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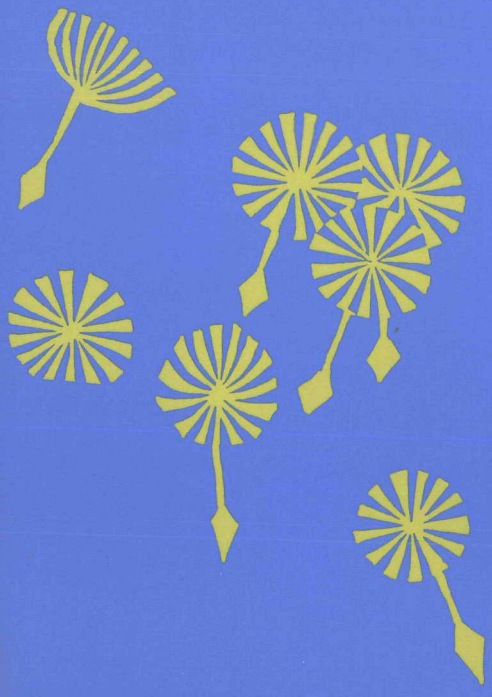

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Articles of approximately 25 pages should be submitted in triplicate, with the author's name deleted from 2 copies, and addressed to The Editor, *Canadian Literature,* The University of British Columbia, Buchanan E158, 1866 Main Mall, Vancouver, B.C., Canada V6T 1Z1. Submissions must include a self-addressed return envelope, either with Canadian stamps or accompanied by International Postal Reply Coupons. Submissions without SASE cannot be returned.

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Canadian Literature, revue universitaire avec comités d'évaluation, reçoit des soumissions d'articles, d'entrevues et autres portant sur les écrivains du Canada et sur leurs oeuvres, de même que des poèmes inédits d'auteurs canadiens. La revue ne publie aucune fiction narrative.

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Editorial

"The City as Anthology"

Eva-Marie Kröller

1

In his column in the *Globe and Mail*, novelist Russell Smith has been campaigning for the urban novel as a more accurate reflection of contemporary Canadian society than its regionalist counterpart, and his view that the alleged small-town preoccupations of Canadian literature threaten to alienate young readers have apparently made their way into a government report entitled *Reading Canadian: Youth, Book Publishing and the National Question 1967-2000* (Heritage Canada). (I say "apparently" because I take my information from an angry rebuttal in the same newspaper by Peter Gzowski, who like me had been unable to lay his hands on a copy of the report.) Smith's description of the urban novel suggests that he has a cloning of his own and perhaps Douglas Coupland's books in mind, that is, novels pre-occupied with the semiotics of "cool." Such fiction may indeed be in short supply, but in other ways the urbanization of Canadian literature is well underway.

Gabrielle Roy's characters in *Bonheur d'occasion* (1945) and Hugh Garner's in *Cabbagetown* (1950) were members of an impoverished urban population whose lives, for all their frantic walking through all parts of town, remain circumscribed by the invisible borders of the social ghetto they inhabit. The maps in *Vancouver: A Visual History* (1992), Bruce Macdonald's unsurpassed historical atlas of one city, show just how sharply defined and insular areas with specific ethnic concentrations were even as late as 1981 (the last year covered by the atlas) and that major changes occurred only when adjustments in immigration policy facilitated the influx of a new group with little previous representation. Thus, a new Indo-Pakistani quarter in the Ross Street area appears in the 1981 map, whereas the 1961 version shows no such

development. The great achievement of Sky Lee, Wayson Choy and Joy Kogawa is to have honoured their parents' and grandparents' lives by drawing an imaginative map of the Vancouver they inhabited, and to have written their books at a time when that map was about to change irrevocably, or had already done so.

By contrast, the Vancouver, Montreal and Toronto that contemporary writers, both Canadian and non-Canadian, describe are permeable and hybridic in unprecedented ways. Travel-writer Pico Iyer, describing the Toronto Harbourfront Writers' Festival in *The Global Soul: Jetlag, Shopping Malls, and the Search for Home* (2000) calls the resulting books an "unlegislated power, hymning into being a new cultural order." Their setting of choice is "the city as anthology," an encyclopedic region that may be Toronto, Montreal or Vancouver—or, as Gzowski insists with reference to Michael Ondaatje and Rohinton Mistry, "downtown Bombay."

2

In her wildly successful thriller *Déjà Dead* (1997), Kathy Reichs helped to popularize Montreal as a setting with international flair. Cutting a wide swath through Montreal neighbourhoods and social *milieux* in the course of her work as forensic anthropologist for the Laboratoire des Sciences Médiciaires et de Médecine Légale de Québec, Reichs's protagonist and *alter ego* Tempe Brennan also enjoys the sidewalk cafés, ethnic restaurants, jazz festivals and parades. Reviving the traditional allegory of the city as body-politic, Reichs is as punctiliously detailed about the cityscape as she is about the bodies Brennan dissects:

> We rode in silence for a couple of minutes. Following her instructions I went west several blocks, then turned south onto St. Urbain. We skirted the easternmost edge of the McGill ghetto, a schizoid amalgam of low-rent student housing, high-rise condos and gentrified brownstones. Within six blocks, I turned left onto Rue Ste. Catherine. Behind me lay the heart of Montreal. In the rearview mirror I could see the looming shapes of Complexe Desjardins and Place des Arts challenging each other from their opposite corners. Below them lay Complexe Guy-Favreau and the Palais des Congrès.

The book jacket displays a silvery negative of Montreal's map, with coloured pins marking strategic spots within the killer's scheme, the spatial components of which gradually begin to dawn on Brennan during her own peregrinations. Indeed, the cover suggests both map and x-ray, with streets, canals and parks blurred into the semblance of a complicated organism.

Reichs, who shares her position at the Québec Laboratoire with an appointment to the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner, State North Carolina, may be forgiven if she reserves her enthusiasm for Montreal during the summer months. Her second book, *Death du Jour*, alternates between Montréal and various settings in the Carolinas, presumably to alleviate the appalling limitations imposed on Brennan's impromptu outdoor investigations by the Québec winter, although Reichs gets as much mileage as she can from a description of the 1998 icestorm. To Brennan, who comes from a climate where seasons blend into one another, summer in Montréal presents itself as a "vernal rebirth" vivid enough to give the city a face and a body: "[summer] flounces in like a rumba dancer: all ruffles and bright cotton, with flashing thighs and sweat-slicked skin."

Energetic movement, miles away from Roseanna Lacasse's weary wanderings in search of affordable housing for her family, also characterizes the personification Benoît Aubin has chosen to embody Montreal. In the essay justifying the newsmagazine *L'Actualité*'s choice of Montreal as "personnalité de l'anneé 2000," Aubin casts the city as a sexy young truck driver of multi-ethnic origins and working-class roots: "un gars qui s'appelle Amhed, Kristos ou Gino autant que Gaétan ou Frank, et qui 'chauffe un *truck*.' Il accelère aux feux jaunes, stationne en double file, perd son chargement dans les bretelles d'autoroutes, klaxonne dans les embouteillages, siffle les filles l'été, fait gicler des déferlantes de 'sloche' l'hiver, et se fout pas mal du reste du monde."

Citing the city's dramatic recovery from economic decline caused by the post 1976-exodus of anglophone business and industries, Aubin asserts that this young male who storms about the place with enough energy to spare is a far more accurate depiction of the city's "combativité et . . . vitalité" than its more common image as a flirtatious woman of discriminating tastes, although he diplomatically admits that Montreal is colourful enough to be both "[u]n costaud et une coquette." (There is a whole research essay in this gendering of Montreal.) Its bilingual swagger makes Montreal less a *Canadian* city (Aubin uses the italicized English word to make it look as alien as possible) than "une petite New York." While it has been something of a tradition to confer status to Canadian cities by comparing them to large American ones (a whole film industry has flourished based on this premise), Aubin also draws another, more problematic, parallel when he sets Montreal side by side with Sarajevo, Belfast, Jerusalem and Beirut because it too is "bilingue, diviseé, compartimentée." For all its intensity,

however, linguistic warfare does not match the bitter combat that characterizes these cities, and to say that "Montréal n'est pas armeé, et cela fait tout son charme" does not begin to address the inappropriateness of the comparison.

Inappropriate, even scandalous, analogies, this time between Jews under the Holocaust and Quebeckers under anglophone rule, have of course also been at the heart of the recent Michaud affair, which significantly influenced Lucien Bouchard's resignation as Premier of Quebec. On that occasion it became clear, however, that Montreal's youthful multi-ethnic image is much more than a journalistic conceit and that it extends well past the city into the province as a whole. Fifteen young nationalists addressed an open letter to *Le Devoir* (I am citing a translation), challenging Michaud's views and those of his supporters: "They emerge out of an ethnocentric and out-of-date nationalism. As such they stand opposite to the Quebec in which we want to live, based on respect, inclusion and openness . . . [Quebec nationalists] must put aside, once and for all, this attitude of victimization and chase away intolerance, now embodied by French-Canadian nationalists, toward other Quebeckers."

3

Although Pico Iyer sees "Toronto's identity . . . formed by being Canadian [but] equally determined by the fact that it [isn't] Quebec," his descriptions of the city are sometimes virtually identical with Aubin's of Montreal (or, for that matter, with Coupland's of Vancouver): "in Toronto, often, a mongrel, many-headed exile was surrounded by a mongrel, many-headed city—a community of exiles looking for itself as he was—and so could find himself central to a city as floating as he was." Iyer's enthusiastic coverage of the Harbourfront Writers' Festival, Toronto's multi-ethnic schools and department stores echoes the celebration in *Canadian Geographic* of Canada as "the most spectacularly diverse country in the world," with special emphasis on Toronto as "a global village." Here, for once, New York is outnumbered, with a mere 28% of foreign-born residents as compared to Toronto's 50%. A city map indicates that, although certain concentrations remain in place, Toronto's old ethnic ghettos have largely dissolved.

Canadian literature too requires re-mapping, and the speed of developments can be gauged in some measure from the currently more than usually wide gap between literary production and the reference works describing it. I was recently asked to produce an outline for such a work by

a non-Canadian publisher who, referring to Ondaatje, Mistry and Findley, wanted to know under what heading I planned to discuss these authors who were "more international than Canadian," presumably because much of their work does not dwell on Canadian geographies. The answer, which I offered with some belligerence, is that these authors are international *by virtue* of being Canadian. To quote Iyer one more time: "Writers, of course, by their nature, draw upon the past—it is, almost literally, the inner savings account from which they draw their emotional capital. But in Toronto, this force of memory had a particular charge because, for so many of its newest novelists, the past lay across the globe, and some of them had come here expressly to abandon it, come to play out its sentences."

4

Douglas Coupland's *City of Glass* (2000), a book combining the author's impressions of Vancouver with photos taken by Una Knox and others, presents its reflections in alphabetical order. The result is more Barthes than Baedeker, because Coupland transforms even the few tourist landmarks he includes into personal discoveries. Thus, the item on the Lion's Gate Bridge appears, out of alphabetical order and in a different typeset, between the items on "salmon" and "Seattle." The piece, a wistful essay rather than a guidebook entry, was previously published elsewhere, but it contributes ingeniously to the ragged flâneurism of Coupland's book. Shots of the sort of light playing on the water that are dear to manufacturers of scenic calendars (and that, if the truth be told, leave even hardened Vancouverites gasping with delight), lose much of their cliché when they appear buried among photos of industrial sites, close-ups of drug-users' discarded syringes, and of pedestrians hurrying along, so much in a rush that only their backs have made it into the picture. Despite the occasional contemplative moment, Coupland imitates their pace as the scrambled order of the book obliges him to dash from "Backlot North" to "BC Ferries," from "Main and Hastings" to "Monster Houses" and from "Wreck Beach" to "YVR" (that is, Vancouver's airport logo). There is much walking, as befits a *flâneur*, lots of driving (two of the photos are point-of-view shots through busy windshield wipers), and roller-blading by "Japanese teenagers, jet-lagged . . . all of them dressed to the teeth in outfits of breathtaking hipness." The style of the book veers as wildly as its subjects, from the lyrical to the banal, the humorous to the maudlin. Some of it, especially the reprinted "My Hotel Year," I could have done without. But the encyclopedism of the book, which

is both affectionate and principled, puts it light-years ahead of the preposterous generalizations in Robert Kaplan's influential *An Empire Wilderness* or Jonathan Raban's *Passage to Juneau.* The former sketches a dubious picture of Vancouver as bucolic and trans-racial paradise, while the latter trots out the old canard that "Vancouver's low specific gravity [is] its most Canadian attribute." I'm with Coupland, who concludes *City of Glass* with quite the opposite obervation: "[Vancouver] is a fractal city—a city of no repeats. It's unique and it's my home."

Michael deBeyer

Echolalia: The Separation Mists

We might consider this personal space
a kind of texture at the surface. The sidewalk
moving in our hands represents even the
smallest particles, never actually passing,

but indicative of the forehead of the train.
Even the smallest addition could separate
this phenomenon. It is like a billowing wall
of the straight and narrow running

through everything. We are translating lateral gravity,
holding vapour in our hands, a point that never
surrounds the soul. The impossibility
of the static object. Pulse: the body's speed.

Sphere of the still circumference:
the curve there suggests the seer, as rising air
could wave the mist. Each step, the Euclidian notion.
Preliminary forecast in the force of the pre-conscious.

Michael deBeyer

The Separation Mists

Before the actual passing of the train, there is a billowing wall of sleet that precedes it, visible against any vertical line. A curved pompadour rising above the forehead of the train. This wave represents a kind of thinking, the preliminary forecast of the passing. Similarly, mists part before the sound of tractor trailers, a pulse towards the body's movement before its decided separation. This phenomenon is indicative, not of a force of sound, but of a lateral gravity running through everything.

We might consider this gravity only evident in specific circumstances, dependent on a body's size and speed, and these relative to climate. Still, while walking through mist, even we never actually make contact with it, to hold vapour in our hands, say. It is like an aspect of personal space, our preconscious moving ahead of ourselves through air. This is why we can be surrounded by fog, but never actually immersed in it. If every body projected this relative sphere of self, we must rethink the Euclidian notion that transposes a dot over the straight and narrow; the point never able to fully participate in its own lineation. Translating this circumference as an extension of self that surrounds even the smallest particles further explains the impossibility of the static object, in addition to electro-magnetic repulsion.

Personal space exhibited in this way suggests the possibility of a future forecast that each of us exudes, a kind of security blanket. Each step being partly known before it is taken by the prehensile and extra-sensitive apparatus responsible for the force of ourselves: a bodily active sub-conscious. By this thinking, the sidewalk actually rises to contact the heel in the space between. The texture of the surface is known before the touch. The heat before the sear. The separation mists could provide visual proof of the carriage of the soul.

Victor-Laurent Tremblay

La Belle Bête de Marie-Claire Blais

du conte éponyme à l'histoire familiale

Avant qu'elle ne publie en 1965 *Une saison dans la vie d'Emmanuel*, célèbre parodie d'un Québec rural idéalisé, Marie-Claire Blais, dans *La Belle Bête* paru en 1959, s'était déjà attardée à dépeindre sur un même mode caricatural, mais sans humour, les liens d'une famille vivant à la campagne. Dans cette toute première oeuvre, plutôt que de pasticher le roman réaliste comme elle le fera dans *Une saison*, c'est du conte de fées qu'elle s'inspire en le contrefaisant de façon brillante. En plus d'avoir maintes fois souligné la nature poétique et mythique des oeuvres antérieures à *Une saison*, certains critiques ont déjà étudié dans *La Belle Bête* cette réécriture des légendes dorées de l'enfance.[1] Ils se sont vivement intéressés au jeu auquel s'est livrée Marie-Claire Blais avec divers "mythologèmes" d'origine féerique comme "Cendrillon" et "Blanche-Neige," mais provenant aussi de mythes comme ceux d'Oedipe, d'Électre, de Narcisse et de Faust. La plupart des littéraires, cependant, écartant rapidement le commentaire psychanalytique surtout en rapport avec la romancière même, ont surtout analysé l'oeuvre dans une perspective féministe (voir Waelti-Walters) ou sociologique (voir Slama). Quarante ans après la parution de *La Belle Bête*, nous croyons qu'il importe de scruter ce livre en relation avec ce que l'on sait de la vie de l'auteure, non pas par voyeurisme, mais parce que cette approche permet d'éclairer certains aspects du roman auxquels on s'est très peu attardé jusqu'à présent, surtout lorsque l'on met cet *imaginaire* en relation avec "La Belle et la Bête," conte éponyme du titre. Nous verrons d'ailleurs que cette interdépendance propose une explication psychique à l'envoûtement que cette tragédie insolite déploie sur le lecteur, dépassant de bien loin celle

de fable macabre sortie d'une jeune imagination débridée à laquelle on a trop tendance à la confiner.

Mais commençons par rappeler dans ses grandes lignes l'histoire narrée. L'on y trouve trois personnages principaux qui, dans une inexorable dialectique affective amour/haine, s'entre-détruisent. Louise, une veuve encore ravissante et riche propriétaire terrienne, adore son fils Patrice, mais cet adolescent d'une beauté admirable est idiot, ce qu'elle refuse d'admettre, d'où le nom de "belle bête." Par contre, cette femme n'éprouve que dégoût envers sa fille aînée, Isabelle-Marie, qui est laide. Devant ce rejet, celle-ci, tout en idéalisant le père mort, jalouse son frère et haït l'injuste mère d'une égale passion qui la consume. Dans sa souffrance solitaire, elle s'adonne entièrement à la culture des champs et à son ressentiment: elle est obsédée par le désir de détruire la beauté de Patrice. Bientôt, deux étrangers interviendront dans la vie de ce trio familial. Lors d'un voyage en ville, Louise fait la connaissance de Lanz, un dandy paresseux, qu'elle épousera par la suite. C'est ainsi qu'elle s'aliène son fils qui, jaloux et poussé par sa soeur, tue Lanz avec son cheval en furie. Mais ce qui désole surtout Louise, c'est la nouvelle qu'elle est atteinte d'un cancer à la joue. Elle trouvera consolation dans la beauté superbe de son fils qu'elle idolâtre. Le deuxième étranger, Michael, est un jeune aveugle que Isabelle-Marie rencontre lors d'une fête à une ferme voisine. Croyant qu'elle est belle, celui-ci en tombe amoureux et l'épouse. Une petite fille aussi laide naîtra de cette union et lorsque Michael recouvre la vue, il bat sa femme et l'abandonne avec l'enfant. Isabelle-Marie qui se réfugie à la ferme maternelle est à nouveau rongée par l'ancienne jalousie. Pour se venger, elle défigure son frère en le poussant dans un bassin d'eau bouillante, préparé pour désinfecter la plaie de sa mère. Dénoncée par sa fillette Anne, Isabelle-Marie est chassée de la ferme, tandis que Patrice, laid à son tour, est enfermé dans un asile de fous. Pendant quelques temps celui-ci est pris en charge par Faust, vieux comédien détraqué mais génial. Malheureusement bientôt ce nouvel ami meurt. Le roman s'achève sur trois autres morts. Par vengeance, Isabelle-Marie met le feu aux terres de sa mère et supprime ainsi celle-ci. Par la suite, elle se jette sous un train. Quant à son frère qui s'évade de l'hospice, ne retrouvant que des cendres où avait été la ferme maternelle, il se noie dans le lac à la recherche de sa beauté.

Contrairement aux critiques qui donnent assez peu d'importance au titre *La Belle Bête* choisi par l'écrivaine, si ce n'est de leur permettre d'affirmer l'importance des contes de fées en général dans l'oeuvre, nous croyons que

ce conte-ci est capital tant au point de vue thématique que formel. Ce pouvoir structurant du titre, et ainsi du conte, a d'ailleurs peut-être échappé en particulier aux nombreux commentateurs anglophones à cause de sa traduction anglaise *Mad Shadows* qui insiste plus sur la dimension démentielle et diabolique du texte, que sur la dialectique entre beauté et laideur, et tous les autres termes oppositionnels que le roman met en jeu: corps/esprit; amour/haine; bien/mal; masculin/féminin. Selon nous, il est certain que la jeune Marie-Claire Blais a trouvé non seulement consciemment dans ce conte des affinités, mais des correspondances à son *imaginaire*, à ses désirs les plus inconscients. Avant de livrer à une psycho-critique *La Belle Bête* et le conte éponyme, peut-être faut-il mentionner que la réticence à analyser ainsi les écrits de Blais provient probablement d'une réaction respectueuse devant la grande timidité et les réserves de l'auteure à dévoiler son intimité, bien que, surtout depuis la parution des *Nuits de l'Underground* en 1978, elle ait affirmé de façon plus volubile,[2] et son lesbianisme et la part autobiographique de son oeuvre. Lorsqu'on lui demande vers la même époque pourquoi les critiques n'avait jamais auparavant mentionné sa relation intime avec Mary Meigs, elle répond: "I guess they do not feel comfortable with the truth" (Oore 129, E49).[3] Toutefois, l'écrivaine persistera pendant longtemps à nier l'apport autobiographique de ses premiers livres qui sont, d'après elle, plutôt de type "sacré," existant "outside of time and place," alors que les autres, plus objectifs, remettent en question la société (Oore 126, E29, E30). Elle avouera cependant à propos de *ses romans d'adolescence* que "Quand on est très jeune, on écrit beaucoup par impulsion, parce qu'on est révolté, parce qu'il faut s'exprimer pour exprimer sa révolte et ses désirs" (Oore 132, E72). Même si elle contrôle bien les ressources de son écriture, nous croyons, à l'instar de Jean Éthier-Blais, qu'à ses débuts elle n'est pas maîtresse de son imagination (229), transposant dans l'allégorie et le mythe son drame intérieur.

Le fait qu'elle n'ait mis que quinze jours à écrire son livre est aussi un gage de l'urgence de son imaginaire à surgir, à naître.[4] Sans doute, comme elle l'affirme, elle veut rejoindre par des symboles la totalité de la vie (Callaghan 33). Mais, par surcroît, sa grande sensibilité a su photographier l'irrationnel, a su plonger aux sources mêmes de l'enfance et nous en ramener les tragiques images du douloureux apprentissage au contact de la réalité. C'est cette *écriture primordiale* et *instinctive* qui nous servira de jalon car c'est à travers cette atmosphère lyrique, que les personnages allégoriques, à demi-désincarnés et réduits à leur destin essentiel, réactivent les conflits

émotifs de l'auteure et révèlent les structures d'oppression qui les provoquent. Ne déclare-t-elle pas après la parution de *La Belle Bête*, que c'est un roman d'"éternelle passion" dont le monde "jaillit de l'Inconnu, dur et avide" ("Lettre") et dont les personnages sont tirés de son subconscient pour les fixer dans l'harmonie rassurante de la réalité?[5] Curieusement, beaucoup plus tard, elle trouvera "déplaisant [l']esprit de candeur, de naïveté" qui s'en dégage, peut-être en raison d'une vérité qu'il ne convient pas de se rappeler (Oore 130, E58). Il n'est d'ailleurs pas dans notre intention de réduire l'oeuvre à la résolution ou non de quelques complexes oedipiens ou autres, mais plutôt de l'ouvrir en examinant ses symboles et ses structures en relation avec ce que l'on sait de l'auteure et du conte éponyme, et de l'interaction qui s'effectue entre ces trois niveaux et le lecteur même. Loin de n'être que simplement biographique, l'objet de notre analyse implique aussi la psychologie des personnages fictifs, celle des contes de fées et, à travers tout lecteur, celle de notre culture.

À premier abord, que la jeune romancière ait été attirée par "La Belle et la Bête" n'a rien de surprenant. N'est-ce pas l'une des histoires féeriques les plus aimées des fillettes, une fable puissante sur le sens de l'amour telle que la tradition patriarcale l'enseigne? Mais ce qui a sans doute séduit la jeune fille "farouche" qui déjà "détestait les structures rigides" (Fabi 3-4), c'est que la protagoniste de ce conte, plus que dans les autres, possède une certaine autonomie. Il importe peut-être de rappeler que si de façon générale ces récits, en tant que psychodrames, aident les garçons à plus d'indépendance, de liberté et de pouvoir, ce n'est pas le cas pour les fillettes. Au contraire, celles-ci sont subtilement conditionnées, par le message et les structures, à la dépendance et à la passivité (Waelti-Walters 5). Nous verrons que "La Belle et la Bête" n'échappe pas à cette loi misogyne, mais l'héroïne y manifeste, malgré tout, une certaine volonté, qui est la plupart du temps absente des autres contes. Un autre facteur important dans cette histoire et auquel pouvait s'identifier Blais, c'est que Belle, la protagoniste, contrairement à ses soeurs, dans la maison de son père, "employait la plus grande partie de son temps à lire de bons livres," et que dans le château de la Bête elle fut "éblouie" par la magnificence de la bibliothèque dont la provision de livres l'assurait contre l'ennui (99, 108). Quand elle était jeune, l'auteure se percevait comme un "ra[t] de bibliothèqu[e]" (Marcotte 194) à un point tel qu'elle s'est "sentie marginale [. . .] très jeune" à cause de cet amour passionné de l'écriture et des livres (Oore 128, E46). Signalons enfin un autre fait sûrement significatif dans la prédilection de Blais pour ce

conte, c'est que Cocteau, un des auteurs qu'elle cite souvent comme influence (Oore 124, E10, E11) a non seulement fait un film de "La Belle et la Bête" (1946), mais qu'il en a publié le scénario un an avant la parution même de *La Belle Bête*. Cocteau la séduit à la fois par ses fables mythiques et symboliques et parce qu'il représente, à cause de ses dons multiples, l'artiste complet, et comme Rimbaud, un autre auteur favori (Oore 123, E1), l'artiste marginal et même maudit à cause de son homosexualité.[6]

"La Belle et la Bête" a aussi retenu l'attention de la jeune écrivaine pour des raisons moins conscientes. Cependant, avant de se pencher sur l'*histoire familiale*, il importe de s'interroger sur la "programmation psychique" du conte même. D'après les critiques qui se sont intéressés à la nature des récits féeriques, ceux-ci "transpos[e] the initiation process into the sphere of imagination" permettant à l'enfant d'accéder à la maturation, de naître à la société, grâce au pouvoir d'une poésie symbolique (voir entre autres Lüthi 59). Ce langage particulier, qui traduit un matériel inconscient, permet à l'enfant de renoncer à ses désirs infantiles et de percevoir les avantages d'un comportement conforme à la morale (Bettelheim 4-19). Plus récemment, la critique féministe a démontré que cette transmission de l'héritage culturel est plus que moins misogyne et sexiste (voir Waelti-Walters). En premier lieu, il s'agit donc de considérer ce que "La Belle et la Bête" enseigne à la petite fille par sa dynamique et découvrir quels relations et sentiments primordiaux ce récit extériorise de façon concrète et visible (Lüthi 51). Ensuite, il faudra se questionner sur ce que cette histoire, à l'origine de *La Belle Bête*, révèle de l'auteure et de son projet d'écriture.

Ce conte semble manifester particulièrement trois conjonctures capitales chez l'enfant: la rivalité fraternelle, le passage de l'amour parental à celui matrimonial, ainsi qu'une différenciation sexuelle certaine. Même si les versions plus récentes ont tendance à euphémiser ou à taire la jalousie des deux soeurs de Belle—peut-être camoufle-t-on cette rivalité pour des raisons de "rectitude politique" ou parce que les familles nombreuses sont aujourd'hui chose du passé—nul doute que ce conflit familial est essentiel au déroulement et à la *morale* du récit: la "mauvaise" conduite des deux soeurs (leur envie, leur vanité) qui seront punies permet de différencier le comportement "idéal" de Belle (son altruisme, sa patience, son amour). Si cet antagonisme fraternel, à la fois primordial dans le conte et le roman, a intéressé Blais, c'est, croyons-nous, qu'elle a été marquée dans son enfance par une situation analogue. Pendant six ans, en effet, Marie-Claire occupera en enfant unique une place privilégiée auprès de ses parents, jusqu'à ce qu'elle se voie

détrôner dans cette affection par la naissance d'un garçon. Émotivement, celle-ci a sûrement subi un choc qu'elle dut refouler, et qui fut d'autant plus pénible à réprimer qu'au cours des ans elle a dû prendre conscience des maintes prérogatives accordées à ce frère cadet, simplement parce qu'il était un garçon plutôt qu'une fille. La personnalité de celui-ci s'avérera d'ailleurs être aux antipodes de celle de sa soeur: "il n'aime pas lire [et] il ne comprend rien à ses goûts culturels et musicaux" (Fabi 12).

Deux poèmes de *Pays voilés* (1963), recueil au ton plutôt élégiaque, lève timidement le voile sur ce drame infantile ténébreux. Dans "L'enfant que j'étais" apparaît une "Petite ombre / Dans le paysage suppliant" "de l'incendie de l'enfance" qui regarde parfois la narratrice "de ses yeux nocturnes" (*Oeuvre* 112). "Les roseaux noirs" sont beaucoup plus évocateurs de la rivalité fraternelle:

> - Où vas-tu? disait ma mère. / Elle retenait mon épaule frémissante sous ses doigts de marbre,
> - Jouer à la guerre / Près des roseaux noirs . . .
> - N'oublie pas ton frère cadet, / Disait ma mère,
> Mais en jouant à la guerre / Nous avons perdu nos compagnons, et nous avons oublié
> Mon frère enseveli sous les roseaux noirs. (*Oeuvre* 135)

Dans une entrevue, vers la même époque, Blais reconnaît que les enfants infligent la cruauté, mais qu'ils la subissent aussi (Oore 134, E81). Plus tard, elle dira à Gilles Marcotte, "que les parents qui ont plusieurs enfants [comme les siens] n'ont pas le temps de ne s'occuper que d'un seul," tout doué que soit celui-ci, comparant cette situation à "l'artiste [qui] n'a pas tellement de place [dans la] collectivité" (193). Elle ajoutera qu'on peut se permettre dans les livres d'être injurieux envers les adultes, et ainsi envers les parents, parce qu'ils sont "vraiment des juges envers les autres," c'est-à-dire qu'ils font souffrir (202). Le poème "Les roseaux noirs" dévoile clairement cette dialectique de pouvoir douloureuse entre frère et soeur, et aussi entre parents et enfants, comme *La Belle Bête* qui raconte une histoire de haine envers une "mère qui n'avait jamais su faire le juste partage entre ses enfants" (133). Et ceci nous amène à considérer la deuxième thématique cruciale dans le conte et le roman, celle du passage de l'amour parental à l'amour conjugal.

En apparence, la mère semble totalement absente de "La Belle et la Bête," il ne reste plus qu'un père veuf idéalisé qui se donne à ses enfants et qui se préoccupe de l'avenir de ses trois filles. La psychologie explique cette disparition fréquente de la mère dans l'univers féerique, qui parfois réapparaît sous

le déguisement de la mauvaise belle-mère/sorcière, comme une conséquence du conflit oedipien de la petite fille qui élimine sa concurrente pour s'approprier l'amour paternel (Bettelheim 112-14). Mais, comme la fillette veut malgré tout continuer à bénéficier des bonnes grâces de la mère pré-oedipienne merveilleusement bonne, à l'arrière-plan apparaît la bonne fée qui tend à réduire le sentiment de culpabilité qu'elle peut éprouver envers la rivale oedipienne. Ainsi, dans "La Belle et la Bête," la bonne fée, qui survient dans un rêve de Belle, lui promet de la récompenser de s'être sacrifiée en prenant la place de son père auprès de la Bête pour être mangée, croit-elle. Le conflit oedipien est par conséquent résolu: la jeune fille, dont la virginité est symbolisée par cette rose échangée entre le père et la Bête, passe ainsi de la dépendance paternelle à celle d'un futur mari, selon le rituel traditionnel patriarcal. À la fin du conte, on mentionne brièvement le rôle de la mauvaise fée, qui était responsable de la transformation du beau prince en Bête. Si la mère oedipienne est une rivale pour la fillette, elle s'avère être aussi désastreuse pour le garçon qui extériorise dans son apparence de bête l'interdit de l'amour incestueux.

Bien que le roman ait transformé plusieurs de ces données narratives, auxquelles nous nous attarderons plus loin, on peut y reconnaître la dialectique mimétique triangulaire oedipienne. Patrice, le fils trop aimé, devient "bête" en raison du tabou de l'inceste qui est transgressé: Louise, souligne le texte, "le suppliait de ne jamais quitter sa mère pour une épouse ou une amie" (136-37). Isabelle-Marie, qui idéalise son père mort, déteste sa mère, dont le statut de sorcière est thériomorphisé par ce cancer qui lui dévore le visage, signe aussi de l'amour incestueux envers son fils.[7] Quant à l'échange matrimonial, même s'il n'est que de courte durée, on le retrouve inversé dans le couple Isabelle-Marie/Michael qui célèbre leur mariage dans l'allégresse comme à la fin du conte: celle-ci, comparable à une bête à cause de sa laideur, joue à être belle pour son amoureux aveugle. Sans doute, de rattacher le psychodrame féerique à celui de l'auteure est-il hasardeux, mais certains faits nous semblent assez probants pour les signaler. Ainsi une ancienne compagne de classe du secondaire de Marie-Claire Blais se souvient qu'il "semblait y avoir souvent conflit entre sa mère et elle" et qu'à une occasion cette dernière, qui pourtant "ne dévoilait rien d'elle-même," avait affirmé "furieuse" que sa mère "la détestait" (Fabi 4). Remarquons aussi que ses parents depuis les tout débuts s'opposaient de façon véhémente aux goûts et projets littéraires de leur fille (Fabi 3), bien que son père paraisse plus magnanime lorsqu'il "offre d'acheter une maison plus grande où elle aurait

sa chambre seule" pour pouvoir s'adonner à l'écriture, proposition qu'elle déclinera préférant déménager pour plus d'isolement et de calme (Fabi 4).

Dans le poème "Les roseaux noirs" mentionné précédemment, l'un des seuls du recueil évoquant des souvenirs d'enfance, rappelons l'attitude inquisitrice de la mère, l'injonction de prendre soin du frère cadet, et surtout son animosité: "Elle retenait mon épaule frémissante sous ses doigts de marbre." L'on retrouve dans le roman un passage semblable où la mère, s'inquiètant de l'absence de Patrice, interroge sa fille sur ses propres allées et venues et s'oppose à elle avec la même agressivité: "Louise reprenait, avec son austérité feinte, l'expression de sa haine envers cette fille qu'elle méprisait. Elle posa sa main glacée sur l'épaule osseuse d'Isabelle-Marie [. . .] La main serrait l'épaule frêle. Les ongles pénétraient. Tout le mépris de Louise pour sa fille giclait comme du pus au bout des ongles" (81-82). En réponse à cette haine, à la fin du livre, la protagoniste réagira violemment contre "celle qui l'avait meurtrie depuis son enfance comme un infatigable bourreau" (179), la détruisant dans un incendie. Ne pourrait-on pas d'ailleurs relier cette punition par le feu au châtiment divin des gens de Sodome et Gomorrhe, condamnés comme le veut la tradition pour leur transgression sexuelle. Dans "La Belle et la Bête," les deux soeurs immensément vaniteuses et jalouses, et mal-mariées, qui ressemblent beaucoup à Louise, seront de même châtiées pour avoir mal aimé: la bonne fée les transformera en statues, ce qui n'est pas sans rappeler le sort de la désobéissante femme de Lot qui sera elle aussi métamorphosée de la sorte.

Cette incursion dans le domaine de la transgression et de l'inversion sexuelle n'a rien d'invraisemblable, étant donné que la troisième conjoncture infantile que soulève "La Belle et la Bête" est celle de la différenciation sexuelle, c'est-à-dire que le récit prescrit inconsciemment à l'enfant les rôles sexuels auxquels il doit se plier pour être accepté dans la société. Cette histoire, nous l'avons vu, énonce d'abord la loi matrimoniale, elle "normativise" l'échange de la fille entre le père et le futur gendre, comme l'a démontré Lévi-Strauss dans ses *Structures élémentaires de la parenté.* Le coffre plein de bijoux donné au père en retour d'une de ses filles métaphorise bien ce commerce socio-culturel auquel se rattache le tabou de l'inceste. Moins évident, mais non pas moins efficace, se trouve dans le conte le paradigme patriarcal de l'identité sexuelle, à savoir une définition traditionnelle de la féminité et de la masculinité. Pour devenir vraiment femme, il ne suffit pas de posséder la beauté, analogon symbolique de l'innocence et de la virginité, mais la fille ne doit pas être vaine, jalouse et éprise de gloire et de

richesses comme les soeurs de Belle. Il faut de plus vénérer ses parents, ne pas mentir, être patiente. Surtout, par sa beauté, sa bonté et sa vertu, il lui faut humaniser l'agressivité instinctive du partenaire masculin qui lui est destiné, et accepter son sort volontairement. La contrepartie spécifiant la virilité, bien que plus schématique, n'en est pas moins distincte: l'homme ne doit pas se complaire dans sa propre beauté, ni dans son intelligence—les deux soeurs sont punies d'avoir épousé de tels hommes—et il se doit de combattre ses impulsions agressives, ses manières brusques et frustes afin d'être régénéré par l'amour salvateur d'une femme, symbolisé par l'eau que Belle verse sur la tête de la Bête pour la ramener à la conscience.

Maints critiques ont déjà observé que Marie-Claire Blais a de la difficulté à suivre ces critères de différenciation sexuelles chez ses personnages (voir Oore 28, C101). En fait, non seulement a-t-elle subverti les rôles génériques entre le frère et la soeur, identifiant d'abord celui-là à la beauté et celle-ci à l'agressivité, mais elle a donné à sa protagoniste Isabelle-Marie une identité double, ou mieux une identité trouble, sur laquelle nous reviendrons plus loin. Déjà à l'école secondaire, Blais "détestait les structures rigides; [. . .] ça semblait l'étouffer" (Fabi 4). En 1965, dans une entrevue, elle déclare: "I want to be free of such things, what you call systems" et, à propos de l'enfance, affirme que nous sommes tous nés mauvais et qu'il est alors impossible d'échapper à "*la peur*. . . it is not rational at all. It is a kind of sickness . . . the dependence upon your fears" (Callaghan 32). À la question "Est-ce que vous êtes heureuse?" que lui pose beaucoup plus tard Marcotte, elle répondra curieusement en retournant au temps de l'enfance: "je crois beaucoup à l'artiste heureux. [. . .] Je voudrais que les autres le soient, en tout cas, le deviennent, parce que les choses qu'on a connues quand on était très jeune, ce sentiment justement de ne pas faire partie de la société, d'être un peu un enfant maudit, on souhaiterait que ceux qui viendront ne connaissent plus ça" (208). Nous croyons que ce *mal-être* que l'auteure associe à l'enfance est relié étroitement à ce que les "systèmes" phallocentriques de la famille et de la culture imposent inexorablement, bien que plus ou moins inconsciemment, sur les jeunes. Ceux-ci ne doivent-ils pas se comporter selon leur sexe au risque de réprobation morale, de punition ou de ridicule?

"Je me suis toujours sentie marginale depuis que je suis très jeune, déclare-t-elle, ne serait-ce que d'avoir commencé à écrire très jeune" (Oore 128, E46); la tournure de phrase indique toutefois que l'écriture n'est qu'un facteur parmi d'autres causant l'isolement, l'exclusion. D'après nous, le choix de "La Belle et la Bête" comme paradigme de son premier roman n'est

pas étranger à cette marginalisation ressentie très tôt, rattachée à des complications au niveau de l'identification sexuelle. Une lecture hâtive du conte semble indiquer que la beauté est primordiale chez la femme, et que chez l'homme l'agressivité métaphorisée dans la laideur de la Bête est condamnée. Pourtant si on y regarde de plus près, on se rend compte que ces critères sexués sont loin d'être aussi rigides que ce qu'on retrouve habituellement dans le monde féerique. Ainsi le surnom de la protagoniste, Belle, marque bien l'importance de l'apparence physique chez la jeune fille, mais sa décision de remplacer son père, malgré le refus de ce dernier, montre aussi une certaine autonomie. De plus, il importe de rappeler que les deux soeurs sont en partie punies en raison même de leur vanité. La beauté n'y est d'ailleurs pas l'apanage exclusif des femmes, puisque l'une des soeurs avait épousé un gentilhomme qui "était si épris de sa propre figure, qu'il n'était occupé que de cela depuis le matin jusqu'au soir et méprisait la beauté de sa femme" (112), bien que ce comportement anti-masculin soit condamné. Mais c'est surtout la Bête qui nous apparaît problématique dans sa nature: cet être est double parce qu'à la fois humain et animal, laid comme une bête mais "pas bête." On a d'ailleurs peu noté qu'on se réfère à lui au féminin et que son caractère, au-delà du symbolisme, n'a rien de la masculinité traditionnelle. Il aime les roses "mieux que toute chose au monde" (105), est d'une extrême patience, déclare à Belle qu'il "n'y a ici de maîtresse qu'elle" (108), et il accepte de mourir d'amour. Sans doute la psychanalyse pourrait certifier que ce comportement plutôt féminin est causé par le trop grand attachement de la mère oedipienne/sorcière et, pour que puisse naître le beau prince, il faut que l'animalité (le tabou de l'inceste) meure. Il n'en demeure pas moins que l'univers de ce conte se rattache intimement au questionnement posé par la différenciation sexuelle.

Dans *La Belle Bête,* il est évident que l'auteure, en renversant dans sa représentation du frère et de la soeur les caractères traditionnellement réservés aux deux sexes, voulait remettre en question ce rigide conformisme sexuel. La beauté, la faiblesse, la dépendance et la passivité conventionnellement féminines sont donc conférées à Patrice, alors que l'intelligence, l'agressivité, la ruse et la force physique le sont à Isabelle-Marie. Il faut voir par contre dans cette inversion *générique* plus qu'une simple attaque féministe contre le culte de beauté et ses dérivés, comme l'ont interprétée certains critiques (voir Waelti-Walters 45-57). Le titre même *La Belle Bête,* qui unit la Belle et la Bête dans une seule et même entité, indique bien que la problématique dont il s'agit est avant tout celle d'un mélange sexuel qui, nul

doute, est associé à l'homosexualité, ce mal qu'on n'ose nommer et qui, selon Sartre, est le paradigme même de la duplicité des êtres, cet état maudit, cette marginalité dont la jeune écrivaine fut consciente très tôt.[8] Il est curieux d'ailleurs que la critique ne se soit pas interrogée un peu plus sur la double duplicité que suggère le nom même de la protagoniste, Isabelle, c'est-à-dire Isa la belle, comme la nomme maintes fois Michael (55, 90, 114), et Marie, surtout quand on sait l'importance que Marie-Claire Blais, qui a elle-même un double prénom, accorde au nom de ses personnages.[9] "La perversité, écrit-elle d'Isabelle-Marie, était, chez elle, une seconde nature comme chez ces êtres doubles qui ont une vie, le jour, et une autre, plus effrayante, la nuit," citation on ne peut plus révélatrice de la vie cachée de l'homosexuel. Il importe de rappeler ici l'épigraphe de la première partie du roman, tirée de l'oeuvre de Rosamond Lehmann, une des "grandes passions littéraires" de Blais à l'époque de *La Belle Bête* (Marcotte 194). Cette auteure britannique, qui a exploité le thème de l'homosexualité féminine et masculine dans certaines de ses oeuvres, et fut la traductrice du scénario de "La Belle et la Bête" de Cocteau, rejoint la même duplicité des êtres (LeStourgeon 31, 41):

> Des créatures d'épouvante qui ne se recroquevilleront pas, inoffensives à la lumière du jour, pour retomber dans la mixture du jour, d'où elles sont sorties, mais qui vont s'enfler et devenir des monstres . . . dont personne n'a jamais rêvé, dont personne n'a jamais su que faire, des monstres destructeurs qui vivent à jamais. (7)

Le roman décrira, à peu près dans les mêmes mots, cette duplicité diurne/nocturne d'Isabelle-Marie, "perversité [qui] était, chez elle, une seconde nature" (82).

Isa la belle, c'est la "vierge monstrueuse" comme dit le texte (95), c'est-à-dire la lesbienne comme l'indique on ne peut plus clairement le nom "Isa . . . ancien nom donné à l'Île de Lesbos," une parcelle de terre perdue/possédée par la mer/mère (Moreau 572-73). Les connotations symboliques du mot Marie, en plus d'être, rappelons-le, l'un des noms de l'écrivaine, sont aussi révélatrices. La plus évidente est celle religieuse associée au culte marial, étant donné que toutes les petites Québécoises ont ce prénom en commun. Dès leur naissance un modèle féminin leur est ainsi prescrit. Mais si Marie est la mère du Christ—que la chrétienté choisira comme patronne des femmes et surtout des mères—c'est aussi par étymologie (et homophonie) l'étoile et la maîtresse des mers. L'étude de la première poésie démontre très bien cette filiation entre les deux termes mer/mère envers lesquels l'auteure réagit de

façon très ambivalente, déchirée par la double contrainte amour/haine (Tremblay 119).

La psychanalyse traditionnelle perçoit dans la relation lesbienne une reconstitution de la relation pré-oedipienne avec la mère, qui présente des traits symbiotiques suggérant un manque de séparation, une fusion entre le moi et l'autre, une absence de reconnaissance de l'autre (voir O'Connor 264-74). Bien que, de nos jours, certains thérapeutes tendent à relativiser ce "diagnostic," admettant que les difficultés symbiotiques avec la mère phallique puissent se résoudre à l'extérieur du modèle oedipien hétérosexuel classique, il n'y a aucun doute que les institutions sociales privilégient dans leurs structures mêmes le modèle oedipien. Pour accéder à l'ordre symbolique et à la "maturité sexuelle," l'enfant doit être "coupé" (castré) de la dyade maternelle par l'intervention de la figure paternelle (le Nom/non du Père). Cette séparation doit se faire, de plus, selon la règle générique sexuelle "normale," l'enfant devant s'identifier au parent du même sexe pour désirer celui du sexe opposé. Toutefois, l'imposante littérature psychanalytique prouve que rien n'est aussi simple et qu'il existe toujours une dialectique plus ou moins résolue, fluide, entre le *sémiotique* (le pré-oedipien), comme le nomme Kristeva (*Pouvoirs* 87), et le symbolique (l'ordre social). Ainsi, nonobstant le sexe biologique de l'enfant, retrouve-t-on dans la triade parentale une dialectique mimétique à la fois identitaire et désirante: l'enfant s'identifie à ses deux géniteurs et les désire, à des degrés divers, en tant que modèles et/ou rivaux.

Au risque d'être "psychanalytiquement incorrect," nous croyons que René Girard condense avec économie cette ambivalence, lorsqu'il traite du complexe d'Oedipe considéré par la théorie analytique classique comme étant normal (hétérosexuel) ou anormal (homosexuel). D'après Girard, cette catégorisation est superflue lorsqu'on considère que l'Oedipe a une double origine: d'une part, peu importe son sexe, par mimétisme, l'enfant prend comme objet le parent que lui suggère le désir de l'autre parent et vice-versa, et d'autre part la rivalité même que peut soulever ce conflit de désir peut s'érotiser, que le parent soit du sexe opposé ou non (voir 488-540). Il est donc toujours très difficile de départager ces jeux primordiaux antagonistes et érotiques. D'après ce que nous avons vu, chez Marie-Claire Blais cette double contrainte amour/haine surtout vis-à-vis de la mère et la problématique de l'identification sexuelle qui en découle semblent probantes. Les propos de Mary Meigs qui fut sa compagne intime pendant plus d'une décennie corroborent cette interprétation.[10]

La différenciation sexuelle dans *La Belle Bête* est particulièrement révélatrice de cette ambivalence vis-à-vis des parents et d'un rôle sexuel distinct. Isabelle-Marie qui détestera sa mère jusqu'à tuer celle-ci, jalouse aussi son frère jusqu'à la mort (153), le rendant laid comme elle, à cause des liens qui le rattachent trop étroitement à la mère. L'eau maternelle dans laquelle il se complaît, lui brûlera finalement le visage, avant qu'elle ne le noie. Les trois personnages, du reste, se fusionnent à la fin dans une difformité commune *abjecte*, signe de cette "chora" indifférenciatrice dangereuse de la dyade pré-oedipienne qu'a décrite Kristeva (*Pouvoirs* 18-22). Le personnage de Patrice *sémiotise* le désir doublement interdit (incestueux et lesbien) d'union à la mère, érotisation de la rivalité entre fille et mère pour l'objet paternel désiré, lequel est idéalisé dans la mort. Dans "La Belle et la Bête," nous l'avons vu précédemment, Belle aime son père veuf de façon inconditionnelle, jusqu'à ce que celui-ci lui trouve un prétendant. Dans *La Belle Bête*, Isabelle adorerait sa mère veuve *à la façon de son frère*, si celle-ci le lui permettait, mais cela lui est interdit; ce désir incestueux (et inverti) est d'ailleurs thériomorphisé dans sa laideur (comme la Bête dans le conte).

Dans "La Belle et la Bête," l'ambivalence de Belle vis-à-vis de la mère est métaphorisée ainsi: la bonne fée représente la mère modèle, alors que la mère morte et la mauvaise fée incarnent la mère rivale. Dans *La Belle Bête*, le père, rival de la fille dans l'affection de la mère, est mort, idéalisé comme la bonne fée dans le conte, mais il est aussi remplacé, comme la mauvaise fée, par le beau-père Lanz (c'est-à-dire lance/*Phallus*), symbole de l'autorité paternelle par son fouet et sa canne d'or, personnage qui sera tué par Isabelle-Marie par l'intermédiaire de Patrice. Par mimétisme, la rivalité ne va jamais sans une certaine identification, ce qui explique qu'Isabelle-Marie "ressemblait à son père" (23) et boîte comme Lanz (29, 36, 51, 87). Rappelons que cet handicap à la jambe se trouvait chez Oedipe qui avait épousé sa mère. Isabelle-Marie dira de même que Lanz, en se mariant à Louise, avait épousé sa mère, ce qui poussera Patrice à le tuer par jalousie. Toute la thématique d'agressivité reliée à Isabelle-Marie n'est pas non plus étrangère à une identification masculine: ses mains, son corps, ses gestes se transforment en lames (15), couteau (20), glaive (36), poignard (52, 149), griffes (28, 31, 141, 176) et "ongles démoniaques" (140, 149).

Dans le roman, le renversement des traits caractériels consacrés traditionnellement à chacun des sexes est plus qu'une simple attaque contre le conformisme des rôles sexuels, comme l'a affirmé jusqu'à présent la critique. *La Belle Bête* questionne et même renverse les assises psycho-sociales de "La

Belle et la Bête" qui, selon Bettelheim, mieux que toute autre conte de fées bien connu "makes it obvious that a child's oedipal attachment to a parent is natural, desirable, and has the most positive consequences for all, if during the process of maturation it is transferred and transformed as it becomes detached from the parent and concentrated on the lover" (307). Pour Belle, si l'oedipe est résolu en beauté parce que considéré "normal" par la société, pour Isabelle-Marie il dégénère en laideur et en tragédie parce que jugé "anormal." "[S]on crime," d'avoir voulu prendre la place du frère auprès de la mère, qui, avoue-t-elle à Louise, était "son seul moyen de vivre" (153), elle en refuse la responsabilité. Pourtant elle a honte de cette "blessure d'enfer" (143) qui la condamne à faire partie de cette "race des laids, éternellement vouée au mépris" (122). Pendant un certain temps, elle a vécu dans le mensonge auprès de Michael: "Elle résolut donc de jouer à être belle, [c'est-à-dire à être *normale*,] pour lui" (53), à le devenir même "à force de le vouloir" (65), mais sans succès. Celui-ci, devant la supercherie, réagira avec horreur, désespoir et violence (121). Hors de l'enfance et au contraire du conte de fées, l'amour dans le couple "normal," hétérosexuel, semble impossible. Il met en jeu des marionnettes qui jouent souvent aux échecs, comme Louise et Lanz (69, 103), et pire il est comparé à une bataille sans merci entre bêtes. La narratrice, dans une page saisissante décrivant le "terrible amour" d'un couple de chats, à qui elle donne le nom de "Belles Bêtes," fusionnent leurs ébats à ceux des humains:

> Leurs gémissements haletaient, rauques, impitoyables comme des spasmes de mourants. Le mâle étreignait la femelle et l'expression de ses grands yeux châtiés variait de l'animal à l'humain et de l'humain à une révolte impossible, close, morte. (101)

À l'inverse du conte, où la sexualité humanisée est promesse de bonheur, dans le roman, la sexualité entre mâle et femelle reste bestiale et entraîne la mort. Quant à la *différence*, peut-être s'agit-il pour prévenir la tragédie d'en être "presque heureu[x]" comme Isabelle-Marie fut tentée de le croire au début du roman avant de succomber à sa passion vengeresse.

Le seul espoir de bonheur, bien éphémère du reste, à la fin du roman, est ce havre de paix, de joie et d'amitié que Patrice trouve auprès de Faust à l'asile d'aliénés où Louise l'a enfermé lorsqu'il est devenu laid. La référence à Faust est révélatrice en ce qu'elle unit deux thématiques que Marie-Claire Blais privilégiera dans toute son oeuvre: celle de l'art salvateur et celle de l'artiste maudit, différent, rejeté par la société parce qu'il a transgressé les lois. Le monde de l'asile est un *underground* pré-oedipien où les personnages

peuvent enfreindre impunément la réalité par imagination et même dans leur sexualité. C'est dans ce lieu, à la fois refuge et prison, que s'effectue la métamorphose de la Bête en beau prince: Faust, en effet, qui joue au roi, surnomme Patrice son Prince (170-71). Les premiers poèmes de Blais présentaient aussi ces liens entre l'enfance, la vie artistique et l'homosexualité: par l'art, le héros comme l'artiste, et ainsi l'auteure, retourne à la dyade paradisiaque pré-oedipienne (Tremblay 121). Faust, ce "fantastique possédé génialement fou" (167), représente le parfait créateur à l'écoute de la "musique de son âme" (172), mais il est aussi relié à une sexualité transgressive, comme le suggère bien sa transformation imaginaire en chat, puis en cheval qui se laisse monter par Patrice qui désire retourner à son lac (168-69). Ici comme dans tout le roman, cette bête est du reste associée à une sexualité débridée, instinctive, plus particulièrement à la symbiose pré-maternelle.

Quand ce "bouffon" (168), lui aussi "monstrueux" (167), mourra, Patrice perdra l'unique être qui l'ait aimé pour lui-même en véritable amant.[11] Faust, à l'inverse de Louise qui, elle, a réellement vendu son âme pour les biens terrestres, s'est donné sans réserve à Patrice, rendant hommage à sa laideur même (167).[12] L'intérêt que Patrice porte à une araignée (174-75), insecte qu'Isabelle-Marie avait défendu à Michael de tuer (115), est un indice significatif sur la laideur maintenant commune au frère et à la soeur. L'araignée est en effet un symbole de malfaisance et une caricature de la divinité, comme l'est l'homosexuel pour l'homme "normal." Par contre, de celle-ci émane un fil mystérieux qui lui permet en artiste d'accéder à la liberté et à la création au risque même de mourir. La "laideur" répulsive a ainsi une valeur de rachat. Mais la mort de Faust condamne Patrice à une destruction semblable à celle d'Isabelle-Marie, lorsqu'elle réalise qu'elle a tué la terre; il tuera d'ailleurs par mégarde l'araignée qu'il avait apprivoisée. Sans l'unique moyen d'accès à la symbiose maternelle, il ne reste pour l'un et l'autre que la mort: Patrice noyé dans *le sémiotique*, Isabelle-Marie détruite par *l'ordre symbolique* représenté par le train bondé de monde. Ne survivra de cette tragédie familiale que Anne, la fillette d'Isabelle-Marie, libre de toute attache parentale et fraternelle, mais laide comme sa mère, donc sans doute elle aussi destinée à la marginalité. Tout chez celle-ci, d'ailleurs, contredit, pour ne pas dire parodie, la symbolique qui se rattache à son nom: Anne qui en hébreu veut dire "pleine de grâce" et qui, pour l'hagiographie, est la patronne des femmes enceintes.

On aura compris que le but de cette analyse n'était pas de réduire le roman à l'inconscient de Marie-Claire Blais. Il s'agissait plutôt de mieux appréhender les structures narratives et les thématiques privilégiées en

ouvrant l'oeuvre à un jeu dialogique entre l'intertexte féerique qui l'a inspirée, l'histoire familiale dont elle s'est nourrie et même l'ordre symbolique transmis par toutes les institutions qu'elle interroge. Selon Kristeva, l'oeuvre d'art provient d'une sublimation magistrale de crises de subjectivité auxquelles le créateur survit à travers le travail et le jeu des signes (Lechte 24-25). Les signes, peut-on dire, produisent un corps, car sans l'oeuvre ne reste plus que la maladie et la mort. Marie-Claire Blais acquiesce; l'écriture est essentielle pour elle: "C'est une passion [. . .] c'est une consolation à la vie, ça donne le courage d'exister" (Oore 128, E40). L'écriture, c'est aussi un combat, un moyen de prendre sa place dans l'ordre symbolique. Pour Kristeva, le roman adolescent, entre autres, est un refus de la perte de soi, un triomphe de l'Ego à travers le texte fétiche (11). Écrire devient ainsi un compliment essentiel au phallus, sinon le phallus *par excellence*, et il dépend, pour cette raison, d'une paternité idéale. Ainsi l'écrivaine de *La Belle Bête* ne pouvait-elle survivre qu'en réécrivant "La Belle et la Bête," la fille laide/différente/rebelle s'identifiant au Père et à sa tradition "féerique," pour mieux les remettre en question et même tenter de les détrôner. L'anti-conte cherche donc à remplacer le conte. À travers l'intensité poétique surgit le *sémiotique pré-oedipien*, à la fois répulsif/attractif et abject/jouissif. Mais pour que le texte survivre, il doit finalement se plier à la castration, à l'ordre symbolique; le désir de la mère doit être échangé pour le Nom/non du Père. Comme la toile symétrique et artistique fabriquée par la bête monstrueuse, le texte romanesque est le produit de la tragédie d'Isabelle-Marie, la véritable "Belle Bête," sublimation du déchirement identitaire de l'auteure.

NOTES

1 Voir en particulier B. Godard, J. Waelti-Walters et B. Slama.

2 Blais, dans une entrevue avec Marcotte en 1983, affirmera: "Je suis contre la discrétion maintenant! J'étais un être impossible, très sauvage [à l'époque de *La Belle Bête*]" (203).

3 La lettre et le nombre qui suit réfèrent à l'article dont Oore et MacLennan font un résumé dans leur bibliographie commentée. Nous utiliserons ce procédé pour les autres références à cet ouvrage.

4 Le père Georges-Henri Lévesque, qui, fasciné par ce qu'elle avait écrit jusqu'alors, trouvait son oeuvre incohérente, lui demanda si elle pouvait "écrire une histoire simple et claire" (cité dans l'article anonyme, *Marie-Claire Blais: Dossier de presse* 6).

5 Blais, "Note de l'auteur." Lorsque Guy Fournier lui demande si les personnages qui s'affrontent dans *La Belle Bête* sont "une transposition de personnages" qu'elle a connus, elle répond: "Aucunement. Ils sont nés hors de moi et de mon connu." Pourtant ajoute-t-elle de façon ambiguë: "inconsciemment, la logique [des destins que je trace] est cette préoccupation de ma vraisemblance à moi . . . ."

6 Elle dira de l'époque où elle a écrit *La Belle Bête*: "il faut penser que les artistes étaient des êtres marginaux quand même. Je pense que cette espèce d'amour de l'art, des artistes qu'il y avait, nous l'avons beaucoup moins aujourd'hui" (Marcotte 193). Signalons à propos d'une influence probable de Cocteau, que *Les Enfants terribles* (1929) décrit l'amour possessif et destructeur d'une jeune fille nommée Élisabeth pour son frère cadet, et que *Les Parents terribles* (1938) présente l'amour incestueux d'une mère pour son fils unique.

7 Dans la première version du célèbre roman *Angéline de Montbrun* de Laure Conan, la transgression incestueuse était de même représentée par un défigurement inexplicable. Voir la note à la page 79.

8 Il semble, d'après Sartre, que l'homosexuel peut vivre dans la *mauvaise foi* en cachant son orientation ou il peut, au contraire, *devenir* homosexuel en s'affirmant aux yeux des autres: *se créant* en accord avec les accidents de la vie et en réaction à eux. Voir Le Bitoux et Barbedette. Cette duplicité de l'homosexuel est un thème que Blais reprendra dans plusieurs de ses romans.

9 "J'ai toujours été fascinée par les noms et plus encore par les noms que l'on choisit et qui font partie, précisément, d'un code." (Oore 133, E76)

10 D'après Mary Meigs, la jeune auteure qui avait une *faiblesse* pour les femmes plus vieilles qu'elle (54-55) aimait à camoufler les rondeurs de son anatomie, une "obsession," souligne-t-elle, contraire à celle qu'ont habituellement les femmes à petits seins qui rêvent d'en avoir de plus gros (42). D'après nous, cette "passion" de se dissimuler le corps et, selon Meigs, cette "preternatural modesty" (42) sont symptomatiques sinon d'un rejet de la féminité, du moins d'une résistance identitaire.

11 Un des premiers poèmes de Marie-Claire Blais, "Luigi," met en scène un saltimbanque qu'on peut associer à l'artiste et à l'homosexuel. Il est lui aussi rejetté et, désespéré, il se suicide.

12 L'auteure a inversé le sens de la légende faustienne: le "magicien" Faust dans *La Belle Bête* échange les biens terrestres contre un surplus d'âme, la folie lui donnant accès aux "biens de l'enfance."

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Paddy McCallum

In the Chapel of the Blessed Virgin

whatever is likely
whatever is sacred
where two jars wait
in the hands of a god

Outside, you were.
Inside, you've become.

Had you never been so large
we would not contain you
blood of the egg
sufficient to the yolk.

When I was a child
I crawled like a child
into a camphor closet.
God was there and you
were there, your breasts
dusty as feet, your hair
a wet cloth drying
too long in darkness.

Now the unintended light
is cruel. The guard
longs for freedom under
an excess of white
but there is only
your cool skin, etched
with lingering remarks.

No one comes in.

Outside in the sun
a billion bodies burn.

debbi waters

Ashburnt

Cinderella in cinders again covered in nicotine filagree
to pay always alone washing forties tile chipped and rust stained
crisp white on laundry day at seven having dinner with her
cinder fella covered in sweat and pesticide with the t.v. on and
maybe later the studio and ice watered mason jars god they
sometimes forget how poor they are until the seven o'clock sun
comes in to examine the age of everything and dog dirt
the worn out and patchy floors ash burnt and the two small smudged
wine goblets when Cinderella wants her own patio deck and
garden no lord crucifying you landlord or what no street fumes
larger than life cigareello engine pop and fizzle she lays
her head down

Too much cinders at forty too
many brittle twigged lives moving on
Cinderella sits in a coffee shop selling poetry
five bucks a shot
enough for tomorrows tubes
cinderella fed up okay mr. satan
i can be bought sign the contract take me to the
top at any cost

Cinderella kneels beside
jesus and joan of arc
all ashburnt and she says too heavy for me
they nod

angels come down for a breather, take off their halos
heaven closes its door

Wendy Roy

Anti-imperialism and Feminism in Margaret Laurence's African Writings

Margaret Laurence's anti-imperialist and feminist impulses have common origins. As she indicates in her 1978 essay "Ivory Tower or Grassroots?: The Novelist as Socio-Political Being," both stem from her upbringing in the United Church of Canada and her involvement with the "old Left" of North Winnipeg during and just after her college years, when she worked for the communist newspaper *The Westerner.* Laurence links her "feelings of anti-imperialism, anti-colonialism, anti-authoritarianism" to her "growing awareness of the dilemma and powerlessness of women," concluding that the situation of "peoples with colonial mentalities, was not unlike that of women in our society"(24, 23). Her own feminism and her connection of anti-imperialism with women's issues began before the feminist movement of the 1960s and was rooted not only in her political and religious beliefs but also in the women's suffrage movement of the early twentieth century. In "Books that Mattered to Me," Laurence cites Nellie McClung as a direct influence (241); as Randi Warne points out, McClung's feminism and social activism, including her work on suffrage and temperance and her battle to have women recognized as "persons" under the law, were also intimately connected to the practice of her religion.[1]

Western Canadian feminism of the type advocated by McClung and the socialism of the Winnipeg old Left are at the roots of the feminism and anti-imperialism evident in Laurence's five books about Africa. Despite these common origins, however, Laurence's feminist principles are sometimes at odds in her African books with her anti-imperialist beliefs. Laurence, like

me in writing this paper, struggles with what Linda Alcoff calls "The Problem of Speaking for Others." Laurence's dilemma is to find a way to act as witness to women's oppression in the African countries she visited and about which she wrote, while maintaining an awareness of cultural difference and of the unequal power relations that resulted from her position as a Western outsider. As Laurence's African writings demonstrate, the desire not to engage in "discursive imperialism" (Alcoff 17) is a powerful one.[2] I agree with Alcoff, however, that Western feminists have a "political responsibility to speak out against oppression, a responsibility incurred by the very fact of [our] privilege" (8). In this essay, I examine and comment on the ways in which Laurence wrote about colonial structures and about women's lives during a time when the terms "postcolonial" and "feminist" were not part of the lexicon and when the theoretical language to discuss such issues was just developing. I argue against positions that characterize Laurence's African works as either unusually culturally sensitive in the astuteness of their commentary (Sparrow, Githae-Mugo), or flawed in the way they appropriate African voices or universalize African experiences (Richards). Instead, I conclude that although Laurence's writings about women's lives and about issues such as child prostitution and female genital mutilation reveal some imperialist inheritance, they also show how tensions between anti-imperialism and feminism may be reconciled.

Laurence's five books about Africa are inextricably tied to the process of decolonization in the three African countries about which she wrote. The first four books were researched, written, and published during the years when a break with the colonial past was occurring in the British Somaliland Protectorate (which became part of the independent country of Somalia in 1960) and the Gold Coast (which became Ghana in 1957); the last book was published during the Nigerian civil war, eight years after Nigeria's independence in 1960. Laurence first travelled to Africa to live with her husband in the British Somaliland Protectorate from early 1951 to mid-1952. In Somalia, Jack Laurence served as the Canadian engineer hired by the British colonial government to build desert reservoirs to collect runoff from rainwater, while Margaret Laurence worked on translating the Somali poems and stories that were published in 1954 as *A Tree for Poverty*. Her account of her life and travels in Somalia, *The Prophet's Camel Bell*, was not published until 1963.[3] In the meantime, she had written two books of fiction set in the Gold Coast, where the Laurences lived from late 1952 to early 1957 and where Jack Laurence worked as an engineer in the construction of the port of Tema.

This Side Jordan, a novel about the end of colonial rule, was published in 1960, while *The Tomorrow-Tamer*, a book of short stories set just before, during, and after independence, was published in 1963. Laurence's last African work, a book of criticism about Nigerian novelists and playwrights, was researched at a distance through the literature of the country. It began as notes for a proposed BBC radio documentary but eventually became *Long Drums and Cannons: Nigerian Dramatists and Novelists 1952-1966*, published in 1968.

The first three of Laurence's Manawaka books, *The Stone Angel* (1964), *A Jest of God* (1966), and *The Fire Dwellers* (1969), were begun during the early to mid-1960s; thus her Canadian fiction does not mark a distinct temporal break from, but overlaps with, her African texts. Several critics of Laurence's work have identified thematic connections between her African and Canadian works, including a continuing focus on what Konrad Groß calls "freedom and dependence or dominance and subordination" (78; see also Morley). Laurence's burgeoning feminism is evident in many ways in the Manawaka books (and later in her memoir, *Dance On the Earth*), but especially in her representation of women's lives, including women's domestic lives, as a subject of fundamental interest to readers; her descriptions of sexuality and childbirth; her rewriting of the myth of the evil stepmother; and her "writing beyond the ending" (DuPlessis 197) of the romance plot to show women as mothers and elderly women. Her African writings signal the beginning of a career-long feminist commitment and introduce the intersections of gender and colonialism with which she grappled throughout her writing life. Laurence had few practical or theoretical models for her comments on gender and sexuality in the African colonial context. Nevertheless, all five African books deal to varying extents with the effects on women's lives of both pre-existing patriarchal structures and colonial situations, and examine issues such as forced early marriage, bride-price, polygyny, spousal abuse, compulsory mothering, prostitution, and female genital mutilation.

Laurence learned about the links between colonialism and feminism during her travels through Somaliland and the Gold Coast. She discovered that colonial rule is paternalistic; that colonialism can exacerbate pre-existing patriarchal institutions such as forced prostitution; and that colonized land is often represented by travellers and writers as a woman to be raped and silenced, while the colonized woman is represented as virgin territory to be conquered by the European man.[4] As a result of these experiences, in her later writings about Africa, Laurence included women in her analysis of colonial situations (something that other writers often failed to do) and

sought to avoid the kind of cultural imperialism that would have had her impose her belief system on cultures outside her own experience.[5] Her desire to accomplish these sometimes contradictory tasks produces tensions in her writing. In *The Prophet's Camel Bell*, her observations about women's lives are constrained by an impulse to avoid being judgmental, while in *This Side Jordan*, her need to criticize colonialism leads her to step back from the feminist critique on which she has initially embarked. Laurence begins a reconciliation of these tensions, however, by focusing on the material details of women's and men's lives that provide evidence of power relations in colonial situations.

Although Laurence is directly linked to the Somali colonial government through her husband's work and through a brief period when she worked as the colonial administrator's secretary, she initially represents herself as a Canadian anti-imperialist. Her bias is not against Somalis; instead, as she writes, mocking her earlier naïve attitude, "I believed that the overwhelming majority of Englishmen in colonies could properly be classified as imperialists, and my feeling about imperialism was very simple—I was against it" (25). Laurence represents her anti-imperialist sentiments as stemming from the condescension of the British toward Canadian colonials. Her subsequent description of "the imperialists" in Somalia is sometimes scathing, although she insists that she is being restrained. She assumes that Somalis will recognize her difference from British imperialists; as she writes, "I felt somehow that I would be immune from their bitterness, for did I not feel friendly towards them?" (34).

One of Laurence's purposes in writing *The Prophet's Camel Bell* is to provide a counter-narrative to previous imperialist discourse about Africa such as Richard Burton's 1856 *First Footsteps in East Africa*. By referring repeatedly to Burton's account, Laurence undoubtedly acknowledges that "the narrative of travel derives its authority from its pre-texts as much as from original observations" (Gikandi 97). At the same time, her account also directly counters Burton's racist and Eurocentrist narrative, which refers to Somalis as "a barbarous people, who honour body, and degrade mind to mere cunning" (1894: 33). Laurence points out that while Burton believed that "his footsteps were the first that really counted for anything in East Africa," he had in fact "come late in the roster of explorers" of that region (12). Her own narrative provides a history of the area that shows that a complex society flourished long before Burton's visit. She follows directly in his footsteps when she visits the mosque where he boasted that, in the dis-

guise of an Arab merchant, he had preached so skilfully that he was commended for his knowledge of the Koran; she then undermines his self-important comments by telling her readers that "No one here had ever heard of Burton" (119).

Later in *The Prophet's Camel Bell,* Laurence borrows from and transforms a discussion of the mentality of the colonizers that appeared in O. Mannoni's 1950 *Prospero and Caliban: The Psychology of Colonization.* She read an English translation of Mannoni's psychological interpretation of the struggle for independence in Madagascar around 1960, eight years after she left Somalia and a year or two before she wrote *The Prophet's Camel Bell.*[6] Her reading came, she writes in that book, "with the shock of recognition one sometimes feels when another's words have a specific significance in terms of one's own experiences" (208). In describing the people she calls "imperialists," Laurence quotes long passages from Mannoni's analysis of colonials in Madagascar (249-51). Adapting his theories to Somalia, she concludes that the Westerners she met there were "not people who were motivated by a brutally strong belief in their own superiority, but people who were so desperately uncertain of their own worth and their ability to cope within their own societies that they were forced to seek some kind of mastery in a place where all the cards were stacked in their favour" (226).

In her first published novel, set in the Gold Coast as it is about to become the independent nation of Ghana, Laurence is also critical of the imperialist project. *This Side Jordan* is written through the alternating viewpoints of two men—one European, the other African—and enters most deeply into the thoughts of an African character, Nathaniel Amegbe, through the use of interior monologue. As Laurence wrote nine years after the novel was published, "I actually wonder how I ever had the nerve to attempt to go into the mind of an African man, and I suppose if I'd really known how difficult was the job I was attempting, I would never have tried it" ("Gadgetry or Growing" 82). Laurence allows the African characters more of an opportunity to speak than is common in Western literature about Africa, and thus assigns them some agency in the colonial situations described—a courageous but risky venture in the literary milieu of the mid- to late twentieth century, considering the potential for charges of appropriation of voice.[7] The emphasis on inner voice makes her African protagonist a much more sympathetically drawn character than his European counterpart, the overtly racist and sexist Johnnie Kestoe, and allows for an intimate portrayal of Ghanaian culture and history. As *The Prophet's Camel Bell* would later do with Somaliland,

Laurence's novel also reflects on the prejudices of the imperialists in the Gold Coast; her European characters are, with one exception, racist critics of their servants, workers, and adopted land. Her novel looks forward to independence through the eyes of both Nathaniel and a third male character, his friend Victor. Laurence herself points out that while her African books do not "ignore some of the inevitable casualties of social change, both African and European, . . . they do reflect the predominantly optimistic outlook of many Africans and many western liberals in the late 1950s and early 1960s" ("Ten Years' Sentences" 11).

Laurence's optimism about the future of the formerly colonized African countries and her desire to counter imperialist perspectives led her to transcribe and translate Somali poetry and stories and to write a book about Nigerian novels and plays. *A Tree for Poverty* demonstrates the existence of a rich Somali culture threatened by colonialism, while *Long Drums and Cannons* focuses on the renewal of indigenous culture during and after the dismantling of colonial rule. Whether she accomplished her task of recovering this literature effectively has been the subject of some debate; her translations, for example, have been judged either as astonishingly accessible to Western readers or as oversimplified and guilty of universalizing human experience.[8] In *Long Drums and Cannons*, Laurence argues that the scars of colonialism "can be seen outlined with bitter clarity in the novels of such writers as Chinua Achebe" (8). She notes approvingly that much Nigerian literature of the postcolonial era is an attempt to recover some of the society's pre-colonial history and culture. In a passage that Achebe later endorsed, Laurence writes, "No writer of any quality has viewed the old Africa in an idealised way, but they have tried to regain what is rightfully theirs—a past composed of real and vulnerable people, their ancestors, not the figments of missionary and colonialist imaginations" (200). With *Long Drums and Cannons*, however, Laurence has been accused, as she was with *A Tree for Poverty*, of continuing the tradition of searching for universal themes in African literature, an accusation that has some justification (Richards 28). She writes, for example, that Nigerian literature, as with "literature everywhere," gives insight "not only into immediate and local dilemmas but, through these, into the human dilemma as a whole" (10); that "The best of these Nigerian plays and novels reveal something of ourselves to us, whoever and wherever we are" (10); and that a book by a Nigerian writer has "an unfaltering authenticity which in turn helps to extend the novel's meaning beyond any one culture" (177).

Laurence does claim in *The Prophet's Camel Bell* that during her stay in Somaliland she gradually became conscious of her inability to interpret African culture except through her own cultural biases, including her inheritance of the British imperial tradition. She writes, "This was something of an irony for me, to have started out in righteous disapproval of the empire-builders, and to have been forced at last to recognize that I, too, had been of that company" (251). In the years after she wrote *A Tree for Poverty*, Laurence certainly became more attuned to the possibility of cultural insensitivity in writing about an unfamiliar society. Her chapter on Somali oral literature in *The Prophet's Camel Bell* is taken almost directly from *A Tree for Poverty*, but the minor changes she makes reflect her desire to avoid the conflation of Somali religious beliefs with Western Christian beliefs; for example, as Fiona Sparrow notes, Laurence replaces all references to *God* in the earlier book with the word *Allah* in the later one (146). As Laurence's quest for universal themes in the literature of Somalia and Nigeria indicates, however, she is understandably unable to recognize all of her own biases. Even when she is proclaiming her lack of racism in *The Prophet's Camel Bell*, she repeatedly stereotypes Somalis as "expressionless" (24), "timeless" (115), and "inscrutable" (207). Her behaviour, like her language, is in some respects determined by the fact that she is the Canadian wife of an agent of the British colonial government. Thus although she initially resists having servants and being called Memsahib, "a word which seemed to have connotations of white man's burden, paternalism, everything I did not believe in" (23), she quickly capitulates to both. As she makes clear to readers, she defers to her husband's insistence that "You don't tote your own luggage here. It just isn't done" (23).

The pervasive influence of imperialist doctrine on Laurence's writing is evident in her adoption of Mannoni's theory that colonized peoples have a prior need to be dependent. Mannoni writes that "colonization has always required the existence of the need for dependence. Not all peoples can be colonized; only those who experience this need" (85). Thus the coming of Europeans, he argues, "was unconsciously expected—even desired—by the future subject peoples" (86). Mannoni's concept of a "dependence complex" has since been refuted by theorists beginning with Frantz Fanon in 1952 (*Black Skin, White Masks*) and Aimé Césaire in 1955 (*Discourse on Colonialism*). As Fanon writes, dependence is not innate but is instead the result of "the arrival of white colonizers" (108): "*It is the racist who creates his inferior*" (93). In Laurence's analysis of her relationship with one of her Somali servants, she makes use of Mannoni's theories about the dependence

complex and about the transference of the Malagasies' reverence toward their ancestors onto the colonizers who employed and protected them. While Mannoni points out that the Malagasies referred to both their ancestors and the colonial administrators as "the father and also the mother" (61), Laurence writes that her and Jack's Somali employees viewed them like parents (189) or like a king and queen (200, 209). In characterizing colonial employers in that way, Laurence argues, the Somalis could feel they had allied themselves with "strong" and "capable" protectors (209) and that their dependence thus was justified. Laurence adopts this theory as a retroactive and revisionary way of explaining the troubled relationship that she and Jack had with their driver, Abdi, who at first was friendly but who later bitterly rejected them. As Margaret reinterpreted the situation in 1963, Jack had entered into "a tacit agreement to act as a kind of protector to him and his family. . . . His later and increased demands . . . seem in retrospect to have been a frantic effort to prove that the bond still existed" (*Prophet's Camel Bell* 208). Mannoni's description of the dependence complex, she writes, provided her with a "clue to the puzzle" of Abdi (207).[9]

Just as Laurence's African texts sometimes reveal an inheritance and replication of imperialist discourse, their critique of the status of women in colonized African societies is at times tentative. In the case of *The Prophet's Camel Bell*, one reason for this hesitancy might be the gap between research and composition of the book. During that gap of about ten years, Laurence became more aware of issues relating to women's oppression, gained more access to theoretical models that would aid her analysis, and experienced the effects of gender typing in her own life. She travelled in Somalia when she was in her mid-twenties and childless, but by the time she wrote her travel narrative she had personal experience with the frustrations of trying to take care of children, keep house, and continue to write. She was also in the midst of writing her first published novel about a woman's life—*The Stone Angel*—which she set aside in order to complete *The Prophet's Camel Bell.* Although in her travel narrative Laurence clearly takes on a role as witness to women's oppression and thus in one sense continues the work begun in her draft of *The Stone Angel, The Prophet's Camel Bell* reveals a gap between her impulses and her actions regarding such oppression.

During the 1950s and early 1960s when Laurence was researching and writing her books about Africa, she had access to few feminist conceptual models, other than McClung's early didactic feminism, that would have given her the theoretical language to write about women's lives. Laurence

read and was influenced by Virginia Woolf, but found Woolf's prose lacking in "ordinariness, dirt, earth, blood, yelling, a few messy kids" (*Dance on the Earth* 130). Betty Friedan's 1963 *The Feminine Mystique* was published the same year as *The Prophet's Camel Bell,* but its frame of reference—middle-class North American women—was at such variance with the situation of women in Somalia that its concepts could not have been usefully applied. Books such as Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* and Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch,* which provide broader feminist theoretical models and at least mention the issues of clitoridectomy and infibulation (Millet 46, Greer 260) about which Laurence also wrote, were not published until 1969 and 1970 respectively, well after Laurence began writing about women's lives in Africa and Canada. Laurence had to create her own language to write about women and had to come to her own conclusions. As she writes, the "upsurge of the new women's movement in the 1960's" simply confirmed her approach and gave her "a much-needed sense of community" ("Ivory Tower" 23).

In her African writings, Laurence appears at first glance almost to ignore women, something that will surprise readers of the women-centred Manawaka series. Only three of the stories in *The Tomorrow-Tamer* have women as protagonists, and *This Side Jordan* is told through the joint perspectives of two male protagonists. Most of the Somalis about whom Laurence writes in *The Prophet's Camel Bell* are men, and almost all of the literature she transcribes and translates in *A Tree for Poverty* and criticizes in *Long Drums and Cannons* is by men. Nevertheless, Laurence does indicate in her African books at least an initial awareness of, and attention to, the conditions of women's lives. In *Long Drums and Cannons,* Laurence makes few comments about Nigerian gender relations or the effect colonization has on issues of gender, but her description of Nigerian literature reveals something of women's status in the country. Many of the works take polygyny as a given, and women are seldom protagonists of the novels or plays. Laurence notes that in one of the few Nigerian novels with a woman protagonist, Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine,* "the novel is not so much about her as about the effect she has upon the three men who involve themselves . . . with her life" (178). Only one of the eleven writers Laurence discusses is female, although this is not surprising, since Flora Nwapa was the only Nigerian woman who had published a book by the mid-1960s. In her discussion of Nwapa, Laurence alludes to differences between Nwapa's novel *Efuru* and the books by Nigerian men. She points out, for example, that "*Efuru* takes place almost totally within the minds and the society of

women" (190), and that the concerns of these women are with childlessness and changing customs about societal issues such as the bride-price. Thus although comparisons between men's and women's literature are not explicit in Laurence's criticism, and although she tends to sidestep gender issues, representing them in neutral terms as part of Nigeria's cultural makeup, her analysis does provide glimpses into women's lives in Nigeria.

Laurence's earliest consideration of gender relations in an African country can be found in *A Tree for Poverty*, which she completed in 1952 and left with the Somali colonial government for later publication. In her introduction to the translations of Somali oral literature, Laurence briefly discusses women's place within Somali society: "Both tribal and religious traditions place women's status as infinitely inferior to that of men. . . . The double standard is extremely strong" (30). Laurence's assessments of women poets and of the representation of women in men's poetry provide graphic examples of the status of women. Laurence was told that some Somali women composed poems but, since Somalia was rigidly divided along gender lines, they could recite them only to other women. Because of this gender segregation, and because her translators were men, Laurence could provide no examples of women's poetry. She was assured by her male informants, however, that women's poems were never about love, the major subject of men's short poems, since "here only prostitutes sing love-songs" (27).

Women thus are depicted through men's eyes alone in the poems and stories that Laurence translates. Many of the male poets' short love poems dwell on women's physical appearance; the only other poetic reference to a woman is in a longer poem in which a faithless friend is said to have a memory as "short as any woman's" memory about the pain of childbirth (55). In the traditional stories that Laurence includes in her book, men are almost always the heroes or likable villains, although one story tells of a mother-daughter pair of cannibal women who eat their husbands and two other stories of a wise girl who marries the sultan, whom she then outwits. In that last story, a subplot is the sexual double standard in Somalia. The sultan's wife outwits him by obeying his impossible order—to become pregnant and bear a child during the year he is away, yet at the same time to remain faithful to him—by following him and disguising herself as another woman, whom he seduces. Her cleverness at outwitting him is the moral of the story; his infidelity is accepted and expected male behaviour (120). The literature that Laurence presents thus reveals aspects of Somali gender relations that include the double standard and the focus on women as sexual

objects (indicated by the emphasis in love poems on their physical appearance). The inaccessibility of women's own literature further exemplifies their restricted place in society.

The segregation of Somali women and the fact that Laurence accompanied her husband to work camps full of Somali men meant that she met and interacted with relatively few women during the year and a half she lived in Somalia. *The Prophet's Camel Bell* reflects that limitation, focusing mostly on descriptions of men, especially in the book's several chapters of character sketches. Laurence saw enough of women's lives, however, to conclude that "the status of women was low, according to both tribal and religious traditions" (103). As this passage indicates, her general observations about women are revisions of earlier opinions expressed in her introduction to *A Tree for Poverty*. *The Prophet's Camel Bell* goes further than *A Tree for Poverty*, examining in more detail gender roles in Somali society, including marriage and childrearing, and broaching the issues of child prostitution and what is sometimes inaccurately called female circumcision.[10] During Laurence's travels in the desert, she learned that Somali girls changed hands from father to husband through the mechanism of a bride-price, that Somali society was polygynous, and that although men often married girls of their choice, young women could be married against their wills to men old enough to be their grandfathers. Once a couple was married, Laurence writes, "Sexual fidelity was demanded of her, but not of him" (*The Prophet's Camel Bell* 103). Wife-beating was an accepted norm and, when one Somali man learned that Jack Laurence did not beat Margaret, he told her "that was carrying consideration too far" (197).[11]

Laurence learned about attitudes toward women not just through observing how others lived, but through the way she herself was treated. One day when Jack was away and several elders came to talk about the water reservoirs he was building, Margaret invited them into the house to explain the project. Her servant later told her that "a woman alone in the house must never invite men in, not even if they happen to be about eighty years old," and that "the elders could certainly not discuss any serious matter with a woman" (41). Although Laurence was linked to the colonizing group, her gender placed her at a lower status than even the colonized men; she was in "a dominant position of race and a subordinate one of gender" (Sharpe 12). In a similar way, comments made to Laurence about her childlessness reflected Somali attitudes toward mothering. Acquaintances repeatedly greeted her with the words "I pray Allah grant you a son" (73), and when

she became pregnant and moved from the desert to the city of Hargeisa, a Somali woman suggested that Laurence's husband must be glad that she was having a child: "You have been married five years—a long time," she told Laurence. "If you did not bear him a child soon, he would have had to divorce you" (255). Laurence thus learned first-hand that in Somalia, "A childless woman is nothing; she is as good as dead," in part because "African male pride refuses to accept any responsibility for sterility" (Githae-Mugo 144). Indeed, after Laurence left Somalia, she wrote in several works of fiction about the cultural imperative for African women to have children and the inability of some men to take responsibility for infertility, which leads them to abandon old, barren wives in favour of new ones.

In *This Side Jordan*, the pain of childlessness is briefly explored through several characters, while in the story "A Fetish for Love," infertility is the main subject. The protagonist, Constance, takes an interest in Love, the teenaged wife of her old servant, when she discovers that he beats Love because she is unable to have children. Constance disapproves of the ju-ju woman Love consults and instead substitutes her own "fetish" (medicine from the European doctor) before she discovers that it is the husband who is infertile. Laurence's story explores the conditions of some women's lives in the Gold Coast during colonial rule, including their forced early marriage, the cultural imperative for them to have children, the refusal of their husbands to take responsibility for infertility, and the societal acceptance of spousal abuse. The story also serves as a criticism of Western meddling—something Laurence identified and criticized in herself—and portrays the helplessness of a Western woman to intervene when an African woman is being abused.

Laurence's own reluctance to intervene is most evident in her experience with child prostitution and genital excision and infibulation in Somalia. She encountered prostitution when a family that ran a small "tea-shop-cum-brothel" attached itself to the construction camp in which she and Jack lived. Invoking her husband's opinion, and equating it with her own, Laurence writes that they "did not mind" that the family was operating a brothel (*The Prophet's Camel Bell* 156). Instead, they were more concerned that the family was using up the camp's meagre water supply, since every time a construction employee visited the brothel, he took some water with him. Laurence describes her husband's reaction to the theft as "annoyance," and quotes him as saying that he decided to give the *jes* or family group a daily ration of water because "The *jes* provides amenities of one kind and another" (157). The implications of the Laurences' hands-off approach are

not evident until Laurence reveals that the prostitutes include not just an old woman and an "attractive girl of about sixteen," but also a girl of eight who "had a curiously vacant and withdrawn look" (156, 157). Laurence chillingly writes, "There was a special name for such children, which meant literally 'a small opening'" (157). As her comment indicates, to Somali men the child is named by her vagina, just as in other patriarchal societies women are named in relation to the sexual services they provide.

In relating her dealings with this child, who was called Asha, Laurence foregrounds the problem of translation, a problem exacerbated by the fact that all her translators were men. As she writes, "We did not talk much, Asha and I, for I did not know what to say to her. . . . My knowledge of Somali was too limited, and who would I get to translate?" (157). Translation was undoubtedly a concern, but what Laurence's account fails to acknowledge is that a larger concern was that men who were part of her camp were abusing a little girl, and that their society appeared to condone such abuse. Instead, Laurence places the majority of the blame, and the source of her own inaction, on difficulties of translation, and on another woman. As Laurence writes, "If we forbade the *jes* to stay near the camp, the crone would only move her trade elsewhere, so the child would be no better off. Here at least Asha got enough water" (157). Although Laurence recognizes that she might find allies within Somali society, she characterizes any action she might take as "meddling" or "interfering" (157, 158). Laurence might have felt unequal to the task of disrupting her husband's work camp, especially since, as she implies, he would not have supported such action. She might have recognized that the colonial employment that separated men from their families encouraged them to turn to prostitutes for sex. For whatever reason, Laurence did nothing about Asha, but she was troubled enough by the experience that she later wrote a short story in which one of the characters is a child who is rescued from a life of prostitution. In "The Rain Child," the girl is only six and has long been separated from her family, but she is significantly named Ayesha. The story is undoubtedly a kind of exorcism for Laurence: while she is unable to negotiate cultural differences that prevent her from intervening on behalf of a real child, she is able to imagine such an intervention in her fiction.

Laurence's dealings with women who had experienced genital excision and infibulation, as reported in *The Prophet's Camel Bell*, show an increasing reluctance to meddle in an unfamiliar culture. When she first arrives in Somalia, Laurence is willing to pose questions about the practice. She asks two young male teachers who speak English a direct question: "Did the

clitoridectomy make it impossible for Somali women to enjoy sex?" (47). Their answer to this question and to several other related questions (including "What did the Somali bride-price actually involve? Did men love their wives or merely regard them as as possessions? Could a woman divorce her husband for infidelity?") is that they "did not know" (47). Laurence takes their reply as a reproof and writes in the same passage that she is appalled by the brashness of her own questions. Her curiosity about women's lives thus is transformed into a reluctance to interrogate gender differences.

Laurence emphasizes her desire not to meddle during her interaction with the desert women who, hearing of her skill in first aid, come to ask if she can give them any medication to relieve the menstrual pain caused by infibulation. Because she wants to be sensitive to cultural difference, she is willing to appear less informed than she is; as she writes, "Somali girls underwent some operation at puberty, the exact nature of which I had been unable to determine, partly because in our early days here every Somali to whom I put this question gave me a different answer, and partly because I no longer questioned people in this glib fashion" (75). Although the word "operation" is certainly inaccurate to describe a procedure that was done outside hospital and without anaesthetic, and that often led to infection, Laurence goes on to give a fairly accurate description of excision and infibulation: "The operation was either a removal of the clitoris, or a partial sewing together of the labia, or perhaps both. But whatever was done, apparently a great many women had considerable pain with menstruation and intercourse, and the birth of their children was frequently complicated by infection" (75). As Laurence learned, ninety-eight percent of Somali women undergo genital excision, and eighty to ninety percent the most radical form of excision and infibulation.[12] She notes that the subsequent back-up of menstrual blood often causes pain; that the thick scar tissue leads to painful sexual experiences; and that the inelasticity of the scar brings further complications at childbirth, when the inevitable tearing of surrounding tissue may be followed by chronic infection. Considering the lack of theoretical models available to Laurence, the feminist statement she makes in broaching this practice is a powerful one.[13] Because she wants to avoid the cultural imperialism implied by too detailed questioning, however, Laurence does not delve into the societal reasons for excision, except to repeat the commonly held belief that women are responsible for its continuation. She quotes "an educated Somali friend" who has told her that "the old women would never agree to its being abandoned" (75). Laurence's

discomfort with excision and infibulation, her reluctance to question the procedures in detail, is emphasized by her abrupt reply to the women: "I have nothing to give you. Nothing." The only painkillers Laurence has are Aspirin and, as she concludes, "the lunatic audacity of shoving a mild pill at their total situation was more than I could stomach" (76). As with the child Asha, another female turned into "a small opening," Laurence does not know what to do. She can only acknowledge that excision is just one part of the women's "total situation."

In her book on Laurence's African writings, Sparrow approves of Laurence's hesitancy, arguing that because "Somali women lived according to customs totally different from her own, . . . [i]t was not, indeed, right that she should criticize the practise openly" (37). Laurence's reluctance is understandable, especially in light of recent essays by writers such as Kadiatu Kanneh, who argues that

> "Female circumcision" has become almost a dangerous trope in Western feminisms for the muting and mutilation of women—physically, sexually and psychologically—and for these women's need for Western feminism. Circumcision, clitoridectomy, infibulation, become one visible marker of outrageous primitivism, sexism, and the Third World woman. (347)

Kanneh dismisses North American and European assessments of genital excision as "arrogant and culturally 'superior' Western interference and insult" (348). In light of this essay, it is clear why Margaret Laurence, a self-described anti-imperialist, might want to avoid interfering with or insulting Somali cultural practices, and thus might avoid commenting on them in detail.

Such comment is essential, however, for those concerned with women's lives, and is made by writers such as Françoise Lionnet, who discusses excision and infibulation while taking note of the potential for cultural and religious imperialism in doing so. Lionnet recognizes the conflict between, on the one hand, the "respect for the cultural autonomy of African societies that denounce any feminist intervention as 'acculturation' to Western standards," and, on the other, the "universal ethical imperative against the physical torture and psychological impairment of millions of women" (131). She does what Laurence is unable to accomplish, given her historical situation, her lack of models, and her self-imposed ideological constraints: she canvasses the cultural reasons for the procedure. As Lionnet argues,

> the reasons for the continued performance of this practice are compelling psychosexual ones for those involved, since it is embedded in a cultural context that encodes it as a beautifying and enriching phenomenon without which girls do

> not become women and will therefore never be able to marry, have some degree of economic security, and lead "full" female lives. (157)

Thus excision and infibulation, she concludes, "are not just irrational and aberrant abuses" but are "part of a coherent, rational, and workable system" (165). Understanding the practice does not mean that it cannot be criticized, and Lionnet's critique is evident in her analysis of works by writers such as Nawal El Saadawi who have experienced excision and who describe the practice as part of an overall patriarchal social system. Sylvie Fainzang puts it well when she writes, "The sexual marking provided by excision is the necessary condition of access to a specific social status, that of *woman subjected to the authority of man*" (178; translation by F. Lionnet). Like prostitution, excision and infibulation are cultural markers of men's ownership of women, since if women are property they can be either sold into prostitution or sexually mutilated to raise their value in the marriage exchange. Excision thus is identified as one aspect of women's place within their society—what Laurence calls their "total situation."

Laurence's critique of female genital mutilation, like that of child prostitution, is more explicit in her fiction than in her travel narrative. The practice is discussed in a pivotal scene in *This Side Jordan*, published three years before *The Prophet's Camel Bell*. At first glance, Laurence's novel appears to resist a feminist analysis. It is, after all, told through two masculine viewpoints, rather than through the viewpoints of the women characters, who include Johnnie Kestoe's wife, Miranda, and Nathaniel Amegbe's wife, Aya. Feminist commentators often view Miranda as a thinly disguised version of Laurence, as she describes herself both in *The Prophet's Camel Bell* and in the essay "The Very Best Intentions" (Morley 84, Martens 13, Pell 41). Miranda, with her brash questions, her naïve enthusiasm for African culture, and her sometimes harmful impulse to meddle, may be too much like Laurence to be placed comfortably at the centre of the narrative.[14] Instead, Laurence writes about the dismantling of the patriarchal colonial structure in the Gold Coast from the perspective of those with power—the men. European protagonist Johnnie Kestoe, an Irishman raised in London, seeks to gain the power of the colonizer, while African protagonist Nathaniel Amegbe seeks to retain the power of the patriarch. Laurence's choice of the masculine point of view, reflecting as it does the patriarchal nature of colonial power, is both disturbing and effective. So, too, is her decision to represent the struggle toward decolonization in Ghana alongside a parallel gender struggle between the male protagonists and their female partners.

The two women are pregnant, and pregnancy adds to the gender conflict both couples experience. Throughout the novel, Aya unsuccessfully resists Nathaniel's efforts to force her to have her baby in a hospital. He believes that his son's life must begin in the "new" way, while she is afraid to have a child without the support of her mother and other women of her family group. Miranda's pregnancy, meanwhile, brings to a head her husband's conflicting feelings of possession of and repulsion by the female body. Although the novel is written in third person, the narrative is often limited to the perspective of one or the other of the male characters; thus Miranda's pregnant body is described through Johnnie's eyes as "the mound that had once been a body belonging to her, and to him. Now it belonged to neither of them, but only to the half-formed sluglike thing inside her, straining food from her blood" (8-9).

In a scene of the novel that was politely ignored by early reviewers such as Mary Renault but has since been the focus of much feminist comment (Osachoff, Leney, Collu, Sparrow, Busia), Johnnie rapes a young, excised woman who has just been sold into prostitution. While it is not surprising that this scene has received so much scrutiny, it is just one part of the exploration in this novel of attitudes toward women in general and African women in particular. Throughout, Johnnie's simultaneous sexual attraction to and revulsion by African women is explicitly stated. This attraction-revulsion is part of a long-standing trope that links land to be conquered with woman to be raped in the imperialist literary tradition of books such as Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness.* As Abena Busia writes, in Western literature about Africa, white men are "seen with peculiar frequency lusting after the black female flesh of a people they continue to hold in contempt" ("Miscegenation as Metonymy" 367). Indeed, in the first pages of Laurence's novel, Johnnie Kestoe, a man "who didn't like Africans," is dancing with a young African woman and feeling an "itch of desire" (1, 4). Johnnie's unwilling attraction to African women is pointed out several times in the novel (87, 134). His assault on the young prostitute is preceded by a scene in which he makes sexual advances toward an even younger girl, whom he then strikes when he feels himself rebuffed (135). The girl is his old servant's 14-year-old "small wife"; as Laurence makes clear, in the patriarchal culture of colonial Gold Coast an old man can take a teenager as second wife if his first is childless. The link between gender oppression and colonization becomes evident when the man, learning of his employer's assault, beats the girl. He cannot take out his anger on his colonial employer, but he can take it out on what he considers his own property—his wife.

Patriarchy merges with imperialist brutality when, with the connivance of several Ghanaian men, including Nathaniel, Johnnie sexually brutalizes an inexperienced prostitute. Busia rightly argues that the "unacknowledged association" between the European and African men in this passage doubly victimizes the African woman, exemplifying as it does "[t]he complicit power of patriarchal institutions, native and colonial" ("Silencing Sycorax" 93 n 92). The girl, who is from the north of the country where female genital excision is practised, is "very young, not more than sixteen, . . . perhaps younger" (*This Side Jordan* 229), and both Johnnie and Nathaniel speculate that she has been sold into prostitution by the male members of her family. She is also a kind of "human sacrifice," given to Johnnie so that he will not persecute Nathaniel (227). Even the language used to describe her is that of sacrifice: "She lay spreadeagled, sheeplike, waiting for the knife" (231). Although Johnnie realizes that the girl he has been offered as a bribe is very young and may not be sexually experienced, he decides that "None of that was his concern. She was an African whore. That was all he needed to know about her" (229). Even when he discovers that she is a virgin, he ignores her cry of pain, and indeed revels in hurting her. Like colonizers who justify oppression by representing colonized peoples as subhuman, he views her as "an animal, a creature hardly sentient, a thing" (230).

The linkage of gender with imperialism is spelled out: "She was a continent and he an invader, wanting both to possess and to destroy" (231). Feminist commentators have variously criticized or defended this restatement of the metaphor of Africa as woman to be conquered.[15] Criticism is often based on a failure to note that the metaphor is endorsed neither by Laurence nor by an omniscient narrator, but instead is an expression of Johnnie Kestoe's point of view. Since Johnnie uses the trope as a way of explaining and thus justifying his brutality, its presence in the narrative indicates the pervasive and harmful power of such metaphors. Busia astutely points out that the entire narrative of the rape is expressed through a series of reflections in Johnnie's mind, "which serve as a deliberate ironic commentary on the use of the black woman as the symbol of the virgin land to be tamed by the European" (91). She argues that Laurence uses the trope in *This Side Jordan* to show that "the despised body-as-land/land-as-body of the native woman . . . must be possessed, not as object of desire but as assaulted object, in order to signal dominion and establish 'civilized' order" (91). Thus Johnnie Kestoe, who is angry with both his wife and Nathaniel, must brutally assault a young woman in order to establish his

power and control over women and Africans in general. The woman he assaults, meanwhile, remains almost completely silenced. Although Laurence revises the trope by pointing out its patriarchal underpinnings, she cannot go further and allow the woman to speak; the collaborative powers of patriarchy and colonialism unite to repress any speech she might attempt. They even repress her name; she is known only as Emerald, a name chosen by her African procurers.

The silenced and unnamed Ghanaian woman in Laurence's novel is also excised, a fact that reinforces her oppression by the joint patriarchal structures. Laurence's narrative provides some detail about the procedure of genital excision, which she expands upon in *The Prophet's Camel Bell.* As she writes in *This Side Jordan,* from Johnnie's gradually enlightening point of view,

> Among certain peoples, the clitoridectomy was performed at puberty. By a bush surgeon—some fetish priestess, perhaps. Some of them were said to use the long wicked acacia thorns as needles. The wounds often became infected and did not heal for a long time. (233)

In this brief passage, Laurence indicates the instruments used and the results of the procedure. Her narrative then emphasizes the fact that genital scarring is torn open during sexual intercourse. The description of the blood that pours from the young woman's genitals because "The scars had opened when he savaged her" (233) reverses the characters' roles by turning the colonizer-rapist into the savage.

At the same time, the suffering young woman not only is silent but also is a very minor character whose role in the novel is primarily to effect a transformation in the male protagonist. The woman suffers pain so that Johnnie can have a moment of redemption. He can look at an African and see that "She was someone, a woman who belonged somewhere" (233). Through her, he can recognize that the Ghanaians whose colonial domination he has been perpetuating are people, more like him than unlike him.[16] By having Johnnie concede the error of his racist ways, Laurence attempts to bring about a closure that provides a critique of colonialism. Before Johnnie can experience his moment of redemption, however, he must first brutalize the woman. In Laurence's text, his conversion is consolidated through her silent forgiveness of his brutality and his subsequent tears. Margaret Gail Osachoff concludes that "the forgiveness of the woman, and by implication of the dark continent, is somewhat sentimental and unbelievable" (224). I would argue that the silent acts of forgiveness and repentance are not sentimental, but extremely disturbing, since brutality is in effect washed away by tears.

The girl's rape and its outcome are just part of Laurence's commentary in *This Side Jordan* on gender conflicts, illustrated in part through Johnnie's involvement with white as well as black women. His interactions with white women have unsettling parallels to his sacrifice of the black virgin. Three times in the novel blood pours from the genitals of a woman who has been sacrificed to provide some form of self-knowledge for Johnnie, and that woman's pain or fear is represented through his eyes as evidence of her animal nature. In the first scene, designed to show some motivation for the brutality of Johnnie's sexuality (and of his nature in general), the reader learns that he watched his mother die from a botched abortion; her cries sound to him like "animal paingrunting" (60). The second incident with the young excised woman is the climax of his imperialistic behaviour and the beginning of his conversion. In the third scene, at the end of the novel, Johnnie watches the birth of his and Miranda's daughter. For a father to be present at a birth set in 1957 would have been unusual, but Laurence invents this scene so that Johnnie can witness blood coming from the genitals of a woman in the act of creation of life, rather than in death or in rape. Still, as the narrator notes of Miranda, again through Johnnie's perspective, "She was no longer human. The voice that came from her throat was an animal's coarse voice" (266). The birth of his child provides his final release, and thus three animalistic women in pain serve as stages in the rehabilitation of this one male character. The scene also provides a symmetry to the closure of the novel, since Aya gives birth to a child in the same hospital after yielding to Nathaniel's insistent demands. Laurence's desire for parallelism leads her to represent the two births through the men's eyes, a choice for which she later berated herself. As she wrote in *Dance On the Earth*, "How could I have been so stupid, so self-doubting? . . . I, who had experienced such joy with sex, such anguish and joy in the birth of my children, not only didn't have the courage to describe these crucial experiences; it didn't even occur to me to do so" (5-6).

In her African books, Laurence steps back from the feminist critique evident in her later novels and in *Dance On the Earth.* Her anti-imperialist statements are also compromised by her imperialist discursive inheritance. Nevertheless, she attempts the difficult task of representing the cultural specifics of the colonies and former colonies she visited, including their indigenous and imported patriarchal oppressions. Her writings about female genital mutilation and child prostitution, and her recognition of some of the other intersections of patriarchy and colonialism, help to illu-

minate the relations of power in the countries about which she writes. Laurence thus begins, in her African fiction and in her travel narrative, to forge an anti-imperialism that is compatible with feminism in its investigation of colonial lives, relationships, and social structures.

NOTES

1 I would like to thank the anonymous readers for *Canadian Literature*, especially for the suggestion that I examine Warne's book for details about McClung as a model for Laurence. Many thanks also to Brian Trehearne and Nathalie Cooke of McGill University, who read and commented on earlier versions of this paper.

2 Alcoff responds to critics such as Chandra Mohanty who argue that intervention by Western feminists may further the oppression of women. She also investigates Gayatri Spivak's dissenting conclusion that because "The subaltern cannot speak," the female intellectual "has a circumscribed task which she must not disown with a flourish" (104). For an examination of the notion of speaking for others in relation to Laurence's story "The Drummer of All The World," see Collu.

3 The epigraph and original title of *The Prophet's Camel Bell* are taken from James's Elroy Flecker's "The Gates of Damascus": "God be thy guide from camp to camp, / God be thy shade from well to well. / God grant beneath the desert stars / Thou hearest the Prophet's camel bell." When Knopf published the book in the United States in 1964, its editors chose a less obscure and less evocative title, *New Wind in a Dry Land*. Laurence's autobiographical account of her life and the lives of those around her in Somalia is based on a journal she kept while in Somalia and subsequently destroyed, and borrows from the introduction to her earlier translation of Somali poetry and stories.

4 The paternalism of British administrators is evident in their proposal to build water reservoirs that the Somalis doubted would be useful (*Prophet's Camel Bell* 44). Laurence's examination of prostitution and her rewriting of the trope of woman as territory will be examined later in this paper.

5 Both postcolonial and feminist approaches investigate relations of power and, used together, should allow for a better understanding of the multiple and pervasive intersections between patriarchy and imperialism. Male postcolonial writers, however, have often shown patriarchal biases, in part through their lack of attention to issues relevant to women's lives. Frantz Fanon writes compellingly about the nature of colonization and the course of the struggle toward decolonization, but his focus is almost exclusively on men's responses, and when he uses apparently neutral terms such as "the native," he almost always refers to men alone (*Wretched of the Earth* 92; for a discussion of Fanon's gendered terminology see McClintock 362). Homi Bhabha, in his foreword to the 1986 edition of Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, perpetuates Fanon's dismissal of women by failing to consider their experience (123). Although Edward Said acknowledges that Orientalism "encouraged a peculiarly (not to say invidiously) male conception of the world" (207), his theories about colonizers rarely mention women. Chinua Achebe does not ignore women as discursive colonizers but instead mounts a concerted attack on them, denigrating one Western critic of African literature in terms of her gender by describing her as "only a housewife" (6). An exception to Achebe's critical stance is his

assessment of Laurence, whom he lauds for her comment in *Long Drums and Cannons* that African history is "neither idyllic, as the views of some nationalists would have had it, nor barbaric, as the missionaries and European administrators wished and needed to believe" (Achebe 12; Laurence 9).

Another tension between postcolonialism and feminism is evident in criticism of the inherent cultural biases of Western feminists who write about colonialism and imperialism. Mohanty, for example, argues that "feminist scholarly practices exist within relations of power" that can in fact perpetuate the colonization of women, especially if such practices present what she calls "a composite, singular 'third world woman'" (197). She argues that what are needed instead are "local, contextual analyses" that avoid "homogenisation of class, race, religious and daily material practices of women in the third world" (210-11).

6 In "Books That Mattered to Me," Laurence indicates that she read *Prospero and Caliban* after *This Side Jordan* was published in 1960 (244). If Laurence's dating is accurate, David Richards and Jane Leney, who argue for the influence of Mannoni on *This Side Jordan,* are mistaken.

7 For a contrasting portrayal of African characters, see Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson.* Mary Rimmer suggests that although Laurence was indeed "making wild guesses about her characters' language and speech," she chose "to make speech and dialogue central elements" in order to enact "personal and cultural power struggles, particularly for low-status speakers" (4). African writer Micere Githae-Mugo defends Laurence against charges of appropriation of voice, arguing that, unlike many Western writers on Africa, Laurence never claimed to "understand the *native* mind" and yet has "a reasonable grasp of what Africa is all about" (13). Sparrow, meanwhile, comments on "how well [Laurence] interpreted the strangeness of foreign lands and unfamiliar customs" (13).

8 Githae-Mugo stresses the cultural sensitivity of *A Tree for Poverty* (12), while Donez Xiques quotes the cautious praise of B. W. Andrzejewski, who helped Laurence work on the poems in Somalia and who later provided his own more detailed translations. Andrzejewski suggests that "in spite of the language barrier she developed such empathy with the Somalis that although her translations are sometimes not very close to the original she conveyed their spirit and atmosphere with a high degree of accuracy" (Xiques 12). Richards provides a more critical assessment of the translations; he argues that *A Tree for Poverty* is "so accessible to a non-Somali reader" as a result of Laurence's tendency to universalize and thus ignore the specific characteristics of Somali culture, and that the poems appear to have been chosen using "western literary criteria" (28). Richards also criticizes Laurence's "appeal to a fundamental, transcultural humanity" in *Long Drums and Cannons* (28).

9 Laurence was so convinced of the accuracy of Mannoni's dependency theory that she used it as the basis for her story "The Voices of Adamo" ("Books That Mattered to Me" 244).

10 As it is commonly practised in Somalia, the procedure consists not of circumcision or simple removal of the prepuce of the clitoris, but instead excision or amputation of most of the external female genitalia, including the clitoris, labia minora, and inner part of the labia majora. Excision is followed by infibulation, or tightly sewing together the resulting wound, leaving only a small opening for the exit of urine and menstrual fluid. The procedure is normally done at age eight or younger (Hicks 58) and, as Joyce Stoller indicates in her review of Somali film-maker Soraya Mire's *Fire Eyes,* results in a "chastity belt" made of the girl's "own flesh" (58). Motivations for the practice include its perceived role in protecting virginity, assuring paternity, focusing women on their tasks as mothers, and making polygynous marriages workable.

11 Other researchers have recognized Laurence's commitment to a discussion of women's lives in Somalia. Barbara Pell argues, for example, that "The themes of human suffering and colonial oppression particularly converged, for Laurence, in her shock at the plight of women in Somali society despite their elaborate romanticization in literature" (39).

12 See Dorkenoo (63, 88, 118) and WHO (11, 17). Laurence's early predecessor in Somalia, Richard Burton, tried to include an appendix on infibulation in his 1856 book. The appendix, in Latin and thus accessible only to those interested in scientific study, was suppressed sometime during the publication process. A 1966 edition of Burton's book includes a translation of two pages of the censored appendix mistakenly included in a first edition. Burton's description is surprisingly detailed and accurate; he writes that removal of the clitoris and cutting away and sewing together of the labia was performed by a woman of the Midgan tribe, and indicates that if a new husband was unable to break through the scar tissue with his penis, he used a finger or a knife—practices confirmed by Koso-Thomas, Dorkenoo, and Hicks.

13 African women writers such as Dorkenoo, Koso-Thomas, and El Saadawi have only more recently written about excision, while Mire first filmed it in 1994. In her book written the same year, Dorkenoo emphasizes that "some years ago it would have been impossible in most countries even to mention the subject [of female genital mutilation] in public" (62).

14 In Laurence's first draft of the novel, the two protagonists were Miranda and Nathaniel (Laurence and Wiseman 97). Laurence wrote Johnnie into the role of main character after criticism from the *Atlantic Monthly* Novel Contest led her conclude that Johnnie's story paralleled Nathaniel's in a more "natural & inevitable way" (103).

15 As early as 1980, Margaret Gail Osachoff commented that the passage exemplified "the rape of Africa by the white imperialist" (224), while Leney criticized the "lack of subtlety" of "the trite symbol of the woman as African continent" (69). In later examinations of the scene, Sparrow and Gabrielle Collu come to Laurence's defence; while Sparrow suggests that "colonialism is condemned by means of a metaphor" (150), Collu argues that "Laurence's use of the imagery is not trite or unsubtle" but instead shows a "revisionist use of the colonial/imperial trope of land-as-woman" (27, 20).

16 Leney calls Johnnie's experience an "epiphany" in which he "comes to see the girl as a person, one of the Others who has to be respected" (69), while Pell comments that Johnnie's "recognition of the humanity of the black virgin (who symbolizes Africa) and his kindness to her are the first evidences of *his* humanity and respect for the Other" (40).

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Sandy Shreve

Grasp the Sparrow's Tail

from "T'ai Chi Variations"

You want to fly with your feet
anchored to the ground, like

bamboo in the wind

where sparrows congregate,
impatient,
they do not wait
long for another turn at the feeder,
are quick to flap chickadees
away from their seeds.

More like demons
than souls released from the bondage
of our bodies, these birds
flick their little tails,
insolent.

You happily snatch one
down from its ecstasy in sky

and as you pull it back to live
on this earth again,
its heart turns to a terror
your fingers cannot bear to hold.

When you let go,
your feathered hands soar.

debbi waters

Miles Davis' Horn

miles davis was a junkie
the world is full of junk and more junk and more junk
and we get depressed so we do junk we get down so we buy junk
we're poor so we buy other peoples junk we are closets and cupboards and on
the floor junk he rattled jazz miles davis was a junkman but he could blow
a tune and you could feel his powerful junk collapsing onto you
so you could Feel the world is junk and we all partake we have our
junk babies and fill their rooms with junk so they grow up to want
more junk and then there are garbage artists who use junk to build multi-
millions of dollars for their collections so they can sell it to austere
wealthy corporations who like neat colorful just one piece of junk in their
environmental japanese decor settings and where these artists live on farms
where they grow
and collect old junk down junkie cars and trucks and their children wear
other peoples junk and we junk up our bodies with tattoos and body piercing and
more junk as if human flesh wasn't enough
junk we recycle junk then buy the same junk made thinner
it costs to salvage in a junkyard for a rearview mirror to fit your
beater 60's chevy the rear view is getting bigger with junk food and junk
fans and junkie junkie jewelry strands of it on the neck of an innocent
six year old

miles davis blow harder blow harder blow harder

clean the vain and hurricane
this worlds junk into dust
the New York harbor blow the barges from here till kingdom come

then i'll be ready to sweep it all up

miles davis was a junkie
but he was useful
he could blow his horn more than i can say about the rest of this
ya say it junk.

Fiction has the power to create a space where the unspeakable can be repre-

Lori Saint-Martin

Infanticide, Suicide, Matricide, and Mother-Daughter Love

Suzanne Jacob's *L'obéissance* and Ying Chen's *L'ingratitude*

Fiction has the power to create a space where the unspeakable can be represented and explored. One of our greatest taboos, maternal violence, is given powerful expression in two contemporary Québec novels by women: Suzanne Jacob's *L'obéissance* (1991) and Ying Chen's *L'ingratitude* (1995). What links these two novels is their portrayal of a mother who is determined to control every aspect of her daughter's existence and who ultimately causes her death: in *L'obéissance*, a mother orders her eight-year-old girl to drown herself in the icy river behind the family home; in *L'ingratitude*, a young woman plans to kill herself in order to destroy her harsh, overly controlling mother. The two novels are similar in other ways as well, beginning with their titles, a single highly-charged word which condemns the mother-daughter relationship. Both Jacob and Chen locate the failed mother-daughter bond in a broader social and political context (including the reality of male power) rather than seeing it as a merely personal and psychological issue. Their narrative structures allow room for maternal subjectivity to supplement the daughter's point of view, so that the mother, here, is not the larger-than-life monster of much male writing (Thurer 267-71). Instead, she is a woman whose sense of self and of her femininity have been damaged beyond repair, a victim who lashes out at the daughter she loves and wants to spare her own fate at the same time as she takes care to inflict that very fate on her. In both novels, in fact, mother and daughter are so closely bound up that the distinction between one body and the other, between matricide and infanticide, nearly disappears. Paradoxically, although violence and rejection dominate, mother and

daughter love each other and long for dialogue and contact, which never come but which are suggested in the text as a source of hope for the future.

L'obéissance is first and foremost the story of Florence Chaillé, an unhappily married mother of two who falls into a strange depression punctuated by intermittent violence, and of Alice, the brilliant eight-year-old daughter Florence orders into the river. It is also the story of Marie, Florence's attorney, who manages to have Florence acquitted at the cost of her own mental balance; of Marie's husband, Jean, and his love affairs; and of Julie, Marie's friend, who is obsessed with the idea of putting a stop to domestic abuse and political torture, which she sees as closely related. The story of *L'ingratitude* is simpler, although far from linear. As the novel opens, the narrator, Yan-Zi, is already dead. The book contains two narrative threads: one, the story of Yan-Zi after her death, as she observes the reactions of survivors from an out-of-body vantage point while waiting to be cremated and buried, and, the other, the sequence of events that led up to her death, including her stormy relationships with men, with her father and especially with her strong-willed and possessive mother, the person her death is calculated to punish and, she hopes, destroy.

The settings of *L'obéissance* and *L'ingratitude* are very different: contemporary Québec and the People's Republic of China. In Québec, when studying the mother-daughter relationship, we need to take into account the influence of Catholic and nationalistic doctrine, which led clerical and political elites to see women mainly as mothers, encouraging them to have many children to protect Québec as a nation from assimilation by English and Protestant Canada ("la revanche des berceaux"). As well, as Québec texts, Jacob's and Chen's novels should be read in the larger context of women's writing on the mother-daughter relationship. Infanticide and matricide have been an important theme in Québec women's writing since the 1940s: Françoise Loranger's *Mathieu* (1949), Anne Hébert's *Le torrent* (written in 1945, but not published until 1950), Marie-Claire Blais' *La belle bête* (1959) and Diane Giguère's *Le temps des jeux* (1961) all portray real or symbolic matricides. In nearly all these novels, the mother is seen not as evil but as a victim of social pressures and control: she is a woman who has been deeply humiliated either by a man or by an intolerant society and who can express her anger only by mistreating a being even less powerful than she is: her child. The mothers in these novels, with the exception of Louise in *La belle bête*, are abusive mothers because they did not want to be mothers at all, a strong criticism of Quebec society of the time, where birth control was not

available, married women were pressured to reproduce (with priests calling on childless couples to ask what was keeping them from doing their duty), and single mothers were severely condemned (see Lévesque). In some feminist texts of the 1970s, such as the collective play *À ma mère, à ma mère, à ma mère, à ma voisine* (Gagnon *et al.*), the "patriarchal mother," the agent of male authority, is put on trial and symbolically murdered; in others, mothers and daughters unite to escape from patriarchal reality. For example, in Jovette Marchessault's short play "Les vaches de nuit," submissive "day cows" turn into free-spirited "night cows" and celebrate their love for each other in company of other mammals who remember "the time of the mothers," a matriarchal and pre-Oedipal paradise. Finally, novels of infanticide appear in the 80s (Aline Chamberland, *La fissure*, 1985) and 90s (*L'obéissance* and *L'ingratitude*).[1] Suzanne Jacob's other novels, especially *Laura Laur* and *La passion selon Galatée*, touch upon the question of mother-daughter bonds and the roots of adult submission to authority in childhood violence, but it is only in *L'obéissance*, a work very unlike any of her other novels, that Jacob devotes her attention almost entirely to these issues.

Born in 1961 in Shanghai, Ying Chen moved to Montreal in 1989. She has published four novels in Québec, all in French: *La mémoire de l'eau* (1992), *Les lettres chinoises* (1993), *L'ingratitude* (1995) and *Immobile* (1998).[2] Her novels are set in the People's Republic of China, except for the second, an epistolary novel, which alternates between recent immigrants to Montreal and Shanghai dwellers who only contemplate the possibility of exile. Ying Chen is one of the few Asian Québec writers publishing today; for various linguistic, historical, and geopolitical reasons, there are many more Québec writers of Haitian, Italian, Middle Eastern, North African and Central or South American background.

As background to my reading of Chen's novel, I offer the following, necessarily incomplete, elements related to gender roles in China.[3] Traditional Chinese society was shaped by the teachings of Confucius (551-479 BCE), who defined the ideal woman in terms of "three obediences" (to the father before marriage, to the husband after marriage, and to the son in the case of widows) and four virtues, namely propriety in behavior, speech, demeanour and employment (Thakur 36). This view of women created a doctrine of separate spheres which has proved lasting. Women were denied participation in political institutions and, if they belonged to the upper classes, were secluded within the household; the tradition of foot-binding, which served a number of purposes, also reduced upper-class women's

mobility. Although norms for female behavior were not always respected, women generally remained confined and subordinate. The only way for an "ordinary" woman to gain power was by having sons and by one day becoming the matriarch whom her daughters-in-law would be forced to obey and serve. Into the nineteenth century and even beyond, deference toward authority and respect for filial duties was still considered to be "the essence of morality and virtue" (Kazuko 96). In such a system, there is little room for values like individual freedom or inalienable personal rights; children belonged to the family unit, ruled by the father, and therefore could be sold if necessary (Sinn 142). The requirement of filial piety remains powerful: Yan-Zi's mother, in *L'ingratitude*, expects deference and obedience from her daughter, and in fact receives it until Yan- Zi is in her mid-twenties. Yan-Zi's ultimate rebellion is all the more shocking in the context of a Chinese mother's expectations. Female chastity (that is, virginity before marriage, conjugal fidelity and celibacy, if not suicide, for widows) was also an important social value despite some intellectuals' calls for reform of women's education and social status during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Larson 74-5, 128).

Over the course of the twentieth century, both the Nationalists and the Communists promised women status as equal citizens, although they failed to deliver entirely despite major changes in women's political, economic and legal status (Gilmartin *et al.* 2; Ziyun 204). The Marriage Law of 1950 allowed individuals to choose their own spouse, rather than have their marriages arranged by their parents; both women and men could file for divorce. Still, the mother Ying Chen describes in *L'ingratitude* was married off by her parents and sees her own role as the traditional one of safeguarding her daughter's reputation and finding her a good husband. She expects Yan-Zi to remain a virgin, although she is twenty-five, and sees herself as responsible for finding Yan-Zi a good husband, rather than letting her fend for herself. In modern China, abortion of a female foetus, female infanticide or abandonment of baby girls are relatively common, marriage is still seen as the aim of all women (Thakur 58), and the double workday for women is standard despite an official ideology of equality: "The new orthodoxy on gender relations is a curious mixture of patriarchy and socialism, where the tensions between women's productive and reproductive roles remain unresolved" (Thakur 62).

Generally speaking, and whatever the challenges to gender roles in today's China, the society Chen depicts in her novels is still a traditional and hierarchal, father-dominated one. It comes under fire from many of her characters

for that very reason. Chen's first novel begins with the narrator's grandmother studying traditional Chinese characters and learning that "une femme qui faisait quelque chose était dangereuse," "une femme n'était bonne que lorsqu'elle avait un fils," and so on, and continues with a presentation of the hierarchy of authority: king, superior, father, son, all of whom the daughter must obey, in addition to obeying her mother in her father's absence (*La mémoire de l'eau* 11-12). The narrator's grandmother has bound feet, while her mother is a transitional figure whose feet were unbound in the middle of the process and are therefore of in- between size. The narrator herself, a young contemporary woman, is no freer than her elders, since she hobbles about on high heels which leave her feet bleeding (in an ironic yet tender scene, her grandmother gives her some leftover bandages.) Chen seems to be suggesting here, as she does in *L'ingratitude*, that there has been little progress for Chinese women over the past few generations.[4] *L'ingratitude* should therefore be read within the context of contemporary Chinese society, without forgetting that, although Yan-Zi, Chin's protagonist, has never been outside of China, Chen gives her character values (privacy, separateness, individuality, and autonomy) which are at least partly Western[5] and which challenge the ways in which, according to Chen, even post-Mao Chinese society favours the group over the individual, filial responsibilities over autonomy, and duty over pleasure.

In this paper, I will be examining a number of issues that both *L'obéissance* and *L'ingratitude* raise: the traps involved in the mother-daughter bond, the exclusive nature of the relationship, the causes of maternal violence, the forms the daughter's reaction may take. I will also look at narrative form as overdetermined by the subject of violence, asking to what extent the novel as genre, with its ability to represent multiple and conflicting voices, makes it possible for both maternal and daughterly subjectivities to be heard. Finally, I will attempt to show how, though both novels represent a daughter's death, both also contain a fragile but real hope for the futures of mothers and daughters, despite the weight of male-dominated culture.

Maternal Control and Violence

To make sense of the tangled mother-daughter bond, I have selected an approach based on contemporary feminist psychoanalytic theory. While I would not argue for the applicability of all Freudian theory to non-Western contexts, recent feminist psychoanalytic theory, particularly French psychoanalyst and anthropologist Françoise Couchard's work on abusive mothers

in Northern Africa and elsewhere, does shed light on both Jacob's and Chen's work. I also am indebted to Nancy Chodorow, Luce Irigaray, and many other feminist writers who deal with the mother-daughter relationship. Generally speaking, these writers take the work of Freud as a starting point, while correcting for gender biases and filling in a number of gaps in Freud's exploration of the "dark continent" of femininity.

Couchard's clinical and anthropological observations show that, especially in cultural contexts where boys are preferred to girls, abusive mothers tend to be more strict with their daughters than with their sons, whom they often smother with excessive attention and tenderness (66). Because of her sex, the little girl reminds her mother of the child she herself once was and reactivates the older woman's past or present conflicts with her own mother. In other words, while a boy may be a source of narcissistic gratification and vicarious prestige, a daughter can be a constant reminder of her mother's earlier frustrations and disappointments as a woman in a man's world, a fact North-American researchers have also pointed out:

> In each stage of her life, the daughter reawakens the mother's own childhood and adolescent struggles to come to terms with her identity as an inferior female, and reopens all the narcissistic wounds the mother suffered in growing up. . . . Through the daughter, the mother relives her own rebellion, her own discontent, her own shame at being a woman. (Herman and Lewis 157)

A woman who, first as a daughter, later as a mother, learns that she is worth less than a man, can only pass on the same pain and emotional damage to her daughters. At the same time, some mothers, like those portrayed by Jacob and Chen, overinvest in their relationships with their daughters, becoming controlling and abusive and refusing to recognize the younger woman's growing autonomy and need for her own voice and agency. In fact, according to Couchard, the abusive mother has truly lost sight of the psychic boundaries between her daughter and herself and therefore sees the younger woman as a part of her. A mother who is unhappy in her marriage or thwarted in her ambitions may vent her anger and frustration on her daughter rather than on her husband or on society. In this sense, and because raising children is traditionally seen as the mother's job, poor treatment of daughters is tolerated by fathers and by the community at large as long as it does not become excessive or threaten male privilege. Couchard goes on to identify the shapes maternal control may take. Physical abuse is only the most extreme form along a continuum which includes spying on the daughter, controlling her movements, making her feel responsible for

her mother's unhappiness and refusing the right to express her sexuality. All of these reactions are forms of violence as well.

Although they give rise to very different reactions in their daughters, the mother figures of *L'obéissance* and *L'ingratitude* are strikingly alike. Both are obsessed with their daughters and oblivious to the world around them: outside of that single relationship, nothing really exists in their eyes. Like jealous lovers, they long to keep their beloved to themselves: Florence is tormented at the thought that Alice might care for her father, her grandparents, or her teachers, and Yan-Zi's mother hates her daughter's admirers because they are "des concurrents menaçants, des voleurs et des mangeurs de sa fille" (96). In fact, both mothers are in love with their daughters rather than their indifferent or brutal husbands. Florence falls in love with Alice the day she gives birth to her:

> Elle qui n'a jamais rien à dire à personne, elle voudrait tout dire à Alice. Elle lui répète les mêmes choses: tout est blanc parce qu'elle a voulu que tout soit blanc pour l'accueillir, c'est toi, c'est moi, c'est moi, c'est toi. Elle la contemple comme si c'était elle-même qui venait d'arriver sur la terre avec une nouvelle chance. Elle se sent délivrée de tout ce qui pèse sur elle depuis le début de sa vie. (Jacob 70-71)

Confusion over pronouns ("c'est toi, c'est moi . . .") reveals Florence's dangerous inability to distinguish between herself and her daughter. Similarly, although prolonged and painful labour deprived her of that initial ecstasy and sentiment of fusion, there is no doubt that Yan-Zi's mother shares Florence's inability, as her statements reveal: "Tu ne peux pas m'échapper, c'est moi qui t'ai formée, ton corps et ton esprit, avec ma chair et mon sang—tu es à moi, entièrement à moi!" (20). Powerful in Florence, this "ownership of the body and mind," here further legitimized by the traditional concept of filial piety (Maria Ng 202) is even stronger in Yan-Zi's mother, who insists, over and over, that a daughter is always a part of her mother, with no identity of her own. She imagines their future together as a couple, with the men in their lives as necessary, yet peripheral: «une place pour papa qu'on devrait accepter par charité et une autre pour mon futur mari, indispensable quant à la continuité de notre famille» (99).

Issues of protection and mastery merge as these mothers try to save their daughters from the dangers they sense all around them; ironically, their own violent control is the greatest threat of all. Alice's natural energy and vitality become her mother's enemies and must be destroyed: "Pour lui refroidir les sangs, comme elle disait, elle la mit aux douches glacées, puisque les privations de dessert et l'isolement dans la chambre ne suffi-

saient pas" (71). She beats Alice and ultimately causes her death by drowning. Yan-Zi's mother is an expert in what Françoise Couchard calls "le terrorisme de la souffrance maternelle" (125): she constantly reminds her daughter of her own sacrifices and of the physical and emotional scars motherhood has left on her body and psyche. Unlike Florence's, her abuse is generally verbal rather than physical, a mixture of guilt, emotional blackmail, insults, blandishments, and threats:

> Elle avait plusieurs fois parlé de s'enfoncer un couteau dans la poitrine, de sortir son coeur saignant et de me faire voir comment par ma faute il vivait mal. "Tu ne vois donc pas, disait-elle, que mon coeur marine dans le sel?" (32)

Although she seems cold and indifferent and is unfailingly critical, Yan-Zi's mother is in fact passionately engaged in controlling her daughter and keeping her close. In addition to displaying her own suffering in the hopes of binding Yan-Zi to her, she refuses even to let Yan-Zi eat dinner out; she must return home directly after work. She also watches her daughter's every movement, keeps Yan-Zi (who, at twenty-five, still lives at home, because of parental expectations and a chronic housing shortage in Shanghai) ignorant of sexual matters, dresses her in shapeless clothing, and urges her to keep her virginity; whenever thwarted, she becomes verbally abusive (for instance, she says that if she had known beforehand what kind of daughter Yan-Zi would be, she would have had an abortion rather than keeping her). In other words, she is, like Florence, a controlling and manipulative mother; Yan-Zi's rebellion clearly shows she finds her mother's actions abusive, violent and unacceptable, even in a context of filial duty and obedience to elders.[6] Again here, the mother seems to be defending traditional values such as obedience, filial piety, submission to authority and the need to subordinate one's desires to the greater good of the group (she says ants are smarter than Yan-Zi because they understand humans are social animals), all qualities she feels are essential to survival and is proud of passing on to her daughter, while Yan-Zi defends more modern, perhaps more Western values: freedom and autonomy, but also physical tenderness and soft words from her mother, none of which is forthcoming since such actions would undermine her mother's authority.

In an attempt to maintain their early, exclusive bond forever, both mothers refuse to recognize that their daughter is growing up. As Marie realizes, what Florence demands of Alice is that she stay a child forever; Alice, by agreeing to die, grants her mother's wish at the cost of her own life. Yan-Zi's mother says that, as painful as childbirth was, watching her daughter grow

away from her is immeasurably more so. She also insists on the debt of gratitude her daughter owes her in exhange for the mother's "unrepayable love"; the mother thus becomes her child's economic creditor (Chow 159). The images that describe her (a devouring spider, a pair of handcuffs) confirm her despotic nature, at least in her daughter's view, as does this ironic remark: "Avant moi, maman avait possédé d'autres choses. Elle avait élevé des oiseaux en cage" (53).[7]

The inability, or the unwillingness, to distinguish between herself and her daughter leads the abusive mother to leave her mark, physically, on her daughter's body (Couchard 149). Florence repeatedly strikes Alice to relieve her own unspeakable suffering. We are told that Yan-Zi's mother has a snake-shaped Cesarean scar on her stomach and that, if Yan-Zi were to swallow the sleeping pills she has accumulated with suicide in mind, a doctor would cut her stomach open in the same way, marking her with the same scar, to her mother's delight. When her mother takes her hand crossing the street, Yan-Zi says: "J'avais peur que ses ongles solides ne déchirent ma peau et ne s'enfoncent dans ma chair" (95), leaving a permanent injury, an indelible mark. "Writing" on the daughter's body, causing its suffering and ultimate death, is the mother's most powerful desire, although it also causes her great pain.

When these mothers abuse their daughters, they act out of a misguided desire to protect them from the world, not realizing the full extent of their own destructive power over them. Maternal violence, in these novels, is born of love, of a desire for complete and unending union with the daughter, of a tragic inability to distinguish between self and other. It is as if they were entirely lacking even in the permeable ego-boundaries Nancy Chodorow sees as a sign of women's superior relational abilities, so that, instead of being capable of empathy, they literally cannot or will not distinguish between themselves and their child, with disastrous consequences for both.

Daughterly Reactions: (Dis)Obedience and (In)Gratitude

How do daughters react to their violent, controlling mothers? Alice and Yan-Zi seem reverse images of each other: one strives for perfect obedience, the other rebels; one calmly destroys herself, the other angrily plots to destroy her mother. But, as we will see, their reactions are ultimately linked.

Alice has abdicated her right to judge her mother and replaced rebellion with pity and compassion. She intuitively understands Florence's pain and tries to alleviate it through total obedience, even developing "perfection exercises" to control her emotions, thoughts, and involuntary reactions

such as blinking. In fact, Alice has deliberately made her life into a living death. A child who cannot run, sing, play, or laugh out loud, who strives only for perfection, is arguably already dead. Walking into the river is simply the ultimate step in a long suicidal process Alice has begun out of love for her mother.

But a daughter cannot alleviate her mother's suffering; the causes are too distant, too obsessive, rooted in the mother's own childhood. Alice's obedience is as painful to Florence as her rebellion would have been. In reality, obedience is never complete enough. If the child is perfect, the mother will invent new crimes and change the distinction between right and wrong so she can punish her, as she is compelled to, again and again: "La mère devenue gravement maltraitante guette donc, dans ce double qu'est sa fille, le moindre écart avec un modèle qu'elle s'est fixé pour cette dernière. Dès que se produit l'écart, elle n'est plus capable de reconnaître cette fille sur laquelle éclate sa fureur" (Couchard 157). Then finally, one day, Alice walks into the river:

> Il est quatre heures de l'après-midi quand l'eau de la rivière vient comme un chat qui a faim se glisser et s'enrouler autour des jambes d'une petite fille. Elle pénètre dans deux petites bottes blanches, dans des collants blancs, elle s'y réchauffe à peine. La petite fille avance en elle, et, elle, elle entre dans la robe jusqu'au ventre chaud de la petite. Une mouette perdue ricane soudain. Le vent s'engouffre dans le bec de la mouette. "Maman, aide-moi, je vais me noyer." La lune pousse l'eau, l'eau pousse la petite fille, lui fait perdre pied, l'emporte, la remplit, bouche, narine, gorge, jusqu'au fond des poumons. (104)

The water which enters Alice's body and blocks up all its orifices recalls both the cold showers Florence forces upon Alice to tame her and the psychic "infibulation"[8] both have undergone at their mother's hands. The water is also her mother's body, as shown by the frequent repetitions of the pronoun "elle" referring simultaneously to the mother, the water, and the moon. The river as maternal element absorbs and destroys Alice, but also reunites mother and daughter in death: one body, one embrace, and one death for both. If, as Marie later realizes, "grandir, c'est désobéir, c'est rire du monde" (213), which would lead to loss of the mother's love, it becomes clear that Alice died so she would *not* grow up. She is willing to sacrifice herself in order to preserve her mother's love for her.

Yan-Zi is also ready to sacrifice herself, but her motives are very different. Alice acts out of pity and compassion, Yan-Zi out of rebellion and rage. She portrays herself as initially obedient, in an attempt to win her mother's love; but she is quickly declared a hypocrite by that ever-attentive judge. Her planned suicide is carefully calculated to achieve two goals. First of all,

mother and daughter are so closely bound together that death seems to Yan-Zi to be the only escape: "J'avais vécu en tant que l'enfant de ma mère. Il me fallait mourir autrement. Je terminerais mes jours à ma façon. Quand je ne serais plus rien, je serais moi" (24). But Yan-Zi dreams as much of destroying her mother as of freeing herself: "Je brûlais d'envie de voir maman souffrir à la vue de mon cadavre. Souffrir jusqu'à vomir son sang. Une douleur inconsolable. La vie coulerait entre ses doigts et sa descendance lui échapperait" (24). Yan-Zi's mother derived all her self-worth from her image of herself as a wonderful mother. Without a child, she will no longer be a mother at all; and since being a mother was her only self-definition, she will no longer exist. Finally, by killing herself, Yan-Zi will violate filial piety and deprive her parents of descendants to ensure their immortality and tend their graves. Suicide is therefore also an indirect form of matricide, especially since Yan-Zi plans to write a falsely loving farewell letter that will exacerbate her mother's regret at losing her.

Love, Hate, Reciprocity and Double Binds

Alice and Yan-Zi react in opposite ways: Alice is willing to die to keep her mother's love, while Yan-Zi plans to die to escape that love. Alice's death is motivated by love, Yan-Zi's by hate. But between mothers and daughters, nothing is as simple as it seems. There is way out of that complex, ambivalent bond: "je comprends maintenant que notre mère est notre destin" (129), says Yan-Zi, half-bitter, half-resigned.

For all her criticism, Yan-Zi constantly describes a longing to fall into her mother's arms, to stay near her and be loved by her, even to die in her embrace. As Adrienne Rich (242) points out, an unmothered woman may look for her mother all her life, even in the arms of men. The three men who, throughout the novel, interest Yan-Zi to some extent, are all described in relation to her mother: the first turned away from Yan-Zi because her mother was jealous of Yan-Zi's affection for him; the second, Chun, courts her through her mother and Yan-Zi feels more and more estranged from him. She asks a third young man, Bi, to make love to her to free her from her mother, but during the act and afterwards, she can think of nothing but her mother. Even her boss is reminiscent of the older woman, assigning Yan-Zi "self-criticism" exercises as her mother does, and commending her mother's severity; the owner of the Restaurant Bonheur, where she spends her final hours, is, like her mother, a strange mixture of approval and severity; it is to this woman, ironically, that Yan-Zi's mother sold her caged birds.

Another paradox lies in Yan-Zi's actual death, an accident rather than a suicide (or is it both?). As she sits in the restaurant writing yet another version of her letter to her mother, Chun appears at the window and then comes inside: his persistent shadowing of her, his tender but smothering attitude, his blend of concern and reproach, his admonitions that he is acting "for her own good," all remind Yan-Zi of her mother. She runs away, with him in full pursuit, and is hit by a truck. Given that, earlier on, we were told that traffic noise in the street, especially honking horns, reminds her of her mother's voice (20), and that the mother has "[une] voix de sirène et [un] front de fer" (13); given that Chun is clearly a mother substitute; given that Yan-Zi's father was also hit by a passing vehicle, it seems clear that, on a symbolic level, Yan-Zi's suicide has failed: she has, instead, been murdered by her mother. This complex mixture of suicide, matricide and infanticide illustrates the double bind Yan-Zi finds herself in. She has to destroy herself to become herself; either way, she dies.

The major female characters of *L'obéissance* are similarly trapped in a double bind. By destroying Alice, Florence obtains a measure of revenge for the wounds to her self-esteem, but she is also painfully aware of destroying her only hope of beginning her life again, of seeing her daughter, that other self, flourish where she could not. As Nancy Huston (127) has pointed out through her analysis of a number of women writers, matricide, for a woman, is always akin to self-destruction; infanticide may come even closer. Although Florence kills Alice, she too is destroyed when Alice disappears: "tous les efforts d'Alice pour l'aimer et la séduire, la séduire et l'aimer lui parviennent enfin et cet amour la cloue sur place, lui donne la mort." For Alice, the contradiction is equally deadly: her mother does not want her to grow up. If she does, she will destroy her mother; but the only way to avoid growing up is to end her own life. Again, either way, she dies.

Marie, the attorney who successfully defends Florence, is also trapped. She becomes both the guilty mother and the murdered child:

> . . . je me suis mise à vivre la vie de Florence pour pouvoir avoir accès à Florence. [. . .] Je ne cesse pas de voir Alice entrer dans l'eau. Je manque d'air à mon tour. Je l'ai trahie. J'ai trahi Alice. (175-6)

For Marie, a victim of child abuse herself, there is no way out of the trap. If she loses Florence's case, she betrays her parents; if she wins, she betrays Alice and herself. As a victim of childhood abuse defending an abusive mother, she defends the cruelty that was inflicted on her, trivializing her own suffering and that of others like her, legitimizing torture, just as Julie

foresaw in her opening monologue on dictatorships and torture. Is Marie simply another over-obedient child, allowing her beloved parents to kill her? Or is she an abusive adult conspiring with the system to allow infanticide to go unpunished? The contradiction is so great that Marie cannot survive it. In fact, all the major characters, Julie, Florence and Alice, and Marie, are caught up in issues of violence and obedience, problems of identification and autonomy, as are numerous minor characters space restrictions make it impossible to deal with here.

All these traps and insoluble paradoxes raise the same question: how can mothers and daughters be freed from obedience and its deathly consequences? Rethinking the mother-daughter relationship and recognizing the violence it inevitably contains, in a society where the Father's Law dominates, will lead inevitably to a new ethic of human relationships, both private and public, as we will see. This new ethic first requires a critical look at male responsibility and the social order as a whole.

The Father

Little is said in *L'obéissance* and *L'ingratitude* about the father: the love-hate relationship between mother and daughter plays out to its violent end almost as if he had never existed. Rather than the traditional Oedipal triangle, we are faced with a mother-daughter dyad whose very closeness makes it deadly.

As Couchard points out, when child-rearing and discipline are left to women alone, men maintain distance and prestige. They are often willing to let mothers dominate daughters as long as their own powers and privileges remain unchallenged; in fact, this kind of domination is a kind of safety valve to direct women's violence against their children rather than against men. In many cases, there is a "une blessure narcissique, une humiliation permanente faite à la femme, dans son rapport avec l'homme: il serait trop dangereux de s'attaquer directement à ce dernier, le ressentiment et la vengeance sont donc détournés sur l'enfant" (35).

The mothers of Jacob's and Chen's novels have suffered this kind of humiliation, first at the hands of their own mothers, then of their husbands, and they pass it on to their daughters. Florence's mother abused her, showering her with arbitrary punishments, insults and blows, while her husband enjoys forcing her to dance naked for him and barely notices when she mistreats their children. In fact, the children themselves are a punishment he inflicts on her through marital rape:

> Hubert crut qu'elle lui résistait. Il fallait lui montrer. Il lui montra. Neuf mois plus tard, Florence accouchait d'un garçon, Rémi. Onze mois après Rémi, ce fut Alice. (69)

Florence soon becomes consumed with weariness, blind anger and an obsession with order and obedience. At the very end of the novel, the scene that gave rise to Alice's death is finally revealed:

> Alice qui se lève la nuit en proie à un cauchemar. Elle ouvre la porte de la chambre de ses parents. Florence danse nue. Hubert va la prendre. Florence veut s'échapper, fuir le regard d'Alice. Hubert la force à continuer. Il la tient. Il l'oblige. Il a vu Alice. Il s'est excité davantage. La fin de tout, pour Florence. Alice recule, referme la porte de la chambre. (179)

Unable to bear the idea that Alice has judged her, Florence must eliminate her. The primal scene Alice witnesses here, what Couchard calls "le théâtre de la sexualité maternelle" (89), is also the scene of woman's humiliation by man and is deadly for the little girl who witnesses it.[9]

As Adrienne Rich (241) has noted, victimization of the mother is humiliating and disempowering for the daughter-spectator. Yan-Zi witnesses another kind of humiliation. We are told that her mother was beaten by her parents with a bamboo rod "pour qu'elle apprenne à se soumettre et aussi à s'imposer dès le moment venu" (92),[10] forced into an arranged marriage, and subjected to various privations. In addition, Yan-Zi's father, a noted professor and intellectual, spends all his time in his study writing, indifferent to his wife and daughter and to material concerns of all kinds. Although the father is clearly a victim both of fate and of changing times (he was hit by a car and pushed into early retirement after the accident), he is also a figure of power for his daughter and his wife;[11] his disgust with the body and with food, in fact with "toutes ces insignifiances qu'il qualifiait de charnelles" (90), makes them ashamed of their own femininity. The mother's grudging admiration, resentment and repressed anger at the father are deflected towards Yan-Zi, who clearly recognizes her father's responsibility:

> S'il était allé plus souvent au marché qu'au musée, s'il avait daigné se montrer un peu plus attentif à maman et à ce qu'elle faisait à la maison—combien de fois par semaine en effet nettoyait-elle le plancher? . . . —maman aurait été moins dépendante de ma présence et de ma vertu. (30)

While not a tyrant (although he does beat his daughter when he learns she has had sex for the first time), Yan-Zi's father exercises considerable power. He does so not by actively dominating his wife and daughter, but by withdrawing into his own work, around which the entire household revolves; after his retirement, he still shuts himself up in his study, although he no longer writes, without any attempt to become closer to his family. The

father's indifference, the male-female, mind-body split he encourages, his withdrawal and quiet scorn, have left Yan-Zi with the sole responsibility for her mother's happiness. While realizing her father is guilty too, Yan-Zi dreams only of punishing her mother, knowing he will remain untouched and indifferent no matter what she does.

Neither Jacob nor Chen blames mothers alone or endows fathers with all the virtues; indifferent or abusive fathers are the accomplices, even a root cause, of maternal cruelty. Jacob draws a striking parallel between "normal" family behaviour (children must be taught obedience), child abuse, and oppressive political regimes, where the leader plays an idealized father role. Ying Chen insists on the way children are dominated by adults only to become dominating adults themselves, so that a system based on a hierarchy of power (old over young, men over women) is perpetuated. Maternal violence is therefore part of a larger social order, which these texts challenge, rather than an individual pathology.

Narrative Form and Maternal Violence

How does the form of these novels mirror the theme of mother-daughter violence? One similarity between them, closely related to their subject matter, is their tone. Throughout much of *L'ingratitude*, there is a curious contrast between Yan-Zi's violent anguish and her detached, cynical tone as she methodically plans to die in the way that will be the most painful for her mother. In *L'obéissance*, after an initial monologue by Julie, there is a dramatic shift in tone as the story of Florence and Alice begins. All marks of spontaneous oral discourse disappear. Sentences become shorter and their structures more rigid; Julie's conversational first person gives way to an icy, detached third-person narrative. The use of the simple past tense and a flat, almost journalistic tone create an impression of fatality: even at the outset, we sense that there is no hope for these characters, no way out. Perhaps this kind of detached tone, in both novels, is at once a recognition of the fact that it is too late for these mothers and daughters and a defence mechanism to avoid being destroyed by the almost unbearable effort of telling the story.

Couchard points out that one of the consequences of abuse is a kind of fragmentation of the self (152), mirrored here by extreme narrative fragmentation. As we have seen, Ying Chen's novel follows two threads, before and after Yan-Zi's death; many scenes are not precisely located in time and the total effect is of a kind of breakdown in the links between events. The very brief chapters, ranging from two to five or six pages in length (35 chapters in

a 133-page novel), add to the general effect of collapse and destruction of the self. In *L'obéissance*, narrative fragmentation is once again a sign of the breakdown of self and the relationship to others in the context of maternal violence. Infanticide is so unthinkable that it is possible only to circle around it without facing it directly;[12] at the same time, it affects the lives of all the characters in the novel, even those who do not know the mother-daughter couple involved, so that every other story is linked to that one. The heart of the novel, the story of Florence and Alice Chaillé, covers only 70 pages of Jacob's 250-page novel. It is located between the first-person meditations of Julie, who is obsessed by the question of private and public violence, and the third-person story of Marie. The novel also contains a number of other elements which at first glance seem superfluous, including a long account of one of Marie's dreams, the story of an unsuccessful love affair between Marie's husband, Jean, and a woman named Muriel, and a passage relating the death of Jean's mother. A closer reading reveals the importance of these scenes for the novel as a whole: although space restrictions make it impossible to discuss them here, they all deal with violence, motherhood, and an unspeakable secret. Violence by or against mothers recurs in nearly every episode, so that readers are confronted with multiple images of the unbearable.

Another formal similarity between the novels is the extensive use made of repetition. As Marianne Hirsch points out, maternal intrigue, if it finds expression at all, is always "repetitive, literal, hopelessly representational," rooted in the suffering body "rather than in the eyes or in the voice which can utter its cries of pain" (185). In *L'ingratitude*, Yan-Zi returns obsessively to the same images: the mother "swallowing" her up, the caged birds, the father writing in his office, the tubes of pills in her purse, her body waiting to be burned and buried. We have seen how the rare events of the novel (relationships with Chun and Bi) constantly return to the mother-daughter bond, and how Yan-Zi acts out her love-hate relationship with her mother on her own body. The result of these recurrent obsessions is of painful stagnation and inability to move forward, even into death. The immobility of the novel's form mirrors the impossibility of finding a way out of the mother's grasp. Dominant metaphors (such as the mother as devouring spider or as keeper of caged birds, as seen above, and the mother's womb as both prison and refuge), as well as the very limited number of settings the novel represents (mostly the family apartment and the Restaurant Bonheur, with a few scenes in Yan-Zi's office, a park, or a streetcar, all of which are confined and/or crowded spaces), also contribute to a sense of emprisonment

and stagnation, showing that there is no way out of the trap.

In *L'obéissance*, repetition is also the textual figure for what is unspeakable in maternal discourse. Stories of abuse constantly echo each other from one part of the novel to another. Julie insists on the importance of breaking the silence surrounding torture:

> Comment un petit couple humain en vient à saigner à mort ses enfants bien-aimés, comment ces enfants bien-aimés laissent leurs parents les saigner à mort, voilà ce que je vais m'obliger à essayer de dire, de redire et de montrer. (Jacob 11)[13]

There is a cruel paradox here: to avoid the repetition of torture, Julie must constantly repeat that torture must not be repeated. Hence the bogged-down sentences of the novel, unable to break out of the cycle of cruelty which all the novel's episodes reflect as in a series of mirrors all trained on the same unbearable scene.

As both these novels show, maternal subjectivity, when violently repressed, can express itself only through violence. Repetition is thus the rhetorical device which both resists violence and continually reinscribes it in the text.

Who Speaks?

Marianne Hirsch has pointed out the importance of distinguishing between writing as a daughter and writing as a mother. Pursuing that idea a step further, we must avoid judging a mother as "bad" simply because her daughter says she is; we need to look at whether, and how, the text accommodates the mother's subjectivity as well as her daughter's. Some authors, writing as daughters exclusively, reduce the mother to silence, which is an act of aggression against her.

The daughter is the sole narrator of *L'ingratitude*, and her portrayal of her mother as a monster is certainly convincing. But is the mother really a larger-than-life figure of horror, or is she deeply and sincerely concerned for the well-being of the daughter she is convinced cannot protect herself? The reader is left in some doubt. Certainly Yan-Zi seems helpless on her own, and directly or indirectly, the text often proves her mother right. Early in the novel, we are told how she insists on holding Yan-Zi's hand to cross the street, an overprotective attitude which Yan-Zi resists. Yet, the first time Yan-Zi says she feels truly that she is out alone, after being sent away from her mother's house, she is in fact hit by a truck. It is almost as if the mother had been right all along in trying to protect Yan-Zi from herself.

Even the novel's title seems mother-oriented, ironically reflecting the mother's negative judgment of the daughter rather than the opposite. And

Yan-Zi is so closely bound to her mother, so aware of every heartbeat in her mother's breast, so struck by her words, that she effortlessly conveys her mother's opposing viewpoint even as she is attacking her. Time and time again, direct quotations from the mother, Yan-Zi's own musings, and narrative action plunge us into the mother's subjectivity, as when the older woman expresses her refusal to be destroyed by her daughter's death:

> Je te préfère ainsi, commmence-t-elle tout bas. Oui, je te préfère en poudre. [. . .] Avec ta mort, tu comptes affoler ta mère, ma pauvre idiote, tu as peut-être raison, mais ton silence suffit pour me calmer maintenant, me sauver du désarroi dans lequel tu as voulu me pousser. (111)

Although the daughter's voice dominates, there is a kind of double effect, a two-voiced perspective within a single-voiced narrative. The mother's pain and her strange bravery are as apparent as her recriminations and her cruelty.

The situation in *L'obéissance* is more complex. There are first-person narrators, notably Marie and Julie (both of whom are also described in segments narrated in the third person), and a great deal of the novel shifts back and forth from first-person narrators to a kind of free indirect speech which is not attributed to any particular character; however, Florence is never allowed to speak as a narrator. In fact, she seldom speaks at all: her frustrated thoughts and her violent actions are reported, rarely her words. In sharp contrast with the long-winded and highly articulate musings of characters in other parts of the novel (Marie, Jean, Julie), Florence is reduced by her circumstances to near silence. Alice is not a narrator either, although we do have slightly greater access to her thought processes (up to but not including the day when she walks into the river). Neither has enough perspective on her situation to succeed as a narrator. It would be fair to say that a daughterly perspective dominates overall in the novel, since Julie and Marie speak as daughters rather than as mothers, but Muriel is a mother figure who appears briefly and Jean calls up his own mother's dying words. In addition, the multiple perspectives encourage readers to seek out the hidden subjectivities and the unspoken sufferings that lie in the margins of the text or between the various spaces it constructs.

Exclusive focus on a single viewpoint means doing violence to the one who is silenced. In order to eliminate both matricide and infanticide, the stories of mothers and daughters need to incorporate both perspectives, so that each can recognize the other's subjectivity instead of seeing her as the enemy who threatens her own existence and must be eliminated. Mutual recognition would also make it possible to establish the psychic and physical boundaries whose lack gave rise to abuse and violence. Only if they can recognize each

other as separate beings, listen to each other and become open to each other's views can mothers and daughters begin to live fully, both as separate beings and as part of a dyad that could strengthen rather than destroy them. To the extent that they allow, or at least point to the need for, mutual affection and understanding, both novels hold out a promise for the future.

Is There Hope?

Both novels, as we have seen, show that when maternal subjectivity appears, there is at least some hope for dialogue across generational boundaries. Another sign of hope is the obvious, although distorted, love between mother and daughter. There is a feeling that everything could have been—or could be—different, if only mother and daughter could talk to one another. Yan-Zi's mother is invariably stern and unsmiling, an uncompromising figure of authority. But one day, Yan-Zi sees her laughing and talking with a neighbour woman and is dazzled by her beauty, her scent, her luminous smile. When the mother realizes Yan-Zi is watching, she frowns and begins questioning her about her homework. But the suggestion remains that a bond could form between a smiling, pleasure-loving woman and a daughter who would be happy at her side. Similarly, time and time again, Florence and Alice just miss making contact: "Moi, je cherche Florence, répond Alice, toute la nuit, tout le jour, mais je suis trop petite pour soulever le mur" (100).

A third form of hope lies in the fact that a private tragedy, when it becomes public, calls attention to abuse in both "normal" and violent relationships. Florence is acquitted in court, logically, since she was only enforcing patriarchal law, that is, obedience and conformity. Still, her action makes abuse a public issue rather than one that takes place behind closed doors and, in that sense, it challenges the social system, which, according to Jacob, is based on violence and mute consent. Yan-Zi's death, giving rise as it does to public scandal, raises the same issues, exposing family violence to public scrutiny.

A final note of hope occurs at the very end of each novel. Both narratives begin after the daughter's death when it is already too late to change what happened, and circle back to examine the events leading up to it. Yet both novels close in such a way as to require a rereading that offers the promise of a different path. Shortly after her successful defence of Florence, Marie becomes pregnant and is then diagnosed with cancer. Her husband, Jean, is convinced she wants to die before her daughter is born so she can break the cycle of

violence and avoid repeating her own tragic past.[14] By letting herself and her daughter die, Marie feels she can put an end to the cycle of abuse; while she may condone past violence, she refuses to pass it on to future generations. The final passage encourages us to reread the novel in a different light:

> —Elle ne m'aimera donc jamais? Je suis si fatiguée de . . .
> Elle avait pris ma main. Elle respirait ma paume:
> —Chèvrefeuille, a dit Marie. J'essaie de la remettre au monde, je n'y arriverai pas. Oh! Julie, je n'y arriverai pas, il faut tout recommencer!
> —Ta fille?
> —Oh non, Julie, ma mère. (250)

Marie dreams of beginning again, undoing the past, healing old wounds. She dreams of a dialogue with her dead mother that would lead to forgiveness, understanding, and a new sense of well-being. Her dual status as both mother and daughter is of key importance, but she dies before she can take advantage of it to change the mother-daughter relationship. Fortunately, her efforts will not die with her, connected as they are to the concerns of the novel as a whole, and pursued by Julie. The fact that the novel ends, not with Alice's death and Florence's acquittal, but with Marie's willed, hopeful death and Julie's continuing commitment to understanding and action, holds out the promise of a better future.

Similarly, at the close of *L'ingratitude*, Yan-Zi recalls the hypocritical letter she wrote to sharpen her mother's remorse through false words of love; it now seems to her that every word was true. She longs for her mother to receive this loving message and realize the depths of Yan-Zi's feeling for her. The hate and resentment emphasized throughout give way to tenderness, requiring us to reread and reinterpret the whole novel in that light. The final paragraph is revealing: "À travers le brouillard de cette mémoire, me parvient, comme une lamentation enchantée, une dernière voix humaine, le cri d'un nourrisson peut-être: Maman!" After life is over, even beyond death, one word and one longing remain, the need for the mother.

A dead daughter yearns to have her words of love read and accepted; a dying daughter who refused to be a mother longs to give birth to her mother and alleviate the mother's suffering, which gives rise to the daughter's, and so on, without end. Both Jacob and Chen seem to be suggesting that only this kind of mothering of mothers by daughters, this kind of retroactive dialogue and healing, holds out any hope of renewal. As Luce Irigaray has stated, mothers and daughters have been separated from each other by the law of the Father. Rethinking the mother-daughter relationship is therefore

a way of beginning to challenge the social order as it stands, however solid it may be. As readers of these novels, we are invited to reconstruct meaning, rethink the mother-daughter bond, reinvent an ethics of human contact based not on control and violence but on mutual recognition and respect. As extreme examples of failed mother-daughter dialogue, *L'obéissance* and *L'ingratitude* point to the need for exploring new ways of reconciling intimacy and autonomy on either side of generational borders. Even after death—especially after death—everything can, and must, begin again.

NOTES

1 These works and others are studied in Saint-Martin, *Le nom de la mère.*

2 For background information on Chen and her novels, see Bordeleau, Chartrand and Lachance. For a brief but interesting consideration of *L'ingratitude* which appeared after this article was written, see Lequin.

3 The following remarks are drawn from Chow, Gilmartin *et al.*, Kazuko, Larson, Sinn, Thakur, Wolf and Witke, and Ziyun. Since *L'ingratitude* is not a novel of immigration, it does not raise issues common among Asian diaspora writers, which, as usefully summarized by Mari Peepre, include "the loneliness and alienation of the displaced person, the struggle to survive in harsh circumstances, the battle to retain their heritage culture while adjusting to the strange, new host culture, and the search for tradition and roots by the partially acculturated second and third generation" (80). I will therefore not refer here to the many excellent critical studies on Chinese-American and Chinese-Canadian women's writing from which I have drawn elsewhere to study Amy Tan and Fay Myenne Ng (Saint-Martin, "Ta mère"). For reasons which include material conditions, changing maternal and daughterly attitudes in a host culture, and daughters' desire to become more like the Caucasian friends who support them in their desire for autonomy, the mother-daughter relationship described in *L'ingratitude* is different from the more reciprocal, caring and tender, although still often conflictual and even manipulative, mother-daughter relationships described by Chinese Canadian or Chinese American women authors like Patricia Chao, Gish Jen, Larissa Lai, Sky Lee, Aimee Liu, Fae Myenne Ng, Mei Ng, and Amy Tan, among others.

4 Obviously, I study only the relationship Chen depicts in *L'ingratitude,* with no intention to generalize about mother-daughter relationships in contemporary Chinese literature.

5 Ying Chen insists that mothers like Yan-Zi's "existent ici [that is, in Canada] aussi" (quoted in Lachance 90), adding that she prefers to explore universal themes rather than those that apply only to China.

6 Although I will not deal with issues of immigration here, it is possible that Chen's character's rejection of her mother resembles the process of "demonization" described by Peepre: the mother becomes a symbol of a negative past and the daughter's rejection of her is also a rejection of the motherland and mother tongue. Dubois and Hommel write that "c'est pour échapper . . . à l'hégémonie de ce texte (familial/national) que la narratrice de *La mémoire de l'eau* quitte sa patrie à la toute fin de son histoire" (44).

7 At the end of the novel, once Yan-Zi is dead, the mother is again happily occupied with some birds in a cage, indicating that her need for mastery has not changed.

8 The term "infibulation" is used several times to indicate the severe kind of emotional and physical frigidity Florence will suffer all her life

9 Rémi, Alice's brother, died a little earlier, after fighting with a schoolmate who taunted him with the fact that his mother was a stripper before her marriage. As in the case of Alice, a glimpse of the mother's sexuality is fatal to her child.

10 This repetition over generations implies that, in Chen's opinion, the move from submissive childhood to abusive adulthood is legitimized, even institutionalized.

11 In *L'ingratitude*, other parents also exercise stringent control over their children's lives: one of Yan-Zi's colleagues' father opens her mail, while her little brother reads her diary out loud at the dinner table. Yan-Zi finds such behavior, however widespread it may be, unacceptable.

12 There is a parallel here with Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, another story of the murder of a daughter by her mother.

13 For an in-depth study of repetition in Jacob's novel, see Saint-Martin, "Les deux femmes . . ." and *Le nom de la mère*.

14 Years before, Marie had an abortion rather than bearing "un enfant qu'on menacerait de noyer à [s]on insu" (242).

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K. I. Press

You have a lot on your mind

for Angel

the borg queen, the houseboys, the internet lovers cybering away till their wrists are sore and contact lenses brittle as their eyes. each time you phone me you sigh and admit you're a tart again. but you deserve it, after all, your career can't pull him out west on a kitestring. but his long sheaves of chest hair. you miss them, used to harvest, grind, mix, knead, and bake them. would watch impatiently for a new crop. you meet your lovers

in vampire rooms, to make sure they can't distinguish between fantasy and reality, and wear black eyeliner, and possibly nailpolish. do you feel it, somedays, the feeling you might be starting to become spontaneous? forgetting the rules. never call first. never leave your pills in plain view. never buy a whole watermelon for yourself. never tell your mother.

let's play a game. let's learn something new. for instance. what would *you* do with a blackbelt in karate? I tell you. I'd let myself go, wear thick glasses, dress in pink sweat pants and slouch socks from 1985. and we'd fool them all, wouldn't we.

Isla Duncan

"The profound poverty of knowledge"

Sandra Birdsell's Narrative of Concealment

Sandra Birdsell's fiction has attracted a wide range of different labels, variously identifying her as a "feminist . . . Prairie, Mennonite, magic-realist and autobiographical" writer as well as a post-modern one (see Harrison 24, 33). However, none of these categories proves fully satisfactory. Birdsell's background, for instance, is far more complex than either "Prairie" or "Mennonite" indicates, as she comes from a Mennonite-Catholic Métis milieu and specifically writes about the Red River Valley area. She has also expressed discomfort with the label "feminist," asserting that she is "'not an ideological feminist. I'm interested in seeing how women cope with life, in dramatizing how they reach some sort of rapprochement'" (quoted in Adachi), and she has equally rejected the notion that her work is autobiographical (see Twigg 22). To call her work "postmodern" in an effort to account for its uneasy location between short-story collection and novel (see Harrison 26) is to ignore the well-established tradition of the short story cycle in Canadian literature (see Lynch 94). Although she cites the work of Gabriel Garcia Marquez as a major influence, she implicitly resists the label "magic realism" for her own writing when she insists that she has kept "elements of the unexplainable or the magical or supernatural" at a minimum ("Up Front" 11).

In her resistance to literary pigeon-holing, Birdsell demonstrates her determination not only to bring to the fore people and regions that rarely find themselves at the centre of attention, but also to flout the "master-narratives" of literary criticism which by their very nature sabotage Birdsell's explorations of the peripheral, while praising her for it (see Diehl-Jones 93-94). None of the approaches that have been brought to bear on Birdsell's writing

facilitates a greater understanding of her narrative configurations. Rather than proposing yet another frame-work with which to read her fiction from the top down, I propose to reverse the process and look at it from a narratological perspective, with a special emphasis on "The Man from Mars," from Birdsell's most recent collection *The Two Headed Calf* (1997).

The close scrutiny associated with the study of narrative structures is necessary if, for example, one is to appreciate the reasons why Birdsell chooses to arrange sections of her story not in a *linear* way, but rather by *association.* Often the relationship between one episode and a succeeding or preceding one seems tenuous: events are combined by means other than temporal succession or causality, which are the "two main principles of combination" in narrative (Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan 16). Birdsell likes to accelerate her narrative by inserting ellipses, and it is not immediately clear what has been omitted from the story, why one segment of text has come to an abrupt halt. There are occasions, too, when she devotes substantial textual space to what appears to be an insignificant piece of dialogue, or a brief period in the story. At such times, she tends to disregard the conventions of story duration, in which "acceleration and deceleration are often evaluated . . . as indicators of importance and centrality" (Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan 56). By so doing, she encourages the reader to reappraise the information s/he has been given.

The tools of narratology enable the student of Birdsell's work to identify these shifts in narrative pace, and examine their effects on meaning. The precision of narratology clarifies the distinctions between the various anachronies in Birdsell's fiction, and helps one explain devices such as paralipsis. Paralipsis is a term used by Gerard Genette, to describe a narrative omission, a lateral ellipsis where the narrative does not pass over a moment in time, but sidesteps it; details of an event or character are deliberately withheld from the reader. I shall argue that, at the heart of Birdsell's story, there is such an omission, one which constitutes the "profound poverty of knowledge" in the title of my essay. The "poverty" refers to the disabling effects of the narrator's Mennonite upbringing; structurally, it is the device which prevents both the narrator and the reader from fully understanding "The Man from Mars," the narrator's father. This lateral ellipsis is a deliberate, and meticulously executed part of Birdsell's narrative design.

In her book, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (1985), the narratologist Mieke Bal explains that there are various ways of disrupting the linearity of a literary text, thereby "forcing the reader to read more intensively" (Bal 52). She notes:

> Deviations in sequential ordering [can be] so intricate as to exact the greatest exertions in following the story. . . . Playing with sequential ordering is not just a literary convention; it is also a means of drawing attention to certain things, to emphasize, to bring about aesthetic or psychological effects, to show various interpretations of an event, to indicate the subtle differences between expectation and realization. (52-53)

Such deviations are often called *anachronies.* The word "anachrony," coined by Gerard Genette, refers to a discrepancy between story-order and text-order in narrative.

The "story" in a narrative consists of a succession of events, while the "text" is "a spoken or written discourse which undertakes their telling" (Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan 4). In the text, the events do not always appear in chronological sequence. Mieke Bal imagines a narrative in which the following sentences occur: "John rang the neighbours' doorbell. He had so irresistibly felt the need to stand eye to eye with a human being . . ." (Bal 51). She explains that "in reality (fictitious or not), the sequence of events must have been the other way round," pointing out that, even without indications in the text, the reader will, with his/her "sense of everyday logic" impose order on the "data in the contents" (51).

Birdsell employs various techniques in her attempts to disrupt text-time linearity, and make the reading experience more intensive. She claims that "fragmentation" is a hallmark of her fiction, arguing that her "ability to go in and out of the mind almost within the same sentence [in] the way memory works" is what she likes most about her stories. She is adamant that, "as a larger picture, [the pieces] come together" (Twigg 19). In "The Man from Mars," the writer's manipulation of time is part of a consciously crafted narrative aesthetic. It is an aesthetic which does indeed "exact the greatest exertion in following the story," but which also serves to enrich and unsettle the reading experience.

Asked what is the main theme or proposition in *The Chrome Suite* (1992), Sandra Birdsell delivers this insight: "The presence of absence in a person's life. And how they attempt to fill it, because you never can, I don't think" (Smith 39). It is with the "presence of absence" that "The Man from Mars" is, I shall argue, primarily concerned.

At the heart of this complex narrative is a mystery, one surrounding the narrator's bitter, luckless father, and the reasons for his expulsion from a Mennonite community. He is "The Man from Mars" of the title—alien and unknowable—someone who "did [the family] a favour when he stepped into the path of an oncoming car and was killed instantly" (Birdsell 116).

The narrator, Sara, endures a childhood blighted by a "profound poverty of goods and knowledge" (98), and the entire narrative, it seems to me, is a recounting of the many ways in which she, her sister and both her parents are deprived of these commodities. It is with the intention of solving the mystery of her father, and finding some explanations for his actions, that the narrator embarks on her meandering, faltering, exploratory journey. Birdsell's tortuous narrative, with its many discontinuities, omissions and retardatory devices, hints at, but never fully explains the enigmas which are posed. In the end, the narrator seems to accept that her father was always cursed by the constant longing for what he could never have: sympathy, opportunities, material wealth, encouragement, success. He was weighted down by "the presence of absence."

The first sentence of the story begins: "My mother must not have cut my father's hair at all during that long trip" (Birdsell 87). The epistemic modality of the verb phrase "must not have cut" is grammatically irregular, with the logical necessity of the auxiliary "must" weakened by the negated main verb. The resulting verb phrase is regarded by some linguists as impossible. Here, its usage seems to foreshadow what I shall argue is a central theme in the narrative—the qualification of likelihood, the nonfulfilment of expectation. Further markers of modality occur in the first paragraph, when the narrator recalls how her father behaved "during that long trip" north, on the family's return to Manitoba, from Mexico. In documenting these changes, she casts doubt on the accuracy of her recollections, and on her father's explanations for his behaviour. In the following extract, I have italicized instances of doubt:

> But it *seemed* that the farther north we travelled the more enigmatic my father became. He no longer approached a store or filling station *as though* he were stalking it. He *seemed* to know, too, if a greeting was in order when he entered a place of business, a smile, or a "how do." Truncated greetings were the way of the English, he *apparently* thought. . . . It was *as though* a light had come on, he said. *As though* he'd never been away. (87)

At the outset of the narrative, the father's interpretation of events is disputed, his authority undermined, and this undermining tends to affect the reader's reception of his subsequent opinions and statements.

The narrator's parents are both Mennonites, whose families came first to Manitoba when they emigrated from Germany, but left for Mexico in 1948, to live in a "Mexican Mennonite ghetto." Sara reports that her father's family "exchanged the black soil of the Red River valley for their new *Heimat*, a place

of clay and gypsiferous loam on a semi-arid plateau peopled by squatters, *agaristas* . . ."(90). The narrator does not fully discuss the circumstances in which large numbers of Mennonite families left Manitoba, but one can imagine that, in the immediate post-war years, anti-German sentiments ran high in Canada, a country which had lost, proportionately, more men than any other member of the Allied Forces.[1] The fleeting reference to the Mennonites' "earlier *Auswanderung* [from seventeenth century Prussia] to the steppes of Russia" is an allusion to a history of diaspora, and iniquitous prejudice, but that history is not elaborated upon. The poverty and degradation which the narrator's father, Willie, must have endured, are tersely narrated, with understatement and summary used to fill in background details: thus, the narrator refers obliquely to her father's memory of Manitoba, pre-1948, as a time of "comfort, and the benefits of electricity and tractors whose rubber tires had not been taken off" (90). It is not until some pages later that the significance of their removal is explained: in the Mexican colony where the family lived, the only "powered vehicles allowed" were tractors, and these had their "tires removed to discourage exploration beyond those borders" (96).

The restrictiveness, and the insularity of the Mennonite culture, whose people are called "*muy astrasado* [backwards]"(90) by the native Mexicans, are recurrent motifs in Birdsell's narrative. Early in the story the narrator recounts her father's memories of times before the exodus to Mexico. She explains:

> His father had had an agreement with a cheese factory in Miami, he said. Others in the community *hadn't approved of his father doing business with* outsiders, just as in Campo 252 they *hadn't approved of my father doing business with* the ranchos of Mexicans or in any of the other towns. (88; italics mine)

Worth commenting upon in the above passage are the examples of lexical repetition and parallelism in those parts of the clauses I have italicised. Only the possessive pronoun is different. The subordinating "just as," which introduces the clause of similarity, makes the connection between the two attitudes of disapproval seem even more marked, and the sense of a traditional, inherited suspicion of outsiders among the Mennonites is powerfully conveyed. There is further evidence of Willie's distancing from a community that preaches solidarity and resistance to progress, one which forbids exogamy, and discourages contact with non-Mennonites. When the family's car breaks down near the village of Lowe Farm, the narrator remembers that her father once lived there, before the flight south. She informs the

reader that her father has tired of the "communal farm life" and now seeks the "anonymity [of] a life in the city" (91). Later, in a daydream, Sara tries to recall the various townships and settlements her family has drifted to and from, noting that they seem to her "not places . . . because we had always camped away from the other workers, from the other town" (96).

That Willie appears marginal in the Mennonite community is clear. That he has contravened certain codes relating to trade with outsiders is indicated more than once. There is evidence, moreover, that Willie is resentful of Mennonite prescriptions and uniformity; for example, he is bitter that he has never learned to read English (104). As the narrative unfolds, other reasons for the family's sudden, shameful flight from Mexico are obliquely suggested, and shed some light on a mystery which lies at the heart of the narrative—the nature and provenance of the force that controls the narrator's father, "compacting him, flinging him outwards and away from us" (111).

There are several references in the story to Willie's consuming rage, and it is a rage provoked by "the profound poverty of goods and knowledge" (98) that blights the family, particularly the female members. They are denied any useful learning, any participation in public life. While "the boys were allowed elementary arithmetic, weights, measures, and volumes to ensure they would not be defeated in business transactions," young girls read only from antique scriptures. The narrator, weighted down by her useless knowledge, "gained not a shred of information that was transportable beyond the hills that rimmed that horizon" (96).

Evidence of the narrator's mother's disabling ignorance is abundant. She accepts her husband's rough and violent sexual advances, asserting, unironically, that "he used her often" (97); in the Manitoba town in which they settle, she sees nothing amiss in having to beg for underwear, to replace that which Willie has torn in his desperation for intercourse. It is a constant source of shame to the narrator's father that he "remains a man without sons" (95), and it is clear that the narrator's mother accepts the blame for this state of affairs, making regular visits to a bone-setter for a possible remedy. The reasons why the couple are unable to produce numerous children, in the philoprogenitive Mennonite tradition, are not reflected upon, but there are grounds for believing that the father's promiscuity may have made him vulnerable to a sexually transmitted disease. Early in the story, the reader learns that Eva is very ill with what turns out to be some kind of urinary infection, which "sulpha drugs" (99) eventually cure; later, the narrator, speculating on why her parents produce no more children, reveals that

her father "had likely drilled for more than water among the senoritas" (95). Details of Eva's illness, her visits to the bone-setter, Willie's apparent infidelities, his greedy sexual appetite, are cursory, but they are not as arbitrary as they may appear. The reader is being invited to make connections between these superficially discrete pieces of information. For Birdsell, writing and reading are both acts of association, rather like "memory, the way our minds work, [always] seeking a resonance, a connection" (Garrod 17).

The young narrator's memory of the family's arrival in the Manitoba town, Sparling, is fragmentary, and the gaps and omissions in the narrative are important means of creating the "psychological effects" that facilitate "various interpretations of an event" (Bal 52-53). The reason why the narrator's mother did not cut her husband's hair, as she was apparently wont to, is not given, but might justifiably be atttributable to her ill health, or perhaps to Willie's increasing eccentricity, his enigmatic withdrawal into the land of his childhood. The manner in which Birdsell presents and juxtaposes certain snippets of her narrator's retroversions is worthy of scrutiny. For example, she has her narrator allude to Eva's anxiety about the mysterious Winnipeg contact whom Willie is to meet, an "elusive Johnny Peters who had been successful, he'd heard, in finding work in the railyards of that city" (Birdsell 91). The parenthetical reporting clause detracts from the reliability of the information Willie has been given, and questions his wisdom in believing it. The clause seems to weaken the word of the father. Its function resembles that of the report clauses in the opening paragraph, which ironize Willie's claim to some kind of spiritual affinity with Manitoba.

Doubting the likelihood of Peters arriving to meet them, Eva voices her concern. By reproducing, rather than merely reporting her mother's plaintive question—"What if Johnny Peters isn't in Winnipeg yet?"—the narrator enhances the importance of the inquiry, and at the same time gives more substance to the mother as a fictional character. Eva says very little in the narrative—her direct discourse is mostly monosyllabic, and consists of questions, such as "What does it mean?" (108) or child-like statements such as "I hurt" (99). Significantly, her question about Johnny Peters is not answered by her husband.

There are several points in the story when the narrator notes her father's disregard for her mother. There are occasions when he completely ignores, or rudely silences her. When the narrator describes her mother's vomiting by the side of the road, miles from Winnipeg, she conveys the extent of Eva's suffering, and the lack of the attention paid to it by her husband. After their

car breaks down, the family begin walking towards their destination, and it is when the narrator's mother collapses in pain that they illegally board a train which has stopped at a siding. Having no money for either transport or shelter, they must depend on the town's charity, and, in return for cheap accommodation, Willie carries out menial work for the municipal council.

The narrator's description of her sick mother is among the most vivid of her episodic memories: she remembers how her "eyes glittered with fever and her face had turned the colour of pie pastry, slick with sweat" (98). One of the reasons why the image is so powerful is because its insertion into the narrative is sudden and of short duration; it is what Mieke Bal terms a punctual analepsis, one which is narrated in the simple past tense, or sometimes the past perfective, and recounts "a brief but significant event [whose] significance justifies the anachrony, despite its short span" (Bal 62). The revelation of this incident is *postponed*, prefaced by details of how affectionate (Birdsell 87), touchingly candid (90), anxious (920), stoical (93), and sexually passive (97) the mother is. The true extent of Eva's suffering and ill health is not revealed to the reader until well into the retrospective account, and, by such postponement, Birdsell deepens the sympathy for the likeable character she has created. The reader is not encouraged to sympathize with the narrator's father, for he is portrayed in a less favourable light. Indeed, how Birdsell has chosen to disperse the characteristics of her story's main participants is significant: thus, in the first few paragraphs of the narrative, the reader learns that Willie is "enigmatic" (87), withdrawn and volatile. How the writer arranges and presents the various anachronous episodes in the narrative can be seen to affect the reader's response to characters, and her/his interpretation of events.

The absence of a reply to Eva's question about the mysterious Winnipeg contact merits some discussion. It is one of the few occasions in the story when her voice is heard, and in the narrator's memory of the incident, her father chooses to ignore his wife. In pragmatics, the study of speech acts, a sequence of two related utterances by two different speakers is known as an *adjacency pair*, a term coined by sociolinguists Schegloff and Sacks in 1973 (see Levinson 303). In such a structure, the second utterance is a response to the first, as in question-answer, accusation-denial. When the response does not conform to the expectation generated by the first utterance, it is thereby made salient, as is the absence of any reply to Eva's question.

In linguistics, there is a distinction made between the preferred and dispreferred response to the first utterance in an adjacency pair, and in this

short story there are quite a few examples of the latter. The notion of preference does not relate to the interlocutors' wishes, but, as linguist Stephen Levinson explains, "corresponds closely to the . . . concept of markedness" (307). The dispreferred response will be marked in some way; for example, the delivery of a reply will be delayed, or prefaced by some qualification, such as "Well." Often, a dispreferred response is, simply, silence. The dispreferred responses in Birdsell's story invite examination, because they shed light on the relationship between the narrator's father and mother, and, more specifically, on the character of Willie. It is, after all, with the intention of understanding him that the narrator has undertaken her journey.

When the family's car breaks down, leaving them stranded miles from their desired destination, Winnipeg, Eva is stoical about their dilemma, suggesting that "Maybe that's the way it should be" (Birdsell 93). This display of simple fatalism provokes the following reaction: "'It's not for you to say,' Willie said. He spat. Spit bubbled on the gravel" (94). The contiguity of the verbal dismissal and the angry physical gesture conveys Willie's contempt for his wife. In a harmonious relationship, one would expect a partner to welcome the attempted reassurances of the other; here, Willie's response is a harsh rebuttal. A little further on in the story, he rebuts Eva's proffered comfort.

The family are accommodated in a house reserved for the indigent, "those used to no better than a house made of mud" (100). Tired and humiliated by the work he does for the town, Willie often drifts off into his past. He remembers his family's leaving Manitoba in 1948, escaping a law which insisted that children be taught in English, and he "blurt[s] from nowhere" his bitterness at being uprooted from Canada, for Mexico. Eva tries to console him:

> "Willie, Willie," Eva sighed and reached, as though she wanted to touch his shoulder.
>
> He turned on her, jaw muscles jumping. "You keep the pig's ass that you call your face shut," he said.
>
> The heat of his anger radiated from his body as he passed by me and went out into the shed. (104-05)

The context in which this outburst occurs invites examination, if the reader is to understand what fuels the character's seemingly ubiquitous rage. Eva, as I discussed above, is naive and poorly educated: she does not speak fluent English; she is socially rather gauche, as she demonstrates in her visit to the German-speaking neighbour (107-08); she disapproves of non-Mennonite fashions and habits, considering them slothful or improper (106); she dresses her daughters so that they resemble "turn-of-the-century

peasants" (98). Unlike her husband, Eva does not fulminate against adversities, but accepts them as the workings of fate (93). She epitomizes qualities admired in the Mennonite community; indeed, one might describe her as a caricature of its most reactionary features. The anger so clearly illustrated in the excerpt above is the expression of Willie's frustration, as he looks back on the opportunities he believes were denied him because of the culture and heritage Eva represents.

On more than one occasion, the narrator suggests that her mother is sexually passive, and that her father treats sex as instinctual, coercive. When the family's car breaks down near Lowe Farm, she recalls that her father orders the two girls to disappear, while his gaze follows his wife's movements across a field, "his eyes never leaving her" (95). She recognizes the "same guarded expression" (95) on his face as the one he wears when discussing the servicing of a mare by his stallion. The narrator remembers times when she and her sister Helena slept at night in the car, and would awaken to find their mother gone, summoned by their father to the cedar woods nearby, from where strange sounds emanated, noises "that sounded like quarrelling . . . something wild" (97). This "something wild" is, the narrator firmly believes, the reason why the family had to flee from Mexico, and it constitutes the tension, and secret, of the narrative.

These references to Willie's sexual urges are oblique and carefully placed: their significance might be overlooked in a cursory reading. Thus, Willie's eyes pursue Eva, not, it would seem, out of concern for her welfare, but out of lust. As he watches his wife walk away, Willie rolls a cigarette, "his fingers working, rolling, lifting the paper's edge to his tongue" (94-95). The succession of present participles conveys his agitation. The imperatives he delivers to the narrator—"Go get a cover from the car. . . . Take your sister and find some shade. Take a sleep" (95)—seem more peremptory because they are clustered, and occur in sentences where monosyllables predominate. The effect created is one of urgency. That the father is sexually aroused is confirmed for the reader by the narrator's recognition of the furtive "guarded expression" she has seen him wear before. These character indices are inserted by Birdsell in contexts where they are made to appear important: the rolling of a cigarette might in one context convey an easeful nonchalance; here, it conjures an image of salacious anticipation.

The fact that the narrator's family had to leave Mexico suddenly and in suspicious circumstances is mentioned several times. Early on, the reader learns that the car passed over the Canadian border with its "headlights

darkened," and that there was "the need for stealth" (89). When their car breaks down, and an inquisitive farmer questions Willie, the narrator reflects on their flight north. Her reflections are structured in a remarkable way:

> But why we'd had to leave so suddenly, secretly, and at night, our dog, Oomtje, tied up in the summer kitchen so it wouldn't follow the wagon, lights left burning and supper dishes sitting on the table, was a mystery to me. (92)

In this periodic multiple sentence, the independent clause—"[It] was a mystery to me" is delayed until the end, preceded by several finite and non-finite subordinate clauses. The interrogative clause, "But why we'd had to leave so suddenly, secretly and at night" is the subject of the mystery, and Birdsell intensifies the enigma, by listing so many adverbials relating to the family's leaving. The father seems to have made trebly sure that no-one would witness it, and the reader infers that he must have committed some serious misdemeanour.

What Alice Munro calls the "soul of the story" (Metcalf 224) is the true nature of the father's crime, and the possibility of its being revealed is his greatest fear. Indeed, he is terrified of disclosing anything about himself, especially if it could be construed as emotional weakness. One incident in the narrative symbolizes for me his terror of revelation. During his mowing of the Municipal Hospital lawn, Willie chances to look in a window and see a coroner conduct a postmortem. He watches as the head of a corpse is sawn away, "like the lid of a jar" (101), and in his reporting of it to his family, one of his rare anecdotal moments, he conveys both his astonishment and his fear. The narrator observes that "It must have frightened my father to see a man being taken apart, the doctor's hands probing what he believed held a person's innermost secrets" (102). The thought of such exposure is anathema to someone practised in concealment and repression.

That the father committed some sexual crime in Mexico, for which he was banished from the colony of *Altkolonier*, is implied in the narration. The reader is not told the unequivocal truth about the incident, but Birdsell's narrative configurations, her syntactic structures and lexical choices encourage such a reading of events.

In an interview cited by Dallas Harrison, the writer elaborates on the strategies she adopts to disrupt the sequential ordering in her fiction. Of her first novel, *The Missing Child* (1989), she writes:

> I wrote it straight—chronologically, "once upon a time"—and after I finished writing I shifted it all, cut it together like you would a deck of cards, with one focal point, so the story goes up, and keeps coming back to the centre. (McCormack 13)

The idea of the narrative encountering, and then retreating from its "focal point" is important in relation to "The Man from Mars." The reasons for the family's sudden flight from Mexico constitute the focal point of the story; the consequences of that flight are recounted by Sara, and its implications are of major importance to any kind of understanding she might gain of her Mennonite father. There is, however, information omitted from her account—information she cannot reveal because she does not know. She can only speculate, and speculate with some insight, because she is portrayed as observant and clever. The gap in her narrative account is not of a temporal kind, but is the result of a paralipsis, "the omission of one of the constituent elements of a situation in a period that the narrative does generally cover" (Genette 52). In "The Man from Mars," possible reasons for the family's flight from Mexico are suggested, but none emerges as the definitive answer, and both the narrator and the reader can only speculate.

The narrator withholds, until the latter part of the narrative, details of an incident concerning her father. What she reveals strengthens my belief that Willie's misdemeanour in the *Altkolonier* was a sexual one. There is only one occasion in the narrative when Eva exercises any power over her husband, and it is when she suspects him of harbouring sexual feelings towards the younger daughter, Helena. He had given the children a pet dog (which he appropriates and trains) and, pleased with their obvious delight, he pulls Helena towards him, drawing her "between his knees" (Birdsell 110). The narrator recalls how "[H]er puzzled eyes asked me for direction. She pulled her head into her neck, a startled turtle . . ." (110). When Eva bursts in on the scene, she immediately senses that her husband's actions are inappropriate, and swings a broom at him, demanding that he "leave her be." The narrator thinks that her father will insult and dismiss Eva as he has done so many times before, but this time her mother stood her ground, exclaiming: "'It's not right for a father to touch his daughter,' . . . and it was Willie who turned away first, uncertain, and then deflated" (111).

This incident is an important link in blocks of narrative which, in Birdsell's aesthetic, are tenuously contiguous, connected by association. These chunks are not linked by linearity. This scene I interpret in the context of the recurrent references to the father's sexual appetite, and to his inability to express any tender feelings. The narrator has already observed that Willie "never touched us. He seldom looked directly at us, either, and if by chance our eyes met, his would look away quickly, as though he knew things he didn't want us to know" (95). Helena's shock, and discomfort, at

her father's sudden embrace, are clearly evident; moreover, that Eva should reflexively assume that the embrace is sexually charged, would seem to substantiate a reading of this scene as further proof of Willie's sexual unsavouriness. The mother is depicted as the epitome of stoicism, patience and candour; her spontaneous reaction, therefore, might be seen as a reliable indicator of truth. Elsewhere in the narrative, Willie is portrayed as dominant, his wife decidedly subordinate, and, in this incident, his chastening is unambiguously conveyed.

The paragraph following the description of Willie, looking "uncertain and then deflated" consists of an account of his trouble with the police, for stealing, failing to pay his debts, and for fighting. The town's constable arrives at the house, to confront the narrator's father with his crimes. Willie's reaction to this humiliation, in front of his family, is to disappear into the fields, "becoming smaller and smaller" (111). Shortly afterwards, he is killed by a car, miles away from his family, in Dakota. After his death, the mother and her daughters flourish. Sara and Helena become the pride of the community, feasting on the learning of which they were starved by their father's ostracisation. The mother finds her voice; her laughter "always dominated the conversation" and the narrator remembers her constantly surrounded by people. One day, Sara returns home to find her mother "standing at the kitchen window, singing '*Sieg, Sieg, mein Kampf is aus*'" (117).

The narrator alludes several times in the story to voice, and to silence. Because these allusions are foregrounded, by techniques such as lexical recurrence, narrative configuration and ellipsis, they assume considerable thematic importance. In one particular instance, the manner in which Birdsell juxtaposes references to voice and silence is worthy of scrutiny. I earlier suggested that Eva's voice is not always listened to: she is reproached by her husband for offering an opinion, and her questions and statements are often ignored. During the visit to the German-speaking neighbour's house, Eva, desperate for someone to talk to in her native language, becomes garrulous, talking in a voice that is "too large, too eager" (109). The perspicacious narrator delivers the wry observation that her mother is "Happy at last, enjoying herself, oblivious that the woman's laughter was directed at her" (109). This piece of narration is followed by an ellipsis, after which the narrator recounts her father's sudden appearance at the door of his daughters' bedroom, where he stands, silently watching.

Genette defines an ellipsis as "a nonexistent section of narrative [which] corresponds to some duration of story" (93). Birdsell's ellipsis fulfils two

functions. First of all, it enhances the impact of the narrator's indictment of snobbery, and at the same time celebrates her mother's candour, that "lack of pretence that is often mistaken for simple-mindedness" (Birdsell 90). Secondly, the textual space makes the contrast with the next sentence—"That night I woke to a presence in the doorway of the room" (109)—more marked. Juxtaposed are two sentences referring to the narrator's parents, one recounting the mother's blissful ignorance of malice, the other suggesting the father's faintly sinister watchfulness. The negative connotations of the father's presence in the doorway are sustained in the sentences:

> Then he stepped back into shadows and disappeared. A sour odour lingered, hops, cigarette smoke, and fear, reminiscent of the night we had left Campo 252. (109)

The ellipsis is not only a means of accelerating narrative. In Birdsell's fiction, it often imparts salience to what precedes and succeeds it. In this instance, it separates contrasting images of the narrator's parents: her mother's "large and eager" presence is set against her father's retreating absence.

The direct discourse of the two sisters is sparse, limited to only a few brief exchanges between them. There is scarce evidence of the sisters' communication with their peers. They are the victims of vicious prejudice which manifests itself in hostile silences and acts of aggression. The narrator remembers how street children's noisy chatter would abruptly cease "like a tap shutting back water" (113) when she and her sister walked by, and she describes an incident when she rescued Helena from bullies who were "grinding snow into her face" (114). As they run off, the tormentors shout vile insults, and Sara confesses that she hated her father then, for bringing such vilification upon his children. She recalls, bitterly, that, by his misdeeds and his obduracy, her father condemned the family to opprobrium. They were regarded as "perverse people obstinately pursuing poverty, . . . *examples of what not to be*" (116; my italics).

The character of Willie is associated with negation and separateness. To use Birdsell's words, he is perpetually aware of the "presence of absence" in his life. I earlier discussed his marginality in a community that is known for its solidarity, its resistance to outsiders. The fact that he is without land and sons, the two primary markers of prestige in the Mennonite community, is a stigma he can never remove. It is suggested that others consider his failure to be the result of "conceited ambition" (95): this ambition may, as I argue above, consist of a desire to move outwith the stifling insularity of the Mennonite way of life. In his determination to deal with outsiders, Willie, paradoxically, intensifies his family's poverty and isolation. Presented at the

outset as a man in vain search of his Manitoba roots, impossible to trace in a landscape so vastly changed, he is portrayed thereafter as a man unable to forge connections with any person, place or thing. The narrator remembers his speaking perpetually in "curt demands" towards the "Indians who had worked the well-digging rig with him, the village herdsman returning late with the cows, my mother [and] the dog" (113). This sense of her father's withdrawal from a world he can neither comprehend nor respect is powerfully conveyed in the final scene, where the reader is returned to the primary level of narration.

The sisters, now middle-aged, meet briefly in Winnipeg, where the narrator lives. They are discussing their father's expulsion from Mexico, and speculating on the reasons. Sara thinks "it had to do with sex" (118), whereas Helena believes that there had been some problem with money. The younger sister has been reading about the Mennonites in Mexico, and tells the narrator that, while there are some advances in education and some improvements in health provision, the way of life is still repressive and reactionary. She informs her sister that

> nurses still tell stories of being chased from hospital rooms by husbands who want to have sex with wives who often have only given birth. "It's like these guys are living on Mars," she said. (118)

The narrator reflects on this observation, thinking of how out of his element her father always seemed weighted down and cumbersome, disorientated, like "a man from Mars" (118) on a strange planet. Throughout the narrative, the father is presented as gauche and unresponsive, alien and incongruous. He is portrayed as a character marked by absence or deficit: he searches for roots that are no longer traceable; he has no skills for work other than menial; he wants a Mennonite lineage but has no requisite sons; he does not know how to express himself in anything other than elliptical statements, grunted replies and angry commands. He is defeated by his "profound poverty of goods and knowledge"—goods and knowledge which, it is suggested, he once possessed. He remembers the family farm in Manitoba, complete with "comforts and benefits of electricity and tractors whose rubber tires had not been taken off" (90); able to speak English, he was prohibited from reading it (104) and thus furthering his education. The radio set, at that time a sign of advancement and luxury in a Mennonite household, Willie never manages to set into working order, for it lacks an aerial, and the static buzzes (110). The useless, stolen radio—damaged, missing a vital connection, not belonging, emitting incomprehensible messages—could be regarded as a

kind of mise-en-abyme in the text, representing the inscrutability, the "unknowability" of the story's central character. In her retrospective reappraisal of her father, Sara tries to reach some kind of understanding of him, but in the end she learns nothing that will alter the portrait presented to the reader, of a man who is incapable of being understood, someone from a world alien and formidable, discouraging of visitors.

In this complex narrative, Birdsell's intricate and abrupt disorderings can make for unsettling reading, and they do "exact the greatest exertions in following the story" (Bal 52). But what Birdsell does is to simulate in narrative form, the kind of meandering, exploratory journey that her narrator must undertake, through her past, in her struggle to unravel the mystery of her father. What the writer sets out to do is to take the reader towards the same indeterminate conclusion with which her narrator is faced. Her story keeps going up to, receding from, and then coming back to the centre, the focal point, where there is an absence of knowing. The story does not move over this absence, but swerves to avoid it. The moments of sidestepping, and the various instances of omission and ellipsis in the text can be identified, because Birdsell wants her reader to notice them. These constitute the "profound poverty of goods and knowledge" at the heart of the Mennonite father's life, and that is Birdsell's focal point, the reason why the narrator and the reader are prevented from knowing any more.

NOTES

1 Over 700,000 Canadians saw active service in World War II; 40,000 died.

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M. Travis Lane

The View from Under the Bookcase

I. *The king of poetry has died.*

The king of poetry has died;
his daughter will decide
what laureate reigns after him
(whoever verses her riddle right).

Among Canadian candidates our Phoeb,
lately come up from the veritimes
with us, his rural retinue
transformed by grant'ma's magic wand:
domestic vermin, sheep, geese, pigs,
chickens in glad rags—and his Dad's
old pickup playing a Cadillac.

Each afternoon we're all in form,
disguised so donkeys look like dons
and bureaucrats half-assed,
rodents and rustics radiant.
Phoeb has a ball.

I, most long-toothed of all the rats,
am woman til midnight. Then the rest
tout-de-suite back to the pet-motel.
But I stick around
(the view from under the bookcase isn't bad),
I use these moments to compose
a kind of requiem for Phoeb,
although right now he seems just fine.

Dear Phoeb, our mini-Hamlet, sow's heir, writes
his poems on tiny post-it notes
which he re-orders every night
and snips up ever tinier.
Stirring his stew of consonants,
he takes pot luck.

My poetry is different.
I need the sentence to emerge,
dragging its long narrative—
(but Time, who shortens every tail,
stalks me and Phoeb alike.
My marks along the wainscot fade;
the grant won't last.)

2. *Deus ex machina*

The prince of disassembly, Phoeb.
His father's scrapyard—body parts,
hub caps, knee caps, unlicenses,
machines dismade, shafts, shards, and screws—
is briar patch for br'er Phoebus where
inception and perception can not meet
in the unpicking of a text.

Phoeb makes a desert, the desired
(for Dad's desertion consolate) effect.
He flipflops words and alphabets
in palindromic particles or petty cash
(small change). Rupture as rapture—
and doesn't he
ramble?
(when
didn't he?)

Sometimes he almost makes some sense
with his eclectic mini-mots,
yet, listening, I want to cry.
The courtiers see him as a priest
who makes the world with its loose scrap
communicant—(not that he thinks
it holy or a whole—)
a kind of lyric liar, or

a mirror of the glass shard in their hearts
(truth being, as they know it, out to lunch).

3. *The riddle is: what does the princess want?*

She wants her will, this daughter of the king.
But no one expected *her* to rule;
her will is want. She wants avowal, narrative.
Yet Phoeb, who only hears the vowel,
can charm her with his master bits,
the moving fracas of decay
he thinks is life.

I, too, feel woman's tenderness
for his long, sloping shoulders, sagging gut,
his tenor voice that seems so sad;
in the refracted light of dusk
he seems to shine.
But he is not safe, my Phoeb, my prince,
my snapper-up of trifles, semi-breve.
The court grows tired of sortilege.
Once crowned he reigns
like a month of April, a fool moon,
and sings as if to wake the world.

But dream time ends. The princess sets
the riddle she must always ask
from poetry, her body's need:
LOVE.
Some things want faith. But Phoeb,
who scrambles all things consonant,
erodently says "vole."
Encrypted is not clear intent.
His dissolution failed the test.
We rats turned tail and scuttled from the hall.

4. *And afterwards?*

Phoeb's bob-tailed bits
like dust in moon-beams recombine
into a thousand other things,
living a sort of semi-life, as he does,
in the narratives
of time, and change, and change of mind.

The rest of us left the palace for
the ports of rapture, monuments
to transit, concourse then discourse.
The jets loom down. Below the baggage carousels
we lurk, making our foodstall forays early dawn,
and live on crumbs and ketchup packs
and the occasional paperback
in faith, sometime, our flight will come
(as yet unnumbered and uncalled).

Back on the farm my sisters hide
uncourted and unheard of, and
unangeled, but
their poetry
like the low lichens of the earth,
lovely, endangered, larcenous,
resists, maintains.

Klaus P. Stich

Letting Go with the Mind
Dionysus and Medusa in Alice Munro's "Meneseteung"

I may yet live, as I know others live,
To wish in vain to let go with the mind—
Of cares, at night, to sleep; but nothing tells me
That I need learn to let go with the heart.

(from Robert Frost, "Wild Grapes")

For the well-tempered reader of Alice Munro's fiction, it would be difficult to overlook her "clowning impulse" (Redekop 159) and penchant for "surprise, complicity and deception" (Heble 18) as well as her general distrust of "final explanations" (Ross *Double Lives* 87). These characteristics are part of her natural inclination toward writing stories that, despite her "masterly control of detail" (Martin 130), retain something she herself calls "rough and unfinished" (Hancock 195). Her choice of words here reflects her reluctance to relinquish her perceptions of the unfinished nature of lived life to the arbitrary authority of words, ideas and narrative constructs.[1] Munro prefers to keep her feet close to the ground and to have her observations of the psychological dynamics affecting heart and mind converge into stories of "open secrets," as the title of one of her later collection puts it. Inevitably, it seems to me, such stories demand not only symbolic language but also an acceptance of a symbol as "an attempt to elucidate something . . . still entirely unknown or still in the process of formation" rather than "a sign that disguises something generally known" (Jung *Two Essays* 291). Moreover, such stories are inherently receptive to the open secrets and unfinished meanings of myths, including myths of Greek gods and goddesses who actually have more than one identity and whose elusive matriarchal origins have tended to unsettle the traditional, patriarchal configurations of their myths:[2] "Of all the Greek gods, Dionysus is the most visible as well as the most elusive. Present in myth, art, and literature, he conceals his divine identity behind an abundance of physical manifestations

that has challenged ancient and modern sensitivities" (Henrichs 13). In comparable ways, Medusa is inextricably and confusingly bound up with Athena and other variants of the Great Goddess (Pratt *Goddesses* 33, 100).

"Meneseteung," as I will show, is a story that thrives on intimations of Dionysus and Medusa. Their presences surface here, unexpectedly perhaps, as part of the historical transformation of a mid-nineteenth-century Ontario frontier settlement into a thriving small town on a river, whose mysterious-sounding and supposedly Indian name of Meneseteung serves as an opaque metonymy for the story's latent mythic energy.[3] As Munro stated in 1974, several years before writing this story, the fictionalized Meneseteung is based on the Maitland River that runs through her hometown of Wingham, Ontario. While growing up there, she and her friends would endow its local course with "deep holes" and intriguing stories; "I am still partly convinced," she added, "that this river . . . will provide whatever myths you want, whatever adventures" (qtd. in Ross "Fiction" 125).[4] Although the all-encompassing "whatever" does not preclude classical myths, there appears to be little direct textual evidence of their importance in Munro's various stories set in her hometown region other than in occasional brief references, especially in the title story of *The Moons of Jupiter*, and "Meneseteung," at first glance, seems no exception.

Allusions to myths and archetypes, both pagan and Christian, have not gone unnoticed but have rarely received close or sustained critical attention. Notable exceptions include I. de Papp Carrington's exploration of Jean Anouilh's *Eurydice* as intertext in the story "The Children Stay," W. K. Martin and W. U. Ober's arguments for the complementary presence of the goddess Rhea and St. Paul's mother Eunice in "Spaceships Have Landed," D. Duffy's conceptualization of "a Pauline Gothic" (184) in "The Love of a Good Woman," M. Redekop's discussion of Arthurian legend with regard to "The Peace of Utrecht" and "Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You" (56-57, 97-101), and J. Carscallen's *The Other Country*. Carscallen touches on classical and Arthurian myth (3, 9 and passim) before revealing a complex web of biblical mythology and typology in Munro's fiction from the early *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968) to *Friend of My Youth* (1990).[5] The present examination of "Meneseteung" serves in part to underline the pre-biblical aspects of "the other country" of Munro's fiction, of her being, as Nathaniel Hawthorne once said of himself, very much "a citizen of somewhere else" while still close to "the town-pump" ("The Custom-House" 74), turning water into wine, facts into ideas and fiction.

Munro, of course, has said of herself, "I'm not a writer who is very much concerned with ideas" (Gibson 241), and, more emphatically, "I never write from an idea, a myth or a pattern" (Hancock 223). That is why it is important to heed her comments immediately following her denial of ever writing with a myth in mind; they clearly suggest that she is generally ready to see symbolic and potentially mythic connections: "sometimes an incident or something somebody's telling, or the sight of two women crocheting tablecloths can get me all excited—as if it is tied to something far bigger than itself" (Hancock 224). If one takes crocheting, a subject which comes up in "Meneseteung," as a cliché of bourgeois decorum at the simple end of a spectrum of Munro's affinities for mythic links and influences, then one could regard the fiction of Thomas Mann as an unexpectedly complementary cliché at the far opposite end: as a student, Munro says pointedly in a 1981 interview with J. R. Struthers, "I read all of Thomas Mann" (8).

Given Mann's attraction to the theme of the artist as outsider in bourgeois society, and his fondness and masterly control of irony, parody and allusions to classical myth, Munro's declaration, "I read all of Thomas Mann," becomes her capricious challenge to critics neither to regionalize nor to belittle her art and to be ready for veiled affinities and connections to open up as part of those "absent and potential levels of meaning" (Heble 41) in her fiction. She underlines that challenge with jovial self-assertion at the end of the Struthers interview: "I think I have read widely . . . more widely than you'd think" and, she adds, above all "for pleasure, really for intoxication" (36). Fittingly, she experiences a very similar form of pleasure when completing a new story of her own: "I kind of enjoy doing final drafts. I'm so relieved to have the thing done. I sometimes even take a glass of wine and sip at it to celebrate as I'm writing" (Hancock 221). In both contexts, Munro is clearly not referring to literal intoxication or drunkenness but to the cheerful realization of having reached the stage when she can afford to relax her mind's need to control the reading and writing process and raise a glass to the Muse and to herself.

As a gesture of relaxation as well as celebration, sipping a little wine is hardly unusual; yet, for a literary explorer of the psyche like Alice Munro, it also suggests an acknowledgement of Dionysus (Bacchus). His symbolic affiliation with poetry and fiction in Western culture has had a long and venerable tradition, especially so since the mysteries of the Dionysian underworld are symbolically interconnected with the mysteries of the psyche (see Warner ch.1). From a Jungian perspective, awareness or experience

of Dionysus can be seen as related to the process of individuation (Jung *Psychology and Alchemy* 143; Hillman *Myth* 295), a relation already very much implicit in Euripides' Dionysian exhortation to know yourself and not to follow, let alone idealize, rigid order for the sake of security and the *status quo* (*Bacchae* 30). Dionysus, as dramatized in the *Bacchae*, demands personal adaptability and flexibility as well as tolerance of chaos. It is helpful to keep in mind here that etymologically and mythologically "chaos was once associated with creativity" (Wieland-Burston 8) and the womb of the Great Goddess (Walker *Encyclopedia* 160); psychologically, "stagnation and lifelessness" are the inevitable consequences of an individual's failure to accept chaos as "a dynamic aspect" of life (Wieland-Burston 2-3). Variations of order and chaos pervade "Meneseteung" and do so with mythic and psychological allusions to the Great Goddess and to Dionysus.

Although Dionysus is never directly mentioned in "Meneseteung," Munro's emphasis on grapes and alcohol is one of her clearest directives to consider his symbolic presence there as neither negligible nor coincidental.[6] As the god of wine, Dionysus is symbolically alive in grapes and the grapevine. Native or wild grapevines like the labrusca and riparia varieties, to name two of the most common, grow in such abundance across the United States and Canada that one may safely consider them part of the natural vegetation in the pioneer settlement on the Meneseteung where Almeda Joynt Roth moved with her family in 1854. In the vicinity of the bog at the end of Pearl Street, they would have been particularly prolific among the "luxuriant weeds" (55) Munro's narrator mentions. Since the Roth property backs onto that street, has a vacant lot beside it and is not at all far from the bog, it is reasonable to suggest that the grapes Almeda uses to make jelly probably came from vines growing on or close to the Roth property. Although Munro makes no explicit reference to actual grapevines here, their local presence appears assured not only by Almeda's grapes but also by the way Munro singles out such vines in "A Wilderness Station." In this story, which shares its regional pioneer setting with "Meneseteung," the shanty of Simon and Annie Herron had "wild vines" in its doorway and, after the place was deserted, it became "a mound pretty well covered with wild grape" (232, 257), a small patch in what Thomas Pinney has called the "great natural vineyard" (4) of North America.

The grapes native to this continent, however, do not lend themselves easily to the making of palatable wine. They make good jelly and may keep the

Prohibition-minded satisfied, but, excepting their importance in the hybridization of vinifera grapes, their connection to wine and Dionysus is for the mind's eye to see. Samuel de Champlain, for instance, readily saw it when he gave the name Isle of Bacchus to what later became known as Richmond Island just off Cape Elizabeth near Portland, Maine (Simpson 34). Munro, I suggest, sees it no less clearly in her veiled allusions to Dionysus; her reference to Champlain, though, does not concern grapevines but his alleged encounter with Indians at the mouth of the Meneseteung (52). I say veiled because Almeda prepares to make jelly rather than wine from her grapes and because none of the references to alcohol in the story specifies wine or, for that matter, any kind of distilled spirits like brandy and whisky. Whereas in such complementary, though historically more contemporary, stories as "Carried Away" and "Vandals," Munro readily distinguishes between fermented and distilled varieties of alcohol, in "Meneseteung" she simply uses the generic term "drink" (67).

Consequences of too much drink have, according to the town's paper, the *Vidette*, "*become all too common*" and especially "*unseemly, troublesome, and disgraceful*" (68; original italics) because of women being involved in acts of public drunkenness like the scene which drew the attention of the paper as Almeda had witnessed it from her house. Yet, despite its evident words of disapproval, the *Vidette* does not speak with the voice of either Temperance advocates or Prohibitionists but with the voice of restrained bemusement:

> *At the corner of Pearl and Dufferin streets last Sunday morning there was discovered, by a lady resident there, the body of a certain woman of Pearl Street, thought to be dead but only, as it turned out, dead drunk. She was roused from her heavenly—or otherwise—stupor by the firm persuasion of Mr. Poulter, a neighbour and a Civil Magistrate, who had been summoned by the lady resident.* (67-68; original italics)

The bemused tone has much to do with situational irony: Almeda, the respectable spinster lady, meeting her opposite or shadow self in the sexually and alcoholically loosened woman, and Almeda's respectable neighbor acting almost as a go-between. Moreover, the *Vidette*, as the enquiring community observer, is implicitly waiting for a story on the lady and the gentleman; their neighborly relationship was, as the narrator with her archival knowledge of the paper and the town puts it mischievously, thought to be only a step away from "spontaneous combustion, instant fornication, an attack of passion" (59).

The combination of such a sexually and alcoholically charged situation creates what one may well call Dionysian undercurrents. They would be

particularly dangerous where patriarchal order, as represented by the side of the Roth house facing onto the street named after Lord Dufferin, seemingly confronts feminine power, as projected by the street behind the Roth property which is named after the pearl, a symbol of the goddess in her role as Aphrodite or Venus. On the one hand, the name of Pearl Street combines Victorian society's tendency toward euphemism and male chauvinism: the street leads, via prostitution and alcohol abuse, into a world of shack people and ends in a wilderness bog; "even the town constable won't go down Pearl Street on a Saturday night" (56). On the other hand, of course, it also leads from the bog to Dufferin Street, venue of law, order and "considerable respectability" (55). While Pearl Street thus mediates between two geographical, social, and cultural extremes, it also both fastens and loosens the connections between a world of rational authority traditionally seen as male/masculine and a world of the imaginal, the unconscious and chaos often associated with fear of the female/feminine and no less often deemed accessible or bearable only with the help of alcohol, sex and of course the arts. From this perspective of connecting and loosening, Pearl Street is worth considering as a metonymy for Dionysus in his role as "a mediating figure between male and female" (Jameson 63) and in his general capacity as "Lusios" (Loosener) whose loosening or setting free may manifest itself as "affliction and a means of healing, . . . [as] revenge or blessing or both" (Burkert "Bacchic" 273).[7] As Lusios, Dionysus transcends his narrow role as the god of wine. At the same time, wine itself becomes a natural metonymy for other agents that can be said to contribute to "an expansion of physical and mental faculties—one that leads either to states of heightened self-awareness or to destructive disruptions of the personality and even to the annihilation of life" (Henrichs 15). With regard to "Meneseteung," the distilled liquor and the laudanum mentioned in it thus obtain Dionysian propensities as well.[8]

The Roth house, at the convergence of Pearl and Dufferin, appears to be ideally situated to invite contemplations on Dionysus. It is therefore hardly a matter of coincidence but of deliberately humorous choice for Munro to make "the manager of the liquor store" (53) its current resident at the time of the narrator's stay in town in the 1980s. Yet, with the Pearl Street bog now drained, the neighborhood implicitly cleaned up and public availability of alcoholic drink regulated by the Liquor Control Board of Ontario, the Roth house does not offer the manager the Dionysian vantage point it once gave Almeda. While in charge of the regulated business of selling alcohol and no

doubt alert to the dangers of irresponsible drinking, he is most likely neither concerned with questions about classical myth nor aware of the dramatic irony resulting from his job and the history of the house.

Almeda, of course, judging by her interest in Pegasus and by her being a formidable reader as well as a dreamer, is openly curious about mythology. The house provides her with a perfect setting for what one may call private initiations into Dionysian mysteries (see Burkert *Ancient* 10-11). Although there is no direct reference as to whether she is any more knowledgeable of the myth of Dionysus than is the liquor store manager, she is clearly receptive, consciously or not, to the experience of Dionysus' archetypal presence in the goings-on outside her house and inside her mind. As a result she has become somewhat of a maenad, not in the cultic sense of a female votary of Dionysus, but in the psychological sense of a colonial Ontario woman who nurtures strong affinities for the classical maenads' celebration of at least "temporary escape from male domination" (Jameson 61). Although Almeda escapes what for many women has been the most traditional form of such domination, marriage, she too requires the "nerve medicine"(62) which her male doctor orders mostly for women who are married. In her case, as presumably in all comparable cases of single women with needs for sedatives, the physician paradoxically also advocates marriage as, so it seems, the best nerve medicine. Still, his belief may not be completely ill-founded, to the extent that it complements the community's perceived effect of marriage on a man: "it protects him, . . . from the extremities of his own nature—from a frigid parsimony or a luxurious sloth, from squalor, and from excessive sleeping or reading, drinking, smoking, or freethinking" (57). In other words, it would protect a woman from the extremities of her own nature, which, from the perspective of patriarchal authority, would include excessive reading, freethinking and consequently also the dangers of modern-day maenadism. Almeda, as we know, disdains any shelter from books, thoughts and the imagination, and she appears responsive to the maenadic undercurrents which strengthen her sense of freedom from male domination through marriage and from the institution that controls marriage, the Church.

The major domestic and societal circumstances that contributed to what the narrator first speaks of as Almeda's "eccentricity" (51) were not uncommon in the mid-nineteenth century nor was her status as almost an old maid considered a social stigma then (see Pratt *Patterns* 113-14). At age seventeen, she had lost her younger brother and sister; at age twenty, her mother. For the next twelve years, until his death, she was housekeeper to

her father. She is in her late thirties when her "undoubted respectability" and "adequate comeliness" are fully accounted for in the calculations behind Jarvis Poulter's decision to marry her. Poulter is "a decent citizen" (57) and a pillar of the *polis* as a prospering businessman whose enterprises encompass salt wells, a brickyard, a limekiln, and woodlots for firewood. Yet, whereas he is a consummate exploiter of the environment, Almeda is a romantic, keen on contemplating the mysteries of nature and human nature. Consequently, her associating Poulter's salt wells with "the salt of the earth" and an ancient "great sea" (58) conflicts with his entrepreneurial mind. Despite their different outlooks on life, however, she likes his occasional company on her walk home from church:

> she can smell his shaving soap, the barber's oil, his pipe tobacco, the wool and linen and leather smell of his manly clothes. The correct, orderly, heavy clothes are like those she used to brush and starch and iron for her father. She misses that job—her father's appreciation, his dark, kind authority. Jarvis Poulter's garments, his smell, his movements all cause her skin on the side of her body next to him to tingle hopefully, and a meek shiver raises the hairs on her arms. Is this to be taken as a sign of love? (60)

As a marriageable father-substitute, Poulter "would be her husband" (60), so she imagines while daydreaming and masturbating. The conjunction of her orgasm with her picture of him "in his long underwear and his hat" (60) seems grotesquely humorous; it is also unexpectedly premonitory about the risks of Almeda's implicit quest through her body into her mind and heart at this stage in her life when she is free for the first time to be her own self. Her vision of him is decidedly not the positive one reported by "some women poets," namely that of "an apatriarchal 'green world lover' who represents a healthy heterosexual Eros" and who may appear in the guise of a Dionysus figure; instead, it is of a negative figure of a husband bound to harm his wife's soul (Pratt *Goddesses* 7). Poulter, of course, has characteristics one might think of as Dionysian: he arrives as a stranger, and he is, one suspects, a Saturday-night binge drinker. The town of course is full of strangers, including Gypsies, most of whom are perceived as a threat to law and order; they can be loosely connected to the notion expressed in the *Bacchae* of Dionysus as the stranger who destroys the foundations of the male-dominated *polis*. Poulter, however, remains a stranger to the townspeople and the *Vidette* only in terms of his private life, especially with regard to the fate of his first wife. Yet when he decides to make Almeda his second wife, he cannot withstand the knowing stare of her eye and mind's

eye after her experience of the Saturday night brawl behind her house and of his role in that experience.

Almeda has always had the back bedroom of the Roth house and has, as it were, often been a private member of the audience of impromptu events of "theatre" and "charade" on Pearl Street on Saturday nights. The bacchanalian performances are crude but not without touches of tragicomedy that point back to Dionysus' role as patron of Greek theatre (see Henrichs 14). On the Saturday night at the centre of "Meneseteung," Almeda actually becomes a participant in the, to her, dream-like drama taking place behind her backyard fence. The dim outlines of a man and a woman engaged in a sexual brawl and their sounds of wild "self-abasement," which she confuses with "the sound of murder" (64), allow Almeda to sense her maenadic shadow in that scene. Instead of imaginal frenzy and sleeplessness, she thus experiences cathartic abandonment to sleep, with the brawl acting as an unexpected sedative as if to confirm her doctor's tacit connection between her sleep disorders and what Freud would soon call hysteria.

Almeda participates once more as a member of the Pearl Street audience when, early next morning, she checks out the seemingly dead woman by the back fence and then alerts her neighbor, potential husband and civil magistrate. A fierce-looking Poulter, "his shirt . . . half unbuttoned, his face unshaven, his hair standing up on his head," answers his door; "[h]is breath is dank, his face creased, his eyes bloodshot" (65). His startling image of dissipation and violence intensifies in Almeda's mind through his blunt handling of the partly naked body of the drunk rather than dead woman, whose "plucked-chicken haunch with its blue-black flower" points to his last name, and through his "harsh joviality" which fails to hide his sudden sexual interest in Almeda (70). In her mind, Poulter has become a Jekyll-and-Hyde character and the drunk woman's likely Saturday-night consort. By projecting herself into that woman's place, Almeda comes to reject Poulter as a husband for herself. She therefore does not accept his offer to accompany her to church this Sunday morning, as it would have amounted to a public demonstration of a forthcoming betrothal. She stays at home instead, where, coinciding with the grape juice container flowing over, her period is about to flow, and, under the influence of laudanum, her mind has started to over-flow with images for Whitmanesque songs meant to capture everything about herself, about the town's discordant past and present, and about the seeming lack of harmony "even in the stars" (70).

The name of the Meneseteung is her title for the poem because the river,

with "its deep holes and rapids and blissful pools under the summer trees and its grinding blocks of ice thrown up at the end of winter and its desolating spring floods," becomes symbolic of "the river of her mind" (70). The confluence of menstrual blood, blood-colored grape juice and streams of consciousness is held together, so it appears, in an implicit pun on both her last name and the "mens" in menstruation, a play on Latin *mensis* (month) and *mens* (consciousness, mind);[9] the latter pun amplifies both Houston's point about the almost homonymic tie between the name Meneseteung and the word menstruation (85) and Carrington's observation of the deliberate irony in Munro's "equation of menstruation and artistic creation" (*Controlling* 215). Indeed, Almeda will never write that poem. Under the influence of daydreams, insomnia and, it seems, growing dependence on laudanum,[10] she will spin it out only in her imagination as a sort of Ariadne's thread that, judging by her obituary in the *Vidette*, allows her to withdraw into her private world: "It is a sad misfortune that in [her] later years the mind of this fine person had become somewhat clouded and her behaviour, in consequence, somewhat rash and unusual. Her attention to decorum and to the care and adornment of her person had suffered, to the degree that she had become, . . . a familiar eccentric, or even, sadly, a figure of fun" (71). Her poem in progress leads her into the unknown reaches of her psyche and death, both fittingly symbolized here by her ventures beyond the end of Pearl Street as mentioned in the obituary: "She caught a cold, having become thoroughly wet from a ramble in the Pearl Street bog. . . . The cold developed into pneumonia, and she died" (72).

Her ramble in the bog is, I suggest, the culmination of her personal experience, however unwitting, of Dionysian mysteries. Dionysus' prominent place in Greek dramatic poetry and catharsis, "his contradictory and paradoxical guises" (Henrichs 41), the profoundly religious nature of his "myths about a double birth, death and rebirth, and a journey to the underworld" (Cole 279), as well as his conventional association with intoxication and madness all touch on Almeda's life. The first hint thereof occurs in Almeda's poem at the beginning of "Meneseteung":

> *Columbine, bloodroot,*
> *And wild bergamot*
> *Gathering armfuls,*
> *Giddily we go.* (50; original italics)

"We" seems to refer to Almeda and her siblings; yet one of their parents might have been with them, since the flowers are likely being gathered both for a

bouquet and for their well-known medicinal qualities. The gatherers' giddiness expresses their childlike *insouciance* and joy, complementing especially the columbine whose name derives from *columba* (dove). The dove, however, is a traditional symbol not only of peace (see Gen. 8.11) and of the Holy Spirit (see Matt. 3.16) but also of the Goddess (Walker, *Dict* 399). Thus, even Almeda's very early verse reflects those ironic tensions in her life which will transmute her childlike giddiness into unsettling Dionysian giddiness, so-to-speak, in connection with her having to deal with the deaths in her family, Pearl Street, sleeplessness, Jarvis Poulter, the effects of laudanum, the grand poem in and of her mind, and fundamental problems of religious belief.

"Every poetic mind," says Emerson, "is a pagan" rather than a follower of organized, doctrinal religion (348). Naturally, the *Vidette*'s obituary prefers to speak of Almeda's "unfailing religious faith" and "faithful end" (71-72), thereby ostensibly affirming her as a conventional Christian despite her eccentric, if not pagan, edges. Yet, while the popular mind would understand faith to be Christian, the *Vidette*'s wording allows for any other faiths or beliefs; and, in a tangential way, the narrator's reference to "the popular, untrue belief" (52) concerning Champlain's association with the Meneseteung adds a further edge of ambiguity to the *Vidette*'s praise of Almeda as a Christian. Church, it seems, came to mean social respectability and decorum to her. Judging by the fact that some of the poetry in *Offerings* is "comically intentioned doggerel about what people are thinking about as they listen to the sermon in church" (52), Almeda, though most certainly not as sophisticated a poet as Emily Dickinson, would have found some comfort in the subversively comic poem Dickinson wrote in 1860 "'Faith' is a fine invention / When Gentlemen can *see*— / But *Microscopes* are prudent / In an Emergency" (# 185; original italics).

For Almeda, Jarvis Poulter would have been among Dickinson's "Gentlemen." Under the microscope of her imagination, he causes her to think of "tombstones" in connection with Sunday churchgoers. Her own laughter at her association of conventional church service with death makes her play with the initial metaphor: "Tombstones are marching down the street on their little booted feet" (69). This line of doggerel is not at all trifling, for it signals the beginning of Almeda's loosening herself from the, to her, spiritually stifling, money-driven world of Dufferin Street and organized smalltown religion. It also marks her descent into the Dionysian underworld of her mind symbolized by the Meneseteung and the swamp and by her becoming a public "figure of fun" very similar to an older townswoman from years gone by, "a drunk nicknamed Queen Aggie" (54).

Comparable figures in other stories by Munro include Violet Thoms in "A Queer Streak" and, above all, Bea Doud in "Vandals." Violet, who would take medicinal whisky with the start of her mid-life years, had always felt drawn to bogs and thickets. Bea actually lived for a while by the Lesser Dismal, a swamp named after the Dismal Swamp in North Carolina. "Vandals" begins with Bea composing a meandering letter, a personal narrative really with parallels to Almeda's poem of her mind, and which she concludes in a pointedly Dionysian way: "I am rather happy sitting here with my bottle of red wine" (308). Her wine parallels Almeda's laudanum and, in a quirky way, it also connects with her grapes to which the narrator redirects the reader's attention at the end of "Meneseteung": "I don't know if [Almeda] ever made grape jelly" (73). Given the story's Dionysian allusions, this conclusion seems deliberately open-ended as if to entertain the possibility of grape cordial or even wine as alternatives to jelly or no jelly. Indeed, Almeda might have found herself agreeing with Louisa, the central character in "Carried Away" who would take a glass of wine with lunch "for [her] health" (1). Above all, the thought of wine may well have been on the mind of the narrator of "Meneseteung" when referring to others who "are curious" about Almeda and "will be driven to find things out, even trivial things" (73). The grapes in "Meneseteung," however, are hardly trivial; they come with strong Dionysian connections which, in turn, complement the connections between Almeda and Medusa.

Analogous to Medusa's infamous Gorgon stare, Almeda's mind's eye, on that epiphanic Sunday morning mentioned above, turns Poulter and the other churchgoers into gravestones.[11] It is reasonable to conclude that Almeda's poet-self is indeed reasserting itself here in more than Dionysian allusions, since, as Annis Pratt has shown, "Medusa is an important archetype of feminine creativity, especially when the creativity is thwarted" (*Goddesses* 40). In other words, although Almeda has published only one book of poems and senses that the respected citizens of her town, as represented by the churchgoers, do not take her seriously as a poet, she nevertheless cherishes her aspirations to write. As her tombstone metaphor and her ensuing laughter suggest, poetry allows her to feel free from the patriarchal colonial town's conventional constraints. Under the circumstances, Almeda's laughter wants to be heard in concordance with Hélène Cixous's essay "The Laugh of Medusa" in which Cixous appeals to women to free themselves from "biblico-capitalist society" (257) and men's need to

associate any woman with the Gorgon mask of Medusa: "They need to be afraid of us. Look at the trembling Perseuses moving backward toward us, clad in apotropes. What lovely backs! Not another minute to lose. Let's get out of here" (255). For Cixous, getting out means: "To write. An act which will not only 'realize' the decensored relation of woman to her sexuality, to her womanly being, giving her access to her native strength; it will give her back her goods, her pleasures, her organs, her immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal" (250). Cixous's literal and figurative emphasis on women's need "[to] write through their bodies" (256) provides a link between the myths of Dionysus and Medusa in the scenes of Almeda's masturbation (see Cixous 246) and of the grape juice flowing over in synchronicity with her menstruation.

Her liberating metaphor of the walking tombstones came to her in response to Poulter's tacit proposal of a marital union that is painfully prescripted through both the *Vidette's* gossip and the way he dealt with the drunk woman on Pearl Street. It is as if marriage to him would have been a classic example of what Cixous calls the "persecution" of women through "the familial-conjugal enterprise of domestication" (257). From Cixous's perspective, Poulter resembles a colonial Ontario variant of Perseus, ready to dominate Almeda and thereby to violate if not destroy her need and will to write. Indeed, Almeda's rejection of Poulter connects him to not only Perseus but also Poseidon who raped Medusa when she was "an especially beautiful priestess in the temple of Athena"; whereupon Athena, mistaking the rape for a love affair, "turned her into an ugly Gorgon" (Pratt *Goddesses* 15). The notion of Medusa as a victim of sex and punishment touches Almeda, figuratively speaking. On a primarily physical level, she faces the threat of Poulter's power over her body; one might even vaguely associate him with Poseidon, when Almeda links his salt wells to an ancient sea. In addition, there are the (presumably male) youths who are said to have driven Almeda into the bog, precipitating her death from pneumonia. On a mainly social level, her assertion of her Medusa-related creative self pits Almeda also against the power of Athena, the patriarchally approved goddess, whose symbolic guardianship of civic norms is being threatened in Almeda's community. This frontier town by the river is the kind of place where it is particularly difficult to keep "dynamic emotionalities, rages, possessions, moist hysterics, depressions, and wild nature outside the *polis*" (Hillman *Facing* 30, 29): for the respectable townspeople, the preceding quotation might aptly describe Almeda ("moist hysterics"), her poetic vision of her town ("dynamic emo-

tionalities") and the Meneseteung ("wild nature"); for the reader, it underlines the subtextual presence of Medusa myth in Munro's story.

The case for Almeda's connections to Medusa can be said to begin as early as the second paragraph of the story where the narrator responds to a photograph of the poet at age twenty-five. It is a picture of a seemingly eccentric, noble and forelorn woman with "a lot of dark hair gathered around her face in droopy rolls and curtains" (50). Almeda's expression of being out of place in a pioneer settlement complements her receptive attitude toward the Muse, while the "droopy rolls" suggest Medusa's snake hair, with the snakes here partly behind "curtains" as if to veil the mythic affinities. The latter remain similarly half-hidden whenever they make themselves felt again, not only in the tombstone metaphor but also in the short form of Almeda's name, Meda, which is a near-homonym of Medusa, and in Almeda's conspicuous attraction to the constellation Pegasus. Since no other constellations or stars are mentioned, her attraction is not that of someone trying to orient herself in the fall night sky by means of the Great Square of Pegasus (see Motz and Nathanson 317). Almeda, it would appear, is pondering the ancient notion that riding Pegasus leads to bardic, god-like empowerment. This notion goes back not only to Pegasus' association with the Muses on Mount Helicon where his hoof struck open a spring of creatively inspiring waters but also to his mythic birth from Medusa's blood. While Medusa's name reveals her symbolic representation of "the principle of *medha*, the Indo-European root word for female wisdom," her "magic blood that could create and destroy life" evokes ancient beliefs in the magic powers of menstrual blood (Walker *Encyclopedia* 780, 629, 635). Particularly enticing here is the fact that such beliefs would yield occult and metaphoric ties between the elixir-like propensities of menstrual or moon blood and Dionysian red wine (Walker *Encyclopedia* 636, 637).

Although Medusa and Dionysus do not appear to be mentioned together in mythology through either blood or wine symbolism, they complement each other in "Meneseteung" in their archetypal representation of the both creative and deconstructive potential of the imagination. Almeda's conflicts, whether between mind and imagination or self and community, appear to settle into a web of Dionysian and Medusan threads of meaning. The result is comic for the town according to the gossipy *Vidette*, whose name appropriately suggests empty bits or nothings; for Almeda herself, it is redemptive. She has accepted the risk of letting go with the mind without letting go with the heart or soul in her quest for the Muse which appears so close in her

private Heliconian waters of the Pearl Street swamp and the Meneseteung and, through them, in her memory and imagination.

There is something decidedly quixotic about this quest by a poet whose ties to an archetypal river correspond to a similar association in the case of Del Jordan in Munro's *Lives of Girls and Women* (see Carscallen 534). The biblical Jordan can be seen "as a death-and-rebirth river like the Greeks' famous Styx . . . [which] was imagined as a river of Goddess blood, emanating from the Earth's womb" (Walker *Dictionary* 350). Del Jordan's stories, as it were, give new birth to her hometown; even her first name affirms the birth metaphor, if one considers it a short form of Delphina, a cognate of Delphi ("womb") which, before it became sacred to Apollo, had been a site sacred to the Earth Mother (Walker *Encyclopedia* 218).[12] In Almeda's situation, such maternal symbolism comes together in the oddly orgiastic contiguity of overflowing grapejuice, the start of her period, her "look[ing] deep, deep into the river of her mind and into the tablecloth" in which she perceives her mother's "crocheted roses floating" (70), and her extraordinary pseudo-pregnancy with the poem she calls "Meneseteung."

What deserves special attention at this point is the theme of mother-daughter relationships which is so pervasive in Munro's writing (see Redekop). Almeda's period, in conjunction with her evidently hypnagogic sensitivities and loss of ordinary consciousness, causes her to connect with her mother, seemingly trying to redeem her by unthreading the symbolic roses from the constraints of conventional artifice or social decorum. At the same time, Almeda also appears to identify with her mother, whose insanity and early death are largely attributable to her evidently high emotional sensitivity that would have made her suffer inordinately from the death of two of her children and that would have been strained all along by life in a pioneer community where, not surprisingly, her husband had quickly prospered as a *harness* maker. Almeda's mother, however, does not project Medusa's petrifying side which, as Karen Elias-Button has argued, controls "the entanglements mothers and daughters encounter so often" (184); instead she seems to point toward Medusa's positive powers that open "the way-in to the world not only of poetry but of a creative activity whose sources are fierce and powerful" (205). The sources of Almeda's poem-in-progress lie in her rambles, whether physical, imaginal or reminiscing, and they inevitably include her mother's efforts to create beauty in the house. Something practical like the mother's crocheting yarn, however, cannot

help the daughter now to order her heightened encounter with the complementary archetypal powers of Dionysus and Medusa. That experience appears to unravel her attempts to harness lived life in poetry, to unravel the threads of her poetic aspirations as she is venturing beyond the comforts of the simple rhymes she was once able to gather as *Offerings*.

"A woman is never far from 'mother,'" states Cixous (251), never far from the body and word of female creativity; thus, with regard to being mother and Muse, Medusa is no longer terrifying but "beautiful" and, above all, "laughing" (255). Medusa's laugh resonates in Almeda's laughing at her metaphor of the tombstones and the implicit fear of Medusa in patriarchal mythology. In the end, Medusa's laugh also touches the narrator's discovery of the Roth family's graves: a quasi-phallic "upright" (73) stone with only the family name on it and four readily visible "flat stones in the ground" inscribed "Papa," "Mama," "William" and "Catherine," respectively (72); a fifth flat stone, after being cleared from grass and earth, reads "Meda" (73). The individual markers' being embedded in Mother Earth is only too obvious,[13] yet the narrator dramatizes this fact with her physical clearing of Almeda's stone: "There it was with the others, staring at the sky" (73). This statement, I suggest, guides the reader's eyes away from the down-to-earthness of the grave site to face the archetypal presences of Medusa as a representative of the ancient mother goddess and of Dionysus in the over-world of myth.[14] For Alice Munro, as the first reader of the story, the narrator's attention to Almeda's shorter name implies that the unadorned inscription "Meda" also became an occasion to commemorate her own mother in the interconnectedness of Meda, *mehda* and Medusa. Indeed, *Friend of My Youth*, the collection which includes "Meneseteung," is dedicated "To the memory of my mother." From Cixous' perspective, moreover, Munro and her narrator see their own writerly selves reflected in "Meda" as well. Perhaps May Sarton's lines from her poem "The Muse as Medusa" (160) capture the fictive, mythic and autobiographical layers of meaning coming together at this point:

> I saw you once, Medusa; we were alone.
> I looked you straight in the cold eye, cold.
> I was not punished, was not turned to stone—
> How to believe the legends I am told?
> . . .
> I turn your face around! It is my face.

Intimations of Medusa in "Meneseteung" are not as overt as those of Dionysus until, at story's end, it would be difficult not to

include them among Munro's "open secrets." Dionysian undercurrents, meanwhile, seem assured early on in the conspicuous references to the liquor store manager and to the drunken brawl on Pearl Street. One may of course question any enduring implication of Dionysian myth here, since wine and spirits flow temperately and sometimes intemperately in quite a few of Munro's stories as part of the regionalist aspects of her fiction. "The habit of getting drunk," as she told Geoff Hancock (204), was widespread in southwestern Ontario when she was growing up there. Yet, at least with regard to "Meneseteung," the alcohol motif also makes it difficult for a designing writer like Munro not to play with its Dionysian potential, especially since allusions to Dionysus neither reduce nor simplify the complexity of "Meneseteung;" and the same is true for allusions to Medusa. The implicit presence of such archetypal figures directs the reader, it seems to me, toward so-called pagan mythology that by its very nature intensifies the paradoxical "unfinishedness" of Munro's fiction.

NOTES

1 Critics from Helen Hoy, in a 1980 essay, to Coral Ann Howells, in her 1998 monograph, have variously drawn attention to the veiled complexities of Munro's fiction.

2 Barbara Walker's *Dictionary* and *Encyclopedia* provide thorough and wide-ranging information on the matriarchal and patriarchal history of myths and archetypal symbols.

3 For a detailed discussion of "metonymic meaning" in this story, see Pam Houston.

4 Catherine Sheldrich Ross refers to legend and myth in Munro's fiction but does so only in a generic and general way ("Fiction").

5 I use the term mythology in its traditional meaning of "imaginative philosophical or religious truth" (Richardson 7). Carscallen prefers to speak of typology rather than myth in his biblical readings of Munro (128).

6 The very notion of coincidence seems out of place, given Munro's wide reading and her familiarity with Arthur Koestler's *The Roots of Coincidence* (see Munro, "Differently" 231) which explores acausal correlations and "unthinkable parallels" (Koestler 110). Concerning Almeda's grapes, Coral Ann Howells touches on their "connotations of the Bacchantes" (112) and does not develop the Dionysian subtext of "Meneseteung."

7 Barbara Heller discusses the theme of "loose" women with regard to several stories in *Friends of My Youth*, including "Meneseteung"; but, similar to Howells, she does so without the subtext of Dionysian myth.

8 The process of distilling alcohol goes back to about 700 CE and was discovered by Arab alchemists; the process arrived in Europe in the early 12th century but did not become popular until early in the 16th century. The fermentation of beer and wine, meanwhile, goes back to ancient historic times.

9 *Roth* is an older German spelling of *rot* ("red"); as an old Germanic name, it can also be found in the British Isles. A critic may well see red in response to my wordplay with

mensis and *mens*, yet the word "think"appears three times on p. 70 and is therefore conspicuous in the passage under discussion; my reading complements Kathleen Wall's observation that, in "Meneseteung," Munro confronts "a near taboo against the representation of menstruation in literature" (84).

10 Alethea Hayter's study of the use of laudanum and other drugs by nineteenth-century writers provides an historical context for Almeda's use of "nerve tonic." For information on hypnagogic phenomena pertinent to Almeda, see Andreas Mavromatis, especially 225-28 and 267-82.

11 The symbolic stone into which the mythic Medusa could turn someone was "a funerary statue" (Walker, *Enc* 629).

12 For other allusions in Del's name, see James Carscallen (48).

13 The stone bearing the name Meda complements Annis Pratt's thesis of the prominence in Canadian poetry of "a Medusalike stone divinity who has shed her classical identity and attributes to take on those of the Canadian landscape" (*Goddesses* 95).

14 Magdalene Redekop sees an allusion to Alma Mater in Almeda's name but concludes that "the maternal function is obscured" in the abbreviated name (223).

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Writing 2K

T. Anne Archer et al., eds.
On the Threshold: Writing Toward the Year 2000. Beach Holme $16.95

Joan Thomas and Heidi Harms, eds.
Turn of the Story: Canadian Short Fiction on the Eve of the Millennium. Anansi $22.95

Reviewed by John Orange

If these two anthologies that claimed to anticipate the change of the century are any standard of what is about to happen in Canadian writing, then the selections in *On the Threshold* and *Turn of the Story* are oddly prescient. Each one contains twice as many women writers as men. Taken together, the short story entries are, on average, twelve pages long. A large number of the stories and poems deal with parents and grandparents (a few cases of uncles and aunts) who are dead or about to die. Only two writers, Steven Heighton and Kent Nussey, make it into both anthologies. How can these things be explained? Demographics? Shorter attention spans among contemporary readers? Pervasive pessimism or depression?

Actually, one need not press for answers to these questions, since it is clear that both anthologies are only kidding about the millennium part of the titles. The editors seem to realize that the change of the year means little or nothing beyond superstition, so they do not try to harvest, for example, stories that are about cataclysmic change or about New Year's Eve parties. Most of the entries have little or nothing to do with the end of the century—at least not explicitly, and so far as it goes not implicitly either. There are entries here and there in the collections that hint at a quiet apocalypse, but that can be expected of any collection of stories from any age. The introductions to both books state that the reason for the collection was that it seemed to be a good idea to collect writings "on the end of the millennium" (*Threshold*), or to "honour an exciting national literature that hardly existed a half-century ago" (*Turn*). The rationales never get very specific and begin to sound like excuses to put some short stories together. The pretext is not that important when it is all said and done, unless readers are misled by the titles.

Readers might be more interested in the selection process, or standard, that the editors used to choose their entries. T. Anne Archer and her friends in what they whimsically called the Foxglove Collective (apparently for Explorations Grant purposes) are not much help in explaining how they went about it for *On the Threshold.* They thought about the idea in 1993 and invited submissions, which they received in the hundreds from all over Canada. They then read each submission, discussed it and "Somehow, the manuscript gets selected and put in order." That's it. The rest of the short introduction reveals little else except for some general themes such as looking to the past to explain the present, or changes in family life, or defining "our place in time through space and landscape."

The collection is made up of fourteen stories ranging from two to eighteen pages in length and thirty-one short poems. One might expect experimental or avant-garde pieces in such short entries, but there are none here. It may be that the millennium signals that all the experiments have been tried and that there is nowhere else to go. In any event, the poems are often filled with rhetorical questions, giving them an amateurish quality, and the short stories are too truncated to either develop or reveal character sufficiently to make them interesting. Rachel Wyatt and Ann Copeland handle the mini-story pretty well, as does Joan Givner, but even here the reader is likely to desire more of the good writing rather than the *liqueur* size glass being offered. If these poets and story-tellers are what we can expect in the next decades, this collection will not instill any great excitement.

The editors of *Turn of the Story* used as their selection criterion stories that "extend our peripheral vision, articulating what lies just beyond the boundary of consciousness or memory." They looked for "quirkiness, irony, mordant humour, idiosyncrasy." They also found that they had a preference for well-crafted stories that nevertheless seem artless, as well as a hyper-real style. None of this has anything to do with the end of the century, of course, and the claim that many of the stories contain anxiety because we have fewer mechanisms to ensure continuity seems more of an excuse than a reason for inclusion. Nor are the artists all new, emerging, or predictors of things to come. The collection includes writers like Atwood, Brand, Harvor, Shields and Vanderhaege. There are two translated stories from established Quebec writers (Bissonnette and Proulx), making the collection a truer "cross-section of Canadian writing at a vibrant point in its evolution." The "emerging" writers in the editors' list are Steven Heighton, Lisa Moore, Connie Gault, Mark Jarman, Kent Nussy, Michael Winter, Leo McKay, Kristen den Hartog, Greg Hollingshead, Olive Senior and Lynn Coady. If anything, this collection establishes the continuing tradition of short story writing in this country, both stylistically and thematically. One can feel a good deal of influence in the syntax, diction, and themes of the newer writers who very often sound very much like their elders.

The editors apparently felt that "fiction was losing out to Information and analysis"—i.e. non-fiction—so they responded by choosing stories that are pretty straightforward narratives about common themes. That is not to say the texts are unengaging. In fact, this anthology is very good reading. There is enough variety of subject matter and style to make each story a fresh experience. The editors' attempts to connect the stories to the change of the century are brave if only half convincing. It is enough that the stories are well constructed and smoothly written. The stories that start and end the collection, by some of best known writers—Atwood, Vanderhaeghe, Brand, Shields—are not their best. The stronger stories start with Bonnie Burnard's "Evening at the Edge of the Water" and from then on through Mark Jarman's "Burn Man on a Texas Porch" to "Mad Fish" by Olive Senior, the stories vary in pace and content enough to keep any reader interested. One does not need the excuse of the change of the century to read good writing.

Lecture dans les marges

Manon Brunet, dir.
Érudition et passion dans les lectures intimes. Nota Bene $23

Lori Saint-Martin
Contre-voix. Essais de critique au féminin. Nuit blanche, éditeur $24

Reviewed by Lucie Lequin

Lettres, journaux intimes et mémoires composent le corpus des écrits intimes. Contrairement aux genres canoniques, ces

écrits ne répondent qu'aux exigences esthétiques et éthiques de l'auteur qui, souvent, n'aspire pas à l'être. Si certains sont destinés à un public éventuel, d'autres n'ont pour destinataire que l'auteur lui-même ou encore un correspondant connu, aimé peut-être. L'intimiste, plus ou moins exhibitionniste, se met à nu ou se cache sous les mots. Le lecteur, mis à distance, est relégué au rôle de voyeur.

L'ouvrage collectif *Érudition et passion dans les écrits intimes*, sous la direction de Manon Brunet, s'organise sous trois rubriques: les pratiques intimistes de l'intellectuel, la passion au féminin et les jeux de séduction. Dans un premier temps, les treize chercheurs tentent de mieux comprendre les écrits intimes qui, plus qu'une extension de la littérature, aident à saisir la notion même du "littéraire". Dans un deuxième temps, ils retracent le filigrane de la subversion qui, souvent, sous-tend ces écritures en apparence bien sages. Les études portent sur des textes québécois, belges et français, du XVII[e] au XX[e] siècles. La notion d'écritures intimes est ici élargie et inclut la fiction, notamment une étude sur *La chair décevante* de Jovette Bernier (Gélinas). Ce décloisonnement entre la fiction et les écrits intimes participe-t- il de l'audace ou de l'impertinence? J'aurais aimé que l'on me convainque du judicieux de cette inclusion.

Par contre, cette analyse prend toute sa place dans la section "Érudition et passion au féminin" où est examiné l'apport des femmes à l'histoire des idées, voire à la subversion des idées reçues. En effet, des femmes, même en franges du pouvoir, ont élargi leur horizon en participant à la mise en mots d'un savoir acquis en dehors des sentiers officiels (Melançon et Dubois). De même, d'autres femmes épistolières qui, dès 1778, écrivent des lettres d'opinion, sont représentées en pionnières de l'accession des femmes au littéraire (Roy). L'article (Boucher-Marchand) sur la diariste Dessaules étonne moins, car le journal de celle-ci a déjà beaucoup intéressé les féministes. Cet éloge des femmes souligne combien, malgré tout le travail de re-découverte des femmes comme reproductrices de savoir, il faut encore explorer de nouvelles pistes ou revoir certaines figures déjà connues.

La partie "Écrits intimes de la passion intellectuelle" donne une large part au Québec. Pierre de Calvet y est représenté comme le penseur dont les principes ont guidé la formulation de la première constitution canadienne (Andrès). Pierre Lespérance présente les écrits d'un dandy canadien érudit, Pierre de Sales Laterrière Fils (1815-1829) dont il étudie la pratique de l'emprunt littéraire. Manon Brunet met en scène le poète Chapman qui utilise ses correspondants pour satisfaire sa mégalomanie. Un texte de Hélène Vidrine traitant de l'iconologie épistolaire du graveur belge Rops clôt cette section. Les quatre premières études sont une riche contribution à l'histoire des idées au Canada et justifient l'importance de poursuivre l'étude des écrits intimes comme révélateurs des moeurs, de la politique, de la culture et, tout simplement, de l'air du temps.

La dernière partie comprend quatre études sur: la rhétorique des passions au XXVII[e] siècle (Desjardins), l'érudition musicale comme moyen de séduction dans les romans libertins (Bernier), le conflit sous-jacent dans la correspondance familiale des écrivains québécois du XIX[e] siècle (Savard), les confessions fictives; ces textes informent surtout et tracent des pistes de recherches ultérieures.

Dans l'ensemble, il y a correspondance entre le titre du recueil et les analyses présentées; les chercheurs parlent de la passion et de l'érudition avec passion et érudition.

Contre-Voix de Lori Saint-Martin réunit des textes déjà parus et d'autres, publiés pour la première fois et s'inscrit dans la continuité du féminisme des années 1970 qui s'est lentement transformé. Saint-Martin nomme métafémisme le féminisme

plus tranquille de la dernière décennie, terme ouvert qu'elle entend laisser ouvert. Elle parle de sexuation et de littérature et laisse entendre une voix passionnée qui s'affirme partisane.

Elle organise sa pensée autour de trois axes: la théorie de l'écriture au féminin, l'analyse de discours masculins à propos des femmes et des études de textes contemporains. Dans la première partie, elle s'interroge, entre autres, sur la portée révolutionnaire de l'écriture des femmes et sur la non-neutralité de toute lecture. Plutôt que d'affirmer, elle s'assure de faire circuler la théorie. Elle remet ainsi en question la notion de différence explorée par Irigaray, une des chefs de file de la pensée féministe européenne. Saint-Martin pense la critique et l'écriture au féminin dans leur capacité d'imaginer de nouveaux réels: "J'affirme et je refuse, je construis et je déconstruis à la fois." Elle rêve d'une rencontre véritable non hiérarchique entre la pensée des femmes et celle des hommes. Questions, rêves et influences théoriques plurielles s'y conjuguent avec force.

La deuxième partie se place sous le signe de l'indignation. Elle dénonce les penseurs antiféministes du début du siècle, la mise à l'écart des femmes du débat sur les sciences et le roman nationaliste qui, d'une part, réclame la libération des Québécois et, d'autre part, cartographie un lieu d'anéantissement de la femme. Ce texte trace des pistes de lecture pour lire d'autres oeuvres où le point de vue résolument masculin réduit la femme à un rang secondaire ou encore représente "la mise à mort du besoin de la femme chez l'homme." Cette étude prolonge le travail de Patricia Smart qui, elle aussi, a osé s'attaquer à des oeuvres masculines placées au coeur de l'institution. Les deux autres textes, quoique fort intéressants, semblent extra-littéraires et hors recueil.

La troisième partie comprend des analyses thématiques, des études d'auteures féministes des années soixante-dix et de jeunes auteures (Dandudand, Proulx, Bouchard) de fiction métaféministe. Ces études sèment le doute et mettent en garde. Saint-Martin, en effet, se méfie d'une pensée, même féministe, figée, demeure à l'affût des limites de toute écriture, de l'ironie chez Bersianik notamment, et recherche la pluralité des voix et des formes. Elle tente de repérer les traces d'un "autre monde" et des éléments de la reconfiguration de la féminité contemporaine. Comme dans tout recueil, certains textes dominent. L'étude des jeux d'échos entre l'écriture de Brossard et de Marlatt s'avère, en effet, éclatante. Dans le dernier texte, l'accent placé sur le continuum au féminin dit avec éloquence qu'on ne peut parler de post-féminisme puisqu'on est encore loin du post-patriarcat.

Contre-voix répond à la belle exigence de travailler encore à faire entendre la voix des femmes. Les analyses riches et variées de Lori Saint-Martin apportent une contribution importante à la critique au féminin et à une meilleure connaissance de la littérature québécoise.

Celebrating Spoken Word

Regie Cabico and Todd Swift, eds.
Poetry Nation: The North American Anthology of Fusion Poetry. Véhicule P $17.95

Sheri-D Wilson
The Sweet Taste of Lightning: Po'ems and Po'em-o-logues. Arsenal Pulp P $12.95

Reviewed by Susan Ellis

When I saw Regie Cabico take the stage at the Nuyorican Poets Cafe in 1994 for a One-Man Slam, the poet literally *took* the stage, storming through his performance with an energy and passion that treats poetry not just as a contact sport, but also as a wake-up call for language as a living art form. This is the kind of charged enthusiasm driving Cabico and Canadian co-editor Todd Swift in assembling *Poetry Nation*,

a Canadian-American anthology that operates as a kind of manifesto for a "new" poetics of fusion that claims to eliminate the borders between oral and written traditions. The result is wildly eclectic but hardly new (Catullus's first-century B.C. love poems would fit in just fine here, for instance; poets have always experimented with the power of vocalization to tap into language's contact with the body through the principles of prosody. But the editors' strong commitment to saving poetry from premature suffocation as high art, together with their years as poetry activists helping to create the poetry slam movement (Cabico in New York and Swift in Montreal), give the anthology a sense of the urgency inherent in the post-typography instantaneous information age.

The style of their selections is for the most part aggressive, additive, muscular, and steeped in the secondary orality of pop cultural icons and vocabulary: MTV, Elvis, Barbie, Agent Scully and Antonio Banderas become the new symbolic language that holds this encyclopedic collection together. Some of the poems stumble against the predictable problem that the most effective oral techniques—simple structural forms, circularity, and the logic of sound association—do not always transfer well to the page. A few, like Melody Jordan's "Everything is Ice Cream (and the world is a very hot place)" and Nick Carpo's "For My Friend who Complains He Can't Dance and Has a Severe Case of Writer's Block," seem, when the performative element is lost, little more than one-line jokes stretched into full length poems. For these, the anthology can only script what we assume works in performance, rather than providing any experience of the piece. Other poems are sufficiently textually "fused" that they work well as a mix of text and oral elements, such Ras Baraka's "For the Brothers Who Ain't Here" and Anne Elliott's elegantly enraged conversational repetitivism. Issues of the body and the bawdy predominate: some poems work simply as elaborate synecdoches in which the body is re-conceived in new fleshly images; still others, such as Louise Bak's "Heteroflexidome," punch up the pop imagery with oral wordplay (her "egotestical flutter-flies" being an excellent example). A number of the poets in this collection tackle the theme of child abuse, sexual, psychological or otherwise, from the child's point of view. Rittah Parrish's excellent "The Rules," Philip Arima's "Be Quiet," and Richard Tayson's "Remembering the Man who Molested Me" stand out as important works worthy of critical attention.

The collection also includes some richly textual poems. Tayson's work startles with its lucid imagism; Taylor Mali's wonderful poems have the same pure clarity on the page as they do in his ferocious *Slam Nation* film performance; Paul Beatty's supreme cursing poem "Stall me Out" leaps from the page. Do not miss Michael Holmes' intricate "(Bramalea Limited)" or Julie Crysler's pedal-to-the-floor car poem, "Fury."

The anthology contains selections of some acknowledged "elders" such as Allen Ginsberg and bill bissett, but disappoints by neglecting other vital contributors (Four Horsemen, The Roots, Amiri Baraka, Lillian Allen) in favour of some puzzling inclusions. Sky Gilbert, for instance, deserves honour but not as a poet, and Evelyn Lau has never been a fusion poet. The editors' preoccupation with "breaking down borders" (a philosophy not sufficiently problematized here—after all, monoliths like the Disney, MacDonald's and Chapters empires also dissolve cultural and national borders) has resulted in a polyphonic text that is a project of tertiary orality. Converting post-literate oral forms back into print, the editors have assembled under one cover a valuable

record of some of the freshest and most vigorous voices of the current decade of slam and performance poetry. But is it "alternative" poetry? As Sheri-D Wilson might say, "alternative to what?" ("Fast For-Words").

Wilson's contribution to the *Poetry Nation* anthology is "Bukowski on the Block Ah-Ha," a poem that contemplates the late poet's wreck of a life and epitomizes the tone for her new collection, *The Sweet Taste of Lightning*. Wilson perfected her unique jazzoetry style and poem-o-logue form in her three previous collections of poems. Known primarily as an "action" poet with roots in improvisational theatre, Wilson knows her language craft, too. When she applies her wit and intelligence to Canadian politics the result is the hilarious narrative poem "Montreal Montreal and Only Montreal" and the brilliant dramatic absurdity, "Oui et Non," that puns the Quebec referendum question against the English "we know."

The collection is organized around the extended metaphor of lightning as the energy behind her poetics/politics, and Wilson digs into this serious work with wry humour. Her "Dober-Woman-Pincer," "im-man-ent muse," and "New York Waldorf elevator Genie Bitch" characters may be fiercely comic, but Wilson's poems delve into some deep waters. In the section entitled "Life Bolt" she writes tender lyrics to explore the tragedies of AIDS, Alzheimer's and genocide. Wilson's elegy in "Ginsberg's Gone Gone Gone" is deeply informed, dramatic, clear-eyed and smart. She also displays her formal virtuoso skills with the rant (a poem-dance) and the poem-skit forms she invented. "He was a Hothead," for instance, treats the themes of rage and sexual violence as Wilson reworks the title of an earlier poem of the same name, this time as a dramatic poem-o-logue terrifying in its power and vulnerability:

SNAP
his body's hard against my back
SNAP
down the exploding hallway
SNAP
the hallway streaks
SNAP
pull away animal wild

In this collection, Wilson practices feminist oralgamy, folding words in on each other to invoke multiple contradictory images for life, sex, death, rage and politics. If the *Poetry Nation* anthology provides a comprehensive overview of contemporary North American performance poetics, *The Sweet Taste of Lightning* demonstrates the range that a single artist working across genre boundaries can achieve.

Anthologizing a Woman's Life

Denise Chong, ed.
The Penguin Anthology of Stories by Canadian Women. Viking $35.00

Reviewed by Sarah D. King

This collection of thirty-two short stories by and about Canadian women invites readers to recognize and celebrate their own lives through fiction. The narrator of Shirley Faessler's "Lucy and Minnie," a garrulous gambling woman, tells the story of two women and the son who became a husband, and concludes, "I still wish I had an intelligent person to discuss it with." The desire to share stories and seek meanings is integral to this collection.

The anthology opens with three stories that "muse about the lives of women, about the past, about possibilities and alternative destinies." The remaining twenty-nine tales sketch the shape of women's lives from childhood to death, by way of love, sex, motherhood, disease, and loss. Sister stories, casting similar events in different lights, are set side by side. Editor Denise

Chong, herself a writer of memoirs rather than imaginative fiction, has chosen mostly stories by established writers, and the familar figures of Atwood, Engel, Gallant, Munro, and Shields are present. But the anthology includes lesser known writers, and their narratives are more powerful for being less familiar. These stories cover the country from coast to coast, and move across the bounds of class, race and religion. Only a few are formally innovative; it is play not with language but with life that animates this collection and gives it power.

The women in these stories face rape, incest, abortion, adoption, abuse, neglect, alcoholism and abandonment, yet they pick up and go on. In the words of one refrain, "this is what we have. This is all we have." Not all is darkness, however. In Hélène Rioux's "Opening Night," translated by Diane Schoemperlen into a flawless yet accented English, the tale of a fragile-stomached vegetarian dining with an adventurous epicurean becomes a shocking but exquisite delicacy. "How Will I know You?" by Elisabeth Harvor, is a relentless, swerving adventure story involving a trip to Gandee falls, roasted sunflower seeds and a possibly psychotic herbalist, all in search of a cure for insomnia.

In the middle of life, women must choose, inevitably it seems, between those they love: mothers, fathers, friends, lovers, daughters, sons. Audrey Thomas's story "Harry & Violet" encompasses the complexities of relationships with ex-husbands and their new wives, new lovers, and, at the centre, "the child." Yes, the narrator decides, "it would be easier without a man. But would it be better?" In "This is the House that Stan and Rosie Built," easily the bleakest story in the collection, Margaret Gibson recounts the bitter consequences of putting husband before children. Monique Proulx, in "Leah and Paul, for example," tells a similar tale of love gone wrong. In Shani Mootoo's "A Garden of Her Own," Vijai, twenty-four Sundays in Canada, fights to accustom herself to marriage with an ever-absent husband, to the emptiness of the streets and the lack of sun. She buys seeds. At the other end of the anthology, Dorothy Speak relates, with clear-eyed compassion, Mrs. Hazzard's struggles to come to terms with Mr. Hazzard's stroke.

Disease and death are omnipresent, but never omnipotent. Bronwen Wallace's "An Easy Life" is beautiful story of altered perceptions, whose attention to the detail and promise of women helping women across lines of class, age and luck, communicates the clarity of vision washed with emotion that drugs bring. Yet still, "death ticks in her cells, as it does in anybody's." In a surprisingly joyful tale, Frances Itani writes of women friends colluding with laughter in the face of breast cancer. Matching the stories to the cycle of life leads to only one possible ending, and yet the recurring bleakness of this collection is absent from the final story. Jane Urquhart's "Storm Glass" is bathed in nostalgic tenderness, suggesting, in spite of all the evidence that precedes it, that a woman's life can be well-lived.

Memories of Mothers

Eliza Clark
Miss You Like Crazy. HarperCollins $18.00

Eliza Clark
Bite the Stars. HarperCollins $26.00

Reviewed by Mark Cohen

The two novels by Eliza Clark that appeared in 1999—a reprint of her first book *Miss You Like Crazy* (originally published in 1991) and her latest fiction, *Bite the Stars*—are, in several ways, strikingly similar. Both take place in the southern United States and clearly attempt to capture the linguistic lustre and emotional ethos of that region. Both books are largely about memory and the relationships

between mothers and their children. Despite similarities of setting and theme, however, these books differ greatly in quality. The first shows the unsteady, exaggerated hand of the first-time novelist preoccupied with formal experimentation; the latest reveals the much more practised and subtle craft of the experienced writer who allows the form to take shape more naturally from content.

In *Miss You Like Crazy*, Clark conveys a daughter's longing-filled memories of her "mama," who has recently died playing a hand of gin against her husband and their friends in a trailer-park in Florida. Maylou makes the trip south to retrieve her mother's ashes and pick up her father, and the plot follows her journey back to her home in Kansas. The road trip home is, of course, the traditional metaphorical path upon which the hero might work through the road blocks in her life: for Maylou they include what kind of work to do, how to decide between a cheating husband and Emmanuel, a true-hearted suitor, and, most important, how to reconcile herself to the loss of the primary source of love in her life, her mother. But in this novel the development of the principal character is sacrificed in favour of what the author perhaps considers an avant-garde formal effect. There is a profusion of quirky extraneous characters: every person Maylou meets, it seems, has some kind of psychic power. Then there is the episodic, casual portrayal of events meant to shock, such as the bland account of the hotel chambermaid who electrocutes herself by trying to vacuum up bath water that has overflowed the tub in Maylou's room. The main characters' morally flippant response upon finding her body—they treat it more as an obstacle to their travels than a lamentable loss of human life—contributes both to our own detachment from these characters and to the implausibility of the narrative.

Even more unbelievable is the novel's dialogue. Clark seems to want to give her characters unique, distinctive ways of speaking (what one reviewer called "curiously poetic language"), but their speech is merely stilted and obtrusive. Soon after Maylou's arrival in Florida she sits at the kitchen table commiserating with her father over the loss of her mother:

> Now things won't be as rosy. I hone for a charmed and simple life. Consider me a shoo-in for your rebounded affection. I will weather the storm with you on my back. I will sprout wings and fly you home. In my voice hear the rustle of sky, feel the meticulous beauty of flight.

That all of the characters speak this way is a problem; while it is fanciful to imagine people who talk like this, this fancy doesn't make it easy to identify with and hence care about these characters. In third-person narratives such as this one, poetry can work well for the narrator, but should be reserved for only those characters who really have a peculiar poetic articulateness. Generally this kind of writing is more effective in first-person narratives (an example being Elizabeth Smart's *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept*).

In her most recent novel, Clark tones down the overwrought language to elegant vernacular and gives it to a first-person narrator, allowing the content of her story to shine through and to shape the narrative in a more unaffected, and more compelling, way. *Bite the Stars* focuses on a mother 's memories of her son's torturous development from warm, innocent baby to mischievous infant (setting new standards for the "terrible twos"), through a career of juvenile delinquency to his sojourn as a convicted felon on Tennessee's death row. Clark has Grace Larson recount the story of her son Cole from the proximity of less than a week before his scheduled execution, so it is of necessity a story of flashbacks. Unlike the unnaturally rigid alternation between past and present encountered by some flashback writers—even Margaret

Laurence struggled with this problem in *The Diviners*—Clark's narrative structure is very sophisticated, possessing a complexity that allows her to suggest the organic flow of a reminiscing mind. Equally important is the writer's sharp ear for dialogue and her knack for turning ordinary occurrences into commanding images. She conveys the heat of a southern summer day, for example, through a simple yet imaginative conceit: "I opened the fridge and stood for a minute inside its mouth, letting the cold breath lick across my skin." In this novel the poetic use of language does not detract from but rather enhances the verisimilitude of the narrative.

And a very convincing story it is, too. Clark obviously writes from a significant well of experience with children (having written two picture books for them), and clearly understands the challenges facing the single mother. Grace unflaggingly gives her son unconditional love and is rewarded time and again with his perfidy. When Cole is a young child, for example, Grace enters her room to find he has destroyed her cherished book collection. As she watches in horror, he tears another handful of pages from a book and throws the pages up into the air. "Why? Why my books?" she cries, but as the white pages float down like snowflakes, Cole only shrugs his shoulders. Episodes like this one are depicted with a chilling vividness and coupled with the anguished self-scrutiny of the desperate mother: "I've spent my life wondering why Cole was born to me, how much was my fault, how much we just are who we are even before we come into this world." *Bite the Stars* can be a rich source of guidance and solace for women facing the prospect of raising a son on their own, and should be required reading for fathers thinking of leaving.

Canadian Lives

Ramsay Cook and Jean Hamelin, eds.
Dictionary of Canadian Biography, Volume XIV, 1911-1920. U of Toronto P $100.00

Reviewed by Janice Fiamengo

If anything looks like a staid, establishment chronicle of Canadian achievement, the latest volume of the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* is it. A collection of formal, unsmiling portraits—predominantly white and male—adorns the red dust jacket as if testifying to smug self-importance within. One could be forgiven for expecting a rather dull read. As numerous critics have noted, the "Great Man" historical model tends toward a narrowly patriotic and uncritical view of national history, in which progress is equated with individual genius or personal initiative, and history is a single, knowable entity, a reassuring march towards enlightenment. Yet far from presenting such a monolithic, self-serving narrative, this volume offers compelling proof of the multiple, often discordant voices of the past and of the hotly contested nature of the events.

This fourteenth volume of the dictionary covers individuals who died in the decade 1911-20; the editors assert that it "brings to a close, for all practical purposes, the 19th century." Here are the individuals who formed the government of the new country, built its industries, established its newspapers, founded churches, fought for workers' and aboriginal people's rights, broke ground for women in higher education and employment, developed the national railway, and sacrificed their lives in World War I. As one might expect, many of the 622 entries concern people who made a substantial contribution to their society, whether in church politics or resource extraction, social reform or judicial practice. Many figures left "an extraordinary legacy" by almost single-handedly shaping

a particular institution, industry, or art form. Graeme Mercer Adam, for example, is judged second only to Goldwyn Smith in his influence on writing and publishing in the period. The mythic statures of railway builder Sir William Van Horne and painter Tom Thomson are amply justified. Many other entries concern figures relegated to undeserved obscurity, such as Louisa Donald, president of the National Council of Women from 1902-06 and David Wells, a conscientious objector who was sent to prison for his beliefs and died under mysterious circumstances in a prison hospital, thus raising the profile of other men who objected to military service. Still other figures are significant only for their inadvertent positioning at the centre of a controversy or scandal, as in the case of William Alexander, an otherwise unremarkable soldier whose execution for desertion after Vimy Ridge ignited a debate about the death penalty in wartime.

For trivia seekers, the volume is a mine of information, uncovering the identities of the man who patented "The Champagne of Ginger Ales" (John James McLaughlin), presided at Louis Riel's trial (Hugh Richardson) or donated the Grey Cup to the sport of football (Albert Grey). For historians interested in a more comprehensive analysis, there are detailed portraits of political leaders such as Sir Wilfrid Laurier and John Arthur Gibson, a renowned Seneca chief. At their best, the biographies are not only stories of individuals but also representative portraits of national life; the contributors skillfully sketch the social conditions, political circumstances, and philosophical climate within which individuals understood and exercised their life choices. James Nix's careful analysis of the limited progressivism of John McDougall, a Methodist clergyman who ministered to Cree and Stoney Indians and helped to negotiate several treaties, is characteristic in its attention to context and sympathetic even-handedness. The entry on Robert Beaven, British Columbia's premier from 1882-83 and a member of the legislative assembly for twenty-three years, presents an absorbing history in miniature of B.C.'s entry into Confederation and the struggle for responsible government. In balancing the determining force of history with the shaping influence of individuals, the contributors reveal the interpenetration of biography and national history.

While the contributors' foremost achievements are their precise detail and accuracy, in many cases they also manage to convey, with poignancy and wit, the passion and particularity of the lives under consideration. Effective quotations from primary sources and, where possible, eyewitness accounts contribute to the entries' interest and historical fidelity. Native, French, and English Canadians emerge vividly in these pages, articulating powerful visions of the nation and struggling to realize them. In telling their stories, the volume demonstrates the striking regional and cultural diversity of the barely postcolonial country. Lewis Archibald's union activism in Halifax, Albert Lacombe's Roman Catholic mission work in western Canada, and Ahchuchwahauhhatohapit's determination to maintain Cree values in the lower Qu'Appelle valley are only three examples of the contest between competing claims on the country's future. The portraits of the many vigorous aboriginal leaders demonstrate that despite significant disadvantages in power and material resources, Native people were not only victims of European legal and social institutions but also influential actors in a variety of cross-cultural encounters. Far from producing any sense of inevitability or destiny, these entries emphasize history's messy and troubling contingency as well as its unresolved conflicts and lasting injustices.

While the diversity of lives is the book's major strength, differences in style and

tone between entries are occasionally troubling. Most entries attempt (as I think they should) to assess the impact and significance of their subject in the final paragraph or section of the entry; in some cases, however, the entry provides little more than a bald recital of facts devoid of analysis or judgement. At the other extreme, a very few entries neglect measured assessment in favour of an intimate and overly partisan account. Greater editorial control to assure uniformity of style—so long as it did not diminish the uniqueness of each voice—would have improved the volume. In general, however, the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* is characterized by the contributors' elegant prose, analytical clarity and effective use of the compelling detail. Of special interest to literary scholars will be the entries on Adams, Wilfred Campbell, Anna Edwards (Leonowens), Catherine Ferguson (Kit Coleman), Louis Hémon and E. Pauline Johnson. But of most value may be the opportunity to read through a number of entries consecutively and to be struck, with all the force of a fresh historical insight, by the startling differences between the disparate lives presented.

The Art of Artifice

Douglas Cooper
Delirium. Random House $28.95

Terry Jordan
Beneath That Starry Place. HarperCollins $26.00

Tim Wynveen
Angel Falls. Key Porter $19.95

Reviewed by Andrew Lesk

I am uneasy with the publisher's proclamation, in a news release, that Douglas Cooper's *Delirium* is "famed as the first-ever novel to be serialized on the Web." It is an unimpressive stand-alone statement which, like much of the Web itself, is empty of apparent relevance. In a world of rapid mass communications, it is a somewhat diminishing comment that a claim to fame might arise from mere firstness.

Cooper's fragmented tale of an architect's revenge upon his would-be biographer, however, dose seem eminently suited to the Web, for these formerly serialized pieces, which now comprise the novel, aspire to a technological coldness: there is no feeling here but art-by-computer-numbers. Yet the cleverness of the work is evident, and so one is left to wonder: Is this chilly segmenting of the novel form part of Cooper's project, one which seeks to expose the limitations of what is loosely termed the postmodern?

Certainly, the novel is saturated with self-referential irony, mostly evident in the characterization of Izzy Darlow, an editor, as the Cooper stand-in; but Darlow is a first-person narrator in the third person, an apparently impossible feat if one applies the logic of narrative conventions. Drawing perhaps on Michael Ondaatje's authorial interference in *Coming Through Slaughter* (in which Ondaatje alludes to personal identification with his protagonist, Buddy Bolden), Cooper protracts such ironic self-recognition to its (il)logical ends. Darlow, both editor and artist, looks out his window upon giant printing presses being moved about by giant cranes. In his isolation, he finds his own story "unbearable" while around him "torrents of words fall mechanically from great machines." Rather than attempt autobiography, Darlow labours to put together the story of another man "whose life, were it written, might make sense of this landscape, and in so doing might make sense of himself."

Darlow, however, is not the central figure of the novel, at least he does not profess to be. Both he and another biographer, Theseus Crouch, concern themselves with the architect Ariel Price. Price receives an unwelcome notice from Crouch, who seeks to expose the ethical problems inherent in Price's, as it were, structural legacy. From

there, the novel emerges as a "classic text on the planimetry of delirium," a subject on which Darlow, not so coincidentally, owns a treatise. Cooper arranges—"parades" would be far too colourful a description for such a clinical procedure—a cast of supporting characters whose lives naturally intertwine with Price's and each others'. Bethany, for example, is a young girl who escapes an unhappy upbringing in northern Ontario, and she eventually come under Prices' scrutiny; Cooper parallels her flight with Crouch's equally dejected adolescence and subsequent escape from London, Ontario. The subsections of the book, though, explicitly tell us that Crouch's early life is a parallel to Price's. Is this Crouch's conceit? Or Darlow's imagining? Or Cooper's intentional game? Of course, the author controls the material, and what we have is, in the end, Cooper's machinations. Yet the interplay suggests that the material comprising (auto)biography is forever at best a pastiche. Indeed, after a few pages, the textual offsetting of the Crouch/Price parallel ends without warning, only to be taken up later, then abandoned once more.

Price's intention to murder the intrusive Crouch is announced early on, but the labyrinth, which leads us to the scene, invokes, well, delirium. The women in the novel ply their sexuality in various ways in order to achieve their ends, while the men use them as catalysts for personal redemption. Bethany's own "whoredom" is equated with Saintes-Maries (Mary Magdalen), and the pairing is so thickly extended and overwrought that Cooper courts mawkishness. Arianna seduces Darlow; Scilla, a self-absorbed performance artist, seduces Tom Sorrow. The interchangeable nature of the characters becomes part of that planimetry of delirium, "the construction of paths that led explicitly nowhere." The result is characters as pieces in a chess game: sure, they serve different functions, but in the end they all have the same colour and texture.

Again, though, it is perhaps too simple to dismiss Cooper as gaming. In the character of Darlow's dead brother, Joshua, Cooper writes: "The witnesses brought together, polyphonic in their combined memory, to produce a complete structure. And when each partial story arrives at the end point, a grave that is empty of all but pneumatic angels and blooded rags, then the story is prepared to walk newly risen in the morning sun." Price-the-architect heralds the idea of the insular self-contained artist who has refused to acknowledge the contributions of others, who denies the polyphony of his creations. With this, Cooper intimates two underlying counterpoints, to which his work is a response: Rem Koolhaas's *Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan* (1978), and Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead* (1943).

The irony turns once more, though: Cooper, the author, paradoxically winds up as coldly distant in his experimentation, often appearing as wildly inaccessible as Rand's Roark or as bleak yet mesmerizing as Toronto's series of black boxes, commonly known as the TD Centre, or Wallace Harrison's post-war additions to New York's Rockefeller Center, the X, Y and Z Buildings (all of which are now being rehabilitated as important contributions to the architectural canon). Cooper freely manipulates the "grid" that is the text to ensure polyphony, yet often creates a random, confusing labyrinth which, in turn, only underscores the possible negative results of communal creation. It would appear that Cooper both esteems and spurns the symbiotic relationship between the artist and her or his audience, between the makers of culture and its consumers. In using a fitting analogy from the world of digital affairs, it would seem that Cooper inadvertently invites his readers to have a virtual affair with his work and the characters that people it.

Tim Wynveen's and Terry Jordan's fictions are more conventional, linear anthropological accounts: the protagonists mine their respective pasts in order to understand the present. Wynveen, in *Angel Falls*, even headlines chapters with quotations from J. G. Frazer's anthropological text, *The Golden Bough*. Ben, the novelistic stand-in for Wynveen, writes that it is important to fashion a story "no matter how painful, that makes sense of our lives, a family testament that pushes back the darkness even a little and provides a guide for those who follow." Wynveen certainly knows his characters; unlike Cooper's assemblage of quirky, self-absorbed islands, Wynveen's arrive on the page in full flesh. With its compelling narrative style, it is unfortunate that *Angel Falls* turns into a family-with-dark-secrets story; the mysteries, eventually revealed, are not sufficient to explain just why Ben's parents commit suicide or to prove his assertion that he indeed had something to do with their deaths. (He doesn't.) Equally puzzling is Ben's assessment of a gay friend whom he cheerfully appraises as "[n]ot so much gay as human," as if there should ever be a distinction made between the two.

Jordan's novel also mines the vicissitudes of memory, and the novel shimmers with the author's love of the lyrical. In one extended metaphor, Eamon, the grandfather of the retrospective narrator, Nathan, explains how his freckles are actually stars: "When his hand was in the shadow of his body, he'd curl the tips of his fingers under and slowly bring his thumb up so that the white crescent on his nail became the moon. He'd roll his wrist to explain the rotation of the earth and the seasonal differences in the constellations. Opening the map of his palm created a landscape of fleshy hills and creased rivers." As such, *Beneath That Starry Place* reveals the universe that is one's physical body, encountered as the "self" in childhood, and the perceptions which encompass other realities, the possibilities of other stars and universes. Jordan's work, however, is more subtle, shaded, and surreal than actualized, to the point where it radiates more the idea of a story than a story itself.

A Shout Out to Marsh

Terence W. Gordon
Marshall McLuhan: Escape into Understanding. Stoddart $22.95

Philip Marchand
Marshall McLuhan: The Medium and the Messenger. Vintage Canada $21.95

Reviewed by E. Hamilton

Marshall McLuhan is probably the most influential Canadian communications theorist, and perhaps also the one most argued over. As an academic, he was often accused of being an intellectual vampire and an idiosyncratic researcher. He was, at times, labelled a doomsayer, a rampant technophile, and a media guru. What is perhaps most astounding about McLuhan was his mobility and the consequent reach of his ideas. The "global village" sells telecommunications companies and McLuhan himself was able to find an audience in the marketing managers of GE and IBM. Finding a controversial seat in the canon of theorists labelled "technological determinists," McLuhan's ideas have been used to promote notions of technological progress or, in a sinister variation, death by technology. That McLuhan's theories of media open themselves to such a polarized field of interpretation, and that McLuhan became one of the most public intellectuals of this century, has resulted in a healthy debate about both the theories and the man.

One of the main confusions about McLuhan himself revolved around his own stance towards media and technology. Much of his writing can easily be read as formalist promotion, emphasizing, techno-

logical capability in terms of form, rather than explication of content. This, coupled with his belief that personal points of view were redundant in the face of the sensory altering power of the media, contributed to the wide array of readings to which he has been subjected. Both Gordon and Marchand stress this aspect of McLuhan's writing, while also investing their own with it to some degree. Though Gordon's treatment of McLuhan is perhaps more apologetic than Marchand's, and though Gordon is far less equivocal in his stance towards the "father of communications studies," each presents McLuhan's life and work as a tray of more or less interrelated *hors d'oeuvres*, deferring interpretation to their readership. As far as their presentations of McLuhan's work goes, this seems adequate, though for those familiar with that work it might seem redundant. So little differentiation exists between the two authors' treatment of the texts that judgements of the two are hardly necessary, though Gordon has a tendency to become bogged down in his own brand of McLuhanesque expostulation.

The differences occur in the ways the authors relate that work to McLuhan's life. Gordon's account gives considerably more weight to McLuhan's pedigree and early years (pre-Cambridge) than does Marchand, and constructs the early life as a kind of frontier epic. McLuhan's forebears are all invested with one or another (or several in the case of his mother) facet of McLuhan, a narrative feature that tends to naturalize individual development and also to glorify and romanticize the family history. This tactic becomes much more plausible when Gordon writes of the tensions between McLuhan's mother and father, but becomes rather dodgy in the depictions of McLuhan's more distant relatives. Marchand rarely dwells too long on matters that may not directly be connected to McLuhan's own development, or that may be said to constitute the intellectual "surround" for McLuhan's work at various stages. Marchand's discussion of McLuhan's early years places great emphasis on the relationship between his mother and father, but does not merely leave as a sidebar. He uses it as a platform upon which to build connections to the future McLuhan of "50 Million Mama's Boys" and *The Mechanical Bride*, as well as to discussions of McLuhan's home life after his marriage. The result is not only the depiction of a figure with an integral history, but with a depth of conflicting attitudes, beliefs, paranoia and superstitions. Rather than subordinating the life to the ideas, or vice versa—ideas which are, generally speaking, respected and vital long after their inception—Marchand, integrates the ideas into the fabric of a life which is not always as pleasant or as easily digestible as some readers might like.

McLuhan does not exactly come up smelling like roses in either account, though here again, Gordon seems to ally himself to McLuhan in ways that Marchand does not. Gordon certainly does not try to paint a flattering portrait of McLuhan, or to allow his readership to be entirely comfortable with him as a human being. Often, he comes off as having been petty, paranoid, somewhat gender-biased, solidly set in the intellectual cadre of his correspondent, Ezra Pound, and the New Critics. Though neither biographer attempts to pass judgement on McLuhan for his questionable beliefs or conspiracy theories, Marchand is much more successful at forcing his readership to confront these not only as quirks or idiosyncrasies, but as they inform the work for which McLuhan has become famous. For Gordon, these connections are quite loose, and there is always room for a salvage operation. But from Marchand, we learn not only that McLuhan was sympathetic to political fascism (though not necessarily to Hitler or Mussolini) and that he believed in a conspiracy of homosexuals, but that these aspects of McLuhan's beliefs

are not perhaps as inextricable from other aspects of the life as they might seem. Marchand seems to recognize and be able to reproduce the complexities that govern the shape and structure of a life, and to allow those to dictate the course of his story.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the biographies for most readers will be how various influences helped shape the thought that became McLuhan. Particularly interesting, and usually absent from a social science perspective on McLuhan's theories, are the influences of Richards, Empson, Leavis and the New Criticism. Marchand weaves an almost seamless web of connections between the New Criticism and McLuhan's later work on media and society, at least suggesting the logocentric and text-centred basis for much of McLuhan's work. Gordon's coverage also stresses these influences, though his discussion is more tentative than Marchand's. In both cases, however, McLuhan's literary background, and the influence of literary theory serve as a means through which researchers from outside literary studies can be pointed towards some useful resources.

Overall, while Gordon serves to points researchers towards areas of further reading, Marchand provides a framework through which McLuhan's thought can be broadened and problematized in the context of a highly complex and often sad life. Gordon seems a little too much on side with McLuhan to present a portrait of him that could be as three-dimensional as that of Marchand. As resources for researchers looking to expand or realign an understanding of McLuhan's theories, both texts serve as valuable touchstones.

Rereading Bethune

Larry Hannant, ed.
The Politics of Passion: Norman Bethune's Writing and Art. U of Toronto P $45.00

Reviewed by Larry McDonald

Is Norman Bethune one of our best known heroes, or shamefully unknown in Canada? Was he driven to greatness by his communist politics, or were they merely the incidental expression of his passionate humanism? Are we to narrate his life as a triumph over adversity, or as a tragedy of self-destruction?

Larry Hannant insists, "we must reread Bethune." *The Politics of Passion* lays the evidence before us. A kind of supplement to Stewart's *The Mind of Norman Bethune* (1977), this book reproduces "almost everything of Bethune's writing which has survived" and "most of his artistic works."

Inevitably, in order to help the reader contextualize the many letters, poems, paintings, stories, plays and articles, Hannant's editorial eye directs us towards his own interpretation of the historical construct formerly known as "Bethune." The events of Bethune's life are summarized at the beginning of each chapter, and the individual texts or paintings for that period of his life are each introduced with an editorial gloss. The result, while it may not be a new biography, is something very close to it. Despite Hannant's insistence that his aim is to allow us to reread Bethune (which, to be fair, his comprehensive publication of Bethune's writing and art perfectly enables), he is constantly doing the job for us: fair enough, especially if one agrees with his reading. I do not.

While it is true that the word "passion" in the book's title could, in theory, cleverly embrace the effect of all of Bethune's passions on his politics (artistic, ideological, philosophical, moral), in practice the passion explored in the editorial notes is mostly framed in psychological terms. The notes

direct our attention to what is revealed in interpersonal relationships, particularly those with women (where Bethune reveals himself as an obsessive romantic). The conception of "politics" in this book is so narrow that Hannant can write in the introduction that "politics was a preoccupation only for the last four years of his forty-nine year life." Little wonder, then, that Bethune's passionate ideological engagement with all aspects of Canadian social life, everywhere present in his writing, is neither traced nor explored.

Nor, through any fault of his own, is Hannant equipped to help us reread Bethune as an artist. What he has done, for which we should all be grateful, is gather the evidence that allows those of us with different disciplinary interests to evaluate Bethune's status as a writer and painter. The editorial notes that accompany the reproduction of selected scenes from the mural, "The TB's Progress," for instance, are content to remark that it "was modelled on Hogarth's 'The Rake's Progress.'" While it might seem churlish to point out that the influence of Spenser and Blake are overwhelmingly present, and that Bethune himself comments that he drew ideas "from old medieval illuminated manuscripts," such sophistication belies Hannant's general thesis that Bethune's artistic strengths were "intuitive." They were anything but. He gives every evidence in both his letters and his creative prose that he was extremely well read and self-reflective about matters of "technic," a word that he uses.

On the basis of the materials gathered together in this book, no case can be made for Bethune as either a great writer or a great painter. About the quality of his painting I am not qualified to comment, though it is obvious even to me that they are far from "intuitive" and owe much to styles that were fashionable in Canada at the time. His prose, however, is certainly worthy of close study. It is not only intelligent and richly eloquent, but also self-consciously literary. Even his letters abound with striking visual metaphors and an impressive deployment of intertext (Dante, Lewis Carroll, Whitman, Blake, Shaw). As one might expect of an anti-establishment writer, he is also a master of parody.

I highly recommend this book. The best of the writing is genuinely moving. All of the writing, not to mention the painting and sketches, is intriguing in its complexity and gives promise of scholarly rewards to anyone willing to attempt a study that relates Bethune's varied artistic discourses to his ideological passions and the politics of the thirties.

From Colony to Nation? Canada Revised

Jonathan Kertzer
Worrying the Nation: Imagining a National Literature in English Canada. U of Toronto P n.p.

Misao Dean
Practising Femininity: Domestic Realism and the Performance of Gender in Early Canadian Fiction. U of Toronto P $16.95.

Colin M. Coates, ed.
Imperial Canada: 1867-1917. U of Edinburgh Centre of Canadian Studies n.p.

Reviewed by Andrea Cabajsky

In *Worrying the Nation*, Jonathan Kertzer examines the legacy of romantic historicism as it applies, and fails to apply, to English Canada. He explores changing critical attitudes towards the nation in order to examine the viability of a national literature in English Canada.

Kertzer investigates the principles by which English-Canadian literature coordinated the terms *national, literary,* and *history* in order to establish itself as a field of literary accomplishment and critical study. He then complicates these terms by questioning the current viability of a national literature

when the very idea of the nation has been set in doubt. Kertzer begins by examining how Hegel's and Herder's romantic historiography influenced attempts at poetic nation-building in English Canada, from the early-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries. He examines Goldsmith's "The Rising Village," Pratt's *Towards the Last Spike* and Lee's "Civil Elegies" as reflecting romantic historiography's inability to represent Canada's national, historical and cultural diversity. He also engages with recent poststructuralist models of sociability that "embrace the disjunctiveness of society," but ultimately aim to replace the nation. Kertzer criticizes the utopian cast of recent poststructuralist criticism (Ashcroft, Giroux, Bhabha), agreeing instead with R. Radhakrishnan that the concept of the nation be expanded and its theoretical contradictions be studied, rather than discarded.

Worrying the Nation is also a meditation on justice, and how justice inscribes itself in national, social, and literary sites. According to Kertzer, theoretical declarations of the death of the nation not only affect our understanding of collective identity, but also affect our conceptions of justice and its implementation. While such poststructuralists as Bhabha and Ashcroft have challenged the romantic notion that the nation is a natural habitation—that is, a natural expression of a people's spirit, of its relationship to the land and to its culture—and have formulated their own models of sociability to replace the nation, Kertzer wonders how these new visions of community and citizenship can be implemented, and what sort of literature will represent them. He also questions the possibility of justice, whose job is to define the rules of social engagement, within such anti—or post-national visions of society. Kertzer looks finally to models of sociability as reflected in Kogawa's *Obasan* and Marlatt's *Ana Historic*. Both novels deal with second generation immigrant women who struggle to find freedom and justice within Canada. As such, they exemplify to Kertzer how experiences of personal suffering and social injustice require redemption and justification in a social context whose scope is ultimately national.

According to Kertzer, for over a century, English-Canadians have yearned for a national literature that, were it ever to come to pass, would actually be false to the diversity of the national experience it was supposed to express. It is interesting, if not ironic, that such an ambitious book, concerned with reconceptualizing Canada as a nation capable of accommodating diversity, deals only with what can be seen as an outmoded literary critical category, namely English Canada. Kertzer insists that the nation can continue to be a viable conceptual tool with which to articulate the "motley space" of English-Canadian national life. Yet his conception of Canada as a nation remains largely philosophical and overlooks the various debates about multiculturalism, binationalism, immigration, and so on, that have increasingly challenged our conceptions of nationhood and citizenship in Canada. That being said, *Worrying the Nation* is a highly successful examination of the philosophical persistence of romantic conceptions of nationhood alongside contemporary poststructuralist visions of sociability. It is also a valuable meditation on the practical application of both romantic and poststructuralist models of sociability to countries as culturally diverse as Canada.

Misao Dean's *Practising Femininity* investigates the construction of gender ideals in early Canadian literature, from 1850 to 1940. Dean builds upon contemporary theories of feminine subjectivity formulated by Judith Butler, Nancy Armstrong, and others, with the aim of revising recent criticism of the literature of this period which, she believes, misconceives of femininity as an attribute rather than an ideological construction. Dean focusses mostly on literature

by women, from a wide range of genres: autobiography (Traill, Moodie), historical romance (R. Leprohon), New Woman novels (Sime), suffrage fiction (McClung) and modernist fiction (Ross). *Practising Femininity* responds to contemporary criticism that privileges literary realism as somehow more progressive and less ideological than romance.

Two premises run throughout Dean's book: first, that gender is an inevitable part of the ideological system that brings individuals into existence; second, that much contemporary criticism of the texts that constitute her corpus has conceived of gender as an artificial limitation upon a pre-existent essential, non-gendered, self. Such criticism, she suggests, unwittingly constructs femininity as something that one should aspire to shed. Dean attempts to correct this misconception of gender by investigating literary texts within their historical contexts in order to determine how they function ideologically to produce and naturalize femininity.

Dean's investigations of Traill and Moodie respond to criticism by Clara Thomas, D.M.R. Bentley, and others, who generally argue that immigration to Canada offered European women a certain kind of freedom to assume roles appropriate to the opposite sex, as if gender could be escaped or chosen. She argues instead that Traill's *The Female Emigrant's Guide*, for example, represents the ideological work necessary to reinscribe femininity which emigration necessitated for nineteenth-century British women. By examining selected works by Traill and Moodie, Dean demonstrates the various ways in which women reconceptualized gender and the domestic ideal to create for themselves an authoritative space from which to speak within traditionally masculine literary genres such as autobiography.

In her chapter on R. Leprohon's *Antoinette de Mirecourt*, Dean builds upon and revises criticism by Carl Klinck, John Stockdale, and others, to suggest that their criticism overlooks the ways in which romance and heterosexual desire enable the resolution of Leprohon's novel. She argues instead that, by subsuming politics under gender, *Antoinette de Mirecourt* empowers French Canada with a conventionally feminine authority to subject political issues to moral judgement.

Dean's interest in vindicating romance informs her readings of New Woman novels and the novels and autobiography of Nellie McClung. These texts, she suggests, appeal to scientific discourses that privilege biological heterosexuality and therefore ultimately fail in their attempts to challenge the domestic ideal of femininity. Realism thus subordinates women, a criticism more often directed towards romance or novels of sensibility. Dean extends this view to Ross's *As For Me And My House* which, she argues, undermines the validity of feminine authority by contrasting domestic ideology with modern analytic psychology, creating in Mrs. Bentley the backlash against feminism which characterizes the early modern period.

Dean aims both to legitimate women's domestic authority and to demonstrate how realism reinforces gender ideology. Yet despite, or perhaps because of, these aims, throughout *Practising Femininity*, the potential for women's empowerment seems to reside almost exclusively within the domestic sphere, and Dean's vindicating of one genre at the expense of another results in a largely straightforward treatment of both. Consequently, a sort of either/or formula runs throughout the book that takes away from the power of Dean's revisions to conventional critical evaluations of romance and realism. Nevertheless, *Practising Femininity* is a valuable contribution to feminist literary criticism that seeks to legitimate the domestic realm as a sphere of feminine authority.

Imperial Canada is a bilingual collection of fifteen essays originally presented as

papers at the twentieth annual conference held by the University of Edinburgh's Centre of Canadian Studies in 1995. The contributors consist mainly of historians, as well as political scientists, sociologists and literary critics from various Canadian, British and American universities. As a whole, the anthology reevaluates the imperial context of Canadian history during the period 1867 to 1917. It also aims to correct an oversight in Canadian historiography since the 1960s, which, according to editor Colin M. Coates, has focussed comparatively little attention on the political, cultural and social effects of post-Confederation English and Celtic immigration to Canada. *Imperial Canada* explores the cultural, political and ideological significance of majority British immigration to Canada from Confederation to its centennial year.

The essays collected in this anthology take a variety of approaches to the conference theme of "Imperial Canada." The collection begins with two very different interpretations of the nature of Canadian nationhood. David Cannadine's essay is a corrective to the historiographical trend, represented by Arthur Lower, Donald Creighton and others, to describe Canada's history as an evolutionary process from colony to nation. He focusses on the role of the imagination in creating a sense of nationhood, and finds that Canada existed more as a state than a nation because of its historical, military and imaginative self-subordination to the British Empire. Bruce Hodgins' essay ends on a more optimistic note, suggesting that Canada's nationhood can be defined positively as "British North American." Hodgins argues that waves of Imperial sentiment that occured throughout Canada's early history were but "intellectual interludes" in its evolving national consciousness as British North America.

Kenneth Munro and Barbara Messamore examine the role of the governor general in contributing to a sense of Canadian cultural distinctiveness within Empire, while Daniel Chartier examines how the process of establishing Canadian representation in France revealed the dualistic nature of the Canadian federation. Other essays explore Canada's literary and intellectual ties to Britain, as well as contemporary portrayals of Canada in Britain.

Largely historiographical in nature, *Imperial Canada* is an accessible resource for those interested in exploring the historical significance of the political, social, and cultural ties between Canada and Britain. Yet despite its aims to explore the "diversity of experiences related to the Canada-British connection" in the first fifty years of Confederation, this anthology ultimately upholds the conventional 'two solitudes' view of Canada. While I agree with Coates that no anthology can do justice to the variety of responses to Canada's early Imperial identity, because the authors collectively focus on majority British immigration to Canada, their conceptions of Canadian national character ultimately overlook the complex historical, social, and political effects of cultural encounter among European, non-European, and Native populations within Canada and, as such, paint a fairly limited picture of the range of responses to Britain's formative influence on Imperial Canada.

Nation/Transnation

Rachel C. Lee
The Americas of Asian American Literature: Gendered Fictions of Nation and Transnation. Princeton UP n.p.

Smaro Kamboureli
Scandalous Bodies: Diasporic Literature in English Canada. Oxford n.p.

Reviewed by Guy Beauregard

In his wide-ranging study *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier,* David Palumbo-Liu presents the term

Asian/American with its prominently placed solidus as a way to read *both* the distinction installed between 'Asian' and 'American' *and* a dynamic, unsettled, and inclusive movement. The term *nation/transnation* may likewise help to name a particular critical impulse at work in contemporary literary studies as it attempts to work both within and between national and transnational frames of reference. This critical impulse characterizes recent critical studies by Rachel Lee and Smaro Kamboureli. Lee, working in an "Asian American" frame, gestures to the notion of *transnation* to discuss what she calls "the Americas of Asian American literature," while Kamboureli, working in a "Canadian" frame, gestures to the *diasporic* to analyze the role of ethnicity in Canadian literature. As such, neither Lee nor Kamboureli leaves behind the nation as a critical frame of reference; they instead attempt to work on the borders of national and transnational modes of inquiry.

Lee's *The Americas of Asian American Literature* presents itself as a feminist intervention in what has come to be known, following the work of Sau-ling Wong, as the denationalization debates in Asian American cultural criticism. Lee acknowledges that a commitment to the political importance of gender and sexuality has been "clearly affirmed by much Asian American literary criticism thus far," but she argues that this commitment has "yet to filter into the 'new' mainstream of Asian American critical reading practices, those that shift Asian America's terrain to postnational, global frameworks." As a result, Lee writes: "My study thus intervenes into this contemporary critical milieu which still regards the feminist analysis of gender and sexuality as extraneous or diversionary to the real work of critiquing state power and the political economy." In response to this perceived elision (of which I'll have more to say shortly), Lee closely analyzes four Asian American novels—Carlos Bulosan's *America is in the Heart*, Gish Jen's *Typical American*, Jessica Hagedorn's *Dogeaters*, and Karen Tei Yamashita's *Through the Arc of the Rainforest*—in order to insist on the gendered nature of the various "Americas" narrated in each work. Of these readings, Lee's persuasive discussion of "fraternal devotions" in Bulosan's novel stands out as an important intervention in masculinist readings of Bulosan's representation of the history of Asian migration to the United States. Less impressive, to my mind, is Lee's discussion of "global-local discourse" in Yamashita's novel, which occupies a pivotal yet underargued position in Lee's attempt to argue for multiple *Asian Americas* outside the borders of the United States.

As I suggested above, Lee's primary argument depends upon a space-clearing gesture: namely, an insistence that gender has dropped out of the picture in the recent Asian American critical turn to postnational or global frames of reference. My sense, however, is that this gesture unnecessarily and somewhat contradictorily discounts the impact of high-profile recent work on the topic Lee claims is being neglected: Lisa Lowe's work on the "global racialized feminization of women's labor," Gayatri Spivak's work on "women in the transnational world," and Aihwa Ong's work on the biopolitical regulation of "the Chinese family" in diaspora have all insisted on the centrality of gender in Asian American and Asian transnational cultural studies. A fuller acknowledgement of the implications of this recent work which Lee cites but does not fully engage with may have enabled Lee to reposition her study as a contribution to feminist Asian American and Asian transnational cultural studies instead of presenting it (somewhat misleadingly, I feel) as an iconoclastic attempt to refashion a field gone astray.

Kamboureli's *Scandalous Bodies*, by contrast, takes an elliptical path through the

topic of ethnic writing in Canada. For instance, in the chapter entitled "Critical Correspondences," which functions as something of an Introduction to the book, Kamboureli discusses viewing Wim Wenders' film *Wings of Desire* as "a heuristic strategy that facilitated my attempts to deal with multiculturalism in Canada." Similarly unpredictable are Kamboureli's very long literary analyses of two canonical novels, in the first and last numbered chapters, F.P. Grove's *Settlers of the Marsh* and Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*, respectively. The more tightly argued "contextual" analysis in this case, readings of Canadian multiculturalism and ethnic anthologies is situated in the two chapters between these analyses. *Scandalous Bodies* thereby deliberately rearranges readerly expectations informed by notions of "text" and "context."

By proceeding elliptically and unpredictably, Kamboureli makes a serious intellectual point about ethnicity and diaspora: they cannot be viewed positivistically, nor can they be comfortably situated in a linear literary history. Yet in its desire to avoid static or pre-given definitions (a desire stated openly in the Preface), *Scandalous Bodies* at times conveys a certain conceptual fuzziness about the tensions between *ethnicity* and *diaspora*. Kamboureli acknowledges "the semantic and political differences" between these two terms, but she deliberately sidesteps outlining and expanding on their significant differences in accounting for collective identifications within and across national imaginings. In this respect, *Scandalous Bodies* is likely to disappoint readers searching for an explicit critical investigation of the nation/transnation problematic, an investigation at least implicitly promised in the subtitle of the book.

While *Scandalous Bodies* does not explicitly address the convergences and tensions between ethnicity and diaspora, it carefully theorizes multiculturalism in what may be the most valuable contribution of this book to contemporary scholarship. Kamboureli updates and expands her previous work on the "technology of ethnicity" to critique what she calls the "sedative politics" of official multiculturalism in Canada. An acute analysis of media representations of multicultural "crises" such as the Writing Thru Race conference, a deconstructive reading of the Canadian Multiculturalism Act, and a detailed discussion of Charles Taylor's "The Politics of Recognition" all contribute to Kamboureli's multifaceted approach to the topic. My only quarrel lies with the surprisingly banal conclusion to the chapter in which this evocative discussion of multiculturalism appears, a conclusion that urges its readers toward a mastery of discomfort, "a mastery that would involve shuttling between centre and margin while displacing both." While Kamboureli insists on the need to move beyond the historical categories that have given rise to the existing paradigm in the first place, it remains unclear to me how a critical exhortation to "shuttle" between "centre and margin" can necessarily transform social locations that are received and not chosen.

Happily, *Scandalous Bodies*'s subsequent discussion of ethnic anthologies in Canada is as evocative and compelling as its discussion of multiculturalism. Kamboureli elegantly ties these two topics together by setting out to investigate "how the representations of ethnicity in [the ethnic anthologies] at once support and contradict the group-identity mentality and the essentialist view of origins in the public response to diversity as well as in the official multiculturalism policy." Kamboureli moves across a wide range of literary and critical sources to deliver considered and trenchant readings of early ethnic anthologies, the elision of ethnicity in the "canon debates" in Canadian literary criticism in the early 1990s, and the "broad critical and pedagogical" impact of *Other Solitudes*. Taken together, these discussions of multi-

culturalism and ethnic anthologies in Canada deserve as wide a readership as possible, not only in Canadian literary studies but also in cultural studies projects concerned with the constitution and regulation of cultural difference in Canada.

Who Were Those Masked Men?

Richard Lemm
Milton Acorn: In Love and Anger. Carleton UP $34.95

Francis Mansbridge
Irving Layton: God's Recording Angel. ECW P $14.95

Reviewed by Dermot McCarthy

Both these biographers lament the state of criticism on their subjects' poetry. Richard Lemm speculates that "Perhaps the fascination with Acorn the public figure—the outspoken, long-suffering, rough-hewn, romantic and romanticized poet of the people"—is to blame. Likewise Francis Mansbridge suggests that Layton's public life has gotten in the way of serious criticism and points, ironically, to Elspeth Cameron's 1985 biography of Layton (which certainly occludes more than clarifies the poetry) as evidence. Mansbridge considers Cameron's criticism to be "surprisingly unsophisticated for a literary scholar," though not for "one of the prissy apostles of Canadian gentility" at whose kind Layton snooked his cock throughout his career. But while Mansbridge upbraids Cameron's failure to provide "the serious intellectual discussion that one expects in a biography of a major poet," his own book does not begin to fill the vacuum. Nor did he intend it to; in keeping with the ECW series it appears in, *God's Recording Angel* only "touch[es] on some of the more prominent facets of [Layton's] life" in order to provide "a useful introduction" for those unfamiliar with the poet, and on these grounds it can be recommended to secondary-school students, undergraduates and the general public. But it is woefully short on "new perspectives to consider" for those already familiar with Layton's life and work. And it is somewhat ironic that, while Mansbridge does use material from his own interviews and correspondence with Layton's family, friends, and acquaintances, he'd have no book without the Cameron biography he criticizes. (He also draws on Layton's own *Waiting for the Messiah* and Wynne Francis's research).

Layton and Acorn came to be consumed by the masks they fashioned for themselves and we need *critical* biographies of these poets to help us understand their works. But while Lemm does read some poems in relation to Acorn's life and times, he admits such a study was not his intention. Mansbridge, writing for a "popular" series, should not have its demands described as his shortcomings. Lemm determined his own approach, however, and it is because he does much and does it so well that I wanted him to do more. Layton is a "big" poet, a major imagination—much more so than Acorn; but *In Love and Anger* shows that consideration of Acorn's achievement involves the same kinds of questions and issues one must address with Layton's.

"How to dominate reality? Love is one way; / imagination another" ("The Fertile Muck"). It is Layton's need to "dominate" that is so difficult for pc po-mo gourmands to swallow, let alone digest; but that, and the precise nature of the relationship between "love" and "imagination" in the personality and the poetry are what a biographer of Layton needs to fathom. Layton (like Acorn), for all his bravado, was usually bluffing; the master of ceremonies of his own grief, he is a poet of hurt who (mis)directs attention to the side-shows of public offense and political controversy, while all the while quietly circling the beast in the centre ring of his mind. Unlike Yeats's, Layton's animals would *not* desert

him and it is unfortunate that Mansbridge does not explore the suggestion he records that Layton's relations with women reflect a profound fear of loneliness that he never confronted directly in his work. Mansbridge believes Layton is a problem because "he does not fit neatly into any pattern in the development of Canadian literature," but if contemporary theory *has* discredited anything, it is such totalizing patterns or master narratives. Layton is a "pattern" unto himself, a poet for whom the invention of a mask was central to his poesis, and as such bears comparison with Yeats, Rilke and Stevens. Mansbridge notes that as Layton's reputation has waned in Canada since the 70s, it has grown in Europe, where Layton is read differently, as a humanist rather than a reactionary. Coincidentally, Lemm sees Acorn as a militant humanist-socialist more than left-wing militant.

Lemm's biography will displace Chris Gudgeon's *Out of This World* (1996), which, while very readable, was ultimately unsatisfying. Lemm quotes many of the same people as Gudgeon, but he quotes them more often and at greater length; he also has asked them about Gudgeon's book because over and over again he shows how Gudgeon misses the mark. Lemm challenges Gudgeon's representation of Acorn's childhood and adolescence and rejects completely his account of the timing and origins both of Acorn's interest in poetry and of his Communist views. Ironically, Lemm uses the same sources as Gudgeon to *discredit* Gudgeon's account of the adolescent Acorn's relationship with his father, and suggests that Gudgeon, like so many before him, was suckered by Acorn's self-romanticizing. Lemm demolishes, for example, Gudgeon's (and Acorn's) account of Acorn's war-injury. Also, where Gudgeon simply jumps from 1972 to Acorn's death in 1986, Lemm covers Acorn's last years on The Island in detail. And in what seems to me both a poignant and important correction, Lemm says there is no basis for Gudgeon's claim that on his death-bed Acorn called for an Anglican priest in order to repent his life.

Lemm is encouraging when he acknowledges that Acorn was a "myth-maker" prone to "self-serving prevarication," but unconvincing when he describes Acorn's mythologizing as "a writer's responsiveness to a society's needs." In debunking "the hyperbole and inaccuracies" that characterize the sentimental melodrama that has been made of Acorn's life, including the "Beauty and the Beast" version of his marriage to Gwendolyn MacEwen, Lemm sets much of the record straight. But ironically, in his own way, he only re-gilds the mask and, if possible, works even harder than Acorn to mythologize Acorn. There are some lengthy side-bars in Lemm's book—discussions of Alex Campbell's Development Plan for PEI in the 70s, the 19c land struggle, and the merits of post-colonial theory for reading Acorn in relation to "resistive regionalism." Instead of such padding I would have preferred that he had researched and risked a more coherent interpretation of his subject's psychoanalytic profile. Scattered suggestions that patterns in Acorn's behaviour, particularly his difficulties with women, might be explained by his relationship with his mother, need to be brought together and considered more deeply in relation to the poetry.

If "there are many Laytons," as Francis Mansbridge suggests, there are not so many Acorns. Neither biographer dodges his subject's failures as husband and father or the obnoxious and repulsive aspects of character and behaviour. Lemm details what he calls "Acorn's darker irrationality" and Mansbridge recounts a life of almost maniacal solipsism. But both quote enough poetry to remind us that *it* is why we may want to read about the lives. Late in Lemm's book, an acquaintance describes Acorn as a "poser" and Lemm asks himself

if he thinks Acorn was a "poseur." His response is no, which is fine—after all, he's researched the life and written his version of it. But he also says the question is "moot." I strongly disagree. The question Lemm mutes is precisely where any biography of Acorn, and Layton (whom Purdy once described as "an egotistic clown, a charismatic poseur"), should begin and end. Mansbridge remarks: "In both poetry and life, Layton delights in trying on different masks, and it is often difficult, if not impossible, to ascertain the extent of congruity between the mask and the personality behind it." To which one can only reply: well yes; quite. And shouldn't that be the *point* of a biography of Layton or Acorn, no matter how brief or proud?

Visit-Stay

Malka Marom

Sulha. Key Porter Fiction $27.95

Reviewed by Gili Bethlehem

The modern experience of immigrating to Israel is described in Hebrew as a pilgrimage. The word *La'a lot*, a colloquial expression referring to the act of immigrating *to* Israel, takes its roots from the biblical act of ascending to Jerusalem. In comparison, the antonym *La'redet*, which literately means to go down, refers to the act of immigrating *from* Israel, or as Malka Marom terms it to "drop out". Israeli society, in the past, tended to frown upon "drop-outs", considering their departure a betrayal of a common set of values. *Sulha*, meaning forgiveness, is the story of Leora, an Israeli war-widow, and her quest to come to terms with her self and the country she has left behind.

Marom's attempt to capture the essence of Hebrew and Israeli society in *Sulha* is commendable. Modern Hebrew contains within it a range of experiences and meanings that are often lost in translation. As Leora, her protagonist, notes, "only in Hebrew could I tell in but a few words this Tal—his mettle, his values, even his madness and the bond that bound us." However, although *Sulha* does read coherently, and granted that footnotes and explanations would break the flow of the text, it is questionable whether the non-specialist reader, unfamiliar with Israeli history, would catch all the nuances of Marom's language and descriptions of various scenes. For example, the significance of the youth movement game played in the sand dunes lies in that it is a simulation of the Illegal Immigration movement stemming from the historical 1939 White Paper.

Leora cannot let go of her Israeli identity and her national role as a war-widow, despite the disabling affect it has on her. Dropping out of Israel, and the emotional baggage that accompanies such an act, constitutes a life of conflicted loyalties, of "sitting in suitcases, one leg in The Land." After twenty years of "sleep-walking" through life in Canada, Leora must close her "open circles" when her only son, Levi, decides to follow in his father's footsteps and join the Israeli Air Force, an act that by Israeli law, requires Leora's written consent. Torn between love for her son and loyalty to the nation, she ventures to the Sinai desert, where her husband fell, to "reclaim the woman buried in the rubble of widowhood." Leora turns to the Bedouin of Sinai, to the mysterious Arab world, the Other, to learn from them how to piece together the fragments of her life. "Visit-staying" in the Bedouin tents, where loyalty to one's kin is a value held above all, she learns how to balance her "visit-stay" experience in both Canada and Israel.

Marom's use of the theme of the Noble Arab as Other, as a means of defining one's self, is problematical, not to mention passé. Still her acute awareness of the difficulties of this issue is expressed in a provocative and sensitive manner. The Bedouin lifestyle, Marom points out, is not one to be romanticized. Leora's attempt to help

preserve their life in the desert is foiled, as she learns that preserving the old culture denies participation in the new, that is, Israeli society. Marom is also aware of the risks of assimilation such progress can involve, and therefore she advocates a gradual and wary progress. Furthermore, the voice Leora finds is not hers to use, for it belongs to the Bedouin. The permission she receives to tell her story is similar to the approval that Levi must receive from her to join the army and, thereby, face his own fears.

Despite this awareness, the Bedouin remain a subjective Other. The relative ease with which their problems are smoothed out is superficial and is in stark contrast with the in-depth portrayal of Israeli society and the changes it must undergo. The many sub characters in the novel mirror the different facets of Israeli society, the most notable of which is Dorit, a young woman longing to "drop out" herself. Leora is incapable of understanding Dorit, as she explains, "I felt like I was seven hundred years old, cursed to see generation after generation repeat the same mistake, thinking they know better." Despite her own escape from Israel and from her role of national war-widow, she rejects the stifling confinement of Dorit's forced role in the patriotic nation.

The quest for *Sulha*—forgiveness—that the novel sets out to accomplish encompasses both nation and self. Living with what she takes to be the enemy, Leora overcomes her fear of death, as she discovers that Arab and Jew are not so different as much as they are the same, while the selfhood she finds is an acceptance of her role as mother and wife in the national context. Yet both of these are incomplete. *Sulha* oscillates between opposing portrayals of the Bedouin/Arabs, which results in a somewhat awkward national resolution. The Bedouin are "true Arabs", as opposed to the "*fellahin*-peasants," that is Israeli-Arabs, yet it is with these Noble Arabs that the difference between the two people is bridged. Arab identity, as such, is lumped together, as one inseparable Other, without differentiating between nationalities.

Similarly, the sense of a female identity Leora finds is ambiguous. Women in *Sulha* remain silent. The Bedouin women are forbidden to speak for themselves, attaining an indirect voice through Leora's story, while the distinct voice of Dorit is silenced behind her demonic laughter that threatens the nation. Leora, herself, is left with a similar choice to that outlined in the beginning of the novel—to be a mother or wife.

Sulha addresses crucial questions and conflicts apparent in contemporary Israel, attempting to give a wide-angled view of Israeli society. Unfortunately, at times, this is at the expense of a deeper portrayal of its characters.

Magic in Narrative

Barbara Mitchell and Ormond Mitchell, eds.
An Evening With W.O. Mitchell. McClelland & Stewart $29.99

Sheila Latham and David Latham, eds.
Magic Lies: The Art of W.O. Mitchell. U of Toronto P $60.00/$24.95

Reviewed by Bryan N.S. Gooch

An Evening With W.O. Mitchell catches the magic of a man with clear affinities to the tradition of Mark Twain and Stephen Leacock. The book conveys a sense of oral tradition and presentation in which the audience (reading or listening) easily becomes part of a serio-comic imaginative world, in which the fictional is real and instructive, and the humour if satiric is neither mean nor corrosive. W.O., a master of dialogue, has a perfect sense of timing and a delight in the unexpected. This anthology, which presents thirty-one of the short pieces (each with a prefatory explanatory note and photograph) with which he has regaled audiences over the years, is an all

too brief testament to his craft and charm. They derive, in the main, from his works published and/or broadcast, and present not only characters whose fame is now legendary, including Willie MacCrimmon (of *The Black Bonspiel*) and Rory Napoleon (of *Roses are Difficult*) but W.O. himself, talking, for example, about his childhood in "The Day I Spoke for Mister Lincoln," his exploits with customs and excise services in "The Shocking Truth About the Undefended Border," and his views on life, death, and the absolute necessity of the artistic experience in "The Poetry of Life." Many of W.O.'s major themes come to life along the way, too: a child's growing awareness of his world, the nearness of death, bonding and the role of the mentor, the importance of the land, and the sense of community in a family and in a small town. While the book might take only a short time to read, though, the temptation is to savour the magic in the voice and to lament the absence—on air—of *Jake and the Kid*, which helped to bring the prairies to life and, indeed, the nation together.

Successful novelist though he has been, W.O. has not claimed quite the level of critical attention accorded to some of his contemporaries. Thus, *Magic Lies*, a collection of essays edited by Sheila and David Latham, is a welcome addition to what should be a growing body of critical response to W.O.'s literary and dramatic output.

The volume is divided into four parts. The first focuses on the fiction, and the initial essay, David Latham's perceptive "Magic Lies and Bridges: 'A Story Better Told,'" recognises that both Leacock and Mitchell have been neglected, even dismissed. Latham sees Mitchell, rightly, as a writer of many talents, interested in truth while enjoying the humour of situations and the wit of dialogue, who focuses on the human community and who is prepared to admire the singular individual who will stand up to the general clamour. W.J. Keith's excellent "'The Litmus Years': The Early Writings of W.O. Mitchell" notes his popular appeal and his use of prairie images, offers significant comments on the fictional Crocus (seeing the town as innocent in a way that Leacock's Mariposa is not) that "informs the matrix of all of his writings up to and including *How I Spent My Summer Holidays*" (48), and views *Who Has Seen the Wind* as the masterful work in which one finds the balance between adult and youthful perspectives. Dick Harrison's "Images of Transgression: The Threat of Sexuality in W.O. Mitchell's Fiction" remarks upon the relative absence of sexual action and allusion in W.O.'s material, pointing out that the few occurrences seem, at best, rather negative. However, some readers will not be troubled by the matter at all, and a few may even wonder why Harrison finds Mitchell's apparent attitude "[f]or a writer of comedy and humour . . . surprisingly dark. " Muriel Whittaker in "Garden with Serpents: Mitchell, Kurelek, and the Boy's Eye View of Prairie Life" brings the young Brian and Hugh (of *Who Has Seen the Wind* and *How I Spent My Summer Holidays*, respectively) alongside the art-work of William Kurelek in *A Prairie Boy's Winter* (1973) and *A Prairie Boy's Summer* (1975). Terry Goldie in "W.O. Mitchell and the Pursuit of the Homosocial Ideal" notes the importance of male bonding and coming to terms with the land and R. Alexander Kizuk's "Return to the Scene of Revelation and Loss: Mitchell's *Who* and *How*" gives the lie to the notion that Mitchell's concerns are very largely with superficial engagements. O.S. Mitchell's "'What's Ahead for Billy?': The Stoneys, 'The Alien', and *The Vanishing Point*" notes links between white and Native cultures (Mitchell has been a staunch advocate for the betterment of Native peoples' situations) and offers a lucid examination of W.O.'s creative process. Theresia M. Quigley in "'Breaking Free in a Fresh Place': The

Significance of Childhood in *The Vanishing Point*" takes the reader back to the issue of the youthful view again, reinforcing the point about W.O.'s serious side and offering insightful comments about the character Carlyle Sinclair. Catherine McLay in "Quest in W.O. Mitchell's *Since Daisy Creek*" focuses on the idea of discovery and the search for self and Michael Peterman turns to parallels with Twain and to old age and loss in "'Upstairs with Mark Twain': The Peril of Magic Lies." The first section ends with Barbara Mitchell's "'Telling' Stories in *Roses Are Difficult Here*," which looks at the blending of reality and fiction, the folk story, the problems of the "tall tale," and judgments about the small prairie town.

The second part of *Magic Lies* deals with Mitchell as a dramatist for radio, television, and the theatre, and begins with Timothy Zeman's useful "Genre to Genre: Tracing Sources through Bibliography;" Zeman outlines the transfer from radio plays to short stories and novels and provides details of the *Jake and the Kid* broadcasts. He notes, especially, the disturbing divergence between a sociologist's report on prairie town life and the *reality* of Crocus and Shelby. He suggests, bluntly, that Mitchell's *Jake* series had exceptional influence, even at the ministerial level in Ottawa. Alan Yates, in "*Jake and the Kid*: Their Radiophonic Echo in Mitchell's Literary Style and Legacy," comments on the scripts (written especially for radio), the actors and production situations, providing insight not always easily available to a modern audience. David Gardner in "Whiskerbits; or, We Tried to Squeeze the Prairies into Studio One" addresses the use of W.O.'s work in television and film. Rick McNair with "W.O. Mitchell: The Playwright" and Guy Strung with "Acting W.O." bring this section, which draws so much on personal recollection and anecdote, to a close with observations on working with W.O.'s material in the live theatre.

The third section of the book features Timothy Findley's fond "W.O." and Frances Itani's recollection of Mitchell as teacher and mentor in "Life Follows Art." The last piece is an interview (from CBC's *Morningside*, 12 December 1992) by Peter Gzowski with W.O.—a fine example of how to step aside and let an engaging guest have the floor.

A bibliography (of works cited), a list of contributors, and an index of Mitchell's works conclude the volume. Alas, there is no general index, and there should be, for this is a large book covering a wide range of subjects and mentioning people and locations not only significant in W.O.'s career but often in the Canadian cultural scene as a whole.

The Questions Posed to Life by Death, A Canon for Three Voices

Susan Musgrave
Things that Keep and Do Not Change. McClelland & Stewart $14.99

Lorna Crozier
What the Living Won't Let Go. McClelland & Stewart $14.99

Libby Scheier
Kaddish for My Father: New and Selected Poems 1970-1999. ECW $16.95

Reviewed by Susan Knutson

Lorna Crozier's *What the Living Won't Let Go* opens with the "Names of Loss and Beauty," mouthing *persimmon, catalpa, piers japonica*—words for shrubs and trees gathered in elegiac salute to transitory life:

> Magnolia petals shine so much like flesh
> without the stains or softness
> aging brings,
> it hurts to watch them fall.

In the end, the collection returns to images of plants, "Wildflowers," short-lived beauties, "Western Wild Bergamot, Larkspur, / Closed Gentian near the Manitoba border."

What would Sorrow look like, asks the speaker, if it were a flower, "bloom[ing] in rich abundance this July":

> If I touched the sepals with my tongue
> I'd say *anise* and then repeat it, an aftertaste,
> a hint of time. Wild near the marsh
> I find a kind of Rue where only yesterday
> leopard-spotted frogs leapt in imitation
> of the heart's strange fondness
> for what is lost.

Time, the poets are singing again, will sweep all things away. *Carpe Diem.* Some themes, after all, remain the same. Perhaps this sameness is evidence of their importance. Certainly Lorna Crozier's treatment can be recommended.

Her poems are divided into three sections, a device which aids in making the book quite teachable, I think. The first section assembles poems limning moments of deepest beauty and sharpest loss: sex between one's much younger parents, in "The Night of My Conception 2" ("*Sweet Jesus* he cries, /and I'm the one who answers"), or the sensations of a man who stands in his own garden, listening through his open bedroom window, as his wife has an orgasm with some one else. "The Wild Swans of Bled" orchestrates a pause, as a brother and sister slip out of a hotel where their parents are drinking, to marvel at the beauty of the moon, the swans, the lake: "Neither of them knew / he would be gone within the year." It is Yugoslavia, in 1989.

The second section, "Counting the Distance: Another Family's Story," tells the stories, tragic and ordinary, of one family—a grandfather whose madness is brought on by the Great War, a beautiful sister whose own mother calls her "whore":

> In me a man's been everywhere
> a man can go. Not my father.
> He gentled me. Say fox,
> he said. My eyes turned green.

The poems of the final section, "Walking into the Future," are loosely linked by images of a present in which the speaker lives in relationship with her lover, the two of them moving together into age, into time, and the signs of it: the parents who are dying, the son who is grown, the flowers which come and then are gone. *What the Living Won't Let Go* includes four poems which were part of a chapbook called *The Transparency of Grief,* the winner of the 2nd annual {m}Öthêr Toñgué Press Poetry Chapbook contest and published by the press in 1996.

Libby Scheier's *Kaddish for My Father* is also largely focussed on the questions posed to life by death, particularly in the first section, "Yud of My Heart" written in response to the death of the author's father in 1997. Several powerful stories intertwine in this collection; of these, one of the most extraordinary is the story of the speaker's coming into closer relationship with her Jewish faith. The centrality of this movement can be appreciated in the fact that the poem declares itself to be a Kaddish, a ritual mourning prayer not traditionally spoken by women. In "Tallis, Tefillin, and a Dream," she narrates one sequence in this development:

> After my father died, on June 26, I took
> my grandfather's tallis, the prayer shawl
> of my father's father, home with me. . . .
> In the purple velvet case next to the tallis,
> in their own black velvet drawstring bag
> gone greenish with age, were my grandfather's tefillin—black, brown and ochre
> leather prayer boxes with leather straps; I
> took them, too. . . . With the women's and
> Jewish renewal movements, some
> women have begun "to put on tefillin,"
> as they earlier decided they had the right
> to don prayer shawls, also traditionally
> worn by men.

When she takes the tallis and tefillin to her friend Justin, who is studying to be a rabbi, he tells her what the objects mean and how they are meant to be used in prayer. She prays. "I did say the prayers, did speak my

devotion to God, my binding to God." That night her father appears in a dream of rich reconciliation. Leaving behind the pain and abuse which marred their relationship in life, the father and daughter together enter a landscape of "lush, green, countryside—rolling hills, wide meadows, tall and leafy trees . . . [where] a couple, man and woman, greet us and welcome us into the [horse-drawn] wagon. He was handsome, with black hair and a beard. She was plump and wore a kerchief. They were colourfully dressed in an old-world gypsy or peasant way, and were very warm, kindly, happy to see us." This poem dream, with its simple but brilliant language, illuminates in a startling way what it might mean, in our present spiritual condition, to honour our ancestors—an almost archaic phrase which is redeemed for me by Scheier's text.

Although many of the poems in this collection are in verse, many others, like the one I have quoted from, are actually little stories or prose poems, and these are the ones that I personally like the best.

My nine-year-old son told me last night that he intends to keep his plush Simba forever; I identify, of course, as I would like very much to keep my son forever, although I am aware that all things change. *Things That Keep and Do Not Change*, I think, and my heart goes out again to Susan Musgrave, whose husband, Stephen Reid, has just been convicted of a serious crime, while Musgrave has written another book which speaks of loss and pain in a language as sparkling and lucid as the freshest British Columbian creek. There is enormous beauty in her poems, and considerable depravity; which suggests something about life.

This book is also divided into three parts. "Part One: The Laughter in the Kitchen" is in fact the grimmest of the three, flecked with the terror of torture and death, lightened only by a graceful sadness:

> The laughter
> in the kitchen reminds me: grief
> is a burden, something to be shaken
> like the foxgloves in our garden, stooping
> under the weight of the seeds. I've learned
> the lessons of pain . . . .

The title poem of "Part Two: Do Not Make Loon Soup" (subtitled, "Valuable Advice from *The Eskimo Cookbook*") is hilarious, and the section as a whole is richly peopled with friends who are lovingly remembered. There is a funny, Canadian parody of Wallace Stevens' "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." The final section, "Things That Keep and Do Not Change" is equally accomplished, literary and even formal in tone, at the same time that it permits a certain level of biographical reading, for example in "Eight Days Without You," dedicated to Stephen. The book as a whole is darkly brilliant, fit company for *What the Living Won't Let Go* and *Kaddish for My Father*, all three collections of elegiac and highly accomplished poetry.

Wounded Narratives

Donald L. Niewyk, ed.
Fresh Wounds: Early Narratives of Holocaust Survival. U of North Carolina P n.p.

Suzette A. Henke
Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women's Life-Writing. St. Martin's n.p.

Reviewed by Méira Cook

In 1946 the American psychologist David P. Boder embarked on a project to gather the oral testimonies of Jews who had survived Nazi persecution. Armed with a heavy wire recorder, Boder toured camps for displaced persons in France, Italy, Switzerland and Germany and in the process interviewed over one hundred subjects, drawing together a valuable collection of sources on the Holocaust. Boder's collection was the first oral history of survivors' testimonies and the only one accomplished before Yad Vashem began its work in Israel a decade later. Sadly, only a handful of the interviews

were published during his lifetime, apparently because he could find neither financial backing nor emotional responsiveness for the plight of survivors in a world divided between the exigencies of denial and exhaustion. *Fresh Wounds* attempts to redress this absence in a collection of thirty-four of the original interviews edited by historian Donald L. Niewyk.

Although Boder travelled to Europe specifically to discover what words survivors would choose in telling their stories, he seems to have undervalued the exceptional narrative in favour of what he would later describe as the "rank and file experience." Limiting his visit in each camp to no more than two days in order to obtain the greatest variety of experiences possible, and because he believed that lengthier stays would result in narratives that lacked spontaneity, Boder employed a non-directive style of interviewing, even going so far as to seat himself behind the interviewee so that his subject would not be influenced by the facial expressions of the interviewer. Such a desire for authenticity results in interviews noteworthy for their immediacy and directness and for the texture of the vernacular voice that cannot be entirely lost even in the process of translation. The men, women, and three children Boder interviewed were born in Poland, Lithuania, Germany, France, Slovakia and Hungary, and idiomatic expressions can faintly be discerned even by the reader unfamiliar with the speech patterns and languages of Eastern Europe.

Boder's detachment is somewhat ameliorated by Niewyk's editorial style. Without being intrusive, Niewyk provides an extensive introduction to the collection, outlining the process by which Boder's oral testimonies were transcribed, translated, and finally published, as well as the edits and revisions these textual narratives underwent in the process of production. In addition, he introduces each narrator with a summary of his/her story, pointing out highlights and discrepancies in the oral text, but also occasionally warning the reader about the credibility of a particular speaker. These warnings seem unsympathetic given the horror that the narrators have recently undergone: if Kalman E.'s account may be judged as "turgid" and "dramatic," and Roma T.'s narrative may be described as "self-centred," such apparent excesses are surely understandable under the circumstances. In fact, these evidences of human foible and idiosyncrasies are welcome in narratives remarkable for the unspeakable events they narrate, despite a certain understandable flatness of affect discernible in the telling.

The interviews Niewyk selects are nevertheless enormously poignant and profoundly distressing, as well as highly informative in portraying daily life in the different concentration camps and Nazi slave labour camps throughout Eastern Europe. The men and women interviewed by Boder provide eyewitness accounts of such historical events as the Warsaw Ghetto rebellion, the *Kristallnacht* pogrom, and the uprising of the Auschwitz *Sonderkommando.* They allow the reader insights into Jewish survival strategies and acts of resistance, and discuss the question of the victim's knowledge about the fate that awaited them as well as relations between Jews and their neighbours in occupied countries, the strangers who extended or withheld aid.

In addition, many of the interviews offer fascinating evidence that Jewish victims were neither as passive nor as resigned as they have been represented. Most of the narrators survived through acts of great courage and resistance and some, like Isaac W., joined the Red army to avenge his fellow Jews while Baruch F. and his brother took up arms during the abortive Slovak National Uprising in 1944. Finally, the collection provides often joyful insights into the liberators' post-war treatment of freed concentration camp inmates and more pessimistic accounts of their later existence in

displaced persons' camps and refugee facilities throughout Europe.

It would be wrong, however, to imply that what resonates after reading these heartbreaking accounts is an accumulation of information no matter how interesting and necessary. These wounded narratives remain fresh long after the last witness has finished her story, long after the camps are liberated and the survivors freed. Or, in the case of Nechama E., long after the last of her compatriots are taken off in the direction of the crematorium: "We all went and looked, so we saw how the women were singing *Kol Nidrei.* They were singing the *Hatikvah.* When they said good-bye, they said, 'We are going to death, and you take revenge for us.'"

Perhaps the greatest challenge in reading the Boder-Niewyk collaboration is in resisting the impulse to perceive these oral testimonies as too easily curative. *Fresh Wounds* cannot be read as a talking cure or simple therapeutic exercise, since speech in these pages is the carrier of an impossible, unrepresentable history. Very different is Henke's *Shattered Subjects,* her account of trauma and testimony in women's life-writing. In her exploration of the "intriguing interface" between autobiography and fictions of self-writing, Henke hails what she calls *scriptotherapy* as an effective means of "writing out and writing through" traumatic events in women's lives through autobiography, diaries, letters, journals, life-writing, self-fabulation, biomythography, experimental auto-fictions and other personally inflected fictional texts.

Although Henke acknowledges that the present poststructuralist moment is one in which coherent and consistent constructions of stable identity communicated by a universal writing subject are recognized as necessarily fallacious, she is assured in her conviction that autobiography has the potential to be a powerful form of scriptotherapy insofar as it offers the possibility of reconstructing the female subject shattered by language, history, patriarchy, memory and invective. Examining a range of twentieth-century life-writing by women, from the Parisian *belle époque* figured in the writings of Collette to postcolonial narratives by Audre Lorde, Janet Frame and Sylvia Fraser, *Shattered Subjects* offers psychoanalytic readings not only of the life-writings of these women but of the lived textures of their lives.

Whereas Henke's arguments are consistently insightful and convincing and the glimpses she allows us into the lives of these women are always fascinating, her construction of scriptotherapy as a heroic life-saving measure seems to be exaggerated. Protracted experiments in autobiographical writing are credited for the poet Hilda Doolittle's eventual recovery from the most deleterious effects of post-traumatic stress disorder, as they are in the cases of Anaïs Nin, Sylvia Fraser and Janet Frame. For these women the alternative to writing is the threat of madness, and scriptotherapy is offered by Henke as the unambiguous heroine in the fight against silence and repression. Of course the process of self-examination through writing is vastly preferable to suffering through the unexamined life, yet what niggles slightly in these accounts of women who have triumphed over intolerable pain and loss through the efforts of autobiography is that little credit is given to the silences in their texts, the stammering or tentative stances that may be assumed by women perhaps less than entirely convinced of the efficacy of writing, and of the unambiguous power of words to heal.

Such quibbles aside, however, *Shattered Subjects* offers intriguing glimpses of the lives of these twentieth-century writers and women, as well as providing a sound psychoanalytic frame for their stories. In concluding, Henke wisely chooses to quote from Nin's diary. "When we begin to see

our suffering as a story," writes the adult diarist, "we are saved." Writing for your life, Henke acknowledges in these final words, is as much about story-telling as it is about life-writing.

Re-Inventing the Real

Catherine Simmons Niven
A Fine Daughter. Red Deer Press $16.95

Natalee Caple
The Plight of Happy People in an Ordinary World. Anansi $19.95

Debbie Howlett
We Could Stay Here All Night. Porcepic/Beach Holme $16.95

Maureen Medved
The Tracey Fragments. Anansi $18.95

Reviewed by Laurie Kruk

Conventions of gender, of genre, are cast off like last century's corsets by four Canadian women writers who give the daughter voice within three novels and a story collection. These authors re-invent the real by poking holes in the realist-based Canadian House of Fiction, allowing more light to sweep the basement, clearing away some of this century's shadows: the casting out of unwed mothers; the abuse of girls, especially sexual; the betrayal of innocence. Three of the four pose pointed questions about the meaning, coherence and potential happiness of contemporary life. Only Simmons Niven risks a "happy ending," via magical intervention and feminist fantasy.

Two of these novels (*A Fine Daughter, The Tracey Fragments*) come recommended by Robert Kroetsch, sometimes dubbed "Mr. Canadian Postmodern"—and these two represent the most polarized visions. *A Fine Daughter*, by Catherine Simmons Niven, draws together the citizens of Little Cypress, a 1950s prairie town, in the hope of transformation represented by a migrating flood of butterflies. If the butterfly is the archetype of metamorphosis, then we may accept the astonishing events this day brings, as an ecological miracle. Certainly Simmons Niven is determined to revisit the "feminine mystique" of the 1950s and to suggest an alternative path, of "living from the heart" as the press release puts it. The magical day is prepared for by the arrival of Fran, seventeen years earlier, as a pregnant teenager who bears a daughter, Cora, of unknown fathering. Speculation on the father's identity keeps the town's wheels spinning in small-minded ruts. But loving emphasis on mother-daughter bonds, the embodied experience of being female, reinvent a kinder, feminine reality. Simmons Niven is actively involved in "natural" childbirth and midwifery. Her passion is evident in the descriptions of medical orthodoxy regarding birth mid-century, when ether and "twilight sleep" were the norm. Fran, who gives birth without either one, gains in mystery *and* marginalization, until the day everything changes. On this day, new life is started, lies confronted, and Mrs.Winnie McRae, *Women's Home Companion* wife and mother, rediscovers her mother's herbal remedies and a new career as midwife. The antagonist to this alliance of women and nature is Edgar Johnson, known in his magazine column as "The Good Doctor." The flatness of his character, and his opposition to the swell of change is never challenged—it is both a sign of the exuberance of the novel, especially seen in the descriptions of conscious childbirth, and flatness, in a certain light.

Natalee Caple's *The Plight of Happy People in an Ordinary World* also seems to defy the pragmatic reader with an experience that hints at the possibility of the unreal (happy people) while grounding us in the quotidian (ordinary world). Her prose style is spare and assured, and elevates this story of double seduction with "lightness" perhaps borrowed from Milan Kundera. The double seduction is not just middle-aged Josef's entanglement with two teenage sisters,

Irma and Nadja, but also his use of lies and "stories" to complete the magic. Men's yearning to be "heroes" is punctured, here, by moments of irresponsibility and guilt. As well as "educating" his young paramours, widowed Josef must be a father to five children. Again, the focus is the daughter's perspective. Irma is impregnated by Josef, but the pregnancy is treated almost casually, as with Cora of *A Fine Daughter*. This undoing of a plot-generating crisis is another example of women re-writing the romance plot. The "European" flavour of this accomplished novel seems to come not just from the casual affairs of the main characters, the Czech/Polish/Irish matrix of Irma and Nadja, but also from the existential haze which thickens the atmosphere, shading the dialogue with philosphical profoundity. The philosophy is relativistic, as the girls' mother tells her unhappy husband: "Don't worry. Something will happen and then something else and then something else. Don't worry. It doesn't make any difference." Reflecting this attitude, the characters move like chess pieces, and Josef's destiny is not only sealed by his initial wooing of one sister—provoking the other's jealousy—but also predicted by his first "story." The careful rendering of hopeful feelings, and tender sensations, of these "happy people" does not outweigh the tragic weight of "ordinary" circumstance. Natalee Caple is admirably balanced in making both perspectives "real."

If *A Fine Daughter* re-visits the 1950s, Debbie Howlett taps into current nostalgia for the 1970s, in her linked collection of twelve stories, *We Could Stay Here All Night*. Ordered chronologically, the stories are delivered from the perspective of Diane Wilkinson, an English-Catholic girl growing up in Quebec. Her father's drinking and restlessness shake the family unit. It unravels over time as the "Love Line[s]" and "Comfort Zone[s]" established by family, teachers, church are revealed to be arbitrary. The father fails to make his heroic Lenten sacrifice of alcohol, and the October Crisis is witnessed by the children, bursting their bubble of security. If Josef of *Happy People* has his stories, Fred Wilkinson has his hollow magician's tricks. But his family has nothing better with which to fill the gap he leaves behind him, and the agency Diane finds first as a rebellious teenager, then as a sexually jaded "New Woman" in that story's acute satire of 1970s feminism, is hollow too. Her attempt to reconnect with the father who abandoned them ends by replacing a reading of the "luck lines" on his palm with the forecasting of his own mortality ("Mount of Venus"). The narrator's voice matures as she does, and a naive perspective is filled by an increasingly realistic consciousness of the limitations of freedom. *We Could Stay Here All Night* gradually replaces the title's youthful dare with the wearying suggestion that we are "Still in the Dark," after all.

Maureen Medved is described by Robert Kroetsch as a "twenty-first-century writer," perhaps because her novel offers a 150-page dramatic monologue comprising tightly-paced brief scenes that are proud to describe themselves as *fragments*. Medved's craft as a playwright is essential to her creation of fifteen-year-old runaway Tracey Berkowitz, who scathingly dissects social decay—incompetent parents, patronizing teachers, cruel classmates and sexist society. The use of a clever young "loser" as satiric mouthpiece may be as familiar as *Catcher in the Rye*, but Medved plays up Tracey's edginess and mouthiness for all she's worth, as she introduces herself to another bus rider,

> Remember in the news when two retards made a kid?
> That was me.
> Just kidding.

The book works as a series of monologues, as Tracey takes flight from her family: par-

ents who appear unable or unwilling to relate to her, and her younger brother, Sonny, who has disappeared. Tracey takes responsibility for creating his persistent illusion that he is a dog. Like Elwood in *A Fine Daughter*, the young boy flees from his gender role by associating himself, even through "madness," with the natural world. Medved's work depends on our familiarity with an unreliable first person, and Tracey's manic speeches assure that we will at least wonder how much of the Sonny story is invented. While looking for Sonny, she also remains obsessed with her "dream-lover," Billy Speed/Bernie Himelfarb. Meanwhile, she gets on and off the bus, seeking contact of one kind or another. She meets a decaying drifter, ironically named Lance, in a bar, and becomes his damsel-in-distress: taken to his apartment, and ministered to, briefly. But the fantasy of escape with Lance, however desperate, is mocked by a violent intruder who beats up Lance and tries to rape Tracey. In her sexual vulnerability, Tracey echoes her "Baba," who was raped by a Polish "horseman." The stigmatizing of women as "holes" is one of the refrains that link the fragments, as is Tracey's retelling of her misfit sufferings in third person, herself sadly defined as "It." The grim anecdote about how the "titless girl" (another alter ego) is accused by her classmates of having "razorburn," due to the depiliation her parents force on her, is as arresting as a wound. The reader is pulled into the position of listener/confidante/witness to the protagonist's swings between rage and despair. This see-saw would be exhausting, but for the pauses between "fragments." It is not surprising to hear that Medved has performed some of the text dramatically.

Perhaps generic categories will loosen further in the 21st century. The creation of tough, uncensored women's voices, captured in active prose and strong off-beat images by all four writers suggests that gender scripts are also being rewritten. No longer content to be "nice girls" who look for a pat on the head from (male?) critics or teachers, these female authors create daughters (and mothers) who dare to be violently angry, painfully honest, playfully philosophical . . . and wholly female.

On Life, Love and Cats

Alden Nowlan
Selected Poems, ed. Patrick Lane and Lorna Crozier. Anansi $18.95

Alden Nowlan
White Madness, ed. Robert Gibbs. Oberon $14.95

Reviewed by Heather Sanderson

More than a decade has passed since Alden Nowlan's death from cancer. He left a substantial body of work in a variety of genres, including numerous collections of poetry (with such evocative titles as *Playing the Jesus Game* and *I'm a Stranger Here Myself*), two novels, short stories, journalism, and several plays. There have been several posthumous editions of his poems, including *An Exchange of Gifts* in 1985, edited by Robert Gibbs, from whose preface Patrick Lane and Lorna Crozier quote in their introduction to *Selected Poems*. Yet, new editions serve the double function of keeping one of Canada's best poets in print and in bookstores, and thus available to new readers, and of demonstrating Nowlan's continuing gifts to younger generations of Canadian poets, as Lane gratefully acknowledges in his foreword. Moreover, broad selections such as this one show not only the range and development, but also the unity in Nowlan's poetry across his career.

This volume includes the most frequently anthologized poems, such as "Warren Pryor," "The Execution," and "The Bull Moose," poems that I first encountered in junior high school English classes and that now seem like old friends. As Lane and Crozier remark in their introduction, Nowlan's poetry developed from a metri-

cally regular, more formal early style into his characteristic irregular verse, shaped by sentence phrasing and using a direct language to achieve a sense of intimacy and unmediated utterance. Throughout, his poems evince a sensibility developed by his early experience of poverty and map his successful transformation into a writer through a combination of ambition, need, talent and luck. His poems reveal an acute, compassionate response to others, which arises in large part from a clear, observant eye for detail and its meaning. Almost any poem illustrates this acuity. In "A Black Plastic Button and a Yellow Yoyo," the speaker observes a mother and child, beginning, "I wish I could make her understand / her child isn't the Christ Child / and didn't create the world, / then maybe she'd stop shaking / her fists in his face," while her son flies "out of his body / into the yoyo" or focuses on a button on his windbreaker, "until he is safe again, / curled up in a ball / where nothing can reach him." The poem uses circles—the button, the spinning yoyo—and repetition to evoke both the cycle of abuse that repeatedly interrupts the poet and the perfection achieved by the imperfect, human child in his retreat, a transformation witnessed by the poet: "a Buddha smaller than my thumb, / a sleeping Krishna, / there inside that dancing yoyo." Such irony and knowledge of human frailty layer poems on the ceremonies of life, big and small, as in "He Raids the Refrigerator and Reflects upon Parenthood": "Nowlan, you maudlin boob, / almost blubbering because / two hours ago at the party / your son said, I'll be / fifteen tomorrow, can I / have a whole pint of beer?" But the ritual is spoiled: the father gives the son a warm beer, saving the "cool ones" for the guests; now, hours later, he sees the bottle in the fridge, nearly full but carefully recapped, and feels shame for this small betrayal, "the petty treason / we commit so often / against those we love."

Many poems, particularly those later in the volume that touch on his illness and mortality, gain power from their restrained, even meditative treatment; such a poem is "This is What I Wanted to Sign Off With." The speaker begins his declaration ruefully, saying, "You know what I'm / like when I'm sick: I'd sooner / curse than cry," but, afraid that he will lose his chance, he continues, warning, "Don't pay any attention/if I don't get it right / when it's for real." In spite of "terror and pain / or the stuff they're shooting into my veins," he manages: "Bend / closer, listen, I love you." This poem's fourteen lines suggest a sonnet, lending this farewell a degree of formality complemented by the self-conscious refusal to be maudlin in "sign off." Yet, at the same time and in typically understated fashion, Nowlan uses direct, colloquial speech to make the poem seem intimate and spontaneous, while his control over the cadences of the line creates the effect of simplicity. The speaker is urgently addressing what might be last words to a loved one, but the poet is also addressing a reader, and behind him is the journalist signing off from his broadcast. Characteristically, this phrase connects to a further poem that at first appears to treat a different subject; the speaker in "The Broadcaster's Poem" describes his unease at sending his voice out over the radio, partly because he is unable to imagine anyone listening, but also because once, when covering a fatal accident, he discovered the radio still on in the car: "I thought about places / the disc jockey's voice goes / and the things that happen there / and of how impossible it would be for him / to continue if he really knew." Both poems—like many of the others—can be read as exploring the act of writing and the complexities of the writer-reader relationship. Nowlan's self-awareness and continuing self-examination draw the reader closer; the persona of the speaker—it is tempting to assume the voice

is Nowlan's own and to forget the carefully structured mediation of the poems—changes and grows throughout.

Thus, while a new selection of Nowlan's poetry might usefully have been presented in a scholarly edition, with perhaps a more detailed discussion of form and technique in the introduction from the editors, both prominent poets themselves—giving dates of composition and/or publication, grouping them in subsections according to which collections they first appeared in, and annotating them, for example, clarifying some of the many literary, historical or biographical references for readers to whom some or all of this material may seem obscure—there is also considerable merit in the choices Lane and Crozier have made. Letting the poems stand side by side, with a brief introduction, encourages readers to respond individually, forming connections, hearing echoes, and discerning patterns.

In the introduction to his selection from Nowlan's *Telegraph-Journal* columns, written between January 1968 and June 1983, Robert Gibbs asserts the continuity between Nowlan's journalism and poetry—witty, simple yet complex, compassionate, intimate. Much of the humour arises from Nowlan's awareness of his own follies along with others'; as Gibbs notes, his use of satire in the genre of the familiar essay places him in a tradition dating back to the eighteenth century and including such Canadians as T.C. Haliburton and Stephen Leacock. The selection in *White Madness* consists of pieces reflecting his autobiographical style and emphasizing his detailed observations of daily life, while also revealing the breadth of his knowledge through the wide-ranging references. Gibbs has grouped the pieces into five thematically linked sections, such as "Humans Have Him Wondering," which contains a number of delightful pieces on his cats and other, often serious thoughts on animal-human relations, and "On Chowder and Chowderheads," which is largely about food, including several discussions of his guilty love for licorice pipes.

This is an entertaining, often moving collection, one that surprises in the scope of topics and references, at the same time as it presents a coherent persona, whose conversational style convinces me that I am listening to an acquaintance, amply explaining the columns' original popularity. Of course, the simplicity and ease achieved here are no more effortless than in the poems; but the air of immediacy in each case demonstrates Nowlan's versatility as a writer and keeps the columns, in particular, from sounding dated, even though some of them were written three decades ago. Gibbs promises a second selection of the more public pieces will appear soon.

Nations and Their Narrations

Isidore Okpewho

Once Upon a Kingdom: Myth, Hegemony, and Identity. Indiana UP US$19.95

Reviewed by Titi Adepitan

Once upon a time, the Nigerian kingdom of Benin (c.950- 1897) was so fearsome there were no rivals anywhere in sight to question its authority. Parading the most ceremonial court in sub-Saharan Africa, Benin displayed a logic unto itself. In the fourteenth century, European travellers wrote about the tidiness of Benin's paved and tree-lined streets; its systems and rituals of succession were observed with a religious zeal that would have beggared some of the most elaborate ceremonies of the Aztecs. In 1979, when Oba Akenzua II died, all males in the former kingdom, indigenes and residents alike shaved their heads for three months in mourning! Understandably, it would seem; the entire history of the Edo (Benin) kingdom has always revolved around the divinity of the king. Benin is

best known to the world for the artistry of its bronze, copper and wood masks and figurines, devoted almost exclusively to the resplendence of the Edo court. A trip through Benin City even today cannot fail to overwhelm a visitor with a palpable sense of both the magnificence and the terror of a former kingdom, where power and blood flowed straight from the edge of the ceremonial sword, and human sacrifices derived their sole sanction from the whimsies of a single potentate.

Isidore Okpewho's book examines some of the stories and legends about Benin, as seen through the folklore of former vassal states. "I think it is about time we broke the monotony of our glorification of great 'emperors' and 'warrior kings' of the romantic past and looked at the other side of the equation. What about the peoples they destroyed in pursuit of their greatness: have they no stories of their own to tell? . . . If we continue to sing the praises of successful warmongers and usurpers of other peoples' land and wealth, what right do we have to chastise European colonizers who did the same?" It is a bold and risky undertaking but there is also a little invidiousness in it because Okpewho, whose parents were from two of the clusters of smaller states over which Benin was lord, is biased.

Okpewho has abandoned the "ecumenical conscience" (his phrase in another context) which shaped his earlier interest in the folklore of southwestern Nigeria for the overt partisanship of the new wave of fierce ethnic nationalism sweeping across the country. The reasons for the new nationalism are well known: Ken Saro-Wiwa, the politics of oil, the concentration of power and its appurtenances in the centre in a rabidly gluttonous federal system and, at a costy level, the rivalries between ethnic communities.

The author comments on the "undercurrent, if not a groundswell, of self-assertion that continues to resist the hegemonist pressures imposed upon communities" that are desperate to come into their own. In a familiar pattern according to which formerly subject peoples in traditional societies destroy their previous overlords in effigy in their oral narratives, the sample tales shift both the locus and the onus of power and its proof from Benin to each of the vassal states in their narratives. These "swerves" (Harold Bloom's term) are only one of several "revisionary ratios" by which vassal states compensate for the tyranny of powers and principalities. Okpewho aids the new readings by recalling the gory days of a Benin in decline: the human sacrifices, the whimsical kings and their rebellious generalissimos, and the antic energy of the folk imagination which promptly and relentlessly blurs the threshold between fact and fantasy, history and legend.

The region that Okpewho's book describes is without question the most ethnically diverse zone of the country. Located in the midwest, it has been influenced by virtually every strand of the national identity, so much so that in some areas whole languages change altogether within a radius of five kilometres. The most dominant influence on Benin was clearly the western, Yoruba kingdom of Ife, from which Benin, from the dynasty after the Ogisos, got its name ("Ile Ibinu," or "land of anger") and the title of its kings, "Oba." Benin has profoundly influenced the Yoruba nation in turn. But Okpewho presses the claim of an eastern, Igbo influence so relentlessly that his intentional maps of misreading chart a route of influence for the Igbo which takes them beyond Benin to the heart of the Yoruba nation—all of this on the highly improbable evidence of a mention of a band of invaders by the name of Igbo in a contemporary Yoruba play!

Many of the ethnic contestations in the book take us back to the old argument on the place of writing in preserving records. Okpewho only makes a whistle stop at Eric

Havelock and Jack Goody's doors. Instead, *Once Upon a Kingdom* draws on an extensive metalanguage from both postmodernism and postcolonial theory: Gayatri Spivak, Homi Bhabha, Luce Irigaray and company, in this call to all "subalterns" to "please speak up." It is an innovative task for folklore, and the book is a huge leap from the settled conclusions and the non-committal language of mainstream oral research. It is bound to become of huge catalytic interest in countries where ethnic and sundry minority issues are still critical to concepts of identity, power and nationhood. It is incidental that the argument uses Nigeria as a backdrop; the same may be said for "other zones of sectional conflict across the world—Eastern Europe, the British Isles, or even the Americas" where the need is to show, in the words of Spivak, that "the oppressed *can* know and speak for themselves."

Isidore Okpewho is Professor of Comparative Literature at Binghamton University (SUNY). A novelist of note, Okpewho pursues comparative studies from a formidable background of at least eight languages, four Nigerian, four European. In the last two decades his books and essays, unmistakable for their dense and exhaustive scholarship, have won for African oral traditions an attention and respect comparable to the gains made for the continent by the first generation of creative writers.

The 'Yellow Peril' Today

Lynn Pan
The Encyclopedia of the Chinese Overseas. Harvard UP US$59.95

Mayfair Mei-hui Yang
Space of Their Own: Women's Public Sphere in Transnational China. U of Minnesota P US$19.95

Valerie Steele and John S. Major
China Chic: East Meets West. Yale UP n.p.

Reviewed by Maria Noëlle Ng

In Sax Rohmer's popular Fu Manchu series of the 1920s and 30s, the reader is forever exhorted to beware of the "yellow menace" that threatens the civilized world. There was, and still is, a real mistrust of the Chinese, not only in western countries, but also in other parts of Asia. It is a historical irony that Chinese have been migrating to other parts of the world as early as the thirteenth century, when Chinese soldiers of the Mongol army were either "captured by the Javanese or stayed behind [in Java] voluntarily," thus forming what the *Encyclopedia of the Overseas Chinese* calls the "Sino-Indonesian communities." The other motivation for historical Chinese migration was trade. Thus, "in about 1600," communities numbering two or three thousand Chinese were located in Southeast Asian ports such as Hoi An and Phnom Pehn. In the twentieth century, the Chinese migration pattern has been extended to countries such as Canada and Australia, and with the globalization of trade and increasing travel in the last decade of the twentieth century, Chinese immigrants can be found in the unlikeliest places, such as Iceland on the rim of the Arctic Circle.

To the uninformed westerners, all these so-called inscrutable orients no doubt present a puzzling picture: they often stay within ethnic enclaves, and they insist on speaking their own language, which to the other outsider is called Chinese but to the Chinese themselves consists of many

mutually incomprehensible dialects. *The Encyclopedia of Overseas Chinese* is just the book to answer the many queries non-ethnic Chinese, and even ethnic Chinese, might have regarding the Chinese people. This exhaustive study is divided into different subjects such as "Origins" and "Communities." Under each heading the reader can find essays on macro-history (Chinese migration in the last thousand years) and micro-subject matters (the living quarters of a typical Strait Settlements Chinese family). Interspersed between essays are statistical studies and photographs, both historical and contemporary. For instance, in Part V, Chinese communities are divided into geographical entities, such as Southeast Asia and The Americas. The reader will find a short article about Sir Julius Chan, twice Prime Minister of Papua New Guinea (Australasia and Oceania), or learn about the Chinese community's support of Mahatma Gandhi in South Africa in the 1900s (Indian Ocean and Africa).

Although the encyclopedia appears to have covered every conceivable area, its main focus is on the history of Chinese immigration and its settlements. In other words, the study is rich in history and sociology, although it includes a brief section on Chinese artists, cinema, and all too briefly, a page on Chinese writers in English. In spite of the divisions and subdivisions, the structure and layout of some sections can be confusing. For instance, although one writer is responsible for the section on the Chinese community in Indonesia (Mary Somers Heidhues), seven writers contribute to the section dealing with overseas Chinese and their relations with China. The effect is somewhat piecemeal. Furthermore, the subjects of study are predominantly male, thus giving the impression that only Chinese men reach prominence in business and politics. The few Chinese women featured, very briefly, are movie stars such as Michelle Yeoh. In the section on the Chinese in the United States, a photograph of three young men with their parents is captioned by "The Chinese-American Dream: having three sons at Harvard." This picture and others affirm the general patriarchal pattern of the Chinese family. Ultimately, the encyclopedia is a very useful but conservative text.

If the reader wants to learn more about Chinese women, she will find in-depth analysis on a variety of topics in *Spaces of Their Own*. The contributors to this volume are all academics in anthropology, comparative literature, English and film from China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and the United States. The purpose of the book, as Mayfair Mei-hui Yang, the editor, explains, is to examine "the positioning of women in domestic or public space in Chinese mass media and public discourse," and to represent women who "live a semiclandestine life and try to carve out a larger space for themselves in the male public discursive world." Needless to say, the content and context of *Spaces of Their Own* is a far cry from the go-ahead- and-succeed male world that *The Encyclopedia of the Chinese Overseas* focuses on.

While the *Encyclopedia* devotes a mere few lines to film, and only to the male Chinese filmmakers, Elaine Yee Lin Ho's essay "Women on the Edges of Hong Kong Modernity: The Films of Ann Hui" in *Spaces of Their Own* examines the changes in Ann Hui's films from the 1970s to the 90s within the historical context of Hong Kong as a British colony to Hong Kong as a special political entity of China. That Ann Hui is the only woman filmmaker in Hong Kong is a statement about the overwhelmingly patriarchal film culture of martial arts and gun-swinging gangsters which so enamour western filmmakers such as Tarantino. According to Ho, Ann Hui's films "are not merely cinematic texts foregrounded by a larger contextual backdrop

but are, in themselves, cultural documents that fuel the dynamics of Hong Kong culture as much as they draw on such dynamics for inspiration and energy." Although gender relations are a constant in Ann Hui's films, in her more recent productions "the space vacated by the drama of romantic love is taken up with the explorations of filial and kinship bonds" and the films "open up an engagement with recent Hong Kong and its changing identities." A far cry indeed from the blood-and-guts-fests of John Woo!

Kathleen Erwin's "White Women, Male Desires: A Televisual Fantasy of the Transnational Chinese Family" also looks at the politics of the film medium. An anthropologist, Erwin was invited to participate in a Chinese television drama, playing "the American wife of a returned Chinese scholar." Her essay is "partially an effort to come to terms with the ways in which the Chinese male creators of the drama constructed [Erwin] as a 'foreign' and 'modern' woman" and "the ways in which Caucasians—the quintessential foreigners—are deployed in constructions of Chinese identity." Thus, Erwin's essay discusses not only the process of essentializing women, but also the occidentalization of white women by Chinese men.

Set in Shanghai, a city which is experiencing its second period of westernization, albeit under very different circumstances from the semicolonial state of the earlier decades, the drama *Sunset* features a Chinese architect, Zhou He, and his relationships with his American-trained son and American daughter-in-law: "What ensues is Zhou He's gradual revelation that his generation and its accomplishments" must make way for the new and that "the 'joining' of East and West . . . is the hope for Shanghai's future." Erwin argues that the absence of Chinese women in the drama is the male TV producers' strategy to highlight the masculine identity of new China in a competitive global economy. By locating the setting in Shanghai, the plot centres "around the negotiations and impact of transnational circuits of power and capital," and "mainland Chinese men are depicted as central agents in the modernization and international-ization of both the family and the nation."

That the male Chinese filmmakers of *Sunset* should want to use an American woman as a Shanghainese bride to symbolize Chinese modern masculinity is ironic, since, as Erwin reminds the readers, "Shanghainese women, considered among the more beautiful and well educated in all of China, are frequently courted by overseas China men." Shu-mei Shih's "Gender and a Geopolitics of Desire: The Seduction of Mainland Women in Taiwan and Hong Kong Media" addresses the very issue of Chinese women from the People's Republic of China (mainland China) seen as a contrasting signifier of desire and contamination by Chinese in Taiwan and Hong Kong. To summarize a complex historical and political situation involving the national and transnational relationships between China, Taiwan and Hong Kong in which Chinese women become a symbolic pawn: mainland Chinese women are desired by Taiwanese and Hong Kong business men. Economic imperatives drive mainland Chinese women to migrate to Taiwan and Hong Kong illegally, since these two other 'Chinas' offer greater opportunities for prostitutional work. Thus, "[i]ncreased legal and illegal immigration of mainland Chinese to Taiwan has not decreased hostility but instead heightened Taiwan's anxiety of contamination and fear of takeover by the Chinese." The mainland Chinese women are given an appellation, *dalumei*, literally "mainland sister." The *dalumei* "is a woman who in most cases serves as a prostitute" according to lurid stories and pseudo-investigative reports featured in newspapers.

Women in Hong Kong also felt the invasion of mainland Chinese women before the return of the colony to China. In late 1994, "a group of angry Hong Kong wives protested to the Hong Kong [colonial] government to demand the curtailing of rampant adultery between their husbands and mainland women," thus blurring the line between public and private issues and giving sexual politics a different dimension. However, the problems posed by the presence of mainland Chinese women in Hong Kong also highlight the hybrid position of Hong Kong culture, although Shih tends to prefer the term "third space" as coined by Rey Chow. Unlike Taiwan, Hong Kong does not have "the option of imagining a 'national' identity," and many of the Hong Kong Chinese were themselves originally immigrants from China. However, Hong Kong Chinese, long exposed to western customs and cultures, also perceive themselves as more modern and more sophisticated than mainland Chinese. Shih analyses some Hong Kong films to show how these works "imagine a narrative of assimilation and domestication in order to neutralize China's political power" which looms over the future of Hong Kong.

Spaces of Their Own is an important collection of essays. Because the contributors come from different disciplines and backgrounds, the juxtaposition of their writing sometimes can be unintentionally startling. For instance, Ho writes with the panache of someone familiar with current literary criticism: "The focus on woman's history and agency in these recent films imbricates an urgent political self-recognition that complicates and transforms Hui's earlier critique of modernity." In contrast, Zhang Zhen, writing on diasporic Chinese literature, sometimes employs awkward but nonetheless clear sentences such as "[Liu Sola] takes on a seemingly playful postmodern stance to reexamine such heavy-duty themes as freedom, history, and language."

Undeniably elegant but disappointingly superficial is *China Chic: East Meets West,* edited by Valerie Steele and John S. Major. This volume of essays is accessorized by visually seductive illustrations of various periods of Chinese costumes. The essays touch on historical and social topics related to fashion, such as "Military Culture and Chinese Dress in the Early Twentieth Century" by Antonia Finnane or "The Cheung Sam: Issues of Fashion and Cultural Identity" by Hazel Clark. In the latter essay, Clark traces the development of the *qipao* or *cheongsam* from the fall of the Q'ing dynasty to today. The history of this garment which is made familiar to westerners through orientalist images of Chinese sirens in movies like *The World of Suzie Wong* is an important subject, since it helps explain the process of sexualizing Asian women through clothes. However, Clark's examination is marred by sweeping statements in disjointed paragraphs.

Valerie Steele in the chapter "China Chic: East Meets West" does address the criticism of chinoiserie "as a form of cultural stereotyping" and concedes that "few designers have more than a cursory knowledge" of either western or Asian fashion history. Here, Steele is touching on the nature of pure fashion design: ethnic motifs and objects are decontextualized ideas to be borrowed. Cultural importance is assigned to fashion by the social and economic factors which drive the industry. But Steele avoids any weighty intellectual discussions and *China Chic,* a beautiful book, is best enjoyed for its surface.

Culturally Bound Illness

Roy Porter and G. S. Rousseau
Gout: The Patrician Malady. Yale UP $35.00

David B. Morris
Illness and Culture in the Postmodern Age. California UP $27.50

Glen Downie
Wishbone Dance. Wolsak and Wynn $14.00

Reviewed by Anna Cooper

In *Gout: The Patrician Malady,* Roy Porter and G. S. Rousseau have constructed a remarkably well-researched history of gout, a disease of swollen joints in the lower extremities that commonly affects males who indulge in a rich diet. When paired with David Morris's *Illness and Culture in the Postmodern Age,* which presents sweeping theoretical statements almost every page, *Gout* seems eager to avoid extensive theorizing, although some challenging questions are raised. Can one be sick without being diseased, or vice versa? Working from the assumption that bodily illness becomes a disease only when it is framed as such (for example, neurasthenia came and went as a framed disease), Porter and Rousseau posit that gout has been framed as a disease of the aristocratic male: a superiority tax, an insurance policy, a prophylactic, and a haven. Believing disease to be territorial and possessive, Samuel Johnson thought gout would ward off other more malignant illnesses. Horace Walpole saw gout as a blessing—the coagulation of the body's destructive humors in one relatively harmless place. For Erasmus, attacks of gout provided an excuse for leisurely reflection and the use of reason. But more than anything, gout served as a sumptuary tag for social superiority by showing that one could afford to be ill. In fact, it seemed to many that simply being patrician, and not the indulgences associated with that status, were the cause of gout. Until the 18th century, Greek humoral theory encompassed the medical understanding and treatment of gout, a word that comes from the Latin word *gutta* for drop, referring to a drop in bodily fluid to the extremities. Accompanying this theory was the humanist "idea that luxurious living would bring nemesis in the form of vengeful maladies," and diseases often were personified in an "Aesopian manner, endowing them with moral messages." One 17th century story explains that gout and a spider, in a search for lodging one night, found that the spider could remain undisturbed in a poor man's house and that gout found leisure and bed rest in a house of an aristocrat, whereas when they switched their residences, the spider was nearly killed by a maid's broom while gout, in the leg of the poor man, was forced to toil in the fields. The gouty male reached his peak as a stereotypical persona in Tobias Smollet's novel *The Adventures of Humphrey Clinker* (1771).

The symbol of gout faced threat from claims that it was not hereditary, at the same time that humoral theory was being contested by Cartesian disciples who viewed "the machine as a model for the body." Vigorous debate ensued—at one point gout was even used as "a badge of loyalism" in the last decades of the 18th century when aristocracy was under siege from liberalism. The disease, of course, persisted, but its positive association with the upper-crust male deteriorated. In Dickens's *Bleak House,* "the pedigree of podagra" returns, but to signify "the dead weight of tradition." Whereas gout in the Renaissance had been popular fodder for parlor chat, in the late Victorian era it became impolite and unmanly to discuss one's illnesses, including gout. Biomedical evidence mounted showing that gout was caused by an accumulation of urate crystals, in turn caused by a high-protein, high fat diet. The most obscure chapter, "Podagra Ludens", follows, merging the history of gout with theories of the human propensity to play, pointing out

the playful elements of gout's profile. A clever chapter on graphic images of gout, including an observation of persistent phallusism in drawings of gouty men, concludes the book. Ultimately, this book demonstrates how "the insignia of gout arose, was culturally inscribed, and fell."

Pop theory, like pop psychology, reaches out to a general audience with generalizing messages. Using essay style prose, David Morris in *Illness and Culture in the Postmodern Age* argues that the biomedical model, a Lyotardian grand narrative, must give way to a biocultural model in our postmodern era. He makes the same point as Roy Porter that illnesses do not become diseases until they are certified, or framed, by the powers that be, who are themselves framed by their culture. For most illnesses having clear organic causes, the biomedical system, with its surgical interventions or drugs, "provides an effective response," but chronic illnesses of unknown cause flounder in our health system.

Although this book may not be a scholarly source for novel theory, Morris's figuration of illness as a social text offers a reminder of humanity's role in making ourselves sick and well. He cites population shifts, environmental pollution, crime, the welfare system, conceptions of beauty and lifestyle changes as cultural influences on our state of health. He summarizes numerous theorists (e.g., Bakhtin, Baudrillard, Lyotard) in defining postmodernism with unabashed certainty. For the most part, his explanations ring true, though simplistic. Even though Morris's book, according to its genre, often depends upon absolutist conclusions, generalizing statements, and well-worn concepts of postmodernism and narrative, it is a lively and fast treatment of some issues in medical sociology. He follows Arthur Frank's lead in *The Wounded Storyteller* (1996) by recounting well-known narratives of illness including Anatole Broyard, Reynolds Price and William Styron. Morris abandons his thesis in the middle section of his book, which reads more as a collection of essays than a unified whole. For example, in Chapter 6, on obscenity and culture, he makes only a tenuous connection to illness in a brief discussion of Turret's syndrome. A chapter on pain offers several provocative ideas—e.g., that society has erroneously tended to locate pain in the body rather than in the brain, the place where it actually occurs—and the strength of this chapter reflects the focus of Morris's past writing on pain and culture. Chronic pain, "the most common contemporary medical problem," is now being treated, he says, more as a diagnosis than as a symptom, in a "crucial redirection of postmodern thought." He then returns to his thesis on the biocultural nature of illness near the end, where he provocatively situates himself in opposition to Susan Sontag's efforts to remove meaning (especially stigma) from illness, believing instead that meaning allows for healing narrative. For Morris, "illness, in short, is never wholly personal, subjective, and idiosyncratic, nor is disease wholly objective, factual, and universal, but both take on their specific, malleable, historical shapes through the mediations of culture."

The poems of Glen Downie in *Wishbone Dance* invite, without melodramatic manipulation, the reader to engage emotionally with the poignant—sometimes loud, sometimes quiet—scenes of medical drama. Though many of the poems have appeared in earlier volumes or in journals, in this book they all seamlessly join together, in part due to a consistent speaker persona. A few poems, such as the moving love poem "Chances Are," feature a distinctly different speaker, but for the most part the speaker comes across as someone at the edge of the medical establishment, close enough to see the blood and hear the moans, but far enough away to develop a somewhat melancholy perspective on it all.

A group of poems interspersed throughout the book, called "Learning Curve Journal," cut with icy precision and confront the reader with colostomies and the loss of dignity, chronic and incurable illness, suicide and the loss of hope, the violence of surgery, and more.

Downie, like most poets, delights in word play, but not for the sake of pure frivolity, since the ultimate effect of his puns and turns is a sense of deeper irony. That is because what are at stake in these poems are the dignity, well-being, and very lifeline of people; the light twists of the form of the poems contrast with the weight of the content: "Dead-easy to love the ones / who are fixed / in memory." Yet the idea of contrast does not entirely explain Downie's project; indeed, an amalgam of effects—humor, horror, sadness, confusion, and at times, celebration—culminates in a vignette-style portrayal of what happens to *us* when we get sick. "Ron and Don," about a twin who sees his own death in his dying brother and then runs away, mirrors what many readers might feel in reading these poems. That is, we see what might happen to us in the grip of the medical institution, yet, perhaps because of Downie's expert artistry, the compulsion is to read ahead, not to turn away. He certainly doesn't offer metaphysical meanings for the pain of death by disease, but occasionally he shares scenes that affirm the human potential to heal, not the physical body, necessarily, but the soul. In "Prosthetics," a technician offers fake appendages to disappointed patients, but he also offers something more, a healing warm handshake and a genuine smile.

These three books approach the junction of medicine and culture from significantly different genres: scholarly history, pop theory and poetry. The history develops a story over time, the theoretical work rearranges cultural icons and the poetry offers glimpses of quotidian life; these genres inscribe the authors' messages with meanings in the same way that all three insist that society imposes meaning on medicine.

Unfixed Selves

Ian Iqbal Rashid
The Heat Yesterday. Coach House $12.95

Rienzi Crusz
Beatitudes of Ice. TSAR $10.95

Suwanda Sugunasiri
The Faces of Galle Face Green. TSAR $10.95

Reviewed by Vijay Mishra

These books of poems show the unusually vibrant side of Canada's multicultural experience. Indeed some of the very best Canadian verse is being written by the many diasporas in Canada. Movement from one locale to another, from an earlier space where foundational narratives are constructed, where the metaphors of living come into being, where information and experience are packaged and bottled to be sent across seas (which in turn needs to be deciphered, learnt, memorized, "deep in a rusting city-centre") in short movement from one country to another creates a consciousness about one's past that has been theorized, in very recent times, as diasporic poetics. One of the key characteristics of this poetics has to do with the dilemma of unfixed selves. How does one write about these selves, how does one negotiate living here (in this instance Canada) and writing out narratives invaded by earlier memories?

Ian Iqbal Rashid's unfixed self can trace his ancestry back to India, but he was born in an Indian diasporic community going back at least a hundred years. Rashid's poems (laid out as prose poems and as free verse) speak about loss, but this collection is less about memory of homeland than about selves whose bodies problematize the whole idea of identity and self-hood. He takes us to marginalized beings (sexually, racially, and so on) within our own democratic Western communes. The first poem in this

collection, "Song of Sabu," may be seen as a prologue to migration of people of colour to Western nation-states. Here we have the figure of the migrant outsider, long before globalization had taken hold of modernity, whose body is on display as exotic, and as providing the essential exoticism for the fantasy genre of so many Hollywood movies of the thirties and forties. What is striking in this poem is not just the "unfixed self," the mobile, rootless self, finally in America with only memories, but the point of view that gives another twist to Sabu as a corporeal being: "Sometimes during the day I catch myself in the mirror. The carelessly put together beauty found in young boys. But day time ghosts—they're easily dealt with." That sense of the body—and its powerful expression—can be seen in "Mango Boy" where gay sexuality is imaged through the richly textured and lush metaphors of that most alluring of all tropical fruit:

> I eat mangoes, sliced
> see the cayenne
> sprinkled, machine-gunned through
> honey-coloured
> flesh
> Then I ride my lover high. . . .

Even as these themes of passion and desire get replayed, we are conscious of the poetry of diaspora, the poetry of making sense of our lives as transplanted, transcultural, deeply uprooted communities. It is here that the titles of the poems—Bastards of the Diaspora," "Another Country," "Knowing Your Place"—persuade us that there is something rather significant going on here. These Canadian poets are now bringing to the nation a new voice: no longer nationalistic, no longer the cringe of a lesser fragment society in the shadows of mother England or France, but a vibrant new Canadian voice without, at least in this positive sense, a dominant tradition that seeks conformity.

If Rashid has moved from one diaspora to or the other two poets are part of the first major movement of people from the Indian subcontinent to Canada in the sixties. Rienzi Crusz and Suwanda Suganasiri are Sri Lankan migrants who have lived in Canada for over thirty years, long enough to have thought about homelands in much more detached terms, and long enough to problematize labels like "postcolonial," "diasporic," and "migrant" writing. Even as events in another country function as an important background, these poets engage with the poetic experience itself: how indeed does one transform reflection into mediated poetic meanings? The title of Crusz's collection comes from a poem subtitled "The Immigrant's Progress."

> I've learnt the beatitudes of ice,
> something sacred, something cold,
> demanding respect. . . .

The religious discourse here is self-consciously deployed, and respect is demanded by "ice" which in turn is the strong, pervasive metaphor of the new "home." The normal discourse of dreariness, of despair and isolation associated with snow—snow makes one homebound, jars nerves, makes one proprietorial about warmth and space—is given a different inflection and implies the migrant's final sense of appeasement after "twenty winters in my bones." In another poem ("After the Snowfall"), the "summer eyes" of the poetic persona reminds us of the diasporic condition, self-consciously connected with the archetypal diasporic narrative: the journey of the Jews out of Egypt and into the promised land. Crusz no longer needs diasporic narrative for his poetic vision—there is a point at which all art breaks away from its past—but when he does return to them it is to awaken a memory that grounds the self (fleetingly) and offers a position of contrast. So in "City Without a Name" the emerging multicultural city is made meaningful through a return to exotic, tropical descriptions. In "Memory's Truth" memory is presented as

a debate, as an issue to be contested, mulled over, and not something that is always fixed:

> How argue the diaspora?
> Would I let nostalgia
> flirt with hyperbole?
> Is there enough love
> to conjure past perfections,
> forget, forgive
> those strident voices,
> the arrythmia of the wicked heart?

Even as the agenda for the debate is laid down, the son born in Canada has "hamburgers (with everything on it)" and fails when it comes to connecting with the farmer's bare back, the "thick wearied legs" of the buffalo, and the paddy. And the debate continues as the son replies in "Distant Rain:"

> do you have to hang up your story
> like a butcher's side of beef?
> Why another poem?
> Why roll the rock
> from the mouth of the tomb,
> what's there in shadows, dry bones,
> memories?

There is one kind of answer in "Synthesis," an exercise in which a name "fuses East and West." But even as there is synthesis, for the son, home is not the home of Sri Lankan cousins. Instead

> Home is where the snowman
> sits on the front lawn
> and waits patiently
> for his return.

The idea of home and homeland, the narrative logic of diaspora (the desire to return to a homeland) is not altogether simple. The child born in Canada has a sense of home that is material—a house, friends, a landscape, a connection through language (English/French) which is the child's mother-tongue. For so many diasporic peoples of colour ("visible minorities"), the very definition of the "mother tongue" is highly problematic: mother tongues are no longer the language of their mothers; mother tongues are the language of the nation in which they live, the language that they speak most fluently, the language in which they think. Their speech doesn't have the sanction of genealogy, of phylogenesis. To situate Kushwant Singh's memorable line here to good effect: "My mother tongue is English although my mother doesn't speak a word of it." Difficult, unresolvable questions, but with powerful political implications nevertheless: cultural theory demands answers, or at least an engagement with the issues. The poetic vision looks elsewhere; questions may not lead to answers, as we discover in "The Sun-Man takes a Tattoo":

> Don't ask for answers,
> ask for history: the pain
> of my woundings, the diaspora
> that runs through my life
> like an alphabet.

Another question—the question that the diaspora is asked most often—"Where are you from?" ("After the K-W Writer's Award")—can only be answered by the poet's "fire and song."

An accomplished writer in Singhalese and a well-known critic and commentator, Suwanda Sugunasiri's English poems have been restricted to journals and newspapers until now. But some eight years of writing verse have now been collected under the name of one of the poems in the collection, "The Faces of Galle Face Green." This encapsulates the dominant themes of Sugunasiri's verse: a strong political commitment alongside detached, pietistic Buddhism. Sugunasiri recalls the recent, highly divisive, history of his homeland Sri Lanka. There is much less of the diasporic in his verse and much more of a straight out pleading for common sense and non-violence. The poet speaks about the strength of tradition against fad, especially in the real world of politics. Why import

Marx when so many native discourses remain untouched, unknown? Written in 1982, "The Faces of Galle Face Green" senses the highly volatile nature of ethnic politics in Sri Lanka. The poet recalls the promise of revolution soon overtaken by equally intense neglect and abuse of responsibility. Sugunasiri returns to the theme of equanimity, the middle way, the way of action in detachment, never the excesses of the revolutionary nor the resignation of the renouncer, in "The Fish Vendor":

> The spice you
> didn't take—
> critical-compassion—all
> I have
> to help you bide by,
> till
> you snap out
> out of your
> karmic misery,
> garnering merit
> in mind body word, as
> you alone can
> in a new universe.

This quietistic humanism bespeaks inspiration from native models, the tried and successful texts. In perhaps the most political poem in the collection—"Bridges"—composed a year after the 1983 ethnic riots in Sri Lanka. Sugunasiri's defence of multiethnic liberal democratic states is unwavering:

> Arunachalam, Ramanathan
> co-freedom fighters
> of one Lanka
> these your models
> not Chelvanayakam, Amirthalingam.
> Read *Mahabharata, Ramayana*
> *Silappadikaran, Dhammapada*
> these your fountains
> not *Das Kapital.*
> Mao Castro Arafat
> Liberators all
> but please
> not ethnic enclaves
> Ireland Cyprus Quebec.

Rashid, Crusz, Sugunasiri, offer diasporic voices that speak not of homelands alone, nor of the agony of living in displacement but of "unfixed selves" that weave magical poems that refashion the citizen. In his polemical introduction Sugunasiri refers to his own earlier plea for a redefinition of the Canadian literary canon where ethnic writings had so far been no more than footnotes to a grander Canadian Anglo-French tradition. These volumes demonstrate how there is now a multiply centred Canadian sensibility that transcends ethnic boundaries. The poems are Canadian insofar as their particular voices have been produced by a specifically Canadian (multicultural) sensibility.

Educating Readers

Nancy Roberts
Schools of Sympathy: Gender and Identification Through the Novel. McGill-Queen's U P n.p.

Lee Thompson Briscoe
Scarlet Letters: Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale. Canadian Fiction Studies No. 34 ECW n.p.

Arnold E. Davidson
Seeing in the Dark: Margaret Atwood's Cat's Eye. Canadian Fiction Studies No. 35 ECW n.p.

Reviewed by Shelley King

"Once victim, always victim: that's the law" observes Hardy's Tess, a figure like many nineteenth-century heroines forever identified with suffering. More than a century later her plight still moves and attracts readers, as do the fates of a number of other abject female characters: Richardson's Clarissa, Hawthorne's Hester Prynne, James's Isabel Archer. But why? Wherein lies the pleasure to the readers of works that feature the "spectacle of what seem[s] to be almost infinite female woe"? From meditation on this subject springs Nancy Roberts's *Schools of Sympathy*, an intriguing study of gender, identification and narration in the

novel. Roberts begins by considering four canonical narratives of female suffering by male authors, suggesting that "[e]ach of these books acts as a sort of school of sympathy, a site of instruction in feeling and subjectivity," and "as a place where one might learn both to feel *for* and to feel *as* a woman. . . [where] the heroine's suffering serves as a catalyst for the reader's emotional involvement and aesthetic pleasure." Each text is developed through a slightly different metaphor of education. *Clarissa*, for example, is read in terms of eighteenth-century speculation concerning the significance of two forms of spectacle: the theatre and the trial. Roberts deftly demonstrates the way in which the interaction of these paradigms establishes both our sympathy with the heroine and our paradoxical pleasure in her misery.

The educative function of the readerly spectacle is further developed in her consideration of *The Scarlet Letter*. Drawing on Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, Roberts complicates her school of sympathy by examining its relationship to guilt and the desire for punishment. In many ways this chapter marks the beginning of a sustained questioning of the value of sympathy, an insistence that "sympathy is less simple and less benign than is usually supposed." She argues persuasively in her discussion of *Portrait of a Lady* that "as [Isobel Archer] moves others, so her novel moves us, and this is done . . . through the creation and exploitation of twin desires: the first a desire to love and to pity, the second an avid desire to possess." This critique culminates in Roberts's examination of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, in which she suggests that these lessons in sympathy are of interest "not so much for the charity that they purport to teach as for the power relations of domination and submission which they conceal."

At this point the study takes an abrupt turn to the second element of Roberts's project, an examination of the ways in which Angela Carter and Margaret Atwood, "talk back" to the literary tradition of male-authored female suffering. It is here that this study holds the most promise, yet also, for this reader, some frustration. Formed as a reader by the previous argument, I wondered what kind of school Atwood and Carter might construct for their readers? If those traditional masculine narrators of the woes of suffering heroines teach us to read as men and to feel as women, as Roberts argues, what lessons are there to be learned from the female narrators of these prominent figures of the postmodern academy? But Roberts moves away from the model of the "school" which so dominates the opening chapters and pursues instead a less structured exploration of readership and gender. She seeks to escape through these texts the unsettling power dynamic of female victimization and reader empowerment enacted in the earlier novels and to find models of female heroic action to set against the passive suffering we have been made to witness (and take pleasure in) as readers of canonical male-authored texts.

Roberts focuses her quest for heroines in command of their own subjectivity on four contemporary works: Atwood's *Surfacing* and *The Handmaid's Tale*, and Carter's "The Bloody Chamber," from the short story collection of the same name, and *Nights at the Circus*. Both writers have been subject to a somewhat mixed reception from feminist critics, and here Atwood receives, I think, a less sympathetic reading than Carter. Though *Surfacing* holds some attraction—"The novel . . . offers a hopeful, though far from simplistic, outlook on the possibility of female heroism and subjectivity"—Roberts sees that hope fading in Atwood's later work, specifically in *The Handmaid's Tale*, which, she argues, merely extends the pattern established in the first half of her study: "Readers have often found Richardson's novels to be virtually pornographic in their minute discussion of

female victimization. Is this novel any less so? Isn't it another exploitation of female victimization for literary thrills and chills?"

In her reading of "The Bloody Chamber" and *Nights at the Circus*, Roberts takes a more affirmative approach. While she acknowledges that the short story "flirts dangerously with the pornographic," she finds value in the fact that "Carter's fiction *does* force us to reassess the motives and forces behind women's all too frequent assumption of the role of victim; it urges us to refuse that role and take responsibility for living differently." Similarly, her study of *Nights at the Circus* dwells on the heroic potential of the marvellous Fevvers, and offers a sensitive and astute reading of the play of ambiguity and possibility that constitutes the magic of Carter's text. Yet in doing so Roberts never engages fully with the victimization within the novel: with Madame Shreck's profitable collection of female freaks, or the violent and sadistic relationship of the Ape-Man and Mignon. There is, however, much that is valuable in Roberts' examination of the four canonical novels, and in her exploration of Atwood and Carter, though one could wish the two parts of this study of sympathy and schooling the reader had been more closely linked.

Lee Briscoe Thompson and Arnold E. Davidson, authors of *Scarlet Letters: Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale* and *Seeing in the Dark: Margaret Atwood's Cat's Eye*, are also in the business of educating readers—in this case those looking for a clear, concise introduction to two of Atwood's most controversial novels. Like Roberts, they emphasize the importance of the political in her work, but offer a more positive reading of Atwood's later fiction. Both follow the now familiar format of the ECW Canadian Fiction series, with chapters on the importance of the work and its critical reception, followed by a reading of the text. Thompson focuses on *The Handmaid's Tale* as "an intersection between institutional and gender politics," and argues that "It may not be too soon to group *The Handmaid's Tale* . . . with a more overtly politicized phase in Atwood's career," calling it "her strongest political vision to date." In her reading, Thompson emphasizes both the contradictory nature of critical response to this novel and the importance of recognizing the aesthetic complexity of Atwood's political vision. This emphasis is perhaps most clear in her treatment of the novel's protagonist:

> readers and reviewers have tended to take strong stands on Offred as heroine or weakling. There has been a palpable feminist desire to set Offred up as a political symbol: of woman victimized, of woman resistive, of woman triumphant. In another camp, lovers of action have berated her for her passivity and her infuriating inclination to forgive her oppressors, as have those feminists who feel she lets the side down by sleeping with the enemy, as it were. . . . All of these reactions seem to miss (or reject) the point that Atwood was creating a rounded character, not an Amazon or a position paper.

Thompson's reading of the text ranges smoothly from an examination of the contexts which gave rise to Atwood's writing of the novel and the founding of Gilead within the text, through a clear elucidation of the relationship between our present and Gilead's "time before," the role of female and male characters, and the careful complexities of Atwood's plot. Always she insists that we recognize the author's refusal to supply easy models or unproblematic answers: "Atwood is determined to break our desire to emerge with a tidy verdict of innocent or guilty, to show that Offred, like every other character in the novel, like us, may be both simultaneously." Yet ultimately for Thompson, perhaps the greatest testimony to Atwood's novel is its ability to generate almost Blakean contraries: "No critical position is taken on this

novel that is not energetically challenged by another. That is somehow appropriate in the face of novelist who distrusts closure, a central narrative that refuses to provide an ending, and an epilogue that wraps up its speculations with a question."

In *Seeing in the Dark*, Arnold E. Davidson also acknowledges the diversity of response, especially with regard to "the quality of its feminism," that Atwood's fiction can elicit. His account of the initial reviews of the novel does justice to its controversial representation of women's relationships, but like Thompson, Davidson's interest in this novel rests not just in its blend of the political and the personal, but in its aesthetic complexity: "the style and meaning of any novel are inextricably interconnected and meaning merges through the artistry . . . *Cat's Eye* is most important because it is Atwood's most artistically accomplished novel thus far." Thus Davidson focuses on unravelling the web of inter- and intra-textual allusion from which the author crafts Elaine's narrative. Sometimes elegantly baroque, sometimes densely overwhelming, Davidson's analysis meticulously traces the connections between past and present through the complex of symbols, images and associations which constitute the novel. His approach, however, may at times prove daunting for the undergraduate readers who provide the main audience for the ECW Canadian Fiction series. I'll cite just one example:

> The image of Susie as an uncooked chicken also brings in the matter of wings. In the immediate context, Elaine, seeing Susie on the bed, also sees that '[u]nderneath her, across the sheet, is a great splotch of fresh blood, spreading out like bright red wings to either side of her.' These wings of blood, as a version of bloody feet, are a sign of the limitations imposed on women and represent another example (albeit disguised) of Atwood's use of the 'Red Shoes' fairy tale which she employed more obviously in earlier works such as Lady Oracle and The Handmaid's Tale. The wings relate, too, to the suggestions of women falling and women flying that run throughout the text.

Still, both Davidson and Thompson attempt, in their differing ways, to educate the reader to a sympathetic understanding of both victims and victimizers in these contemporary texts.

Various Fictions

Gail Scott
My Paris. Mercury $17.50

Ed Kleiman
The World Beaters. Thistledown $14.95

Yeshim Ternar
Rembrandt's Model. Véhicule $16.95

Reviewed by Norman Ravvin

With *My Paris* Gail Scott devises an experimental novel that can be likened to the work of only a few contemporary Canadian writers, and which derives its inspiration from numerous avant-gardists who created radical books in Paris during the first decades of this century. Nicole Brossard, Kristjana Gunnars and Aritha van Herk, like Scott, forefront the writer's predicament—highlighting feminist, or at least feminine concerns as they conjure a poetic, digressive style. But Scott's chosen compatriots are not live Canadians; rather, they are mainly dead Frenchmen (along with a single dead American-turned-Frenchwoman). Walter Benjamin, Marcel Proust, Roland Barthes, André Breton, and Gertrude Stein all haunt and motivate Scott's narrator—a lesbian Québécoise writer who has the run of a Paris apartment, and is penning a kind of diary of her stay abroad. The outcome is a book with many of the fascinations of the French modernists who inspired it. The nameless narrator makes oneiric forays through the city like Breton's Nadja. She investigates the remnants of nineteenth century arcades beloved of Benjamin. Her

infatuations with the Parisian women she meets are notable for their lack of intimacy, and remind us of the ritualized courtship practiced by Proust's characters. Her penchant for reading shop windows as texts reminds us of Roland Barthes's mythologies of the everyday—his decoding of pasta ads and movie posters to discover their hidden messages. And all of this is rendered in denatured prose strongly reminiscent (though not quite imitative) of Gertrude Stein. In a number of enigmatic asides we are reminded of Stein's battle cry in favour of "abolishing commas," her assertion that by "emphasizing predicates" she was "inventing the 20th," and the peculiar Steinian urge to make "a picture of you sitting there. In portrait of about three words." And so, echoing her mistress, Scott creates a narrative voice that is at once abstract and vivid:

> Looking out window. Rain streaking pane. Not having found dream café yet. Probably having to leave Faubourg. In this manner whiling away the dangerous snare of late afternoon. Manufacturing alcoholics. Into evening. Until it's late when slipping off cushion. Showering. Dressing. Coming up with calf-length tights. Short flowered skirt. Black top. Rushing down Raspail. Choosing café near more ordinary 6th. Growing crowded. Workers drinking beer or wine. At bar. Pulling wallets from belts. At smalls of their backs. Elegant women with pretty shopping bags. Ordering non-alcoholic drinks. Grenadine. Or mint. For the skin.

If Stein's motto, put a bit more pugnaciously by Ezra Pound and Ernest Hemingway, was to abandon dead forms and discover a script appropriate to the new era, what motivates Scott's experiment? And in what sense is *My Paris* experimental, trailing as it does the ghosts of surrealists and automatic writers, the unfinished projects of Benjamin and Breton? One answer might lie in Scott's search for a lesbian poetics—a subject that underwrites nearly every scene in the novel. In the hard, juxtaposed images of women's clothing, faces, hair and gestures she portrays a hidden life of fantasy and fetishized desire. It may be, too, that in coming to the city of surrealists and Stein, from the frozen province the narrator calls "chez nous," that she quite simply goes native, immersing herself in Paris' rich and radical writerly heritage. In doing so—though Scott does not address this directly—the narrator may be describing a Francophone cultural landscape, unfindable at home, which she will transplant from the Luxembourg Gardens and Montparnasse to the somewhat less romantic routes she travels along Rue St-Denis and St-Laurent.

My Paris is a puzzle, leaving questions of intention unanswered. Its narrator's views about Bosnia, north-African immigrants, fashion and the importance of a good café are all clear. But beyond these more prosaic concerns, the novel's mode of expression seems designed to titillate and provoke. Scott might argue that there is nothing more to the idiosyncracy of her narrator's voice than the simple fact that it is *hers.*

The most direct pleasure of *My Paris* is the presence of a number of multifaceted scenarios, built of shapes and colour reminiscent of a Robert Delaunay painting. These images, like the one that follows, are the most striking mementoes of Gail Scott's Paris:

> P asleep in her bed. Dusky pink cheeks—still alarming shade of grey. Having received transfusion. Adorable pyjamas with hearts. Ear piercings. Making her look vulnerable. Incongruously I recalling they putting saltpeter in milk. At girls' schools chez nous. To keep libido down. I wondering if behind innocent closed lids—she feeling angry. Being famous for temper. Once climbing ledge. To throw pavé at spurning boyfriend's window. Breeze filling room. Curtains blowing gently. Leaves whispering happily. No one surveying the coming and the going.

> Suggesting sickness just a pause. In the gaiety. Making hospitals chez nous. Appear like prisons.

The short stories collected in Ed Kleiman's *The World Beaters* are genre pieces, though not of a kind all readers will be familiar with. Almost all are stories of family entanglements, with occasions like weddings or *bar mitzvahs* providing the situations that set up the ensuing action. This action is almost wholly external—in which we learn about the characters via conversation, and though a first-person narrative is Kleiman's favoured point of view, that voice is rarely introspective. The outcome of this approach is a fairly fast paced *repartée* among characters we never really come to understand. Kleiman's narrators, in particular, remain mysterious to the reader, but not for any obvious reason. In one of the better stories in *The World Beaters* a family reunion brings a young man to the West Coast for his first visit, and his time spent cycling around Victoria leads him to muse about the "siren song of the Pacific." But the story's action—a rather funny train of events concerning old cars and their dubious attractions—never quite reveals what the narrator's introduction to the coast means to him. In another coastal story, eccentric Vancouverites wear each other down with their zany antics, yet we're not exactly sure at the story's end what their entanglements are meant to suggest. The clearest focus of Kleiman's fiction is what's referred to in a number of his stories as Winnipeg's North End. But again, not quite enough is suggested about this "Old World Village" for an outsider to appreciate what the neighbourhood is meant to stand for. The characters who people it are a variety of borscht-belt-style strivers, who fling insults at the drop of a hat, but there's something tentative about their portrait as well. Only one story—ironically about the Chinese proprietor of a local laundry, and not his Jewish clientele—captures some of the ambience and texture of immigrant life in Winnipeg after the Second World War.

In the collection's title story—by far the best piece in *The World Beaters*—Kleiman shows that he can imbue the story of a man's life, from birth to death, with novelistic detail and subtle humour. But the portraits that surround this one are not nearly so precise.

Yeshim Ternar's novel *Rembrandt's Model* is packed full of narrative dips and turns. It begins as a contemporary travelogue, following a young Canadian named Sara on her travels to Istanbul. There, she encounters a man with a secret library of 17th century books. Following this, a chapter shift takes the reader into what amounts to a long short story depicting the life of a Portuguese converso, whose travels to Holland lead him into Rembrandt's circle. Here we encounter one of Ternar's more pleasing tableaux: a depiction of exporters of *etrogim*—the large, lemonlike fruit central to the rituals of the harvest holiday of Succoth. Once this tale concludes, the narrative returns to Sara, now in Montreal, as she broods over her studies, failed romance, and the possibility that a form of messianic revelation is encoded in such daily events as her interaction with a St. Laurent Boulevard tailor. Though certain motifs—messianism, past lives, world travel—run through the novel's disparate sections, there is no scaffolding on which Ternar's narrative ramblings can take clear shape.

The long narrative set in Rembrandt's Amsterdam has its own charm as a historical set piece, but it is only loosely relevant to Sara's travels. And the outcome of these is a bizarre disintegration in a Montreal hypnotherapist's office, which sets Sara's search for emotional health in the somewhat clichéd context of a self-help session aimed at exorcising the influence of her would-be Jewish mother-in-law. This session is lent a more sophisticated air by Sara's insistence that she carries secret knowledge about the false messiah, Sabbatai Zevi. Zevi's preachings caused

great upheaval among the Jews of the Ottoman Empire and lands further west during the mid-seventeenth century. He is a kind of sensational bugaboo in Jewish history—a scandal maker and transgressive figure who influenced Jewish notions of redemption and mysticism. Ternar is not the first writer to import Zevi to fictional ends that do little to inform our sense of his mission or his meaning for contemporary readers. One reason for Sara's fascination with Zevi arises from his claim that

> the Jewish soul must pass through all the world religions before it can gather the broken pieces of light (the shekhinah) which are scattered around the world. These scattered pieces are concentrated mostly among the Muslims, he said. Therefore, a Jew must be a Muslim before he can truly become a Jew

This is an idea for the nineties—multicultural messianism—but things get battier in due course as Sara muses

> that perhaps the collected works of the Sabbateans have never been revealed to the world because the world is still not ready for their truth. The crisis of Sabbateanism occurred in 1666. If you invert the numerals, you get 1999. Perhaps that is when the Sabbatean teachings will come to light.

Beside issues related to the larger narrative pattern of the novel, I wondered often about its language. Would a Canadian writing her ex-lover, a native of Turkey, tell him, without explaining the word, of her "dysphoria"? Why is the story of a 20th-century Canadian at loose ends in Turkey told in much the same tone and diction as the tale of a confidant of Rembrandt? Is it a help or a hindrance to the reader of this tale to hear that a character has lips whose "carmine tumescence discharged invisible taunts"? And there is Sara's oddly lazy claim as she explains her ennui to her abandoned lover by saying that "the emptiness" she feels lies not in her but "in the West." In an irruption that contradicts her supposed savvy as a postmodern anthropologist, Sara whines that "people here have no knowledge of history."

As with much else in *Rembrandt's Model*, the reader is left to wonder what she could possibly mean.

Renovated realism

Russell Smith
Young Men. Doubleday $29.95

Zsuszi Gartner
All the Anxious Girls on Earth. Key Porter $18.95

Bill Gaston
Sex is Red. Cormorant $19.95

Brian Panhuyzen
The Death of the Moon. Cormorant $19.95

Reviewed by Brett Josef Grubisic

A prevailing bit of CanLit mythology concerns its relentless realism—that psychologically probable characters set in a concrete, recognizable landscape is the hallmark of our literature. The following story collections toy with this assumption. If the foursome are not exactly subversive, their purposeful excesses of plot and character suggest an awareness of convention and an eagerness to break beyond it.

Russell Smith, Toronto fashion columnist and author of *How Insensitive* and *Noise*, stays mostly true to form in his first story collection, *Young Men.* As his past novels have shown, Smith has a magpie's affinity for glittery surfaces that is twinned with a parodist's disdain for them. The tension between the two sentiments works—to a degree: the satire enlivens otherwise bland notations about never-exactly-fascinating people, but Smith's enchantment with things fashionable blunts his satiric edge.

Eight of Smith's eleven stories feature men (Dominic, Lionel, James) whose fraternal badge is aloof glibness. Each guy stands on the periphery of fashion—by

choice or circumstance—and looks at the centre with yearning. "Dominic is Dish" is characteristic. In it, beautiful youth with names like Vibica Ashe and Muriella Pent dine at trendy restaurants (Uranium, Crepuscule), attend A-list events, and drink whatever's *au courant*. Russell's rendering of scenes recalls Hemingway in *The Sun Also Rises*, albeit with far less *angst*. Repeatedly, he gives readers access to an ostensibly glamorous world and then shows it to be vacant. Smith's dialogue in particular captures the amphetamine charge and incessant facileness—

> 'Well well well, darling, mister very very suave, intellectuals only here, give us a kiss, *mwa*—'
> 'Danny sir, loved the piece on—mwa—the handgun chic thing, very vicious, very very *very*—'
> 'Dominic, sir, I haven't seen you since at least last night and I love you and you and you, I am not serious enough for you, sir, you *Buzzer* types, we only talk TV here—'
> '*Love* your *coat*,' said Dominic, 'what is it, that new nylon with—'

Though in the thick of it, Smith's seeming alter ego is none the less a secret gossip columnist who skewers the hip.

What can be amusing with Smith, though, creates a problem: his tendency to dwell on his characters' surface attributes makes feeling much about their inevitable crises difficult. "Party Going," "Sharing" and "Desire," for instance, study the complex intimacies of couples. Yet because the characters are in part targets of satire and in part simply *boring* creatures, they cannot endure a reader's scrutiny for long. We do not get involved because there's no story *per se* to grasp. This shortcoming is especially evident in Smith's lengthy story, "The Stockholm Syndrome." It describes the bus odyssey of Lionel—author of obscure novels and legend in his own mind—that ends in self-discovery. Lionel's newfound depth seems pat and improbable. Smith's narration expresses such dislike for the pomposity of Lionel as well as the yokel culture of Yarmouth, Nova Scotia that the sudden turnaround (in which Lionel's humanity emerges as if from a cocoon) has a false ring. Smith is so quick with the witty phrase and this season's fabric that sincerity and the nuance of commonplace humanity elude him altogether.

Anxiety is indeed a keyword throughout the nine stories of Vancouver-based Zsuzsi Gartner's début, *All the Anxious Girls on Earth*. Tied to this anxiety are other qualities familiar to readers of, say, Margaret Atwood: characters (a shell-shocked retail clerk, a broken-hearted office worker) who feel trapped and need to escape, but are possessed of an apathy-inducing sense of being overwhelmed.

While Gartner, an editor and journalist, focusses on the quirky denizens of urban environments, she's always conscious of her literary forbears. In "How to Survive in the Bush," for example, Gartner uses knowledge of Canadian literature (from Atwood to Moodie as her title alone suggests) to tweak tradition. Under the guise of a survival guide, she explores the theme of mismatched lovers. Following stints as a country wife and rural artist, the city-bred protagonist dreams of concrete and traffic. The story, written in the imperative à la Lorrie Moore's 1985 short story, "How to Be an Other Woman," employs a comic frame to explore the relationship between citizen and landscape.

Gartner's best stories are her edgiest. With distinct echoes of Barbara Gowdy, "Boys Growing" follows the trail of a high school teacher whose erotic interest lies in "green fruit"—the boys in her class. The sympathetic examination of the cruelly witty and manipulative narrator incidentally reveals Gartner's wisdom about desire and the steps people take to get what they need. A complex comic piece, "Odds That, All Things Considered, She'd Someday be Happy," fea-

tures an icy-cold teenaged terrorist, her mentally handicapped victim and the mothers of the two, one of whom later rises to fame as a talk-show personality. Gartner here takes on the voices of four characters with aplomb, and builds an oddly uplifting story from the wreckage of several lives.

Gartner's gift for inventive scenarios and turns of phrase makes for highly visual, kilometre-a-minute storytelling. And her humour is always sharp. At times, however, her work reads like a comic monologue: it is fast and topical but not especially memorable. Gartner does not often excel at developing psychologically resonating characters or involved plots. And in stories such as "Anxious Objects," "The Tragedy of Premature Death Among Geniuses" and "Measuring Death in Column Inches," clever conceits and bravura delivery cannot fully maintain our interest.

Outsiders, weird family units and unusual epiphanies in the midst of everyday life are the outstanding aspects of Bill Gaston's third collection of stories, *Sex is Red.* This is not to say his stories form a catalogue of grotesquerie; Gaston's fondness for his decidedly weird characters and their sometime comic, sometime tragic follies is evident in every sentence.

The title story (which first appeared with the less sexy title, "Painting the Dishes Red") and "The And" are built on a similar foundation. The former describes a suburban meeting between long married Marie Anne and free spirit Tooley, lovers some two decades earlier. In the latter tale, stolid Don rekindles a friendship with Walter, an easy-going nonconformist. Both cases present men on the social margins who act as prompts to their more materially comfortable companions, and suggest the limitations of "having it all." While the stories could edge toward cloying nostalgia for freedom, Gaston's sharp observations about the foibles of all his characters indicate the benefits and shortcomings of both sides.

With no little glee Gaston sketches wayward families in "Saving Eve's Father" and "Wisdom." The latter story looks at three children in a family who have reached the end of the relationships with their father, a man already dead twenty-four years. Knowing he was soon to die, the ailing parent had written a series of letters to each child: through their words he passes on his paternal wisdom as they grow up. A slice of Maritime gothic, "Angels Kill Hummingbirds" describes a "just plain trash" family waiting for its long-suffering leader to die—during a holiday meal and without the aid of medical professionals.

Other, very brief, stories are like miniature sketches of madness tempered by the soft lighting of comedy. Like in Gaston's lengthier pieces, "The Sunday Lise Saw Jesus," "The Night he Put his Clothes on in Public" and "With Your Hand in Satan's Gleaming Guts" showcase protagonists who stretch the definition of "normal." As reflected in these vignettes, their moments of intensity (whether of pain, embarrassment, or wonder) offer some form of salvation, though not always ones we learn to expect.

The fourteen stories that comprise Torontonian Brian Panhuyzen's uneven début collection, *The Death of the Moon,* run through the whole gamut of genres, edging close to the speculation of science fiction, time-tripping to 1940s Ontario and then careering back to tales thick with good ol' boys vernacular. Like Gaston, Panhuyzen focuses on offbeat moments and unexpected realizations. By placing perhaps too great an emphasis on the plainly weird, however, Panhuyzen, an editor, publisher and performer, reduces the scope of his fiction: a story's O. Henry moment becomes its centrepiece and obscures other potentially valuable qualities.

Response to the "Wouldn't it be strange if . . . ?" structure of the stories is complicated by Panhuyzen's prose. The author favours a kind of descriptive filigree whose

busyness is more often disruptive than seductive. The opening sentence of "The Machine Escapes" is illustrative:

> The air is thick with heat as it laps against the little building from which Hewyn emerges. Claustrophobia has driven him outside ahead of the others, but he feels no better under the incendiary sunshine, his eyelids crushed into moist slits. As he surveys the gravel compound that is entirely circumscribed by chain link and barbed wire, the sandblasted rock and scrub rolling away beyond it, he imagines with amazing clarity the slow ooze of his sunglasses down the instrument cluster of the rental car.

Panhuyzen's collection is stuffed with literary technique, restless experiment, flowery language, and diverse themes. Despite these many efforts, *The Death of the Moon* remains curiously leaden. It is as though Panhuyzen put so much effort into making a literary artifact that the end product shows all his labour and little of his art.

Long-Lost Worlds

Raymond Souster
Collected Poems of Raymond Souster: Volume Eight 1991-1993. Oberon n.p.

Raymond Souster
No Sad Songs Wanted Here. Oberon n.p.

Raymond Souster
Close to Home. Oberon $29.95 cloth/$14.95 paper

Reviewed by Dermot McCarthy

Reading Raymond Souster's poetry, one gets the overwhelming sense of a congenial, eminently decent, deeply empathic human being. Blessed with what might be called a mundane epiphanic imagination, an elegiac sensibility, and a perfect pitch when it comes to a natural-sounding, conversational prose, Souster is an important poet in our tradition. His turn from English to American models and aesthetics in the 1950s exemplifies the fusion of native and American influences that predominates Canadian poetry since the mid-century.

Collected Poems . . . 1991-93 reprints *Running Out the Clock* (1991) and *Riding the Long Black Horse* (1993). Now in his late 70s, Souster continues to produce poems like trees do leaves; but while each is unique and seems as natural as breathing, as they pile up in these unedited editions the effect is drearily repetitive.

For many years now, Souster has been a Wordsworthian poet recollecting in tranquil retirement, working up memories into anecdotes. "Sitting in with Pigs" recaptures the precision, shapeliness and humane wit of his best work, and in "Laird's Confectionary," he is almost Orphic in his exhumation of the lost world of his generation's youth. When Souster gets it right, as he does in such nostalgic-narrative poems, he achieves his poetic's highest potential, a subtle allegory of the commonplace: the kind of breath-taking and yet disturbing suggestion he developed in such early and masterful lyric miniatures as "The First Thin Ice."

Just as an elderly relative's recollection may lead us to see a parent or place in a wholly new light, so too do Souster's poems about pre-war West Toronto, the city's jazz clubs, baseball on the island, his father's youth and experiences on the Western Front, and Souster's own childhood, adolescence, and years in the RCAF during World War II. *Running Out the Clock* contains a number of "Pictures from a Long-Lost World," a series he began in the 1970s as a combination of personal album and public archive. However, while "That Last Bend," about starving children in Ethiopia, is a subtly complex expression of deep anguish and even deeper mystification, the satiric bite in "Toronto Landlord, Christmas Week" is more a nip; and "Boy in the White Shirt," which describes the famous photograph of the student facing off with the tanks in Tiananmen Square,

cannot displace the power of *that* image with its own.

The challenge for any poet, but particularly a poet of the quotidien like Souster, is to combine clarity of focus with energy of expression, and not so much to write *about* the thing but as if the thing itself spoke, *for* itself. Souster has not deviated from the project and principles he announced in early credos like "Get the Poem Outdoors," "The Lilac Poem," and "Queen Anne's Lace"; so "Fire-Hall Parking Lot" sits on old ground:

> leaving me slightly breathless
> here among my tin cans and bottles,
> before the unexpected miracle
> of everyday things
> transformed into the extraordinary,
> with no explanation asked for or needed,
> only price the pure joy of our surprise.

To redeem the commonplace, to show the world in the way of revelation, is a noble project with a long and honorable pedigree. But Souster's realist poetic is often at odds with his epiphanic intentions: he *sees* the quotidien miraculously transformed into the extraordinary, but does not *enact* that transformation in the language, rhythms, and shape of the poem.

While Souster's father dominates *Riding the Long Black Horse*, with "All the Long Way Home" and the poems in "Stand Down, Cover Up" forming a moving testament to the man who in many ways was the template for Souster as man and poet, in *No Sad Songs Wanted Here* (1995) he turns to his mother's last days and death. He also records "The Life & Death of the Colonial Bar & Grill" and "A Local History of Chocolate." *Close to Home* is a wonderful Souster title, suggesting his life-long residence close to his birthplace, as well as the significance of baseball, literally and literarily, in that life. On the whole, it is a stronger book than *No Sad Songs Wanted Here*. "Last Words with My Mother" brings closure to that experience. There are more "Pictures from a Long-Lost World," dealing with such disparate items as Ned Hanlan, the Warsaw Ghetto, J.S. Woodsworth, the War of 1812, Canadian artillery in Flanders, and a duel in Toronto in 1817. And although there are yet more poems about cats and squirrels and falling leaves, birds in the trees, and even, alas, Wiarton Willie, Souster's war remains the lodestone of his mental life. Robert Billings said that Souster's ironic vision, "in which the best of life and the worst of life battle constantly for attention," came clear to him during the war, "when he experienced the paradox of camaraderie and attrition." That vision persists in "The Ballad of the Coca-Cola Kid," "Our Friend John," and "D-Day 43."

A Work of Devotion

Carl Spadoni

A Bibliography of Stephen Leacock. ECW $45.00

Reviewed by Joseph Jones

Numbering over seven hundred pages and weighing in at a little under four pounds, this bibliography has the aura of a monument. Good paper, sewn signatures, and a cloth binding of silver-embossed serious blue serve to further that impression.

As a descriptive bibliography devoted to a Canadian author, this work has few companions. Five others, all published in the 1980s, include Michael Darling's A.J.M. Smith (Véhicule), J. Howard Woolmer's Malcolm Lowry (Woolmer/Brotherson), Bruce Whiteman's Raymond Souster (Oberon), Susan Bellingham's Isabel Ecclestone Mackay (University of Waterloo Library), and Roy Miki's George Bowering (Talonbooks). Of these, only the Lowry and Mackay are likewise purely primary. By far the largest of these others is the Bowering at some four hundred pages. A published bibliography, primary and/or secondary, is one mark of canonicity for a literary author. ECW Press has been responsible for

issuing most of the substantial enumerative Canadian author bibliographies. With a few exceptions, these have appeared in a set that self-consciously proclaims a canonical function in the phrase "Canada's major authors."

Thus it seems appropriate to consider the place of Leacock in relation to this bibliographic manifestation of his status. (Of course, the existence of this bibliography immediately contributes to enhancement of that status.) For an independent though crude gauge, I tallied author coverage in some one hundred reference works from a personal card file, and Leacock ranked at the lower end of the top forty. A less thorough garnering of citation counts in the MLA bibliography suggests a move further up the chart. Still, the conclusion is that there is disproportion between the undertaking and its object.

This disproportion is not a bad thing. It reflects the devotion of the compiler, Carl Spadoni, who is Research Collections Librarian at McMaster University. By his own account in the introduction, he has "collected Leacock's work fastidiously since 1979." This is the foundation of the bibliography. Fellowship and grant funding have sustained five years of research and have subsidized publication. The number of people both competent and willing to undertake this kind of bibliographic task probably is declining, in part because the matter is today less covered in the curriculum of graduate literary study or librarianship.

The bibliography itself is divided into twelve sections that group materials by type. In addition are provided a detailed table of contents, a Leacock chronology, an introduction, a list of location symbols, twenty-nine pages of illustrations, and a combined index of names, titles, and some subjects. Answers to any questions about using the bibliography must be sought in the fifteen-page introduction. A careful reading of this turned up only one typo ("19101" for "1901" on line 15 of page 37).

The first of the twelve sections, "Separate Publications," covers the various editions and issues of 134 titles and amounts to almost half of the volume. Entries typically provide quasi-facsimile title page transcription, collation, pagination, foliation, size, contents physical and textual, an account of binding and dust jacket, and notes. Thanks to the compiler's work in a variety of archives, the notes often contain a good deal of circumstantial and incidental information. A spot check of A16a.3 (the 1922 American issue of *Arcadian Adventures with the Idle Rich*) against a battered and recased copy from my university's general collection revealed no discrepancies in the description.

While the general arrangement and layout are clear, there are details that may cause some difficulty, especially for the casual user. (1) Sections C-F and J-L adopt a chronological one or two-digit numbering system. For example, C1.1 follows C99.2, meaning that 1901 follows 1899. The user must resort to induction or reading the introduction for explanation. (2) A reader who is using the bibliography to locate a short piece must rely on the index to locate the item as content in a book, although all other instances may be collected under the entry for serial publication. For example, C94.1 offers twenty-five lines detailing initial and subsequent publication of "ABC: or, The Human Element in Mathematics," with no indication that it was collected in *Literary Lapses*. A further complication is that the URL listed in this entry is for a National Library of Canada electronic text explicitly derived from *Literary Lapses*. (3) Although 1998 is described as "the cut-off date," it is really an after-which-not-possible date, since the bibliography was published in 1998. The only 1998 item is A134, a Spadoni edition of Leacock. (4) The nature of entries (name, title, subject) in the index could have been

made more evident through typography or separate indexes. These things said, it has to be admitted that no large and complex work can offer transparent navigation and use.

Professor E-merit-us

Clara Thomas
Chapters in a Lucky Life. Borealis P $24.95

Reviewed by Ruth Panofsky

To readers of Canadian Literature, Clara Thomas requires no introduction. Thomas's pivotal roles as early proponent and critic of our literature, former president of ACCUTE, and member of the Department of English, York University are well known among academic and general readers of this journal. Thomas's work has continued into retirement. In 1994, Tecumseh Press published All My Sisters: Essays on the Work of Canadian Women Writers and in 1999, Borealis Press issued her memoir Chapters in a Lucky Life, Thomas's own contribution to the field of Life Writing. Since 1977 she has taught a graduate course in Canadian Life Writing to students who have benefited from her sweeping knowledge of the field and its long history in this country.

Born in May 1919 in Strathroy, Ontario, Thomas claims her birth was fortuitous: she was "the first child of young and healthy parents, born red-headed, and too soon." Thomas enjoyed the obvious advantages of health and the special status attributed to red-headed members of her family. Moreover, since her birth followed her parents' marriage by a short two months—a shocking and potentially disgraceful event for her young mother and father—her mother determined early on that daughter Clara "would confound all comment by being front and centre—by being an achiever from the beginning." In fact, neither her immediate family nor the young Clara appears to have suffered censure for her "early" arrival. True to her mother's spirit of willfulness, Clara proved herself an outstanding student in Strathroy's public schools and enjoyed what she evokes as a rich childhood and adolescence amid the relative comfort and security of small-town life.

As a youth, Thomas was told by her paternal grandfather that he would make sure she attended university. Soon, taking voracious pleasure in reading and writing plays as a girl, her grandfather's vision for the future became her own. After high school, Thomas moved alone to London where she attended the University of Western Ontario and completed the BA and soon afterward the MA. She was discouraged by friends and colleagues, however, from pursuing the PhD because she was a woman and much later, following marriage to meteorologist Morley Thomas and the birth of their two sons, completed a doctorate at the University of Toronto.

Thomas's narrative unfolds against the larger backdrop of world events that shaped Canada during the first half of the twentieth century. In fact, one of the strengths of this volume is the vivid picture it provides of this country at war and the lives of young men and women so affected by World War II. Thomas takes her readers through a brief history of Strathroy—"in every way a perfect fit for our various archetypal Canadian small towns"—but especially fortunate in the political success of some of its nineteenth-century inhabitants and for being situated on the main line of the CNR. In fact, after her parents died, Thomas inherited the family home where she still spends her summers. Her portrayal of Strathroy, then and now, owes much to the affection she continues to feel for "home."

From London, Thomas moved first to Dauphin, Manitoba where her new husband was posted during the War and later

to Dunnville, Ontario. She describes young couples who lived with constant uncertainty in less than satisfactory accommodations. Through it all, Thomas began a family and continued working first as an essay marker, then for years as a teacher of Extension for her alma mater. When the narrative shifts to her appointment at York University, then a fledgling institution, Thomas's story intensifies and focuses. There is much here about York's earliest years, especially the institutional politics that took it from conception as a four- year liberal arts college to its current state as a flourishing university that grants professional as well as graduate degrees.

An "emotionally conservative" writer, Thomas carefully presents herself to an audience. She is "prudent and circumspect," adjectives she applies to Anna Jameson, the subject of Thomas's first biography, and to herself as biographer. Thomas's narrative positioning is strategic; she offers her reader selective details, both professional and personal, and the result is a complex portrait of a gifted and determined academic woman. Thomas participated fully in university life during the latter part of the twentieth century, faced difficulty and isolation as she tried to balance the claims of a professional career with the equally pressing day-to-day demands of family life—at a time when women of her generation and class were primarily wives and homemakers. Thomas admits to the burden of guilt she felt constantly as a working mother. Perhaps this accounts for her unabashed celebration of the women who supported her—and whom she supported—in life: paternal grandmother Martha McCandless; aunt Dorothy Sullivan; friend Agatha Cavers; and writer Margaret Laurence, whose friendship she cherished. In the end, this is indeed a work of celebration and affirmation of a "lucky life," as Clara Thomas tells it, a unique story of decision and resilience.

Flights of Verse

Frank M. Tierney and Angela Robbeson, eds.
Bolder Flights: Essays on the Canadian Long Poem. U Ottawa P n.p.

Anne Carson
Autobiography of Red. Knopf $33.50

Reviewed by Ian Rae

Bolder Flights represents the latest contribution to an ongoing critical enterprise that articulates why, as Michael Ondaatje stated thirty years ago, "the most interesting writing being done by poets today can be found within the structure of the long poem" (*The Long Poem Anthology*). Editors Frank Tierney and Angela Robbeson follow a strain of critical thought through Dorothy Livesay, Michael Ondaatje and others that sees "the long poem as distinctively Canadian in its documentary aspects, often serving a topographical and memorial function." While the notion of a "distinctly Canadian" genre is disputed by one contributor (Margot Kaminski) and has been the target of parody from long poem writers such as George Bowering (in *The New Long Poem Anthology*), *Bolder Flights* nonetheless addresses a range of issues pertinent to the study of the long poem in Canada.

If there are any doubts about the omnipresence of the long poem in Canadian literature, D.M.R. Bentley dispels them in "Colonial Colonizing." Bentley's introductory survey begins with "Now Reader Read. . . ", the "Jonsonian verse epistle in which Henry Kelsey recounts his journey in 1690-91 from York Factory (Churchill) to the Canadian plains" and argues that the oscillation between lyric and epic features in Kelsey's verse typifies a concern for balancing personal and communal expression that extends across three centuries of writing. While Bentley is necessarily cursory, the temporal range of his

survey and the 128 works cited in his 17-page essay set an impressive standard for critics wishing to make comprehensive claims about the long poem in Canada.

As the collection shifts to more focused inquiries, however, the boldness of *Bolder Flights* comes into question. Already in the preface, the editors cast doubt in this direction when they state that their collection "extends and revises previous analyses by the leading scholars in the field." If this collection is radical, it is radical only in the sense that Charlene Diehl-Jones employs the term in her essay on "Fred Wah and the Radical Long Poem": "Radical: from the Latin, pertaining to the root."

In fact, many of the essays aim to check overbold assertions—such as the "unmappability" of the long poem—in Smaro Kamboureli's *On the Edge of Genre.* Sandra Djwa challenges Kamboureli's dismissal of E.J. Pratt in an insightful essay that is, none the less, firmly grounded in a defence of early modernism. Similarly, Gwendolyn Guth re-assesses the picture of Pratt as "a bard banished to a poetic point of no return, with his clutch of unfashionable poems" by favourably comparing Pratt's *Brébeuf and His Brethren* to Eldon Garnet's 1977 *A Martyrdom of Jean De.* Further contributions include Stephen Scobie on definitions of the long poem, arguing for the inclusion of Bronwen Wallace as a "short long poem" writer. In a more poststructural vein, essays on Fred Wah, David Arnason, Kristjana Gunnars and Dennis Cooley focus on the long poem among Prairie writers.

Carson's novel in verse, *Autobiography of Red,* creatively engages with the Greek lyric tradition. A classics scholar, Carson has elsewhere cast new light on the works of Sappho, Mimnermos and Simonides of Keos, to name a few. This time she brings her talents to bear on the work of Stesichoros, most "'Homeric of the lyric poets,' according to Longinus." Carson revisits Stesichoros's *Geryoneis,* the fragments of which relate the story of Geryon, "a strange winged red monster" who dies protecting his mythical herd of red cattle from the covetous Herakles. In her proem, Carson writes that "the fragments of the *Geryoneis* itself read as if Stesichoros had composed a substantial narrative poem then ripped it to pieces and buried the pieces in a box with some song lyrics and lecture notes and scraps of meat." Carson creates an analogous mix by adding a palinode, a mock interview, testimonia and translated fragments, to her core romance-in-verse, "Autobiography of Red."

The romance at the heart of the *roman* recasts the Geryon myth as a contemporary homosexual love affair. In Carson's retelling, Geryon, not Herakles, provides the narrative focus. Plagued by shyness and acute sensitivity, Geryon resembles other artists-as-young-men except for a unique attribute: Geryon has wings. The wings play a largely metaphorical role until the story's conclusion. For the most part they symbolize Geryon's alterity, a difference he feels painfully when he meets and falls in love with Herakles. Not surprisingly, Herakles has his way with Geryon and then leaves him. At this point the narrative faintly echoes the "erotic sufferings" of ancient Greek romance. The echoes grow stronger as the Geryon-Herakles romance turns into a love triangle, a contest to which the winged monster is ill-suited. Geryon yearns for the soaring heights of love, but he achieves those heights only through art.

As befits the contemporary long poem, Carson combines poetry and narrative with references to visual media. The poet converts fragments of lost texts into "photographs" through the studied refinement and clarity of her lyrics. Yet Geryon begins his autobiography as a sculpture, a medium that underscores both Carson's sensitivity to classical form and her metafictive play-

fulness. As subtle fissures in the story widen and Gertrude Stein resurfaces from the proem to answer questions on Stesichoros in the final interview, one looks at the interviewing "I" and asks, "Autobiography of Whom?"

Fooling Around At Last

Tom Wayman

The Colours of the Forest. Harbour $14.95

Reviewed by Susan Ellis

In a 1993 interview, Tom Wayman declared his intention to change the focus of his poetry, to write more for the pure fun of it, backing off from a sense of social obligation to record the everyday reality of work simply because *somebody* needs to do it. His latest collection, *The Colours of the Forest,* is presumably the result, and he continues to craft poetry with all the wit and tragic pathos that characterize his previous fourteen collections. These poems, however, focus not precisely and not exclusively on joy, but rather on the deeply ambivalent times we live in.

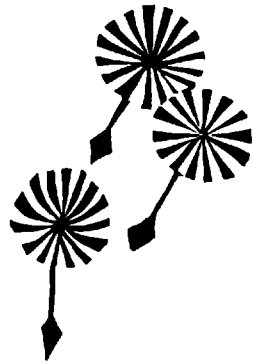
There are more of Wayman's wonderful poems about teaching, seen alternately as gardening, river journey, and warzone. In "The Genius", he takes a well-aimed poke, as a life-long defender of hermeneutic and narrative poetics, at language poetry that has nothing to say. But Wayman's material approach to the issues of middle-age life lead him now to exactly the twin themes that in youth appeared to be merely escapist: love and death—or, as Wayman explores these inescapable corporeal realities, the carnality and mortality of the human body. In addressing these themes, Wayman brings to bear his craftsman's toolbelt of comedy and compassion, a pure and tender lyric mode, the elegy of praise and of mourning, and the clownish persona of the Everyman "Wayman" character.

This figure, simultaneously tragic and comic as he struggles valiantly to hang on to a tiny piece of happiness or personal freedom against all odds, is almost gone, replaced by the unfortunate and boorish "Billy," a country neighbour character. "Wayman" appears here only in "The Road's Side" in which the poet talks back to critic John Harris with his familiar humour and sauce as he once again skewers the sacrifice of personal freedom required to maintain any committed sexual relationship. Wayman tackles this theme more seriously in the deeply anguished "The Quarrel," a piece both tender and enraged in which the poet does what he does best: he makes us feel the simultaneous hope and hopelessness of the human condition, in the yearning for love and for freedom that withers intimacy within the isolation of the nuclear family. A set of poems, "In a House of Women," ostensibly explores the tattered remains of the romantic myths that keep women tied to what Wayman calls "the old / error" of the gendered economy, but the text is actually another take on the over-arching theme of Wayman's career: the question of "what a man is / for." In "Where Mountain Water," "Sophia," and "La Belle Dame Sans Coeur," Wayman reaches back to an image he crafted as a UBC undergraduate in the 1965-66 Senior Poetry Workshop: the depiction of his own heart encased in concrete and buried in order to pursue a commitment to art. This series is an unfinished exploration of loneliness and a life lived without love that forms the basis of an extended quest parable continued from his earlier collection *The Astonishing Weight of the Dead.*

Wayman has a great time clowning around with sex and lust in a series of poems that includes some hilarious and exemplary ribald standards: "The Bald Man," "The Big O," and "Life With Dick" are sure to please. But the fun of carnal knowledge is underscored by the simultaneous knowledge of its possible physical

cost, the threat of disease or "a basket of puppies," and other poems that acknowledge grief, loss and death. These themes culminate in the "Clown" series, which offer another analogue extended though a series of poems. In these, the melancholic hilarity of the trickster—a joker, a jack-in-the-box who pops back up after every death blow, a baggy-pants rascal who can never win but never stops trying to outwit the authoritarian ringmaster in order to dance or play—is suffused with an alternating enmity and bitterness that belies the foolery.

Wayman chooses to end the collection not with comedy or tragedy, but with a sense of mystery and of gratitude for the experience of being alive. These poems offer no transcendence of the everyday, no late twentieth-century ironic detachment, no incisive intellectual analysis of the post-modern condition. They have instead the feel of a late-night conversation with an old friend, talking through without resolving any of the seemingly endless series of paradoxes that disorder our lives.



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Essays

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