid, but the tendency to merge author and text is problematic and may lie with the critical temptation to control the uncontrollable. Addressing the autobiographical in "Real Material," Carrington writes: "what she means by her 'most autobiographical' . . . is not simply her use of personal material but also her inner compulsion to attempt to control such material. Her choice of one of her key words, *abdication*, to describe her mother reveals that there is a doubly uncontrollable material here: the mother's helplessness as well as the daughter's, the powerfully combined humiliations of the mother's dying flesh and the humiliations of the writer-daughter struggling with material so compelling that *it* controls *her*." The surmise is provocative, but how can its truth, frequently suggested in the book, be materially known?

Despite the element of psychological speculation about Munro, individual readings are often as subtle as the stories demand, and the use of intertextual motifs provides fine illumination. Carrington's argument demonstrates how much Munro's stories inhabit a Cartesian universe in which the control of the observer is at once dangerous and necessary, permitting the illusion that it is indeed possible to walk on water. As Carrington suggests, however, the risks are immense: the author survives, but in surviving may also be forced to abdicate, and, therefore, lose more as she controls more.

E. D. BLODGETT

HELD HOSTAGE

GUY VANDERHAEGHE, *Homesick*. Ticknor & Fields, $16.95.

BRIAN MOORE, *Lies of Silence*. Lester & Orpen Dennys, $24.95.

IN "THE WATCHER" from Vanderhaeghe's first book, *Man Descending* (1982), the youthful narrator observes that "adults can be immensely interesting and entertaining if you know what to look for." In that Governor General's Award-winning collection of stories, and in his first novel, *My Present Age* (1984), that observation generally holds, because the reader really cares what happens to the characters, and this is because Vanderhaeghe himself seemed to care about them, drawing them with convincing precision and understanding in believable situations.

There is something of a falling off of this talent in *Homesick*: not only are the characters neither "interesting" nor "entertaining," but they do not function effectively as elements holding the novel together. Any one of the novel's three major characters could serve as the main narrative agent and moral centre, but the reader is never sure who for the moment is occupying these roles. The family conflicts in this novel derive in various and inconsistent ways from Alec's selfishness, Vera's pride, Daniel's confusion, but more frequently a kind of willful refusal to face ordinary reality seems to incapacitate these individuals, or cause them to assume stances that are unreasonable or unconvincing.

The problems derive in part from the failure of the novel's structure to bring together properly its many disparate epi-

sodes, from Vera's stint in the army to the mental instability and death of her brother Earl. The novel is framed by scenes of death by freezing, Alec's opening dream of drowning beneath the ice being complemented by his literal death at the end where, after a stroke, he can only utter the word "cold." Presumably, these images of cold are meant to suggest the lack of warmth in human relationships, but this connection is somewhat strained. Alec's opening dream, for example, dramatizes his fear of death, not his failure to understand his family, and Vera's use of her body to try to restore warmth to him as he lay dying seems to derive as much from impatience as from any subconscious love she may finally be feeling for him.

In his efforts to dramatize the tragedy inherent in one's inability to express love, Vanderhaeghe in this novel frequently fails to exploit a moment's potential: language too often dissolves into clichés, and particular scenes into situations that have no significant consequences. Some scenes — Alec's betrayal of his son, Vera's discovery that her father *had* looked after her mother's grave — are individually powerful in their emotional impact, but they aren't sufficiently woven into the fabric of the novel. As a result, the reader is moved more by impatience than by moral or artistic argument as to why a character behaves in a certain way. Why, for example, does Alec never tell Vera what happened to her brother? That he tells Daniel suggests that it is not moral shame that keeps him quiet, but only a kind of exasperating stubbornness.

Homesick ultimately is a disappointment because the techniques we have come to expect from Vanderhaeghe — irony, understatement, sensitive language, credible characterization — are not sufficiently exploited here. As a result, we do not share, as we do in Moore's *Lies of Silence*, the "moment of crisis" that helps transform the ordinary character into the extraordinary, a talent that Moore has powerfully revealed in some fifteen earlier novels.

Here he creates a masterful novel of suspense, in which individuals' moral crises are convincingly tied in with the social, political, and religious conflicts that have beset Ulster, seemingly forever. Moore has exploited these issues in many of his earlier works, but in *Lies of Silence* the protagonists do not merely suffer or endure these bigotries: they are forcibly conscripted into the terrorist activities that these behavioural patterns make inevitable. By playing on the connotations of the title words, Moore shows how an ordinary individual gets caught up in this dilemma: "Dillon felt anger rise within him, anger at the lies which had made ... [Belfast] sick with a terminal illness of bigotry and injustice, ... lies from parliaments and pulpits, ... and above all, the lies of silence from those in Westminster. ..." When he has these thoughts, he has been transformed from a private, non-political person with a soluble moral crisis (to tell his wife that he is leaving her) into a public, political figure, held hostage by the IRA, with a moral crisis that in effect is insoluble (saving the lives of dozens of innocent individuals, or saving his wife).

In this ten-chapter novel, Dillon's immediate moral situation occupies only the first chapter, but there is sufficient foreshadowing here to give hints of the other nine-tenths of that world, like some gigantic invisible iceberg moving into place: "a police armoured car came towards him, lop-sided, like a damaged cardboard carton"; "the left side of Teddy's head was matted with blood, the jaw crushed as though it had been hit by a car." And at the end of this chapter, the "traitor's kiss" that he gives Moira both spells out his own failure to act decisively when he had the chance, and foreshadows that his

moral situation will become increasingly difficult to resolve.

That Dillon cannot tell Moira about leaving her for Andrea Baxter is only one of the "lies of silence" that he commits over the succeeding few days of this crisis. With or without Andrea, with or without the IRA, it is likely that his marriage to the bulimic Moira would not have lasted, for he knows that he had married her chiefly for her physical beauty. But the IRA crisis reveals how incompatible they are: she grows in strength and determination, and becomes very much her own person, a role that was denied her as Michael's wife. She speaks out on radio and television — no "lies of silence" from her — while Michael veers back and forth between silence and speaking. That she survives this ordeal may be Moore's way of suggesting that there *might* be a solution to the Irish problem. "It's people like us who're the only ones who can stop them," she argues to her parents and Michael. "And we're not going to stop them by letting them run our lives."

But that is as far as Moore goes. What he gives us in *Lies of Silence* is a disturbing depiction of how individuals and societies behave when held hostage by forces both uncontrollable and unpredictable. As in his earlier novels, the "moment of crisis" from which he works may seem uncomplicated, but the strength of Moore's fiction, including this superb novel, resides in the ways he reveals that this is inevitably a delusion, and that individual actions always have ever-widening moral implications.

HALLVARD DAHLIE

LE VOYAGE HUMAIN

PAUL CHAMBERLAND, *Phoenix intégral*. Ecrits des Forges/Le Castor Astral, $8.00.

PAUL CHAMBERLAND, *Un Livre de morale*. Essai/L'Hexagone, $19.95.

PHOENIX INTÉGRAL, sorti en 1988, est un livre écrit en forme de cercle qui veut dénoncer les signes culturels d'une civilisation malade. Pour bien conmprendre les fondements du traité ontologique qu'il renferme, il faut commencer sa lecture à la page 73. C'est en effet dans son dernier poème que Paul Chamberland exprime le plus clairement son point de vue. La vie naît de la mort, le monde (re) tourne, l'obscur est l'aliment de l'or et l'un n'existe pas sans l'autre. Mais les choses ne sont pas aussi simples que cela car, comme l'explique *Après Auschwitz*, l'espace dévore, l'homme prend à tout moment le risque de l'horreur parfaite qui consisterait à perdre jusqu'à sa propre mort. Heureusement, dit Paul Chamberland, la sentence est sans appel: la vie continue.

Le voyage humain sur la terre prend une allure désastreuse et inquiète mais la tâche que se donne Chamberland est de sortir l'homme de son trou, parce qu'il en vaut la peine. La renaissance du monde se fait par l'aspiration vers le haut; il s'agit de s'extirper de l'univers carcéral des espaces clos. Alors, l'homme ne peut renaître de ses cendres qu'en ouvrant les sources du temps: "Je n'ai jamais été." C'est là que le bât blesse. Paul Chamberland parle à la fois d'ouverture et "d'invagination." Le mouvement est continu, mais il n'est pas, ne peut pas être, ouverture uniquement. C'est pourquoi le terme "d'implosion" me paraît très adéquat, car il connote, et l'intérieur, et l'extérieur, deux entités inséparables.

Ce que *Phoenix intégral* exprime de façon, je dirais quasi théâtrale et sinueuse, non pas tant poétique, le texte *Un Livre de morale* l'explique sans ambages et de

manière assez agressive, au début, en tout cas. Paul Chamberland prêche sans beaucoup de délicatesse, la résistance à l'attraction de l'accumulation, par tous les moyens, y compris la pensée. Il propose, d'entrée de jeu, une idée, bien tentante certes: il faut s'en tenir à la seule occupation de soi, rompre avec le consensus générale. L'ontologie "à la Chamberland" se résume de la façon suivante: nous, chercheurs de la connaissance, sommes pour nous-mêmes des inconnus. Le sujet est mort, *je est personne*. Dans sa lutte contre la manipulation, Paul Chamberland essaie de démontrer les avantages de l'art délicat qu'est la dissidence active. Il est vrai qu'il est particulièrement difficile de rester un chercheur au milieu de l'absence de réponse!

La voie initiatique que propose Chamberland va du politique à l'éthique, comme pour contourner le danger médiatique, qui est pouvoir certes, mais narcissique et redondant. L'évacuation de la fonction critique est un grand risque, mais l'impasse du politique en est un autre. On n'échappe pas au nihilisme (tel que vu par l'auteur) : il est le passage de la "distance critique différentiante." Il faut pousser le nihilisme jusqu'à son terme, non pas le considérer comme une racine. Le nihilisme actif est autre chose que la simple volonté du néant. Paul Chamberland prêche une dissidence non réactive, car c'est elle qui permet à l'homme de vraiment se rendre compte du nombre grandissant de valeurs vides, indigentes, qui font son entourage. S'inspirant très clairement de Nietzsche, Chamberland stipule qu'il faut d'abord vivre le nihilisme pour dire ce qu'était la valeur proprement dite de toutes ces "valeurs." Le nihilisme est un consentement au vide qui n'a aucun des attraits de l'ingénierie médiatique dont Paul Chamberland a, une bonne fois pour toutes, fait sa bête noire. C'est là une des notions les plus claires de tout son texte: il s'agit de se soustraire à "l'autorité" quasi sacrée du social. L'oeuvre de destruction est nécessaire. Le parfait nihilisme, selon Paul Chamberland, consiste à miner radicalement la volonté du néant pour laisser place à un non qui *s'oppose* au non de la volonté du néant. C'est ce qu'il appelle la volonté du "grand oui à toutes choses." En d'autres termes, on parle de l'extermination du "valoir des valeurs." Chamberland donne le joli nom de "sahelisation de la pensée" à ce processus.

Il s'agit en fait de la dissolution de la conscience du sujet historique; l'anthrope, dans un parfait retour à soi (tel que décrit dans Phoenix intégral), doit arriver à un nihilisme terminal "hautement ascétique." Maintenant, la volonté de néant doit *vouloir* la volonté de néant. On l'a déjà vu: le néant se nie lui-même et se transforme en une affirmation souveraine.

C'est dans son chapitre *L'Enigmatique* que Chamberland semble exposer la visée critique/esthétique de son livre: le réel fonctionne seul, dépasse toutes les capacités d'intervention de la pensée. Le sens est une question creuse, penser est une disfonction et l'écriture, en tout cas, est provisoire.

Le remède préconisé par Chamberland est l'intelligence, une voie évolutive nouvelle, qui fait fi de la suprême concurrence "entre égaux (égos)" pour tenter de se débarasser de ses fausses idées sur la soi-disant "civilisation moderne." Mais attention, Chamberland décrit toujours le "revers de la médaille." L'éveil déchire, il n'y a de communauté que des solitaires. L'esprit se suicide; il n'y a pas d'avenir. Alors, après tout, les hommes ne seraient pas des Phoenix?

L'idéal, dit Chamberland, c'est l'être différencié, qui aurait encore beaucoup à penser avant d'arriver à sa délivrance. Mais délivrance de quoi? Du monde médiatique et accumulateur? L'homme moderne est un halluciné qui vit dans la contradiction, invitant ce qu'il devrait éviter.

La "morale" suggérée par Chamberland est dure. Il faudrait à la fois que l'anthrope reconnaisse ce qui risque de disparaître: sa grandeur, son envergure spirituelle, et qu'il aille avec le danger, et encore, qu'il y aille seul. Les valeurs sont pure fiction, l'homme aurait intérêt à s'habituer à l'idée qu'il ne vaut absolument rien. Sa grandeur consisterait en l'aspiration vers le plus grand que soi. L'homme "surmonté," voilà la voie de l'auto-légitimation.

Paul Chamberland, pour des raisons de clarté, aurait mieux fait, me semble-t-il, de préfacer son texte avec la démonstration des possibilités limitées de l'homme, plutôt que d'en faire un "mot de la fin." Cette perspective inversée aurait peut-être été un meilleur soutien pour son idée maîtresse, à savoir que, pour abandonner sa petitesse, l'homme doit apprendre à être responsable, au sens le plus lourd du terme. L'inégalitaire réassumé, au lieu de la prosternation aveugle devant les forces (médiatiques) de volonté, pourrait bien constituer le salut de l'homme. Paul Chamberland le dit pour conclure: "il faut répondre *à, de.*"

KARIN M. EGLOFF

CONFIRMATIONS AND DOUBTS

GARY GEDDES, *Light of Burning Towers: Poems New & Selected.* Véhicule, $12.95.

PAUL B. ARMSTRONG, *Conflicting Readings: Variety and Validity in Interpretation.* Univ. of North Carolina Press, $24.95; pa. $12.95.

CLIVE SCOTT, *Vers Libre: The Emergence of Free Verse in France 1886-1914.* Clarendon Press, $87.50.

Light of Burning Towers, a selection of new and republished poems, justifies the reputation of Garry Geddes as one of Canada's most important social-political poets, and complements the recent appearance of his *Letters from Managua.*

In his images Geddes establishes causal connections between weaponry and silence — whether it be the silence that follows the erasure of political expressions ("The Wall"), the violent destruction of hearing ("Year of the Child"), or the destruction of a speaker together with her words ("Sandra Lee Scheur"). His irony is conversant with the narrowest verbal latitude, and never far from elegy, as befits the satirist of a world where political irony, in turn, often means death: "When the time came, they hired killers / to babysit, glared at us / along gun-barrels ..." ("Year of the Child"). *Light of Burning Towers* is a persuasive achievement; but there are problems, of an editorial nature. Although the poems are "New & Selected," the new are not identified. Also, the term "Selected" does not do justice to the often complex editorial history of some of the poems. The reader who remembers "Time Out for Coca Cola" as a single-stanza poem from *Changes of State,* for example, will be surprised to find here a poem of seven stanzas, containing changes in diction and punctuation. A note would have been helpful. Geddes is known for exploring the interplay between the visual and the

verbal. Earlier collections of his poetry made significant use of photographs, but here they are not reproduced. It might be argued that the present collection reprints only selections from the earlier ones, but in the case of *The Terracotta Army*, the verbal entirety of the original poem/volume (Oberon, 1984) is reprinted, while the Chinese ideograms (of Shuai Lizhi), which formed an integral part of the connected series of dramatic monologues in the poem, are omitted. Geddes is a poet much influenced by Pound (as "Technique" and "The Last Canto" both testify), and the first edition of *The Terracotta Army* certainly suggested a use of ideograms not unlike Pound's. Could one contemplate a reprinting of Pound that dropped the ideograms? Yet such a decision has been made here. It is no small irony that the last words of the prose introduction to the poem speak of the "unsung artist"; the contribution of Shuai Lizhi is pointedly unsung in the present edition, and the poem, one of the most interesting and carefully crafted poems modern literature has to show loses power as a consequence.

If *Light of Burning Towers* raises editorial concerns, Paul Armstrong's *Conflicting Readings* raises hermeneutic doubt — only to dispel it, at least in part. What Armstrong proposes for literary interpretation is a theory of "limited pluralism" (not the equivalent of eclecticism) based upon the notion of the "heteronomous" text: the text as both dependent upon, and independent of, the reader's hypotheses. Armstrong accepts Heidegger's insistence that to interpret one must "foresee" possible meaning. Confronting such an anticipatory "wager" are the conclusions of other readers, together with the text's "otherness." The result is that tests for validity do become possible. While not determining a correct interpretation, they *can* exclude a palpably faulty one. Armstrong identifies three tests: inclusiveness, the ability of a hypothesis to explain as many details about a text as possible; intersubjectivity, the ability of a hypothesis to gain the assent of a community of readers; and efficacy, the ability of a hypothesis to produce fruitful conclusions, even in light of new findings. Armstrong's arguments accord well with John Ellis' *Against Deconstruction* and John Sheriff's *The Fate of Meaning*, although the contemporary appearance of these studies unfortunately prevented Armstrong from making use of them. Armstrong extends his theory by examining the problem of validation in the natural sciences, and (in a criticism of Rorty), the problem of understanding in history. He also offers an account of metaphor that is in clear (if only implied) distinction to the current reduction of metaphor to metonymy, together with a testing of his theory against readings of *The Turn of the Screw*. He concludes with an analysis of the problem of defining a canon, and of "the politics of interpretation." Although Armstrong's positions are not new individually, the synthesis he presents effectively challenges both unlimited relativism and absolutism in interpretation.

A study which serves a similar function for prosodic analysis is Clive Scott's *Vers Libre*, which offers a detailed account of the development and theory of free verse in France from 1886 onwards. Scott offers close analyses of poems by Rimbaud, Laforgue, Claudel, and Apollinaire, while examining the theoretical contributions of Kahn, Mockel, and Dujardin. Scott also examines the "formal stimuli" of *vers libéré, vers libres classiques*, popular song, translations of Whitman, and the prose poem. While the primary audience for *Vers Libre* will consist of specialists in French poetry of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there is much here for students of other literatures, and other periods. Scott's account of the prosodic implications of free verse prompts

one to rethink some traditional assumptions about prosody in general: Scott examines, for example, the role of the paralinguistic in prosodic analysis (the role of tempo, tone, and intonation), and extends traditional prosodic conceptions of syllabic duration, accent, and pause. Scott shows that free verse exists in a variety of types, in several relationships to traditional rhythm and rhyme (as well as to prose). He analyses the critical role of reader response, and the relation of free verse to the question of the relative and the indeterminate in poetic experience. In these last enquiries he implicitly draws parallels between the theoretical implications of free verse and the postulate of deconstruction, showing free verse to work against traditional notions of structure in favour of free play and inconclusiveness. As his treatment of Claudel demonstrates, however, Scott can extract deconstructive parallels without wholeheartedly embracing deconstruction.

ALEXANDER M. FORBES

LUCID PARADOX

LOUISE DUPRÉ, *Stratégies du vertige: trois poètes, Nicole Brossard, Madeleine Gagnon, France Théoret.* Remue-ménage, $19.95 paper.

THE PLACE OF FEMINIST writers in the Quebec literary institution has been an important one. As a special survey of *Le Devoir* literary magazine proclaimed: the 1970s were dominated by the emergence of feminist writing. Now, a decade later, a number of critical studies are appearing which confirm the significance of these writers in a conjuncture when the narratives of history are brought to a crisis, ushering in the reign of the signifier. Working within a strong tradition of Quebec poetry, Nicole Brossard, Madeleine Gagnon and France Théoret challenge its investment in a lyric subjectivity, working instead on the linguistic material to foreground the production of signification. The quest for meaning is displaced in the play of signifiers, exploding the subject, the text, in a multitude of configurations. Dupré outlines three possible trajectories in this shifting field of dissemination, three "stratégies du vertige."

Dupré approaches feminist writing from a deconstructionist perspective, aiming to decentre the totalizing concept of Woman, produced under the patriarchal law in the symbolic, through an exploration of the difference of women in their heterogeneous subjectivity. In this Dupré draws on Kristeva's concept of the "unformulable heterogeneity," of infant glossalia, before the construction of the subject in the thetic moment. The writing in the feminine of Quebec poets is characterized by its exploration of the near side of language, the musicality, the drive rhythms, the ruptures of language in its materiality. This is the mobile writing in the feminine elaborated by Luce Irigaray which deconstructs the binaries inside/outside, self/other, same/different, enunciation/utterance, real/imaginary to rethink the alignment of body/text, personal/political, practice/theory. This reversibility of signification is dis/played in textual strategies exploding the opposition of signifier/signified on which conventional semiotic thinking is grounded. Such a focus on the performative enactment of poetic language Dupré suggests, following Guy Scarpetta, is a mode of foregrounding the artifice of art through structures of ambiguity to produce a "logic of contradiction" which is both post-modern, in that it disrupts the theory of progress of modernist avant-garde art, and feminist, the "gynesis" of Alice Jardine.

Sketching in the theoretical underpinnings of her study briefly in the first chapter, Dupré focuses in three long chapters on the figures, syntactic, phonic

and rhetorical strategies deployed by each of the poets. Especially noteworthy are the subtle and nuanced readings of the work of France Théoret and Madeleine Gagnon which has been unjustly neglected. Beginning with the work of Théoret, Dupré enumerates the modes of paradox which explode the Cartesian rational and selfpresent subject. The "je" in her text is the site of loss of presence, a "je" subjected to discursive norms which "unspeak" her, make her "rattle on" (déparler) paradoxically silent and verbose, out of control. This is played out in a different relation to the text where the subject of the enunciation and the object are confounded in a play on deixis. These are strategies of the mobile text, the logic of aporia, texts which move between genres, texts between autobiography, poem and theory, texts which stage the difficult trajectory of becoming women, of coming to voice in a textuality of contamination: 'Necessarily a whore,' as Théoret titles one text. This oscillation between stasis and flow is displayed in the rhythms of Théoret's language, texts which pose poetry in the second degree as the space of feigning, the space of the female subject.

Dupré's reading of Brossard's texts as a quest for the absolute, vertigo through mystic or scientific speculation, is equally lucid and detailed, revealing a profound understanding of the complex ways in which Brossard works language against the grain, producing a "rhizomatic," nomadic text in the sense of the anarchic undoing described by Deleuze and Guattari. This, she suggests, is a better figure than the more ordered, circular "spiral." Through a detailed examination of Brossard's collapsing of the binaries of material/immaterial, self/other, body/text, Dupré shows how this vertiginous dynamics of contradiction is staged in figures of the eye, of translation, of metonymy, in poetry which as "practice" is "theory."

Exploring Madeleine Gagnon's work as an example of what she calls "romantic post-modernism," Dupré examines Gagnon's strategies at the intersection of many recent currents of Quebec writing — the thematics of "le pays" from a Marxist perspective, filtered through the strains of counterculture and psychoanalysis, as well as feminism; the extremes of lyric subjectivity and political manifesto in what Gagnon has termed a "poélitique." But in this poetics too, signifying (significance) prevails over "signification." Gagnon's play with the caesura, with unravelling narrative and historic lines to reshape a "diagonal intertextuality" in every sense at once, is a textuality in the feminine which must be read both against the grain and sideways. The sonority of a poetry that aims at pure vocality, where the instance of enunciation counts more than the utterance, changes the relation between the I and the ego; the concrete play on the page changes the distance between the writer and reader. Unlike the other two poets, Gagnon does not displace metaphor by metonymy but deploys strategically metaphors of sewing to foreground the constructivism of writing, poetry as the space of the construction of meaning. In this poetry, as in her fiction, Gagnon works with the concept of repetition of mnemetic traces, fragments repositioned, reworked from text to text, so that the borders between novels, poetry, theory disappear in an "in-finite" circulation of meaning. This too, is a vertiginous un-ending to history, to the symbolic, to modernism.

Dupré re-traces the textual dissemination of these three poets, laying bare the meaning (un)making strategies of these texts, the places where they turn back on themselves, where writing as undoing is the site of theorizing. It is a model of lucid paradox which demands to be reread with the same attentiveness to the fragment in play. BARBARA GODARD

PRODUCTION & INTERPRETATION

GEORGE TAYLOR, *Players and Performances in the Victorian Theatre.* Manchester Univ. Press, $59.95 (US) cloth.

MICHAEL D. BRISTOL, *Shakespeare's America, America's Shakespeare.* Routledge, $57.00 (Cdn) cloth, $16.95 (Cdn) paper.

NATALIE CROHN SCHMITT, *Actors and Onlookers[:] Theater and Twentieth-Century Scientific Views of Nature.* Northwestern Univ. Press, $26.95 (US) cloth, $10.95 (US) paper.

GEORGE TAYLOR'S *Players and Performances in the Victorian Theatre* and Natalie Crohn Schmitt's *Actors and Onlookers[:] Theater and Twentieth-Century Scientific Views of Nature* do not take their rise — even in part — in any Canadian art-work or venue, and though Michael Bristol is on the faculty of McGill University, his gaze in *Shakespeare's America, America's Shakespeare* is almost exclusively southward to the United States — *almost* only because certain of the views of Northrop Frye come under scrutiny, albeit briefly and then within the American context on which he has chosen to focus. Thus, only Bristol's book is, in a sense, a Canadian work, by virtue of authorship and the references to Frye; the other two are evidently unconcerned — at least, directly — with any particular fragment of the Canadian aesthetic experience. Now this is not a point made in chauvinistic pique, but a matter of fact. The truth is, of course, that Canadian scholars and performers can learn much from all three volumes: Taylor's deals with what is clearly part of our theatrical heritage; Bristol's deals with American response to Shakespeare, particularly with respect to political and established cultural traditions and reactions to them and Schmitt's volume centres on modern, Cageian and other non-structural theatrical experiences, and the relevance of her comments to developments in experimental drama in this country becomes clear enough.

George Taylor's text lies essentially in the realm of theatre history, and is splendidly rich in providing insights into and details of particular productions; chapters on major issues, such as "French naturalism and English ensemble," "The conventions of melodrama," and "Shakespearian interpretation," alternate with ones which focus on single plays, including Boucicault's *The Corsican Brothers*, Bulwer Lytton's *Richelieu*, and Buckstone's *Jack Sheppard*. Well-known actors, among them Macready, Sothern, and Irving, as well as others less renowned gain careful attention. The result is a vivid account of the nature and development of nineteenth century British drama and production practice — well documented and equipped with a nice selection of plates and, a boon to students, a short section headed "Further Reading."

Bristol's *Shakespeare's America* ..., in contrast, does not deal with specific plays or concern itself significantly with the business of production and interpretation. Rather, it looks at Shakespeare as a cultural *given* in the United States, and takes account of the dramatist's place in the socio-economic-artistic-critical milieu, detailing reactions from John Adams and Thomas Jefferson to Richard Levin and Stephen Greenblatt. Yet within a discussion in which political/theoretical considerations appear to have primacy, there are chapters which, by virtue of their orientation, seem to offer other insights — "The Function of the Archive," with its consideration of the legacies of Horace Howard Furness and Henry Clay Folger is one, and "Editing the Text: The Deuteronomic Reconstruction of Authority" is another — both useful essays in their own right. Bristol's conclusion that the Emersonian view of "Great Shakespeare" —

or something like it — belongs to another irrecoverable time may provoke dismay and denial in some quarters, but even there, I suspect, would be the admission that the challenges of the book's arguments merit consideration, at least that our historical record is the richer for Bristol's efforts.

While Taylor and Bristol offer analytic surveys of the history of wide periods, Schmitt concentrates her volume more narrowly, beginning with "John Cage, Nature and Theater" and then moving to "Family Plays: *Long Day's Journey Into Night* and *Rumstick Road*," and "A Popular Contemporary Work: *A Chorus Line*." She then considers, by way of partial retrospection, the work and influence of Stanislavski and ends with a chapter on "Improvising Ensembles." Certainly, the work relates recent developments in drama to matters social, intellectual, and technical — she sees modern, non-structural theatre as a move toward social involvement rather than as a denial or manifestation of petulant escapism and hostility (prompted or gratuitous); and while links to twentieth century science are present — her comments on "Field" provide an example — *Actors and Onlookers* seems to offer less specifics in terms of those relationships than the subtitle appears to promise. However, what is inherent beyond such details is the nature of the world-view in question; if one is reading history with much of Taylor and Bristol, one is experiencing it with Schmitt. Her care, her sensitivity to her subjects, is manifest throughout (her treatment of Cage is superb even if, at the end of the day, it may seem difficult or impossible for some of us to find his approach congenial or satisfying), and the discussion is distinguished by a lucid prose which is a pleasure to read — Schmitt avoids, in both argument and syntax, any sense of complexity for its own sake.

All of these volumes will attract readers with particular interests, it is true; however, it is also fair to suggest that those readers whose chosen domains lie outside the theatrical/critical areas covered would profit from examining them because of the very breadth they afford. Taylor's account of Victorian theatre is illuminating and helps to explain what emerged from it; Bristol's consideration of Shakespeare's position in America is eminently valuable, particularly for the scholar as well as the director and actor; and Schmitt's study is essential in coming to terms with recent, experimental drama — it has clear applications to texts and productions well beyond its immediate purview.

BRYAN N. S. GOOCH

BEYOND THE SELF

STEVEN HEIGHTON, *Stalin's Carnival.* Quarry, n.p.

MARK ABLEY, *Blue Sand, Blue Moon.* Cormorant, $8.95.

BOTH STEVEN HEIGHTON in *Stalin's Carnival* and Mark Abley in *Blue Sand, Blue Moon* write their best poetry when drawing inspiration from foreign sources. While Heighton in the series on Stalin ("Ashes on the Earth") empathizes with that historical figure yet manages to convey irony through a dramatic presentation, Abley in "A Lighted Match" portrays with remarkable sympathy and insight the heart and soul of French Canadian poet Emile Nelligan. Whereas Heighton creates a romantic *alter ego* for the ruthless politician Stalin, Abley recognizes genius behind what he interprets as Nelligan's misspent creative energy that unfortunately degenerated into madness. Although Heighton can be precious and perhaps a little too self-consciously artsy (as when he refers to soldiers on a parade square as

forming "stanzas" in "Carnival"), *Stalin's Carnival* contains much solid work and promises us a developing talent. Abley's *Blue Sand, Blue Moon* also reflects a refined sensibility but more discipline.

In "Ashes on the Earth," Heighton explores the shaping influences in Stalin's life. "Biography" presents the power-hungry politician and megalomaniac as incongruously "romantic" by temperament and, surprisingly, as an amateur poet. A sentimentalist, he "magnified names / of the spirits of forebears" and could even get drunk with the ideal of freedom. The poet-speaker probing his past in these poems describes Stalin's secretly-penned poetry in these terms:

> . . . one can sense
> the harsh grandeur of the Caucasus
> Georgian slopes and orchards are evoked
> with the elegant power
> of dedicated sensitive men
> and women, sheets in hand
>
> who felt the music move within them
> the wind that blew through pores
> the pain of the world, the light
> in lovers' eyes —

With an ironic twist, the poem ends with the information "years later he strangled his wife / and slew twenty-million others."

In "Elegy," Heighton roots out past influences, revealing that Stalin's father was a cruel disciplinarian. Subdued by regular, unexplained beatings, he held his father in awe. According to Heighton, Stalin after his father's death consciously emulated him as a kind of deity:

> . . . Father
> You will be for me always
> Those black brows like a hawk's wings
> arching
> Avid of prey, you will be for me beatings
> We must have deserved
> Though you would not give us a reason,
> father
> You will be these things though you have
> left, you will stay
> My teacher, my shadow, you
> Drunk as a cobbler, boot-nails and brandy
> Hammer at the throat, you deity, Father
> I am nailed to the future
> You will be for me always.

The incongruities in Stalin's personality best come across in "Testament," which is written in his own dramatic voice. Reacting against his former self, the statesman Stalin despises poetry and scorns regret as "for the foolish and temperamental." Faced with death, he denies remorse and writes "this testament, this explanation — no apology" and certainly "no poem." Although not so naive that he expects statues and cities named after him to be safe from desecration after his death, he is unrepentant in his ambition "to surpass God" (which is why he "left the seminary"). In the third article of this "testament," the Stalin persona recounts how a young poet approached him to admire his early poetry and how he "slapped him across the face," retorting "What has the moon to do with Russia?" The poems which the aspiring student left in Stalin's keeping he later read, acknowledging they were "better written variations on [his] own first poems." When signing death warrants, this incompletely reformed sentimentalist Stalin could not avoid weeping.

The first section "Energy is Eternal Delight" includes poems that work out Heighton's artistic and philosophical theories and the last section "Man to the Hills" is a medley, containing everything from poems dramatising nightmares ("The Burned-Out Slope" and "Nightmare") to a series about Franklin's tragic journey to discover a northwest passage ("Deciphering the Passage"); but the middle section "Ashes on the Earth" is a memorable series that effectively pulls together the volume and which I regret could not have been longer.

Like Heighton in "Ashes on the Earth," Abley in "A Lighted Match" has apparently done some research. In this brilliant series, he translates poems written by Nelligan and lets these verses speak for themselves of the poet's sense of life's

fragility, its transience and his regret. The first "Fragment" reminds me of Keats' "When I have fears that I may cease to be / Before my pen has pleaned my teeming brain:"

Although I felt the birds
Of genius steal through me,
I set the snare so poorly
That they flew
Away on white and silver wings
Into the mind's vast blue:
Listen, it's my heart
Rattling brokenly.

In contrast with this poem, "Nelligan's poem "The Black Virgin" portrays the traditional dark mistress or *femme fatale* with a colloquial verve and humanity that is refreshing. In translation it reads:

Her smile had been so kindly I believed
Her friendly. In the face of all the world
She and I should have clasped each other's hand

But when I spoke to her, black with desire,
She said: *your steps are dirtying my road.*
You know the lady? C'est la vie.

Less appealing is the penultimate section "A Poet." Here an element of self-pity mars our view of the poet, and I was unfortunately reminded of Shelley's wounded deer.

Knowing nothing, he loves without love
No-one cares for him: avert your eyes
Or mock him, call him a fool . . .
No matter, everyone dies . . .

As in this series on the poet Nelligan, Abley writes well when he draws inspiration from borrowed or foreign sources. Poems written during his travels abroad reflect a fine sensibility tinged with ironies but he never hides behind those ironies. In "Credo" of "The Asian Mass," Abley enters the feelings and emotions of India's poor, and creates a kind of *everyman* figure. Far from scorning this point of view representative of India's poor, Abley suggests a hidden valour in the determination to survive against all odds. In fact, the final lines turn back on the poet, himself, with flattening self-irony. What use is poetry, indeed, when you are starving? Countering this view of poetry's relative triviality, Abley in "Diez Cordobas" reflects on how material possessions including pieces of art become the "opium of the people" (to twist Marx's famous words) and the mainstay of their soul.

The closing poem of *Blue Sand, Blue Moon* successfully brings the poet-speaker home from his travels to his wife — echoing Ulysses' return to his Penelope and other classical returns of heroes — but "The Return" is perhaps too self-conscious and the closure too neat. Describing himself as an "alley cat," the speaker's pose is romantic and sentimental in a way that is, however, unusual in this volume.

GILLIAN HARDING-RUSSELL

LA RAGE

LOUIS HAMELIN, *La Rage*. Editions Québec/Amérique, 1989. n.p.

GAÉTAN BRULOTTE, *Ce qui nous tient*. Leméac, 1988. n.p.

LOUIS HAMELIN's impressive first novel, *La Rage*, has been hailed as the manifesto of a new generation of young Québécois intellectuals who are revolting against the past, against Trudeau-style federalism and against the pervasive influence of American culture (symbolized in the novel by the pin-ball machine) upon Québec. None of this may seen particularly original, but the form which Hamelin has given to his complex and richly textured novel certainly is. Stylistically, it is a lavish panorama of modern-day French as it is spoken in Québec, a vast array of different styles and levels of language (including a parody of the pretentious oratorical style of UQAM-based academics steeped in the intellectual, mainly Barthesian, tra-

ditions of contemporary France). In sharp contrast, Gaétan Brulotte's collections of thematically interrelated short stories, entitled *Ce qui nous tient*, is an uninspiring series of vignettes based on the daily lives and fantasies of a number of rather eccentric characters. Some of the stories are interesting at the level of narrative techniques and structures, but their content varies greatly in substance and in quality.

In many respects a novel for the 1990s, *La Rage* is narrated in the first person by a young McGill-trained biologist who is squatting in an abandoned chalet owned by an old man named Bourgeois (a very appropriate if somewhat obviously emblematic name). Representative of a whole generation of young Québécois to whom the expropriation of farmland to build Mirabel airport is symbolic of the way Québec has been treated over the past twenty years by the federal government, Edouard Malarmé, the Narrator, carries the concept of alienation (from family, friends, society and every other conceivable source of security) to extremes rarely seen even in the contemporary Québécois novel. The title *La Rage* is a play on the various meanings of the word *rage* in French, all of which have an important function to perform in the elaborate interweaving of themes which takes place throughout the novel. First, there is the meaning of "a violent desire or passionate need," in this case the love of the elusive Christine Paré and a much less well-defined "rage de vivre" which Malarmé initially directs towards hunting and pin-ball machines and then towards society as a whole. Secondly, there is *la rage* meaning rabies, a theme which occurs throughout the novel and which plays a key role in its apocalyptic conclusion. Thirdly, there is the meaning of "anger leading to violence and aggressive behaviour," an anger which manifests itself in various ways which are central to the plot.

Delighting in elaborate word-games and highly sophisticated bilingual puns, Malarmé (an oblique reference to Mallarmé, perhaps?) keeps a kind of diary in which he records his thoughts, dreams and obsessions over a period of several months. The novel abounds with references to writers as diverse as Melville and Malcolm Lowry, Baudelaire and Céline, Roch Carrier and Ken Kesey. Many of these allusions are directly connected to the main themes of the novel, dispossession and expropriation. One of Malarmé's friends, Burné, touches on the wide implications of these two themes when he contends that "nous autres, christ, on forme une génération d'expropriés. Mais comprenez-moi bien: des expropriés intellectuels! Des expropriés dans la tête." In Hamelin's eyes, the expropriation of the farmlands around Mirabel is but one of the many ways in which the people of Québec have been uprooted and dispossessed.

At the same time that *La Rage* provides the Québécois novel with new material and a fresh innovative approach to familiar themes, it also makes frequent (and often ironic) reference to long-standing traditions in the novel of Québec, to the *roman du terroir*, for example, and to Guèvremont's *Le Survenant*. As in many recent Québécois novels, violence plays an important part in this remarkable work, as does allegory, in the form of the fox. "Le renard, c'est mon totem," Edouard proclaims early in the novel. As the plot of the novel unfolds, the fox performs an increasingly important function, that of bringing together many of the main narrative and thematic threads of which the novel is composed. This process gives the work a unity and coherence which it might otherwise have lacked.

In *Ce qui nous tient*, Brulotte structures the various "movements" of his collection around three themes: "Résistance," "Insistance" and "Persistance," although the connection between a given

story and the theme it is supposed to be illustrating is often tenuous at best. Some of the stories, such as "Candy Store" and "Le rêve de tomates" involve relationships, real or imagined, between people who are struggling to understand themselves as well as each other. Others ("Les messagers de l'ascenseur" and "Le renvoi de Hoper," for example) portray solitary, often rather bizarre characters lost in a nightmarish world which turns out to be reality. Themes such as stifling family relationships and social marginality are treated with some degree of originality and many of the stories show the mark of an experienced storyteller who delights in spinning tales and entertaining his readers.

RICHARD G. HODGSON

CULTURE STORIES

CAROL BALDORF, *Spirit Quest*. Illus. Tracy Williams Cheney. Hancock House, pb. $9.95.

DIANA WIELER, *Bad Boy*. Douglas & MacIntyre (Groundwood) pb. $6.95.

ALTHOUGH *Spirit Quest* and *Bad Boy* are two very different young adult books, set in two different times, they can be read as culture stories, stories that repeatedly foreground questions for this reader, at least, of the relationship between predominantly male cultural narratives and young women.

Diana Wieler's *Bad Boy* challenges the adolescent reader to consider the meaning of playing it safe. The protagonist, A. J. Brandiosa, is a sixteen-year old hockey player thrown into a turmoil when he discovers that his best friend, Tully, is a homosexual. The discovery frightens A.J. not just because it disrupts his categories — how can a homosexual be his friend? — but because the fact challenges his sense of self. Wieler introduces A.J. as a young man obsessed with control — controlling his weight, repressing his anger at his parents' divorce, proving that he belongs on the team.

By placing this narrative about sexuality in the context of Triple A hockey in Moose Jaw, Wieler can reexamine a Canadian myth. On those cold winter nights, all Canadian boys play hockey eh? Hockey as a way of defining the normal leads easily to stereotypes about masculinity, about who belongs and who does not. As A.J. worries that gossip about Tully will turn into gossip about himself, he finds it easy to respond to the coach's directives. He becomes the team bully, the Bad Boy. The notoriety gains him friends, male friends who are also sexually uncertain and assert their "normality" by labelling the opponents: "he's got faggot skates." Soon they press A.J. to establish his sexual identity, a challenge that leads to a near rape when he panics at his inability to respond to the girl he thought he desired.

The girl is Tully's sister, Summer, the only character who seems unimpressed with this male myth of hockey heroics. Throughout she has mocked the male obsession with hockey, the need to prove identity through socially approved violence. The uncertainty regarding sexual identity that fuels this violence is made evident with the assault. Earlier in the novel, A.J. feels that Tully's sexual orientation is the result of a mistake: "Maybe Tully was confused. A.J. had read that somewhere, that adolescents were sexually confused. That they tried on identities like hats." The relevance of this assertion collapses when Tully tells him he has known of his difference since he was seven. It is A.J. who is confused, who fears his own desire is homosexual. It is at this point that Wieler draws the line; A.J. is not truly homosexual, just confused. Tully resists responding to A.J.'s confession of desire: "And he knew it was wrong. Knowing A.J., knowing himself, it was completely wrong." So we end up with two questionable but intriguing cate-

gories: homsexuals are those who discover their sexual identity early; heterosexuals take longer to work out their sexual identity. While *Bad Boy* breaks with young adult novel convention in suggesting that it is the heterosexual who has the problem, it remains very conventional in focusing on the heterosexual and marginalizing the homosexual. Tully is placed in a category apart, the rare adolescent for whom sex is not a problem.

The hero of *Spirit Quest: The Initiation of an Indian Boy* is also set apart from his culture, but Carol Baldorf's story is very much about imagining what such a separation would be like. In her introduction she carefully explains the context for her story, making her readers aware of the problems of writing this kind of story. Essentially she is alerting readers to the book's limitations, limitations not in a negative sense but in admitting what the book is, that is "*Spirit Quest* is not historical, in the white society's sense of the word, but it is in the way that *The People* would view it." Baldorf is not attempting factual history but trying to give non-Native readers a way to imagine how a young boy Oogli who later was known as Cha it zit, chief of the Lummi people, experienced his initiation. Such a task is clearly problematic: "The language used is English, but the ideas and thoughts behind the words are Indian." When the language is English, surely that affects how readers will interpret what the ideas are? Does recognizing the problem in an introduction get rid of it?

One example of the inevitable tension is in the treatment of Oogli's relationship to women. Baldorf wants us to recognize that the Lummi culture has its own rules. When Sax ump ki, Oogli's father, reprimands him for crying: "A true man never acknowledges pain. . . . That is your first lesson. You reacted as a girl would" how can we control our response? Gender roles are clearly distinct in the culture described in the novel; it would be foolish to criticize this male story of long ago for not reflecting current concerns about gender construction. Yet Baldorf anticipates that we will ask exactly such questions as she tries to imagine how Oogli would position himself in relation to women. She explores his relationship to his sister, Latsi, and to his mother, his growing separation from them and how he might feel about that separation. Reference to the sister's unwritten narrative keep appearing:

> 'My sister is growing up,' he observed, 'I've been so deep into my own affairs that I haven't noticed. Soon she will be secluded. I must give some time to her while she is still a child. I do not want to lose Latsi,' he mused thinking of the distance between himself and his mother.

Yet inevitably he does reject Latsi and all the references demonstrating his sensitivity to her gendered fate seem somewhat forced.

ADRIENNE KERTZER

CARICATURES & CHARACTERS

JOHN METCALF, *Adult Entertainment*. St. Martin's Press, $15.95 (US).

HELEN WEINZWEIG, *A View from the Roof*. Goose Lane Editions, $14.95.

THE COVER BLURB for *Adult Entertainment* explains that this collection of two novellas and three short stories "will introduce readers in the United States to the work of one of Canada's finest writers," and the comments which follow declare that this work is "hilarious," "ribald," and "howlingly funny." Metcalf's work *is* "funny," but in a bleak and cruel kind of way, for the humour here seems to have been stimulated by an intense and bitter disillusionment. *Adult Entertain-*

ment provides a relentless lesson in what might be called "the dynamics of disappointment": in this fiction, human aspirations exist only to be shattered, leaving the protagonists and the reader with an empty feeling of unfulfilment.

Another distinguishing feature of Metcalf's work is that his protagonists are all men, flawed, but shown to be more thoughtful, more *sensitive*, than the cartoonish characters around them. With the qualified exception of the protagonist's wife in "Travelling Northward," Metcalf's fiction is of a series of male Persephones trapped in the Underworld and befuddled or tormented by foolish and/or repulsive grotesques.

The story "Single Gents Only" presents the archetypal Metcalf plot. A young man from northern England, a gentle, likeable fellow, travels south by train to London, to attend university. As he sits, "feeling special, feeling regal," dreaming about future delights, a "pasty-looking" toddler with "slimy fingers" ruins the student's carefully pressed trousers — an omen of greater disappointments ahead. Later, the student discovers he must share a tiny, dank room in a run-down rooming house — next to a cemetery — with a roomate who devoted his time at Oxford to "amassing an extraordinarily large collection of photographs of naked eleven-year-old girls with their ankles bound." The landlady is The Landlady From Hell:

> Her gross body was divided by the buried string of the grubby pinafore. Her hair was grey and mannish, short back and sides with a parting, the sort of haircut he'd noticed on mentally defective women in chartered buses. The torn tartan slippers revealed toes.

The story concludes with heavy irony, with the student reading aloud from *The Wind in the Willows*: "Oh what a flowery track lies spread before me, henceforth! [Toad exclaims.] What dust-clouds shall spring up behind me as I speed on my reckless way!"

As the above description of the landlady suggests, the language in *Adult Entertainment* is most often denigratory, motivated by an apparent need to ridicule whatever cannot be controlled. After finishing this volume, the reader feels a little bit like one of its protagonists — slowly "worn down with a drizzle of pissy and querulous complaint."

In contrast to "Single Gents Only," the thirteen stories in *A View from the Roof* seem more humane and open, more capable of responding to a wide range of human experience. Helen Weinzweig's protagonists, like Metcalf's, are also usually maimed or trapped somehow, but never because of the farcical actions of some beastly "Others." Rather, Weinzweig is fascinated by how often we become our *own* victims, by how, for example, we ignore "the years of secret preparation that goes into an apparent whim."

Weinzweig's particular interest, to the point of obsessive concern, is in memory, and in how the memory of past traumas conspires with the desire for present consolation to destabilize the personality. In one story, the narrator remarks, "A Slav uses memory as a tranquilizer, to by-pass anguish, to blur reality," but more commonly, memory in Weinzweig's writing *is* anguish, a stimulus to present dismay. Moreover, as her protagonists usually have a Jewish, European background, dark memories of Hitler and the Holocaust are a part of their psychic history, giving *A View from the Roof* a dimension beyond the strictly personal.

Weinzweig is one of very few Canadians writing in English in the Surrealist tradition, a tradition which probably accounts for the phantasmagorical nature of her work. "L' Envoi" provides an especially effective example of this elusive quality in her writing. The story begins with a woman trying to imagine how, many years earlier, her mother must have felt, when, at the age of nine, she was inexplicably

and permanently separated from her family:

> If no one told her why she was being sent away from her mother, father, two brothers and three sisters, then she was forced to exist without the memory of words. Something should have been said — truth, a lie, an approximation even — for in the absence of words a presence slips in to fill the emptiness and haunts forever.

Abruptly, the story shifts to the woman herself, who is having a loveless affair with her husband's best friend. "My entire life," she tells him, by way of "explanation," "my entire life has been spent trying to forge one human tie with one person in this whole wide world who would want me."

The psychological connection between the woman's heart-breaking loneliness in the present and her imperfect understanding of her mother's torment in the past is never explained. Weinzweig simply juxtaposes the two sections of her story, or the two fragments of her protagonist's life. The reader, like the character, is left suspended, haunted by the kind of presence which "slips in to fill the emptiness."

PETER KLOVAN

SKILLFUL ACTS

ANNE CHISLETT, *Quiet in the Land.* Coach House Press, $12.95.

MARGARET HOLLINGSWORTH, *Willful Acts: Five Plays.* Coach House Press, $16.95.

IT IS AN UNUSUAL pleasure to have the opportunity to review work as familiar as these plays, which over the past decade I have read, seen performed, taught, and in the case of one of the short plays in *Willful Acts*, even directed. Anne Chislett and Margaret Hollingsworth are playwrights of very different sensibilities, but these plays share the curious fact that they are at once highly regarded and underproduced. They also have in common the fact that they are about patriarchies.

Quiet in the Land was and remains the high point of the history of the Blyth Festival as a developer of new work. First produced at Blyth in 1981, it was an immediate success, and it was produced again in the following year in Montreal and Toronto, where it won a Chalmers Award for best Canadian play. It was published in 1983, when it won the Governor General's Award for Drama. Since then it has largely disappeared from the stage, thanks primarily to budgetary restraints at theatres who cannot afford to produce Canadian plays with casts of more than ten (but who continue to produce Chislett's earlier and less successful play, *The Tomorrow Box*, which of course has a small cast).

This is a pity. *Quiet in the Land* is a carefully crafted and delicately underwritten example of the kind of regional realism that has become Blyth's trademark. The story of an Amish community in Waterloo County during the first world war, the play dramatizes with great subtlety the conflicts between father and son, self and community, tradition and rebellion that are the subjects of so many realistic family dramas of much less achievement and power. Unlike many realistic plays, however, the closure invoked by the form echoes and imitates in this play the enclosure imposed by the almost archetypally patriarchal community that is its subject. The struggle of the rebellious son, Yock, with the constraints placed upon him by a fanatical father, a burgeoning love, and a wavering faith, is only provisionally contained within an action that seems to struggle against its own form. The penultimate action of the play is tragic, as Yock leaves home once and for all, in the best tradition of such narratives; but the play ends with complication rather than catharsis, and it

raises more questions than it comfortably comprehends.

Willful Acts is a collection of very different plays. Where *Quiet in the Land* resists production because of cast size rather than form or content, Hollingsworth's full-length plays, eschewing realism for the most part, are presumably too difficult or daring for frequent production on stages that are forced by funding constraints to be conservative, and her largely experimental one-acts are written for a production market that has all but disappeared outside of schools and universities.

This, too, is a great shame. Margaret Hollingsworth is one of the most innovative and exciting of Canada's playwrights, and one of its very few avowedly feminist dramatists with a national reputation. Her experimentation with form and language in these plays, if occasionally difficult, is always compelling. Even the most conventionally realistic (and most frequently produced) of the plays in the collection, "Islands" and "Ever Loving," are at least in part disruptive explorations and evocations of gaps between conflicting subjectivities.

In the more experimental short plays, "Apple in the Eye" and "Diving," and in the magnificent and complex "War Babies," Hollingsworth employs idiosyncratic and deliberately obtrusive ichnographies to fly in the face of traditional dramaturgical wisdom: she dramatizes her characters' internal struggle toward selfhood rather than the external "action," "behaviour and "reality" of classic realism. The image of the apple in "The Apple in the Eye" and of the dog, fish, and eagle in "Diving" are not used, as in realist drama, to provide interpretative clues or symbolic unity for the audience; rather they are used to make meaningful dramatic action out of the conflicting subjectivities of their central characters' struggles to interpret themselves. It is a mark of Hollingsworth's achievement as a playwright that this internal struggle becomes more "real" for the audience than the "actual" physical situation in which the struggle takes place.

In "War Babies" this subjective struggle takes the form of an extended metadrama projected by the central character, the playwright Esme, as she takes apart and recontextualizes fragments of her life and perceptions in much the same way as she de/re-constructs newspaper and magazine articles in her found poems. The play presents the marriage of Esme and her husband, a war journalist, as a series of "war games," and marriage and war, journalism and playwriting, murder and birth — Esme, at age 42, is pregnant with the couple's first and her second child — form the core of the action and the symbolic structure. As in the short plays, the subjective, symbolic action swallows and transforms the "facts" that are the objects of its perception, and constructed reality asserts itself in the face of the apparently "natural." The audience is not encouraged to be passive consumers of meaning, but active participants in its (re) production. The play's feminism is complex, and its tensions are between competing modes of interpretation rather than simply between characters representing different points of view. Its meaning and impact are functions of its metadramatic and dialogic form, and it is one of very few plays written in Canada that successfully revisions traditional dramatic structures in explicitly feminist ways.

Both *Quiet in the Land* and *Willful Acts* are well produced and attractive volumes, as one has come to expect from Coach House. The former includes a useful introduction and notes by the author, and the latter an insightful introduction by Anne Saddlemyer. The plays themselves make stimulating reading, and merit frequent production, in order to provide income for the playwrights, in-

sight for their audiences, and encouragement for other playwrights to push against the limits of small budgets, small casts and conservative dramatic structures.

RICHARD PAUL KNOWLES

FRESQUES RURALES ET URBAINES

NOËL AUDET, *L'Ombre de l'épervier*. Québec/Amérique, n.p.

CHRISTIAN MISTRAL, *Vamp*. Québec/Amérique, n.p.

ON SERA SANS DOUTE étonné de retrouver, au sein d'un même exposé, deux romans qui sur plusieurs plans semblent incompatibles et qui, selon la tradition littéraire devraient se faire concurrence: il s'agit de *L'Ombre de l'épervier* de Noël Audet et de *Vamp* de Christian Mistral. Tout en se distinguant nettement sur les plans narratif, thématique et stylistique, ces oeuvres s'entrecoupent et s'imbriquent grâce à une piste corollaire: c'est que compte tenu de ce qu'elles décrivent, elles sont toutes deux susceptibles d'être désignées comme des fresques.

Quoique consacrés à la représentation de moeurs, les romans d'Audet et de Mistral peignent, par des procédés littéraires fort distincts, de vastes peintures murales urbaines et rurales qui mettent en scène deux familles issues de milieux différents: l'un montréalais, l'autre gaspésien. Outre les nombreux personnages, par l'entremise desquels nos deux romanciers s'appliquent à décrire avec sensibilité les générations campagnardes et citadines, leurs oeuvres mettent également en scène, en tant que protagonistes, des espaces topographiques. Chez Audet, c'est le paysage superbe de la Gaspésie, porté par des images séduisantes, qui peignent avec exactitude les charmes de la nature ensorcelante: "à l'Anse-aux-Corbeaux [...] la mer avait creusé une anse en forme de croissant laissant des arêtes rocheuses autour desquelles foisonnaient les écueils." Chez Mistral, le naturalisme disparaît pour donner lieu à une puissante évocation d'un espace de décadence, qui parvient également à captiver le lecteur ou plutôt, l'angoisser par une écriture qui, l'invite à errer dans un univers fluide dont la nature insaisissable provient des ambiguïtés lexicales et des allusions mythologiques qu'il n'arrive pas toujours à saisir intuitivement: "Montréal. Le Métropolis des Vamps [...] paraphait page après page de peau, contrats de Faust [...] on jaillissait en gyser séminal, en senteurs salées de sperme, on fondait en coulées lactescentes comme une entraille d'artocarpe. On chaissait des filles sauvages et soûles pour s'épuiser." Bref, quelle que soient les différences qu'ils déploient sur les plans thématique et stylistique, *L'Ombre de l'épervier* et *Vamp* abordent, avec la même conviction, les domaines de l'amour conjugal, de la tendresse fraternelle, de la passion, de la sexualité et de l'angoisse de vivre.

Dans le roman de Noël Audet dont le titre, *L'Ombre de l'épervier*, sert à annoncer, tout au long de l'histoire de mauvais présages (la noyade du jeune américain Marc Freeman, la disparition de Noun Guité) ce que l'on y retrouve c'est un très long récit, qui s'étend du début du siècle aux années quatre-vingts. Au long des cinq cents pages, qui sont avant tout consacrées à l'histoire d'une famille villageoise gaspésienne, d'innombrables événements sont représentés: des guerres, des révoltes, des aventures amoureuses, des mariages, des accidents et des meurtres. Outre les nombreuses péripéties, qui proviennent des faits susmentionnés, Audet s'applique aussi à nous décrire, de façon vraisemblable, les activités quotidiennes de cette famille de l'Anse-aux-Corbeaux composée de trois générations. Il ne manque pas de personnages ou d'actions dans

L'Ombre de l'épervier. Sur le plan de l'intrigue et de la présentation des personnages, l'on y retrouve de nombreuses ressemblances avec les romans de Laure Conan, de Marie-Claire Blais, d'Anne Hébert et de Michel Tremblay. Il n'y a aucun doute que, sur ces deux plans, l'oeuvre d'Audet mérite notre assentiment: les personnages sont bien campés et, les aventures romanesques ainsi que les descriptions topographiques présentées ont le pouvoir évocateur nécessaire pour nous transporter dans l'univers romanesque gaspésien. Néanmoins, ce qui manque à *L'Ombre de l'épervier*, c'est dans une certaine mesure, un cadre socio-historique convaincant. En dépit des nombreuses allusions d'ordre historique (la seconde guerre mondiale, la conscription, les élections, la crise économique mondiale; les références à King et à Duplessis, l'appel de dates précises: 1918, 1930, 1944, 1970), l'on a l'impression que ces événements sont présentés comme étant détachés des personnages qui sont en train de les vivre ou qui les ont déjà vécus.

Pour ce qui est de *Vamp* de Christian Mistral, ce qui nous est peint ce sont les moeurs d'une génération qui se définit par l'alcool, la drogue, le sexe, à savoir, par la déchéance. Comme l'explique le narrateur (nommé Christian Mistral!), ce qu'il cherche à faire, par l'entremise de son récit, c'est de présenter la mémoire d'une certain génération, vamp, dont l'Histoire n'a jamais vu la pareille: "à cause de son style fatal [. . .] qui réduit et terrorise en même temps, de son individualisme farouche et de l'effrayante quantité de sang qu'elle suçait du tissu social." Ce qui est mis en scène dans *Vamp* ce sont des personnages angoissés et angoissants et, c'est par le biais de longs extraits consacrés à la description de leurs activités quotidiennes, de leurs dipositions affectives et intellectuelles que Mistral parvient à nous présenter, de façon souvent confuse, mais néanmoins séduisante, une certaine vision du monde, celle des vamps dans laquelle règnent le néant, l'affaissement et l'isolement: "les vamps s'entrebaisent à grands coups de boutoir, leurs sexes soudés glués les uns aux autres [. . .] qu'on aille tranquillement perpétuer le génocide culturel, et qu'on aille retentir entre les frontières erratiques, le no man's land du chaos."

L'on voit, selon l'extrait précité, que la facilité de la lecture du roman d'Audet, qui provenait de l'intrigue bien conduite, des personnages bien campés, d'une écriture aisée à comprendre, disparaît avec la lecture de *Vamp*. De nombreux phénomènes confèrent à cette oeuvre des données perturbatrices qui défient notre processus de lecture. Il y a tout d'abord le langage employé: sur presque tous les plans (sémantique, stylistique, poétique, référentiel), l'écriture de Mistral est enivrante tout en étant accablante. L'on y retrouve un niveau de langue souvent très élevé, des figures de discours qui font normalement concurrence aux fragments de textes dans lesquels elles sont insérées et, des néologismes qui suspendent momentanément le sens de ce qui est évoqué. Il se mêle également, au récit du narrateur, d'innombrables allusions d'ordre historique, mythologique, biblique, philosophique, scientifique, littéraire et musical. Leur valeur référentielle est parfois évidente, mais le plus souvent ambiguë, car leur profusion agace le lecteur, l'épuise et enfin le sature.

En lisant ces deux livres, où les écrivains s'appliquent à décrire des générations, issues de milieux fort différents, on ne peut s'empêcher de penser aux grandes distinctions génériques du roman du terroir et de celui de la ville. Toutefois, les moeurs rurales et urbaines qui sont présentées dans *L'Ombre de l'épervier* et dans *Vamp* n'ont pas la simplicité de celles retrouvées dans nos romans québécois du début du siècle. Peu importe la nature des sujets traités dans les oeuvres de Noël Audet et de Christian Mistral, ces

derniers abordent avec finesse les domaines de l'amour, de la mort, de la débauche et du mal de vivre. Par ailleurs, ils peignent de façon animée un tableau de nombreuses générations: celles de leurs ancêtres et de leurs progénitures.

JULIE LEBLANC

INTERCONNECTIONS

MARGOT LOVEJOY, *Postmodern Currents: Art and Artists in the Age of Electronic Media.* UMI Research, n.p.

MARK POSTER, *The Mode of Information: Poststructuralism and Social Context.* Chicago, $39.95 cl./16.95 pa.

THE GENERAL AND TIMELY problematic explored by *Postmodern Currents* and *The Mode of Information* is that of the interrelations between electronic media and, respectively, contemporary art and poststructuralist theory. Margot Lovejoy presents her book as a broad survey of past and present relationships between technology and art, intended to fill a glaring absence in traditional art histories: "As an artist who has always used technology in my work, I've *always* felt cheated by art history." Walter Benjamin's essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936) prompted the author to draw parallel paradigms between the industrial revolution, the rise of photography, and Modernism on the one hand, and the "electronic era" and postmodernism on the other. The first part of her book draws a historical line between recourse to the camera obscura, photography, and electronic media in the production of art, while part two focuses more specifically on the works of artists using copiers, computers, and video.

The documentation, in this book, of technological and institutional developments in the production, distribution, and evaluation of contemporary art should be of great interest to anyone engaged in cultural studies. Through 144 black and white figures and (necessarily) brief descriptions of individual artworks, collective happenings, art exhibitions and interactive international video extravaganzas, Lovejoy sketches how artists have explored notions of subjectivity, originality and authorship, and questioned the value of art and its reality as material object or "dematerialized communication." She carefully explains innovations in copier, computer, and video technologies, indicates their possible convergence, and illustrates their impact on the production and distribution of art with bookworks, mail art, and the transmission of "photographic, text, sound, voice, music, and various other visual elements" by telephone as electro-carbon prints, to name only a few. Attempts at collaboration between artists and engineers, the avant-garde and the corporations are also noted, as are the organization of groups promoting alternative means for the dissemination of art (such as the Public Art Fund, sponsoring art in subway stations, billboards, and department store windows), and various innovative government, university, and television programs.

Because of its scope and its survey format, the book tends to list problems and issues rather than examine them; this leads to a somewhat repetitious form, where the reader is told time and again, without much elaboration, that "important questions are raised." More troublesome is the book's actual organization, which assumes a continuous, progressive historical line in artistic developments, and at times favors a rather simple determinism: "The new set of possibilities opened through the invention of electronic technologies ... has, by now, far surpassed the mechanical age and undermined the narrowness and suppression of forms inherent in the modernist construct." This kind of assertion is at odds

with the "postmodern" revolution being extolled elsewhere: "the times, too, are unprecedented, for we no longer accept a single notion of history as progress." "Postmodern" is used to mean just about anything ("Postmodernism is a new condition, essentially a much broader territory where the suppression of social and cultural influence is no longer possible," or the "history of video is the history of Postmodernism"), and "deconstruction" is used without any apparent relation to Derrida's work. This theoretical impreciseness can distract the reader from what is otherwise a most valuable document on contemporary art.

By contrast, Mark Poster's investigations of the social context of poststructuralism reject any attempt "to demonstrate the slow, continuous evolution of the past into the present, thereby creating a familiarity effect, an ideological haze of false recognition." Noting that the rise of electronic media has been accounted for by existing social theories (Marxist, liberal, Weberian, and so on) as though no qualitative change had occurred, Poster chooses "the newness of the new over the oldness of the new for political, not epistemological reasons." He argues that electronic media have brought forth new structures of domination "which are linguistically based," and depend on "totalizing forms of discourse," and that these structures have radically transformed social relations and the configuration of the subject.

This assessment impacts both his method and objects of analysis. Poster proposes the notion of the "mode of information" (rather than the usual temporal categorization of the "information age") as a helpful framework for the analysis of the social context of electronic media. Modelled on the Marxian mode of production, this category is meant to account both for historical discontinuities in symbolic exchange systems, and for the major importance given to information in current Western culture. The notion also allows Poster to consider the "configuration of information exchange," or what he calls "the wrapping of language" (which seems a rather injudicious choice of terms), and its effects on writing, the constitution of subject and object, politics, and power.

Poster begins with a critique of totalizing categories in general and of the concept of postindustrial society in particular (through a discussion of the works of Daniel Bell, as well as those of Marx, Althusser and Gramsci, Max Weber, and the Frankfurt School) and then proceeds with a series of localized investigations of specific theorists and electronic media (Baudrillard and TV ads, Foucault and data bases, Derrida and electronic writing), and computer science (in conjunction with Lyotard). This procedure allows him to contextualize poststructuralism in a particularly telling manner (he notes, for example, that "the distinction between speech and writing has been gaining attention in the social sciences and the humanities just at the moment when both forms of communication are being overshadowed by electronic media"), and to apprehend the new media with the incisive perspective developed by poststructuralism.

While not presuming expert knowledge on the part of the reader, Poster articulates fundamental theoretical and technological developments in analyses that are strikingly clear and effectively argued. The only reservation I would note is a certain wavering in the text between language, where the focus is placed on subject positions, meaning production and identity constitution and discourse, where the focus is on social and political practice. This uncertainty at times allows the discussion to remain at a rather abstract level. For example, the discussion of Baudrillard and TV ads argues that media language forces the viewer into new rela-

tions of meaning: "The social effect of the ad (floor wax/romance) is not economic or psychological but linguistic: the TV viewer participates in a communication, is part of a new language system. That is all. But that is also enough to constitute a social formation." Poster insists on the importance of the linguistic dimension of ads in order to avoid reducing their meaning and effects to "those of the logic of capital," and states that "when a person watches a TV ad, language is recognized as a socially constructed play of differences." Perhaps. But the logic of capital is at work nevertheless, as the origin and evaluator of this practice — what commercial will be aired, and when it will get pulled — and an engagement with actual commercials, rather than the abstract category of TV ads, might have helped in avoiding this kind of generalization. However, the importance of the issues and texts this book addresses with exceptional insight make it an outstanding contribution to debates about critical social theory, post structuralism, and electronic media.

MARIE-CHRISTINE LEPS

DREAMS & DECEPTIONS

CARY FAGAN, *History Lessons: Stories & Novellas*. Hounslow Press, $14.95.

CARY FAGAN'S FIRST book-length collection of short stories introduces the reader to a fictional world which may actually turn out to feel more real than the one in which we live. It is certainly a vivid and lively world, and, more important, it is shaped "naturally," that is, without the traditional novelistic compulsion to have a definite plan, produce an intricate plot, and keep an epic purpose in mind.

In this sense these stories can be described as "minimalist," an admirable attempt to avoid the charm of a traditionally high-keyed, well-built, flawless and eventful story. As a matter of fact, what *is* interesting in Fagan's fiction is precisely the ordinariness of the life, of the feelings, and of the people portrayed in it. What is charming, and quietly surprising, is the normal (yet unexpected) variety of experience depicted in each story.

A "classic" sexual initiation of an adolescent boy on holidays with his family ("Nora by the Sea"); a child's double exposure to immigrant poverty and to a magician's wonders ("Houdini of Clinton Street"); a failed perfectionist birthday party for a busy "yuppy" ("Happy birthday to me"); a young boy's intermittent perception of personal history, amid the emotional discontinuities of a sentimental "calling" ("History Lessons"), and the improbable disruption of a familiar routine following an old man's encounter with a theatrical troupe ("The Village Angel"), these are the events which shape a fictional world that mirrors the daily life of middle and lower-middle class in contemporary Canadian and American cities.

These are all, in a sense, stories of ethnicity, drawn against a solid background of social and national cohesion. A nuanced anthropological map emerges from the narration, pointing to a common background of personal dis-locations which elicit the past. Thus, for example, there is no strain in evoking South Africa and Israel in relation to Toronto; Portugal in relation to Clinton Street, or Geneva in relation to J. R. Henry Junior High School. If personal roots divide characters, a shared contemporaneity of time and place (today's Canada) unites them, letting them communicate and interact, making them accepted rather than merely acceptable, ultimately identifying them in a positive manner by acknowledging their daily needs.

Despite an awareness of many distinctly personal histories, the threat of separation

and alienation is dissolved in these stories, in the light of a liberating common present moment. The acknowledgement of being *deracinés* does not convey a sense of alienation for these characters who are "engrafted new" in what is now *their* country and the reader is left to wonder if this vision is a mere mark of the times, or else the result of a political and ethical effort. However, Fagan does not venture into the fields of cultural critique. The avoidance of intellectual ambiguities is perhaps the prerequisite for this postmodernist Eden. Despite this ideological simplification, there is much subtlety in Fagan's stories. The apparent simplicity of the stories does not exclude a complex expository strategy of narration. The writer's ear for colloquialism should not be mistaken for banality, but as an enriching form of "defamiliarization." The "structure of surprise" is central to many of these stories, ranging from epiphanic shock (in "Nora by the Sea"), to the anticlimatic reworking of surprise itself, when the planned surprise of a birthday party turns out to erode the very expectations that go with it ("Happy Birthday to Me").

At his worst Fagan lightly dismisses complex ethical issues (mostly linked to history and religion). "History Lessons" a sentence referring to European Jews under Nazi rule states: "They got burned in ovens. But knowing how someone died isn't knowing anything at all." This remark, made in a young boy's school composition, might even be a warning, a grim reminder of the postmodern loss of historical memory. Perhaps the remark is prompted by a sense of responsibility, but the young boy's profile and the narrator remain too detached to support this reading.

At their best Fagan's stories and novellas reveal "a man of feeling," softly speaking with the voice of delicate complexities. There are instances of a subtle orchestration of feelings and perceptions that turn these "dreams and deceptions" into insightfully gentle stories.

CARLA LOCATELLI

LANGUAGE WOMEN

GEORGE BOWERING, *Imaginary Hand*. ed. Smaro Kamboureli. NeWest Press, $13.95.

LINDA HUTCHEON, *The Politics of Postmodernism*. ed. Terence Hawkes. Routledge, $45.00.

IN *Imaginary Hand* AND *The Politics of Postmodernism*, Bowering and Hutcheon cover much familiar ground. The sixteen essays in Bowering's book span the years 1966 to 1987, and earlier versions of many have appeared in magazines. Seasoned Bowering readers will recognize earlier essays like "How I Hear *Howl*" and other meditations on Olsonian poetics and William Carlos Williams. While these essays certainly maintain their freshness, vigour and insight, veteran Bowering readers might want to turn to more recent essays such as "A Great Northward Darkness," "Wiebe and Bail: Re Making the Story," and "Language Women: Post-anecdotal Writing in Canada." Basing his comments primarily on work by Kroetsch, Ondaatje and Cohen, Bowering, in "Northward Darkness" formulates a postmodern 'theory' (or poetics) of history which often involves, paradoxically, "a rejection of history." Understanding well the postmodern resistance to closed systems (such as literary canons), Bowering argues that "in Canada we are observing, with appreciation of the irony entailed, the formation of a kind of canon of postmodern fiction." Linda Hutcheon has already secured a place for Bowering's own historical novel, *Burning Water* (1980) in this 'canon' in her work on historiographic metafiction.

"Wiebe and Bail" and "Language Women" signal even more interesting new(er) directions in Bowering's work.

In the former, he argues that Canada's Wiebe and Australia's Murray Bail, "agents of deconstruction," have problematized storytelling and interrogated complacent cultural icons to (successfully, according to the optimistic Bowering) explode the colonial and cultural garrisons in these 'western' countries. While this essay points to an exciting widening of the spaces within which Canadian writing is read and examined, "Language Women" is, in my opinion, the most important essay in the collection. It is of some significance that Bowering's discussion of "the female avant-garde" occupies, literally, the central spot in his book. Bowering's discussion of the postmodernism of women writers such as Nicole Brossard, Daphne Marlatt, Lola Lemire Tostevin and Sharon Thesen forms, in many ways, the heart and soul of this collection.

The other "language woman" in Bowering's book is Smaro Kamboureli, general editor of "The Writer as Critic Series" of which *Imaginary Hand* constitutes Volume One. The series, Kamboureli tells us in her preface, "invites readers to read criticism as literature," and Bowering's "Author's Preface" echoes this erasing of boundaries: "these essays are not meant to cover the field, whatever the field may be." Very postmodern.

Linda Hutcheon's *Politics of Postmodernism* is, to her detriment, at times, based on an almost opposite editorial principle. Hutcheon's book is thirty-third in the "New Accents" series edited by Terence Hawkes. Whereas Bowering's book pioneers a series Kamboureli seems to envision in a fairly open-ended way, Hawkes tells us that each "New Accent" book will offer an "objective exposition of significant developments in its field up to the present," including "an account of its author's own views of the matter" — "culminating in an informative bibliography as a guide to further study." These are the house rules set by Hawkes, patriarch of the series; unfortunately for Hutcheon, they are not the 'rules' of postmodern discourse.

Hutcheon follows Hawkes' rules almost *too* well. Her *Politics of Postmodernism* is a scholarly tour de force, with six heavily-documented chapters, an extensive "Directed Reading" bibliography, and a main bibliography of over two hundred and fifty entries. Hutcheon is certainly up to Hawkes' exhaustive task; she is a fine scholar with many provocative insights. In her book she refines and places into a broader context the 'double' postmodernism of "complicity and critique" she had developed in her earlier works. The broader postmodernist context within which Hutcheon examines the politics of representation includes literature, film, photography, music and architecture. Throughout, she argues, with sometimes excessive jargon, that postmodernist art, in its parodic doubleness, continually "denaturalizes" and "'de-doxifies'" those ideological (and explicitly or implicitly patriarchal) systems that have tended to be represented as natural, true and real.

However, for all her interest in, and knowledge of, the subversive energies of postmodernism and its tendency to expose the unnaturalness of ideologies and closed systems, Hutcheon adopts a conservative critical method. One wonders why the form of her own discourse does not offer more of a challenge to traditional academic, male-dominated criticism — especially since she is writing as a woman, and since feminist critics today are exploring, with increasing cogency, alternative forms of critical discourse.

Like Bowering's *Imaginary Hand*, Hutcheon's book is most engaging and possibly most valuable in its discussion of women's writing. In *Politics*, Hutcheon's analysis of "feminisms" comes at the end, unlike Bowering's 'centered' consideration of women writers. In this final — and most interesting — chapter, Hutcheon

courageously attempts to reconcile postmodernism and what she calls "feminisms," a somewhat uneasy pairing, as she realizes. Hutcheon speaks here in a more authentic voice than in previous chapters. Considering a wide range of women writers, she carefully considers areas where postmodernist and feminist politics seem to overlap — in the "general problematizing of the body and its sexuality," for example — and areas where their politics diverge. Ultimately, Hutcheon admits her own bafflement at this very difficult question of the relationship between postmodernism and feminism, and, confronting the question head-on, we suddenly hear a very different — and more genuine — voice speaking when Hutcheon says, "I really do not know what to do with this."

But even this brief respite from the dense critical dogma of Hutcheon's book suggests that she, like Bowering, may be heading in worthwhile new directions. *The Politics of Postmodernism* and *Imaginary Hand* indicate that we can hardly discuss postmodernism without taking into account the considerable contribution women writers have made to that movement.

JEANETTE LYNES

TRAIN & BALLOON

JANICE KULYK KEEFER, *Travelling Ladies.* Random House, $24.95.

JANE URQUHART, *Changing Heaven.* McClelland & Stewart, $24.95.

Travelling Ladies is a volume of interconnected short stories; *Changing Heaven* is a novel which fragments perspective to a degree where we seem to be reading linked stories rather than a novel. Both are formally innovative, which redeems their cliché-ridden plots, although *Changing Heaven* is a powerful impressionistic synthesis while *Travelling Ladies* is a lacklustre effort at modernist realism "in the Munro manner," to which one of the characters aspires.

Linked by theme and structure, the stories in *Travelling Ladies* explore various relationships between girls and women travelling geographically, emotionally or (in one case) temporally. Schedules, trains, suitcases and hotels are the familiar details of this book, and the stories have other links too: the secret garden represents one woman's childhood reading, another's adult fantasy and another's place of reconciliation with her own child. And the word "bella" will be in one story a Latin declension, in another a proper name and in another a description. But the very familiarity of these details is destabilized: "The Grey Valise" contains a travelling widow's husband's ashes, and "A Really Good Hotel" is ominously uncomfortable. Dislocation and a struggle for unity is a theme Kulyk-Keefer develops through this defamiliarization. The alienation of mother and daughter in "Accidents," the estrangement and return of a woman to her family in "Prodigals," the dual identity of "Bella Rabinovich/Arabella Rose," the growing identification of one woman with another who is murdered by anonymous men — all these are relationships based on a tension between the familiar and strange.

Unfortunately, these stories are trite, resolving complex problems too simply (as in "Accidents" and "The Lesson") or drawing facile psychological portraits (as in "The Grey Valise" and "The Grandes Platières"); the cliché is the most-used device in "The Gardens of the Loire." The narration contributes to this triteness insofar as the third-person narration, while adopting the perspective of a character, amounts to little more than detached description. There are efforts to reflect the characters' traits in their language (particularly in "Bella Rabinovich/Arabella Rose" and "Isola Bella"), and "The Gar-

dens of the Loire" shifts perspective following each of the main characters individually. But none of these attempts is successful and there is a notably uniform tone. A few stories do present similar situations but take different points of view, so that the juxtaposition of these stories makes for a more complex reading of a situation than a particular story suggests, alone. Thus the structural linkages allow each simple story to be read as one dimension of a larger construct.

Changing Heaven is a novel apparently fragmented into individual stories telling of separate characters in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Like *Travelling Ladies*, these stories are linked through theme and recurrent images, but the characters, too, begin to merge into each other's stories. Arthur and Ann, two twentieth-century academics, have at first separate chapters, but their stories converge as they become enmeshed in an increasingly stormy affair. The story of two nineteenth-century balloonists parallels *Wuthering Heights* in some aspects and the ghost of Emily Brontë figures in their tale, told intratextually by a moorland sage Ann is coming to love. In this intense and complicated structure, time is spatialized to bring the stories of these characters together under the (internal) storyteller's control in a frenzied, storm-tossed chapter. These winding stories show the wind to be the book's theme. The academics intellectualize the wind and see it, in art, as a metaphor of passion: Ann associates it with the passion of *Wuthering Heights*; Arthur is obsessed with the tempest-tossed angels in Tintoretto. One of many angels, fallen or otherwise, who link the narrative levels of the novel is the balloonist Arianna who falls to her death at the start of the novel.

The reader is enthralled not by plot but by the tight interlacing of metaphor, structure and theme: it is not only the wind which aspires to change heaven, controlling destiny, but each of the characters reflects this thematic desire to shape and control as well. Urquhart explores this theme from a variety of perspectives and narrative levels. The convergence in the climax is overwhelming; the impressionistic integration of character, setting, image and theme is, for me, more effective than the dispassionate description in Kulyk-Keefer, and I look forward to reading more of Urquhart.

SUSAN MACFARLANE

RESOUNDING VOICES

PAULETTE JILES, *Song to the Rising Sun: A Collection*. Polestar, $12.95.

SARAH MURPHY, *Comic Book Heroine and Other Stories*. NeWest, $19.95.

PAULETTE JILES'S recent collection of six works commissioned by the CBC includes poetry, verse drama, and prose. This diversity of genres reflects Jiles's wide-ranging interests and her ingenious use of voice to engage what she describes as a "flexible, interested, alert" audience that is vitally responsive. The use of oral tradition and aural presentation makes this a highly original work, whose patchwork arrangement resembles the quilt which is its dominant motif.

An introduction emphasizes the influence of radio on the pieces which follow. In her distinction between written and spoken work, Jiles attributes to oral presentation an immediacy of expression and experience which is absent during reading. For the creator, radio does not intimidate in the way the blank page does. To write for radio is liberating; in the process of creating Jiles hears the work "happening" in her mind and discovers a unique voice.

"Song to the Rising Sun," the title poem, evokes the Canadian Arctic, where the author spent ten years as a journalist and

consultant for Native organizations. As Jiles explains, it adopts devices of oral tradition, such as "repetition, variations in sentence structure, those long series of driving imperatives, the fall-back into a softer lyric, the direct address to the audience, and doubled or chorused or massed voices." Such technical virtuosity is evident throughout the collection. The poem introduces the work's celebratory tone, and the importance of recording personal and family history, for which the radio as lifeline is an appropriate vehicle:

> Wake up and start again.
> Wake up and free yourself.
> You must be told this over and over, in dreams,
> in messages, in radio waves.
> . . . this Arctic sun will open your body on its rising,
> because your heart is the sun of the world,
> because the sun rises and rises over the bare mountains,
> the tundra . . .

"The Oracles" and "Moroccan Journey" are verse dramas which adapt the convention of a narrator who speaks variously to herself, her soul, and the audience and the ancient convention of the chorus. Written in a serio-comic vein, "The Oracles" praises sisterhood while it discloses the difficulties and vagaries of women's lives. "Moroccan Journey," which tells the story of a clan feud and employs separate men's and women's choruses, was inspired by a trip Jiles took through that country.

The largest part of the collection consists of "My Grandmother's Quilt" and "Money and Blankets," accompanied by photographs and a map of New Lebanon and its surrounding area, which suggest the author's commitment to recovering history, in particular the history of women which traditionally has gone unrecorded. These are companion prose pieces which are set respectively in the 1880s and the 1980s. "My Grandmother's Quilt" recounts the story of Lula Belle and Dale King, who are left motherless at a young age, abandoned by their father, and shunted about among relatives during their childhood and adolescence. "Money and Blankets" focuses on Lula Belle's granddaughter, Rita Jean, and her unhappy marriage to Harlan Stoddard, who is a physically abusive husband. In these pieces Jiles introduces "the voice of a spirit" to counterbalance the dominant, colloquial idiom. Lula Belle and Rita Jean are aligned in their respective connections with the spirit voice and in their interest in storytelling. Since she is dyslexic, Lula Belle's personal narrative takes the suitably domestic form of a quilt made from fragments of discarded clothing, each of which suggests a story of its own. A century later, Rita Jean enters a storyteller's contest "to tell you the truth about my life . . . all these stories that got passed down." Rita Jean corroborates Jiles's belief that storytelling, in its oral and written forms, is especially redemptive for women.

Sarah Murphy makes a similar claim for the possibilities of narrative in her collection of eight short stories. Although the prevailing voice in this work is one of anger, which is in striking contrast to Jiles's genial voice, Murphy affirms the healing power of prose. These stories arise out of the author's varied and intensely personal experiences. Unlike Jiles's collection which should be heard as well as read, Murphy's stories were conceived as written testimonies to women who endure violence and oppression. In her examinations of women's powerlessness within several cultures and in their various relationships with men, Murphy consistently politicizes the theme of oppression.

"Comic Book Heroine," the title story, introduces the ghost motif which is central to the collection. Here Hannah, the victim of family abuse who is driven to murdering her husband, attempts to exorcise his enduring presence in her life. Like many of Murphy's heroines, Hannah feels

silenced, invisible, and struggles inwardly against the threat of erasure. "An Open Letter to the Boys on the Block" is a tale of sexual assault of a young girl by the boys of her neighbourhood. The abiding hostility of the adult narrator reveals the extent of her suffering. In "Xmas Baking: A Choose Your Own Morality Tale" the youngest sibling in a dysfunctional family resolves her trauma by retreating to "the central stillness of her mind." Pinky, who is in all likelihood an incest survivor, seeks shelter from her painful experiences and memories. The *Comic Book* world is a deliberately uncomfortable place, a world of subjugation, of torment, and of singular triumphs. Each character attempts to construct her "own new country" that will accommodate and possibly quell the resounding echoes of the past. For the author, the making of narrative offers solace and honours the ghosts that haunt her imagination.

RUTH PANOFSKY

CULTURAL ESTRANGEMENT

JOSEPH SKVORECKY, *The Return of Lieutenant Boruvka*. Lester & Orpen Dennys, $14.95 pa.

CHARLIE JANG, *The Tears of Chinese Immigrants*. Cormorant Books, $10.95.

MARWAN HASSAN, *The Confusion of Stones*. Cormorant Books, $9.95.

FROM SKVORECKY'S IRONICAL depiction of an Eastern-European émigré through the eyes of a solidly-established Anglo-Saxon Canadian narrator, to Yip's idealistic view of Chinese-Canadians struggling to understand Western ways, to Hassan's complex and poetical portrait of Lebanese-Canadians haunted by the political turmoil of the Middle-East, these books augment the growing genre of Canadian literature which gives words to the experience of social and cultural outsiders.

The immigrants portrayed in these fictions come not to carve a European culture out of the wilderness as did the first wave of French and Protestant Anglo-Celtic settlers, but to adapt to and find a place in pre-established socio-economic, cultural and class structures. Lieutenant Boruvka, a well-educated police detective from Czechoslovakia, makes the jarring transition to parking lot attendant in downtown Toronto. Zhang Ruigi and Zhou Meifang assume Anglo names (Charlie and Marlene) and secure blue-collar employment because they cannot yet afford to continue studies they had begun in China. Falah, a poor but independent farmer in Lebanon, faces the dismal work of a night custodian when he arrives in Canada to live with his uncle. And the second of Hassan's two novellas suggests one result of successful immigrant assimilation when a second-generation immigrant educated as a neurosurgeon returns to his parents' country of birth only to learn that he cannot identify himself as Lebanese, though he feels an affinity for the culture and speaks the language. The message in these structurally and stylistically divergent narratives is the same, and it is relentless: the immigrant or outsider experience is most often a painful and frustrating one. And, the risk of achieving the desired assimilation may be the fracture of an immigrant's fragile connection with his cultural roots.

The Return of Lieutenant Boruvka is the first of Skvorecky's novels in translation to take place entirely in Canada and the third in a series (*The Mournful Demeanour of Lieutenant Boruvka* (1973; tr 1974) and *The End of Lieutenant Boruvka* (1975; tr 1989). Departing noticeably from the world of writers and jazz musicians who typically populate Skvorecky's other fiction, the story centres on a Canadian-born investment banker, his feminist-detective girlfriend and a murder which plunges them into the

Czech underground of Toronto and leads them to Boruvka. The use of an Anglo-Saxon narrator gives especial force to the irony of Skvorecky's immigrant vision as privileged, educated Canadians encounter the Czech émigré and learn from the outsider that they cannot be "inside" and in control at all times, even in their own country. Skvorecky's adept use of humour counterbalances a subtle and searing ironic commentary on this particular immigrant experience. He constructs witty and accurate parodies of feminists, financiers and political activists, treating both Canadians and immigrants with equal levels of satire. Only the gentle political refugee Lieutenant Boruvka partially escapes the satiric tone, with a tender treatment more reminiscent of the softer, sadder moments in *The Engineer of Human Souls* (1977; tr 1984).

The Tears of Chinese Immigrants is a significant hallmark in immigrant fiction, depicting the experiences of an immigrant voice as yet rarely heard in Canadian literature. First published in Cantonese in Hong Kong in 1959, the novel's appearance in Canada in translation thirty years later indicates recent and growing interest in the literary expression of the Chinese-Canadian immigrant experience.

Yip, or Charlie Jang, depicts immigrant life in Winnipeg in the 1950s in the tradition of social realism; the novel features starkly drawn scenes and characters: smoke-filled Chinese gambling halls, drab, cramped apartments, a ruthlessly domineering father and an addicted gambler. The presence of the idealistic narrator Charlie, who preaches the doctrines of hard work, dedication and tolerance toward racism, serves to connect the many separate sub-plots representing a broad spectrum of Chinese immigrant life. Yet, this device does not adequately unify the novel and as a result, the story line is disjointed and many characters are superficially drawn. As translator Sheng-Tai Chang comments in the book's fine introduction, "Yip's novel is weaker than its ideas." Despite artistic weaknesses, however, the novel can instruct Western readers in the Chinese literary tradition which may have influenced Yip, including episodic structure, didacticism and the social reform of the New Literary Movement. And, as its translator points out, the novel provides a valuable introduction to the social and cultural issues faced by mid-century Chinese immigrants.

In *The Confusion of Stones*, Hassan successfully unites artistry with cultural contribution. A rare literary portrait of war-torn Lebanon and the experiences of Lebanese immigrants, it is also a complex canvas of delicately rendered and at times intricate prose. Hassan accomplishes admirable structural complexity in the juxtaposition of two shorter novellas, each of which describes the war and life as a Lebanese-Canadian from different perspectives. In the first novella, an agrarian whose family has been killed in a bombing raid is "rescued" from his ruined village by a solitary uncle living in Canada. The alternation between young Falah's painful but curiously nostalgic recollections of his life in Lebanon with his experiences in Canada is both natural and effective. In its sensitive and tender portrayal, the novella demonstrates that "the land of opportunity" is not always appropriate hope or solace to an immigrant who feels emotionally estranged from his home country and way of life, no matter how devastating the conditions there. Hassan's second novella also chooses to explore Lebanon and its immigrants, but this time a second-generation immigrant returns to the Middle East for a university sabbatical only to find it become a painful confrontation with his cultural past. As the novella develops, Abourezk finds himself an outsider not in Canada, but in his parents' home country, a situation which frustrates and even angers him. Hassan's

work deals with an inescapable immigrant irony: that cultural estrangement can occur in both directions. The juxtaposition of Falah, who cannot bring himself to assimilate, with Abourezk, a product of successful assimilation is effective and in a sense, profound.

EILEEN PEARKES

ECRITURE-FEMME

LOUISE BOUCHARD, *L'Inséparable*. Ed. Les Herbes Rouges, $14.95.

FRANCE THÉORÊT, *L'homme qui peignait Staline*. Ed. Les Herbes Rouges, $17.95.

TROP SOUVENT l'écriture-femme, féminine ou féministe, pose à un second degré de lecture le problème réel du roman à thèse, au sens où véritablement, le texte assoit sa justification sur la démonstration qu'il propose. *L'homme qui peignait Staline* n'échappe pas dans une certaine mesure à ce travers, tablant visiblement sur sa réception qualitative auprès d'un public déjà favorablement sensibilisé à l'illustration de la subjectivité, ou des subjectivés, féminines.

Ce n'est pas d'ailleurs que les nouvelles rassemblées dans ce recueil soient dénuées d'intérêt, loin de là. On y lit les récits divers de femmes de tous âges aux prises avec l'homme, avec l'autre, vivant l'abandon, affrontant leurs souvenirs. Ainsi, la nouvelle centrale qui donne son titre au recueil dépeint bien la perte graduelle et inconsciente d'autonomie et d'identité d'une jeune femme pourtant décidée à contrôler son destin, confrontée sans le savoir vide mais péremptoire de son conjoint incapable de réaliser ses velléités artistiques, en dépit de ses prises de positions véhémentes. Cependant, la perspective du récit basculera finalement au profit de Mathieu qui, malgré son inauthenticité et son immaturité opposées à une constante recherche de vérité chez Louise, se voit attribué la possibilité d'affirmer "la raison du plus fort" jusqu'à l'élimination textuelle du personnage féminin, comme victoire métaphorisée du paraître sur l'être.

Toutefois, une lecture disons plus "formelle" des nouvelles de Théorêt ne va pas sans quelque peu décevoir dès que l'on relègue au second plan la valeur indéniable de ces mises en situations fictionnelles du vécu féminin. C'est que la langue de l'auteur, vouée à l'illustration toujours délicate de la subjectivité et de l'intériorité, n'est pas toujours à la hauteur de ses ambitions. On oscille ici entre un réalisme plat, semé de clichés dont le lecteur n'arrive pas à décider du caractère volontaire et contrôlé qui les désamorcerait, et un lyrisme de l'intime, surtout en ce qui a trait au personnage de Louise, qui ne parvient pas à trouver son ton juste, sombrant trop souvent dans l'imprécision et le flou. Or, un certain nombre d'auteurs intimistes québécois ont fait la preuve que l'indicible du "je" peut néanmoins trouver une articulation précise qui n'en soit pas moins multiplicatrice des sens conférant de nouveaux reliefs aux sentiments décrits. Ajoutons cependant que ce même style impréciés chez Théorêt est curieusement plus efficace — dans un emploi elliptique — en ce qui a trait au personnage de Mathieu, et permet également la réussite plus totale de nouvelles courtes comme *Justine* et *Onze ans*.

Il reste que *L'homme qui peignait Staline* constitue une recueil de nouvelles prometteur de textes futurs plus accomplis, dans lesquels la forme saura servir complètement et sans restriction les projets thématiques chers à France Théorêt.

Les problèmes stylistiques inhérents aux textes de Théorêt se retrouvent, sous une autre forme, dans le recueil de poèmes de Louise Bouchard, *L'Inséparable*. Ici encore, et l'auteur n'en fait textuellement pas mystère — "Il faut bien trouver refuge dans la langue," "Quels

mots me serviraient à cette heure," "Ce lexique pauvre réduit où tu te trouves, semble-t-il, enfermée," nous assistons au trop limpide combat entre le poète et une langue réticente à se soumettre au service de l'expression du désespoir amoureux, du sentiment d'abandon, de la perte de soi et de sens. Or, le constat indubitable de la résistance des mots devant l'ineffable ne constitue pas précisément le jeu sémantique et phonétique qui fonde la création de tout texte poétique. Si le véritable viol du langage nécessaire à l'espace ludique de l'expression, même dans la déréliction, est empêché par la puissance trop aisément reconnue des normes de ce même langage, il y a vraisemblablement risque d'échec, non pas *de* la poésie, mais *vers* la poésie.

Force nous est de constater que Louise Bouchard frôle quelquefois cet échec avec certains textes de *L'Inséparable*, confiant elle aussi un peu trop à la thématique choisie le soin de définir et de valoriser son langage poétique. On peut pourtant lire des passages réussis, d'où se dégagent des images fortes et incisives, en équilibre entre le signe plein et le silence. Le langage de la défaite et de la perte de l'autre est alors cherché et trouvé dans une justesse unique. Alors qu'à côté, souvent à l'intérieur du même poème, on peut lire des lignes qui ne sont que des syntagmes normatifs découpés selon les nécessités typographiques de la versification dite libre. Or, une énumération simple ou une répétition parsemée de variables ne sauraient, laissées à elles-mêmes, constituer l'essence du texte poétique. Il faut savoir y ajouter — et y soutenir — une authentique recherche de la permutation et de la concentration du sens.

C'est toutefois dans les textes en prose que se révèlent véritablement les indéniables réussites du recueil, peut-être parce que la poète, n'ayant pas ici voulu souscrire à la contrainte purement formelle du vers, a joui d'un espace plus large pour établir toutes les nuances voulues. C'est dans ces pages que s'épanouit le mieux un discours intime, qui, sous la métaphore du quotidien, suscite une émotion réelle.

DOMINIQUE PERRON

GREEDY TORONTO

MORLEY TORGOV, *St. Farb's Day*. Lester & Orpen Dennys, $24.95.

IN *St. Farb's Day*, Morley Torgov draws on two very different literary traditions for his portrait of Toronto's Bay Street establishment, and of the outsiders — some arrived, some only *arriviste* — who long to find their niche where the big money is made. There is a light, almost flip side to Torgov's novel, where he develops a kind of hip urban anthropology, portraying the antics of lawyers and real estate sharks, resplendent in their lizard skin accessories. But alongside the mating and preening rituals of the young, he places the story of a man moving uncertainly into middle age, which draws to its bittersweet conclusion with an echo of Eliot's "Prufrock." *St. Farb's Day* combines the middlebrow kick and flirt of a drug store mystery, with the kind of characterization and satire of social mores which one associates with the work of Philip Roth and Mordecai Richler. Torgov's Toronto Jews are often as funny, and as well drawn, as those Roth has described in Newark, or Richler has created in his depictions of Montreal's Jewish ghetto.

Torgov's "saint," Isadore Farb, is a kind of Everyman, a lawyer who means to do good, who loves his work but fears that it controls him, and who has a reputation for being a kibitzer as well as a fierce litigator. His is the saintliness of Raymond Chandler's stoic loners, or of Hemingway's self-contained men, who have a bit

of the hero in them, but are also a bit blind to the exigencies of the world around them. The main intent of *St. Farb's Day* is not a portrayal of the hostility which exists between the "white" world of Bay Street and that of the poor-boys-turned-good who have made their way there from Toronto's immigrant ghettoes. Farb has been around long enough to be called an old-timer. And although he is graced with the Torgovian gift for viewing all things with light irony, he is no embittered observer on the make. His is a world of ethical dilemmas, and one senses that Torgov would have us understand that there is something covenantal about Farb's obsession with ethics, as if the counselor sees his profession as the modern-day arena in which he can answer to the age-old Jewish imperatives of law and interpretation. And it is his respect for these imperatives which leads Farb to act like a latent Talmudist, niggling over hairs, submitting himself to the kind of self-examination so uncommon in the milieu of the quick flip.

But Torgov does not rely solely on his masterful light comic touch in *St. Farb's Day*. The book has a dark centrepiece, based on Farb's mid-life crisis following an encounter with a renowned Holocaust survivor and writer. Modeled transparently on Primo Levi, this memoirist leads Farb to examine the way in which the War's events — although removed from a Toronto kid who signed up for the air force but never flew — can claim's one's imagination. Torgov handles this material with sensitivity, and with a willingness to ask questions, putting down no air-tight conclusions about the meaning of the suffering experienced by survivors and their children.

Interestingly enough, it is back on his home ground — that of the comic — where Torgov's control over his material falters. There is a tendency in *St. Farb's Day* for the characters to descend into over-cute banter, which is a bit too much like the quippy dialogue which weighs down Neil Simon's plays. And in one glaring flaw of characterization, Torgov asks his reader to accept a colourful Greek real estate operator named Chris Tatoulis, who thinks (as well as talks) far too much like a Jewish man of his generation, never once convincing the reader he is the son of devout Catholic immigrants ensconced at Danforth and Pape.

But aside from these slips, Torgov presents a picture of greedy Toronto which is far removed from the rancid critiques of land-flipping and the legal jungle which have become so common in recent film and fiction. In *St. Farb's Day*, Torgov moves between the shenanigans of lawyers and crooks, and the survivor community of Jewish north Toronto, with sensitivity and a sharp eye.

NORMAN RAVVIN

TAKING SIDES

W. J. KEITH, *A Sense of Style: Studies in the Art of Fiction in English-Speaking Canada.* ECW Press, $26.00/16.00.

BEVERLY J. RASPORICH, *Dance of the Sexes: Art and Gender in the Fiction of Alice Munro.* Univ. of Alberta Press, $27.50, $16.95.

SOME CRITICS ARE PATTERN-MAKERS, good at finding similarities, while others make their contribution pointing out uniqueness. In *Dance of the Sexes*, Beverly Rasporich tries to fit Alice Munro's work into the unifying pattern of the feminist quest. W. J. Keith, on the other hand, is suspicious of any approach that loses sight of individual differences. *A Sense of Style* begins with the works themselves. Keith asks: What is special about the writing of each of these ten Canadian writers? what is their unique flavour? what critical issues arise from a careful reading of the en-

tirety of each author's work? Keith wants to recall literary criticism "to its traditional function of providing help in the profitable reading and enjoyment of literature as a serious and richly rewarding cultural pursuit." This approach, he seems to suggest, may not be as fashionable as postmodern difference or indeterminacy but it has the advantage of being intelligible in a period when "literary criticism as a civilized humane discipline threatens to become an extinct species."

By style, Keith means everything that together makes up the writer's individual vision, including "various aspects of form and technique, of genre (especially the artful blending of genres), of moral attitude, of adherence to or divergence from convention." This definition of style allows him to focus on issues that arise from an informed reading of the texts themselves. Providing a roughly chronological ordering, Keith gives a chapter apiece to his ten authors: O'Hagan, Wilson, Mitchell, Davies, Gallant, Laurence, Hood, Munro, Atwood, and Hodgins. He explains that he has chosen writers who have produced a substantial body of work, omitting some because he has written about them elsewhere (Grove and Wiebe) and others because he has nothing to add to existing criticism (MacLennan, Callaghan, Richler, Kroetsch). "By contrast, then ten I am about to discuss raise pressing literary-critical issues which — perhaps because they are essential *literary* issues — have been curiously neglected."

Typically, Keith takes an eclectic approach, providing close readings of texts from the whole corpus of the author's work and placing these readings in the context of biographical evidence or interview material. For example, the essay on Howard O'Hagan begins with a supposedly autobiographical detail of O'Hagan's first meeting in 1920 with an eccentric wilderness man and opens up into a discussion of the relation between remembered events, oral storytelling, and literary art as demonstrated in *Tay John*. The chapter on Mavis Gallant explores questions of abandonment and the displacements that involve language, taking as a starting point Gallant's own description of how, barely four years old, she was betrayed by her mother and abandoned at a French Catholic school. Each chapter stands alone, but the context of the whole book allows Keith to clarify the quality of a particular author in comparison with others. Hence we are invited to consider the different handling of the tall tale, gossip, and storytelling in O'Hagan, Mitchell, and Munro; the clear moral stance and didactic impulse in Davies and Atwood; allegorical concerns and levels of meaning in Hood and Hodgins; the use of artifice in Davies, Atwood, Hood; and the scrupulous attention to language in Wilson and Gallant. Finally the subject of *A Sense of Style* is reading itself. Keith's own reading is informed, rewarding, and sometimes provocative.

Alice Munro forms the point of contact between the two books under review, and it would be hard to find two treatments more different. Keith takes Munro very much to task for failing to provide unambiguous ethical norms that would allow her readers to judge characters and their actions. Claiming that "the conspicuous refusal to hint at any moral comment can be deeply troubling," Keith cites the ending of "Mischief" as an "unsatisfying technical trick" that is "damagingly evasive": "we suspect Munro of covertly defending (or at the very least refusing openly to condemn) an action that seems irresponsible and even repellent." Where Keith complains that Munro refuses to take sides, Rasporich in *Dance of the Sexes* congratulates Munro for choosing the right side. She reads Munro as a writer of feminist protest who has created heroines who renounce subordinate roles and patriarchal exploitation to seek independence,

social authority, and liberated action. Rasporich calls her book an introduction to Munro's "female, feminine and feminist sensibilities as they affect fictional form, technique and content."

Taking her cue from Elaine Showalter's comment that Anglo-American feminist criticism "tries to recover women's historical experiences as readers and writers," Rasporich begins by situating herself as a reader and then goes on to provide a very interesting first chapter on Alice Munro, part biographical and part excerpts from two interviews conducted by Rasporich in 1981 and 1982. In the other four chapters, Rasporich considers various aspects of Munro as a female artist: the feminist quest for independence, identity, and authority; Munro as folk artist and ironist; regionalism and the gender implications of place; and aesthetic and stylistic features that are influenced by writing as a woman. Using gender as the lens through which to investigate Munro's fiction, Rasporich celebrates precisely those features that Keith has singled out as "most troubling" because they remind him of women's fiction — Munro's continuing concern with love relationships and her need to describe how people look and what they wear. To this list Rasporich would also add Munro's writing of the female body from adolescence through physical aging.

Rasporich never quite reconciles her portrait of Munro as feminist protester with her recognition that any reading of the stories is "complicated by Munro's increasingly typical method of seeing characters and events from more than one perspective." When Rasporich suggests in an interview that writing about female passion might itself be a feminist statement, Alice Munro responds, as she always does to such questions: "Yes. But, you know, what happens in a book . . . in a story or novel is not necessarily a philosophic statement by the writer. It's what happens in the context and you are not sure why it happens." Munro has a compulsion to turn things inside out and show the other side. Rasporich tends to be interested in just one side, but shows that side more clearly than it's been shown before in Munro criticism.

CATHERINE SHELDRICK ROSS

ANACHRONISTIC SUBJECT

LOUIS-JEAN CALVET, *Roland Barthes.* Flammarion, $40.00.

MARY BITTNER WISEMAN, *The Ecstasies of Roland Barthes.* Routledge, $18.50.

TEN YEARS AFTER the death of Roland Barthes, books are still being written about France's most influential theorist of the 1970s; now, the first biography has appeared. An analytical philosopher, Wiseman reads Barthes eccentrically, that is from outside the French context. She views Barthes's experiments with language and literature as a series of attempts "to reposition the human subject with respect to language and to time in order to let the subject escape from the language of a particular culture and the present time." The escapes that Barthes articulated are his "ecstacies," whether he called them "satori" in *L'Empire des signes,* "le texte de jouissance" in *Le Plaisir du texte,* or "*le punctum*" in the last book published before his death, that meditation on photography and death that is undoubtedly his best work, *La Chambre claire.*

Equating somewhat rapidly structuralism with modernism and poststructuralism with postmodernism, Wiseman views the evolution of Barthes's ideas as a passage or rather a series of passages from the former to the latter, the common thread consisting of RB's constant preoccupation with the body. Wiseman ack-

nowledges Barthes to be intellectually perverse and compares him to Socrates deflating the lazy, complacent, and less than rigorous thinking of his times, our times. Barthes's paradoxes — such as reading as sexual "bliss," or a science of the individual, or semiology as the "joker" in the play of contemporary knowledge — were his responses to the so-called *doxa*, the voice of established and accepted truth that forever seeks to hide the semiotics of life and texts, as well as the history of these forms, under the cloak of the "natural." Hence, his long and complicated relationship with semiology and what one might term the Barthesian revolution. As the critic writes:

> By the end of his adventure into semiology Barthes will have run two changes on Saussure's suggested science: he will have reversed the order of dependence between linguistics and semiology, making semiology a branch of linguistics, and he will have disjoined the two, making semiology the supplement to and the remedy of linguistics.

For having studied literature, or more accurately, textuality — whether it be the field of texts or daily life — as systems of signifying practices, the late Barthes went on to semiologize the physical, "introducing along the way a conception of writing performed by genetic material and by light—a writing from which the human hand is absent — and thereby changing the conception of the semiotic." Here Wiseman at once overstates and understates her case and the names and theories of Lacan and Kristeva would have been useful in conveying an idea of the semiotic.

Rather than a contradiction or break or even the advent of a "nihilistic subjective relativism," Wiseman views Barthes's evolution from pre-structuralism to linguistics and semiotics and then beyond as "an experimental rewriting of concepts surrounding the notion of the human subject and, in particular, a rewriting of the concept of the self." In the eyes of the American critic, the late Barthes incarnates a kind of structural humanism. And to appreciate it, even just to see it, the reader must, according to Wiseman, have a structural imagination. To which one could add a sense of play and a feel for the body (including the body politic) as it interacts with and produces signifiers of all sorts. Of course, the final or at least the last paradoxical turn of the theoretical screw was to articulate the triumph of the referent, the photographic *spectrum*. What fascinates Barthes as he looks long and lovingly at the old and faded portrait of his mother as a child is "the photograph's transgression of the logocentric association of the real with the present." For photography, like postmodernism, is anachronistic in that it plays with our very notions of what the present is: "The style quoted in the postmodern building and the body apparent in the photograph are alike in *being past*."

The value of this work of secondary theory lies precisely in what some might see as its primary weakness: by removing Barthes from the French scene, Wiseman has (re)contextualized his work within the problematic of postmodernism of which he is seen and amply demonstrated to be one of the principal and most honest heroes.

The very existence of Calvet's biography proves that Barthes was more than a "mere" theorist, for to many who followed his career over some thirty years on the international intellectual scene, he came to represent a kind of character, "RB." To write a biography of Barthes is, of course, a hazardous enterprise, given his own difficult relationship with the genre. Calvet has opted for a traditional approach, following the chronology of Barthes's family and his life from his grandparents to the afterlife of the numerous posthumous publications. Although Calvet interviewed many people (including President Mitterand, with

whom Barthes had lunch the day of the accident) he was unfortunately not allowed by the literary executors to quote from the correspondence or the juvenalia.

Unable to follow the normal trajectory (L'Ecole Normale Supérieure and the *agrégation*) because of the eight years he spent in sanatoriums in France and Switzerland, Barthes was obliged to think and read for himself. Although he did the equivalent of a Masters degree, he never completed the doctoral dissertation. Ironically, he was later to direct the research of many graduate students, to sit on PhD committees, including that of Kristeva, his most famous intellectual offspring. However, what is important is that Barthes avoided the regular path of the French *universitaire* and the critical clichés that often tend to attach themselves to such a corporate citizen. It was in the sanatorium that he developed his method of working with index cards, his love of structures (although it was later in Egypt that another French *lecteur*, A. J. Greimas, introduced him to Saussure's *Cours de linguistique générale*), and even his preferred way of writing — in fragments. On leaving the sanatorium, Barthes took away with him in his intellectual and literary baggage the ideas and outlines of his first two books: his *Michelet* in the series "Les écrivains de toujours" (to which he was return with his autobiography) and *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture*. Barthes's "graduate education" was now complete.

Always, one comes back to the body of Barthes, to desire and to death. Calvet raises the possibility that it was the death of desire in the Other, not to mention the death of his mother (with whom he lived until her death a few years before his own) which may in fact explain Barthes's final lack of will to live. Quoting from the posthumous *Incidents*, Calvet wonders if Barthes let himself die because he knew that "desire" for his sick and irremediably scarred, imperfect, and by then intubated body would now be limited to hustlers. "Puis je l'ai renvoyé, disant que j'avais à travailler, sachant que c'était fini, et qu'au-delà de lui quelque chose était fini: l'amour d'*un* garçon." For Barthes was homosexual. Calvet is more than somewhat ill at ease with this part of Barthes's life. In fact, the only loves of Barthes his biographer is willing to mention are one of his subject's earliest romantic interests, now long dead, and another, unrequited affair he had with a straight man, as though Barthes's sexuality were only made decent by death and/or nonconsummation. There is no real discussion of the relationship between Barthes's sexuality and his work, and the fact that there is little overt mention of homosexual desire in his writing (apart from the still as yet untranslated text mentioned above) is not sufficient reason to avoid the subject. Calvet would appear to be embarrassed by the whole issue, and one has the impression he would have avoided it had the last book not been published. Following Barthes's lead in this procedure — he was very good at dividing and structuring his life, friends, and lovers into discrete sets — Calvet, while mentioning RB's nocturnal sorties, refuses to allow the Other to speak (much like *Fragments d'un discours amoureux*), for none of Barthes's lovers is included. Now, it is true that "outing" is a peculiar form of hysteria that Barthes would have hated, yet surely some more honest, "in-between" solution could have been found.

And it is no doubt here that the two books come together, for Barthes was and is forever that anachronistic subject, that *erastes*, whose ideas and desires were out of touch with the discourse of what is normally, "naturally," accepted. Barthes taught us to push to the limit, to the paradox, the myths of daily life, literature and theory. That bodies and texts are connected is demonstrated by Barthes's suc-

cessful attempts to eroticize the text, to semiotize the body, and to deconstruct the cliché (still largely espoused by both Calvet and Wiseman) that would have us believe that the two have nothing in common.

RALPH SARKONAK

PRODUCTIVE CONTRADICTIONS

JAMES CLIFFORD, *The Predicament of Culture: Essays on Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art.* Harvard. $30.00 cl.; $15.95 pa.

The Predicament of Culture begins with William Carlos Williams' poem about Elsie, an Indian woman who was taken from her community as a young child, "reared by the state and sent out at fifteen to work / in some hard pressed house in the suburbs." The book ends with a chapter on the Mashpee tribe of Massachusetts who, like Elsie, live "within and against the dominant culture and state." The rest of the book is James Clifford's implicit attempt to come to terms with the situation of Elsie, the Mashpee, and others like them; their predicament is a particularly acute form of the predicament of living in a time when, according to Clifford, no person or culture has any claim to authenticity: "Twentieth-century identities no longer presuppose continuous cultures or traditions. Everywhere individuals and groups improvise local performances from (re)collected pasts, drawing on foreign media, symbols, and languages." A culture, like a human being, has no given identity, no essence — it is a continually negotiated process.

Clifford's project here is to re-think the role of ethnography. He defines ethnography, plurally, as "diverse ways of thinking and writing about culture from a standpoint of participant observation." Both ethnography and the avant-garde appreciate fragments, curious collections, and unexpected juxtapositions drawn from exotic and erotic realms. Both attack traditional modes of representation. Caught up in the myth of growth and progress, both look to the future. And both critique the desire to appropriate otherness, "to discover universal, ahistorical, 'human' capacities." Clifford sees this latter tendency at work in the Museum of Modern Art's exhibition of Winter 1984-5: "'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern," and in Claude Levi-Strauss's discernment of an underlying order to things, out of which arose structural anthropology.

By discussing the work of other anthropologists and ethnographers — Marcel Griaule, Bronislaw Malinowski, Michel Leiris, Margaret Mead, Clifford Geertz — Clifford elucidates the predicament of ethnographers who, like novelists, are torn between one desire to impose authorial control over their subjects and the opposing desire to allow different voices to speak for themselves. The situation of the ethnographer is convincingly connected with that of writers of all kinds — essayist and pornographer Georges Bataille, novelist Joseph Conrad, travel writer Victor Segalen, and surrealist poet Aimé Césaire. All of these writers, Clifford shows, help us to see how we are all "inauthentic," caught between cultures, entangled in others. They also show us that authoritative accounts of other ways of life are contingent fictions, self-fashionings. In the penultimate chapter on Edward Said's *Orientalism*, Clifford calls for a radical questioning of "cultural and social totalities," much like the interrogation that "the textual ensembles have undergone in recent critical practice."

In the final chapter, "Identity in Mashpee," Clifford leads us through the 1976

case heard in Boston Federal Court in which the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribal Council, Inc., sued for possession of 16,000 acres of land. The reason for the trial was not to solve the problem of land ownership but rather "to determine whether the group calling itself the Mashpee Tribe was in fact an Indian tribe, and the same tribe that in the mid-nineteenth century had lost its lands through a series of contested legislative acts." The jury, a group of four women and eight men (no minorities) could not be made to believe in the "persistent Indian existence" of the largely Christianized, English-speaking, racially mixed tribe of people who, despite retaining many of their tribal customs and traditions, no longer dressed in regalia or looked like Indians. Clifford, however, attended the trial in its entirety and is convinced that organized Indian life had been carried on in Mashpee for over three hundred years. He then makes an observation that links the final chapter, which is mainly fragments of transcripts from the trial, with the rest of the book:

> The plaintiffs [for the Mashpee] could not admit that Indians in Mashpee had lost, even voluntarily abandoned, crucial aspects of their tradition while at the same time pointing to evidence over the centuries of reinvented "Indianness." They could not show tribal institutions as relational and political, coming and going in response to changing federal and state policies and the surrounding ideological climate. An identity could not die and come back to life. To recreate a culture that had been lost was, by definition of the court, inauthentic.
>
> But is any part of a tradition "lost" if it can be remembered, even generations later, caught up in a present dynamism and made to symbolize a possible future?

It is difficult to know how to take Clifford's statement here and, at times, the book in general. Presumably, if the jurors adopted Clifford's way of looking at culture (a term he rejects but cannot do without), then they might see that there is this present-becoming-future reinvented "Indianness" in the Mashpee and might, therefore, vote in their favor. But Clifford's view of culture could easily work against the Mashpee as well: how could they be the "same tribe" as three hundred years ago if they have been reinvented? And despite Clifford's rejection of essence, the tone of this passage suggests that there is something pure and authentic that needs to be salvaged and re-created. Certainly the majority of Indian communities in North America (of which the Mashpee are not typical) believe this to be the case; this is evidenced by, among other things, the care and concern for detail that has always gone into their pipe ceremonies and rain or sun dances. So, though Clifford, while scrutinizing the "collage" of cultures that makes up the world, strives to homogenize heterogeneity, he struggles to balance this tendency with a largely productive search for the emergence of new orders of difference. This simultaneous needs is, perhaps, the true predicament. *The Predicament of Culture* is an important book that is full of productive contradictions; it significantly augments our understanding of culture.

BERNARD SELINGER

CORRECTION: No. 128, p. 230, col. 1. One of the titles being reviewed was omitted. The review should read: "Students of Canadian poetry will find much of interest in David Perkins's *A History of Modern Poetry: Modernism and After* (Harvard Univ. Press, $14.95), especially in the chapter on 'Open Form.'"

INTENSITY OF LOVE

GABRIELLE ROY, *Letters to Bernadette*, Patricia Claxton. Lester & Orpen Dennys, $24.95.

Letters to Bernadette, a translation of *Ma chère petite soeur*, published in 1988, is a collection of 138 previously unpublished letters, which Gabrielle Roy wrote to her elder sister, a nun, between 1943 and 1970, when Bernadette died. The excellent translation is the work of Patricia Claxton, recipient of the 1987 Governor General's Award for her rendering into English of Roy's autobiography, *Enchantment and Sorrow*. François Ricard, executor of Gabrielle Roy's literary estate, contributes a highly informative introduction. He places the relationship between the sisters in its family context and explains its importance to both Bernadette and to Gabrielle. Ricard views the publication of these letters as important for their intrinsic aesthetic value as well as the light they shed on the *oeuvre*.

According to Ricard, the letters divide naturally into two parts: those written during the almost three decades between the death of their mother and Bernadette's illness, and those composed during the months preceding Bernadette's death.

Indeed, Richard's point is well taken. During the first part, which takes up approximately three-quarters of the book, Gabrielle Roy writes about her career ("My book — *Bonheur d'occasion* — is really a great success and I'm more surprised than anyone else"), her daily life, and her concerns for the welfare of other family members. There are many memorable passages, such as her reflections on the differences between life in Canada and in France: "From here, I can see how incomparably beautiful, youthful, and dynamic life is in Canada. It's different here: you live amid elegance of form, colour, works of art, and you have to partake of all this refinement in order to appreciate the things that are less polished but have another kind of beauty." She writes about her meetings with Antonine Maillet, and her investiture in Ottawa as a Companion of the Order of Canada, a ceremony which, she regrets, received less attention than a meeting of the separatist Saint-Jean-Baptiste Society held at the same time in Montreal. The few political comments she does make betray a real fear about the direction Quebec society was taking ("The climate in Quebec is becoming dangerous. It's enough to make you wonder if we'll be able to live here in freedom much longer. There's a fanatic and racist demon slumbering in all peoples, and once it's unleashed it's almost impossible to catch before it's brought violence, horror, and mortal fear.") She also writes of her sister Adele's jealousy and her malicious manuscript about their childhood, which was later expanded, revised and published under the title *Le Miroir du passé*: "I realize now that her (Adele's) hatred of me is implacable, close to lunatic. If ever you get your hands on that text and destroy it, you'll do everyone a great service, and harm no one."

In the second part, there is a radical shift in tone and substance, after Gabrielle Roy's visit to Manitoba to see the ailing Bernadette. Gone is all mention of career and talk of everyday concerns. In its place are longer, lyrical daily letters expressing, in stunningly beautiful prose, great warmth and deepest love, as if she were losing a sister she loved intensely and had not fully appreciated: "Perhaps the success of a person's life is measured by the intensity of love it has inspired in others. If this is so, then yours is a total success." Expressed in these letters, too, which will surprise some readers, is a communion with God that is sustained and moving.

This is a book which can be profitably read by anyone, but will most certainly

be deeply appreciated by those already familiar with the author's writings.

PAUL G. SOCKEN

RELATIONSHIPS

DIANE SCHOEMPERLEN, *The Man of My Dreams*. Macmillan, $16.95.

LOUISE MAHEUX-FORCIER, *Words and Music*. Oberon, $25.95/12.95.

DIANE SCHOEMPERLEN'S *The Man of My Dreams*, short-listed for the 1990 Governor-General's Award, may be one of the more curiously concocted collections of short stories you are ever likely to read. The acknowledgements alone hint at the oddity of the work: there are references to *The Dreamer's Dictionary*, *The National Enquirer*, *Consumers' Distributing Catalogue*, and assorted guidebooks to painting and astronomy. The stories themselves are a pastiche of recipes, train tickets, greeting cards, horoscope columns, letters, phrase books, and trivial pursuit questions. But what is there behind this postmodern compound of literary narrative and popular culture to engage our interest?

The stories are about women — women school teachers, writers, store clerks, mothers, daughters, wives, lovers, ex-lovers — and, to a lesser extent, the men in their lives. Most often in their mid-thirties, what these characters have in common is their attempt to make sense of their lives, usually after failed relationships, by taking active control of the present. Some stick to well-established and obsessive rituals as Myrna does in "How Myrna Survives"; others, like the narrator in "Stranger Than Fiction," transform their daily activities into works of fiction. The extent to which they attain control or ultimately celebrate their very lack of control varies from story to story.

Technically the stories are fascinating. In the title story, the narrator addresses her dream diary to an unnamed man ("you"), the man of her daydreams whom, ironically, she never dreams about in her sleep. Interspersed in the already fragmented narrative are excerpts from dream dictionaries which provide an ironic comment on the narrator's daily life, the background material for her dreams. "Tickets to Spain" is a humorous twist on similar metafictional devices. Here, Howard, the husband of Miriam, incorporates his daily life with his wife into a play he is writing (entitled "Tickets to Spain"), a play which keeps changing over the years because of new developments in their relationship. Told from the point of view of Miriam, the narrative shifts from excerpts from the various drafts of Howard's play (she listens to his recorded tapes while doing the ironing), to quotations from Spanish phrase books, to Miriam's eavesdropping in restaurants to glean new material for the play, until, by the conclusion of the story, Howard is anticipating their future together, and playing the tapes to his wife in advance.

These are the more conservative selections. Others, such as "Red Plaid Shirt," are even more self-consciously wrought. This story, focussed through the consciousness of one character, is arranged into sections headed by the names of pieces of clothing: red plaid shirt, yellow evening gown, black leather jacket, and so on. The memories associated with these colours and items of clothing enable the narrator to organize and make sense of her past. "Mastering Effective English" is likewise divided into sections, this time centred on different parts of speech, an ironic combination of the main character's staid career (teaching highschool English) and her vacation on a tropical island where she meets an island native whose precise and formal English is curiously at odds with his passion and vitality.

If I have any reservation about the book, it may be that Schoemperlen strives too hard in her quest for novelty and eccentricity. As with much postmodernist writing, the technical sleights of hand sometimes cloak the story beneath, making the writing less engaging than it could be. This is certainly the case with Schoemperlen's multiple-choice stories, which, like the popular children's choose-your-own-adventure series, instill a certain amount of tedium before the end is reached. However, this is only a slight quibble. Her stories are a masterful blend of entertainment, literary vivacity, and insight into women's waking and dream lives. As she writes in the conclusion to "What We Want,"

> We could be anything
> We could be wives
> We could be terrorists
> We could be artists
> We could be wizards
> We could be legends in our own time.
>
> What we want is a change in style.

And a change of style is certainly what we get here.

Louise Maheux-Forcier presents relationships differently in her novel *Words and Music*, originally published in 1973, now translated into English by David Lobdell. Framed as a confessional monologue, the unnamed heroine recounts the history of her life and loves from a bed in a Catholic hospital (black coifed nuns wander in and out of her vision) where she is "nourished on morphine" and convinced that she is about to die. Confused by the blurring effects of anaesthetic and pain killers, she takes us on a rambling, free-associating hike through the terrain of her sordid past (largely centred on Montreal), replete with the clichés of 1970s bohemia: surreptitious abortions, incest, alcohol and drug addiction, child abuse, cancer, affairs with manipulative artists and breezy young women, disillusionment, gynecologists, sexual intimidation at the hands of her older brother and sadistic cousin. . . . the list goes on.

The novel is reminiscent of the heated confession of *Kamouraska*, but without the mystery and compelling intensity of that work. Maheux-Forcier's highly metaphorical and convoluted style, while often beautifully evocative, becomes oppressive when carried out at this length, and at times the allusions are so oblique as to be unintelligible. This is a work that simply takes itself too seriously. It communicates angst and guilt, but it does this so self-indulgently that the reader quickly loses all sympathy for the protagonist. The narrator is without any sense of distance or self-irony, and converts too many inconsequential events, such as her brother's slicing off one of her golden pigtails, into momentous psychological turning points. While the characters of Diane Schoemperlen's book respond to life's trials by doing things like mouthing pop songs into inverted turkey basters, this character chants a monotonous and incessant lament of lost innocence.

The monologue is addressed to the mysterious Geneviève, the one stable point in the narrator's vertiginous vision, who sits at her lover's bedside throughout the ordeal. By the end of the novel, however, this ordeal, kept obscure throughout, appears somewhat less cataclysmic than we had been led to expect. The narrator emerges from the hospital, fit and cheery, a benign lump removed from her breast. The metaphorical significance here is obvious. Typical of the confessional tradition, we end on a cathartic note: with the exorcism of past guilt comes a joyous affirmation of life. The travelogue concludes with a mystical, life-embracing vision, making a sudden about-turn and passing through the narrator's life in reverse order this time, from her vacationing in Florida with Geneviève, to her mother's lingering death, to her affair

with the duplicitious David, and finally to her childhood summers along the banks of the Rouge where she can at last assert "what she has learned": ". . . that there are neither men nor women in this world, but only the desire to love. . . ." Given the obsessive, angst-ridden account that has preceded, this affirmation of life and love (the latter of which seems to have caused the narrator more trouble than it was worth) is hardly reassuring. The tale itself, like the tumour, is ultimately benign.

CYNTHIA SUGARS

A DIDACTIC BENT

ROGER VIAU, *Les Fous de papier*. Méridien, n.p.

RACHEL FONTAINE, *Gabrielle Provencher, Suffragette*. Quinze, n.p.

ROGER VIAU'S *Les Fous de papier*, is, on the whole, a well-researched socio-critical study of the theme of madness in Québécois literature from its beginnings to the present day. The title is ambiguous: it is unfortunate that the self-explanatory subtitle of the original Ph.D. thesis, "l'image de la folie dans le roman québécois," was not retained. The main subject of inquiry is Québécois novels in which a "fou" is explicitly identified as such. This research, however, has a double focus: the exhaustive list of works consulted provide material for Viau's critical look at Québécois society's treatment of the mentally ill. He begins with an overview of the fool's role in society from the Middle Ages onward, with an interesting, albeit brief, discussion of "la période gestatoire préscientifique de la folie." The introductory chapters discuss the horrifying living conditions of the mentally ill in Quebec, beginning with the New France period. Viau criticizes religious communities' care of Québec's violently insane, while presenting the social, historical and financial reasons for the lack of humane practices in their institutions. This lengthy introduction lays the groundwork for the succeeding chapters, which diachronically examine "le fou" in literary works from the nineteenth century, and then from 1900-39; 1940-59; and 1960-88.

In the first half of nineteenth-century Quebec, short stories, legends, "contes" and a limited number of novels usually reflected the Romantic notion of the "crazed (always male) lover"—who goes mad because he is kept from the object of his desire. In the second half of the century, however, when historical novels and "romans du terroir" were coming into vogue, madness was seen as a moral punishment for deviant behaviour. Ambition, materialism, displays of sexuality, or any breech in familial loyalty could cause insanity. This chapter closes with an interesting account of madness in "récits fantastiques," (1885-1900) where it continues to be perceived as divine punishment for immoral conduct. Viau notes, however, that two well-known novels of the nineteenth century, Philippe Aubert de Gaspé's *Les Anciens Canadiens* and George Boucher de Boucherville's *Une de perdue, deux de trouvées*, are not representative of these stereotypes.

In the novels published during the first four decades of the twentieth century, madness continues to be portrayed as a punishment for those who do not uphold the dominant agrarian ideology. Three novels of this period are different: Albert Laberge's *La Scouine*, that infamous anti-terroir novel, where "la folie" is gratuitous, and two political novels where political injustices cause the loss of reason: Félix-Antoine Savard's *Menaud, maître-draveur* and Lionel Groulx's *Au Cap Blomidon*.

Between 1940 and 1959, Québécois novels change radically. Instead of transmitting traditional values, they now question them. Viau's analyses of Marie-Claire

Blais' *La Belle Bête* and Jean Filiatrault's *La Chaîne de feu* illustrate how the role of the family is particularly challenged: numerous characters go mad because of familial tensions. During this period insanity begins to be seen in a positive light. In Félix Leclerc's *Le fou de l'île*, madness, paradoxically, is symptomatic of mental health: the "fou" goes mad because he refuses to bend to society's inept laws.

According to Viau, three categories of "folie" dominate the 1960-1988 period: "politique, echatologique et féminine." Unfortunately, only two or three novels illustrate each category: political madness in Hubert Aquin's *Prochain Episode* and Laurent Girouard's *La Ville inhumaine*; apocalyptic madness in Marie-Claire Blais' *Les Manuscrits de Pauline Archange* and Normand Rousseau's *Le Déluge blanc*; and feminine madness in Suzanne Paradis' *Emmanuelle en noir* and two of Louky Bersianik's novels. This last section is disappointing: no space is devoted to the mad witch woman, as illustrated, for instance, in much of Anne Hébert's work. A discussion of "l'idiotie" follows, in which Viau underlines the major change in attitude to madness in contemporary Québécois novels: the fool is sane in a world gone mad. The work concludes with a section on institutional madness, with reference to Jacques Ferron's work. This brings Viau back to his secondary focus: a critical appraisal of psychiatric treatments of the insane in Québécois society. Regrettably, no reference is made here to Michel Foucault's work on madness and institutions. Viau's back-and-forth movement between novels and social critique may be annoying to some readers. This well-written research, however, presents a refreshing and original approach to the usual overview of a particular theme: we learn about the concept of madness, Quebec society's evolving attitude toward it, and its portrayal in an impressive number of prose works.

Rachel Fontaine's *Gabrielle Provencher, Suffragette*, also has a didactic bent: this historical novel retells the efforts of Québécoises to obtain the legal right to vote during the 1920s and 1930s. Based on scripts by Lise Payette, this story tells of a young librarian from Montreal who gets caught up in the political struggle. At the beginning of the novel, twenty-two-year-old Gabrielle Provencher boards the train to Quebec City in the company of other suffragettes. The women's first meeting with Alexandre Tachereau resembles several others described throughout the novel: their repeated requests for political equality are turned down. During that first trip, Provencher meets a young journalist, Emile Gariépy, who is sympathetic to women's rights and romantically interested in her. The two stories, that of the collective political struggle and that of Provencher's personal relationships, are intertwined here. This novel's interest lies in its description of the suffragettes' work and of famous political activists: Thérèse Casgrain, Marie Gérin-Lajoie and Idola Saint-Jean. It also succeeds in portraying the accepted mores of the time: when Provencher's father selfishly denies her permission to accompany Gérin-Lajoie's delegation to Rome, she never once considers defying his authority and using her own money to pay her way. Fontaine's narrative is provocative, in that it presents the conflicts of a woman with traditional expectations about family and marriage who gradually becomes aware of the political dimensions of feminism. The third-person narration is sometimes distancing, however, and the occasional narratorial interjections regarding historical research do not fit the overall tone of the work. Nonetheless, this novel brings to life a crucial and too easily forgotten period of Quebec's history. As does Viau's research, Fontaine's text helps to keep the past in the present.

MARIE VAUTIER

WOMEN ALONE

JOHN FERNS & KEVIN MCCABE, eds. *The Poetry of Lucy Maud Montgomery.* Fitzhenry & Whiteside, $19.95.

BETSY WARLAND, *Proper Deafinitions: collected theograms.* Press Gang Publishers, $11.95.

BRONWEN WALLACE, *People You'd Trust Your Life To.* McClelland & Stewart, $12.95.

IN ONE OF HER FIRST LETTERS to G. B. McMillan, L. M. Montgomery describes herself as a lonely child, shut out from social life with no companionship except that of books and solitary rambles. She constructed a "world of fancy and imagination" into which she retreated at will. Books, nature and romantic idealisation are the elements of her poems, which were published from 1890 in such venues as the Charlottetown *Daily Patriot* and *Youth's Companion. The Watchman and Other Poems* appeared in 1916, eliciting the *Journal* entry for November 11: "It is very nicely gotten up. I expect no great things of it." Now 70 years later there is another selection, edited by John Ferns and Kevin McCabe, *The Poetry of Lucy Maud Montgomery.*

Given that the "poetic" diction seems trite, the pathetic fallacies indulgent, the Patience Strong uplift outworn, some of these poems can still make contact with the reader. Inferior echoes of Wordsworth though they may be, the representations of nature as a comfort and refuge, as a precious heritage to be preserved, embody attitudes acceptable to our environment-conscious age:

> The woods are never lonely, as I stray
> Adown rain-freshened slopes I hear today
> All shy blithe forest voices
> Calling around me till the great woods' calm
> Falls on my spirit with a wondrous balm
> And my vexed heart rejoices. ("In Untrod Woods").

The profusion of wildflowers which she celebrates make us aware of our impoverishment — rose-red clover scenting the air, violets, bluebells, orange lilies, buttercups like a flood of sunshine across the marsh, mayflowers blooming above the snow, goldenrod, daisies, roses, and smoke blue asters in the meadows by the sea.

Though Montgomery's letters mention her delight in talking freely "out of my inmost 'ego'" and her fiction abounds with the subjective effusions of her heroines, an almost total lack of women's voice characterises her poetry. The nature poems are neutral. Those of experience are voiced by a father returning from town, a sailor, a bereaved lover, and an assortment of boys who harvest apples, cut hay and attend dances. The personae of her dramatic monologues include the Magi, one of Daulac's men captured at Long Sault, and a Roman soldier at Christ's tomb. Scott, Wordsworth, Tennyson, Browning, de la Mare, and Carman are her masters. Where a particular voice can be identified, it almost always belongs to a male.

This edition is not enhanced by McCabe's inept introduction. It is poorly organised and atrociously written, lacking the technical vocabulary appropriate to the discussion of Romantic poetry. Unreliable as a guide to the poetry's literary, intellectual and social contexts, it is best ignored. The text is useless as a scholarly resource, since it makes no attempt at completeness and it lacks the most basic information about dates, places of composition and publication, or sources. One can only conclude that its perpetrators were less concerned with filling a lacuna in the accessible Montgomery canon than with cashing in on a popular interest which successful television dramatisations of the fiction have stimulated. The author's low opinion of publishers' motivations seems confirmed.

If the woman's voice is largely suppressed in Montgomery's poetry, that is not the case with the two remaining col-

lections. *Proper Deafinitions: Collected Theograms* by radical feminist lesbian deconstructionist Betsy Warland contains 14 pieces of poetry and prose, of which only 5 have not been previously published. In a Foreword, Louise H. Forsyth defines theograms as "short texts having a high charge of potential energy written for the purpose of transgressing and displacing a system of signs which renders dominant culture deaf to the individual's vital sound." Spiralling language is the means of freeing "women's tongues, hearts and minds" from the "ideological underpinnings" and "ready-to-think clichés keeping us out of touch with our own sensuous rhythms and desires." Word play and etymology are the tools of Warland's "languaged-focused" style (which is far less a unique dialect than is claimed.):

> sentence, sentire, to feel
> over & over she's caught red-handed
> feeling her way
> with her own
> sense, sent-, sentence
> her own
> language, lingua, tongue

The device is effective in poems like "mOther muse: "Mousa, mosaic" where Warland combines disapproval of her mother's deviousness with pity for her lack of words — "You do not speak of yourself." But the prose pieces are frequently arrogant, defensive, and hyperbolically contrived, demanding more attention than they deserve. Unintended ironies abound. When the author provides etymologies from *The American Heritage Dictionary* (exclusive, ex-, out + claudere, to shut), she not only assumes her readers' ignorance of Latin and Greek roots but she also bases her "radically fresh perspective" on two of the "patriarchal headlocks" that she condemns. The self-indulgent descriptions of her ailments and operations, larded with the jargon of medical texts, are as boring as the "women's complaints" conversations of her despised mother's generation.

The expression of lesbian love, particularly examined in "Moving Parts," is claimed as a vehicle of freedom but there is little joy in these selections. The whine predominates as she "still functions essentially in resistance to, and as a retreat from, the world." Lesbian power, possession, narcissism and exclusiveness seem to be what *Proper Deafinitions* is about. This reader's desire to penetrate (Latin *penetrare*, from *penitus*, deeply, from *penus*, the interior of a house) the teks/text was difficult to sustain.

People You'd Trust Your Life To is Bronwen Wallace's only collection of short fiction. She wrote poetry, directed documentary films, and worked as a counsellor in shelters for abused women and children. She was, in turn, a student activist, housewife and mother. In a poem entitled "Bones" she wrote, "Everywhere I went, my work experience / drew me through confession I couldn't stop, / and I couldn't stop talking about them." These confessions are the raw material of her technically sophisticated and emotionally convincing stories.

As in James Joyce's *Dubliners*, or, a closer analogy, Alice Munro's *Lives of Girls and Women*, the stories exist independently yet have unifying elements. The protagonists are women living in present day urban Ontario. Some of them, like the sisters Lee and Jill Stewart, appear in more than one tale. All are women whose men have failed them by deserting them, by being absent in times of crisis, by refusing to commit themselves, by abusing them and their children or by dying unexpectedly. The women are survivors, determined, self-reliant, compassionate, stoical — people you'd trust your life to. They are also enormously vulnerable. Their tough, pithy, unsentimental voices do not conceal their need for tears. The milieu is conveyed not by descriptions

of cityscapes and landscapes but by the trade names of a secular North American consumer society — Swiss Chalet, Kresge's, Zellers, Dairy Queen, Kraft dinners and Baskin-Robbins ice cream. The past — the childhood of characters now middle-aged — is evoked by references to Ringling Brothers' Circus, Elvis Presley, the Beatles, the Ed Sullivan Show and the anti-Vietnam demonstrations. The fabric of the present includes eating out on Friday night, working part-time after school, listening to Patsy Cline on a walkman, dealing with aging parents and tension-induced back pain. The terrain is social and psychological. The ache of living "ordinary" lives is pervasive.

When Lydia Robertson, the narrator of "Chicken 'N' Ribs" (nurse, age 36, three teenage children) was 21, she found her husband's note propped against the lunchbox: "Look, I'm sorry, but I can't take anymore of this. I've got to get out while I can." Single-handedly, she trained as a nurse and raised her family. Now she embarrasses her children, who think she's "weird." Beautiful Marion Walker seems to have had "An Easy Life," a Canadian version of American upper-middle class liberalism. There were flower child undergraduate days, marriage to a promising art student, retreat to a food producing farm, concerned parenthood, Women's Lib, a graduate degree in Psychology, a "rewarding" career as a school counsellor; in short, a life that conforms to her husband's dictum, "You have to go with what's happening all the time." The joint with the morning coffee and the obsessive scrubbing of the kitchen with Comet, Lysol and Javex signal the effort of keeping chaos at bay. Jill, who narrates "The Scuba Diver in Repose," is a drifter, a bank teller and a hobby photographer until she meets Jimmie. He cherishes her, gives her confidence, encourages her to mount a successful exhibition of her photographs. He turns her into an artist, teaches her to pay attention to people's "secret, difficult and hard-to-get at places." Then, closely attended by his parents, his son and his ex-wife, he rapidly dies of cancer, leaving Jill to realize "there really isn't anyone there to protect you from anything anymore."

Wallace expands the temporal frame and the cast of characters by skilfully using retrospective narration, memory and dream. Ironic juxtapositions of child/adult perspectives increase complexity without destroying the sense of mystery. The philosophical stance is fatalistic. "Anything can happen any time" or "No matter what you call it, it's still death and decay and you're still stuck with it." Bronwen Wallace died in 1989 at the age of 44. The stilling of this woman's voice is a loss to Canadian literature.

MURIEL WHITAKER

LAST PAGE

START WITH Howard Zinn's *The Politics of History* (U Illinois P, US$34.95; pa. $11.95): it's essentially a theory about American history, together with a series of case studies probing Vietnam, Hiroshima, and the cultural embrace of military interventionism — how, asks the book, does a society construct for its citizens images of "neutrality" and "balanced judgment" when its behaviour argues against this position? Drawing on psychoanalytic and other theories re double standards in relation to violence, Zinn examines aggression in history, seeking connections between racism and the so-called ideal of the "new frontier."

It has now become critically conventional to regard history as a "fiction," i.e. a selective arrangement of details and events to argue or establish a political position, and numerous recent works have been taking up versions of this perspective. For example, Christopher Shaw and Malcolm Chase, in *The Imagined Past: History and Nostalgia* (St Martin's P/ Manchester UP, US$49.95) assemble essays on painting, on adventure stories (especially those of John Buchan), and on aristocratic socialism: all with the intent of demonstrating that the "happy past" is an historical illusion, wrought for different purposes. "The home we miss is a state of mind," writes one writer, with good

intent but somewhat sententious overgeneralization. Basic to the idea of nostalgia, the writers collectively make clear, is a concatenation of beliefs: time is not cyclical, the present is deficient, there is a loss of faith in the power of individuals to change current public life — hence available images of the past become talismans. However, as Renato Rosaldo's *Culture & Truth* (Oxford, $15.50) also points out, nostalgia can be a distortion of history: a reconstruction of "poor victims" and "nice times," when the times created those very victims; such nostalgia is an escape from intellectual responsibility, perhaps, as well as a flight into fancy. P. J. Rich's *The Elixir of Empire* (Regency Press, £9.95) could be arguing something similar, but its American insistence on an exact relation between pedagogy and politics, on the parallel between imperial political rewards and "Public School" prize days and between imperial battles and adolescent school triumphs — while no doubt relevant to an historical understanding of British Imperial politics — begins to sound like an exercise in nostalgia itself.

Peter Womack's *Improvement and Romance* (Macmillan, n.p.) demonstrates how the Scottish Highlands have been one ground for such nostalgic reconstruction; tracing the changes in public images of place, Womack looks at such motifs as savage, rogue, fool, child, beggar, ghost, and barbarian, in order to show how "Romantic" images become accepted as "truth." Nicholas Green's *The Spectacle of Nature: landscape and bourgeois culture in nineteenth-century France* (St Martin's, US $65.00) looks to France for the forms by which "depiction" turns into "power." "Art," Green writes, "still stands as the *metalangue* for how culture as a whole is to be envisaged." Tamara Plakins Thornton, in *Cultivating Gentlemen* (Yale UP, US$29.95), looks to early nineteenth-century Boston for similar reasons; her book is a history of an elite's management of perception — a demonstration of the way a group of private persons seeking rural retreat managed to shape public values, in particular making landscape *morally* more valuable as *ornament* than it had previously been, thus reducing the priority given to landscape's *utility*.

Terry Eagleton's Marxist *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Basil Blackwell/Oxford, $27.50) takes up the general premise behind such books, enquiring (through a survey of the aesthetics of Hume, Kant, Hegel, Marx, Freud, Walter Benjamin, and a few others) into the disparity between the *function* of the term "aesthetics" and the idea of "functionlessness" which it popularly records. Charting intellectual currents is but one thread in this book, however; a more personal quest is to reconcile the belief that the whole notion of aesthetics is bourgeois in inception with the nagging realization that that doesn't necessarily mean that it's all bad. Value, in other words, seems to shift, through history, which has slippery implications for those who would deal in fixed principles.

There are some who would revisit Empire in empirical ways, as when Caroline Alexander, in *One Dry Season* (Knopf/Random House, $29.95), travels to Gabon, "in the footsteps of Mary Kingsley." Here the observations in the present are recurrently (and entertainingly) contrasted with those from the past, but whether things seen are "half-finished or half-destroyed" is sometimes beyond empirical determination. Allister Sparks's *The Mind of South Africa* (Knopf/Random House, $33.00) is also in some sense informed by personal visitation; ostensibly a history, it is more particularly an exposé of the duality inherent in Afrikaner nationalism. Leonard Thompson's *A History of South Africa* (Yale UP, $29.95), by contrast, tries to foreground black perspectives on South African political developments, thus contextualizing the political philosophies of various ruling groups (the book contains clear, useful maps and a chronology). Relatedly, Neil Lazarus, in *Resistance in Postcolonial African Fiction* (Yale UP, $27.50), reads West African history through the works of the Ghanian novelist Ayi Kwei Armah, determining that history and fiction trace parallel paths from postcolonial political independence (with Walter Benjamin in two: independence carries with it all the dangers "of bourgeois nationalism'), through utopian rhetoric, to disillusion. But the danger of such paradigms is that they themselves become "truths" as fixed *but as "romantic"* as any trope of Scottish highland picturesqueness. Mineke Schipper's *Beyond the Boundaries* (Allison & Bushby, n.p.) tries to address such issues in an introductory history of the limitations of various critical positions brought to the interpretation of African literatures; but it, too, has its limitations, as do all analyses of historiographic process: they are implicated in the very language they analyze, and therefore cannot be absolutely free from bias — or romance — themselves. Hence their value is not in establishing the truth or untruth of what others have said, but in reminding readers to question the assumptions that lie behind any arrangement of data and any declaration that the arrangement constitutes an unquestionable determination of "fact."

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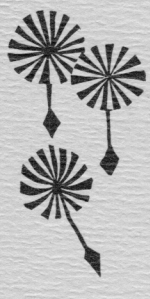

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