

The Secular Opiate

Marxism as an Ersatz Religion in Three Canadian Texts

Proletarian literature in Canada often produces ideological misgivings in Marxist critics, particularly Robin Mathews in “The Socio-Political Novel” (146), Bruce Nesbitt in “The Political Prose” (175), and Clint Burnham in “The Dialectics of Form” (101), all of whom suggest that few noteworthy Canadian texts, if any, present Marxism in a way thematically palatable to a revolutionary consciousness, and even writers with leftist reputations often portray Marxism in a context that can easily undermine the political philosophy to which the writer purports to subscribe: for example, *Down the Long Table* by Earle Birney, *What Is To Be Done?* by Mavis Gallant, and *In the Skin of a Lion* by Michael Ondaatje, all present problems to a Marxist critic seeking a completely positive affirmation of a socially viable politics rooted in dialectical materialism. Misgivings in such a Marxist critic may arise in part from the depiction of the labour movement as a kind of ersatz religion, a secular cult, that acts as its own opiate and thus prevents meaningful social reform. While Marxism has striven to establish itself as a rationalist discourse, its terms in these three texts lie couched in a mystified discourse, one that might bring an unsympathetic reader of the texts to dismiss Marxism as an ideological delusion that already contains the seeds of its own political defeat: after all, the texts appear to suggest that such a political philosophy, despite its utopian idealism, if not because of its utopian idealism, is actually an experiment doomed to failure, and the era of *perestroika*, with its global abandonment of Communism, can only lend support to this readerly response. When pro-

letarian radicalism is not satirized, it is portrayed in an almost tragical light, with some kind of commentary upon the apparent inability of the movement to transform human nature, so that consequently all three texts in effect end with a social vision that almost seems to confirm the political irrelevancy of Marxism in Canada.

Collective, political pessimism about Marxism seems at first glance to be a particularly surprising trait among these three writers, given their varied, political experience: Earle Birney has demonstrated the greatest personal involvement in Communism by virtue of his own active participation in the Trotskyite movement during the Depression; Mavis Gallant has demonstrated a less explicit, more flirtatious, involvement with Communism by virtue of her experience in sociopolitical journalism; and Michael Ondaatje has demonstrated almost no explicit, personal involvement whatsoever in Marxist politics. Despite these varying degrees of commitment to some brand of Marxist ideology, however, all three writers produce texts that recount the stories of failed revolutionaries and aborted revolutions: the protagonist Gordon Saunders in *Down the Long Table* fails in his attempt to consolidate the splintered Communist factions on the West Coast; Molly and Jenny in *What Is To Be Done?* fail in their attempt to sustain a spirit of revolutionary idealism during the War; and Patrick Lewis in *In the Skin of a Lion* fails in his attempt to commit an act of political terrorism against a monument of capitalistic exploitation, the Toronto Waterworks. Moreover, each text's degree of ironic commentary upon the labour movement is directly proportional to the degree of each writer's engagement in political activity: Birney and Gallant undercut proletarian radicalism, reducing it to pathetic absurdities, while Ondaatje almost romanticizes it, elevating it to heroic dimensions. Nevertheless, all three writers portray the movement in terms potentially incongruous with the rationalist discourse of dialectical materialism.

Robin Mathews in "The Socio-Political Novel" argues that, unlike American writers, whose formula for sociopolitical reform consists of pitting the anarchistic individual against the bureaucratic community, Canadian writers have, until recently, rejected anarchistic individualism, equating it with capitalistic materialism, and have suggested that the individual can only find freedom through an enlightened alliance with the community (134-35): "[t]o contest the ideological presumption that the individual is more sacred than the group is—in Canadian critical terms—to write political novels, propaganda novels" (134). Birney, Gallant, and

Ondaatje do indeed appear to write texts that stage a political argument for communal solidarity; however, none of the texts can escape a romanticized individualism; the texts in fact present revolutionary ideology as itself potentially oppressive, an ideology of which the protagonists must always beware in order to sustain their individual humanity. Mathews also argues that, while political idealism in Canada has sometimes been connected with interests of the dominant classes, such idealism has nevertheless been the basis of sociodemocratic politics and has contributed to an extension of rights for certain minorities, both religious and ethnic (133). Birney, Gallant, and Ondaatje do indeed appear to subscribe to idealistic visions of social reform; however, none of the texts can escape a tragic pragmatism; the texts in fact present political idealism as an obstacle to political reform, even as the texts appear to portray such idealism with a kind of nostalgic sympathy. Mathews complains that “‘Left’ characters are regularly presented in Canadian literature as sick, uncertain and unstable” (146), and these three texts are no exception: the protagonists are often politically ineffectual and subscribe to a revolutionary vision that often resembles religious conversion. The mystical portrayal of revolutionary ideology is perhaps no coincidence, given that the dominant classes have at times marginalized such ideology to such a degree that it has had to operate as an underground organization, as a secret society—a metaphor that lends itself well to religious allusions. Birney in *Down the Long Table* draws implicit parallels between the Communism of the Depression and the monastic factionalism of the Middle Ages; Gallant in *What Is To Be Done?* draws implicit parallels between wartime Communism and Sunday School instruction; and Ondaatje in *In the Skin of the Lion* draws implicit parallels between the labour movement and primitive cultism. Implicitly, all three writers distinguish between what Graham Greene in the *The Comedians* has called the Marxist *mystique* and the Marxist *politique* (353): the three texts privilege visionary idealism over dialectical materialism, the *theorein* of utopia over the *praxis* of reform, and although any parallels between the rational and the mystical are not necessarily to be condemned, their presence in the three texts may pose a problem to a Marxist critic seeking a proletarian literature that attempts to offer a dialectical, not psychological, analysis of Marxist failure.

Earle Birney in *Spreading Time* recounts his devoted commitment to Marxist ideology, what with his extensive readings of left-

wing philosophers (26), his participation in leftwing clubs (27), and his contributions to leftwing magazines (29), all the while fundraising, proselytizing, and pamphleteering. Birney in “On ‘Proletarian Literature’” has gone so far as to say that at times such political commitment must take precedence over artistic commitment: “I would[...]not allow my reading of *proletarian* literature to interfere with the much bigger job of helping to organize my fellow workers towards the establishment of a society where writers will be free to express themselves without starving or turning intellectual traitors” (2). Birney in “Proletarian Literature: Theory and Practice” reaffirms this point more polemically by declaring: “the worker-writer must be ready to sacrifice his own artistic fruition in order that the heritage of past cultures, bourgeois among them, may be rescued and preserved and a finer society attained—a society which will unfold no earthly paradise but in which the artists of the future will have room to build upon the creative achievements of mankind” (60). Birney has argued early in his career that the writer must be prepared to forfeit writing in the present so that he or she may be able to write in the future, and while his politics have become less strident over the years, this devoted commitment provides the context within which *Down the Long Table* is written.

Birney has had experience as both an academic medievalist and a political revolutionary, a combination that may account in part for the frequent appearance of monastic allusions in his novel. The text opens with a McCarthyite hearing that frames the tale—a hearing whose overtones all too closely resemble a medieval inquisition, with the senatorial interrogator asking political questions couched in the terms of a “moral code” (4). “Do you preach internationalism,” the senator asks (5), and in an attempt to respond to such loaded questions Saunders—“an arena Christian” (3) and a “Man of Sin” (20)—offers only an inarticulate description of his own brand of Marxism:

‘I—if I could fit it coherently into, into expression, it would be a work of philosophy, I suppose, a book, or a’—not a bible, be careful—‘religion.’ (4)

This McCarthyite hearing merely parallels the earlier trial of the protagonist before the Social Problems Club in Toronto, a club situated in the Sunday School room of the Twelfth United Church (69), a club where Stalinites, the “Black Monks” (193), meet to hold what Roberts calls a “seance” (66). Club members not only participate in scholastic debates about Communist

dogma, but also act out, in Saunders' case, a kind of political inquisition, in which such "counter-revolutionary" viewpoints as Shavian fascism (77), Mosleyite trickery (83), and Trotskyite imperialism (85) are all condemned and their proponents summarily excommunicated: the eviction of Saunders from the Club causes his newfound friend Bagshaw to conclude that Communists "have a Religion without any, well, Ethics" (95), "[I]ike having a Longer Catechism and no Bible" (95).

The Marxist allegory, the "ponderous sermon" (115) delivered by Saunders at the Stalinist meeting (70-76), in fact represents an almost mystical interpretation of Communist dogma, an interpretation that owes more to the *New Atlantis* by Francis Bacon than to the *The Communist Manifesto* by Karl Marx: Saunders' tract, with its metaphorical Island, Swimmers, and Bathers, offers a utopian vision of Marxist philosophy without any Marxist materialism. The Stalinist rejection of this allegory only causes Saunders to declare that "it looks as if I'm not going to be joining any of the new orders, the political Friars" (93), but within a week he becomes a full-fledged Trotskyite, "a convert" in the words of Thelma, his future fiancée (105). Moreover, Saunders' trip from Toronto to Vancouver in order to establish a Trotskyite league becomes tantamount to the pilgrimage of a political missionary, a "prophet" (184), in search of other "prospective converts" (185). Saunders even recognizes his virtually sacred role in a moment of religious irony when he thinks to himself:

These, your precious 'politicized' few, they're just working for a new boss and mouthing a new religion. Everything, for them, has already been thought and written down somewhere by Saints Marx or Engels or Lenin or Stalin or one of their attendant priests. But through this road they may come to me.

You! Are you a Christ? You're only an imp of Trotsky, their Anti-Christ.

I'll make them read Trotsky.

They won't. They read only to be confirmed. (198-99)

Saunders' epiphany in this last line perhaps offers an inadvertent explanation for the subsequent failure of his Marxist mission to revolutionize society on the West Coast.

Mavis Gallant has admitted in the *Canadian Fiction Magazine* interview that she has at times had experience as an "intensely left-wing political romantic[...], passionately anti-fascist" (30), not only having raised money for striking workers (30), but also "having believed

that a new kind of civilization was going to grow out of the war" (39), and she stresses her continued, political commitment: "I'm *extremely* interested in politics" (33); "[m]y writing is permeated with politics" (33). Gallant in in *The Canadian Forum* interview goes on to admit that she has been an avid reader of "the Gollancz publications; the Left book club with the yellow covers" (23), but confesses that she has not adequately understood the Leninist pamphlet whose title is shared by her play *What Is To Be Done?*: "I knew what that little pamphlet was, but it was full of names I had never heard and didn't understand" (23) since "[y]ou have to know Russian politics" (23). Gallant in effect expresses an interest in leftist issues, but unlike Birney she has not become passionately engaged in a comprehensive understanding of the international left: whereas Birney expresses more interest in political *theorein*, Gallant has expressed more interest in political *praxis*; however, both writers prefer to use their fiction to examine political contradictions between theory and practice, contradictions that manifest themselves at the level of private experience. Janice Kulyk Keefer in *Reading Mavis Gallant* points out that Gallant insists upon highlighting the disparity between what people study and what they live, between the Marxist promise of freedom and the Marxist reality of sexism (122), and indeed Gallant agrees with Barbara Gabriel, who comments in *The Canadian Forum* that, within the play *What Is To Be Done?*, "women are completely earnest about the left-wing ideals [that] the men affirm, but all the men want to do is get them in bed" (27).

Gallant's exposure to the Communist movement may be less formal than Birney's experience; however, her play uses similar religious motifs to depict the Communist movement in Canada. Gallant's ironic commentary upon proletarian radicalism begins even in the opening scene, in which the two heroines Molly and Jenny take an informal class in Marxism, a class taught by Willie, a man "*dressed for a Bible Society meeting in a damp chapel*" (10), and by Mrs. Bailey, a staunch Communist with the same matriarchal authority as Mrs. Barstow, the maternal Trotskyite in *Down the Long Table*. When reciting the monotonous litany of Communist slogans, Molly concludes that Marxist instruction "*is something like Confirmation class*" (14), and indeed such religious overtones are emphasized by Mrs. Bailey's own soliloquy, in which she remarks:

The natural movement goes[...]*from religion to politics. That's a natural*

movement. Where's love? Before religion, if you like. To one side. A kind of bypass. Somewhere. But not between. Not between religion and politics. For one thing, there's no room. (34)

Molly's Russian pamphlet by Lenin is accorded the kind of reverence normally reserved for a sacred text (26-27), and the group of Jehovah's Witnesses stoned in the street outside Jenny's window (50) almost become a religious parallel for Communists similarly oppressed because of their secular beliefs. Gallant not only blurs the distinction between religion and politics throughout the play, but also suggests that the failure of the labour movement stems in part from its resemblance to a religious diversion.

Mrs. Bailey, for example, may remove the word "GOD" from the slogan "GOD BLESS THE RED ARMY" (53) during the Second Front Rally, but the visit by the Russian dignitaries cannot escape the overtones of a religious revival meeting, complete with its own brand of political hymns and "doleful keening of the righteous" (52). Jenny weighs the success of this diplomatic visit against the success of the diplomatic visit made sometime earlier by the Archbishop of Canterbury (54), and although nobody understands the Russian speech, Jenny responds with a rapt faith, more appropriate in a church: "What matters is what I felt when I believed. When I thought it was true. I've never been so happy" (59). When the two heroines discover, however, that Willie's heroic friend, the political prisoner Karl-Heinz, is in fact a Trotskyite, someone whom the women have been taught to regard as Fascist, they lose some of their trust in the representatives of the movement, and eventually Molly concludes: "Stalin is waiting for the war to end so that he can enter a monastery. He was always a mystic. Essentially" (93). Just as Gordon Saunders in *Down the Long Table* fails to sustain his Marxist idealism in the face of petty, political factionalism, so also do Molly and Jenny eventually fail to sustain their Marxist idealism in the face of the Armistice when the social structure between men and women threatens finally to return to normal without any meaningful, social transformation. Keefer accounts for this ending with a biographical commentary, arguing that Gallant "has obviously divested herself of[...]the kind of naive emotional[...]immersion in a cause that promises a simple, straightforward solution to injustice and exploitation, a solution that cannot tolerate, never mind deal with, the existence of its own inherent contradictions and complexities" (122).

Ondaatje also writes about politics in a similarly religious tone, but unlike the other two writers, he has often tried to disavow the sociopolitical implications of his writing. Ondaatje expresses this political disengagement during the 1972 *Manna* interview, where he declares: “I’m not interested in politics on [a] public level” (20); “[t]he recent fashion of drawing journalistic morals out of literature is I think done by people who don’t love literature or who are not capable of allowing its full scope to be seen” (20). Ondaatje later admits in a 1975 *Rune* interview that he has an interest in “the destruction of social violence by the violence of outsiders” (46) and that “[t]he whole political thing has been obsessing me this last year” (51); however, he tries at the same time to deny any alignment with a systematized politics by stating:

I avoid reading books on[...]politics. It’s a funny thing, political theses I find impossible to read. I have to be affected emotionally or in a sensual way before something hits me. (51)

Ondaatje professes his own admiration for the proletarian poet Tom Wayman because “he talks about politics, about history as it happens to himself” (52), but at the same time Ondaatje betrays a potentially embarrassing, political naiveté by confusing Trotsky with Marx (52)—a curious, educational blindspot, given that *In the Skin of a Lion* appears to exemplify a political sensitivity to the plight of the proletariat. Ondaatje in the 1990 *paragraph* interview declares: “[n]ovels that give you the right way to do things I just don’t trust any more” (5)—and he makes this statement even as he laments the lack of canonized texts that feature the political involvement of artists (5): he is more interested in “human character as opposed to politically correct behavior” (5); yet nevertheless, he wishes “to write about that unofficial thing that was happening” (5) during the era of proletarian radicalism. Ondaatje in fact expresses a burgeoning tension throughout his career between two conflicting, artistic impulses, the will to social retreat and the will to social contact. Ondaatje may have no professed interest in social politics, but just as Birney and Gallant show the way in which the *mystique* of Marxism can affect idealistic personalities, so also does Ondaatje use *In the Skin of a Lion* to explore the private response of the individual to public politics, a response largely mystical in tone.

Ondaatje makes this mystification of political experience immediately apparent in his text: for example, Patrick Lewis in his childhood has a virtu-

ally surreal encounter with the skating loggers, an encounter in which “[i]t seemed for a moment that he had stumbled on a coven, or one of those strange druidic rituals” (21), an encounter that merely prefigures his later, proletarian encounter with the secret society that gathers illegally in the Toronto Waterworks, a veritable “Palace of Purification” (103) that, to the workers, embodies all the byzantine grandeur of a medieval cathedral, a building where “[e]very Sunday they still congregated” (158) in order to watch the theatrical performance of an agit-prop allegory—a puppet-dance that not only recalls the mystical character of the political tract read by Gordon Saunders, but also the religious character of medieval miracle-plays performed by village guild members. Moreover, the leader of the movement, the key actress Alice Gull, who tries to “convert” (125) Lewis to the revolutionary cause, is in fact a church member incognito, a former nun saved by Nicholas Temelcoff during the accidental fall from the Bloor Street Viaduct earlier in the text: the revolutionary, political leader is cast as a reformed, religious leader—a charismatic figure whose eloquent call to arms, with its explanation of class disparity, does not draw explicitly upon political philosophy, but relies more upon the mystical notion that, because people are “terrible sentimentalists” (124), “[y]ou reach people through metaphor” (123), through allegory—an idea that, Gull argues, is proven true by the compassionate reaction of Lewis to her suffering role in the agit-prop miracle-play (125).

Linda Hutcheon in *The Canadian Postmodern* points out that such mimed miracle-plays dramatize the silence of the proletarian classes, a *silence imposed upon them by the dominant classes, a silence that embodies not an act of political rebellion, but an act of political surrender* (97): “[s]ocial commentary challenges the separatist aestheticism of art that denies history and human pain—but, in a typically postmodern paradox, we learn this through art” (98). Gull accuses Lewis of retreating from social issues into a realm of romantic privacy (123), an accusation to which Lewis responds that “[t]he trouble with ideology[...]is that it hates the private” (135); “[y]ou must make it human” (135): while the political thinking of Lewis appears at first glance to oppose the political thinking of Alice, both positions are in fact similar, in that they both privilege the *mystique* of ideology over the *politique* of ideology. Lewis remarks: “I don’t believe the language of politics, but I’ll protect the friends I have” (122); however, his revolutionary sentiments derived from a sense of communal loyalty are not

enough to forestall the historically consistent, anticlimactic ending, in which the traditional structures of power are merely reaffirmed by the subsequent failure of Lewis to destroy the waterworks. Ondaatje, like Birney and Gallant, is not so much interested in the effects of political *theorein* upon public experience as he is interested in the effects of political *praxis* upon private experience: all three writers in effect privilege the integrity of the individual over the integrity of the community.

Birney, Gallant, and Ondaatje represent disparate political views, but all three writers imply to some degree that Communist politics represents a kind of secular supplement for the experience of religious community. Richard Crossman in *The God That Failed* attempts to explain the reasons for this recurrent relationship established in Communism between the secular and the sacred:

The emotional appeal of Communism lay precisely in the sacrifices—both material and spiritual—which it demanded of the convert. You can call the response masochistic, or describe it as a sincere desire to serve mankind. But, whatever name you use, the idea of an active comradeship of struggle[...]has had a compulsive power in every western democracy. The attraction[...]of Communism was that it offered nothing and demanded everything, including the surrender of spiritual freedom. (11)

Detractors of Marxism may simply dismiss the labour movement on the grounds that such religious associations merely invalidate the principles of dialectical materialism, and indeed the respective failure of each protagonist in the three texts is in part attributed to a misplaced, visionary idealism—an idealism developed in terms of a religious discourse. Implied in the criticism of such detractors, however, is the notion that, while committed engagement to an actual religion may be appropriate, perhaps even beneficial, committed engagement to a secular ideal is somehow inappropriate, perhaps even self-defeating. Birney, Gallant, and Ondaatje, however, do not try to invalidate Marxism so much as try to examine the ideological contradictions that almost always arise between the political realms of theory and practice, and the three writers go on to imply that, while Marxism may define religion as a species of ideology, of false consciousness, Marxism often fails in the end to take into account the fact that even its proposed alternative, its dialectical materialism, is itself necessarily “false” in the sense that it is equally ideological.

Bruce Nesbitt in "The Political Prose" complains that "[t]he absence of serious leftist scholarship in Canadian literature is both a reflection of a milieu and an indictment of the academic community" (175), and this lack of intelligent, Marxist analysis perhaps still remains to be redressed. Mathews observes that "the amount of genuine ideological analysis, even in novels of protest, is depressingly small" (147) for three possible reasons: first, the Canadian development of Communism has historically had its course directed by institutions outside the country; second, the media controlled by capitalistic interests has long presented proletarian radicalism as an antipatriotic expression of selfish materialism; and third, writers in this country have had to appease the dominant classes in order to gain any socioeconomic mobility (147). Mathews concludes in effect that the Canadian left is politically parochial. Clint Burnham in "The Dialectics of Form," however, argues that Marxist interpretations are rare in Canadian literature because of the success of social democracy in Canada, a movement that has compromised its idealistic agenda for pragmatic gains (101); moreover, "[t]he aesthetic conservatism of the Canadian left[...]has served to isolate and prevent the emergence of leftist critics, poets, and novelists" (101) since the left is insulated from any consideration of the necessary role that radical aesthetics plays in the formation of a radical society. Burnham concludes in effect that the Canadian left is not simply politically parochial, but also artistically parochial.

Whereas the protagonists in *Down the Long Table* and *What Is To Be Done?* are often depicted as absurdly naive, the protagonists in *In the Skin of a Lion* are depicted as heroically noble: all three texts in the end, however, reflect the attitudes of writers who have at one time or another forsworn some brand of definitive, political engagement, be it Trotskyism (as in the case of Birney), wartime socialism (as in the case of Gallant), or simply politics in general (as in the case of Ondaatje). Birney and Gallant appear to deploy satirical, religious motifs in order to express not so much a disenchantment with the *mystique* of Marxist theory as a disenchantment with the *politique* of Marxist practice, and indeed both Birney and Gallant portray visionary idealism in a sympathetic light, while at the same time criticizing the misapplication of material philosophy; on the other hand, Ondaatje deploys more serious, religious motifs in a way that reflects his own distance from the Marxist milieu, a distance that offers greater room in which to romanticize the mystical grandeur of proletarians who agitate for

social reform. Each text perhaps reflects the continued attraction of each writer to the *mystique* of revolutionary politics—an attraction qualified, however, by the unwillingness of each writer to engage such a *mystique* at the expense of individual integrity. While the texts tell stories about people who yearn for a sense of socially responsible community, the writers betray misgivings about the longterm effectiveness of this idealistic desire, and as a result the texts threaten to reify the bourgeois argument that, as a viable form of radical politics, communist philosophy in the era of late capitalism has done nothing but prove its own innate ineffectuality.

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