

# *Canadian Literature*

A Quarterly of Criticism and Review

Autumn 1996

\$15

# 150

Urquhart  
and  
Munro

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## Call for Submissions

*Canadian Literature* invites contributions to a forthcoming special issue on the state of the art in Canadian Poetry and poetics. Potential topics include poetry and the other media, poetry and paradigms of reality, poetry and politics, poetry and the state (especially funding), poetic regionalism/nationalism/internationalism, translation (the practice of, the impact of), influences/presences from elsewhere/abroad, contemporaries and/in the canon, the role of institutions (schools, small presses, little magazines, creative writing programmes), the poetry marketplace, innovations and outsiders, why I write/read poetry.

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# Canadian Literature / Littérature canadienne

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**A Quarterly of Criticism and Review**

Number 150, Autumn 1996

Published by The University of British Columbia, Vancouver

Editor: Eva-Marie Kröller

Associate Editors: Margery Fee (Reviews), Iain Higgins (Poetry),  
Laurie Ricou

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Publications Mail registration  
number 1375  
GST R108161779

Publication of *Canadian Literature*  
is assisted by the University of British  
Columbia and the SSHRCC

*Canadian Literature* is indexed in *Can-  
adian Periodical Index* and *Canadian  
Magazine Index*. It is available on-line  
in the *Canadian Business and Current  
Affairs Database*, and is available in  
microfilm from University Microfilm  
International, 300 North Zeeb Road,  
Ann Arbor, Michigan USA 48106

For subscriptions, back issues (as avail-  
able), and annual and cumulative  
indexes, write: Circulation Manager,  
*Canadian Literature*, #167 - 1885 West

Mall, University of British Columbia,  
Vancouver, BC Canada V6T 1Z2  
TELEPHONE: (604) 822-2780  
FAX: (604) 822-9452  
<[http://www.swifty.com/cdn\\_lit](http://www.swifty.com/cdn_lit)>

SUBSCRIPTION: \$40 INDIVIDUAL;  
\$55 INSTITUTIONAL; PLUS GST IN  
CANADA; PLUS \$10 POSTAGE OUT-  
SIDE CANADA

ISSN 0008-4360

*Business Manager:*  
Sandra Christensen  
*Design:* George Vaitkunas  
*Illustrations:* George Kuthan  
*Printing:* Hignell Printing Limited  
*Typefaces:* Minion and Univers  
*Paper:* recycled and acid-free



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*Canadian Literature* welcomes submissions of articles, interviews, and other commentaries relating to writers and writing in Canada, and of previously unpublished poems by Canadian writers. The journal does not publish fiction.

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Articles should be submitted in triplicate, and addressed to The Editor, *Canadian Literature*, #167-1885 West Mall, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, B.C., Canada V6T 1Z2. Submissions must be accompanied by a self-addressed return envelope, either with Canadian stamps or accompanied by International Postal Reply Coupons. Submissions without SASE cannot be returned.

Articles should follow MLA guidelines for bibliographic format. All works accepted for publication must also be available on diskette.

# So Unwise About Green

Recognition that we do not in fact create the wilderness, but that it makes and remakes itself, is the first step toward learning to read nature's text as something other than fiction.

ALISON BYERLY

In learning to read land, one can't just name objects but must point to what they do: pines live in sandy soil, oaks in clay, and thus their rates of water absorption differ.

WILLIAM HOWARTH

Nature, as revealed by evolutionary biology, paleobiology, and geology, is violent, unbalanced, improvisatory, dynamic.

FREDERICK TURNER

A thought may have no weight and take up no space, but it exists as part of a stream of consciousness that is made possible by food, air, and water.

HAROLD FROMM

In sketching the eclectic history of ecology, William Howarth discovers "what amounts to a vernacular and democratic science." That such science, undisciplined in its promiscuous receptivity to varied fields and methodologies, has "earn[ed] the hostility of classical science," should make ecology especially interesting to students of literature, themselves as a group (I include myself) in turn ignorant of, if not hostile to, classical science. Ecology might just be the science most open to literary scholars.

Indeed, the collection in which I read Howarth's "Some Principles of Ecocriticism," amounts to a sustained argument that students of literature must be governed by Barry Commoner's first Law of Ecology: "Everything is connected to everything else." *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (U. Georgia Press US\$45.00/19.95) is the first anthology to attempt to assemble the defining

documents of this emergent sub-field. For these editors, those documents are almost exclusively U.S. American, both in origin and focus—a profound irony given the a-national movements of wind, water, and even eagles. But in proposing a second volume, they acknowledge this paradox. And, certainly this reader can and should be a great stimulus to students of Canadian literature, whose project, as I noted in related editorial in *Canadian Literature* No.130, has so often featured land, landscape, climate, wilderness, animals, and region.

Glotfelty and Fromm collect twenty-five essays, organized in sections devoted to theory, criticism of fiction and drama, and studies of environmental literature, in which these terms and concepts constantly circulate and revise one another (although “region” is not listed in the generally helpful Index). An annotated list of recommended reading, and of relevant journals and organizations is appended. Glotfelty’s own Introduction develops “the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it.” “Simply put,” she writes, “ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment.” The deliberate naiveté of this definition enables (as does the recklessness of ecology itself) a challenging undefining of what literary scholars do.

The name of this *re-placing* is implied by the epigraphs to this review, all selected from essays in *The Ecocriticism Reader*. They propose a program for becoming un-wise, a notion most entertainingly presented in this astonishing tidbit from Frederick Turner’s “Cultivating the American Garden”:

... consider the courtship ritual of the blue satin bowerbird, which, convinced that its own color is the most beautiful in the world, builds the bluest nest it can to attract its mate, painting it with chewed-up blueberries and decorating it with blue flowers, bits of blue paper, and its own feathers; a nest which, since it is on the ground and vulnerable to predators, is never used by the lucky bride. (She later builds a sensible little nest in a tree.) This charming un wisdom is more attractive, perhaps, than wisdom. Wisdom sits still and doesn’t make a fool of itself. Nature sends in the clowns.

A little study, Turner notes, will unsettle any assumption that nature is inherently wise, at least, by any analogy to *human* wisdom. The mime of the clowns (they are likely to be mute) enacts ecocriticism’s greatest challenge to be unwise, to abandon (somehow, however paradoxically) our anthropocentric view, so beloved, especially perhaps, of humanists and social sci-

entists, for a biocentric view in which all organisms have equal status. This approach would have us getting our literature classes outside of buildings to taste the needles of the jack pine, and finding out more about Roberts' animals than we can pick up from a dictionary or encyclopedia, and reaching, in some impossibly implausible yet necessary way to learn the *language* of animals.

And, conversely, being un-wise also means attending to a different principle than utility. Even as we try to find the way out of an anthropocentric approach, we, in the "humanities," find ourselves essential to this awkwardly sprawling muddle of ecology. In this collection, this proposition finds its best expression in Canadian Neil Evernden's "Beyond Ecology":

The subversive nature of Ecology rests on its assumption of literal interrelatedness, not just interdependence. Ecology as a discipline has been called upon to ignore the former and deal with the latter, on the assumption that the patterns of dependence can be shifted, whereas relatedness cannot. It seems to me that an involvement by the arts is vitally needed to emphasize that relatedness, and the intimate and vital involvement of self with place. Ultimately, preservation of the non-human is a very personal crusade, a rejection of the homogenization of the world that threatens to diminish all, including the self. There is no such thing as an individual, only an individual-in-context, individual as a component of place, defined by place.

To become less linear, to open the creative irrational un-mind which will discover relatedness, Evernden celebrates the possibilities of the unmodish (for science) concepts of metaphor and pathetic fallacy. Through them, he urges, we can imagine the world—even as we distrust our social constructs,—from a non-human perspective. In elaborating and demonstrating the connectedness of Howarth and Evernden, the essays in *The Ecocriticism Reader* provide a compact, provocative program for genuinely reciprocal study of literature—environment. L.R.



# Trees

Trees dream that they will be horses some day.  
They stand in the blue rain and gently shake their hair.

Sometimes they laugh for an entire year, then they sleep  
until the horizon startles up and stares into the black mouth  
between the stars.

When the chickens settle on their branches at dusk,  
only the saplings giggle: the older trees hold their breath in,  
for they know that God  
made chickens because he missed his angels.  
Trees know about love.

In the mountains the trees call for the sea.  
In the night the waves crash and crash on the shore.

While the cows sleep under their branches with their eyes open,  
the trees listen to the gentle chiselling  
of the violin maker in a mountain town. They remember God  
very well,  
even though he only spoke to them once:  
he was everything that you couldn't see,  
everything which now streams with light.

Sometimes they ride the moon as if it were a horse.  
Sometimes the moon crawls into their branches.  
Then they embrace her and softly sing.

In the winter, trees go around naked,  
so that in the moonlight their beautiful bodies  
will be transformed into silver.



When the fire comes, they are smoke.  
When war comes, they follow the soldiers  
on the tips of their toes, with a finger on their lips.  
In the night they fly quietly through the air,  
dragging their roots behind them  
like jellyfish in the sea.

They remember the first day of the world,  
when the fish were swimming in the dark ground.  
The trees walked out through the fields,  
caught the fish, and washed them with water.  
Because of that the fish can't remember the earth at all,  
and the trees know that nothing is new  
and everything will be renewed.

## Weed Flowers

He picked flowering weeds, wild  
flowers, as we were walking,  
and gave them to me: wild sweetpeas,  
goldenrod. They grace the kitchen table  
now. For them, I have displaced  
the garden flowers which are always  
there for the picking.  
For the moment, these weeds triumph,  
and will die too in their time,  
which is not yet.

I carried them home in my hand,  
rode the crowded transit bus  
with the bad-tempered driver  
who thought I was lingering  
with a lover. No. These flowers,  
picked so casually on a walk, were  
given me by a man who will not  
be a lover, though I had hoped.

So I have carried carefully home  
the flowers casually given, and  
when they die, or when I leave  
for the other home where I have to  
live, these flowers, these wild-growing  
weeds transferred to a tame  
kitchen, these weeds in their end  
will mark an end. Not yet.

# Meditations on the House

## The Poetics of Space in Jane Urquhart's *Changing Heaven* and *The Whirlpool*

On Christmas Day, between the early morning opening of gifts and the evening meal, I read Jane Urquhart's *Away*, one of the gifts of the day. Quite soon after, I read *Changing Heaven* and *The Whirlpool* back-to-back. Urquhart creates worlds one wants to last; as Gaston Bachelard says in *The Poetics of Space*, the poet places us on the threshold of oneirism, where our dreams can be entered. "The great function of poetry is to give us back the situations of our dreams" (15). In Urquhart's poetic prose, the reader experiences a sense of enlargement—of possibility—the presence, Rilke calls it in *Duino Elegies*, of the perilous archangel (Elegy Two). My meditation on the house in Urquhart's fiction arose, then, quite simply and subjectively from the situation of my reading, combined with the sense of enlargement which her work licenses. More analytically, Urquhart's presentation of character through the characters' thoughts, dreams, and imaginings, rather than through the events of their lives, invites attention to the house: in her fiction characters' dreaming and remembering occur in well defined interior spaces. In Urquhart's novels, characters develop through a poetic spatiality which extends from the intimacy of the house to realms unlimited.

Much has been said about landscape in Urquhart's fiction, but little has been said about the house, which seems to be an image of considerable importance, even of genesis. Interviewed by Geoff Hancock, Urquhart, explaining how "other people's memory stories" enter her poetry and prose, says, "When I hear a story I visually construct the house where the story occurred, the garden outside the house, the road that passes by the front

door, the town the house is in and so on" (35). In her fiction, the house is both opposed to, and an entrance to, landscape, which, in its "turbulence and flux" (Canton 4), is one expression of chaos. Order and chaos (Hancock 36), house and universe, are polar opposites, needing one another; there is no entering chaos but from the house.

Of the three novels, only *Changing Heaven* fails to achieve the effect of enlargement, or achieves it to a lesser extent. Since Urquhart's novels provoked my thinking about poetic space, I wondered if my diminished satisfaction with *Changing Heaven* had to do with this aspect of the novel. Having established, rather personally, how this article arose, let me begin anew.

A spate of books reimagining nineteenth-century fictions has recently appeared—Timothy Findley's *Headhunter*, Julia Barrett's *Presumption*, Lin Haire-Sargeant's *The Story of Heathcliff's Return to Wuthering Heights*, Emma Tennant's *Tess*, and Jane Urquhart's *Changing Heaven*. One might assemble another list of returns to the eighteenth century although these tend toward appropriations of form rather than content. In this genre, Urquhart succeeds more than most (and most do not succeed) but her success in *Changing Heaven* comes in spite of, not because of, the return to a nineteenth-century model. The language is magnificent (if occasionally extravagant), but structure and character do not match language. The structure of *Changing Heaven* is inorganic, overly elaborate. Like two fabrics (images of drapery, silk, sewing recur) lying side by side, the nineteenth-century and present-day sections of the book are unseamed; other parts are overstitched. Ann and Arthur, present-day characters, have too neatly similar childhood encounters with Tintoretto. More significantly, the parallelism—the way in which the nineteenth century explains the modern—illustrates a lack in the present-day narrative.

Structurally, the alternating ghost (beginning 1900) and character (beginning in the 1950s) chapters make for discontinuity. That spectral time and human time coincide in the final section does not compensate for the diminution in tension in the alternate ghost chapters, conversations between spooks, really, during which they sort and sift and settle the accounts of their lives (42). Arianna Ether, dead balloonist, acts as the auditor of what Emily Brontë has to say on ferocity, creativity, and love. Arianna's persistent question as to how she died gives the ghost chapters some push, but it is not enough to "inspirit" this side of the novel. In a metafictional way, Brontë's

remarks on writing comment upon Urquhart's making of the novel. Urquhart writes about a writer (Ann Frear) writing about a novel (*Wuthering Heights*) whose author is a revenant in Urquhart's own text and in the life of her writer-character. Confused? The revenant comments, in conversation with her companion ghost, on subjects in Urquhart's novel. Obsession and possession, not acts of writing, are, however, Urquhart's subjects. Critics and reviewers speak of Urquhart's interest in obsession (Vanwart 47; Canton 4). I prefer to think of her characters as dreamers, and their dreaming is obsessive. They dream of vastness, interminable space. Obsessive dreams of space (Jeremy Unger's for skies and polar regions and Ann's obsession with weather) and Ann's dream of entering heaven through the "other" (her attempt to possess Arthur) involve these characters in circumnavigational journeys. Such dreams, and their resultant journeys, must, however, begin on earth. A tension must exist between the terrestrial and the aerial, between the house where one dreams and the universe one aspires to. The house—whatever its form—is the *terra cognita* from which the dreamer takes flight. When the intimate space of dreaming (the house) is absent, we cannot follow flight. A poetics of intimate space prefigures a poetics of immensity.

*Changing Heaven* invites comparison with *Wuthering Heights*; scenes from the latter are replayed in the former. *Wuthering Heights* is a powerful place in the reader's memory. The personal experiences of the reader congregate around images of house, moor, crag, but especially around the house, so that years after reading, one says "Nelly Dean" and smells the Christmas cakes and feels the cool, damp, flag floor. Geography and domestic space are so thoroughly realized in *Wuthering Heights*, they seem to be places we have been. Like us, Ann Frear is a reader of *Wuthering Heights*. As a child, *Wuthering Heights* is a blizzard she stumbles into (18); for the adult Frear, it is a space as memorable as a room, a cave, a beast's lair.

A sense of space, both intimate and immense, is invitational in Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*. Perhaps it has to do with her experience of the moors or her own dreaming at Haworth parsonage. As readers we enter the spaces of her novel, conflating these with our own experiences, but we cannot reach the originating source. *Wuthering Heights* may be read, but not rewritten.

*Wuthering Heights* is a book about a house. Its verticality (atop a hill) bred the gargantuan aspirations of its two main characters, and its isolation concentrated those appetites. The rage and wrath of their passion was nourished in attic rooms, lofts, and peculiarly enclosed chambers. *Changing Heaven*



aspires to but does not occupy the space of *Wuthering Heights*. As a result, Ann Frear is a pale version of Catherine and Jeremy Unger, the Heathcliff-like character, is an effect without a cause. An unsatisfying dispersal of character marks *Changing Heaven*, because the characters are unhoused.

In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard writes that “great dreamers profess intimacy with the world. They learned this intimacy, however, meditating on the house” (66) in the “*chrysalis*” of a house which enabled “both the repose and flight of being” (65). Urquhart creates great dreamers in her fiction; the successful dreamers move from intimate space to immensity (sky, water, wind), that is, from the house to the universe. In fiction, as in poetry, the great dreamer, the poet-character, licenses the reader’s own daydreaming: “a world becomes . . . accessible to our daydreaming” (Bachelard 47). The fiction of dreaming enables in the reader a similar movement from intimacy to immensity.

A fully realized house—and that doesn’t mean description—is requisite if the reader is to credit, and be complicit in, a character’s dreaming. We do not need the geometry of the house—“Inhabited space transcends geometrical space” (Bachelard 47)—but we need to experience with the character the planes of daydreaming in the enclosed space. Intimate space is the agent of character integration (Bachelard 6). Character integration begins from this site (the house); character and site are fused. Between sheltered space and storm space, a dynamic dialectic exists; at whatever pole the dreamer stands—house or universe—each awakens the dream of the other.

*Changing Heaven* does not create the intimate spaces, which the reader can enter, where characters dream the immensity they move towards. Of course, the novel does present several levels of a Toronto house and an upstairs room in a west Yorkshire cottage. Additionally, there is a white room. But these spaces have the non-intimacy of a tourist home. *Away* and *The Whirlpool*—novels that do succeed in terms of poetic space—are not appropriation novels; in each of these, characters dream in intimate inhabited space and move towards its opposite, limitless world.

In *Changing Heaven*, Ann Frear (freer than what?) “wants to write a book about disturbance” (2), but disturbance can only be known by way of repose. We know little of the dailiness and duties of her life. A present-day academic, her work focuses on weather in *Wuthering Heights*, a novel with which she has been obsessed since childhood. Eventually she will admit to

her lover, Arthur Woodruff (Heathcliff at ground level), that all her words on weather are really about him. Weather is her metonymic heaven. Jeremy Unger, nineteenth-century balloonist, parallels Anne; he dreams of polar regions, expanses of white emptiness.

It might seem that each of these dreamers, and their dreams, is sheltered in intimate space—Ann's west Yorkshire cottage and Jeremy's white room at Dover. The room at Dover is, however, not a protected space for dreaming; Jeremy's beloved, Arianna, must shed her past for their tryst in the white room. The room is an ice box, fixing time—erasing the past, precluding the future. Although the site of sexual intimacy, it is the opposite of individual integration since it strips memory and prohibits imagining. As a natural reflex to the polar room, Arianna dreams a house, which is everything the room is not. Jeremy's dream of immense snowfields, the "home" to which he eventually journeys (199), must have been nurtured in some intimate space but this side of the dialectic never emerges.

Arianna's forbidden dream of a house stands opposite Emily's dream of Wuthering Heights, and as their century-long spectral conversation unfolds, we understand how the Haworth parsonage enabled Emily to invent her dreamhouse. "We [at Haworth] were besieged, you see, by something other, something outer, regardless of how we were sheltered" (82). In the attraction of the terrestrial for the aerial, the dreamer would draw down the universe into the house (Bachelard 66); so Emily longs "to haul some of the stars I saw from my bedroom window into the parlour in the afternoon" (82). When a house can be dreamed, invention proliferates: "*I* invented them [Catherine and Heathcliff] so they could invent each other" (82). They lived "[a] permanent state of unfulfilled desire" (84). The exultation in longing which characterizes Heathcliff and Catherine's relationship may seem, as it is described here by Emily, adolescent, but the lovers' unfulfillment is an extension of Emily's dream of a house. A state of impermanence, never finality, characterizes the dream of a house (Bachelard 61). Emily's emphasis in her conversation on her dream of a house, a subject to which she frequently recurs, indicates that her dream generated not only a house but also the characters, and their passions, that tenant Wuthering Heights. Love, Emily says, has "architectural properties" (137), and conversely, for Heathcliff, everything about the house—"the flagstone floors," "the winds that assault his house"—are "memoranda" of Catherine (146).

Ann Frear, no more than Jeremy Unger, knows intimate inhabited space.

She careens into immensity without first living intimate space. Neither the several-levelled house of her childhood nor the motel rooms of her assignation with Arthur Woodruff constitute inhabited space. Urquhart does not shelter her character in intimate space enabling her to dream immensity, as Emily Brontë dreamed it at Haworth. Without a realized inhabited space—a mix of dailiness and a place of dreaming—Ann Frear is dispersed, non-integrated. A clinician's report—the sights, sensations, conversations experienced by the character in a series of rooms—supplants integrity of character: a pathology of character replaces presence.

The west Yorkshire cottage to which Ann Frear flees (part two), escaping her past, is a space nuanced with literary associations. A launchpad to immensity—Ann's extravagant hopes for heaven via Arthur Woodruff—this cottage is little different from Jeremy Unger's white room.

As is appropriate for one whom literature has claimed, Ann makes her assault on heaven with words—"an orgy of speech" (223), desperate talk. But Arthur Woodruff—whom she joins, without invitation, in Venice, where he is inspecting Tintorettoes—is not the angel to bear her heavenward. He insists upon his attachment to daily life, his ordinariness: "'I'm not what you think . . . desperate or passionate. . . . I'm fixed, Ann, stationary'" (236). Clearly, hers must be a solo flight, but there is too much flight, too much heaven. Grounded Arthur is merely dull; he is no substitute for the place of repose in which dreaming begins. *Changing Heaven* gives us heaven with no earth—no nook, corner, room, house where heaven is dreamed. There is no entrance to this immensity. Jeremy Unger's dream of unlimited, unmarked polar space is unoriginated, and Ann's dream of heaven begins not in inhabited intimate space but unfolds like a tourist's appropriation of the intimate spaces of the inhabitants' homes in a toured landscape, in this case a literary landscape.

We can credit, can join (indeed, are irrevocably joined to) a character's dream of immensity if it arises in intimate inhabited space. *Changing Heaven* is rare atmosphere without a house on earth. Of course, it need not be a house; hut, cave, a single room, the branches of tree will shelter a poet's dreaming. And the universe that the poet dreams in that sheltered space need not be the known universe. The kingdom which Mary (O'Malley) dreams amidst the daily tasks of her Rathlin island cottage and in an Ontario homestead is not of this earth (*Away*), and Fleda (*The Whirlpool*) dreams, and finally departs for, a wilderness of tree, wind, and water

because a tent sheltered dreaming. A poetics of space, in these two works, renders comprehensible the longing for universe.

**P**rologue and epilogue frame *The Whirlpool*. Because he had the “conventional life” of “a copy clerk” (11), Robert Browning daydreams the dilapidated Palazzo Manzoni his own, imagines it restored and full of friends: “In his daydreams the old poet had walked over the palace’s swollen marble floors and slept beneath its frescoed ceilings . . .” (9). In well-being, listening to the calm lapping of the canal, which nudges the side of his house, Browning dreams past his ordinariness to the possession of that extraordinary structure. The poetics of the prologue situate Browning in repose, anticipating imminent death. That anticipation is linked to “dream architecture; the unobtainable and the unconstructed” Palazzo Manzoni (epilogue 237). Aware that the gondola moored below will bear his body to the cemetery, Browning thinks of the boat as “chrysalis” (237). Bachelard in *The Poetics of Space* speaks of the house as *chrysalis*, place of “both the repose and flight of being” (65). Prologue and epilogue, focusing on Robert Browning’s death, illuminate the poetics of space in the rest of the novel, an account of Fleda McDougal’s movement from intimate space to interminable space.

*The Whirlpool* provides those spaces a reader can enter, bringing the most personal recollections with her, because its characters are fused to intimate inhabited space. It is scarcely possible to speak of the characters of this novel without mentioning domiciliary space. *The Whirlpool* is a novel of integrated characters—memory and imagination fluent, past and present interpolated—and of characters integrated with space. Whether it is Maud Grady in the gothic structure, Grady and Son (house and business), with its attached embalming room, or Fleda’s tent, these domestic spaces are places of thought and dream. Maud’s house is rooted in earth and in history. The surrounding garden, orchard and cemetery—places where Maud not only works but dreams—is the site of the battle of Lundy’s Lane. “[S]he lived, worked, and slept in the same series of rooms . . .” (42). In this house, long-settled and imbricated with history, Maud has her “travels.” She is often “away in the memory of her dead husband’s memories” (95), and from the objects found on the bodies of those whom the whirlpool has claimed, she construes whole lives. Confident in the well-being the house affords, Maud Grady, roaming its corridors or settled in a corner, “visits” the horizons of

other lives. Truly a resting place (a meaning implicit in the business function of the structure), Maud's house enables her to imagine these horizons.

Sharing the house is Maud's son, known only as "the boy" or "the lovely boy" (153). His silence, his wordlessness, puzzles and sometimes provokes sputtering rage in his mother, a rage she immediately regrets (66-67). Something is wrong with this boy (autistic, one reviewer says); he seems to inhabit a vast solitude. The boy is sifting in silence the "I" from the "non-I": "[T]he word *world* moved lazily behind his forehead, followed by the word *water*" (75). The image of the body and the self is formed in intimate space, in the cradle, in the first house, but something is askew here. There is no "I," no name; he does not name himself (201). The "non-I" is overwhelming; the boy is located, or unlocated, in the immensity of the "non-I."

In perhaps the most poetic passage of the novel, the boy conquers the world with words: names of objects or names of actions are desperately repeated; then, descriptions of others' actions proliferate: "Now you are climbing the stairs. . . . Now you have come to the top, now you are walking down the hall" (200); and then a manic need to organize the contents of the house sets in (204-06). The child fills the world, the open, with words: "The child spoke constantly; his mother and her employees hardly at all" (163).

Between the boy and the chief male character, Patrick, a visitor to this Niagara Falls area, a great sympathy develops. The boy must recognize in Patrick a companion, another who inhabits immensity. And to Patrick, the boy's disconnected words are recognizably the language of poetic association. In the dialectic of house and universe, each character in *The Whirlpool* stands at one pole or another, and there dreams its opposite. From the boundless world, the boy, as the narrative ends, comes home. Patrick belongs to immensity.

Although he is housed, a visitor at his uncle's farm, Patrick has so long dreamed landscape that he lives in the territory of his dream, the landscape. Patrick is a "refugee" from Ottawa. In his clerical work there, and in the society and conversation of friend and workers—"utter loneliness" for him (69)—he had experienced "panic" (70). The landscape, by contrast, is a "pure, solitary state" (192). Conceiving the plan of swimming the whirlpool, he will "take the world above with him" (81), "a journey" without maps, beyond language (221). Intimate with immensity (the landscape), he is poised on a precipice (the whirlpool) from which, if he enters its mystery, there will be no return. Throughout the summer, he considers the



whirlpool, and speaks of the projected swim. No one believes him. Sometimes he thinks of the whirlpool as architecture (the tug of the house from the position of immensity), and sometimes as flesh. In his mind, he conflates the whirlpool with the woman Fleda, whom he observes in secret. The possession of the woman—his need to know her movements, habits, history—is not a desire for intimacy. Signs or acts of domesticity in her revolt him. Speech, that is her speech, is unwanted and unheeded; he wants to keep her completely still (128). When towards the end of the summer, she tries to draw close to him, he responds to her intimacy with distance: “I don’t *want* to be this close to you. Not now, not ever. . . . I want the distance” (181). Unlike the whirlpool, she is ordinary not mysterious: She “pulled his fantasy into the mundane architecture of fact” (182). Patrick is one for whom intimate space has no attraction; in immensity, he does not dream its dialectic opposite, the house. Wherever, long ago, he dreamed interminable space (and we are told where), he has made his choice.

Fleda stands at the pole opposite to Patrick. In a house, a tent actually, she dreams the universe. Years earlier, in other inhabited spaces—in her first house and in a hotel—she had conceived of her dreamhouse, one which is now under construction in Cedar Grove, just yards from the whirlpool. But over the summer (1889, according to her journal), for Fleda, the dreamhouse, the projected house, becomes inadequate. Although she has already, in the move to the tent, “broken out of the world of corners and into the organic” (142), during the summer and the long dream in the solitude of the tent, she will complete her departure from architecture (143), daydreaming a house without walls, a wilderness. The tent opens onto space. In the primitiveness of this refuge, the tent, Fleda feels herself becoming a part of the whirlpool (145); she responds to “*the pull of the open dark*” (151). The tent and the forest (the “*unsurveyable*” [151]) neatly illustrate the dialectics of sheltered space and storm space, house and universe. The poet who daydreams in the well-being of sheltered space welcomes the storm. Fleda is called to adventure. Ultimately rejecting the geometrical house, with its long-considered floor plans and excellent windows, she refuses, as well, the role of angel in the house, a role offered through marriage and symbolized in her husband’s gift of Coventry Patmore’s poems. Because she is rapt in dreams, Patrick confuses Fleda with the whirlpool, and she, for awhile, mistakes him for what she is dreaming.

Patrick—already in immensity (the landscape), poised on the brink of

annihilation (the whirlpool)—sees Fleda as part of the landscape, but she is infuriatingly independent of his efforts to keep her still, quiet, and distant. It is distance and, finally, absence he wants from her: “[I]t was *she* he desired to be absent from” (217). The desire of the beloved’s absence, as Rilke similarly recognizes, is integral to the dream of immensity.

And you, dear women  
who must have loved me for my small beginning  
of love toward you, which I always turned away from  
because the space in your features grew, changed,  
even while I loved it, into cosmic space,  
where you no longer were. . . . (Rilke, “The Fourth Elegy”)

Similarly in *Changing Heaven*, Jeremy Unger’s peculiar kind of love for Arianna requires absence; the beloved is cherished through absence not presence, but it is an absence which is felt as possession not lack. Jeremy arranges Arianna’s absence (the ballooning accident) to possess her more fully. The dreamer of immensity becomes intimate with vastness; for such a dreamer, the absence of the beloved is union. This is the condition which Fleda, too, achieves. When Patrick, after Fleda’s attempted intimacy, turns his attentions away, Fleda feels, at first, like “an abandoned house” (193), but when her anger subsides, she merely separates the “man who visited” from “the one in her dreams,” whom she can keep “in the dream house in her mind” (196). Fleda no more needs his real presence than she does the projected house in Cedar Grove. Rilke calls the cosmic space toward which one dreams “the Open”: “[T]he natural world looks out/into the Open” and “Lovers, if the beloved were not there/blocking the view, are close to it” (Elegy Eight), but “Aren’t lovers/always arriving at each other’s boundaries?” (Elegy Four). In the immense, the beloved’s absence is tolerable, is necessary.

Primitiveness and simplicity make the tent a superb example of intimate enclosed space. In a house of many rooms, the one room or corner must be found, but in the tent, site of basic needs and simple domestic tasks, the body is one with enclosed space. In the tent’s protective space, Fleda drifts: “*I think about the water all the time. It is constantly on my mind*” (61). At the end of her summer of dreaming, “an idea was forming, taking vague shape. Departure” (218). To her journal, Fleda confesses:

I can’t imagine this house any more. David is very pleased with the progress . . .  
but I just can’t imagine it.

Yesterday, I found the Old River Man's cave halfway around the whirlpool. . . . This cave seemed better. I wanted to stay there. People did once, but not on this continent. (218)

When departure is chosen, the dialectic between house and universe—tent and continent—collapses, and the dreamer is liberated even from her own dream (Bachelard 198). The center becomes one with the horizon, and the poet is intimate with immensity.

Jane Urquhart creates great dreamers. In *Changing Heaven*, the earlier fiction *Wuthering Heights* is substituted for the enfolding space of the house, in which and because of which a character dreams. Ann Frear does not enter the “heaven” she aspires to. She crashes, awakening on earth (*Changing Heaven* 238), where she will find, or construct perhaps, a first home—a hut, a house, for dreaming. In *The Whirlpool*, the poet-dreamer Fleda McDougal becomes intimate with immensity because her dream of it was housed, protected, in the caressing walls of a white tent.

In commenting on the dialectic of domiciliary and immense space in Urquhart's two novels, I have been trying to understand my diminished satisfaction with *Changing Heaven*, establishing what I believe that novel lacks. But perhaps the lack I sensed is fundamental to Urquhart's point. What Ann Frear needs is succinctly named by Mary Ann Smart in “Emily's Ghost,” her review of the novel: “the essential underpinning of a life”—the “domestic foundation that allowed Emily [Brontë] to create her masterpiece” (28). The poetics of space in Urquhart's work suggests that the daydream of infinity begins in the felicitous space of the house. *The Whirlpool* creates what *Changing Heaven* does not—a domain of dreaming, but its absence in the latter confirms that there is no changing heaven but from the house.

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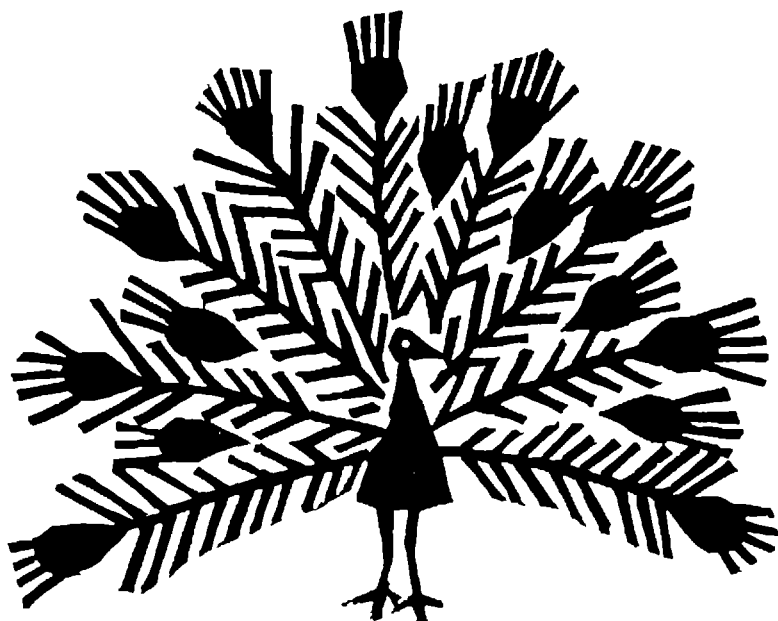
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## Animal molecules

These creatures are hard to love. Not so much her husband, who seems for the most part to keep the same shape, though lately he's been threatening to burst forth into a new person with new concerns, to have a closer connection with his feelings. No, it is the children who are difficult to love. They insist on changing shapes so often, on rearranging their animal molecules, so like Vincent's heavenly bodies in *Starry Night*, they have many rings, many sources of light, which they may keep or throw off at any moment. These creatures—her daughter, her son-in-law, her grandson—are volatile, amazing, and so hard to hug, though she wants to surround them with hugs. But they will not stand still, always changing, growing, throwing off trails of light. Instead, she must be content to worship them silently from afar, rather like she did the Great Blue Heron she followed for hours in the boat last summer. She had wanted to hug this Heron. And he stayed in his shape so easily, but flew away at the slightest hint of an oar. He possessed an abundance of love, as it rose out of the lake, wafted over him from the great rocks and fragrant evergreens and restless sky. Her love would not fit into this complete landscape.



# Translating the Sublime

Jane Urquhart's *The Whirlpool*

Jane Urquhart's third collection of poetry, *The Little Flowers of Madame de Montespan*, depicts Louis XIV, that great orderer of the landscape, stumbling through the forest at the edge of Niagara Falls in a nightmare. In *The Whirlpool* (1986), this nightmare becomes reality when all of the characters in the central section of the narrative, including the historian, Major David McDougal; his wife, Fleda; the poet, Patrick; the local undertaker, Maud; and her nameless son, find themselves surrounded by the sublime geological chaos of the Falls and the whirlpool below in the summer of 1889. Taken together, the novel's central section and the frame story concerning the last days of Robert Browning, effectively portray the difficulties attending the translation from the old world to the new and, more specifically, the repercussions of imposing the concept of the sublime onto an alien landscape.

Originally introduced in discussions of rhetorical technique in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the sublime gradually disrupted the harmony which had previously shored up rule-governed, neoclassical understandings of art. Disseminated primarily through Boileau's translation of Longinus in 1674, the concept became linked, not so much with concrete rhetorical or stylistic features, as with the revelation of "a quality of thought and the emotions which that quality, vividly presented, evokes" (Monk 32). Writing some twenty years after Boileau, John Dennis extended the concept's parameters by investigating, not the sublime object, but the emotional responses of individuals who experienced the sublime. Dennis's

contribution reinforced the connection between the sublime and “enthusiasm,” a set of emotions or “passions”—including joy and terror—that were aroused by circumstances whose cause was not fully comprehensible (Dennis qtd. in Monk 48). With the increased attention focused on the ambiguous nature of the sublime experience, the idea of the inexpressible began to gain ground. As Samuel Monk explains, the sublime filled a need not met by neoclassical categorization, which threatened to provide “a too great standardization of literature under a theory of a universalized nature, and a tendency to overemphasize the value of reason in art.” In contrast to previous modes of categorization, the sublime provided “a justifiable category into which could be grouped the stronger emotions and the more irrational elements of art” (Monk 85). In accordance with Monk, Bryan Wolf suggests that the sublime offered the writer a way of “adding to his or her text a dimension of power and mystery that conventional empiricisms lacked” (Wolf 196-97). Yet, as we will see when we turn to Urquhart’s novel, whereas the sublime may have provided a means of escaping ossified traditions in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, by the nineteenth century, it had already been appropriated by the established discourses.<sup>1</sup>

In his discussion of the sublime, Jean-Francois Lyotard suggests that this appropriation occurs when the fundamental question raised by the sublime—a question which throws progress, rules, and presence itself into doubt, which Lyotard formulates as “Is it happening”—is betrayed by translating this question “as a waiting for some fabulous subject or identity: ‘Is the pure people coming? . . .’” (209). For those interested in the sublime, the importance of Urquhart’s text lies in its offering equally valuable insight into the potential dangers of the concept by foregrounding the relation between sublime quests for transcendence and the discourse of imperialism and its forms of domination. In many ways, the novel can be taken as a cautionary tale because it demonstrates that, while the sublime signals a crisis between the known and the unknown, the resolution of this crisis is in no way predetermined: the sublime can just as easily be invoked to promote a reinscription of a rule-governed system, as it can to instigate a break with tradition which, in the novel, is associated with Europe.

In interviews, Urquhart suggests that she set the story in 1889 because she wanted to contrast the old world with the new and investigate the problems surrounding translation—the difficulties that Canadians experienced when they attempted to impose old-world modes of categorization onto the new:

Part of the reason that late nineteenth-century Canadian poets were having problems, or at least in my opinion, was that they were trying to impose Wordsworth's daffodils in the total disorder of the Canadian landscape . . . . In *Whirlpool Dream House*<sup>2</sup> a young man (Patrick) with an old-world idea of what a poet should be is trying to live out that fantasy in nineteenth-century Canada. (Interview 38).

Ultimately, by engaging with the sublime, *The Whirlpool* highlights the fact that, as language users (readers and writers), individuals have a choice whether to support misguided attempts to translate European culture onto the new world (and thereby neutralize the sublime) or whether, by stressing the poetic and associative aspects of language, to support the efforts of sublime deterritorialization.<sup>3</sup>

Reliant on European modes of categorization to organize aesthetics, landscape, and gender roles, the principal characters in *The Whirlpool* are, for the most part, perplexed when confronted with Canada's distinctly non-European historical and geographical contours. Before going on to look at the way in which two of the characters, namely the poet, Patrick, and Maud, the undertaker, deploy the sublime, I wish to consider, more generally, the way in which the characters' responses to the new world are mediated by the old-world discourses. In some instances, the dependence on these discourses proves crippling. For example, we are told that Patrick, unable to deal "effectively with the body or soul of the new country, had found himself, at thirty-three, eking out a subsistence salary as a clerk in the capital city . . ." (69). Rather than investigate the possibility of constructing new paradigms or even, at the very least, acknowledge the disjunction, he looks to the old-world literature for escape from the Canadian landscape which he cannot fathom. As the narrator explains, night after night "he disappeared into the old-world landscape with Wordsworth, Coleridge, or Browning" (69). But escape is impossible precisely because the old-world descriptions cannot account for the radically different features of the new. Even his uneducated wife recognizes the futility of his endeavour to hide from reality. Exasperated, she tells him, "'You're never going to find Wordsworth's daffodils here'" (69).

Patrick's reliance on models from the old world eventually jeopardizes his physical and mental health. He travels from Ottawa to his uncle's farm in Niagara Falls in order to recuperate from the effects of his alienation (at work, and within the country as a whole), which have culminated in a physical and mental breakdown (69). His sickness, and the attendant sense that

words were being erased from his mind, signal the dangers of attempting to impose the linguistic order of the old world onto the new. There can be no seamless translation, and the text repeatedly highlights the perils that result from engaging in this type of fantasy.

Critics have suggested that Patrick, Fleda, and David “form the triangle that ignites the plot” (Hodgson 116). But these characters are linked less by emotional ties than their mutual need to develop strategies of adapting to a new country. In Patrick’s case, his inability to adjust to the new world compromises his relationships with others, especially Fleda. Early on, Patrick’s and Fleda’s paths cross when the poet goes for a walk on Whirlpool Heights. He glimpses Fleda from a distance and becomes instantly infatuated with her. Although Fleda invites Patrick to develop a closer relationship, he is unwilling and/or unable to accept her offer. Like his beloved Browning, who had “placed himself in the centre of some of the world’s most exotic scenery and had then lived his life there with the regularity of a copy clerk” (11), Patrick (who *is* a clerk), can never bring himself to abandon his solitary, mechanized existence. When Fleda demands authentic intimacy rather than a relationship based on voyeurism, Patrick abandons her. Shifting his obsession from her to the landscape, he becomes obsessed with the idea of swimming across the whirlpool—a sublime quest which proves fatal.

Like Patrick, twenty-nine-year-old Fleda is captivated by the whirlpool, and she, too, voraciously consumes volumes of English Romantic poetry. She repeatedly compares the landscapes described by the poets to her own surroundings. But rather than strive to render the process of translation invisible, as Patrick does, Fleda recognizes the incongruity between the old and new world. For example, at the beginning of the novel, while on her way to her husband’s property, Whirlpool Heights, she peers out of the streetcar’s window and carefully examines the geography beyond the city limits. She is immediately struck by the disjunction between the European landscape she reads about and the actual landscape she inhabits:

The tough old rocks of the escarpment were in evidence everywhere, varying in size from the jagged edges along the road to the cliffs that dropped down to the river . . . The hill country of England, as Fleda imagined it, or gentle undulations of the Tuscan countryside, had *nothing to do with this*, nothing to do with this river side of the road. If she turned and looked through the windows on the opposite side of the car, however, she would see nothing but acres of rigidly

planned, severely trimmed orchards. It was a geography of fierce opposites. Order on one side and, nearer the water, sublime geological chaos. (31; my emphasis)

In her book, *Margin/Alias: Language and Colonization in Canadian and Québécois Fiction*, Sylvia Söderlind argues that this kind of recognition alone—the ability to allow the disjunction to remain visible—constitutes a deterritorializing strategy (19).

**W**hen the novel opens, Fleda has already rejected the traditional codes of domesticity and begun to experiment with deterritorialization. She has previously vacated one house and, more recently—to the horror of the town matrons—has left her husband's lodgings at Kick's Hotel in the town of Niagara Falls in favour of dwelling in a tent set up on Whirlpool Heights. As the story progresses, she moves even closer to abandoning this temporary structure, until, finally, she leaves her marriage and escapes into the woods. Fleda decides to abandon her husband (and the role of wife) only after thoroughly grasping the claustrophobic and stultifying implications of living in the traditional home gradually being erected on the property.

Whereas Fleda sees the effects of colonization, her husband, the historian, Major David McDougall—the final character in the “triangle”—remains blind to its effects. Despite his blindness, he nevertheless negotiates between the old and new worlds. Reacting to what he perceives as Canada's unhealthy Eurocentric focus, David embarks on a quest to sever Canada's ideological attachment to Europe and the U.S. Whereas Patrick clings to the European model of the romantic quester, David apparently favours a strategy which celebrates and reinforces the divide between Europe and the new world. In his capacity of military historian, he takes it upon himself to furnish Canada with an orderly past of its own. Specializing in the siege of Fort Erie, he dedicates his life to proving that Canada won the battle of 1812 against the Americans. Ironically, his desire to free Canada from attachments to Europe and America leads him to embrace a form of nationalism that simply mirrors the models that he claims to reject. His rabid nationalism is comically evident when he speaks to Patrick and expresses his desire for an indigenous history:

“Yes, we need real writers . . . thinkers . . . that think Canadian. Thinking Canadian is a very lonely business, my boy, and don't forget it. Do they think Canadian at

the University of Toronto? No, they don't. They think Britain . . . the Empire and all that nonsense. Do they think Canadian in the churches? No, they don't. They think Scotland, Rome. Why not a church of Canada, I ask you? Surely we could at least have our own religion. I'll bet this group assembled here doesn't have more than one Canadian thought a day, and they pretend to be interested in Canadian history!"

In his search for an authentic Canadian history, David, like Patrick, also emulates the European figure of the romantic, solitary quester. To recall Lyotard's model, both Patrick and David translate the potentially subversive force of the sublime—"Is it happening?"—into a question of waiting for the "fabulous subject or identity"; in David's case, it is the Canadian identity which is anticipated.

After Fleda leaves him, however, David understands, on some level, the limitations of his position. He finds himself recalling his aunt, a woman whose life progressively shrank to the confines of a single room. In the midst of this recollection, he comes to the realization that his desire for an orderly history and the concomitant betrayal of the sublime are linked to the same fatal longing for stasis that claimed his aunt. Suddenly, he sees that his own life "had been moving down a path which would eventually carry him through the door of his still unconstructed house. And while he had imagined walking through the door of the house, he had never considered stepping back outside" (230-31). Ultimately, by conforming to the old-world models, both David and Patrick remain unwitting victims of a European legacy, associated with stagnation and death.

The novel signals this connection with death when Patrick's fatal quest to swim the whirlpool and David's inability to resist his obsession with order bring both men into contact with Maud, the local undertaker. David meets Maud after he is summoned to identify Patrick's body, but the reader is introduced to Maud from the start. Although not part of the "triangle," the experiences of both Maud and her son also underscore the difficulties associated with adapting to the new world and the risks associated with invoking the sublime.

Maud's negotiations with the new world are complicated by the death of her husband and in-laws two years before the events in the novel. In the blink of an eye, Maud found herself in possession of the family home and business. Yet rather than revel in her newly acquired freedom, Maud continued to subscribe to a European protocol. In the initial phases of her widowhood, she dutifully followed the cultural codes and transformed herself

from a proper wife to an equally proper widow: she became the “perfect symbol of animate deep mourning,” encasing herself in folds of noxious black crape for two full years (22).

As the narrator explains, the fabric of Maud’s costume comes from Halstead, England, and is woven by employees at Courtault Limited: “The workers—mute, humble, and underpaid—spent twelve hours a day, in hideous conditions, at their steam-powered looms pounding black silk threads into acres of unpleasant cloth” (21). At first, it is not clear why the narrator dwells on the origins of the fabric, and the digression into the history of the cloth only makes sense when viewed in the light of the text’s more general concern regarding the origin of the repressive order which threatens to regulate life in the new world. But the history of Maud’s mourning garb illustrates the harmful aspects of the unself-conscious translation of values and practices from the old world to the new. In particular, the exploitation that characterizes relations between factory owner and employee at the Courtault establishment are reinscribed on the bodies of women who believe they should wear the fabric in Canada.

From the description of the material, it would seem that the cloth is designed solely to punish women for having the audacity to survive their husbands: “It encased the female body . . . in a suit of crumpled armour. . . . [I]t scraped at the neck and dug at the armpits. It clung to the limbs and rasped at the shoulder blades. It lacerated the spine if that series of bones ever dared to relax. And it smelled, always, of grave mud and sorrow” (20–21). In her dreams, Maud imagines escaping the onerous task of wearing this costume. Instead of wearing the crape herself, she offers a cape made of the stuff to her dead husband. But he “would reject it, outright . . . [and] after this refusal, Maud would once again drape the heavy material on her own shoulders realizing, as she did so, where it rightfully belonged” (23).

**R**eferring to Coventry Patmore’s description of the ideal woman as “an angel in the house,” the critic Aritha van Herk describes Maud as “an angel in the house of death” (15). This description is apt because, even before her husband passed away, Maud was expected to live in a saintly state of suspended animation:

[W]hen she was newly married, the periods of enforced quiet had disturbed Maud—times when she had sat dutifully over some senseless piece of embroidery while downstairs mourners had recited measurements for coffins. It had

been as if, in her own life, emotion had been held in suspense, so that the rest of the world could live and love and, more importantly, die. (43)

But, as we will see, Maud does not remain a static angel, and the force that sets itself in opposition to the discourses of nineteenth-century Europe and ultimately frees her is embodied by her son.

In many ways, Maud serves as a foil for Patrick. For this reason, the experiences of these two characters—more than those of David or Fleda—best illustrate the tensions that arise when old-world narratives are imposed on the new. The aesthetic concept of the sublime constitutes a principal mechanism which Patrick and Maud use to negotiate between chaos and order. Patrick relies on the Kantian notion of sublime to maintain a unified sense of self. By contrast, Maud, although initially bound by the dynamics of the Kantian sublime, transforms this aesthetic structure into what the feminist critic Patricia Yaeger describes as “the sublime of nearness.” Maud resolves the crisis associated with the sublime in a fashion which allows her to develop a relationship between self and other.

The central portion of the narrative is prefaced by the following quotation: “For everyone / The swimmer’s moment at the whirlpool comes.” This line from Margaret Avison’s poem intimates that everyone must negotiate chaos. The question is not whether chaos will enter the system, but what bargain will be struck with the other. In the central section, chaos is figured by the whirlpool located downriver from the Falls. Fleda underscores this association when she suggests that “it was a geography of fierce opposites. Order on one side and, nearer the water, sublime geological chaos” (31). The novel associates the whirlpool with the archetype of the labyrinth when the historian explains its origins to Patrick.

As David McDougal states, the whirlpool below the Falls was formed because, at one point, before the “ice age came along and filled it up with rocks and soil,” there had been a fork in the river. Even though the fork no longer exists, “some of the water still wants to go that route. But, of course, it can’t because there is nowhere to go so it turns back on itself” (103). David goes on to explain that his wife interprets the whirlpool in terms of the quest structure of romance and views it as a metaphor for “interrupted journeys. As if the river were Ulysses or something” (103).

At first, Fleda, who views the whirlpool from above, describes it as a “cumbersome, magnificent merry-go round.” From her distanced vantage point—a drop of three hundred feet—she sees only the “awkward, ceaseless



motion of going nowhere . . ." (32).<sup>4</sup> When she launches her toy boats into the current, noting that not many of her crafts are "able to go the distance," she is forced to revise this initial impression and to admit that "the water is dangerous" (60). But the power of the whirlpool to wreak havoc—to instantiate chaos—is most forcibly demonstrated in the scene which portrays the fate of the stuntman, Buck O'Connor, a young man who attempts to brave the whirlpool in a boat he constructed himself from "the antlers and the tanned hides of several moose" (116). Consistent with the character of chaos as "anything where the parts are undistinguished; a confused mass or mixture, a conglomeration of parts or elements without order or connection" (*OED*), the whirlpool pulverizes the stuntman and his boat; as one spectator explains, it was "difficult to determine . . . which areas were beast and which were human, but there was one thing certain: neither had survived the journey in their original form" (133). In addition to this association with confusion and disorder, the whirlpool is also aligned with the image of chaos as a "void" (*OED*). The link between whirlpool and chaotic void is drawn when Patrick remarks that the sound made by the whirlpool is "a negative sound, the sound of silence . . . a vacuum of sound . . ." (222).

The novel not only sustains this identification between chaos and the whirlpool, but goes on to underscore the gendering of the labyrinth. This overlay of gender first becomes explicit when Patrick identifies the whirlpool as Woman.<sup>5</sup> Early on in the novel, he finds himself infatuated with both Fleda and the whirlpool, and he actually confuses the two. When describing his plan to swim across the whirlpool to David, Patrick silently acknowledges the conflation: "Suddenly, he was uncertain whether it was the water or the woman he was talking about" (102).

In his study *Male Phantasies*, Klaus Theweleit discusses the prevalent association in literature between women and water:

A river without end, enormous and wide, flows through the world's literatures. Over and over again: the women-in-the-water; woman as water, as a stormy, cavorting, cooling ocean, a raging stream, a waterfall; as a limitless body of water that ships pass through, with tributaries, pools, surfs and deltas; woman as the enticing (or perilous deep . . .). (283)

Theweleit argues that the representations by male writers of "woman-as-water" reflect pre-Oedipal desires for the dissolution of the Oedipal split between id and ego sustained upon entry into the symbolic order.<sup>6</sup> He suggests, further, that the attraction / repulsion which often constellates around

the figure of woman as water indicates the tensions experienced by a subject whose externally imposed identity is based on this split (204).

Yet, as Lyotard reminds us, between “the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Europe this contradictory feeling—pleasure and pain, joy and anxiety, exaltation and depression—was christened or re-christened by the name of the *sublime*” (198-99). In his study of the sublime published in 1757, Edmund Burke highlights both terror and delight when he emphasizes that the sublime produces a feeling of “delightful horror” (136). And in *The Critique of Judgement* (1790), Kant also identifies the ambivalent response seemingly elicited by the sublime object. He remarks that during the sublime experience the mind feels agitated and experiences a rapid alternation of “repulsion from, and attraction to, one and the same object” (115). Whereas for Burke, the sublime simply produces terror and astonishment, Kant views these responses as merely the first step of a complicated cognitive process. In order to understand Patrick’s method of resolving his encounter with the sublime whirlpool, Kant’s model must be explored in greater detail.

According to Kant, pain and pleasure are bound together because, initially, when the mental faculties cannot comprehend an object’s magnitude (as in the case of the mathematical sublime) or power (the dynamical sublime) and provide an instantaneous representation of the object, the individual experiences pain (108). But this sensation is quickly replaced by one of pleasure after the mind “sinks back into itself” and becomes aware of reason’s demand for synthesis—a demand which would have remained invisible, ironically, were it not for the failure of the imagination (109). In the Kantian sublime, the individual transcends human frailty and mortality because the blockage of the imagination prompts an act of self-analysis, which acquaints the mind with reason’s demand for totality—a demand which “indicates a mental power that surpasses any standard of sense” (111). Fear mingles with delight when the mind becomes aware of “its own sublimity, which lies in its vocation [its duty to obey reason] and elevates it even above nature” (121).

In Urquhart’s text, the whirlpool affords a concrete image of the “interrupted journey,” the blockage of the imagination which forces the mind to turn back on itself; and the feelings of pleasure and pain, fear and desire, that Burke and Kant isolate, characterize Patrick’s attitude toward both Fleda and the whirlpool. Initially, it remains unclear whether he wants to

transcend nature in the fashion outlined by Kant, or whether his ambition lies in healing the split between id and ego as described by Theweleit. At first it seems as if Patrick wishes to efface boundaries. While he meditates on his plan to swim across the vortex, he specifically expresses a desire for the dissolution of personal boundaries:

Submerge. To place oneself below and lose character, identity, inside another element . . . . The world above. That's where he lived all the time now. Patrick had not swum for years. He remembered the liquid envelope, the feeling of total caress . . . Patrick standing alone at the top of the bank, made a decision. He would swim again somehow. He looked out over the difficult whirlpool. He would swim there and take the world above with him, if necessary. This would be his battle and his strength. (80-81)

Although his claim supports the belief that he wishes to undo the work of the symbolic order and return to a pre-Oedipal existence, his subsequent assertion that this would be his "battle and strength" indicates that, quite the contrary, he will continue to identify with the position of the sublime hero.

Tragically for Patrick, by ultimately conforming to Kant's model of the sublime experience, which depends on the rigid separation between self and other, he forgoes the chance to experience the deterritorialization that he longs for. When Fleda casually mentions that she hoped that they might have been able "to get close to each other . . .," he responds by thrusting his face into hers and shouting, "I don't want to be this close to you. Not now, not ever. Look what happens . . . when we're this close we can't see each other at all . . . This close, you're a blur . . . and I'm nothing . . . completely nothing . . . nothing but a voice" (181). Here Patrick expresses his greatest fear and his greatest desire, that of becoming "nothing . . . completely nothing"—a fear which Kant suggests stems from the imagination's fear of losing itself in the "abyss" of the sublime (115). As Burke clarifies, sublime delight only arises when danger and pain do not "press too nearly."

But Fleda challenges Patrick's claim to "want the distance" by betraying her knowledge that Patrick visits Whirlpool Heights almost on a daily basis, and watches her through his binoculars. Her revelation of his voyeurism utterly destroys his sense of safety:

He felt that his privacy, his self, had been completely invaded. He was like a walled village that had been sacked and burned, just when it was feeling most secure . . . How *dare* she? he thought, as if she, not he, had been the voyeur . . . He was furious . . . Patrick did not look at her, would never look at her again. She was not supposed to be aware of the focus of the lens he had fixed on her. (182)

At this point, Patrick determines to separate his lofty quest from Fleda, and the image of the soiled workaday world that she has come to represent: "She became the smudge of the news on his fingers, the ink from his employment on his hands, the ugly red brick of his small house. Still, there was a swimmer in his mind and that swimmer would descend the bank without the woman, alone" (186). His decision to persist in his quest is ultimately a decision to retreat from society.

In her essay on the sublime, Frances Ferguson confirms that the sublime promotes this type of withdrawal:

a kind of opting out of the pressures and the dangers of the social, because the sublime elevates one's individual relations with that mountain (or whatever natural object one perceives as sublime) above one's relationship to other human beings. Sublime experience cannot be taken away from you precisely because it is being set up as an alternative to the relationships among humans in society that make the question of referentiality have its force. Further, even though the sublime object is such because it is more powerful than the perceiving individual, any humiliation or abasement that may be involved in one's submission to a sublime object is preferable to humiliation by another person. (73)

Patrick, a man who cannot stand crowds, who cannot control his panic and disgust in their midst, who must recite nursery rhymes to distract himself from the overwhelming sense of bodies pressing up against him, before fleeing from the smell of "sausage on its collective breath," is clearly unable to deal with the "pressure and dangers of the social" (122-23). Earlier in the novel, he suggests to Fleda that he wants to live "weightless" (178). At bottom, his flight from humanity represents a flight from the gaps in meaning, the instabilities, that mark communications among humans. He finds comfort in the romantic notion of the solitary quest: "It was the landscape that he wanted and needed, uncomplicated setting, its ability to function and endure in a pure, solitary state" (192).

Patrick's ultimate refusal to renounce the old-world order and engage in deterritorialization is clearly reinforced by his subsequent interpretation of his recurring dream. In this dream, he always finds himself walking through the rooms on the ground level of his uncle's farmhouse. All of the rooms correspond to reality, but when he reaches the end of the parlour, in the position normally occupied by a large window, he finds a door which opens onto a mirror-image of the ground floor, except that the contents are "entirely scrambled":

In this space, the dining room with its cold, blue walls and perfectly regular flooring, was filled with wheels and teeth and blades and smelled of damp, rotting burlap. The harsh, golden light of the kitchen, on the other hand, would expose undulating sinks and counters, soft tables and doughboards resembling the overstuffed furniture of the parlour. The parlour had become as smooth and untouched as ice; its surfaces reflecting not its own contents at all but those of rooms Patrick had never even imagined until that moment.

He would awaken, always, with blood pounding in his head and an intense fear that all the objects in the room where he slept would suddenly be unfamiliar and out of context. (1919)

Recalling this dream immediately after his final confrontation with Fleda, Patrick asserts that “for the first time [he] understood its meaning, its message”:

Keep the sequence of fear, of quest, of desire in logical order—compartmentalized and exact. . . . Do not confuse fear with desire, desire with quest, quest with fear. Otherwise the world scrambles, becomes unidentifiable, loses its recognizable context.

A simple shift of objects, events, emotions, from their rightful place brings chaos. And the world you live in enters nightmare.

He had dislocated and mixed categories, had confused the woman with the whirlpool, had believed, in some crazy way, that she was the landscape . . . .

There would be no more confusion. He was through with the woman. From now on, whenever he visited Whirlpool Heights, and he knew he would visit often, it would be the landscape he was courting. (91-92)

Initially, Patrick’s acknowledgement of his earlier misguided conflation of the woman with the whirlpool would seem a positive step. As Klaus Theweleit argues, the sexualization of males [and females] involves the manipulation and control of desire. The young boy’s “desire is—indeed is *required to be* directed solely toward women. All of the growing boy’s ideas, hopes, dreams, and plans must be focused and fixated on the conquest of that one object, women” (375). Arguing that this disciplined desire, which takes the initial form of an incestuous desire for the mother, is reductive and forecloses choice because it is “installed in the subject from without, by society” (377), Theweleit asserts that, in fact, desire “cries out for something else: ‘It isn’t my mother I wanted. It was never her—or even simply a woman. I wanted to know the world, produce it, people it with my creations. I wanted to explore every possible connection, visit every site on earth and leave again’” (376). Patrick seems to attain this recognition when he chastises himself for believing that he wanted this woman rather than the world.

However, while he rejects the conflation, his desire still remains fixated

on an ideal notion of “pure, solitary landscape,” which indicates that he remains committed to maintaining his defensive position; he still wants to keep the elements in his life “compartmentalized and exact.” Rather than explore the possibility that his recurring dream offers him a glimpse of what he longs for and has repressed, namely, the opportunity for deterritorialization, he interprets it as a warning to maintain an ever stricter order. Henceforth, he will police the division between self and other with even greater vigilance.

When he meets Maud’s child in the street toward the end of the novel, this renewed commitment to order and boundaries is apparent. In the course of their poetic exchange, it becomes obvious that the boy, who is seemingly autistic, does not understand the meaning of pronouns. More precisely, he does not know the difference between “I” and “you,” and Patrick takes it upon himself to teach the child the difference. Although the boy successfully makes the distinction, an aura of disappointment hovers over this achievement. Afterwards, Patrick muses to himself: “Self and other. That’s the way it always was. To merge was impossible except for short periods of time. Impossible and undesirable” (188). His remarks seem sensible, the product of a rational mind, but the narrator clarifies that he has failed because, despite any assertions to the contrary, he longed for closeness but he was never able to break down the wall that separated him from others: his whole life had been “a dance in which the partners turn away” (220). But, as we have seen, this dance was choreographed, in part, by the aesthetic of the sublime, which is based on sacrifice.

The idea of sacrifice is integral to the Kantian sublime because the lofty natural phenomenon which first inspires awe in the viewer is sacrificed—reduced to an object—and is used merely to prove the superiority of the viewer’s mind, so that what begins as an “excessive interest” in nature ends with an “excessive disdain of nature” (Weiskel 76). But the category of nature also includes our natural bodies, which explains why one of the “things the sublime enables us to discount is our life,” and why Schiller was able to develop Kant’s view into a justification of suicide under certain conditions (Weiskel 95).

Ultimately, Patrick opts for something that looks very much like suicide. He fulfils his desire to heal the split between ego and id in the most perverse fashion: he ventures in the whirlpool and drowns. And yet, rather than “lose character” and escape the order associated with the old world, he

becomes its victim. But, as I suggested earlier, Urquhart's text offers more than an illustration of the dangers associated with the sublime. In its portrayal of Maud, the novel highlights an alternative to the obsessive and destructive *pas de deux* between subject and object which is characteristic of the Kantian sublime.

When the novel opens, Maud has recently taken over her dead husband's role as the town's undertaker. She now looks after members of the community who die, as well as the tourists who drown themselves in the Niagara River. The bulk of her work begins when tourist season arrives in the spring. The River Man, mentioned earlier in conjunction with Patrick's death, assists her in collecting the bodies, or "floaters" as they are termed by the initiated. But these unnamed and unclaimed bodies, or, in some cases, fragments of bodies, which arrive at her door trouble her greatly. She feels an urgent need to impose order onto the chaos wrought by the whirlpool, the force that erases the identity of each body. Her method of imposing order involves writing down all available information concerning each corpse into a book, entitled "Description of Bodies Found in the Niagara River, Whirlpool, etc., 1887—" This process is potentially infinite, and, for this reason, can be aligned with Kant's definition of the mathematical sublime. Unlike the "dynamical" sublime, where the imagination is paralysed by the awesome power of nature, in the case of the mathematical sublime, the imagination is faced with the impossible task of synthesizing a seemingly infinite amount of data (Kant 111). Ironically, when Maud first opens the book in the spring, she finds that "the book itself was unidentified" because the gum label which had adorned the leather cover had disappeared over the winter (48). The threat of chaos never ceases.

In an effort to stave off chaos, Maud also constructs a private museum, which consists of a cupboard filled with numbered canvas sacks, each one containing the possessions of an unknown and unnamed body. We are told that she builds "a frail network of history around each death . . . This was how she maintained order, how she gathered together some sense out of the chaos of the deaths around her" (165). Not surprisingly, her obsession with order affects her relationship with her strange, silent son.

In one episode, Maud takes the child into the garden and tries to impress on him the Adamic role as namer of the world. "Gar-den," she says to him slowly, pointing to the expanse. To her consternation, he gives no indication that he is even aware that she is speaking (64). Frustrated, Maud is forced to

recognize that this “absurd naming of objects had become one of the rituals of the day” (65). Inside the house, she can calmly utter an inventory of the objects, but when she is no longer within the confines of those four walls, where the number of objects to name is seemingly finite, “the enormity of the task confounded her” (65-66). Her predicament once again recalls Kant’s discussion of the mathematical sublime.

Eventually, the futility of her task, coupled with the child’s unresponsiveness, drives her into a rage. In her anger, she pins the child between her legs, jerks his head upright, and peels back his eyelids, forcing him to stare directly at the sun. Then she screams the word “SUN!” over and over into his ear. Despite this violent attempt to conscript the boy into the symbolic order, he does not relinquish his role as a force of subversion. He continues to work, not in the name of the Father, but in the unnamed efforts of deterritorialization. Although he groans his first word, “sawn,” in the garden (with the play on the words “sun” and “sawn” underscoring the division instituted by the symbolic)<sup>7</sup>, the boy’s bizarre linguistic practice, which includes mimicry, recitation, and parody (all forms of quotation) demonstrate the impossibility of enforcing order, stability, or ownership of language. Toward the end of the novel, his verbal acts of deterritorialization culminate in his physical reorganization of his mother’s house.

One day when Maud is away, the boy (in a gesture reminiscent of Patrick’s nightmare) scrambles the domestic order which she has created. He takes all her possessions and rearranges them, so that her home became “a puzzle” (204). Unlike Patrick, who feels only horror when faced with a loss of order and the blurring of categories—a loss which unleashes fears of becoming “nothing”—when Maud returns and sees what her son has done, she experiences only curiosity. She recognizes that this alternative system of classification may be an expression of the other and that these “strange little assemblings might be the key to the child’s mind; a garden she’d been denied access to for years. In her heart, she felt like letting him continue. Rearrange it, she would say, it might be better” (206).

When she discovers that the boy has also invaded her museum, emptying the canvas sacks and removing the labels from the shelves, so that all hope of resurrecting the “incredible classification process” is lost, she is finally forced to renounce her pursuit of sublime transcendence. She ceases to obey what Kant describes as the “law of reason”—the law which insists on



“the idea of a whole” that the imagination can never adequately represent (109). In Maud’s case, this “whole” was associated with the belief that she could restore an absent identity in its totality through a relentless process of collection. Until her son interrupts this process, she behaves as if, by patiently collecting fragments from the nameless dead, she will ultimately discover the name and put an end to chaos. But her son’s gesture of emptying her museum demonstrates that these fragments were never parts of some greater, unified whole, and that reason’s image of totality remains an illusion in the world of experience. When the boy interrupts her impossible quest, he pierces to the heart of the illusion of sublime transcendence. As the narrator explains, he had caused “all the objects that surrounded her, all the relics she had catalogued, to lose their dreadful power. He had shown her what they really were: buttons, brooches, tie-clips, garters . . . merely objects” (215). Maud, prior to her son’s intervention, betrayed the sublime (to recall Lyotard’s model) by translating its doubtful question, “Is it happening,” into “a waiting” for an immanent identity. Whereas Patrick uses the sublime moment to reinforce the arbitrary divide between self and other, order and chaos, Maud seems grateful for the opportunity to remove this obstacle. Her resolution addresses a pressing concern regarding the discursive legacy from the old world which Patricia Yaeger identifies, namely, “How do we move away from our . . . allegiance to an imperial Cartesian Adamic self . . . toward a model of the self that permits . . . an exploration of the pleasures of intersubjectivity?” (205). In Maud’s translation of the Kantian sublime into “the sublime of nearness,” the struggle typical of the Kantian sublime is retained, but, as Yaeger suggests, “the conflict is rewritten so that the desire for closeness with the other that the conventional sublime tries to repress remains visible and viable . . .” (204). In the final section featuring the undertaker, we see this formerly isolated woman pulling her son “closer to her own warm body” (233). Her life becomes a dance in which the partners turn toward one another.

At this point, one wonders what enables Maud and not Patrick to revise the choreography of the Kantian sublime. The novel seems to suggest that the answer lies in the difference between their investment in traditional discourses—a difference which is informed by gender. When the novel opens, Maud has already begun to realize that she stands to gain little by conforming to the roles of bride, wife, or widow, which have been imposed on her by the old-world narratives (149). By contrast, although Patrick feels constrained

by these same narratives, they nevertheless guarantee him, as a man, a slightly more privileged position. For this reason, he persists in conforming to the role of the solitary quester who affirms his subjectivity by dominating the sublime object.

Although I have restricted this discussion to an examination of characterization, I would like to conclude by pointing out that the text's commitment to deterritorialization has an impact on the formal structure of the work as well. The central story traces the intersecting lives of five characters. There is no single hero. The text, composed of over forty discrete sections, alternates from the adventures of one character to the next. Like a merry-go-round, it offers the reader a whirling vision of colour and incident. With its shifting focus, the novel ensures that whatever plot can be said to "exist" owes its tenuous existence not to the unifying presence of the hero, but to the reader's ability to fabricate meaning through a poetic process of association. Like the child's chaotic speech, this polyphonic structure, which invites readers to compare the experiences of the various characters, also works in the service of deterritorialization because the multiple meanings which proliferate as a result of this type of associative structure frustrate any impulse toward containment. In the end, as readers we must also strike *our* bargain with chaos: "For everyone / the swimmer's moment at the whirlpool comes."

#### NOTES

- 1 By "discourse," I refer to what Catherine Belsey describes as a domain of language-use, a particular way of talking (and writing and thinking). A discourse involves certain shared assumptions which appear in the formulations that characterize it (5).
- 2 This was the working title of the novel.
- 3 The term deterritorialization is used by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in their book *A Thousand Plateaus* to describe the subversion of entrenched discourses.
- 4 My thanks to François Lachance for pointing out that Fleeta's initial understanding of the whirlpool as an innocent merry-go-round is dependent on her distanced perspective.
- 5 In using the term Woman, I refer not to actual historical individuals (i.e. women), but to what Teresa de Lauretis describes as the product of various social technologies of gender, which assign individuals to a particular category that does not exist out there in nature (4).
- 6 In my use of this term, I draw on Chris Weedon's definition of the symbolic order as the social and cultural order in which we live our lives as conscious, gendered subjects,

which is structured by language and the laws and social institutions which language guarantees (52). For Lacan, meaning and the symbolic order as a whole are fixed in relation to a primary, transcendental signifier which Lacan calls the phallus, the signifier of sexual difference, which guarantees the patriarchal structure of the symbolic order (53). See Lacan, pp. 67, 198-99.

- 7 According to Lacan, the child's first use of language constitutes a fall into alienation and reification because, when an individual represents himself, he does so as if he were an object among objects.

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# Others Aren't Personal

others aren't personal  
are they?  
the best of friends  
least of all  
lending a book & clothes & stuff

but words make a book  
& a book can  
bring it on

does anyone notice

that books are sunshine

they make people too  
don't they?

doubt it (then)  
many a time  
because  
others aren't personal

# Ultrasound

On the screen part of me as one of the seas  
of the moon, what astrologers see  
when they look into their telescopes  
and see night skies swimming by.  
I have drunk oceans  
of so many years  
to look inside . . .

I thought ultrasounds were only  
for pregnant women reassured  
with floating images of their small wet miracles.  
My ovary is a dime I've spent  
and will spend again. And there's another bowl  
of blood preparing to spill its routine.

Oh, if we were not creatures of habit . . .  
If we could stare into the sun  
and the lunar eclipse  
and if we knew where the world's  
water goes at low tide,  
if we knew ourselves back  
to the sounds of the original world,  
if we knew what we could hear,  
if we knew, what we would hear ?

# I Would Try To Make Lists

## The Catalogue in *Lives of Girls and Women*

“I would try to make lists,” says Del near the end of *Lives of Girls and Women*, and she lists some of the lists she made:

A list of all the stores and businesses going up and down the main street and who owned them, a list of family names, names on the tombstones in the Cemetery and any inscriptions underneath. A list of the titles of movies that played at the Lyceum Theatre from 1938 to 1950, roughly speaking. Names on the Cenotaph (more for the first World War than for the second). Names of the streets and the pattern they lay in. (253)

This sounds like a fairly mechanical exercise, and perhaps as a result readers who remark on Del’s list-making tend to deal with it briefly as a literal-minded, even simplistic technique. If metonymy is the trope of realism (Jakobson 78), the list is apparently the most innocently realistic, as it is the most metonymic, of figures. It speaks of things together only because they are found together, or so it seems to claim, stringing into a verbal line details that history has already arbitrarily assembled. Since Del mentions the device in the context of her own distinction between realism and romance her realization that “*Real Life*” (242) in the Sherriff household may be stranger and more interesting than gothic fantasy about the fictional Caroline—and since she suggests that her list-making project links her with her Uncle Craig, whose mind-numbing history of Wawanash county is itself little more than a list, it is not surprising that her own lists tend to be placed at the low mimetic end of the scale and regarded as an inadequate rhetorical strategy.<sup>1</sup> One of the most frequently quoted passages in *Lives of Girls and Women* is the one in which Del emphasizes the futility of her efforts:

no list could hold what I wanted, because what I wanted was every last thing, every layer of speech and thought, stroke of light on bark or walls, every smell, pot-hole, pain, crack, delusion, held still and held together—radiant, everlasting. (253)

But “*Real Life*” is itself a literary construction, as the ironizing capitals and italics suggest, and the very fact that Del’s complaint about the inefficacy of lists itself contains a list might suggest that this device is mobilized in *Lives of Girls and Women* in a highly self-conscious and by no means naively realistic way. The catalogue is after all a rhetorical figure traditionally associated less with documentary realism than with mythopoeic energy and performative aplomb. Usually traced in the history of Western literature back to Hesiod, whose lists of women establish a subgenre not irrelevant to some of the lists in *Lives*, the catalogue is characteristic both of oral poetry (like the Scandinavian Eddas mentioned in *The Progress of Love*, 421) and of high-cultural *écriture*<sup>2</sup> (the Renaissance rewrote the classical catalogues and invented the blazon, also relevant to *Lives of Girls and Women*<sup>3</sup>). The figure lends itself as well to the projects of modernism and postmodernism as to those of nineteenth-century realism: a recent search for “lists in literature” in the Wilson Catalogue turned up twenty-one items, on authors from Nero and Catullus to Dos Passos, Borges, and Cheever. A writer as sophisticated as Munro might be expected to use such a versatile figure in more interesting ways than her adolescent protagonist is initially able to do, and that she indeed does so is the contention of this essay.

■necessarily selective, both because it is constituted by selectivity—by a prior act of classification that defines the set of objects to be enumerated—and because it usually cannot contain the whole set, the literary list nevertheless connotes *copia* and gestures towards inclusiveness: Ovid’s catalogue of trees stands for all trees, Homer’s catalogue of ships evokes the whole of Greece. “Total enumeration by means of a comprehensive catalog” is, as a reader of Borges has recently noted, “a longstanding method for representing a total vision.” Yet “the method does not work well because...the former is sequential and encyclopedic whereas the latter is simultaneous and unified” (Thiem 107).<sup>4</sup> It is the very frustration of the urge for exhaustiveness that makes the figure useful for Munro. The quest for the whole is important in her writing (Hoy, Garson), and what eludes the grasp of words always weighs heavily on what is preserved. Uncle Craig’s history is so much deadlier even than Del’s lists partly because, in its igno-



rance of its own selectivity, it represses what it has forgotten. The list, in its aspiration to completeness, is well suited to suggest helplessness in the face of the mass of material it cannot reduce to order, the vast areas of experience outside the text that press in on it from all sides.<sup>5</sup>

Even when it names a complete set, the list tends to have a centrifugal momentum. Perhaps because its individual items are so loosely linked, each retains a life of its own, so that the catalogue leads not only forward and along, but out and away to other sets and contexts. A critic of Spenser has observed that while the list seems to move forward with “straightforward progress,” “the resonances within it of earlier texts subtly disperse this progress in several directions” so that “the dilating and regressive movement of [the] allusions” impede a straightforward reading (Parker 1979, 71). To use Jakobson’s metaphors, the catalogue functions on a vertical as well as a horizontal axis. While its several units are linked to each other (metonymically, “horizontally”) in the order in which they appear in the text, individual items may also point (“metaphorically”, vertically) to other units, sets, or patterns.<sup>6</sup> Munro is always ready to exploit this allusiveness. “Khartoum Street,” for example, which appears, to Del’s surprise, among the street names of Jubilee, is linked in its immediate context to the other streets she names but also belongs to the set of eastern allusions to Isis, to the Nile, to the Jordan so exhaustively investigated by James Carscallen.<sup>7</sup> Like the cross-word puzzle that Addie is attempting to complete, the list moves along two axes; and like the puzzle, with its reference to Isis and its reminder of the fragmented body, it gestures towards wholes it can never contain.

Lists might be classified in terms of their inclusiveness, their basis of selection, and their sequence. How many members of the implied set are included in the list? What principle underlies their selection? What principle governs their order? When Del and her brother Owen devise an inventory of the items from Ben’s chaotic kitchen, what they include is simply what they manage to remember, and the order in which the details are arranged is apparently just the order in which they come to mind. There is a sharp distinction between lists like this, highly selective and randomly organized, and what might be called cases of spurious completion, premature or overemphatic closure. The short but closed list signals the aspiring but limited mind. Miss Farris’s “fatalistically” parochial reply to Gwen Mundy’s “How many different operettas are there?”—“Six . . . *The Pied Piper. The Gypsy Princess. The Stolen Crown. The Arabian Knight. The Kerry Dancers. The*

*Woodcutter's Daughter*." (130)—her conviction that the six operettas in her repertoire are the only six in the history of music suggests both her appetite for culture and its frustration.<sup>8</sup> As these examples suggest, Del is not the only list-maker in her narrative: many of the other characters organize their perceptions by lists, and those they draw up often say much about their desires and anxieties and the kinds of control that they seek.

In the discussion which follows I shall argue that the act of list-making is in *Lives of Girls and Women* subjected to a quiet scrutiny and that Munro's use of the list becomes a critique of the construction of meaning and of the notion of naive mimesis. What is finally exposed is the illusion that language can ever be transparent, unproblematically referential, or divorced from desire or from the will to power.

**D**el suggests that she makes lists in order to hold onto the town in which she has grown up. Jubilee is a place rich in memories, in history, in affect, and for Del the most resonant of her lists seems simply to be the "Names of the streets and the pattern they lay in" (253). In a small town, the street grid shapes lives: Del's friendship with Naomi arises, like most childhood friendships, simply from the fact that the two girls live close to each other and walk to school together. It also shapes memories and narratives: when Addie tries to support her contention that the town is "rife with suicides" (243), she does it by proceeding in her memory systematically up and down these streets. The grid pattern is already implied, soon after Del's move to the town, in her list of the "civilized desirable things" of Jubilee—things mostly in straight lines: Sidewalks, street lights, lined-up shade trees, milkmen's and iceman's carts, birdbaths, flower-borders, verandahs with wicker chairs, from which ladies watched the street (6). Del's words are also in a straight line: the list is a simple figure, apparently, as innocent and natural as the young girl's bemused perceptions. But pay attention to "ladies," a problematic word for girls and women, which echoes in these street-grid lists. Later, looking down on the whole town from above, Del will remark on the "not very complicated pattern of streets named after battles and ladies and monarchs and pioneers" (258). A bit more complicated than it looks, though: since units in a list are implicitly exclusive, Del's wording betrays her assumption that "ladies" cannot also be "monarchs" or "pioneers." If the street names constitute a kind of synecdochal history of the town of Jubilee, it is a history always already misread and always open to new misreadings.

The street-name motif becomes the core of the most conspicuous catalogue in the novel, the passage in which Del rejoices in her

sense of the whole town around me, all the streets which were named River Street, Mason Street, John Street, Victoria Street, Huron Street, and strangely, Khartoum Street; the evening dresses gauzy and pale as crocuses in Krall's Ladies' Wear window; the Baptist Mission Band in the basement of their church, singing *There's a New Name Written Down in Glory, and its Mine, Mine, Mine!* Canaries in their cages in the Selrite Store and books in the Library and mail in the Post Office and pictures of Olivia de Havilland and Errol Flynn in pirate and lady costumes outside the Lyceum Theatre—all these things, rituals and diversions, frail and bright, woven together—Town! (70)

The poetic effect of this highly patterned and rather self-conscious bit of writing derives partly from the contrast between the street names, with their historical solidity and permanence, and a certain fragile, artificial glamour that is the basis of the town's appeal to the adolescent protagonist. In realist writing, a list of the goods displayed in shop windows may suggest the economics of a whole region, as do, for example, Hardy's list of things for sale on the main street of Casterbridge (Hardy 60) and Dickens's list of objects in a London pawnshop (Dickens 178-9). Hillis Miller points out that each of Dickens's details is linked metonymically with the person who owned it, so that the objects for sale become "trustworthy signs of the quality of life in that part of London" (Miller 126). Though the effect of Del's figure is rather different—for the "goods" that seize her imagination are dreams: dreams of glamour, dreams of pastoral *otium* (crocuses, singing birds), dreams of acceptance and belonging—her list has a similar centrifugal effect. Like Dickens's, each of its units points out and away to a larger world outside. But for Del the world is less a socioeconomic than a textual one, a world of scripts and roles, delusions and desires: letters in the post office, books in the library, the Baptist hymn, the Hollywood movie—and the history of the town itself, preserved (though elliptically, enigmatically) in the names of the streets. The suggestiveness of the passage derives from the contrast not only between permanence and evanescence but between secure referentiality and intertextual free play. The shops and movies of Jubilee, which seem to offer the adolescent choices and chances, roles and rituals, point to the future, while the street-names suggest, on the contrary, the sober, stolid weight of the past. These names apparently ground the fantasy worlds in "real" history, but it is a history largely alien to Del, not fully possessed or understood (she doesn't know what "Khartoum" is doing in a

Canadian town: her fantasies are shaped by the American-movie version of British history, by Hollywood stars in "pirate and lady costumes," even as her town has been marked by other versions, other readings). What is history itself, the passage suggests, but a selective and unstable collection of texts, readable only in terms of the desires of the reader and of the texts that intersect with it? By lining up in a single sequence both the more remote past and a particular moment in the 1940s, the list, even as it suggests the impermanence of that moment, promises to dissolve "history" as well into a textual day-dream.

This paragraph presents a motif that will recur interestingly at other points in *Lives of Girls and Women*. The title of the Baptist hymn Del names—"There's a New Name Written Down in Glory . . ."—itself describes an act of list-making. In a list of the elect, what matters is the proper name ("*Mine, Mine, Mine*") and what is expressed is the desire for security, identity, "chosen-ness"—membership in an elite group. The motif of drawing up an exclusive list of the elect is repeated in a different key just a few lines later, with the reference to the "beautiful, shining girls whose names everybody knew—Margaret Bond, Dorothy Guest, Pat Mundy—and who in turn knew nobody's names, except if they chose" (70). The list of women's names—the catalogue of good (or beautiful) women, traditionally a celebratory device—here makes a satiric social point. By not remembering Del's name, Margaret Bond, Dorothy Guest, and Pat Mundy have the power to render her a nonentity; but by remembering theirs and recording them in writing, Del can take a subtle kind of revenge. The proper names she records are, however, of course fictional, and thus not "proper" at all: indeed the citizens of Wingham, Ontario who see themselves in Munro's fictions may find them quite improper. Listing people, particularly listing women by their names, is a powerful and potentially hostile gesture in *Lives of Girls and Women* and one to which I shall also want to return later in this argument.

The primary effect of the evocative description of Jubilee is, however, not exclusive but inclusive. With its deictical quality implying that nothing more needs to be said about these names, these places, with which of course you are familiar<sup>9</sup>—and with its primitive syntax, suggesting that anyone can do it, that we can all add on, the list empowers the reader and invites collaboration. Lists of the books in the Jubilee library (118), of the hymns Fern sang at the United Church (145), or of names connoting adult sophistication to an adolescent in the 50s—"Somerset Maugham. Nancy Mitford . . . Balenciaga, Schiaparelli . . .

Whiskey and soda. Gin and tonic. Cinzano, Benedictine, Grand Marnier . . .” (175)—such lists evoke a nostalgic response and construct as members of a group those who are able to share it. The fact that there seems to be no principle governing either what gets into this kind of list or in what order the units shall be arranged contributes to the illusion of artless factuality. Spontaneous, communal, apparently unstructured, such lists suggest that thought and memory can be easily turned into writing, that verbal authenticity and transparency are within everybody’s reach.

Yet even such apparently random and casual constructions have textual antecedents. Del’s list of her adolescent enthusiasms sounds indeed vaguely familiar. In his analysis of the rhetorical operations of fashion magazines, Barthes quotes a similar text:

She likes studying and surprise parties, Pascal, Mozart, and cool jazz. She wears flat heels, collects little scarves, adores her big brother’s plain sweater and those bouffant, rustling petticoats. (Barthes 225)

It is the very heterogeneity of such lists, Barthes says, “the rapid and disordered succession of . . . semantic units (*Pascal, Mozart, cool jazz*)” upon which their effect depends, for it functions “as the sign of a profusion of tastes and consequently of a great richness of personality” (Barthes 229) and adumbrates “a dream of wholeness according to which the human being would be everything at once” (Barthes 255). His remarks are relevant to Munro, whose characters often try to define themselves by listing their tastes and habits<sup>10</sup>, sometimes specifically in response to women’s-magazine questionnaires. Evoking as it does the texts of mass culture, the very catalogue that suggests to Del her new scope and individuality conveys to the reader her limitedness and derivativeness. Even as the young writer reconstructs her world and her adolescent self, she exposes herself as constructed by the discourses that speak through her.

**D**el is greedy for life, and the catalogue is the trope of appetite. Greed, literal and metaphorical, is important in *Lives*: Del uses the word “greedy” freely to describe appetites for things other than food—sensing, for example, in the blithely insistent way her mother prepares her for her uncle’s funeral, a sinister parental appetite, “something greedy for your hurt” (47). Significantly, she describes herself in the same terms—“Voracious and misguided as Uncle Craig”—when, “greedy for Jubilee” (253), she begins to make lists, and it is not surprising that the largest single set of lists

in *Lives of Girls and Women* is that of food. Del's menus, recipes, and shopping lists recreate a time, a place, and a way of life, and are as nostalgic in their way as lists of movie titles or 1950s fashions. Particularly evocative are the lists of the dishes prepared for Craig's funeral (21 items, including "ten or twelve varieties of pickles and relishes," 52), of the dainties prepared by the aunts for Aunt Moira's visit (41), and of the hearty country dinner offered to Del at the Frenches':

stewed chicken, not too tough, and good gravy to soften it, light dumplings, potatoes ("too bad it's not time for the new!"), flat, round, floury biscuits, home-canned beans and tomatoes, several kinds of pickles, and bowls of green onions and radishes and leaf lettuce, in vinegar, a heavy molasses-flavoured cake, black-berry preserves. (225-6)

Do such catalogues celebrate a simpler, more leisurely, more bountiful society, less self-conscious about diet? Or is what looks like plenitude actually a kind of morbid coerciveness, or a displacement of other needs? The catalogue, suggesting *copia* but leaving its value open to interpretation, blurs the line between abundance and excess, gusto and compulsion. Some of the characters in *Lives* do indulge in compensatory gorging, defending themselves against death or alienation by eating or displacing the appetite for life or love into food: Uncle Bill, who eats obsessively as he is eaten by cancer, Fern Dougherty, who grows fat when Art Chamberlain deserts her, have something in common with Del when she binges after her "Voluptuous surrender" to the emotions evoked by opera. Admitting that "Greedy eating first appeased then made me gloomy, like masturbating" (184), Del makes clear the analogy between sexual desire and the consumption of food. But the text is equally suggestive, though less explicit, about food *preparation* as a displacement of female energies. Del admits, of her dinner at the Frenches', that "There's no denying I was happy in that house" (226), but the female providers of that feast also represent a threat to her, and their bounteous hospitality is an aspect of that threat.

A particular blankness tends, consistently, to mark the depiction of women as providers. The feast at Craig's funeral represents hours and hours of unpaid and probably undervalued female labour. How do we feel about the tribute which is complacently demanded of women ("Work is a good offering" the minister tells them, 53) and the prompt, even extravagant way they fulfil the demand? What is implied when Del enumerates the daily chores of Aunt Elspeth and Auntie Grace, in a list of tasks that ends with a list of food?

floor-scrubbing, cucumber hoeing, potato digging, bean and tomato picking, canning, pickling, washing, starching, sprinkling, ironing, waxing, baking . . . their laps were full of workcherries to be stoned, peas to be shelled, apples to be cored (32)

Is this a celebration of the aunt's energy and skills, or an indictment of a culture that defines real work as masculine, abstract, and cerebral, while imposing a kind of domestic slavery upon women? There is a certain rich concreteness about Elspeth's and Grace's daily round, especially in the context of Uncle Craig's interminable history-writing. Yet the very length of the list implies excess. Is their schedule a mindless immersion (drowning?) in a specifically female kind of servitude—servitude which becomes an end in itself? Is there a whiff of free indirect discourse here?—a suggestion that this is the aunts' plaintive characterization of their own work load? Their demeanour *is* somehow reproachful: Del describes their hands moving "with marvellous, almost vindictive speed" (32). Vindictive against what? Their brother's "abstract intellectual pursuits"? The fate that assigns them this endless drudgery? Lazier, less skilled women who can't perform it so efficiently? The ambiguity has led to divergent interpretations: critics see the aunts very differently, and sharply disagree about whether they are being idealized or satirized.<sup>11</sup> The catalogue, a resonant but empty figure, teases and tests the reader, who is constrained to interpret the plenitude it implies.

The list can also be a useful way of exposing ambivalence about other kinds of *copia* associated particularly with woman. In Munro's work the female body is often constructed in terms of plenitude—plenitude that can easily seem like excess: too much pubic hair ("this vile bundle," 145), too much blood ("that little extra gush of blood, little bonus that no Kotex is going to hold," 179). No surprise, then, that its vulnerabilities should be outlined in a kind of parodic gynecological blazon. Del recognizes her Aunt Moira as a stereotypical female victim of "varicose veins, hemorrhoids, a dropped womb, cysted ovaries, inflammations, discharges, lumps and stones in various places" (40). The traditional blazon is usually visual, itemizing the parts of the female body that draw the male gaze, and evoking wholeness by means of a list of carefully selected and organized parts. This list is tactile, suggesting how the body feels to the woman herself, and foretelling dissolution as the swollen or overgrown parts turn cancerously against the whole. Yet it also has something of the blazon's scopic energy: though the adult narrator's comprehension is retrospective ("I would recognize now . . ." 40), we also get the sense of the young Del watching her aunt,

but from an exasperated or horrified male perspective.<sup>12</sup> The verbal rhythms, on the other hand, sound like an Aunt Moira's: partly because it is followed by more complaining, by "Aunt Moira's voice [spreading] out over the day, over the yard, like black oil" (41), this list too has the flavour of free indirect discourse, evoking the wearisome rhetoric of female complaint. The catalogue unfolds and displays not only the female body but the discourses that construct it, implying a mixture of sympathy, revulsion, dread, and irritation. Munro's writing teaches us to be wary of this figure, to attend to its power in defining girls and women.

I have been focusing on lists generated by the narrative voice on the list as product. But *Lives of Girls and Women* also dramatizes list-making as a process, often a collaborative ritual or game between characters. The first time we hear Del speak, she is trying to draw up, with her brother Owen, a list of the objects in Benny's kitchen:

"Two toasters, one with doors one you lay the toast on."  
 "Seat out of a car."  
 "Rolled-up mattress. An accordion." (4)

But which words are Del's? Because we aren't told which child speaks first, it is impossible to identify the protagonist's first utterance. Such ambiguity is rather striking in a *bildungsroman* concerned to establish her special relationship with language. It is more striking when we realize that Del's first *written* words also take the form of a list, and that this list, too, entangles her words helplessly with those of others. It has often been pointed out that the first thing Del writes is Ben's postal address and that the episode is an allusion to Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.<sup>13</sup> That it is also a kind of list seems to me equally interesting. Both lists are radically shaped by convention. In Del's and Owen's memory-game, there is no pattern to the order of the remembered details, but the order in which they speak is fixed: they must of course take turns. In her postal address Del begins with a convention and tries to expand it, but her expansion echoes that of a writer she has not yet read. It seems that no linguistic gesture, however elementary, can exempt the subject from the discursive games she does not even realize she has begun to play.

Both the inventory and the postal address have to do with defining and controlling an uncontrollable environment. How is chaos to be mastered:



by mimicking it or by reordering it? The order of the objects in the postal address is as rigid as that of the items in Ben's kitchen is random. Sequence implies enclosure: each subsequent unit encloses the preceding one. Del uses enclosure to attain closure, extending the sequence to include "*the Universe*" (11) and declaring "The Universe means everything. It's all there is" (11). But Ben, invoking the term "Heaven" and making clear that her statement is not a description of reality but a product of a particular discourse, reminds the reader that if the individual is inside the universe, the universe is also "inside" the mind—that space, as a mental construction, cannot be used to shore up or locate the subject which constructs it.

Del's first two linguistic acts, then, suggest both the desire to control one's environment by language and the possibility that this desire must always be thwarted. The implications of the failure may be social and moral as well as existential. Ben's kitchen is the first and most literal example of those "deep caves paved with kitchen linoleum" (253) which it will later be Del's vocation to investigate—a black vortex into which any number of objects can apparently disappear.<sup>14</sup> Del and Owen blithely confront the chaos, play at mastering it, and complacently accept their failure ("we weren't getting half, we knew it. The things we remembered could have been taken out of the house and never missed," 4). But since what goes on in Ben's house is the point of the narrative that follows, their list-making appears retrospectively as the first of several strategies for dealing with darkness, all of which prove to be sadly inadequate. It is important that the first act of memory in *Lives of Girls and Women* points also to what can't be brought to consciousness, for repression and denial will acquire sinister significance in the story that follows. ("Her mother beats her, doesn't she?" says Addie of Diane, after Madeleine has gone back to Toronto—"Why didn't I think of it myself?" 20). Del and Owen cannot be held accountable, as the adults perhaps can, for their inability to rescue Diane, but their participation in mastery games implicates them in the moral and hermeneutic failure on which the story turns. Making lists is linked from the very beginning of *Lives of Girls and Women* with that will to "control the uncontrollable" that Carrington sees as the central theme in Munro's writing, with the failure to control, and with the social and moral implications of that failure.

Addie, whose compulsion to control is one of her most marked characteristics and whose inability to accept the irrational may be linked to the abuse she herself suffered as a child, is a great list-maker. Her simple faith

that saving knowledge is to be won through the accumulation of facts is expressed both in her cross-word puzzles and in her encyclopedia project. Although she bitterly resents her own mother's missionary enthusiasm and the exploitation of children in its service, she peddles encyclopedias as ardently as her mother had distributed bibles and demonstrates their efficacy by using *her* daughter to rhyme off lists of facts. This is a performance, like those of the ancient bards who recited epic catalogues, and it is one that Del initially enjoys in what she suggests is a childish way, finding it "an irresistible test . . . like trying to hop a block on one foot" (66). But she soon tires of it, for it displaces what she really does find fascinating in the encyclopedia, romantic historical stories of violent death. The encyclopedia, as Del experiences it, offers narrative and list-making as two alternative ways of dealing with mortality. Del's preference for narrative can be read as the mark of her creative spirit, and as representing a progression from the mechanical to the organic, from the factual to the imaginative. But her own facile distinction between list and story may not be the text's final position. List-making might be an even more fundamental human need, and a more honest and tragic one, foregrounding, even as it dramatizes the desire to conserve, how little can be saved.

Death and cataloguing are repeatedly associated in *Lives of Girls and Women*. Del listing the names on tombstones is not so different from her mother, who finds her reassurance in breaking the human body down into a list of chemicals or organs. A somewhat different defense is constructed by the "two old men" (53) at Uncle Craig's funeral, collaborating on a list of Jubilee residents whose bodies, one particularly cold winter, couldn't be buried until spring thaw:

"By that time must have been three-four of them waiting. Let see. There'd be Jimmy Poole"

"Him all right. There'd be Mrs. Fraleigh,  
senior"

"Hold on there, she died before the freeze, she'd be all right." (53)

"All right" because into the ground promptly? The phrase, with its connotation of organizational efficiency, is ironic, and poignantly suggests what motivates this memory-game: the men's attempt to come to terms with their own mortality—with how quickly they are destined to join Jimmy Poole and Mrs. Fraleigh—and make it, somehow, "all right." Uncle Craig had included among his own files "lists of those present at funerals" (31).

Del's account of this conversation at *his* funeral is a meta-list, not only a record of "those present" but also an account of list-making and a list of other dead. Del once again outdoes her uncle even as she recognizes the source of the obsession that links all of them in rituals designed to deal with darkness.

**L**isting the dead can do them no harm. Listing the living is more problematical. Making lists of people's names is always a loaded gesture in *Lives of Girls and Women*. Del makes or records several of these lists the "beautiful shining girls," the members of the Anglican church, the members of the Baptist Young People's society, the names of persons requesting songs to be played by the Jubilee radio station. These are all acts of social classification and can have powerful consequences. Del understands quite clearly how such categories function in social and institutional life. She senses the class basis of membership in the groups she describes; she is perfectly aware that the teachers run the school smoothly by classifying students as more or less "reliable" (and more or less socially prominent and influential) and selecting them accordingly for honorific tasks and prerequisites. Her very awareness makes this kind of list-making somewhat sinister when she and her friends begin to do it.

Jerry Storey, fascinated as he is by the idea of intellectual control, is a natural list-maker, and Del is not unwilling to collaborate with him. In their ruthless characterization of the groups of people who come to the revival meeting from the surrounding towns and villages, Del and Jerry at once epitomize and parody the motive behind such list-making. When Jerry lists the sexual perversions they are supposed to practise—"Fathers sleep with daughters. Grandfathers sleep with granddaughters. Brothers sleep with sisters." (210)—his Polonian exhaustiveness accidentally (or self-parodically) generates one ("Mothers sleep with fathers," 210) which, because it is not taboo, abruptly deconstructs the sequence and exposes the malice that lies behind it. It is ironical that this exercise in social classification is interrupted by Del's first encounter with Garnet French, who, precisely because he cuts across their smug categories, is able to disempower her.

Garnet too is a list-maker. His "list of girls' names, each one with an X after it" is the climactic catalogue in *Lives of Girls and Women*. Garnet's "legend of good women," which he completes with Del's name and concludes with a phallic flourish, links his will to power with a desire for closure:

When he finished the name he did a border of stars around it and drew a line underneath. "I think I've come to the end," he said.

He snapped his knife shut. . . . (225)

Although Del emphasizes Garnet's unease with language, he is one of only three characters in the novel actually described in the act of writing.<sup>15</sup> And he writes with a *knife*.

This list, too, is collaborative. The scene is staged before an avid female audience: Del herself, the two little sisters, giggling "rapturously" at the thrilling idea of "'Garnet's girl friends!'" (224), and Mrs. French, indulgently satirical, whose comments form an invidious counterpoint to her son's characterizations:

"Doris McIvor! Her father owned a sawmill, up past Blue River. If I had've married her, I would've been rich."

"If that's any way to get rich!" said his mother, who had followed as far as the screen door.

"Eulie Fatherstone. She was a Roman Catholic, worked in the coffee shop of the Brunswick Hotel."

"Married her you would have been poor," said his mother significantly. "You know what the Pope tells them to do!"

"You did okay without the Pope yourself, Momma—Margaret Fraleigh. Red hair."

"You can't trust their kind of a temper."

"She didn't have no more of a temper than a baby chick. Thora Willoughby. Sold the tickets at the Lyceum Theatre. She's in Brantford now."

The dialogue is a double list, Garnet's words expanding on each proper name, his mother's bringing the focus back to him and his welfare. Although it is set up as a kind of dispute, the two speakers are not really at odds, for Mrs. French, emphasizing the risks of permanent commitment to a woman, is reinforcing her son's somewhat predatory sexuality. Her closing question, wilfully naive, underlines the ethos of sexual conquest which motivates Garnet's writing:

"What is the X for, son? That when you stopped going out with them?"

"No, ma'am it's not."

"Well what is it *for*?"

"Military secret!"

The text has already had something to say about "military secrets" and about male delight in war, conquest and violence.<sup>16</sup> The French household is in fact rather matriarchal—all the fully characterized people in it are female—but this is a matriarchy complicit with phallic aggression (Garnet

and his mother are in their way as “husband-and-wifely” [202] as Jerry and his.) Though it is apparently staged as a tribute to Del, Garnet’s performance is ominous enough, and clearly enough connected with the events that follow it to foreground the will to power that lies behind the list-making.

The phallic suggestions of this particular scene are clear, but Munro is as willing to attribute the urge for mastery to girls and women as to men and boys. It is, after all, Del and Naomi who fabricate the only purely fictitious list in the book when they maliciously insert the names of “the two reigning queens of our class” into the list of the “bad brainless girls” (157) on the door of the Ladies’ Toilet in the Town Hall. This too is an act of sexual aggression, though the writers are themselves female. And it overturns, definitively, the notion of the list as an innocent mimetic figure. It is precisely because their victims would *not* be found there—“because they could never be imagined entering the Town Hall toilets” (157)—that their names are worth adding to the list.

*Lives of Girls and Women* is a consistently subtle, self-reflexive text, one that meditates critically on the least of its own rhetorical gestures. Never a transcription, always a construction, the simplest list betrays a will to power which, while it is perhaps an inevitable aspect of self-development and self-expression, is nevertheless quietly exposed in Munro’s writing.

Thomas Tausky, in his discussion of the various draft versions of the final episode in *Lives of Girls and Women*, argues that the insufficiency of list-making is even clearer in the drafts than in the final text. He points out that six of the seven drafts follow the “radiant, everlasting” passage with variations on the same theme: “No lists, or tricks either, are going to manage that,” for example, or “What tricks could manage that?” This despairing or disparaging reference to authorial “tricks,” he observes, “recalls the exact wording” of a passage from an essay of Munro’s on the pains of composition, a passage which Tausky quotes as an epigraph to his article:

Even as I most feverishly, desperately practise it. . . I am a little afraid that the work with words may turn out to be a questionable trick, an evasion (and never more so than when it is most dazzling, apt and striking) an unavoidable lie.  
(Tausky 52)

It seems to me, however, that the two statements, when juxtaposed, imply something rather different than Tausky suggests about list-making. By making “lists” parallel to “tricks” and applying the term “trick” to the very act of writing itself (“the work with words”), Munro, far from emphasizing the

distinction between apparently mechanical strategies like list-making and more “dazzling, apt and striking” techniques, would seem in fact to be collapsing it. While I agree that the ending of *Lives* does not come out just on the side of realism and that Alice Munro writes “in ways that make us all deeply aware of the abyss that divides the world we imagine from the worlds in which we exist” (Tausky 76), I would argue that the catalogue in Munro is not presented as a realistic device: rather, it is one of those ways by which she makes us aware of the abyss.

Though she has never again foregrounded the device the way Del does in *Lives of Girls and Women*, Munro has never stopped using it. In *Friend of My Youth*, in particular, she comes back to the catalogue in a very self-conscious way. Like Del, though they do not draw attention to it, the protagonists of two of these stories are list-makers. In “Menesebung,” two of Almeda Roth’s poems are catalogues: her “The Passing of the Old Forest” is “a list of trees, their names” (*Friend* 52) and its companion piece features “catalogues of plants brought from European countries” (*Friend* 53). In “Hold Me Fast, Don’t Let Me Pass,” Hazel, whose name is the name of a tree, makes a list of the trees in the Scottish countryside (*Friend* 74). These rather pointed references, in two stories in the same collection, to a traditional *topos*, the Ovidian catalogue of trees—a motif intriguingly reworked at the end of “Vandals” (*Open Secrets* 294)—suggests that Munro, in thinking about lists, has always had classical exemplars in mind.<sup>17</sup> The catalogue in her writing is no artless mode of documentary realism. Rather, it raises in almost paradigmatic form some of the problematic issues of language itself, which can not get so simple that it does not have a history, can not get so innocent that it does not have designs, can not find a shape which can make itself whole.

## NOTES

- 1 Those who see Del’s list-making as an inadequate kind of realism include Blodgett (38-9, 58-9), Besner (111), Fowler (196-7), and Tausky (65-7).
- 2 Braden insists on its essential literariness: “If we are reading a catalogue, it is a self-conscious catalogue, concerned with the sources and implications of the allure of its iconic entries” (26).
- 3 For women’s perspectives on the blazon see Cropper, Vickers, and Parker (1989).

- 4 Thiem quotes Borges on the problem of “setting down a *limited* catalogue of *endless* things” (*Aleph* 264, cited by Thiem 115).
- 5 As Blodgett observes, “lists are . . . useful only as cues to discovering something as yet unseen” (39).
- 6 Redekop, discussing the “Macaroni pepperoni Botticelli beans” list, refers to “the double signing of each item that makes us do a double take” (12).
- 7 See also Rasporich, 46-7, 108-9, on the Egyptian imagery in *Lives of Girls and Woman*.
- 8 Miss Farris’s titles might be compared with those of the six operettas cyclically performed by Wingham Public School students in the 1940s: see Ross 35.
- 9 It has been suggested that learned catalogues in literary epics must have worked in the same way, that contemporary readers must have been “able to identify their members at once and through the names associate with them everything that they evoke” (Hunter 59 on Milton; see also O’Connell 245 on Spenser). Redekop writes of “the pleasures of recognition” (3) experienced by a reader of Munro.
- 10 For example, the narrator in “Miles City, Montana” makes lists of her husband’s good and bad features in an attempt “to get my feelings about Andrew to come together into a serviceable and dependable feeling” (*Progress* 123); “Jesse and Meribeth” exchange lists of their favourite things (*Progress* 222); Averill in “Goodness and Mercy” notices ship passengers “establishing themselves” by cataloguing their tastes and habits (*Friend* 161).
- 11 Rasporich reads the description of the funeral feast as making a feminist point at the expense of the aunts, who “despite the pretense of being in control . . . through preparation of enormous quantities of food . . . have in no sense contained death” (45-6); but Godard argues that the hands preparing food “triumph over those on the typewriter” (54-5).
- 12 Cf. the frankly misogynistic catalogue of gynecological maladies in Denys Arcand’s *The Decline of the American Empire* (1986), collaboratively assembled by three male characters: “fibromas, vaginitis, asalpangitis,” “chlamidia and spirochetes,” “herpes and chancer sores.”
- 13 Martin, Baum, and Struthers emphasize the parallels between Joyce and Munro, Godard, and Harris the differences.
- 14 The list of junk in Ben’s kitchen is a variation on the disgorging-closet topos of situation comedy. (An earlier literary example is the list of things tumbling out of Mrs. Jellyby’s closet in *Bleak House*, discussed by Miller 125). In Munro’s female gothic version, the bad housekeeper is a man not a woman, the closet keeps its secrets, and domestic disorder acquires a different kind of sinister meaning.
- 15 The others are Del herself and Art Chamberlain, who, like Garnet, writes Del into a text of his own (“*Del is a bad girl!*” 164).
- 16 Redekop, noting the phrase “military secret,” compares the catalogue of names to a list of war dead (184).
- 17 Carscallen also sees this traditional catalogue in the protagonist’s “long disquisition on different kinds of trees—what they look like, what they are good for, how they should be handled” in Munro’s uncollected story “Wood” (*Other House* 15-6).

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# Por Favor Muy Bonita Saraswattie Señorita, Por Favor

Accepting an award I would have  
refused (?) naively tripping memory on spotlight  
charged with Gordon's flash of suicide or murders:  
the historian who would live by the walkie talkie  
died by it—a lone anti-hero-worshipping-anybody  
poem, "Reply to Walter Rodney is dead" reproduced

The sole female recalling the  
rapes at Wismar—the '62 governor suspending the  
constitution. British puttees patrolling streets  
of father's frames: click click click. Water Street  
in flames, the sky's white-black smoke a scent of  
race for prizes I would have avoided (?).

Jagan CIA-ed and chased from  
office clutching Gandhi's *ahimsa*. Troops returning  
to Empire, serpenteyed Harris returning to London  
after Carnival, Shinebourne to the Last English  
Plantation and Freddie stuttering around Mamma Dot's  
uncertain Mother Sally stumbling from the podium,  
someone mimicking:

My bonnie lies over the ocean  
My bonnie lies over the sea  
Bring back, bring back  
O bring back my bonnie  
To me to me . . .

In front the police commissioner  
the colonels and the President on stage—  
all rise his Excellency will arrive after all  
gone back unborn unconcerned uncaring. But I would  
*puja* the earth Saraswattie goddess of learning, Kali  
goddess redtongued on every-crack-of-limb-on-ground

pink petals from el Kama Sutra  
de Español de Puerto Rico. Taste for grilled something  
on the Lincoln Road Mall inside inside inside entering  
behind reproduction's famous oil over the bar Rembrandt  
or Rubens(?) whomever nude back buttocks in July

or was it June's dangerous hips  
recall bonita bonita bonita; not the two-table-waiter,  
si we own the restaurant's space-song like Paris'. But  
how could you mother—be controlled, faithful repressed  
to poison on your lips? The bottle emptying the lives

we will fulfil  
our lips for touching lips tongues for thinging  
tongues on hips' waterways English a decidedly  
poor language for love I will come to the Fine  
Arts Museum we will savour the flames of fingers

NOW señorita here señorita  
señorita the sitar player on your wrist my palm  
aching for the instrument—one summer of music  
another painting, several danceteaching will you  
me a salsa tonight tonight tonight. Today only 24  
hours days years all inconsequential unsequenced.

The burger tested. Nothing the  
waitstaff saying more assuring than your nodding—  
yes we would eat any morsel from pudendum's pink  
ixora cluster if you will part it agreeably, if you  
will lend your Lorna-Book, notes in souls' margins:

I am going to find this space  
Most of her poems do not give up (p.35)

Señorita señorita muy bonita  
señorita por favor por favor. Como esta usted?  
Freddie promised. I didn't. El Hombre Puerto Rico  
didn't ask. I do. Por favor por favor señorita  
Saraswattie: bonita bonita señorita ah señorita!

# What Makes You Feel You Are Suited To This Type Of Employment?

Because, despite my appearance, I have the strength of twenty men.

Because all the events and experiences of my life have brought me here, in this moment, to this place, this colonnaded hall, this mahogany desk.

Because I am a sort of volcano of productivity and success, ready to blow.

Because I am an avid scholar of French Absurdist Theatre of the 1890's—especially *Ubu*.

Because I highly value personal freedom and creativity, and dislike any form of routine or time-pressure.

Because my bones become soft and pliable at the sight of beauty.

Because I understand thoroughly the mechanics of the rise and fall of civilizations, and have brought my wrench.

Because last night, under the pale light of the first quarter moon, my wife and I made love in the woods behind the house—first like animals, then slow and sweet.

Because on a clear day I can still see from my balcony the shining towers of Constantinople rising up from morning mist.

Because I am an enemy of the Regime.

Because there is no antidote to the charm of my smile.

Because I will promise not to woo your daughters.

Because I can sing you to sleep.

## The Rhetoric of Fictional Realism in the Stories of Alice Munro

In "Epilogue: the Photographer," a story from *Lives of Girls and Women*, the narrator tells us that as a young girl she wrote a novel, mostly in her head, about a local family that numbered among its members a suicide, an alcoholic and a mild lunatic. "I picked on the Sherriff family to write it about; what had happened to them isolated them, splendidly, doomed them to fiction."<sup>1</sup> In her imaginary novel, the narrator transformed the characters, who are real to her within Munro's fictional world, just as Greek writers had transformed the reality of the unfortunate houses of Atreus and Thebes into an imaginatively satisfying, well-wrought drama. Like the young narrator and the Greek dramatists, Munro has no choice but to work within the compelling force-field of melodrama, romance, legend, and adventure, but at the same time, like all realists, she must persuade her audience that her fictions are made in opposition to that same force. There are numerous ways of doing this. For example, Cervantes in *Don Quixote* and Flaubert in *Madame Bovary* are realists in portraying characters deceived by the popular fiction of their day and by including details that would be excluded from romance or heroic drama. Zola is a realist because he writes about characters driven by low motives and because he amasses "facts" to support his "scientific" analysis of their actions. *Death of a Salesman* is "realistic" insofar as we learn that Willy Loman insists on American cheese; in contrast, we will never learn what Oedipus's food preferences were. In all these cases the presumption is that the realist writer resists the temptations of mere storytelling. Cervantes will not write another romance like *Amadis de Gaul*,

Flaubert will not write a pathetic tale of adulterous love, Zola will not indulge his readers with that staple of nineteenth-century popular fiction, the saga of a lady and a gentleman on the road to matrimony, and Miller will not pretend that his hero does not get upset when he doesn't get his favorite kind of cheese. But "[w]hat seems natural in one period or to one school seems artificial to another period or to another school" (Booth 42). Consequently, while Alice Munro as a contemporary realist employs certain still viable techniques—the most obvious being the rambling nature of her telling, and the suppression of overt moralizing or thematizing, a mark of the realistic short story since Chekhov—she must also find new methods of creating verisimilitude. Munro escapes dooming her characters to fiction through a variety of subtle strategies which she uses to build our faith in her reality and to strengthen our own opposition to the potent mythologizer in us all.<sup>2</sup> By this means, her stories take their place in this tradition of fiction which resists the temptations of the imagination.

However, while she resists the fictionality of fiction, Munro does not assume the role of a mere reporter documenting everyday reality, as one critic implies in claiming that Munro's stories "are translations into the next-door language of fiction of all those documentary details, those dazzling textures and surfaces, of remembered experience" (Ross 112). While Munro is certainly a realist, she is not naive; she does not simply oppose the semblance of reportage to the legend-making of the story-teller. Munro recognizes, and also makes us aware, that her own works are fictions as well, and that awareness dictates that she cannot simply rely on including more realistic detail and letting her stories mirror the confusions that we often take to be a mark of reality. That Munro believes the documentary manner to be no longer sufficient to create stories is indicated by the irony with which she treats one of her characters who portrays himself as merely reporting, which is the pose of the naive realist. After Albert in "Visitors" has given his fragmented and unshaped account of the man who disappeared into the swamp when Albert was young, another character wonders what makes the incident significant for Albert and why he had recounted the story; but when asked, Albert replies defensively, "It's not a story. It's something that happened."<sup>3</sup> For him, and for other naive realists, the randomness and inconclusiveness of the account are both a function and an indication of its authenticity, whereas for Munro, such merely truthful but unarranged telling is clearly unsatisfactory. She rejects this documentary style and instead adopts a

number of sophisticated rhetorical strategies as she tries, once again, to tell fictional stories that present themselves as truer than other fictions.

Sometimes Munro's strategies appear conventional enough. First of all, hardly any of her stories are what would usually be called "tales," narratives with a good plot at the centre. A typical Munro story is a ramble that includes sudden shifts of time and place and subject, the reasons for which are often not immediately clear. Sometimes Munro announces the shift by saying, for example, "To change the subject . . ." <sup>4</sup> or "I have forgotten to say what the foxes were fed" (*Dance* 118), but most of the time she shifts without warning. While it might be thought that this technique insists that we recognize that our reality simply is like that, the shifts actually force us to work out where we are and why we are being told what we are being told. We tend to label as "mere stories" those narratives which do all the work for us, for they, we have learned, are moving along the well-worn grooves of myths and legend, the archetypal narratives. What lets us drift easily is unreal; what resists us is real. Such, we would argue, is the audience's unconscious reasoning that Munro's rhetorical, rather than mimetic, ramblings are addressed to. It is not that the looseness of construction mirrors the real world, but that as readers we are forced to work for our meaning, and we reward ourselves for the effort with the belief that we have penetrated a resistant reality.

Another way in which Munro creates the impression of realism paradoxically is to give a significant place to improbability and contingency, elements that are opposed to the conventionally well-constructed realist narrative. However, Munro avoids mere bad story-telling by explicitly acknowledging the existence of the improbable and the contingent, thereby anticipating the objection that her stories are fantastic or pointless, even as the improbable and the contingent become part of her meaning. Thus, she manages to have her cake and eat it too. For example, in "Epilogue: The Photographer," the narrator says that in her imaginary novel she "got rid of the older brother, the alcoholic; three tragic destinies were too much even for a book, and certainly more than I could handle" (*Lives* 241). In other words, the narrator, unthinkingly accepting some of the conventions of contemporary realist fiction, sacrificed "truth" to probability, but in *Munro's* story, of course, the family does have three tragic members. Munro's story thus gains the appearance of truth precisely because it is *not* probable and because the improbability is acknowledged; here Munro turns to her advantage the adage that truth is stranger than fiction.

Similarly, the acknowledgement of contingency occurs in a story whose title, "The Accident," clearly signals the importance of contingency. In this story, the affair between a married man named Ted and a woman named Frances is about to end when the death of Ted's son in a car accident precipitates Ted's divorce. Frances marries him, they have children, and her whole life changes. When Frances eventually happens to meet the man who ran the boy over and killed him, she reflects on the far-reaching consequences of the accident, for others as well as herself, concluding with the thought that she "would not live in Ottawa now, she would not have her two children" (*Moons* 109). Thus, there is no necessity to a major portion of her life; it does not flow from her character, as it would in the classical formulation in which character is fate and fate is character; her life would have been very different, and, therefore, so would she. The acknowledgement of contingency by both character and author, and not its mere imitation, intensifies the impression of realism.

**M**unro also emphasizes the realism of her stories by portraying the conventionality of her characters' inventions. In "Epilogue: The Photographer," for example, the young narrator tells us about another change she had made in the lives of the Sheriffs, other than the number of tragic fates. She had changed the father from a storekeeper to a judge, and now comments on the alteration: "I knew from my reading that in the families of judges, as of great landowners, degeneracy and madness were things to be counted on" (*Lives* 240). Tales are about the humble and the proud, the shepherd and the king, and not about shopkeepers (though in the modern world a judge will have to do), and the proud are routinely brought low, perhaps punished. Here we are in the fiction factory, the assembly line of setting, character and action that structuralist analyses try to diagram. In her young narrator's story, Munro shows us the machinery of fiction-making, and we are invited to recognize the narrator's naive endeavours while becoming engaged in Munro's own fiction.

While letting her narrators unselfconsciously use such strategies, Munro can also indirectly comment on the artifice of such little tricks by having the narrators consciously employ them for the very purpose of fictioneering. In "Tell Me Yes or No," the narrator addresses a former lover in her imagination:

Would you like to know how I am informed of your death? I go into the faculty kitchen, to make myself a cup of coffee before my ten o'clock class. Dodie



Charles who is always baking something has brought a cherry pound cake. (The thing we old pros know about, in these fantasies is the importance of detail, solidity; yes, a cherry pound cake.)<sup>5</sup>

Here the narrator takes a step back from her story, with the result that we see the story at three removes. By having the narrator admit to the use of this realist device, with which the narrator self-consciously tries to enhance the verisimilitude of her tale, Munro also exposes the possibility of its use in her own story-telling and thus rejects simple documentary illusion. However, even though the narrator's comment on her purposeful use of such detail should alert the reader to Munro's use of the same device, this self-reflexive gesture actually has the opposite effect: by undermining her narrator Munro actually deepens our trust in her truth.

A very clear example of Munro's effort to resist the telling of tales occurs in the conclusion to "The Stone in the Field" from *The Moons of Jupiter*. In this story Mr. Black, a man with an unknown past, had built a hut in the corner of a field owned by the narrator's family, which consisted mostly of "maiden ladies" (*Moons* 1). He died there and was buried under a stone. That is all we know. The narrator concludes the story by drawing attention to, and explicitly resisting, the potential for fiction-making that the enigma of Mr. Black's life and death presents:

If I had been younger, I would have figured out a story. I would have insisted on Mr. Black's being in love with one of my aunts, and on one of them—not necessarily the one he was in love with—being in love with him. I would have wished him to confide in them, in one of them, his secret, his reason for living in a shack in Huron County, far from home. Later, I might have believed that he wanted to, but hadn't confided this, or his love either. I would have made a horrible, plausible connection between that silence of his, and the manner of his death. Now I no longer believe that people's secrets are defined and communicable, or their feelings full-blown and easy to recognize. I don't believe so. Now, I can only say, my father's sisters scrubbed the floor with lye, they stooked the oats and milked the cows by hand. (35)

The narrator tells us what "a story," as she now calls it, would have been like. This story is contrasted with the unknowable and no doubt more banal "reality," and the contrast serves to make us feel the "truth" of the brief memoir that we read. Munro's story is made out of the refusal to tell the "natural," that is, romantic, story of buried and unrequited love which we might expect in sentimental fiction. Mystery and surmise are pushed aside in favour of the knowable reality of the ordinary world, what—in "The Peace of Utrecht"—is called "the unsatisfactory, apologetic and persistent reality" (*Dance* 197).

One of the most important ways in which Munro prejudices us in favour of her alleged realism is to portray unfavourably both legend-making and those who engage in it, and this strategy encourages us not to doubt that *her* stories, in contrast, are real. She shows how characters in her stories use others as material for tales with which they implicitly glorify themselves, and by a sleight of hand she uses our moral disapproval of those who legendize to bolster our allegiance to her concept of what is real. But it is not only story-tellers who, as Munro repeatedly implies, should resist the enchantments of tales and legends, for we often make use of other people as material for tales of implicit self-glorification. Our assent to Munro's moral position is transferred to her concept of realism.

She employs this technique in a number of stories, including part one of "Chaddeleys and Flemings," the opening story of *The Moons of Jupiter*. The narrator's mother frequently refers to her hometown of Fork Mills in the Ottawa Valley, thereby trying to distance herself from her present home in Dalgleish and to assert her own superior background and status. However, the mother's four Chaddeley cousins take this process one step further: at home in larger towns and cities, they cast their sights beyond national boundaries and further up the social ladder, deriving their status in part from a rumoured family connection with the English aristocracy, possibly even with a family whose founder may have "come to England with William the Conqueror" (*Moons* 7). Later, these social ambitions are rudely exposed by the narrator's uncharitable husband, who by making the narrator see the gap between reality and Cousin Iris's pretensions both robs the narrator of her half hoped-for family background and further undermines her self-confidence and her already vulnerable position within the failing marriage. While Munro shows the emotional brutality of the husband's exposure of these social ambitions and thus obviously has some sympathy for the impulse to try to rise above a humdrum reality, she also leads her audience to feel the moral weakness of the pat aggrandizing tale, thereby increasing our allegiance to her own realism.

Legend-making as a means of self-glorification is also a theme in "Day of the Butterfly," where the narrator remembers her former classmate Myra. Myra is poor, a relative newcomer and outsider who remains on the fringes of school life. When Myra falls ill with leukemia (though the other children don't know how sick she is), she becomes for a moment the center of concern for her class, who visit her in the hospital and bring gifts. "We began to

talk of her as if she were something we owned, and her party became a cause,” says the narrator (*Dance* 107-08). At the end of the visit, Myra calls the narrator back to her bed and offers her one of the gifts she had received. She does this because the narrator had once given her the prize from a Cracker Jack box, and Myra now suggests that when she returns to school, she and the narrator will be friends. The narrator recoils at the idea (her earlier generosity was only a momentary impulse) and thinks to herself that she will let her little brother take the gift apart. Later, as an adult, she reflects on her last glimpse of Myra:

She sat in her high bed, her delicate brown neck, rising out of a hospital gown too big for her, her brown carved face immune to treachery, her offering perhaps already forgotten, prepared to be set apart for legendary uses, as she was even in the back porch at school. (*Dance* 110)

Once Myra was the occasion for fun, before she became the occasion of a pathetic legend that shed a flattering light on the good feelings of the children who visited her. Of course, the person who had no significant place in this legend was Myra—the “actual” Myra in contrast to the Myra transformed into a saint-like figure by illness, martyrdom, and fashionable charity. As an adult, the narrator looks back upon this childhood self-indulgence with chagrin, and it is her self-critical resistance to the legend-making of her youth to which moral virtue is attached. Legend-making is thus shown to come easily; what is difficult is the hard-won attitude reflected in Munro’s own oblique telling. And—so we are to deduce—what comes hard is what is real.

**M**any brief passages in Munro’s stories quietly create the “reality effect” (to use Barthes’ derogatory term) she seeks. In “The Peace of Utrecht” the narrator returns to her hometown with her young daughter, and on seeing the mother’s old home the daughter asks, “Mother, is that your house?” This question gives rise to the following reflections:

And I felt my daughter’s voice expressed a complex disappointment . . . ; it contained the whole flatness and strangeness of the moment in which is revealed the source of legends, the unsatisfactory, apologetic and persistent reality. (*Dance* 197)

In this passage a disappointment that in a sentimental tale would have to be overcome by some happy resolution is here itself a climax. The narrator in “Peace of Utrecht” has a moment of recognition, when she locates the common human impulse to invent illusory wonders in the banality of the quotidien. As she thus turns disappointment into a small victory, we accord

Munro's own fictions the reality which is her and our reward for acknowledging these deflationary occasions.

An episode in "Friend of My Youth" also brings moral approval to the support of realism by portraying the consequences that legendizing has on personal relationships. Near the beginning of the story, the narrator tells us that her mother

often spoke of the Ottawa Valley . . . in a dogmatic, mystified way, emphasizing things about it that distinguished it from any other place on earth. Houses turn black, maple syrup has a taste no maple syrup produced elsewhere can equal, bears amble within sight of farmhouses. Of course I was disappointed when I finally got to see this place. It was not a valley at all, if by that you mean a cleft between hills; it was a mixture of flat fields and low rocks and heavy bush and little lakes—a scrambled, disarranged sort of country with no easy harmony about it, not yielding readily to any description.<sup>6</sup>

The narrator here begins the process of demythologizing which at first divides mother and daughter, but which, when the process is turned against her own inventions, will allow the narrator to come to terms with her embattled relationship with her mother, which would not have been possible had she remained inside her mother's or her own legend.

Not only can legend-making be destructive through self-aggrandizing, but it can also operate as a means for the story-teller to portray himself as a victim, thereby disparaging and victimizing others. A sinister instance of succumbing to this kind of legend-making is the central concern of "The Office." In this story a woman writer rents an office and finds herself having to deal with the landlord's insistent attempts to befriend her. But it soon becomes clear that he is setting himself up to be rejected, for he pushes his friendship beyond what they both know to be appropriate. When she finally does reject him, she realizes that she has taken her place in the long line of imagined betrayals, which is the basis of his identity, and she imagines him "arranging in his mind the bizarre but somehow never quite satisfactory narrative of yet another betrayal of trust" (*Dance* 74). Here the roles are reversed, and it is not the writer but the landlord who creates a story about the previous tenant in magnifying and so mythologizing his history of repeated betrayal, thus dooming this and other former tenants to fiction.

In two stories in *Friend of My Youth*, the title story and "Meneseteung," what had been a thread running through a number of stories becomes the very substance of the stories themselves; here, the fictionality of story-telling becomes the main theme.

In “Friend of My Youth,” the relationship between the narrator and her mother is defined by, and explored through, the different stories they tell, and the daughter comes to accept the broken relationship with her mother by understanding the essential kinship between her mother’s legendizing and her own. In this story, the barrier between a mother and daughter is expressed primarily through their very different ways of imagining the life of Flora Grieves, a woman whom the mother had known as a young school-teacher. “Friend of My Youth” begins with an account of one of the commonest forms of false tales, a dream:

I used to dream about my mother, and though the details in the dream varied, the surprise in it was always the same. The dream stopped, I suppose because it was too transparent in its hopefulness, too easy in its forgiveness. (*Friend 3*)

As the conventional comparison of the impossibly happy story to a dream implies, despite our immediate need for the happy ending, such stories are not finally satisfying, for they conform too obviously to need rather than reality. The dream, in this instance, brings about a reconciliation that did not occur in life, and the rest of “Friend of My Youth” is the story of the “bugbear” (*Friend 4*) that had alienated the narrator from her mother. The bugbear was the difference in their values that was expressed in their very different ways of imagining Flora’s life.

Of course, given such a dramatic series of events including deaths, betrayals, miscarriages, and stillbirths, the narrator and her mother were not the first to make a story of the lives of Robert and the Grieves sisters:

The story of Flora and Ellie and Robert had been told—or all that people knew of it—in various versions. My mother did not feel that she was listening to gossip, because she was always on the alert for any disparaging remarks about Flora—she would not put up with that. But indeed nobody offered any. Everybody said that Flora had behaved like a saint. Even when she went to extremes, as in dividing up the house—that was like a saint. (*Friend 8*)

The narrator rebels against this hagiographic impulse, for the mother’s noble tale masks the puritanical fear of sexuality which is the real impulse behind her version of Flora’s story. And this fear expresses itself also in the religious cast of her story, with Ellie as the sinner punished:

God dealt out punishment for hurry-up marriages—not just Presbyterians but almost everybody else believed that. God rewarded lust with dead babies, idiots, harelips, and withered limbs and clubfeet. (*Friend 11*)

The story of saintly Flora is rooted in the crude sexual morality of the

Cameronians, though the narrator's mother distances herself from the "monstrous old religion" which Flora's family followed (*Friend* 12).

**M**unro calls on our moral approbation to support her realism in the account of the effect which the mother's story of Flora had on the daughter. When the narrator was a teenager, her mother told her, "If I could have been a writer . . . then I would have written the story of Flora's life. And do you know what I would have called it? 'The Maiden Lady'" (*Friend* 19), and the narrator recalls her own dismissive response:

*The Maiden Lady.* She said these words in a solemn and sentimental tone of voice that I had no use for. I knew, or thought I knew, exactly the value she found in them. The stateliness and mystery. The hint of derision turning to reverence. I was fifteen or sixteen years old by that time, and I believed that I could see into my mother's mind. I could see what she would do with Flora, what she had already done. She would make her into a noble figure, one who accepts defecation, treachery, who forgives and stands aside, not once but twice. Never a moment of complaint. Flora goes about her cheerful labors, she cleans the house and shovels out the cow byre, she removes some bloody mess from her sister's bed, and when at last the future seems to open up for her—Ellie will die and Robert will beg forgiveness and Flora will silence him with the proud gift of herself—it is time for Audrey Atkinson to drive into the yard and shut Flora out again, more inexplicably and thoroughly the second time than the first. . . . The wicked flourish. But it is all right. It is all right—the elect are veiled in patience and humility and lighted by a certainty that events cannot disturb. (19-20)

And after telling us that she "felt a great fog of platitudes and pieties lurking, an incontestable crippled-mother power, which could capture and choke me" (*Friend* 20), the narrator provides an outline of her own version, an almost spiteful counter-story which portrays Flora's saintliness as well-disguised malice and hypocrisy, used to gain control over her sister and brother-in-law and finally subdued only by the triumph of "the power of sex and ordinary greed" in the person of Nurse Atkinson (*Friend* 21). Here we have a feud carried on through legend and counter-legend, and the implication is that avoiding legendizing of any kind is a moral good that is encouraged by Munro's own kind of telling.

When the narrator eventually realizes that the absent figure in the mother's story is Robert, she takes this striking absence as a sign of the sexual repression shared by her mother and Flora, and of their shared belief in refined and virtuous female fragility, and groping, inarticulate male brutishness. Only when the narrator recognizes this gap in the mother's story of Flora

can she begin to dismantle the mother's myth, and thus she no longer needs to oppose it with an anti-myth of her own. Unlike her mother, the narrator reaches the awareness that her story is a legend that serves her, just as her mother's version met her needs, and this recognition ultimately permits her to draw closer to her mother in her mind and feelings.

The narrator of "Friend of My Youth" has managed a difficult mental feat. She has distanced herself from the legend she invented to oppose her mother's, and by de-mythologizing her own tale she is able to overcome her anger and accept her mother; it is now up to the reader to accept the unsentimental, undramatic final passages in which the story trails off without providing the posthumous but emotionally gratifying reconciliation which could be expected in conventional fiction. The narrator's stepping back from her own legend makes us feel that Munro's fiction itself is, at least to some degree, free of legend-making. As a result, our admiration for the emotional gain of the narrator's de-mythologizing is inevitably transferred to Munro's realism, which is defined, in part, by its own resistance to myth-making.

In "Meneseteung," a story in which a contemporary historian tries to recapture the life of a nineteenth-century "poetess," there is a constant tension between the compelling story which the historian-narrator engages in and the recognition that the story she weaves is predicated upon, and deeply imbued with, her own social and sexual attitudes. This is, as one critic says of another of Munro's stories, "fiction that questions its own truth and mocks its own telling" (Struthers 106). But this is not an end in itself, for it too has a rhetorical purpose. Here there is no question of praise or blame in regard to the effects of legendizing, but the narrator's final recognition of her tendency to fictionalize persuades us of Munro's own realism.

"Meneseteung" is the story of Almeda Roth, a "poetess" whom the narrator gradually "reconstructs." At the beginning the narrator tells us of the collection of poems that Almeda Roth wrote, describes the book itself, describes her picture which appears as the frontispiece, and quotes extensively from Almeda's autobiographical Preface—Almeda's own story of herself; then the narrator describes and paraphrases the poems. Juxtaposed to this are a view of the town and glimpses of the townspeople's attitude towards Almeda, culled from the narrator's reading of old newspapers. These disparate pieces of evidence are presented as historical materials, distant and more or less opaque. Soon, however, and almost before we know it, we are involved in the narrator's direct telling, having slipped from distanced

pseudo-history to imaginatively engaging story-telling. But then Munro brings us up short by having her narrator say, "I read about that life in the *Vidette*," the local paper (*Friend* 54). We are jolted out of unthinking involvement in a fiction, only of course to find ourselves in another one, *but it does not feel that way*. It feels as if we had "really" awakened, but we are immediately ready to be led back into the imagined world. The narrator makes up a very modern tale of repressed desire, of symptoms and symbols that have resonance for the sexually liberated. In the narrator's story, the "poetess" is both victim and abettor of Victorian sexual attitudes, and she can only fantasize about a poem, "Meneseteung," that will include all that has been excluded from her life.

This "modern," "liberated" kind of story, however, is only one possible reading of the raw materials with which the narrator presents us. In themselves, the poems amount to a series of deeply sentimental sketches of Almeda's psyche, the Preface offers a pathetic account of a life marked by death in the family, and the newspaper provides a string of rather smart-alecky observations on a failed romance between the heroine and a suitor. Rather than balance moral claims, as is common in almost all narrative, we are here asked not only to question inherited and perhaps outmoded ways, but to assess the validity and viability of certain ways of telling; and this effort generates the sense that Munro is grappling with reality and not merely succumbing to legend.

As is so often the case in realism, "Meneseteung" deals with a character's submission to unreality of her own making—Don Quixote as provincial Victorian lady-poet. Having fled the ugly, mundane, and merely ordinary aspects of reality, the heroine rejects the possibility of a relationship with a man, because of her fear of sex, mercantile aggressiveness, and interpersonal conflict. But when we are once again comfortably settled in our favourite narrative armchair, Munro gives us a parting jolt. In the final paragraph the historian-narrator says of others who might look at the life of Almeda Roth: "And they may get it wrong, after all. I may have got it wrong. I don't know if she ever took laudanum. Many ladies did. I don't know if she ever made grape jelly" (*Friend* 73). All that we have been imaginatively engaged in has been (fictionally!) taken from us. Our pleasure in the thematic coherence within the disjointed structure is undermined by the reminder that this was a construction after all, one that fits nicely with our



current preoccupations and prejudices, but which cannot claim to be authoritative. Indeed, just as the story which the sexually liberated narrator constructs around Almeda Roth grows out of and satisfies our preconceptions regarding the repressiveness of Victorian society, so the inconclusive ending questions and undermines these prejudices. At the end, we feel displaced, but we have to acknowledge the rightness of the reminder.

Munro cannot or in the end does not want to escape from being a storyteller. These are stories after all, and the sense of reality we get from them does not depend only, or even primarily, on her concern with story-telling. We may get some sense of Munro's goal from a passage at the beginning of "The Shining Houses." On her way to a child's birthday party, Mary, the main character, stops to talk with the old woman from whom she buys eggs:

And Mary found herself exploring her neighbour's life as she had once explored the lives of grandmothers and aunts—by pretending to know less than she did, asking for some story she had heard before; this way, remembered episodes emerged each time with slight differences of content, meaning, colour, yet with a pure reality that usually attaches to things which are at least part legend. She had almost forgotten that there are people whose lives can be seen like this. . . . Most of the people she knew had lives like her own, in which things were not sorted out yet, and it is not certain if this thing, or that, should be taken seriously. (*Dance* 19)

Munro's stories take place somewhere between the certainty and "pure reality" of legend and the unsorted life we usually feel in the midst of.

Thus, Munro's stories, with their uncertainties and contingencies, resist our imagination. They are like models of what a story that is true to fact might be like. In a sophisticated manner, her stories create the appearance of being as truthful as the narrative in "Visitors" to which Albert refuses the appellation of "a story"; they appear to be more what he calls just "something that happened" (*Moons* 215). The actual life of a person might be just as impenetrable as the imagined life of Flora in "Friend of My Youth," and it might be as crucially determined by coincidence as the life of Frances in "The Accident." We expect stories to offer us patterns of knowledge based on Aristotelian probability rather than to expose gaping holes of ignorance, and we expect purpose and design, not chance events; the story teller is expected to make sense of things and not to present us with disorder and ignorance. But Munro's stories resist this expectation, and perhaps for this reason Munro (like others) writes fictions that lack the finality of certainty and seem closer to "unsorted life" than the legendary nature of most tale-telling, whether of people or nations.

In exploring the ways in which her stories portray and enact the dialectic between legend-making and de-mythologizing, we have discussed a number of techniques which Munro uses to adapt the Cervantean opposition between fiction and reality to the expectations and ethical beliefs of her audience. If they succeed, it will not be because they reproduce reality, but because they, like the best stories in the realist tradition, alert us as readers to the presence of fantasy in our narratives about ourselves and others, and, hence, enable us to become more tolerant of the doubts, uncertainties, and blanknesses that legends obliterate.

## NOTES

- 1 *Lives of Girls and Women* (New York: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1971), 240. Subsequent references will be given as short title and page number.
- 2 James Carscallen, in his recent book *The Other Country*, teases out the mythical and typological (mainly biblical) patterns that lie just beneath the surface of Munro's realist manner and rhetoric, "resonat[ing] in the background" of various stories and recalling an "exotic other place" (2-4). These patterns constitute, he argues, "a paradigm World, one of patterns distinguished from reality as such" (4). We differ from Carscallen in thinking that the "unsatisfactory, apologetic, persistent reality" (*Dance* 197) of many of Munro's stories is not a reproduction of mythical patterns in the imagined world of the stories, but a rhetorical construction demanded by a real world which wavers between the powerful impulse to create its own legends and the refusal to submit to them. We agree with Ajay Heble, who argues in his book *The Tumble of Reason: Alice Munro's Discourse of Absence*, that Munro's disruptions of the traditional discourse of realism serve to thematize the fictionality of her fictions. Unfortunately, Heble's book appeared too late for us to consider it in this paper.
- 3 *The Moons of Jupiter* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1982), 215.
- 4 *Dance of the Happy Shades* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968), 196.
- 5 *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1974), 109.
- 6 *Friend of My Youth* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1990), 4-5.

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## Early Machines

The mysterious crane of her left arm  
pivoting,  
the block and tackle rippling  
its supple housing,  
and in her eye as in a snake's or rabbit's  
the obvious, hungry calculation.  
And beneath:  
the useless mouldings of her breasts, the forms  
and the fillips:  
like decorations made  
by an innocent artisan  
who once was here  
and prayed  
and remembered Pan  
in smoke blown from the smelters.

At night on the watery road,  
a white deserted trail glimmering beside the stream,  
he would stop the starved weaver, the demobbed soldier,  
as they hobbled mumbling.

There are still signs of him: he placed  
acanthus on boiler doors,  
grapes and great stone heads on the cornices of banks,  
he asked the beggar for his story  
and took him to lodge at least one night at a cottage  
that shone above unscrolled water  
sparkling in its sleep.

Secure now in the river's and the beggar's  
sheltered peace,  
he wandered again  
back into the deceiving, divulging night,  
considering that he knew good  
of the not-human.

And she: random and exquisite,  
the thin beauty tacked across those pumps, her breasts,  
for a while blinded me to everything.  
For a while it was pleasure

though I don't forget  
 why the stars this evening  
     appeared to leap from the sea  
         over the horizon of her belly  
 breathing on the sand (hers  
                                 is the shape  
 that water longs for  
 in all its shapes and its caressing,  
                                 its howling  
 changes). Though I still stumble  
 in the poor fallen night

until the sun  
appears, because the earth rolls forward,  
and this scrap where we are lying plunges down  
beneath the constant fire. I

like all  
seeing the dawn  
can't help  
but say,  
"It rises."

And winter too  
will seem brilliant, when it comes,  
because she loves it:  
with the artisan's love of rest,  
which winter commands: the locked season, of pure  
colours and forms burning and secluded  
in candid outline, of the forced need to live  
sheltered, close to the fire,  
on the hoarded produce of dead summer  
and once-triumphant arms.

I saw her  
loving, more than sunrise,  
winter and hope because her will  
is a machine of that sort which works  
on whatever is left—even if it longs  
    and cries out with antiquated gears  
        to stop, it goes on working because  
            the parts were thrown together  
to work until the end.

But the light of this explanation  
went out. And in the dark again there was  
nothing  
    but what the eye sees:  
the endless, the starving, the prolific,  
ignorance hived in winter,  
    her at the heart of the gaze  
        and the needful power to love her.

## Schizophrenic

He has been watching her  
for weeks  
for weeks.

Ruby smiles have fox teeth.

My facade walks one foot in front of me.  
I crouch and loiter behind.  
She makes me safe.

He claims  
“more eye contact,  
more smiles,  
increasingly sexual.”  
He croons he and she have a “relationship.”  
He sighs, “Her classroom creates a bad  
environment for young men.”

While, I planned lectures,  
chalk dust under  
my fingernails,  
was she letting her  
pointed tongue loll  
on her lips, lollipop licks?

Slut. Slut. Slut.

I don't think so.  
Please. No.  
Please. No.

The lesson to all  
was a message unto him.  
Prose analysis of the Lord's Prayer.  
Lead us not into temptation.  
The serpent's lithe body.  
Undulations in that garden.  
Its flickering tongue  
tastes of pomegranate, of pears.

He mews outside my door  
calling her name  
or is it mine?  
dragging his claws  
like chalk on my blackboard.

We are sore afraid.

# Poetry and the Modern Woman

## P. K. Page and the Gender of Impersonality

The female is a chaos,  
the male  
is a fixed point of stupidity. . . .

You, my dear correspondent,  
are a stabilized female,  
I am a male who has attained the chaotic fluidities. . . .

LETTER FROM EZRA POUND TO MARIANNE MOORE

**W**hy insist upon reading P. K. Page “as a woman”?

Doesn't this come dangerously close to concurring with critics who more or less dismiss or downplay her poetic achievements with a well-placed and seemingly innocuous “feminine” or some related adjective (e.g. “sentimental”)? At the very least, will I not be forced to make ahistorical, essentialist claims, which are problematic at best, untenable at worst? If, in the face of these admittedly thorny questions, I persist in the enterprise, it is precisely because the problems which arise when I engage certain feminist critical practices are telling; they are also fruitful, if paradoxical, inroads into the poetry itself. Not only do the dilemmas and difficulties with which I wrestle when I read Page ‘as a woman’ point to some of the dilemmas and difficulties of being both a woman and a modernist poet, they also generate a serious and useful critique of the limitations of a ‘traditional’ feminist critical practice, as well as those of an ‘impersonal’ modernist aesthetic. Questions about the historical relationship between modernism and gender, and finally between modernism and feminism, can then be used to illuminate one another, as well as create a lexis with which to speak of and make inquiries into Page’s particular modernist aesthetic.

One of the most indicting feminist studies to date documenting the



undeniable misogynist undercurrent running through much modernist rhetoric is Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the 20th Century*. The first volume in this series, *The War of the Words* (1988), devotes the greater part of its 300-odd pages to the gathering of tangible evidence of this structural misogyny: from the declarations and manifestoes which denigrated 'feminine' and 'feminized' language/writing/culture and called for a new, hardened, vital, virile language and poetics, to the offhand yet dutifully recorded patronizing statements made by high-profile proponents of modernism. Itself militaristic in tone, *No Man's Land* casts the modernist movement (if not all of literature) as a battle of the sexes:

Indeed, both the shape of literary history and the nature of the language out of which that history is constituted became crucial combat zones, since both the man's case and the woman's cause had to be based not only on redefinitions of female and male nature but also on revisions of the aesthetic assumptions and linguistic presumptions of patriarchal culture (121).

Though such a style can be off-putting at times, the evidence wielded here is substantial and concrete, effectively pointing to the political stakes behind modernism's metaphorical use of gender difference.

Still, one risks reductionism to declare that modernism is at base little more than "the reaction-formation of intensified misogyny with which male writers greeted the entrance of women into the literary marketplace" (233). To do so certainly works to obscure other issues at stake. The fact that Joyce said of Eliot's *The Waste Land* that it "ended the idea of poetry for ladies"—and not *women*—suggests the class issue at the heart of modernism as well. Certainly the modernist movement claimed to represent a revolt not only against the 'feminized' domestic culture of the Victorian age, but also against the 'bourgeois realism' of the nineteenth-century novel. Suzanne Clark, however, in *Sentimental Modernism*, reminds us that even *this* is a highly nuanced, gendered distinction, all the more sinister for its subtlety and 'naturalizing' impulse:

The sentimental as a form, a set of tropes, and a rhetorical stance is profoundly intertwined with the historical conflicts of middle-class culture. . . . Women, of course, have had a privileged (or fatal) relationship with the sentimental. From the point of view of literary modernism, sentimentality was both a past to be outgrown and a present tendency to be despised. The gendered character of this condemnation seemed natural: Women writers were entangled in sensibility, were romantic and sentimental by nature. . . . (2).

Here Clark's analysis proves useful in bringing the issue of modernist misogyny back to a *textual* level, a battle of rhetoric and form, and something which critics like Gilbert and Gubar tend to ignore in their enthusiasm for reconstructing social contexts like the literary marketplace.

Other feminist critics, however, have more recently come to see the formal innovations of modernism, with its challenge to novelistic realism, as empowering for women writers. Its insistence on calling into question seemingly self-evident concepts such as personal identities is particularly apt to undermine heretofore 'natural givens' such as gender identities, revealing them to be mere linguistic configurations. Modernism, therefore, held out to women the possibility of effecting a revolution from within the language itself (Moi 11), of undermining the very structure of western patriarchal tradition by exposing the duplicitous nature of discourse—an assertion which leads Toril Moi to conclude that Virginia Woolf prefigured deconstruction. Indeed, Clark herself concedes that the "revolution of the word would challenge standard conventions of language, including the way gendering appears to be natural rather than an effect of discursive practices," but maintains that the "bad news for women" (the "unwarranting" of sentimental discourse) remains "intimately bound up with the good news" (6). Even so, we do well to remember that an ideology which defined woman as the angelic guardian of sentimental and domestic culture most often translated in practical terms into imprisonment within the domestic realm. The issue of women's suffrage and the first feminist movement had already made many intellectual women painfully aware of this chasm between laudatory rhetoric and hard reality at the time in which modernism as a literary movement began to emerge. It is more than reasonable to imagine that modernism must have seemed to many such women a potentially liberating force and means of subverting the patriarchal Victorian order which defined and confined them. Gilbert and Gubar's mammoth work is weakest where it attempts to deal with women writers who openly embraced modernist principles. Having worked from the implicit assumption that the modernist aesthetic is necessarily antithetical to feminism and to women in general, they go to great lengths to reclaim for a feminist vision of language and fiction several women writers closely associated with the modernist movement—Virginia Woolf, H.D., Gertrude Stein, Djuna Barnes—without ever addressing the apparent conflict which this would seem to set up. In fact, it can be difficult to distinguish between

the kind of language experiments which are praised in H.D. because they can “‘hatch’ multiple meanings” (247) and those in the ‘Penelope’ chapter of Joyce’s *Ulysses*, which are disparaged as “artless jingles” (232); as feminist and Joyce critic Bonnie Kime Scott is quick to point out: “They [Gilbert and Gubar] are not prepared to see Joyce’s puns and word images . . . in the same joyous spirit” (108). This potential contradiction is partially reflective of a realist bias in the practice of Gilbert and Gubar’s variety of feminism, one of its limitations which the poetry of P. K. Page will force us to re-examine.<sup>2</sup>

The liberating promise of modernism would also help to explain why so many women writers did, in fact, leap onto the modernist bandwagon, particularly women whose personal lifestyles were considered deviant by rigid, heterosexual, Victorian gender norms. Indeed, rather than discouraging ‘women scribbling,’ as we might expect, given much of the negatively gendered language of modernism’s political and literary stances, the period saw women authors, as well as critics and publishers, flourish.<sup>3</sup> This would suggest that these women saw as in their interest the overturning of the Victorian cult of domesticity and ‘sentimental’ novelistic tradition. This is not to suggest that embracing a modernist aesthetic was unproblematic for women writing at the time—or after. Often it entailed a symbolic murder of the Victorian mother within, a repudiation of one’s literary ancestresses: witness Woolf’s “angel in the house.” For Clark, this is the double bind of modernism: “not only the unwarranting of feminine authority but a rupture of conventional womanhood that promises freedom” (8).

In several ways this double bind of modernism for women writers (as well as this realist / anti-realist split in feminist criticism of modernist texts) can be shown to originate in the very underpinnings of the modernist vision, at least as it has been institutionalized: that is, what Suzanne Clark has identified as modernism’s radical shift of the masculine, “naturalized critical gaze” (7) from woman as sexual object of desire (romantic, sentimental and Victorian plots) to eroticized textual object. The result, as Clark notes, is the conceptual ‘splitting’ of woman “into the sexualized textual body and the conventional feminine lady, into a revolutionary and erotic object and a derided maternal or hysterical subject” (9). In other words, modernism’s rejection of the sentimental and romantic conventions entailed shifting the primal scene of ‘boy meets girl’ to ‘pen meets paper.’ In this way modernism can be said to have invented an *écriture féminine*: a metaphoricized, textualized, feminine body symbolizing the “otherness as

style” of the modernist text, of which Joyce’s Molly Bloom has become the privileged emblem.<sup>4</sup> From the more recent, anti-realist, constructivist or ‘French’ feminist standpoint, this ‘othered’ text constitutes a disruptive feminine poetics which dismantles phallogocentric discourse from within; representatives of the older, realist, essentialist or ‘Anglo’ school of feminism (Clark, for example) would want to claim, however, that the new textual ‘primal scene’ retains all of its erotic impact, and the pen its phallic and author-itative overtones.

**Y**et in spite of this double bind—the demand to repudiate a ‘feminine’ or feminized tradition and the opportunity to participate in the reforging of tradition itself—at the time in which she was writing, P. K. Page could have laid claim to a women’s modernist tradition, in which her literary mothers and sisters would be Woolf, H.D., Amy Lowell, Mina Loy, Marianne Moore and certainly Dorothy Livesay. If she did feel herself to be working within just such a tradition, however, she failed to acknowledge it openly. This points to a most uncomfortable problem within more traditional feminist literary scholarship, an enterprise which has tended to posit a mother/daughter paradigm of nurturing influence in antithesis to Bloom’s father/son model of the anxiety of influence.<sup>5</sup> It is a model based on a female poetic tradition of thinking back through one’s literary ancestresses, claiming and celebrating the familial ties and finding inspiration and authority therein (think of Adrienne Rich on Emily Dickinson). Even the woman poet who repudiates the tradition and becomes the rebellious, modernist daughter will often begin by going through the process of “looking back,” and in so doing self-consciously define herself against and yet within the tradition of “women poets” (for example, Amy Lowell’s “The Sisters,” in which she finally pities Emily Dickinson and ridicules “Mrs. Browning,” embracing only Sappho as a literary matriarch worthy of her attention). The woman poet, then, who neither acknowledges nor openly rebels against a “female poetic tradition” poses a distinct dilemma for the feminist critic.

Similarly, much of feminist criticism has placed enormous emphasis on women’s writing as a record of women’s personal experience. If, however, one is dealing with a female poet such as P. K. Page, who systematically warns against the “tyranny of subjectivity” and the “tyranny of the Eye/[I]” (and presuming one remains committed to such a critical perspective), the

dilemma is exacerbated indeed. Fortunately (for this feminist critic), in the fifties she ‘slips’ up, and a highly problematic and feminine ‘I’ slips in, giving us something of a foothold (even as *she* ‘slips’) and rescuing her from the fate of a poet like Marianne Moore,<sup>6</sup> whose unwavering commitment to Eliot’s principle of impersonality in art has served practically to exclude her from feminist revisionary canons and criticism, which have often dismissed her by characterizing her poems as “concentration upon technical brilliance coupled with a marked exclusion of feminine experience from art” (Juhasz 35-6).<sup>7</sup>

I include the quotation about Moore because I feel that it serves as an apt description of Page’s earliest work, where “exclusion of feminine experience” translates from (Anglo) fem-crit jargon to mean the almost total absence of the *direct* expression of a gendered poetic subject-self, usually in the form of the lyrical first person pronoun. One of the earliest (1942) and most successful poems, “The Stenographers,” will serve as an example, but it should be noted that almost any poem of this period, with one or two crucial, self-reflexive exceptions upon which I will later focus, would do. It is ostensibly a poem inspired by Socialist sympathies, to which at least the subject matter of the poem—the exploitation of office workers—testifies. The formal aspects of the poem itself, however, its progression by the proliferation or accumulation of images on the page, its impersonal, objective stance, its aestheticized object, do much to undercut the human(ist) element.<sup>8</sup> The human, and more specifically, *female* suffering at the center of the poem, and the empathy which it does or should generate, seem strikingly at odds with the reader’s detached admiration of the virtuoso performance of the poet’s pen. Though the speaking voice does, indeed, lay claim to a single “I” in the final stanza, it is clearly not the “I” of personal experience, but rather the representative of the impersonal, observing and distancing eye which has scanned and recorded the lives and dreams of the women up to this point in the poem: “In their eyes I have seen/the pin men of madness in marathon trim/race round the track of the stadium pupil” (23). There is nothing within the poem which hints that Page herself suffered through the experience she is documenting, though of course she did. This is not to suggest that we ought to be hunting for autobiography in poetry; it is, however, to suggest that the careful excision of the poet’s subjective voice seems to render the task of generating empathy a paradoxical, if not impossible, one. The irony of the choice of distance in this particular poem—the impersonal poetic treatment of impersonal labour practice—is deepened by the fact

that Page is here addressing what could be considered a women's issue (low-wage, feminized service jobs) in a seemingly neutered voice.

This reading of "The Stenographers" is tinged with a certain propensity in traditional feminism to 'hunt for the woman' in any woman-authored poem. As we have seen, another kind of feminism, one influenced by Lacanian psychoanalysis and French poststructuralism, takes issue with this realist-feminist preoccupation with a personal and gendered signature, which we have already acknowledged to be problematic for the exclusionary practices to which it appears to lead. Interestingly, the constructivist feminist critique of traditional or essentialist feminism is bound up with the rhetoric of modernism itself, and goes something like this: the theoretical assumption that a text should reflect a writer's personal experience (in this case, that of being a woman) is based on the naïve and empiricist assumptions that 'female experience' or a 'female self' is somehow immediately apprehensible, and that language is a readily available, transparent medium with which to convey it. Toril Moi, in good modernist form, concludes that it is "a position which favors 'bourgeois realism'" (4).

As an alternative model, Alice Jardine has developed the notion of the *gynema*, which is not a writing *subject* but a reading *effect*, a woman-in-effect, out of which comes her theory of *gynesis*<sup>9</sup> in a specifically modernist context: "the putting into discourse of 'Woman' as that process intrinsic to the condition of modernity" (27); as in the notion of *écriture féminine*, the 'feminine' here serves as the quintessential metaphor for the 'otherness' of the modernist text. Christine van Boheemen (1987) argues forcefully in a similar vein, though she, unlike Jardine, casts the phenomenon in a sinister light:

If Western literature has traditionally seen the feminine as emblematic of nature and biological origin, Modern thought from Joyce to Derrida rests upon a double dispossession or repression of "femininity" and the appropriation of otherness as style. (8)

While many feminist critics (and Jardine is certainly among them) have come to see this "process" of "the putting into discourse of 'Woman'" as the ultimate valorization of the feminine, others warn that it is dangerous territory: the flesh-and-blood woman writer appears to be threatened with invisibility once again, for these critics concede that even a male author may write a woman-in-effect into his text (witness the quintessential example, James Joyce). And just how desirable, or how politically useful, such a

‘valorization of the feminine’ is remains questionable. As van Boheemen (1987) concludes:

It does not and cannot say anything about woman as nonsymbolic, historical being. She is disembodied, etherealized as text. Modernity, moreover, reduces the complexity of woman’s being in the world as both *anthropos* (human being) and *gyne* (sexual creature) to a merely sexually determined identity (199).

This deliberate ‘othering’ of the modernist text through the metaphor of the feminine is closely related to what Clark is about when she speaks of the unacknowledged sentimentality of modernism itself, which merely displaces the gaze of desire from woman to text—the shift which effectively split the female “into a revolutionary and erotic object and a derided maternal or hysterical subject” (9). I here want to ask, as does van Boheemen in her introduction (1987), if “the idea of woman’s otherness [has] become the emblem of Modernity,” what are the implications for women writing and speaking in the Modern age (2-3)? More precisely, what might have been the implications for modernist poet P. K. Page?

■ If I have elaborated at length upon Jardine’s theory of *gyne*sis, it is because I find it a temporarily useful tool with which to pry open the mechanics of Page’s poetic vision, even as I maintain some reservations about how valuable or valorizing a tool it is. It enables me to identify what I am tempted to call a “reading effect,” which I see as a central paradox in the poems: on the one hand, while Page is forever warning the reader about the danger of the subjective I/eye, particularly in the poet (in which we recognize Eliot’s doctrine of the impersonality of art), and while we might assume that ‘extracted’ I/eye to be gendered feminine in the case of the poet, I feel that *she* characterizes it as masculine: it is the eye that would fix, the (phallic) camera that would kill, the gaze that would harden; on the other hand, the poetic and impersonal objective eye (from which the ‘I’ of personal experience has been carefully excised) is characterized by a feminine fluidity,<sup>10</sup> by its receptivity to an unending flux of images which merely flow through it, like light through glass, air or water, and by its association with flowers and gardens. This metaphoric, feminine fluidity is what I will tentatively call a textual “woman-in-effect,” according to Jardine’s understanding. Whether this is finally Page’s sublimated femininity or merely part and parcel of her adopted modernist aesthetic falls beyond the scope of this paper. My argument will rest on the fact that she finally does

not, or cannot, sustain this divorce of a poetic vision coded feminine and a gendered self—that is, the splitting of the female subject implicit in the modernist aesthetic.

Though I am more or less allowing the anatomical metaphors of modernist discourse—hardness and fluidity—to suggest the epithets ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine,’ there are occasions, though rare, when Page more directly associates the fluidity of poetic vision with the female. “Vegetable Island” is the most explicit of these occasions, in which men would contain and control the growth of flowers (“are they too lush and lovely lovely are they / a little out of hand?”) while “women wander unafraid as if / they made the petals” (48-9). Similarly, “The Flower and the Rock” attributes a self-transcending sympathy to the woman in the poem, again associated with flora (“She felt the flower of his pain beneath her hand / which cupped for it and was soft and yearned as if / all her blood had withdrawn to the stamping wrist”), while “he” does not feel beyond his own “solid rock of pain” (53). More often, however, at least in the early poetry, the ideal fluidity of Page’s vision is disembodied, becomes a mere ‘textual effect,’ a transcendent and impersonal consciousness awash in imagery. Or it is located in the child’s imagination, as yet untainted by adulthood and sexual maturity.<sup>11</sup> It is in this sense that the textual ‘woman-in-effect’ of the poem need not be gender-specific with respect to its personae; “Only Child” quite clearly places the fluid consciousness of the poetic imagination in the eye of the little boy, while it is his mother’s words which make the birds into statues, *her* imperative which causes *his* eyeballs to harden—the beginning of his initiation into unseeing adulthood.<sup>12</sup>

There are, however, stages and states of consciousness and even places which come close to approximating, or which are conducive to, Page’s poetic vision: the childhood imagination, lush gardens, and dreams, all of which are characterized by the flux or fluidity of images which I have characterized as ‘feminine.’ But there are telling, self-reflexive moments (by this I mean dealing with the poetic process itself) when the vision itself becomes sinister and threatening, when gardens become maddening labyrinths, when dreams become nightmares, when self-effacement before the poetic image teeters on the brink of self-annihilation. A brief series of comparisons will serve to sketch the contours of the rim of the chasm where the poet does her balancing act. Page begins “Traveler, Conjuror, Journeyman” with a description of her poetic vision:



The idea diminishes to a dimensionless point in my absolute centre. If I can hold it steady long enough, the feeling which is associated with that point grows and fills a larger area as perfume permeates a room. It is from here that I write—held within that luminous circle, that locus which is at the same time a focusing glass, the surface of a drum. (208)

A remarkably similar image of this ideal of poetic vision appears, though significantly distorted, in “If It Were You” (1946):

... madness would rush at you from the shrubbery  
or the great sun, stampeding through the sky  
would stop and drop—  
a football in your hands  
and shrink as you watched it  
to a small dark dot  
forever escaping focus . . .

Might you not, if it were you,  
bewildered, broken,  
slash your own wrists, commit  
an untidy murder in the leafy lane . . .

might you not  
grow phobias about calendars and clocks,  
stare at your face in the mirror, not knowing it  
and feel an identity with idiots and dogs  
as all the exquisite unborns of your dreams  
deserted you to snigger behind their hands? (39-40)

Though the poet carefully avoids taking up a subject pronoun to represent the speaking consciousness, it nevertheless remains present throughout the poem (though used only once) in a less obtrusive object pronoun: “If it were you, say, you . . . not *me* this time” (38) (*italics mine*). Next to “Traveler, Conjuror, Journeyman,” *this* particular garden seems to emblemize poetic vision run amuck; diminishment to a “dimensionless point” has become a maddening, shrinking sun which forever *escapes* focus. What otherwise might have become what she refers to as “dream-poems” (Pearce, 34-5), images ‘given’ in a dream, remain “exquisite unborns” which abandon the poet, leaving the “person you call ‘I’” without any sense of a coherent self, indistinguishable from “idiots and dogs.” Ideal poetic transcendence of ego boundaries spills over into a maddening loss of personal identity.

Even the favorable dream-state hovers about the terrifying possibility of transforming itself into nightmare. A juxtaposition of the two poems “Sleeper” (1947) and “Nightmare” (1952) (as, indeed, they are arranged in

the volume *The Glass Air*) measures the tenuousness of the boundary that would separate dream from nightmare. In the earlier poem, the unconsciousness of sleep is associated with being overcome by water, which is a positively charged association for the reader of Page's poetry:

The gentle dreamer drowns without a sound . . .  
Complete in sleep, discards his arms and legs  
with only whimpers;  
from his flesh retreats  
like water through a mesh, leaving it beached  
alone upon a bed.  
  
And takes the whole night in his lungs and head.  
A hydrocephalic idiot, quick at sums  
wandering strangely lost and loose among  
symbols as blunted and as bright as flowers. (45)

If dream-drowning is a means of escaping the "flesh which blocks the imagination" ("After Reading *Albino Pheasants*," 106), a privileged passage to a mystic state in which vision is uncluttered by the present, the mundane, the egotistical, it already contains the seeds of destruction.

"Nightmare" is the underside of "Sleeper," charting the same region of the unconscious dream-state, this time personified as a kind of succubus, "this too-dark creature," which lurks in the poet's bed. The ironic twist, of course, is that the poet is of the same sex (one wonders what this implies about a woman poet's relationship to the muse, and is this, in fact, her muse gone mad?), so that instead of a scene of poetic seduction we have one of birth, in which the "yelping young" of the demon-muse feed—in almost cannibalistic fashion—at the poet's breasts. The passive receptivity of the muse poet becomes her graphic undoing, twisted and stretched "tight and thin" as she is "at the dark bitter wish/of this night-walking/anxious alchemist." The protean demon-muse, however, will also shape-shift into seductive, ego-gratifying poses, which might allow the poet to believe that she is in control: "Sometimes she smiles at me/as if I were/her own face/smiling in a mirror." The final, terrifying stanzas return to the cannibal motif, that ultimate, demonized image of total identification; the suggestion is that the demon-muse and the poet are perhaps so intimately bound up with one another that they may, in fact, be on either side of a mirror:

Yet should I sleep forever  
she would eat

my beating heart  
as if it were a plum  
  
did she not know  
with terrible wisdom  
by doing so  
she would devour her own. (47)

This poem stands out as strikingly different from those which precede it in significant ways. First, there is the sustained presence of a speaking subject; secondly, this is a voice which is no longer an impersonal, recording vehicle, but rather one which is intensely implicated in the images with which it presents the reader; lastly, and most tellingly, this poem comes very close to acknowledging a deep split in a feminine consciousness, and to recognizing this as somehow fundamentally self-destructive.

**F**or its ambivalent treatment of both a speaking poetic consciousness and a troublesome and clearly feminine alter-ego, “Nightmare” in several ways anticipates “After Rain” (1956), a poem universally recognized by her critics as a pivotal Page poem. Here, for the first time and in sharp contrast to all that has come before, Page openly claims her poetic vision as *belonging* to a gendered self; not as some ethereal, mystical, feminine flux of images, but concretely: it is “a woman’s wardrobe of the mind/Such female whimsy. . . .” Though this reclamation of a feminine identity is disturbingly self-deprecatory, it also appears as a necessary first step in a move toward a new wholeness. The poem moves from its habitual impulse of image-making (“garden abstracted, geometry awash”) to a recognition of the depersonalizing effects of such an impersonal aesthetic:

I suffer shame in all these images.  
The garden is primeval, Giovanni  
in soggy denim squelches by my hub  
over his ruin, . . .  
I find his ache exists beyond my rim  
and almost weep to see a broken man  
made subject to my whim.

“[S]ubject to her whim” recalls Page’s characterization of her poetic vision as “female whimsy” at the beginning of the poem: Giovanni the man is both subject *of* and *to* her poem. As such, he can only exist within the poem as aestheticized object (“so beautiful and diademmed”); the genuine pain and disappointment of the human *subject* lies “beyond [the] rim” of the poet’s

vision. One is reminded of the stenographers, typists, and salt mine workers of her early socialist poems; is this an implicit acknowledgment of their failure, now an embarrassment? It is noteworthy that such a recognition is accompanied by, indeed, is only possible because accompanied by, the poet's embracing of her own subjectivity.

(Re)introducing the poet's subjectivity, however, is not the only modernist taboo which Page flouts in this poem; she also dares to speak of "a heart that knows tears are a part of love." If she was not already another sentimental female poet,<sup>13</sup> she undeniably earns herself the stigma here; in this sense, "After Rain" represents quite a risk. Here is where I part ways with Rosemary Sullivan, whose 1978 "Heart a Size Larger than Seeing" focuses primarily on this poem. Sullivan identifies the self-reflexive moments of the poem as pointing to the tension between self-effacement before the image and self-annihilation, something like what I have been trying to do with the earlier poems. Her portrait of the poet is disturbingly passive, painting her awash in images merely "given" her, a reading which Page endorses by claiming to be a muse poet. This, too, is where I am a resistant reader of Page's own reading, and would suggest, rather, that she was certainly aware that by the fact of her gender alone she risked the most damaging of assessments by her modernist brethren: being labeled a *sentimental poetess*. This implies that her early, highly formalized, self-contained, crystalline, imagistic poems were the result, not of the gift of the muse, but of carefully honed and applied formalist techniques—certainly suited to her talent as a poet, but perhaps also partially out of an awareness of the risk which her gender already constituted in terms of her critical reception. In my reading, then, Page is taking, and taking responsibility for, a great risk in these lines: they are nothing less than a very serious critique of modernism's anti-sentimental and anti-subjective stance.

Yet another poem written in the same period, "Arras" (1954), testifies to this new direction in Page's poetry, a direction which promises to be a significant departure from the formalist impersonality of her poems of the 1940s. Indeed, the poem's opening line invites us to "Consider a new habit—classical." Yet the following stanza will witness the "insinuation" of that least 'classical' of beasts, the excessively voluptuous peacock, whose "screaming" and gaudy "jewels and silk" embarrass the poet in her 'classical' intent, so that she does not claim her creation: "Through whose eye . . . ?" she asks, feigning ignorance. The denial of her participation in the creation of the striking image sparks

something of an identity crisis: “Who am I/or who am I become that walking here/I am observer, other, Gemini . . . ?” This doubling and division of the self is reminiscent of the ‘split’ in the poet’s consciousness which surfaced in the earlier poem “Nightmare.” Is it, in fact, the ‘classical’ impulse behind her formalist poetry which is at the root of the poet’s alienation from herself?

Pleading powerlessness (“I ask, what did they deal me in this pack?”), she hesitates before the entrance to the two-dimensional world of the poet: “My fingers slipping on a monarch’s face/twitch and grow slack.” The two dimensions of the arras and the cards, like those of the blank page, are a formidable challenge to the poetic imagination: “The tines of a fork pushed vertically through the paper appear as four thin silver ellipses”; how to suggest “their unity, even . . . the entire fork—large, glimmering, extraordinary”, or “catch some overtone which will convey that great resonant silver object”? (“Traveler, Conjuror, Journeyman” 184). Finding neither hand nor heart to shore her up against the unrelenting demands of poetry (“Is it I who am forgotten, dismembered, escaped, deaf, uncollected?” [183]), the poet considers all-out flight as a possible solution. But the poet’s dilemma is an inescapable one: should the once spinning world of the imagination grind to a halt, the “stillness” proves as unrelenting, even damning.

In the midst of the stillness, graphically isolated in the blank space between two stanzas on the page, a confession: “It was my eye.” Only by claiming the extravagant and “voluptuous” image as her own will the poem move forward again. And it does so in strikingly erotic imagery:

Voluptuous it came.  
Its head the ferrule and its lovely tail  
folded so sweetly; it was strangely slim  
to fit the retina. And then it shook[.]

Though much more oblique an admission than that of “After Rain,” the poet’s eye is clearly figured as feminine: its adequate image is that of female genitalia receptive to the phallic peacock of her creation.<sup>14</sup> This sexual metaphor for poetic vision in Page marks a significant shift in the nature of that very vision: no longer figured as drowning, but as orgasm; not a splitting of selves, but unification of once separate beings. For the poet to announce flatly, “It was *my eye*,” is to collapse deliberately the distinction she was so anxious to make in her earlier work between the tyrannous subjective eye and objective poetic vision; indeed, she is moving toward marriage, reunion, restoration and re-vision.

Like “After Rain,” “Arras” seems to be striving for a new wholeness of vision; and again, the dramatic entrance into the poem of the poet’s subjective, female self seems to be a primary step in this endeavour. These two poems mark, however, not the dawning of a new era of poetry for Page, but rather the beginning of a ten-year silence, about which she remains disturbingly silent. If we read them in retrospect, we find alongside the promise of a new vision (a “heart a size/larger than seeing”) a foreboding sense of helplessness, a groping for a restored wholeness without the certainty of where to turn next, in both her appeal to external forces in the concluding stanza of “After Rain” (that the birds “choir”) and in the startlingly prosaic query of “Arras”: “Does no one care?” She gives a clue to the ensuing silence, perhaps, when she speaks of her sojourns in Brazil and Mexico, the time period which perhaps tellingly corresponds to her poetic silence:

My first foreign language—to live in, that is—and the personality changes that accompany it. One is a toy at first, a doll. Then a child. Gradually, as vocabulary increases, an adult again. But a different adult. Who am I, then, that language can so change me? What is personality, identity? And the deeper change, the profounder understanding—partial, at least—of what man is, devoid of words. Where could wordlessness lead? Shocks, insights, astounding and sudden walls (“Questions and Images” 187).

If, as she intimates, she has discovered a profound and inextricable link between the self and the language with which one constructs the world, the implications for her earlier notion that the subjective I/eye is to be, and can in fact be, overcome, are devastating. And indeed, we have already seen her moving toward a recognition of this sort.

Once again speaking of the time-frame which corresponds to her period of ‘silence’—at least in terms of poetic production—Page wrote in 1969:

I began to suspect, in what would once have been near-heresy, that drawing and writing were not only ends in themselves, as I had previously thought, but possibly the means to an end which I could barely imagine—a method, perhaps, of tracing the ‘small design’. And the very emergence of these ideas began to clear a way, remove the furniture and provide a new space (“Questions and Images” 190).

This suggests that her ‘silence’ was not an unproductive one, in spite of the absence of publication. In this “new space” cleared away, Page’s poetry of the late 1960s confidently picks up the more tentative thread woven throughout “After Rain” and “Arras.” This later poetry strives after a wholeness of vision which now readily embraces the sensual (as in “Cry Ararat,”

1967) rather than seeking to move beyond it or somehow eradicate it as tyrannical, and most notably by a dramatization of the interaction of a poetic self—unabashedly gendered female—with the images of her creation: not self-effacement before the verbal image, but a negotiation of the self and its boundaries in the creation of image. This process is eroticized in “Another Space” (1969) in a way which recalls the imagery of “Arras.”

In yet another dream-poem, the poet here finds herself being ‘reeled in’ by a dancing circle of figures on the beach. Significantly, the volition of the poet is in play: she is “willingly pulled by their rotation.” As she approaches, the figures are more clearly distinguishable as figures in “‘a Chagall’—/each fiddling on an instrument.” The feathered bows of the fiddles then transform into arrows, one of which is shot by the ‘headman’,

to strike the absolute centre of my skull  
my absolute center somehow  
with such skill  
such staggering lightness  
that the blow is love.

Constance Rooke points out that the bow transformed into arrow at the center of this poem (and the center of the poet’s skull) is related to the aboriginal bone of “Arras” transformed into phallic peacock (143). Both images make use of the sexual in order to translate the necessary loss of self in the act of creation, without the terrifying overtones which have elsewhere accompanied the poet’s depiction of this necessary loss. The result is no longer the radical split or dissolution of the self, but rather a healing dissolution of barriers dividing selves:

And something in me melts.  
It is as if a glass partition melts—  
or something I had always thought was glass—  
some pane that halved my heart  
is proved, in its melting, ice.

In a single movement, the terrifying stillness of “Arras” is dispelled, and the prayed-for new vision of “After Rain” is realized:

And to-fro all the atoms pass in bright osmosis  
hitherto  
in stasis locked  
where now a new  
direction opens like an eye.

I suggest that Page is finally enabled to attain the glimpsed-at wholeness of “After Rain” and “Arras” only by subscribing to a “near-heresy” in modernist terms: “that drawing and writing [are] not only ends in themselves . . . but possibly the means to an end. . . .” Abandoning the formalist doctrine of “art for art’s sake”—to which the notion of impersonality is wed—allows Page to use poetry itself as a means of revisioning and actively constructing a healed and whole poetic self—more explicitly, the poetic self of a *woman*, a concept which modernism had split open and apart, alienating herself from herself. Page’s poetic vision is, in turn, transformed, no longer exacting the execration of the ‘subjective eye,’ but rather, “requir[ing] the focus of the total I” (“Cry Ararat!”).

## NOTES

- 1 Such as A. J. M. Smith in “The Poetry of P. K. Page” (22).
- 2 Gilbert and Gubar are here representative of a certain realist current in feminist criticism, often referred to as Anglo-American feminism (although the tag has little to do with national boundaries anymore). From this perspective, the opacity, difficulty, or simply the rejection of a realist treatment of human (female) experience could become grounds for suspicion, and the term “impersonal” itself a scathing critique. The most cited example of feminist critical ambivalence toward “female” modernism is Elaine Showalter’s characterization of Virginia Woolf’s “androgynous aestheticism” as “impersonal and defensive,” “a strategic retreat, and not a victory; a denial of feeling, and not a mastery of it. . . . a response to the dilemma of a woman writer embarrassed and alarmed by feelings too hot to handle without risking real rejection. . . .” (26, 28); to which we might add the indicting generalization of a critic such as Suzanne Juhasz, who reads Marianne Moore as “representative of women who are poets in the first half of the century,” and her poetry as a “concentration upon technical brilliance coupled with a marked exclusion of feminine experience from art” (35-6).
- 3 Shari Benstock’s *Women of the Left Bank* is one of the best and most comprehensive histories of women in the modernist movement. See also Mary Loeffelholz’s *Experimental Lives: Women and Literature, 1900-1945*.
- 4 See Christine van Boheemen, “‘The Language of Flow’: Joyce’s Dispossession of the Feminine in *Ulysses*,” in *Joyce, Modernity, and its Mediation*, ed. Christine van Boheemen (Amsterdam, 1989); Derek Attridge, “Molly’s Flow: The Writing of ‘Penelope’ and the Question of Women’s Language,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 39 (1989): 543-65; Jeri Johnson, “‘Beyond the Veil’: *Ulysses*, Feminism, and the Figure of Woman,” in *Joyce, Modernity, and its Mediation*, ed. Christine van Boheemen (Amsterdam, 1989); Suzette A. Henke, *James Joyce and the Politics of Desire* (London, 1990); Hélène Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” in *A Reader in Feminist Knowledge*, ed. Sneja Gunew (London, 1991) 224-30; Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language* (New York, 1984).
- 5 For a theoretical elaboration of this model, see Gilbert and Gubar’s *The Madwoman in*



- 6 About whom Eliot once said: "Miss Moore's poetry is as 'feminine' as Christina Rossetti's, one never forgets that it is written by a woman; but with both one never thinks of this particularity as anything but a positive virtue" (149). Such a left-handed compliment is a measure of how very thin was the ice upon which these women had to tread.
- 7 This is one of the more 'objective' dismissals. She is often quite openly castigated for "wanting to be one of the boys," or labeled "Eliot's hyacinth girl," because "both sexually and aesthetically Moore could be counted on to observe a ladylike decorum" (Erkkila, 102). And indeed, the male critics seemed to appreciate this quality in her.
- 8 For these observations on "The Stenographers," I cite Professor Brian Trehearne, whose seminar discussions and conversation—in particular, the suggestion that an aesthetic of impersonality posed a special problem for Page—were the inspiration and occasion for this paper.
- 9 As opposed to Elaine Showalter's *gynocriticism*, her coinage for distinguishing between *feminist critique*, reading 'as a woman', i. e., deploying a 'hermeneutics of suspicion' (usually reserved for men's texts), and reading the woman writer 'as a woman.'
- 10 Page has spoken of the 'gifts' of her muse as being "just like water rushing" (Pearce, 34).
- 11 See "Only Child," "Little Girls," "Boy with a Sea Dream," "Blowing Boy," "Young Girls," "Morning, Noon and Night," and "Images of Angels."
- 12 At this point, turning briefly to Page's 1944 novella "The Sun and the Moon" proves an informative and useful digression. The heroine, Kristin, has an empathic gift which allows her to enter into an ecstatic identification with, and feel herself continuous with, things like rocks and trees. When she meets and falls in love with Carl, an artist, sun to her moon, she discovers that her love for Carl saps his identity and talent. The night before their wedding, she decides to release him, and uses her empathic gift to annihilate her own identity and transform herself into a tree. The implications of this highly *sentimental* story, as well as Page's own reticence about publishing it, are helpful things to bring to an examination of her poetry. That Kristin's gift of empathy with objects is an analog to Page's own poetic vision seems apparent (indeed, Constance Rooke does not hesitate to take this "as *evidence* of the author's own empathic knowledge" [114] [*italics mine*]), that this gift is both necessary to experience an authentic 'reality' fully and also threatening to personal identity seems obvious; and that this ecstatic and annihilating gift for empathy is located in a feminine consciousness seems significant, together with the fact that the story was published under a pseudonym: a constructed and alternative identity clearly meant to keep the story and its possible implications out of the poetry.
- 13 Desmond Pacey, in 1954, characterized Page's poetry as "a sensitive woman's response to the world of war, want, and fascism," and noted that circa 1945 "Miss Page" had seemed likely to earn herself the distinction of "leading poetess of Canada" (Dudek, 167).
- 14 Rooke elaborates on the sexual imagery of this stanza, which she takes to signify the equation of "vision and love," "so that the peacock (gloriously male) enters both arras and woman through the poet's eye" ("Approaching P. K. Page's 'Arras'" 141).

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## Emblems

As the mountain was long-lost,  
So I came—  
You came.

Slab of stone,  
Bear-walker  
Across a myriad sky.

Here it is not  
New York  
Or Dutch Guiana.

This exchange—  
Blood for  
Limestone.

Ontario is all I think about  
You see,  
Believe in . . .

Lake Superior at last,  
A shale entrance—  
More of it . . .

Nanabijou too I am,  
Asleep  
With other legends.

Virtues really,  
A pelt beginning  
Convincing me . . .

Who I am,  
You are—  
We are!

## Boundaries of the Self

**Eugenia C. DeLamotte**

*Perils of the Night: A Feminist Study of  
Nineteenth-Century Gothic.* Oxford UP US\$ 50.50

**Leslie Smith Dow**

*Adèle Hugo: La Misérable.* Goose Lane \$16.95

Reviewed by Laurie Aikman

*Perils of the Night* and *Adèle Hugo* make for interesting parallel reading. DeLamotte's book is a persuasive and in-depth analysis of Gothic fiction that makes explicit connections between the conventions of a genre dominated by women as readers and writers, and the private and social realities in which those women lived. Dow's well-researched biography of Victor Hugo's youngest daughter provides a fascinating glimpse into the life of one such woman: a beautiful, wealthy, talented and creative individual who nevertheless spent most of her life trapped in the respective prisons of her social circumstances and her own, private madness.

In her preface to *Perils of the Night*, DeLamotte writes that "the Gothic vision has from the beginning been focused steadily on social relations and social institutions and that its simultaneous focus on the most private demons of the psyche can never be separated from this persistent preoccupation with the social realities from which those demons always, in some measure, take their shape." Central to DeLamotte's feminist reading of the Gothic tradition are two main concerns. The first

is her refusal to "masculinize the Gothic canon"; she argues that women were the primary writers and readers of Gothic fiction precisely because it explored in dramatic and displaced fashion the terrors and constraints of their daily lives. It is no accident that Gothic romances are literally "about women who just can't seem to get out of the house." The second and related concern is her desire to emphasize the social dimension of women's Gothic: the fact that "for women writers and readers. . . in symbolic form Gothic interiors *were* the daylight world, apprehended as nightmare. Their disorder and illogic was the logic of the social order as women experienced it."

DeLamotte examines the theme of "boundaries of the self" as both a theme of Gothic fiction in general, and an important theme for women in particular. In the first part of the book, she discusses four motifs in which anxiety about the boundaries of the self manifests itself in the Gothic tradition: self-defense, knowledge, repetition, and transcendence. In the second part of the book, she demonstrates how these motifs represent anxieties that are particularly significant for women. For example, Gothic romance is characterized by repetition: the heroine is confronted by the same terrors over and over again, not to mention the fact that woman after woman is presented in the role of victim. DeLamotte suggests that this represents "the claustrophobic circularity of women's real lives," as well as "the inescapable victimization of women in general." Although occasionally

the critic's own analysis falls prey to a similar repetitiveness, her research is thorough, her use of examples illuminating, and her interpretation convincing. The last two chapters of *Perils of the Night*, which comprise roughly a third of the book, focus on *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*, by Charlotte Brontë. For DeLamotte, Brontë's innovative use of the Gothic tradition "was to unveil what women's Gothic before her had known only in disguise": the explicit connection between romance and reality, between Gothic terrors and the boredom and confinement of everyday life. DeLamotte's analysis of Brontë's novels is thorough and persuasive, and provides a fitting culmination to her earlier arguments.

It is tempting to read *Adèle Hugo* as a Gothic romance with a tragic ending. The cast of characters is complete: the volatile and tyrannical father, the loving but ineffectual mother, the beautiful and well-educated heroine, the charming and mysterious hero-villain, the exotic and secluded settings. Award-winning Ottawa author Leslie Smith Dow writes in a lucid and factual style that is as interesting and as readable as a well-written novel. The story that she has pieced together from numerous sources (including the private diaries of Adèle Hugo herself) is an astounding one. The youngest child of one of France's most renowned authors, Adèle grew up in a family that was marked by mental illness, loss, death, and exile. From a beautiful, creative and talented child who impressed the many literary and musical friends of her father, Adèle grew into a depressed and miserable woman, unhappy living under her father's authority, but unwilling to give up her relative independence through marriage. Her unfortunate passion for a profligate English soldier led Adèle to a desperate act: at the age of thirty-three, she ran away from her family and followed Albert Pinson and his regiment to Halifax, Nova Scotia, and ultimately to Barbados. Although Pinson

refused to marry her, Adèle continued her desperate efforts to persuade him, until she finally succumbed to the mental illness that had haunted her for many years. Adèle was brought back to France from Barbados by a stranger, and she spent the last forty-three years of her life in expensive asylums.

Despite Dow's meticulous research and her painstaking attempts to recreate the life of Adèle Hugo from the fragmented texts and testimonies that survived her, we will probably never know how much of Adèle's tragedy was personal (a private struggle with some form of hereditary mental illness, possibly schizophrenia) and how much was social (the destruction of a fiercely independent and creative woman by the repressive, patriarchal social structures in place at the time). One of the most impressive features of Dow's writing is the way in which she is able to present not only Adèle but also the events and people in her life in all their complexity, so that casual judgments and easy condemnations are impossible. *Adèle Hugo* is the story of a privileged nineteenth-century woman who spent her entire life in prisons: her father's home, exile from France, the small and crowded rooms that she rented as she pursued her lover from country to country, the comfortable asylums where she ended her days, and perhaps, ultimately, the prison of her own mind. Like a Gothic heroine, Adèle made every effort both to protect the boundaries of her self as an autonomous human being, and to escape from the boundaries of her self, as that self was defined for women by nineteenth-century French society. Dow writes in her introduction to *Adèle Hugo* that "[in] some ways the story of Adèle Hugo is the story of all women past and present, whom a patriarchal culture has reduced to their base value as brides, wives and mothers. Like all frustrated and oppressed women, Adèle wanted most of all to be free."

Dow also writes in her introduction that

"in the life of Adèle Hugo, truth is far stranger than fiction." Yet DeLamotte's study of women's Gothic suggests that the boundaries between truth and fiction are not as clearly-defined as one might imagine. Fiction can be one of the ways in which writers express our deepest personal and social experiences, and in which we, the readers, attempt to make sense of them. Dow presents us with the narrative of a life, which we are free to interpret as we are able; DeLamotte provides us with an insightful interpretation of a genre in which daily life has become a nightmarish narrative. It is encouraging to realize how far women have come in terms of the stories they are able both to imagine for themselves and, in fact, to live out. It is sobering to discover how little, in some ways, it has changed. Both DeLamotte and Dow invite us to reflect on the ways in which women have been, and still are, enmeshed in narratives not always of their own choosing, struggling to define and defend the boundaries of the self.

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## Logics of Destruction

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**Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne,**  
eds.

*Walter Benjamin's Philosophy: Destruction and Experience.* Routledge \$23.95

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**Teresa Brennan**

*History After Lacan.* Routledge \$62.50/19.95

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Reviewed by Doug Aoki

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Walter Benjamin's identification of criticism with history takes an apocalyptic turn:

[The critic] is concerned only with the enigma of the flame itself: the enigma of being alive. Thus the critic inquires about the truth whose living flame goes on burning over the heavy logs of the past and the light ashes of life gone by.

More than a half-century after his suicide, Benjamin's own critical inquiries still burn

enigmatically over a heavy past. In that spirit, *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy* writes out multiple after-lives of his illumination of art, history, and destruction at the nexus of truth.

As might be expected, many of the papers of this anthology rework the "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," and, in general, they succeed in finessing fresh subtleties from that familiar text. Howard Caygill observes that Heidegger valorizes the work of art as a temple, but that Benjamin discovers in it a ruin, "a site of mourning where the destruction of tradition can be acknowledged." In repudiating Heidegger and embracing destruction, Benjamin refuses both origin and authentic ground in order to clear a quintessentially political space. As Irving Wohlfarth notes, that blasted space is a "neutral, strategically organized territory, a (wandering Jew's) no-man's-land that kept lines open and space free for Elijah and Utopia." This is the place where praxis comes forth in a profoundly religious grasp of the political. When Benjamin moves from literature to philosophy, he recapitulates the Talmudic criticism that so irritates Brecht, producing a Messianically politicized history. In particular, Benjamin restages the compelling deformations of Kafka's fiction at the conjunction of historical materialism and Jewish mysticism.

According to Peter Osborne, Benjamin esteems Kafka's prose for its knowing failure to convert poetry into doctrine, or more precisely, for its failure to convert the *Haggadah* of the *Talmud*—its passages of lore or parable—into *Halaka*—its passages of law. To put it another way, the exemplary failure of Kafka succeeds in bringing forth the "mundane way in which the incomprehensible presents as everyday," as the bafflements of the Hegelian slaughterbench of Spirit's progress. As Rebecca Comay notes in her brilliant essay, "Benjamin enumerates the stigmata of Kafka's blighted creatures. . . . Dogs, bugs, monkeys, mice, moles, butter-

flies, monstrous kitten-lambs yearning for the butcher's knife of redemption." Looming behind and above these beasts and monsters is the prototypical figure of distortion, the hunchback bent by the battle of capital across his/her shoulders. By such means Benjamin's philosophy returns history as eschatology: "that 'things keep going on like this,'" he observed, "is the catastrophe." Within such a malign history of the present, the knife of redemption necessarily becomes the liquidation of the past, and the Messianic end of history becomes the condition of the liquidity of true presence of mind. These are treacherous waters, and their elegant navigation by the authors of this collection convincingly recasts Arendt's alchemist-critic as a most singular philosopher-historian.

*History After Lacan* is not, at its heart, concerned with history. Instead, as Teresa Brennan matter-of-factly declares, it is dedicated to the story of social psychosis, a sequel to her previous *The Interpretation of the Flesh* (1992). Nonetheless, this story is certainly historicized: logically embedded in an atypical argument for a historically sensitive Lacan, and temporally situated in the current "era of the ego." Brennan's analysis of this psychoanalytic modernism, like the studies by Benjamin and company of history, has a strongly neo-Marxist bent, implicating the predations of capital in a reciprocal reinforcement of the ego. Indeed, as she carefully winds together the micro- and the macro-cosmic, Brennan even points out that Benjamin anticipated Lacan's formulation of the totalizing ego in a cultural psychosis, although in rather different terms. Yet while Brennan elaborates the fortification of the ego as an active evil in an orthodox Lacanian fashion, she simultaneously resituates it through an unorthodox extrapolation of its dire political effect. This is the aforementioned social psychosis, the virulent relation of late capitalist humanity to nature which threatens

both with utter destruction.

By such means, Brennan produces an ambitious theoretical linkage of Lacan and Marx. However, she begins by bringing Lacan together with Melanie Klein, in order to elucidate a psychoanalytic "foundational fantasy" retroactively grounded in an *in utero* "logic of the flesh." The impossibility of instant gratification spawns not only Freudian primary and secondary processes (the pleasure and reality principles), but also the Lacanian dialectic of fixity, aggression, anxiety and projection (the mirror stage). The ineluctable deferral of desire prepares the ground for the social subject, as repression both founds an energetic system defining subjective boundaries and makes immanent to that subjectivity certain problematic relations to time and energy. At the social level, these relations are exacerbated by the capitalist appropriation of desire. The key moment here is the reiteration of psychic cathexis in the binding of natural energy by the commodity. With that structural homology in place, Brennan reconstructs Marx's value theory as a theory of time and speed, by which the processes of surplus-value extraction orchestrate the exploitation of the environment. This is the cautionary *telos* of social psychosis acting out the foundational fantasy.

Brennan's account does have its soft spots. Her reading of Lacanian psychoanalysis doggedly makes coherent what is notoriously resistant to coherence, and while such an imposition of an order of things allows her to make an original and suasive argument, it is no less an imposition for doing so. The same desire for order also surfaces in a valorization of the logic of nature, a move that does not quite succeed in freeing itself from the flabby New Ageisms Brennan rightly disparages. However, her missteps are neither flagrant nor frequent, and she handles her improbable match of Lacan and Marx adroitly enough to make a splendid high-theory story.



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## Life and Friendship

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**Stella Algoo-Baksh**

*Austin C. Clarke: A Biography.* ECW/ UP of the West Indies \$14.95

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**Austin Clarke**

*A Passage Back Home: A Personal Reminiscence of Samuel Selvon.* Exile \$19.95

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Reviewed by John Clement Ball

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*Austin C. Clarke* is the first full-length biography of a pioneer of black writing in Canada, a complex personality and an often controversial figure on the literary scene. Published the year of Clarke's sixtieth birthday, it combines a lucid and elegantly written narrative of his life with thoughtful readings of the major works. The author, a former Trinidadian now teaching in Newfoundland, details the major events of Clarke's productive and energetic life so far: his poor and disadvantaged childhood in Barbados, his struggles to establish and re-establish himself as a writer in Toronto, his important (if sometimes quixotic) second careers in broadcasting and public service, and his tempestuous, love-hate relations with both his native and adopted homelands.

In publishing terms, Clarke has always been more the solid mid-list author than the bankable celebrity, and accordingly he is mostly spared the prurient investigations of the celebrity biography. Stella Algoo-Baksh combines a fan's tact and respect with an academic's attention to paradox and irreducible complexity, providing a full-bodied portrait of the public individual but a rather anemic account of the boisterous socialite, the father, the sometimes unfaithful husband.

Since the book is written for fellow academics and admirers of Clarke's fiction, such politeness is probably appropriate. Algoo-Baksh articulates Clarke's intellectual engagements — with black activism, racism, immigration, colonialism and culture — masterfully; in this alone she makes

an invaluable contribution to Clarke criticism, nicely supplementing the best articles and the one fine book on Clarke, Lloyd W. Brown's *El Dorado and Paradise*. But while the virtual invisibility of Clarke's children and friends may not detract much from this biography's scholarly value, it is a symptom of a larger opportunity lost — to broaden the biographer's dominant perspective of peering over the shoulders of the working man. Algoo-Baksh's major source was Clarke himself; as outlined in her preface, it was from extensive interviews with her subject and a thorough combing of his archival papers at McMaster University that she constructed the basic story. And despite numerous other voices sprinkled throughout, this biography suffers from some of the *self*-obsession of an autobiography.

As a result, the author handles the "life and works" duality better than the "life and times" component of her mandate; she leans heavily toward close-ups of the individual's struggle at the expense of more panoramic views of social, cultural and political contexts. This omission is especially true with respect to Canada. Her background accounts of colonialism, poverty and social structure in the West Indies are helpful, and make judicious use of thinkers such as Fanon, Memmi and Mphahlele. Canada, however, is taken for granted; we hear much about Clarke's perspectives on race issues, for instance, but he is not positioned within a broader community debate, nor is the reader offered basic information about the constitution of Toronto's black community, the racial bias of the pre-1967 Immigration Act or the events of the 1992 riot to which Clarke responded so strongly. Clarke's career spans a fascinating time of great changes in Canada's cultural and literary life, and while he was an important voice in those changes, he was not a lone voice. A stronger sense of the flavour of the era would have enriched this study.

Other problems are mostly minor: pictures printed out of sequence, a rather rushed treatment of the past half-dozen or so years. More frustrating is the inconsistent attention paid to Clarke's *oeuvre*; while books like *The Prime Minister* and the first two story collections are given lengthy, original readings, some others receive only brief and superficial summaries. However, it is a rare biography that includes everything a reader might come looking for; overall this one does much to augment and clarify our knowledge of a man the author rightly calls "Canada's first major black writer."

If Algoo-Baksh unduly narrows her focus, Clarke's own latest offering happily exceeds its occasion. Far more than just "a personal reminiscence of Samuel Selvon," *A Passage Back Home* is a lyrical and evocative memoir of key times and places when Clarke's and Selvon's paths crossed. It begins with Clarke's Caribbean memory of Selvon as one of the "cricketing voices...pelted back to us on the BBC" in the 1950s. As Kenneth Ramchand has remarked, London at that time was the literary capital of the West Indies, and Clarke first met Selvon in 1965 while preparing a CBC radio documentary on West Indians in London. He writes a fascinating, detailed narrative of his encounters with C.L.R. James, Andrew Salkey, V.S. Naipaul and others, and offers a keen outsider's analysis of the problems and contradictions this pioneering generation of "New Commonwealth" writers experienced at a time when living in England was "a kind of higher education in the taking of 'racial lashes.'"

Later sections of the book contain memorable anecdotes about former Guyanese president Burnham (who called his wife "slave" in public) and a woman Clarke calls "the Dancer," who once slapped Selvon during a reading for sexist remarks made by his character Moses. Selvon himself is

eulogized throughout as a man of charismatic simplicity, feisty humour, patience and humility whose career and spirit began to falter around the time he moved to Canada in 1980. Here Clarke makes some dubious claims: Canada may once have been "parochial" and hostile to "literary interlopers," but not recently; the reasons for Selvon's obscurity in Canada are much more complex than Clarke allows. And he wistfully claims that Selvon's "neglect" by the Canadian literary establishment finally "ended the week he died" when *An Island is a World* was celebrated in *Books in Canada*, which ignores the much more influential rave *The Globe and Mail* gave to another reprint (*Those Who Eat the Cascadura*) four years earlier.

However, this is a memoir, not a biography, and if it suffers sometimes from incomplete or shaky facts it compensates in atmosphere and eloquent emotion. Clarke appears to have decanted these memories rapidly, as a labour of love and a way of coping with his "lingering sorrow" during the two weeks following Selvon's death in April, 1994. Something of the therapeutic urgency that went into the book's composition comes across in its loose, free-associating style. It may, perhaps predictably, tell us less about Selvon than about the author; Clarke's personality and ideas dominate, although he does give the reader unmediated access to his subject through facsimiles of Selvon's lively letters printed at the back. What the book does say about Selvon provides an engaging tribute to one of Canada's too-well-kept literary secrets, and a record of a largely uncelebrated literary friendship. As for Clarke himself, *A Passage Back Home* offers welcome glimpses at what a sequel to his previous memoir, *Growing Up Stupid Under the Union Jack*, might look like. And while it nicely complements Algoo-Baksh's narrative, it also shows that Clarke in his early sixties still possesses the prodigious energy and com-

mitment, the creative and intellectual drive that made him a literary force to be reckoned with in his early thirties.

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## Making Bread out of Stone

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**Carol Morrell, ed.**

*Grammar of Dissent.* Goose Lane \$17.95

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**Dionne Brand**

*Bread out of Stone.* Coach House \$19.95

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Reviewed by Guy Beauregard

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*Grammar of Dissent* is an anthology of poetry and prose by Claire Harris, M. Nourbese Philip, and Dionne Brand, three politically engaged writers and cultural critics who were born in Trinidad and Tobago and who have spent most of their adult lives in Canada. *Grammar of Dissent's* chronological arrangement makes a convincing case that the writing of Harris, Philip, and Brand is becoming increasingly assured and politically challenging. Particularly impressive are the multiple levels of storytelling: Harris's "It is a matter of fact," an excerpt from *Drawing Down a Daughter*; the ironic intertextuality of the poems from Philip's *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks*; and Brand's "Blossom," a short story from *Sans Souci* about an obeah woman in Toronto.

Carol Morrell's editorial contributions to *Grammar of Dissent* are much more uneven. She clearly states the purpose of her introduction ("to analyze [the writings of Harris, Philip, and Brand] as important contributions to contemporary Canadian society and literature"); she candidly acknowledges the limitations of her scholarship ("The more extensive project of placing their work in its other proper context, the critical theory and creative practice of the black Americas and/or Africa, remains to be undertaken"); and she provides a helpful list of "Resources for

Further Research" to help readers locate writing not anthologized in this collection. Unfortunately, Morrell seriously misreads the work she anthologizes when she states that "In Canada, because of what they [i.e. Harris, Philip, and Brand] call subtle but systemic racism, these women do not readily fit in." Subtle? A fifteen-year old black girl being strip-searched for jaywalking in Edmonton is subtle? (See Harris's "Policeman Cleared in Jaywalking Case"). Audrey Smith being strip-searched for drugs in Toronto is subtle? (See Brand's "Water More Than Flour" in *Bread out of Stone*). Far from labelling racism in Canada "subtle," Brand (for one) explicitly contests the way in which appeals to "subtlety" participate in the construction of a national myth which diverts attention away from racialized acts of violence.

Morrell's introduction serves the normalizing function of making radical voices safe for consumption by a presumably white academic audience. Thus she can position Harris, Philip, and Brand as "teachers of the white Canadian literary and political communities" without asking whether the writers would want such a role, or how such a responsibility to "educate" already-privileged groups would divert their efforts away from other groups battling gender, racial, and sexual oppressions. Morrell concludes that "Their eloquent contribution to literature in Canada is their making their universe visible, persuasive, acceptable." Visible, persuasive, and acceptable to whom? Morrell's desire to make the work she anthologizes "acceptable" marks the nadir of her attempts to contain dissent in a normalized academic grammar.

Thankfully, the writings of Harris, Philip, and Brand cannot be contained by an introduction to a single anthology of their work. Brand's *Bread out of Stone* functions as an uncompromising response to the political shortcomings of *Grammar of Dissent's* editorial apparatus. *Bread out of*

*Stone* collects thirteen essays, nine of which appear here for the first time, and provides a cohesive yet flexible context within which Brand can address a wide range of theoretical, cultural, and literary issues. The political function of writing; desire and the black woman's body; the complex intersections of racism, sexism, and homophobia; and cultural appropriation as a critical category are only a few of the concerns Brand effortlessly interweaves with her personal narratives.

Occasionally Brand misfires. In "This Body for Itself," she condescends to explicate the relationship between "poetry" and "politics": "I've become so used to explaining and explaining their dependency on each other to Canadian reviewers and audiences that I've forgotten that it is unnecessary here. One thing you do not have to do at a Caribbean writers' conference or perhaps any writers' conference outside Canada is explain that writers mean to change the world." This passage characterizes "Canadian" audiences as uniformly naive. Brand's appeal to a homogenous national group, however strategic, fails to address the heterogeneity of "Canada" and, as the recent work of Homi Bhabha has shown, the way "nation" as an analytic category is being transformed by post-colonial migrants. Moreover, the passage I have quoted settles for an easy target (those who falsely depoliticize poetry) without addressing the more difficult task of denaturalizing "politics," a term which has become, according to Diana Fuss, "the self-evident category in feminist discourse." At least in my small academic corner of Canada, the term "politics" is used frequently and casually as an *assumed* part of literary studies; Brand's frustration does not help to challenge the limits of an assumed conflation (and possible normalization) of "poetry" and "politics."

Brand is, of course, profoundly concerned with the heterogeneity of communi-

ties in Canada, and elsewhere she theorizes "politics" with an admirable combination of subtlety and directness. What could be more powerful than the enormous wallop of "Job," in which Brand narrates how, at the age of eighteen, she "dressed up in [her] best suit outfit with high heels and lipstick and ninety-seven pounds of trying hard desperate feminine sexuality" only to find the advertised job evaporate when the prospective white male employer saw her black skin?

Perhaps the finest "passage" in Brand's collection focuses on the specific urban site of Toronto's Bathurst Subway, "the passageway, the nexus from which we all radiated, the portals through which we all passed, passing from Negroes into Blacks, from passive into revolutionary."

And it is in Bathurst and the increasing heterogeneity of Toronto that Brand finds hope, despite police shootings and strip-searches, despite harassment by immigration officials and the normalizing effects of multicultural bureaucracy: hope in a city that is "colourising beautifully" with "all the different people living in it—the Chinese, the Italian, the Portuguese, the South Asians, the East Asians and us."

*Bread out of Stone* is a hopeful and beautiful book whose writing consistently aspires to be "significant, honest, necessary—making bread out of stone—so that stone becomes pliant under the hands."



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## Bishop's Many Arts

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### Bonnie Costello

*Elizabeth Bishop: Questions of Mastery.* Harvard UP \$16.95.

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### Joanne Feit-Diehl

*Elizabeth Bishop and Marianne Moore: the Psychodynamics of Creativity.* Princeton UP n.p.

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### Victoria Harrison

*Elizabeth Bishop's Poetics of Intimacy.* Cambridge UP \$59.95

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### Brett Millier

*Elizabeth Bishop: Life and the Memory of It.* U California P n.p.

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Reviewed by Neil Besner

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The recent torrent of work on Elizabeth Bishop, you might think, threatens to drown the poems themselves, collected in one volume of 276 pages where they seem, still, to glow in a deepening and luminous silence—as if their own force and form were becoming all the more insistent in inverse proportion to the cascade of criticism falling over them. Each of these four books comes to Bishop from a different quarter, and each touches her and her poems differently; but all of them leave the poet and the poems quietly present at the centre of a wreath of commentary that seems at times to circle on itself decorously but uneasily, like a commemorative garland. And that, I think, is more a comment on Bishop's art than on her critics' acumen.

The most significant encounter with Bishop's poems themselves is Bonnie Costello's fine study. Patiently, thoroughly, and with the best eye and ear among these four writers for Bishop's language and craft, Costello ranges across the poems with a command born out of what reads like a long-standing intimacy with them. Her thesis is disarmingly straightforward: that Bishop is acutely aware of the dangers—the "questions"—of mastery over experience and art, and that she sets out to be what Costello aptly describes as an "interpreter

of sight." In six chapters and a brief epilogue, Costello reads a wide selection of poems to demonstrate how Bishop's apprehensions of space and perspective depart from a tradition grounded in the steady gaze and transcendent vision of the romantics to create and record an optics more troubled by time, and a mastery more suspect of its own aspirations. Costello's obvious comfort among the modernists, as well as in the canon at large, allows her to move swiftly and surely from Bishop to her precursors and contemporaries and back, so that there is nothing cramped here. And her careful, detailed readings of individual poems—even of much-anthologized poems like "The Fish" or "The Moose"—have much to teach both Bishop scholars and her growing body of new readers.

Joanne Feit-Diehl's monograph on the psychodynamics of Bishop's relationship with Marianne Moore, her formidable predecessor and mentor, offers an intriguing reading of the literary mother and daughter by drawing, first, on Melanie Klein's work on mother-daughter connections, and then on one of Klein's successors, Christopher Bollas, and his work on object-relations theory. Feit-Diehl argues persuasively that Bloom's model of influence and its attendant anxieties cannot account for literary mothers and daughters, given their marginalized positions in the tradition; she then guides us through a lucid reading of Klein's theory of envy and gratitude as determinants of mother-daughter relationships. With Klein's theory and Bishop's troubled childhood firmly in the foreground, Feit-Diehl reads Bishop's memoir, "Efforts of Affection," for the subtle signs of conflicted ambivalence that for Feit-Diehl signal the tensions in the relationship between Bishop and Moore. Here and in her readings of several poems, Feit-Diehl makes a convincing case for reading Bishop—and, by extension, other writers—through the lens of Klein's and Bollas's work as a useful way to

reconnect and redirect psychoanalytic and literary theories of influence.

Victoria Harrison's study of Bishop's "poetics of Intimacy" is less successful than Costello's work, and this is unfortunate, given the meticulous and extensive research that Harrison has done, working very carefully with Bishop's unpublished papers as well as with a wide range of theorists—from the pragmatism of James and Rorty, to Geertz's work, to Spivak and De Lauretis—to ground her reading of Bishop's poetics. It may be that this book was originally a dissertation—no problem in itself, of course—but it still bears too many of the stigmata of that form: excessive directions to the reader towards what has already been shown, or what will be argued in each chapter, or delayed till later; a diction sometimes clotted with jargon—"Bishop 'call[s her] own tune,' I argue in this book, because her poetry's concerns are very simple and quite unique: she enacts subject-subject relations in their dailiness"; and a tendency to repeat, almost too insistently, these formulations ("enact" is a verb that Harrison needs to use far less, for example). Harrison has devoted admirable care and energy to her approach to Bishop; but the result is not always as illuminating as it could be, and readings of individual poems sometimes strike me as either somewhat forced or unsubstantiated. I cannot, for example, reorient "The Map" to accommodate Harrison's assertion that Bishop, "keeping her own same-sex love secret and separate from her public life, . . . invented a language for lesbian love within a poem about a map, land, and water, a love that need not set containing and spilling in opposition." The first part of the claim is fact; the second, I find dubious.

As the first full biography, Brett Millier's exhaustive account of Bishop's life faced a daunting task. Bishop's life was riddled with pain and loss, illness and suffering; her childhood migrations among families,

her afflicted mother, her long-hidden sexual life, her bouts with alcohol, with asthma; her legendary travels, her literary and personal relationships with complex personalities like Moore and Lowell, like Pound; her long sojourn in Brazil with Lota Macedo de Soares, and its tragic end—the shadows of all of this history and more have until recently been largely hidden, part of the poet's and the person's notorious (and, perhaps, undeserved) reputation for reticence. Millier has chosen to give us what amounts to nearly a day by day account of Bishop's life from birth to death, and the choice has its cost. On one hand, we learn, in as much close detail as any reader could look for, virtually all about what Bishop did, wrote, thought, felt: Millier's research is prodigious, and she has given us a thick description of a remarkable life. But Millier's balanced thoroughness, ultimately, can be disheartening: paradoxically, the living woman and artist that Millier looks at so long and carefully gets obscured beneath the accumulated mass of detail. I recognize that this is a failing only for a reader looking for a biography more attuned to the climate of feeling that Bishop created, nurtured, and inhabited—the climate that inhabits the poems, too, and that now has been made more available to us with the publication of Bishop's letters; and of course that kind of biography has its own very real dangers too. Meanwhile Millier's biography is commendably thorough if regrettably dispassionate, and Bishop's reader will come away from it with a much enlarged sense of Bishop's astonishingly varied life. It will remain for another biographer—and this is no reflection on Millier—to provide us with a more interpretative vision of Bishop's richly troubled life; Millier, to her credit, has given us all of the materials.

As I write, the Elizabeth Bishop Society, with close to 150 members, has just published Volume 3, Number 2 of its *Bulletin*,

announcing the publication of another biography (Fountain and Brazeau's *Remembering Elizabeth Bishop: An Oral Biography*), a critical study (McCabe's *Elizabeth Bishop: Her Poetics of Loss*), and another critical book due in early 1995 (Lombardi's *The Body and the Song: Elizabeth Bishop's Poetics*). In September 1994 a three-day Elizabeth Bishop Symposium was held at Vassar, and the prodigious amount of current scholarship on Bishop continues to multiply. I would guess that over the last five years, she has had more critical attention—more books, articles, conference papers—than any other modern American poet. And yet, as it should, her work continues—“(Write it!)”—and largely without that elegant, despairing, not quite pervasive sense of loss that haunts her most famous poem—to quicken and abide in its own fine, almost accessible solitude. Her critics should be thankful.

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## Anciens & modernes

**Joseph Melançon, Nicole Fortin,  
Georges Desmeules, dir.**

*La lecture et ses traditions.* Nuit blanche n.p.

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**Nicole Fortin, Jean Morency, dir.**

*Littérature québécoise: les nouvelles voix de la recherche.* Nuit blanche \$22.95

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Compte rendu par Neil Bishop

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“Anciens et modernes”, mais débats plutôt que querelles: voilà ce qu’offrent ces deux volumes de la collection “Les Cahiers du CRELIQ” (Centre de recherche en littérature québécoise). *La lecture et ses traditions* ne se limite pas aux “anciens” ni par son corpus ni par ses collaborateurs, mais ceux-ci comportent bon nombre des noms les mieux connus, depuis plusieurs décennies dans certains cas, en critique littéraire québécoise. Noms auxquels s’adjoignent ceux de générations plus récentes. Par con-

tre, *Littérature québécoise* [:] les nouvelles voix de la recherche a pour vocation explicite de diffuser les recherches de la jeune génération en présentant les actes du quatrième colloque interuniversitaire des jeunes chercheurs tenu à l’Université Laval en 1992 (louons au passage l’excellente initiative de tenir de tels colloques ainsi que celle d’en publier les actes).

Dans sa présentation de *La lecture et ses traditions*, J. Melançon fait le tour de l’historique et de la théorie de la problématique de la lecture; la majorité des autres études portent sur un corpus plus limité, parfois sur un seul texte littéraire, mais le plus souvent en évoquant un corpus de lectures du texte littéraire retenu. Melançon observe que les textes recueillis portent sur des lectures écrites (des lectures dont les auteurs en ont rendu compte par écrit, sans quoi il serait difficile de connaître ces lectures). À notre sens, il faudrait approfondir la question de savoir dans quelle mesure la lecture dont rend compte un écrit serait transformée par le processus d’écriture, dans quelle mesure il s’agirait de deux lectures différentes, même si elles ont eu pour foyer l’esprit d’une même personne croyant reproduire fidèlement par écrit la rencontre entre son esprit et un texte donné.

L’empire du roman est battu en brèche par la première étude, celle qu’offre Lucie Robert sur la lisibilité du joual dans les texte théâtraux (*Les belles-soeurs*) et nouvelles (“Le Cassé”). Toutefois, le début de cette étude semble promettre que celle-ci se penchera sur “la grande difficulté que les étudiants éprouvent à lire les textes littéraires écrits en ce qu’il est convenu d’appeler joual.” Il n’est qu’une fois la lecture bien lancée qu’on apprend qu’il s’agit en fait de la difficulté de lecture rencontrée par, non pas “les” étudiants, mais des étudiants, ceux provenant des “communautés culturelles,” “mes étudiants non-francophones.” Une fois la part faite de cette portée plus spécifique de l’étude de Lucie Robert,

son texte répond de manière fertile au phénomène qu'elle dénonce: "l'enseignement ne fait pas un assez grand cas de la formation réelle de nos étudiants." Robert affirme que le règne du "monolinguisme" (entendons: la valorisation du sociolecte du français standard) dans l'enseignement ne nuit pas seulement aux étudiants non-francophones, mais "a pour effet d'interdire à la majorité de la population la lecture des textes en joual." Ajoutons que la tâche de l'enseignant-e est donc, lors de l'abord de textes en joual, d'assurer d'emblée aux étudiant-e-s une formation de base à propos du joual. Il est intéressant de découvrir que cela est aussi nécessaire lorsque les apprenant-e-s sont de langue maternelle franco-qubécoise que dans le cas d'étudiants non-francophones.

Plusieurs textes de *La lecture et ses traditions* rendent compte des travaux entrepris par ces diverses équipes de recherche qui se multiplient (tout comme leurs acronymes) au Québec. Gilles Thérien rend compte des recherches du GREL (Groupe de recherches sur la lecture) par le biais d'une sémiotique de la lecture de *L'antiphonaire*, alors que Jean-Louis Major prend la parole en tant que coordonnateur du Corpus d'éditions critiques, éditions qui paraissent dans la collection "Bibliothèque du Nouveau Monde." Major signale de façon passionnante le processus et les résultats de l'édition critique tout en décochant quelques traits envers ceux qui mépriseraient cette activité pour s'en tenir à l'exégèse de textes sujets à caution. Le vers "Je gravissais mes ponts perdus" a beau être tout aussi poétique (à mon sens) que "Je gravissais mes monts perdus," c'est ce dernier qui devait figurer dans *L'étoile pourpre*, comme le prouvent indiscutablement, nous l'apprend J.-L. Major, le manuscrit et le double au carbone du tapuscrit. Je ferai désormais étudier à mes étudiants des "monts" plutôt que des "ponts" perdus, tout en remerciant, *sotto voce*, le typographe (?) qui m'aura valu

pendant tant d'années un autre poème.

Jacques Blais, de manière tout aussi passionnante, démontre à quel point la lecture critique a réussi à fermer ses yeux sur l'anti-catholicisme de *Mystère de la parole*. L'élite clérico-conservatrice a insisté pour lire ce texte de manière à lui assigner, dirais-je, un sens conforme à son idéologie et cela malgré les prémisses d'anti-catholicisme dans l'oeuvre antérieure d'Anne Hébert. Si la lecture de l'oeuvre hébertienne évolue, Maurice Lemire montre qu'il en va tout autant de la lecture (il en recense cinq types) des *Anciens Canadiens*, roman dont Lemire démontre l'individualisme bien moderne.

Les efforts anti-fédéralistes de quelques auteurs de *La lecture et ses traditions* allègent à la lecture de ces lectures de lectures, sans guère empiéter sur l'utilité d'ensemble d'un fort bon ouvrage.

Si plusieurs études dans *Littérature québécoise : les nouvelles voix de la recherche* sont structurées de manière passablement scolaire, certaines n'en sont que plus claires. On se réjouit de voir la place prise par la sociologie de la littérature (mais le "portrait type" du fantastique qu'offre François Larocque est excessivement réducteur, car il tait totalement l'importance des fantastiques québécoises qui, pour 25% qu'elles seraient de la gente fantastiquante, selon Larocque, n'en représentent pas moins pour autant leur grande moitié du ciel et du souterrain fantastiques; cette étude montre néanmoins l'intérêt que peut revêtir l'enquête comme outil en études littéraires). On applaudira qu'ici encore le théâtre conserve ses droits à la critique littéraire (l'étude du *Roi boiteux* par Sylvie Bérard est des plus utiles). Mais... le jour du colloque, la poésie serait-elle partie à la pêche?

Parmi les études consacrées au roman, celles de Katie Knox ("Désir dans *Le désert mauve*") et d'Allan Walsh (sur le roman historique à forme biographique) rappel-



lent (à l'encontre de *La lecture et ses traditions*) combien riche est l'examen extra-qubécois / extra-outaouais de la littérature québécoise. Josée Vincent répartit les responsabilités quant aux "tribulations du livre québécois à l'étranger, alors que Josias Semujanga compare de façon intéressante le processus de légitimation littéraire entre divers pays francophones." Longue vie donc à cette série de colloques des jeunes chercheurs—et puisse la poésie québécoise y trouver désormais la place que lui mériterait son abondance, son intensité, sa générosité.

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## Amour trans-outaouais

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**Agnès Whitfield**

*Ô cher Émile je t'aime ou l'heureuse mort d'une Gorgone anglaise racontée par sa fille. Le Nordir n.p.*

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Compte rendu par Neil Bishop

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Ce long titre reflète un immense désir de communiquer. La différence sémantique entre titre et sous-titre résulte de la dualité destinatrice-destinataire. La destinatrice se révèle duelle à son tour: produit d'une tradition (la "Gorgone anglaise"), elle s'y oppose. Son but est de dire à "Émile" qu'elle ne correspond point à l'image d'une "Gorgone" (dont Méduse est la mieux connue) qu'il se fait d'elle. Émile est un destinataire collectif composé de tout francophone québécois. "Je" se présente comme individu, sans oser affirmer que tous ses compatriotes anglophones partagent ses valeurs, ses attitudes envers ses compatriotes francophones, qui rendraient superflu le "divorce" dont Émile semble rêver.

Grande spécialiste de la communication en littérature québécoise—autrice déjà de l'admirable *Je(u) illocutoire. Forme et contestation dans le nouveau roman québécois*—Agnès Whitfield nous offre une locutrice qui soigne finement son acte de communi-

cation—ce qui ne lui enlève rien de son authenticité ni de sa puissance d'émotion. La fonction expressive (des valeurs de la destinatrice) se veut aussi fonction informative (car il s'agit de communiquer des informations à Émile sur la réalité de la "je"). Et la fonction "conative" (influencer l'autre) sous-tend le tout. On sent fortement que la destinatrice veut persuader Émile de changer d'avis en lui démontrant qu'elle l'aime, et qu'ils peuvent continuer à cheminer ensemble. Sagement, elle se contente de lui dire son amour, sans l'implorer ni le sermonner.

Le désarroi de la locutrice, son "amour en déroute," s'exprime d'emblée par une image-choc, "je suis un pont sans route." Pont en peine, car "le fleuve ne coule plus / les rives s'éloignent / je n'arrive / plus à / les joindre." "Je" se voit comme victime d'un passé collectif—"la douche froide / de mes ancêtres / je la paie en / sanglots." Émile verrait la locutrice à l'aune de ses ancêtres: "tu vois l'histoire dans mes yeux / et l'hypocrisie dans mon âme." Histoire redoutable, car "derrière moi / des siècles et des siècles et des siècles / de baïonnettes / se dressent / contre moi / contre toi."

L'histoire, ce n'est donc pas seulement ces quelques siècles qui ont souvent opposé anglophones et francophones au Canada, mais aussi les millénaires qui ont vu l'humanité recourir systématiquement à la violence pour mater toute différence. Le désir qu'éprouve la locutrice pour Émile s'exprime sur le mode érotique, mais l'élan de la chair se mue en horreur, "la peau nous suppure." "Je" ne cesse pour autant de vouloir "tisser des liens / sans te contraindre," mais Émile risque fort de n'y voir "qu'une faim obscène." La destinatrice se sent elle-même mal à l'aise devant ses contradictions de "collante colonisatrice."

Avec intelligence et sensibilité, la locutrice pense aux générations futures: saura-t-on leur dire "que la peau est un mur / qu'on ne franchit pas seule / que la

peur est un mur / qu'on n'érige qu'à deux [...]” Et certes, les générations passées n'offrent pas que d'affreuses “baïonnettes”: “d'autres ont pris le même chemin que moi / des deux côtés de l'Outaouais d'ailleurs / [...] / et leurs mains / patientes [...] / me caressent le coeur et me fortifient / [...] fille fidèle / à l'autre héritage en elle.” Mais si le désespoir est repoussé, toute naïveté est exclue: par lucidité, la locutrice dit à son Émile bien-aimé que “ton pays est tout concentré sur lui-même / [...] nous ne voyons plus le grand fleuve qui nous rejoint”; “tu conduis quelque part / au fond de toi tout seul je crois,” cela nonobstant un dernier bel élan érotico-amoureux. Mais la visée et le rêve de communication restent, vivaces, ardents: “je pars en fumée / [...] sauras-tu lire mes nuages.”

Ô cher Émile je t'aime montre—outre un beau don pour des actes illocutoires amoureuxment conatifs—une belle habileté langagière sous forme de polysémies, de jeux de mots (sérieux), de québécoïsmes qui contribuent avec bonheur à la vocation communicative du volume. L'intertextualité renvoie richement à la littérature québécoise, depuis ces “mains / patientes” tisseuses de “solitudes rompues” évocatrices de la poésie d'Anne Hébert jusqu'à ce “Narcotown” rappelant Gérard Bessette qui a su éveiller à l'amour de la littérature québécoise une certaine Agnès Whitfield. Bref, un excellent volume, touchant et intelligent, sensible et lucide. Appel au partage, à la convivialité, à l'amour. Puisse-t-il être largement lu—et écouté!



## Worlds and Words Apart

**Janet Guildford and Suzanne Morton, eds.**

*Separate Spheres: Women's Worlds in the 19th-Century Maritimes.* Acadiensis \$19.95

**Elsie B. Michie**

*Outside the Pale: Cultural Exclusion, Gender Difference, and the Victorian Woman Writer.* Cornell UP us\$34.95/£3.95

Reviewed by Deborah Blenkhorn

With one hand, she holds a corn cob pipe to her lips; the other hand is firmly on her hip. In her ill-fitting garments, she is far less elegant than the scenic backdrop against which she has been photographed. Under a jaunty straw hat, her weather-beaten face gazes from the cover of *Separate Spheres: Women's Worlds in the 19th-Century Maritimes*. This photo of Elizabeth “Betsey” Seamond (1852-1901), from the Queens County Museum in Nova Scotia, conveys visually the collective point of the essays Janet Guildford and Suzanne Morton have chosen to include in this volume: as the editors state, the aim of the text is to “challenge some of the prevailing stereotypes about nineteenth-century Maritime women.”

Unifying this collection of essays by eleven writers is a discussion of sociological and historical issues in “Victorian” Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Prince Edward Island in light of the concept of “separate spheres,” according to which women had “nurturing and submissive roles within the household” while men assumed “active and dominant roles in the economy and politics.” Each essay challenges such an ideology by exploring a particular paradigm or situation, proving the editors’ contention that “separate spheres ideology not only described but also distorted the complexity of men’s and women’s relations.”

Rusty Bitterman’s essay on “Women and the Escheat Movement” points to the active

political role of farm women on Prince Edward Island in the nineteenth century. Particularly striking is a description of vengeance/retribution behavior—including the maiming of animals—carried out by women. Gail Campbell's essay on "Women Petitioners in New Brunswick" provides an equally compelling case, that "denial of the franchise had not prevented women [such as school teachers] from being actively involved in the political life of their communities."

Property law in Nova Scotia, specifically as it pertained to matters of divorce and desertion, is the subject of Philip Girard and Rebecca Veinott's essay; here, the authors consider whether legislation did in fact change the "husband's formal monopoly over the family economy." These issues are pursued further in Judith Fingard's essay on "The Prevention of Cruelty, Marriage Breakdown and the Rights of Wives in Nova Scotia."

Hannah Lane's discussion of women's attraction to and involvement in the Methodist Church considers both theological and political questions, as well as the question of an enduring female "voice" which arises from this tradition. Similarly, Bonnie Huskins examines "The Ceremonial Space of Women," arguing that the presence of women in public processions proves that "separate spheres ideology" was not a "rigid societal blueprint"; Sharon Myers makes an analogous point in her essay on "Female Industrial Workers in Halifax." Gwendolyn Davies' essay on "The Literary New Woman and Social Activism" stands out as the only "literary" piece in the collection, and provides a valuable analysis of works by such well-known women as Margaret Marshall Saunders and Anna Leonowens.

The best essays in this collection are those written by its editors. Janet Guildford's discussion of women teachers and Suzanne Morton's of African Nova Scotian women

are the standard against which the other pieces must be judged, and which most clearly articulate the thematic concerns raised in the introduction. Nonetheless, all the essays put forward a clear argument, and the collection as a whole is both lively and enlightening.

Like *Separate Spheres*, Elsie B. Michie's *Outside the Pale: Cultural Exclusion, Gender Difference and the Victorian Woman Writer* is a unified work incorporating diverse elements. Here, a single writer examines a variety of texts from a point of view which grapples with issues of materialism, colonialism, legislation, education, and culture. In examining works by Mary Shelley, Charlotte and Emily Bronte, Elizabeth Gaskell, and George Eliot, Michie asserts that these women were strongly influenced by male mentors. Her project, as she claims, is to demonstrate that "the way femininity is constructed at different points in history varies because what is repressed or denied by the dominant culture changes."

In her first chapter, Michie discusses Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* in terms of the relation between imagination and production. This novel represents, for Michie, an articulation of "images of monstrous products" which are associated with the "repressed otherness of femininity." Michie brings Marxist criticism and the Romantic literary tradition into her analysis, as well as a consideration of the work that Ellen Moers and Helene Deutsch have done on female psychology. What emerges is impressive: an original and convincing interpretation of the novel in the context of a scholarly breadth of discussion.

The subsequent chapter on *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre*, subtitled "Heathcliff, Rochester, and the Simianization of the Irish," tackles both Eagleton and Bhabha in considering the question of racism in these novels. Somewhat disturbingly, this chapter's argument is most clearly articulated in the book's conclusion: "It was the desire to

dominate implicit in the narrative of the self-made man which Victorian audiences did not want to see and which the Brontës made visible in their novels by depicting Heathcliff and Rochester in terms of mid-century stereotypes of racial difference." Chapters 3 and 4 deal with Elizabeth Gaskell's connection to Charles Dickens. Michie discusses Gaskell's novels *Ruth*, *Mary Barton*, and *North and South* in light of the economic and sexual issues which dominated the author's work. Prostitution is the focus of both of these chapters, which might have been more effectively combined into a single discussion. Michie's fifth chapter, on "Culture and Menstruation in *Middlemarch*," outlines the way in which a "natural inability to comprehend 'high' culture was articulated through the figure of the menstruating woman."

Michie's conclusion, too ambitiously entitled "Products, Simians, Prostitutes and Menstruating Women: What Do They Have in Common?" attempts to answer this very question, following W.R. Greg's definition of the "monstrous" as what was "out of the pale of humanity." Instead, or perhaps as well, Michie might have considered the metaphor she employs: to British imperial makers of charts, what was beyond England was shaded more darkly, was "outside the pale." Both Michie's work and, in its own context, *Separate Spheres* negotiate the distance.

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## Economy and Excess

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**Lesley-Anne Bourne**

*Skinny Girls*. Penumbra \$12.95

**Tony Cosier**

*Kilmarnock*. Penumbra \$12.95

Reviewed by Stephanie Bolster

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Neither Lesley-Anne Bourne's *Skinny Girls* nor Tony Cosier's *Kilmarnock* is a first book, but both feel like apprenticeship col-

lections by unquestionably talented poets.

Bourne's first collection, *The Story of Pears*, was short-listed for the Lampert Award in 1991. Her territory is the ordinary, made extraordinary and menacing through understatement. Her voice, occasionally reminiscent of Lorna Crozier's in its honesty and its resonant sparseness, demands attention; at the close of the book's last poem, she convinces us that "Every woman must stand/one clerestory morning/at the window/sure that small, hot lips/breathe her neck." But however strong Bourne's voice is, it's only one voice, and the best poets have several.

Even the series of poems about Camille Claudel, the sculptor Rodin's assistant and lover, while distinguished from the others in the collection by their shorter form and infrequent punctuation, feel as if they belong to the speaker of the other sections, the pursued woman who seems never to get what she wants, even when she gets what she thought she wanted. The idea of the Claudel poems excites much more than do the poems themselves. Although Claudel is a natural subject for Bourne, she is also a safe subject. It is as though Bourne knows her so well, she assumes we all do. These brief first-person poems read like journal entries, intended for no audience but Claudel and those close to her. Such intimacy, while emotionally involving, is intellectually alienating. Like all of Bourne's work, the poems give just enough to frustrate us at what they withhold.

Aside from the occasional flat closing line, like "brighter than rage," these poems make few mistakes. This isn't surprising, given the few risks the poems take. They are written with such care, it often feels as though the real poem—perhaps more long-winded and conversational, almost certainly more outspoken—is repressed. The space around the poems reverberates with irony and barely restrained fury. Bourne's brutal frankness about anorexia and female

adolescence—"I longed to/be the girl who/ walked home late nights/thrilled by what he'd done"—shows her potential. If she could be as daring in style as she is in content, these poems would be deeply startling.

In addition to their stylistic consistency, the poems share a short-line, columnar appearance. While this compression produces memorable statements like "the sharp-boned/shame they pull on/fits," evoking an anorexic's painful self-restraint, one wonders what Bourne might discover through experimentation with longer lines and more regular stanza forms. In the latter case, a ready-made rather than a self-imposed restriction might awaken Bourne's rebellious tendencies; in the former, her language might be allowed to breathe rather than gasp.

The economy Bourne shows all too well at the level of the individual poem is, ironically and unfortunately, absent from the overall manuscript. At 120 pages, some of which contain two poems, *Skinny Girls* could be two books. Better yet, it could be one book in which each poem makes a strong and distinct impact. Too many of these poems cover similar ground; rather than building upon each other, they end up cancelling each other out.

While Bourne's book quietly implodes, Tony Cosier's quietly explodes. At 150 pages, *Kilmarnock* is even longer than *Skinny Girls* and is as varied and dense as the region that is its subject. In four sections, the poems explore the dwellings, history, people and landscape of Ontario's Montague Township, where Cosier lives. In a less rampant manuscript, exceptional poems like "Running the Richmond Fen," included in the League of Canadian Poets' *Vintage '91* anthology, and "Father," a concise, moving character sketch of a man who can express love only through action, wouldn't be lost in the undergrowth.

In Cosier's case, this excessiveness permeates not only the book as a whole but the

poems individually. By saying less, each poem would convey more. Sometimes Cosier falls into the trap of telling rather than showing; at other times his love of detail simply gets the better of him. The historical poems in particular, while more densely written than most prose, veer towards the "documentary" side of documentary poetry.

Cosier's book is as frustrating in its inconsistency as Bourne's is in its consistency. It's difficult to believe that the same writer who soars with this observation of a muskrat—"With enough generations studying the floating moon/Or stars straight up above it through the reeds/Some night, I swear, it will glow like a firefly"—stumbles fifty pages later, describing "A saw set in a metal bench,/angular and ugly,/awkwardly uncomfortable on the lawn,/ [that] seems somehow less cold than it is,/more like a largeish pup." Cosier's rhymed poetry, while worthwhile for the variety it provides, is clearly apprentice work in which the lines frequently serve rhyme rather than meaning: "With slab flat faces/That totally without features pack/More character than a living visage traces." One applauds this formal experimentation while wishing Cosier had included fewer such poems in the manuscript.

Cosier's reverence for all things, animate and inanimate, proves to be his greatest strength and his greatest weakness. In describing the natural world, he relishes all the names—"hepatica/trout lily, trillium"—and the verbs that take us into the landscape—"lop . . . flailed . . . hack." His nature poems frequently echo Ted Hughes' work, particularly the poems of *River*, in their patient, intricate observation. However, while Hughes' images are startling and unapologetic, Cosier's are blunted by a gentleness that approaches sentimentality. "Old Giants," his long poem about trees, feels too respectful, allotting each tree nearly a full page of text, as if this is its due.

The personae that emerge from these two collections are more captivating than the collections themselves. However, if Bourne and Cosier can have faith in their own voices while learning from a stringent editor and, ideally, from each other, we have some very good books to anticipate.

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## Writerly Musings

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**Ken Norris**

*A New World: Essays on Poetry & Poetics.*

Empyrean \$10.00

**Susan Musgrave**

*Musgrave Landing: Musings on the Writing Life.*

Stoddart \$15.95

Reviewed by Brenda Carr

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I always approach writers' pronouncements about the creative process with anticipation of new insights into the contexts, muscle, bone, sinew, and breath that produced their textual bodies. With both of these books, I was thumpingly disappointed. While Norris' title promises glimpses into a "new world," what he offers is rehash of the Black Mountain/Tish/Véhicule poetics of the sixties and seventies. Musgrave's musings are little more than a literary version of *Vanity Fair*, writerly gossip about herself and others, wittily set forth. Both make for light reading. Something to pass time on the train or take with afternoon tea.

The superman-like "DR M" cartoon figure on the cover of Norris' collection signals that this imaginary new world of poetics will be muscular—male. In most of the essays, the artist is "he," the poems are "his." There are only two women noted: Daphne Marlatt of Tish and Claudia Lapp of Véhicule. Not so new. These essays may be read as something of an apologia (again) for the process-oriented poetics inspired by Charles Olson & co. and carried through to Tish in Vancouver and Véhicule in Montreal. Ezra Pound's "make it new" is

chanted throughout the volume like a mantra. Not so new. The anecdotal glimpses of the literary history of Tish and Véhicule are like journal versions of the much more fulsome history Norris offers in *The Little Magazine in Canada: 1925-80*.

The cartoon alter-ego also suggests that Norris' brave new world of Canadian poetics is actually American. For nationalists like Robin Matthews and Keith Richardson, this is not so new either. Norris notes of Tish and Véhicule, "both groups were far more interested in postmodern American poetry than in the Canadian poetry going on around them." Such sweeping generalizations neglect the crucial fact that each of these groups of young writers was producing the Canadian poetry going around them. For Tish writers, at least, this involved loving and careful attention to the local—the texture of Canadian ground.

In his closing improvisational essay "Poetry Matters" (1993), Norris takes up the familiar lament that poetry is a dying species. His explanations for this diagnosis are poetry's lack of use-value in a consumption-based culture, the otherness of poetry (which he problematically links to "the foreign," exemplified by "heathen, Turk, and Jew"), and its upholding of unreachable ideals. While I agree with Norris' sense that poetry does not accommodate the commodity logic of capitalism, his equation of poetry with otherness and idealism reinforces traditional notions of the lyric as transcendently disengaged from the lived world. Such poetry, not surprisingly, does have limited appeal in public culture.

However, one only has to observe the large audiences for Caribbean-Canadian Dub Poetry (a form of performance poetry frequently set to music) or the youth culture popularity of "Spoken Word" events to see that sung, shouted, and embodied forms are the venues in which poetry lives. Such poetry typically functions as a tool of

social engagement and identity articulation within minority communities (women, Afro-Canadians, gays and lesbians, Generation X and so on). It is clear, then, that poetry does matter, but what counts as poetry and for whom it matters are undergoing radical transition. The death chant which Norris offers up may, in fact, be for the traditional lyric.

While Musgrave has a more established literary reputation than Norris (she is included in the *Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*), her stints as a newspaper columnist mark her as a cross-over writer with a populist sensibility. Most of the pieces gathered in *Musgrave Landing* are culled from her journalistic stints in such venues as the *Toronto Star* and the *Vancouver Sun*. Each vignette has a predictable structure: lots of quotations from famous writers, wittily spliced together with a dash of Musgrave experience and insight.

This book has a tinge of the “how-to” about it, offering tongue-in-cheek observations on any number of writerly topics: how to get started, what drives people to writing, writerly tools, handling editors, and so on. It also offers parodic glimpses into what it is like to be a “famous” Canadian author: the reading circuit, literary wine and cheeses, the fan mail, the autograph seekers, the botched interviews. I appreciated Musgrave’s ironic play with her own reputation which emerged largely from the personas of her poems and novels: the witch, the femme fatale, the raving feminist, the pensive romantic. It reined in the near-egocentrism of the volume.

Often her humour was almost self-indulgently clever, but there were occasional real grinners. My personal favourite is the anecdote of Canada’s perennial Beat poet, Bill Bissett, who hailed the Queen of England with these words: “You look raging in yellow. . . . You’re much more beautiful in person than on your stamps.” One symptom of

keep-it-light-and-moving humour, however, is that its quickly sketched lines do not lend themselves to care with context, nuance, and implication.

In one anecdote of adjudicating the Commonwealth Poetry Competition in Trinidad, Musgrave tosses off racist clichés as tourist parody: “Only the whites of my driver’s teeth showed in the rearview mirror . . . Men crouched at the road’s edge, waving at us with machetes. . . I overtipped the taxi-driver for having the decency not to dismember me . . . We agreed on a prizewinner, a local woman whose themes ranged from oppression to pineapples.” Perhaps an ethics of caricature is in order, particularly in cross-cultural situations.

I must admit I admire Musgrave’s zany flare, her feisty attitude, her commitment to taking writing to the public. One of her unconventional pronouncements delivered to a full-house at Edmonton’s Off-the-Wall Gallery signals her promising populist sensibility: “hockey is the poetry of the masses. . . . What if there should come a time . . . when poets like hockey players are traded by publishers for hard cash to foreign countries.” Musgrave’s view that poetry must cross-pollinate with popular culture may be one answer to Norris’ concern for a disappearing species.

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## Cultural (Inter)Texts

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### Mieke Bal

*Reading Rembrandt: Beyond the Word—Image Opposition.* Cambridge UP n.p.

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### Peter Brooks

*Body Work: Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative.* Harvard UP \$49.95

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Reviewed by C. Jodey Castricano

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Readers whose interests lie in the relations between literature and visual art will find both books under review relevant to their concerns. Mieke Bal’s *Reading Rembrandt*:

*Beyond the Word—Image Opposition* examines the tendency of interpretative scholarship to set up artificial boundaries between the two. Her primary assumption in the book is that in *cultural* life, no strict distinction is imposed between the “verbal” and visual domain. Bal’s goal is, therefore, to shift attention from “medium bound” interpretive strategies to the question of reception as a way of overcoming the boundaries determined by academic disciplines. However, rather than deny differences between verbal and visual art, Bal seeks to bracket those differences in an attempt to focus instead on the cultural responses to works of art or, to use Bal’s terms, “on the interaction between the verbal and visual ‘behaviour’ of those who deal with, process, or consume the works of art.” According to Bal, *both* visual and verbal art lend themselves to “narrativity”, enabling a semiotic “reading” which functions not only to allow the work to tell the story of its own making but also to implicate reader and viewer in making the art *work*. Bal’s study of visual art takes up current theories of the gaze and spectatorship and couples them with literary theories on point of view and focalization. Each chapter considers a theoretical problem. For example, Bal asks, “How do images narrate? What are the status and the effect of a represented viewer in visual and literary art?” In short, Bal’s goal is to establish what she calls an “integrative discipline” where the study of words and images is no longer separate.

To address these issues Bal’s work centers upon Rembrandt though works attributed to this artist are now, she says, being disclaimed as being part of the Rembrandt corpus. Bal contends that this fact works in her favour because its disavowal supports her argument that “Rembrandt”—a term Bal uses to include both the works *and* the response to them—can be considered as a “cultural text” rather than, as traditional

scholarship seeking a ‘master’ might have it, a “historical reality.” Bal also chose Rembrandt (and “Rembrandt”, for that matter) since she contends that the works attributed to him both address and elicit responses regarding the relationship between power, looking and desire and can be read in psychoanalytic terms. In sections appropriately entitled “Viewer,” “Voyeurism,” and “Focalizer,” Bal’s detailed readings of works such as *Susanna Surprised by the Elders* and *Joseph Accused by Potiphar’s Wife*, illustrates how the dynamics of focalization, usually thought of in terms of narrative discourse, function in visual art often to complicate, contradict and subvert the voyeuristic stance seemingly offered to the viewer, especially when that art has as its “pre-text” a Biblical story.

Bal’s analysis of “Rembrandt’s” Biblical episodes demonstrates how the images themselves create new texts which are often resistant to the Biblical stories and, in fact, pose a counter-reading to them. For example, in “Visual Storytelling,” Bal examines two versions of *Joseph Accused by Potiphar’s Wife* and an etching entitled *Joseph and Potiphar’s Wife*, all of which propose radical alternatives to the story of seduction and rejection told in Genesis 39 in which Joseph narrowly escapes seduction by Potiphar’s wife. According to Genesis 39, Joseph refuses her advances claiming Potiphar’s trust as his excuse. Whereas the Genesis episode tells the story of the bond between men, actualized through the rejection of a woman, Bal contends that the paintings reveal a resistance to that story. Bal suggests that though the paintings make clear that the woman’s action in pointing is accusatory, the accusation is not directed towards Joseph, the slave and younger man, but towards Potiphar, the husband who has approached the woman against her will. Bal makes this assertion based upon the spectator positions which the picture proposes. To substantiate this argument Bal examines



the details of the paintings, including the subtleties of illumination, of figure grouping, of gesticulation and of focalization, to demonstrate how each element contributes to a displacement of the Genesis story in favour of one predicated upon fantasy and desire, in fact, a narrative now open to psychoanalytic interpretation. Bal employs a similar 'reading' strategy when she examines the semiotics of rape in visual art. As with the Biblical episodes, Bal finds that the focalizer's appearance in Rembrandt's *Lucretia(s)* introduces a narrativity which is an occasion of cultural critique. Calling upon "visual rhetoric" as a means of determining the clash between an image and its pre-texts, Bal's analysis of the *Lucretia(s)* demonstrates how focalization functions to indict both rapist and rape as predicating the self-murder which the *Lucretia* story tells.

When Bal uses narratology and the concept of the focalizer to read how a scene is proposed to us, she is at her best, for her narrativizing strategy highlights the tensions, gaps and aporias which visual art, like verbal art, produces. Thus, what is at odds in the work, as Bal points out, is especially viable for both feminist and psychoanalytic readings. Bal finds particularly useful the psychoanalytic notion of transference as a means of addressing the dynamic relations between reader/viewer and the work of art. She makes a well-aimed point when, turning her attention to the interpretive practices and critical responses of others, she asserts that it is difficult, in fact, to distinguish "Rembrandt" from herself. In discussing the concept of narcissism, however, Bal also problematizes the notion of self-reflection as a mode of interpretation in both verbal and visual art pointing out that self-reflective reading is often "ahistorical" because it "relieves the reader of the trouble of placing the work in a historical context." Seeking to avoid what she calls the "simple application" of "classi-

cal and vulgar Freudianism" to critical endeavours, Bal offers numerous caveats against the dangers of universalizing theories. Unfortunately, as her lengthy deliberations on primary narcissism, the Oedipus and castration complexes and the mirror stage demonstrate, Bal seems not only to have overlooked her own advice but also to have turned "reading Rembrandt" into an opportune occasion for reading Freud and Lacan.

Peter Brooks's project is similar to Bal's in that his book sets out to examine the relation between narrative and visual representations of the body, especially the female body, as the site where society determines meaning. Although Brooks draws attention to the thematics of "unveiling" in eighteenth century visual art, his focus is on the gaze "subtended by desire" as it is evoked in modern narrative literature. Brooks's concern is with the body in modern narrative or, more specifically, how modern narrative produces what he calls, "a semioticization of the body which is matched by the somatization of story." Brooks views the body not only as a place upon which cultural messages are written and read semiotically, but also as the *source* of narrative itself, the material of "symbolization." Narratives in which a body figures predominantly, argues Brooks, are not only effectual in telling how a body becomes endowed with meaning—how it is "semioticized"—but also how the desire for knowledge of that body becomes analogous to the "desire to master the text's symbolic system, its key to knowledge, pleasure, and the very creation of significance." Thus sexuality and the desire to know—the "epistemophilic urge,"—are inextricably linked and, according to Brooks, connected through narrative which both seeks and defers fulfillment.

Brooks views the body as a site where "society is played out"; the marked body functions as the key to both identity and recognition. He also argues for a close relationship between narrative and the body

taking as a point of departure Freud's notion of hysterical symptoms as writing on the body. Brooks sets out to examine the "erotic body"—the body endowed with meaning—as it enters the field of vision in modern narrative. Brooks maintains that the body is made semiotic through its marking and, conversely, that language carries the imprint of the body. In one example, Brooks examines how clothing functions in Rousseau's novel *La nouvelle Héloïse* as metonymy for body parts. The passage with which he is concerned is Letter 54, of Part 1, from Saint-Preux to Julie, written from her "cabinet" where Saint-Preux is awaiting their rendezvous. Brooks draws our attention to Saint Preux's description of Julie's scattered clothing which was "present to his imagination." In detailing her clothing, Saint Preux pays close attention to her corset. Brooks points out that the term for corset used by Rousseau was "le corps." The corset, says Brooks, when "[v]iewed from the inside, . . . gives the form of the body in its 'imprint,' as its mold or negative." Brooks makes the point that we could read "le corps de Julie," the article of clothing, as "le corps de Julie," her body, and that this imprint serves to show how "language captures only the imprint or impress of the body, its presence by way of its absence."

In tracing the "impress of the body," Brooks follows the representation of the body in both narrative and visual art from the novel's emergence to the modernist project of the twentieth century. His readings range from the fiction of Balzac and Flaubert to Zola, Marguerite Duras, Henry James and James Joyce; in visual art from the myriad births of Venus appearing in the nineteenth century, to the paintings of Gauguin whose work, says Brooks, "reshaped our viewing of the body" and finally, to the work of Robert Mapplethorpe and John De Andrea. Considering that Brooks poses the question, 'How does the

body mean?' across such a broad range of narrative and visual art, one might expect a less than in-depth response. Brooks's reply, however, not only details the long tradition of the male gaze but also argues convincingly how vision, desire and the drive toward knowledge are necessarily entwined in narrative.

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## Subversive Frontiers

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**David M. Jordan**

*New World Regionalism: Literature in the Americas.* Toronto UP \$45.00/\$17.95

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Reviewed by Amaryll Chanady

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David Jordan's book contributes to the increasing volume of inter-American comparative studies that has appeared in recent years, mainly in the United States. Whereas earlier works discuss the possibility of considering the literature of the Americas in a comparative context or, in the case of collective volumes, offer an eclectic sampling of analyses of common themes and literary modes, *New World Regionalism* discusses, as its title implies, a particular phenomenon that has shaped the literature of both continents, although not to the same extent. Jordan points out that regionalism was much more important in Latin America than in the United States and Canada, where it usually has pejorative connotations. In his attempt to reassess regionalism and dispel these connotations, he argues that, contrary to opinion, regionalism does not consist only of "placid sketches of rural life" that are aesthetically and politically naive." In his sketch of the development of regionalist poetics since the end of the eighteenth century, he shows that early regionalists wanted to express New World difference, realists tried to "voice a subversive alternative to frontier mythologies," modernists "portrayed both self and region as autonomous enclaves of identity," early

20th-century regionalism “increasingly became a literature of protest, aimed at the homogenizing forces of modernization housed in urban centres,” and postmodern regionalism depicted “multiplicity.”

In the first chapter, “A World Apart,” Jordan discusses early regionalism, which expressed a “new-found sense of selfhood,” but neglected “the tangible reality of New World environments,” preferring symbolic representation and transcendent meaning, owing to the influence of German Romanticism. He presents two examples of romantic regionalism, the Brazilian José de Alencar and, after a brief discussion of Thoreau and Emerson, James Fenimore Cooper, in whose fiction references to European culture are as frequent as in Alencar, and which does not succeed in portraying “an autonomous regional identity.” In Chapter Two, “Regions from Afar,” Jordan discusses realist regionalism in Northern Brazil (especially Franklin Távora’s novel *O cabeleira*, and Euclides da Cunha’s *Os Sertões*, strongly influenced by naturalism) as well as in the United States (Frank Norris’s *The Octopus*). He argues that since realism cannot adequately depict the “mystery of place,” a few twentieth-century authors “have experimented with non-realist alternatives to traditional notions of regionalism.” The third chapter, “Inside Out,” then introduces the reader to Brazilian modernist regionalism (José Américo de Almeida’s *A bagaceira*, Graciliano Ramos’s *Vidas secas*, José Lins do Rêgo’s *Fogo morto*) and *Tierra pródiga* by the Mexican Agustín Yáñez. In chapter Four, “The Poetics of Place,” Jordan claims that the false distinction between (modernist) poetics and (realist) thematics explains the marginalized status of regionalism in North America, where it flourished mainly in small literary magazines. Only the Agrarians, who wrote in the early 1920s and proposed regionalism as “an alternative to the ‘tyranny’ of such cultural

and economic centres as New York” gained short-lived notoriety. Jordan presents Faulkner as the most interesting regionalist of that time, owing to his modernist poetics, and illustrates this assertion by analysing passages of *Go Down, Moses*. He also discusses Canadian authors Sinclair Ross (*As For Me and My House*) and Sheila Watson (*The Double Hook*). In the fifth chapter, “Multiple Worlds,” postmodern regionalism is described as “a ‘middle ground’ somewhere between romantic abstraction and naive realism.” Robert Kroetsch’s *Gone Indian* presents the prairie as “a shifting matrix of dreams, myths, and cultural stereotypes,” and the Mexican Carlos Fuentes’s *La región mas transparente* is “a typically postmodern depiction of ontological multiplicity.”

Although *New World Regionalism* is an interesting and extremely accessible introduction to the subject, the central concept—regionalism—is not rigorously theorized. Apart from the stipulation that it depict “lived experience that is not available to the casual observer” and a “very specific sense of place,” there is no satisfactory definition beyond the general one of “works in which setting figures prominently.” His assertion that Frank Norris’s *The Octopus*, although “a massive volume of realistic fiction devoted to capturing the West as Norris saw it at the close of the century,” “is finally not a ‘story of California’ at all, but a story of universal forces represented by the wheat and the railroad” suggests that regionalism is to be considered as strictly local and without any broader signification, which contradicts the study’s aim to dispel pejorative notions of it, as well as the pertinence of some of the examples that demonstrate that regionalism is not confined to superficial and static *tableaux*. Some of the novels selected for more detailed study also leave the reader somewhat perplexed. Fuentes’ *La región más transparente* has always been consid-

ered as an example of the Latin American New Novel (the "boom"), which is frequently contrasted with earlier regionalism, or as a "novel of the city." Few Latin Americanists would consider it regionalist. Does not Jordan's statement that "specificity of place infuses the novel's urban environment with a particular meaning. Only in this city could these distinct realities collide and interpenetrate" apply to most novels set in the city? But this conclusion would contradict his insistence on marginality and the de-centred world view in regionalism, as well as the fact that regionalism was often an affirmation of "authentic" cultural identity to be found in rural areas (especially in Latin America) in opposition to the cosmopolitan city "corrupted" by foreign influences. Jordan's use of the expression "regionalism's influence" when mentioning García Márquez suggests that the book is not consistently about a particular literary mode or movement, but that it slips into a discussion of geographic contextualization in general. Finally, there is no discussion of the major Latin American regionalist novels (Rómulo Gallegos, Ricardo Güiraldes, José Eustasio Rivera), or Québécois regionalism, which is generally considered as very important. Though *New World Regionalism* is not a comprehensive survey, a brief discussion of a greater number of the continent's most important regionalist writers would have been in order.




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## Veteran & Novices

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**W.P. Kinsella**

*Brother Frank's Gospel Hour and Other Stories.*  
HarperCollins \$23.00

*The Journey Prize Anthology: Short Fiction from the Best of Canada's New Writers.* M & S \$16.99

Reviewed by Lesley D. Clement

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When two collections of short stories, *Brother Frank's Gospel Hour* and *The Journey Prize Anthology*, arrived for review, I expected to discover more undiluted enjoyment in the vigorous prose style and polished narratives of the veteran, W.P. Kinsella, than in the inevitably rough textures and open seams of the novices.

Certainly W.P. Kinsella has provided much pleasure for many readers over the years. *Red Wolf, Red Wolf*, for example, delights with its variety and originality. In *Brother Frank's Gospel Hour*, however, one story is much like the other, and the collection itself is much like previous Hobbema collections. We are given the same stereotypes of Natives, women, and figures of authority; the same inconsistent attempts at a stilted "dialect" for the narrator, Silas Ermineskin, through occasional insertions of "ain't," "gonna," "musta," and verb tense and agreement blunders; the same plot patterns and themes (yes, the individual does continue to put one over on the system); the same vapid sentiments and jokes that are too familiar to be insightful or humorous; the same condescending attitude to those who differ from Kinsella's own attitudes.

If anything, in many of the stories, Kinsella is more annoyingly querulous than ever. At a time when the Charter of Rights is under attack, it is rather frightening to have it dismissed by Silas as a mechanism used only by "crooks and illegal immigrants," and then reduced to a mere mechanism to permit girls to play baseball and boys to enter cooking competitions, as if these victories have somehow proven Silas

wrong in his original assumption ("Ice Man"). For Kinsella, "equal opportunity" is nothing more than Frank Fencepost's opportunities to develop his talents of "creative borrowing" (cars, dictionaries—nothing is sacred) and to bed every attractive young woman whose backside fills out her jeans to his specifications. Because Fencepost exercises his rights as "an equal opportunity stud," he claims his computer needs "a program called MacSperm, help me keep track of all the rug rats I've fathered. My motto is 'A Fencepost in every oven.'" Why does Canada need a Charter of Rights when, Silas assures us, its people share a common quality? "It is a place for people to complain, which is the national pastime in Canada, the one thing whites and Indians, French and English, and everybody else got in common. And it seems like the smaller the minority the louder they whine." Nor do Kinsella's "politically correct" opponents escape his barbs. "Turbulence," for example, begins with Silas's absurd attack on what Kinsella takes to be a politically correct stance: "I'm what's known as a white-knuckle flyer, even though some whiney Indians would say I was downplaying my Indianness by claiming to have white knuckles. Those are the same Indians who think just because they're Indians they should get published, no matter how bad a storyteller they are." Later in the same story, a similar attack is made on creative writing classes for Natives only: "Story writing is story writing no matter the color of your skin."

The promotion sheet indicates that this is Kinsella's final collection of Indian short stories. Perhaps this will give Kinsella the opportunity to return to the varied lyricism, power, and humour of *Red Wolf*, *Red Wolf* and leave Hobbema behind. "Story writing is story writing no matter the colour of your skin." And for this reason, I will turn elsewhere for pleasurable reading experiences. The talent displayed in the

sixth *Journey Prize Anthology* suggests that the creative stream of new Canadian writers runs deep. The contest and publication of the anthology help ensure that novices receive recognition and exposure in an attractive volume with the \$10 000 prize for the winner, \$2 000 for the journal submitting the winning entry, and this year's new challenge, an award for the cover design. The anthology as a whole offers great variety despite an almost morbid fascination with accident or suicide by falling or drowning. First-person voice, used in all but three of the stories, highlights the interest in memory, subjectivity, and the illusory nature of truth. Each selection has a very different yet worthy story either to tell or to discover.

The first story in the anthology, Robert Mullen's "Anomie," is of the former sort. This story is told from the perspective of a doctor accompanying a jungle Indian, Huehue, up river to his tribe after Huehue's release from jail. The doctor is increasingly challenged as her empathy and even fondness for the tribe members as individuals develop, despite the savagery that their tribal customs, carried on without the gods, dictate. Vivian Payne, in "Free Falls," cleverly interweaves the stories of three groups of characters, bringing them to several junctures and an engaging close. Dorothy Speak's "Relatives in Florida" tells the story of a woman returning to the routine and stifling atmosphere of her family home after a daring but abortive assertion of freedom. Although occasionally shifting into the past, Jim Reil's "Dry" does so only to highlight the story of the present, Charlie's first step towards sobriety. Most experimental in this group is Alison Wearing's "Notes from Under Water," told in journal form to foreground the changes in the narrator's relationships against the backdrop of Prague as it enters a free market economy. The narrator's cynicism remains even as she leaves Prague for

Beijing and realizes that her “hands are full of bones.” There is nothing unusual or unique about the form of these stories; nevertheless, each succeeds simply because there is a story to be told, and it is told simply.

Contemporary readers are more accustomed to a story being discovered—or only suggested—through fragments or flashbacks, a method used so successfully by writers like Alice Munro. Richard Cumyn’s “The Sound He Made” attempts to tell and connect several stories, but the excessive and unrelated details fail to cohere into an interesting whole. The final story in the collection, and the most experimental, is Anne Carson’s “Water Margins: An Essay on Swimming by My Brother.” Interweaving introspective diary entries into the narrative thread, the story is almost totally submerged in the subjective act of trying to discover what in her brother’s life has led to self-destructive behaviour. More successful is Genni Gunn’s “Versions” as the narrator sifts through family legends of the day she almost fell from the balcony. Each version emanates from “memories which shift dangerously from narrator to narrator” and which, transformed, lead to new legends fabricated for new occasions and audiences. “Landfall,” by Joan Skogan, only hints at the stories left on shore by a second officer of a ship on a winter fishing voyage. During the first part of his voyage, he “allowed only itinerant, easily ignored characters to cross the geography of his dreams” but later so “enmeshed himself in memory and dreams” that one night he delivers himself to “the sea who cradles us and pushes us away and reaches out for us. Sucking and roaring and yearning after us.”

My personal favourite, Robyn Sarah’s “Accept My Story,” and this year’s winner, Melissa Hardy’s “Long Man the River,” both belong in the latter group of stories: those of discovery. With Sarah’s story, the form ideally complements the content as Ruth, the narrator, now divorced with two

young daughters, pieces together the story of Melanie, a girlhood friend, who has recently committed suicide by jumping. The self-consciously probing style has a sense of urgency both to provide Ruth with the wisdom to raise her own two girls and to exorcise Ruth’s feelings of guilt through creating a story that, as with the crystal doorknob at the end of the story, would allow Ruth to “look inside it and see Melanie, restored to wholeness, safely passed through.”

The muted colours and irony of Melissa Hardy’s “Long Man the River” (originally published in *Exile*) contrast with Kinsella’s bold strokes and sarcasm. Hardy focuses on the story of a Cherokee woman, ‘Liza Light-Up-The-Sky Talahawa, who has come to the river for adult baptism as preparation for marriage with Walter Barkman. This baptism is no Christian experience, however, as ‘Liza relives her earlier mystical and debilitating contacts with Long Man the River: from her baptism by a conjure man, through later attempts to cure her of the voices and spells she has had since childhood. The lure of the uktena, a giant serpent with “no agenda apart from opportunity,” is too strong; ‘Liza marries Wally Barkman and aches for success in love the rest of her life.

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## Existence & Life

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**Pete McCormack**

*Shelby*. Douglas & McIntyre \$16.95

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**Monique Proulx.**

*Invisible Man at the Window*. Translated by Matt Cohen. Douglas & McIntyre \$16.95

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Reviewed by Peter Cumming

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Publisher’s hype promotes Pete McCormack’s first novel, *Shelby*, as a “classic coming-of-age story.” Despite its comic potential, however, McCormack’s *Portnoy’s Complaint* for Generation X proves as unproductive as

its protagonist's obsessive masturbation. Following the tedious adventures of Shelby, a university dropout "with a yin that needed to be yanged"; his roommate Eric, of the unmusical ("it's a look thing") bands, Smegma Bomb! and Void of Paisley; Lucy Moon (!), his on again, off again, celibate/ feminist/psychic/stripper/girlfriend; and his cartoon grandmother-philosopher ("Be nice"; "Enjoy life"), *Shelby* explores the depths only of superficiality.

McCormack's sharpest comic edge is in his voicing of nineties' absurdities. Lucy reads under a sky "as blue and warm as it probably was in the late sixties." Eric feels guilty about "screwing on the back of an endangered species" (a polar bear rug). In one exceptional scene, Shelby cuddles up with Eric, "two heterosexual men . . . inches apart in a warm bed. . . . [B]y confessing I loved him . . . I could blast open the social envelope, exposing a better world for all." In this incisive if rarely redemptive way, McCormack taps into 1990s masculine angst. But if Shelby's literary predecessor, Guy Vanderhaeghe's 1980s *Ed*, was hardly able to get out of his basement, Shelby has trouble getting out of bed. Shelby's sexual misadventures and earnest search for love and meaning *could* be both hilarious and moving—if readers cared about him and his cast of caricatures.

Unrelentingly, *Shelby* reduces all possibilities of love. "Afloat with the joy of connection," Shelby lets out "the longest fart of my life." In his tabloid television world, Shelby trivializes his loss of Lucy, Eric, and Gran by weeping to *Mr. Dressup* and masturbating to *Oprah*. As a result, Shelby's vision of "a wet stream of life . . . an infinite thread of interconnectedness" reads more like a *wet dream* of self-indulgence. If this is a contemporary "slice of life," it is a thin slice of a thin life. Instead of delivering comic irony, *Shelby*'s epigraphs highlight the novel's hollowness. "Steer for the deep waters only!" advises Whitman, but *Shelby* is stuck

in the shallows. St. Augustine hits the bulls-eye with "O rottenness! O monstrous life!" because, like Shelby, readers end up feeling only emptied: "What had I accomplished in my twenty years? Nothing. Had I made a difference in anybody's life, including my own? No." (But then, how like a Baby Boomer reviewer to remind a Generation X novelist that even masturbation was better in the sixties.)

Happily, "rotteness" and "monstrous life" are transformed into pure light in Monique Proulx's *Invisible Man at the Window*. Published in French in 1993, winner of Le Prix Québec-Paris, now in a loving and timely translation by Matt Cohen, *Invisible Man* explores "admirable and fragile human beings" not "crushed by the burden of existence." *Invisible Man* is simultaneously a masterpiece of poetic prose; a fable in the manner of Kafka, Coetzee, and Brossard; a psychological study of a bizarre *mélange* of artistic hangers-on on Montreal's "The Main"; and an intellectually charged mystery: what was the "Big Bang" that changed Long Man into Max, the paraplegic artist whose "portraits" make up this novel? why does Gerald Mortimer humiliate himself doing lowly tasks for Max? why can Mortimer not love Maggie, and why can Maggie not stop loving Mortimer? why does Julius Einhorne provide Max a free, if rundown, apartment? why does Laurel's mother have no time for her son, while Max's has time for nothing else? why does Lady, Max's girlfriend, leave, return, and leave again? what happened to Purple, Long Man's friend and Lady's other love?

Everyone revolves around immobile Max who, since a car accident left him "forever dead beneath my belt," now "spends his time painting naked people." Through Max's sardonic *and* compassionate eyes, we see right into these others; through his portraits, we also hear their voices. Fleeing from movies which "want to show me stark naked," Maggie relishes posing nude for

Max, with whom she can wonder “why life isn’t like gliding in a canoe across a still lake.” Julius’s corpulent, white body “has the beauty of an arctic landscape,” yet Julius poignantly confesses his life as a possible child molester.

(Faced with the perhaps impossible task of translating Julius's mixed English and French dialogue, Cohen chooses not only to translate everything into English, but, curiously, even to translate Proulx's English into his English. "Yes, *votre ami*, the Artist, the one who seems astonished by life" is insufficiently replaced with "Yes, your friend, the Artist who seems to find life so amazing." On the other hand, Cohen's retentions of French could be more frequent. ". . . [G]ros criss écœurant j'vas t'faire enfarnier gros tabarnak de bloke de porc que j'te r'pogne à l'approcher . . ."—ranted by a father who thinks Julius has molested his daughter—is beautifully rendered by "Nauseating fat pig I'm going to have you locked up fat shit of a *gros tabarnak de porc* if I ever catch you near her again. . . .")

Max himself is complex, convincing, and naked: in his affection for "my faithful Rocinante," his wheelchair; his resentment of the "sadistic manufacturers" of his fluorescent urine bottle; his fear of his mother's smothering love ("[she] sniffs me out . . . look what they've done to you, poor little doggie Max"). Although Max claims that love and desire are no longer available to him, he is also a "Casanova on wheels"; in enforced androgynous/erogenous zones, he loves women with the sensitivity of a lesbian lover.

What makes *Invisible Man* more than a collection of Max's paintings of body parts is Lady's return. Max tries to block out the window through which he sees into Lady's window: "Each of us is seated on his own side of the curtain." But Lady's phone calls and the "perfect" love story she is writing (of two lovers who never meet) unsettle

Max's comfortable discomfort, opening up possibilities of self and other once again. Through the catalyst of Lady's arrival and departure, Max is prompted to "walk," out of his apartment, away from all the others, into his own life, out on the street where he is "felled by the stray bullets of [others'] kindness."

Thus, in his closing self-portrait, Max is no longer "that thing on the chair which is me" from the opening tableau of this remarkable novel. Instead, he is standing, whole, made of "the sun-splashed head of Maggie on the impeccably pure torso of Julius . . . [with] the never-weakening sexual organ of Mortimer, Julianne's knotty hands, the arms of Pauline, and . . . Laurel's powerful legs." Unlike Shelby, who wallows in existence, "spread-eagled and spent, the wet rag in my right hand, my body and brain draped in an itchy blanket of self-loathing," Max finds "the colours that make existence into life"—he walks, he even runs. As a result, if reading McCormack sometimes seems as tiresome as watching someone play with himself, reading Proulx is like Laurel's reaction to a woman who may be his lover or his mother: "When you are with her it is like walking in a foreign city. You find your way around streets you don't know, you speak languages you didn't realize you knew."

## Diamonds and Shit

**Michael Fournier and Ken Norris, eds.**

*Take This Waltz: A Celebration of Leonard Cohen.*

**The Muses' Company / La Compagnie des Muses**  
\$16.95

**Ira Nadel.**

*Leonard Cohen: A Life in Art.* ECW \$14.95

Reviewed by Peter Cumming

In 1970, Michael Ondaatje set out to write about Leonard Cohen only “by what I find in his writing,” but ended up concluding



that “Saint Leonard” and “not his poems, has become the end product of his art.” Now, two new books unabashedly focus on Cohen the man. The more interesting of the two, *Leonard Cohen*, finds its way through the persona of this dark lover and pop saint back to what is ultimately more interesting—his diverse artistic achievements. *Take This Waltz*, a Festschrift anthology of sixtieth birthday greetings, too often deteriorates to the level of a fanzine even if there are (in the words of *Beautiful Losers*) “diamonds” to be found “amongst all the shit.” *A Life in Art*, by contrast, is a balanced, workmanlike book (if not a precious jewel, at least an industrial grade diamond encrusted with very little shit): it successfully integrates biography, a critical overview of Cohen’s *oeuvre*, photographs, and an up-to-date “Discography” (though curiously eschewing a much-needed “Bibliography” for a “Works Consulted”) in a mere 160 pages.

*Take This Waltz* consists of poems, wannabe poems, essays, and reminiscences contributed by a hodgepodge of alphabetically arranged well-wishers from Baez to Woodcock. The rubbing of shoulders by Judy Collins and Kris Kristofferson with a who’s who of Canadian writing (Bowering, Dudek, Purdy, Webb, *et al.*) strangely reinforces the wall between popular culture and literature more than it breaks it down. Not that only intellectual lightweights breathlessly utter adulation of Canada’s answer to Byron, Gibran, and both the Dylans. Allen Ginsberg’s contribution, after all, is no more scintillating than Phil Spector’s disclosure that Cohen was “extremely influenced by the Partridge Family.” It doesn’t matter how Bill Bissett spells it (“we ar all grateful / for yu n love yu”), or Adrienne Clarkson says it (“the throbbing romanticism of Leonard”), or Ken Norris recalls it (“this poet ruined my life. Thanks, Leonard”), a gush is a gush is a gush. When not kissing the prophet’s feet, contributors welcome his seduction: “Leonard Cohen is

the only man I would consider turning gay for,” says “Liam” to writer Gillian McCain; “Leonard Cohen is the only man I would consider marrying on the eve of his sixtieth birthday,” replies Gillian.

The most interesting contributions are by writers who do not feel obliged to check their critical faculties at the party’s door. Stephen Scobie’s poem observes “Leonard . . . standing / still in the wings / watching as ‘Leonard Cohen’ / steps into the spotlight”; Scobie’s “karaoke of the spirit” is right up there with “Plastic Birchbark,” one of Cohen’s early titles for *Beautiful Losers*. In “Fling Through *Beautiful Losers*,” Stan Dragland shows his “respect” for Cohen in the attention he pays Cohen’s text as he traces his own evolving and active responses as a reader. The anthology’s highlight is Raymond Filip’s “The Only Montreal Poet Who Doesn’t Know Leonard Cohen,” a humorous romp initiating a much-needed class analysis of Cohen. (Notably missing from the volume, and perhaps bad manners at a lover-saint’s birthday party, is any substantial gender analysis.) A Verdun-born poet and guitarist, Filip both is and is not a fan: Leonard Cohen “has never taken me down to his place by The Main to touch my imperfect body with his mind. Thank Yahweh.” Increasingly disillusioned with Cohen, the “Westmount hillbilly,” “personal savior of spoiled brats,” Filip drops in on Cohen at his “monastery converted into a Radio Shack” to take a piss. Questioning the “phallocentric faith” of “basketcases” for whom “[s]exual awakening lasts a lifetime,” Filip wonders whether his reception would have been as lukewarm had he been “a skinny female on a motorcycle.”

Happily, Nadel’s *A Life in Art* respects Cohen and his work without turning a blind eye to opposing points of view. Nadel reminds us of the self-professed “con,” Leonard Cohen, who wrote “*Caveat emptor*” on bathroom tiles in a 1965 film.

He recognizes that though sex, love, and beauty inspire Cohen, he also obsessively flees their entrapment: "only art can truly seduce Leonard Cohen." He gives voice to critics who call Cohen the "Prince of Bummers" and "Beautiful Creep," who claim that Cohen has turned "sadness into a career," that his songs are "music to slit your wrists by."

What Nadel's biography "modestly offers" as rejoinder to these "ungenerous" assessments is actually an ambitious list: to explore the "union" between Cohen's "life in art" and his "life outside of art"; the "mystique of his popularity"; the "interplay between his writing and singing"; his "need to create"; his "spiritual self-discovery"; his pessimism and hope. Given the scope of his brief study, Nadel succeeds admirably: highlighting the variety of his work (poetry, fiction, and songs, and also film, plays, opera, watercolours, not to mention a guest appearance on *Miami Vice*); tracing Cohen's influences, reassessing Lorca and Klein, succinctly noting that "Dudek had knighted him, but Layton kicked him in the pants;" offering insight into Cohen's painstaking craft: "While it may take Dylan only fifteen minutes to write a song, it takes Cohen years." Errors are few, though "Ray Charles (the subject of the movie that Krantz and Edith watch in *Beautiful Losers*)" (25) stands out: Krantz is a character in *The Favourite Game*. Though the book's compression and ambitious agenda result in some chronological chopiness as Nadel leaps back and forth between texts and life, he only occasionally slips into overly schematic generalizations (the "mythology and lyricism" of Cohen's early poetry subsequently "made transparent by . . . historical realities" only to be plunged "into the inferno and self-hatred" before rising "toward purgatory" and finally "approaching paradise").

Nadel's major accomplishment is his refusal to accept the primacy of either

Cohen's songs or his poetry. From the Buckskin Boys to poetry readings accompanied by guitarist Lenny Breau through Cohen's 1969 statement that "All of my writing has guitars behind it, even the novels," Nadel demonstrates that if anything, Cohen's "interest in music may predate his interest in poetry." Indeed, he argues the paradox that "The change from poetry to songwriting . . . saved Cohen's creative life" but that "Cohen's popularity as a singer . . . jeopardized . . . his reputation as a writer."

Hardly the last word on Cohen, *A Life in Art* does fill a gap by updating earlier studies by Ondaatje, Scobie, Hutcheon, *et al.*, by emphasizing the unity and diversity of Cohen's art, and by recognizing significant connections between Cohen's life and art. One has only to compare it to Lorraine S. Dorman's and Clive L. Rawlins' sprawling 1990 British biography, *Leonard Cohen: Prophet of the Heart*, error-prone and excruciatingly written, cloyingly uncritical beyond the worst of *Take This Waltz*, to see just how serviceable and concise Nadel's biography is.

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## Bed Companions

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### Dany Laferrière

*Dining With the Dictator*. Trans. David Homel. Coach House \$16.95

### Dany Laferrière

*Why Must a Black Writer Write About Sex*. Trans. David Homel. Coach House \$16.95

### Dany Laferrière

*Chronique de la dérive douce*. VLB Éditeur \$16.95

Reviewed by Caroline Desbiens-Magalios

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With the audacious title of his first book, *How to Make Love to a Negro without Getting Tired*, Dany Laferrière made his entrance into the literary scene in Quebec. Whether the book was as equally powerful as its title remains to be discussed. Nevertheless, the shock waves are still being

felt ten years later, gaining rather than losing intensity as the works of Laferrière are being made available in translation to the English-Canadian and American readership. Given this success, one may wonder if each new book by this author is not written against his first novel, with the risk of being obscured by it.

Laferrière strategically circumvents this dilemma by positioning his literary voice exactly where the reader least expects to find it. If eroticism and sexuality remain a guiding thread in his works, the channels through which he comes to those themes differ constantly. The three books under review are no exception: whether as a young boy coming of age in *Dining With the Dictator*, an adulated writer in *Why must a Black Writer Write About Sex* or a disenfranchised Haitian immigrant in *Chronique de la dérive douce*, Laferrière paints his most telling portraits of human relations comfortably lying in sheets and pillows still wrinkled and warm as a result of his frolickings.

In *Dining with the Dictator*, Laferrière—still faithful to his custom of blending fiction and memoir—creates a gallery of flamboyant female characters as the narrator transports himself from contemporary Miami to the Port-au-Prince of the Tontons Macoutes. One narrative blends into another by presenting the events in Port-au-Prince in the format of a film script written by the fictionalized Dany Laferrière, as he is leisurely soaking in the bathtub of his Miami apartment. In this story, the young Dany finds himself implicated in an incident with “the sharks,” Duvalier’s much dreaded secret police. Fearing for his life, he goes into hiding in his friend Miki’s place. Thus exiled from the protected environment of his mother and aunts’ house, Dany is hurled into the harsh reality of Haiti’s dictatorship. The latter is illustrated by Miki and her five girlfriends, most of them barely over fourteen years old, who

are all trading sexual favors with the sharks in return for the (largely unfulfilled) hope to see a loved one rescued from the hands of Duvalier’s police. In the course of his stay, Dany becomes the silent observer of these machinations and if his mix-up with the sharks proves to be of no consequence, the exploitation that constitutes the young girls’ daily life is, by contrast, painfully real. Although the actions of the female characters may at first seem exaggerated and unrealistic—bursts of laughter that turn into sobs or repeated verbal and physical attacks—Laferrière slowly uncovers, as the narrative progresses, the horror of their existence, therefore convincingly justifying such extremes. Although the translation necessarily loses the particularly colorful and excessive tone of the girls’ speech, it captures the eeriness of this reality and renders the dreamlike state with which the novel is crafted.

In *Why Must a Black Writer Write About Sex*, Laferrière finds himself once more the observer of a human theatre. The actors and the setting have changed, however, and one may refer more adequately to this new display as a comedy. The division between fiction and reality is again blurred as the author of the book and the author in the book (who is also the narrator) share many characteristics: indeed, both are black authors living in Miami. Laferrière makes us sharply aware of this tenuous frontier with the opening words: “This is not a novel.” As the narrator sets out on an itinerary across Canada and the United States in order to gather images about “America” and write a piece commissioned by a popular magazine, this initial question remains, becoming one of the central themes of *Why Must a Black Writer Write About Sex*: Is this a novel? Is this America? And furthermore, is this Dany Laferrière? Throughout the book, the author merely dabbles at the surface of complex issues such as race, sex, class or fame in America with a disconcert-

ing dilettantism. His potentially cutting critique is repeatedly undercut by the cultural and political values which brought him fame and success when he published his first book. If Laferrière's candor commands a certain respect, one is nevertheless exasperated by the undermining of his voice; Laferrière has perhaps rolled around in bed with more than his share of American icons, or is it that he has been soaking too long in Miami's tub of popular culture?

It is precisely because the reader might be left wanting a more genuine voice after reading *Why Must a Black Writer Write About Sex* that Dany Laferrière's latest book comes as a pleasant and wholly unexpected surprise. The author seems to turn away from shock value long enough to write with a disarming sincerity. This Montreal-based chronicle of an immigrant's first few days in his country of adoption gestures toward the essential without ever fully naming it. The book is a series of short vignettes, some reading like poems while others are more prosaic, marking the slow transformation which will lead the main character to the decision of becoming a writer. The sense of longing and pain necessarily linked to the experience of immigration pervades the whole book but is undercut at times with more joyful moments, many of them related—as one might expect from Laferrière—to the new sensual pleasures at hand. With this latest novel, Laferrière forces us to rethink his previous works as more than lighthearted fantasies about sex and fame. Although his voice remains humorous, fanciful and at times sarcastic, Laferrière demonstrates that he can maintain a perfect balance between what to reveal or conceal so that his narrative never sinks to the level of facile drama. If this invaluable quality became increasingly present in his previous memoirs, it is fully deployed in *Chronique de la dérive douce*. This slow but certain shift in tone is most emphatically welcome.

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## Poetic Agents

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**Douglas Fetherling**

*Selected Poems*. Arsenal Pulp \$12.95

**Dennis Denisoff**

*Tender Agencies*. Arsenal Pulp \$12.95

Reviewed by Peter Dickinson

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With over forty books (authored or edited) to his credit, Douglas Fetherling is nothing if not prolific. 1994 alone saw the publication of three important volumes: *Travels by Night*, Fetherling's acclaimed "memoir of the sixties"; *The File of Arthur Moss*, his somewhat less acclaimed first novel; and, finally, his *Selected Poems*. In the "Author's Note" appended to this last text, Fetherling claims that although his "poetry has certainly changed over the years," "I hope this *Selected Poems* will show that nonetheless I have been consistent. From the start, I was a political and religious poet (in that order), and so I have remained." Leaving aside questions of politics and religion (for the moment, anyway), what struck me in reading these poems was not so much the consistency of theme as that of form.

In the same "Note," Fetherling goes on to suggest that some of the more pronounced poetic shifts recorded in this text "have been the natural ricocheting that occurs when a period of using a short lyric form is followed by the desire for a longer line (or at least for longpoems)." But even Fetherling's "longpoems" are dominated by the short lyric line. (Granted, Phyllis Webb's 1965 *Naked Poems*, generally regarded to have inaugurated a new long form in Canadian poetry, is made up principally of wonderfully economical lyric stanzas. And yet, I am assuming that "longpoems," at least judging by how Fetherling deliberately employs the neologism, are not to be confused here with that more identifiable Canadian genre, the "long poem," which is usually of book-length—think Robert Kroetsch's *The Seed Catalogue* or

Daphne Marlatt's *Steveston*—and which can even extend, like bp Nichol's *The Martyrology*, over several volumes.)

Indeed, of the five poems in this book ("Teratology," "Moving towards the Vertical Horizon," "Rites of Alienation," "Dissimulation," and "Chinese Anthology") that I am arbitrarily classifying as "longpoems," all are broken up—by italicized, lower-case Roman numerals—into what are essentially individual lyric units. Consider, in this regard, section iv of "Moving towards the Vertical Horizon":

Christ was alive  
one of only 300 million  
when Natives met here  
to trade and discarded  
these broken tools  
in what, then as now,  
was alluvial mud

Here presumably is the admixture of politics and religion that Fetherling mentions in his "Note," although not necessarily in that order. And yet, I am not at all clear on how this poem (Fetherling's longest at 18 pages) differs formally from the 21-line "Pre Texts," to which it is thematically linked (at least in terms of how a landscape "documents itself" and is documented by others, in this case "anthropologists" and "explorers"). Perhaps, as Fetherling remarks in the latter poem it is a question of "same process, different complexities."

"Of process," Fetherling writes elsewhere in his *Selected Poems*, "The operative word is silence":

Days descend to us through the agency  
of night, brightness decays into  
darkness  
the constant breaking down of matter  
and of data.

As Sharon Thesen comments in her cover blurb, "Fetherling's poems are notes from underground, intelligence reports from the countries of *noir*." And it is true, in his poems Fetherling does seem to prefer to

"travel by night": "Nightwear nightware nightmare nightmirror/we're locked in these conspiracies together" is how he puts it in "Rites of Alienation." Moreover, like the quintessential *noir* antihero, Fetherling here reveals himself to be a double agent, dealing readers his melancholic verse in the form of blithely practised lyrics.

At first glance lyricism would not appear to be a primary causative agent in the poetry of Dennis Denisoff, author of the novel *Dog Years*, and editor of the prose anthology *Queeries*. "Lyricism and narcissism?" he asks at one point in the hilarious "He Sang Him," "No, I didn't know/I should write that down." Indeed, where Fetherling's *Selected Poems* belies a consistency of form, *Tender Agencies* dramatically (and unpredictably) showcases Denisoff's sheer love of language. The dense and complicated poems that make up this remarkable debut collection are filled with all manner of alliterative ironies ("one beat words / nothing propagating polysyllabism"), assonant puns ("language: l a n g u i s h: very good"), dissonant refrains ("the kid the kid the kid the kid / .green green green green green"), and wonderful bits of camp dialogue ("oh how we laughed / you see we were drinking pernod that year"). Denisoff even goes so far as to embed entire sections of *Roget's Thesaurus* within his poems ("distress affliction see adversity see / disease see lamentation see / dejection"). And yet, together, these "narcissistic" (in the sense of self-reflexive) metalingual moments combine to produce passages of sumptuous (not to mention sensuous) "lyricism," as in the following section from "Fissure Him Him (Smack Dab)":

I just loved the words we exchanged  
yesterday  
position / emission / holography  
stationary vehicle  
nothing limp  
enthralled he tells me  
cherry lip balm

maybe something streamlined and  
hemmed  
not the pillar of the community  
but as thrilled as a flying buttress  
Eros has arose;

or the final stanza of "A Comprehensive  
Miner Murders the Power Source":

and the SKIES open for Michael  
the voice of harpers harping with their  
harps  
every last one of them water-skiers  
white linen briefs with wide elastic  
waistbands  
the train: "Klein Calvin Klein Calvin  
Klein Calvin Klein"  
the station itself silent and gentle  
frozen flanks  
everyone asleep and breathing  
while I sprinkle patchouli  
in strategic corners

These are poems, despite (or perhaps in spite of) the stunning visual effects created by their intricate layouts on the page, that demand to be read aloud. The timbre of Denisoff's unique poetic voice is alternately elegiac (as in "Who is Luis Possy?"), deliberately mechanical (as in "Consumer Complaint"), and refreshingly whimsical (as in "Hallelujah Pancake Syrup"). Everywhere it is suffused with "homoerotic concern," as Kevin Killian remarks on the back cover. And, I would argue, nowhere is this "homoerotic concern" more evident than in Denisoff's passionate explorations of the subtleties of language:

rakish  
that man is rakish  
this man is svelt  
another man is that man is he is that  
guy sure is boy is he ever

Of course, in this book of poems Denisoff is also concerned with the interplay between individual or collective desires (sexual agency, to be sure, but also a more general will to action, freedom, sometimes even power) and the representative establishments

set up to regulate those desires (medical, industrial, government, bureaucratic, and real estate agencies, to name just a few). This interplay is not always tender, as the title suggests. Frequently it is raw, Denisoff's "skeletal refrain" creating a linguistic scaffolding from which he can assail the social infrastructure. Readers who undertake to climb this scaffolding alongside the poet will be rewarded for their efforts.

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## Wanting Undecidability

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**Dianne Tiefensee**

*The Old Dualities: Deconstructing Robert Kroetsch and His Critics.* McGill-Queen's UP \$44.95

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Reviewed by Susan Rudy Dorsch

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Dianne Tiefensee's feminist deconstructive reading of Robert Kroetsch and his critics is the most powerful, sustained, and knowledgeable critique of Canadian postmodernism—and of the critics of postmodernism, including myself—that I have seen. It deserves to be read widely. Taking Robert Kroetsch's work as exemplary, the book argues that Kroetsch and his critics have produced a Canadian postmodernism based on "lazy and sloppy" readings of Derrida:

That postmodernism provides the means by which Kroetsch attempts to disentangle himself from traditional thought and to resist or subvert the hegemony governed by it is problematic not only because postmodernism's means of resistance is a simultaneous asserting and subverting of "the Subject," representation, and traditional values and conventions but also because the postmodern theory by which this asserting and subverting is to be accomplished is a hodgepodge of bits and pieces derived from thinkers as incompatible as, for example Foucault, Kristeva, Bloom and Derrida. Not surprisingly, the compilation and practice of such superficial theorizing, more often than not, results in lazy and sloppy scholarship in the name

of ground-breaking innovation. The only way we can possibly resist traditional modes of thought is to consider Derridean undecidability seriously.

The book is effectively divided into two parts. Part One, "Derridean Deconstruction, Canadian Postmodernism, and Robert Kroetsch," begins, in Chapter 1, by explicating Derrida's notion of "undecidability" as that "which resides in the gap between opposed terms, refuses to be incorporated into the familiar dichotomy, and moreover functions as a force that resists the sublimation or synthesis (*Aufhebung*) of the binary opposites between which it resides, partaking of both, yet *being* neither." Chapters 2 and 3 consider how and to what extent Kroetsch has constructed Canadian postmodernism and interrogates his use of Derridean deconstruction from which Kroetsch "and his colleagues claim that his postmodernist theory proceeds."

Part Two, "The Writing of Robert Kroetsch," first reads his criticism, which Tiefensee finds is not as "non-thematic, as de(con)structive of realism, authority, and the cult of the Subject" as many claim, and that is, in fact, "intensely thematic, with its theme and goal being that of all earlier Canadian criticism—the creation and affirmation of a Canadian identity in literature." Part Two includes the most compelling feminist critiques of Kroetsch's *Gone Indian*, *What the Crow Said*, and *Badlands* ("Fear of Women: A Misogynist Erotics" is an especially powerful chapter) that I have seen. Tiefensee demonstrates that Kroetsch's work does not in fact "derive from Derridean undecidability but rather from a traditional Hegelian metaphysics founded upon the notion of the victorious quest of the hero."

Of most interest to me is the central concern of the book, which is "not merely to criticize Kroetsch for advocating and promoting the negative attitudes that he holds in common with the culture in which he

lives and works but rather to criticize the attitudes themselves." She wants to find out

how a thinker such as Robert Kroetsch, who claims to be interested in *différance* (one of the many [non]terms that Derrida utilizes in talking undecidability), is necessarily held captive by the very system he wishes to shake when (or where) the strategy he adopts in order to effect such a displacement is one of resistance through the dialectical anti—a strategy entirely governed by the very metaphysical thought that, on one level, he desires to escape.

Or, "[to] put it another way, why is he [Kroetsch] so fascinated with the negative" and not with resistance, since "[m]etaphysics and the oppressive violence it fosters cannot be escaped, but it can be resisted (and this resistance is *not* a negation) by our rigorously contextualizing the metaphysical concepts that govern our thought, our actions, and our lives?"

An honest if disturbing answer to that question comes in the last chapter, entitled "Canadian Postmodernism and Difference," in which Tiefensee returns to Derridean "*différance*" as "radical difference or irreducible alterity; that is, difference which cannot ever be reduced to identity by any operation of logic or dialectic, the difference which precludes the possibility of the other's being perceived as 'one's own other' or a reflection of the self" and contrasts it with "the postmodernist interest in the different [as typified in the work of Robert Kroetsch which is] not concerned with radical alterity and does not finally allow for the recognition of "previously silenced ex-centrics: those defined by differences (inferiorities) in class, gender, race, ethnic group, and sexual preference." If Kroetsch epitomizes Canadian postmodernism, Tiefensee argues, then it is "every bit as repressive of ex-centrics and supportive of those with power as are the traditional modes of thought."

I am entirely convinced by these arguments. Tiefertsee's book is useful, not only for its critique of Canadian postmodernism, but for its appropriation, for feminist anti-racist purposes, of the strategies of deconstruction. Tiefertsee's unswervingly feminist framework produces her political analysis of otherness. She *wants* the undecidability of which she speaks. Thus, she makes available the radical implications of Derrida's philosophy where others, who do not (want to?) know the lived experience of otherness, have not. Since the critics of Kroetsch have all been white, and almost all male—certainly all middle class and professional—it doesn't really surprise me that we would not have been able to see the difference between Derrida and Kroetsch. Tiefertsee, an instructor at the David Lam Centre for International Communication at Simon Fraser University and an artist, is a very gifted thinker, and perhaps enough outside of the debates which she criticizes to see their—our, my—most problematic assumptions and practices. I am grateful to Tiefertsee's book which makes them thoroughly and unrelentingly apparent.

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## Historical Recovery

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**Carlotta Hacker**

*The Indomitable Lady Doctors.* James Lorimer & Co. \$5.95

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**Monica Hopkins**

*Letters from a Lady Rancher.* James Lorimer & Co. \$4.95

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Reviewed by Debra Dudek

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Goodread Biographies seeks to rescue history from the anonymity of hardcover texts. Established in 1983, Goodread reprints Canadian biography, autobiography, diaries, memoirs, and letters. *The Indomitable Lady Doctors* collects the stories of Canada's first women doctors, outlining the struggles these women

underwent in order to pursue medical careers. Their biographer, Carlotta Hacker, gathers facts from public record offices, personal communications, medical journals, published and unpublished papers, archives, newspaper cuttings, manuscripts, "personal information and communication," diaries, biographies, letters, registers, lectures. She has done extensive research in order to reconstruct the "truth" of these women's lives. What she has not done is let the women tell their own stories.

The second book under review, Monica Hopkins' *Letters from a Lady Rancher*, contains two years of correspondence written from Monica Hopkins to a close friend named Gill. The letters narrate the first two years of Monica's life at "Enmore," her homestead in Priddis, Alberta. From September 21, 1909 until November 1911, Monica writes the adventures of her life in a new country as a newly married woman. Born in England, Monica met her husband, Billie, on a ship to Canada when she was fifteen and Billie was twenty. Her family returned to England three years later, and two years after her family's return, Monica and Billie were married. They left England to set up a homestead in the foothills of Alberta. The text ends with Monica announcing her first visit back to England. While her letters were written from 1909 to 1911, the original manuscript was prepared for publication in the 1940's and later donated to the Glenbow Museum in Alberta. Monica apparently collected the letters from Gill, rewriting and expanding upon the letters thirty years after originally writing them. Having this information presented in the introduction invited *this* reader to ponder which was original text and which was rewritten. Inevitably, I wonder what is absent in the version I now read, for the relationship between memory and the forgotten certainly culminates into an un/intentionally altered text.

While Hopkins altered her texts as a nos-



talgic gesture, Hacker rewrites the stories of Canada's first medical women using her own voice rather than allowing the voices of the doctors to speak. The result is a text which offers itself as a reference guide. Hacker's insistence upon inserting her own unnecessary quips and comments serves to blend each story into the next. And between the stories contained in each chapter are lists of other women doctors and their vital biographical statistics. The amount of information is overwhelming. While I appreciate the recovery of these women from the pages of medical journals, I long for the rhythm of their own voices which Hacker must have read and subsequently chosen to leave behind. The list she constructs of James Miranda Stuart Barry, Emily and Augusta Stowe, Jennie Trout, Elizabeth Smith, Elizabeth Beatty, Charlotte Ross, Susie Rijnhart, Pearl Chute, Elizabeth Matheson, Maude Abbott, Irma LeVasseur, Mary Lee Edward, Frances Evelyn Windsor, Frances McGill, and Mary Percy Jackson, is void of body. The text is important as a resource for others who wish to expand upon individual lives. The Great Canadian Theatre Company in Ottawa presented a play titled, *Tiger's Heart*, which portrayed the life of James Miranda Barry, the first woman doctor to practise medicine in Canada, who was discovered to be a woman only after her death. Fred Edge wrote *The Iron Rose* which is a biographical account of Charlotte Ross's life.

In the pictures included in every chapter I searched eyes and mouths in an attempt to translate Hacker's facts to individual corporeal existence. Perhaps my favourite story is captured in the cross-legged portrait of Dr. Susie Rijnhart. Her body in profile, she turns her face to me while her hands cup a shallow bowl. She is clothed in the robes of a Tibetan, a round cap settled on her head. She sits on etched flooring before an ornately carved stool. Her respect for Tibetan culture shows in her manner of dress and ges-

ture, her dedication to medicine and religion suggested in the steadfast gaze. Every adventure and tragedy is read and misread in this photograph, but there is nothing which exists which does not belong. The reader looks upon such portraits and admires the dedication, the single-mindedness of the women's dream and its success. Carlotta Hacker is to be commended for the research she undertook so that the faces of these women not be forgotten.

Monica Hopkins writes with enthusiastic precision outlining the construction of the log cabin, the texture of the landscape, the taste of the food, the contents of the vegetable garden, the type of preserves she keeps in the pantry. We hear in explicit detail the story of a cow which ate gunpowder and of its inevitable explosion. We see how Monica has soaked her clothing in the bath tub and how the water has frozen so that she has to cut her blouses out from the ice blocks. How a pesky elk chased their buggy placing his antlers under the bottom of the buggy lifting it a foot off the ground. She constructs her life with tactile gestures and passionate emotions. The landscape unfolds before us under her intimate watching. Even the neighbours do not escape her gaze or her judgment. She explains the upkeep of their homes, their mannerisms, the hospitality she receives or the lack of the same—she does not hesitate to voice her opinions either favourable or indignant. We have access to a frontier homestead and the way of life which accompanies it. She places her simple existence beside the frivolities she had in England. She enjoys the contrast and is mostly pleased with the life she has chosen and constructed. Trips to nearby Calgary are greatly anticipated both for the delightful little shops and the bathtubs with plugs. We are allowed into her sitting room to feel the sunshine and smell her flowers.

The stained walls and turkish rugs are rather dark and the [gold silk] curtains

lighten the room and make it look as if the sun was always shining, which it very nearly always is. This is a wonderful country for sunshine. I have several vases of yellow flowers, wild sunflowers and black eyed Susans, and other vases of sweet peas, which I bring down from the garden and they make the room so fragrant.

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## **Alienation and Sunshine**

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**David Helwig and Maggie Helwig, eds.**

*Best Canadian Stories 94.* Oberon n.p.

**Simone Vauthier**

*Reverberations: Explorations in the Canadian Short Story.* Anansi \$17.95

Reviewed by Jill Franks

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David and Maggie Helwig claim to have collected the best stories of '94. There is a range of quality in this collection, but it does not represent the best in Canadian short fiction, according to my taste. Mavis Gallant's "In Plain Sight," with its apt characterizations and poignant ironies, is the best of the stories. Among the pieces about which I have reservations are Eugene McNamara's "Terror, Exile or Despair," and Leila Marshy's "A Thousand and One Nights in Palmyra's Bed." These stories have something in common: they are written from the point of view of characters who feel alienated. Rather than eliciting sympathy, however, the narrations themselves tend to alienate the reader.

The story "Terror, Exile or Despair" uses an unlikely character to represent the extreme emotional states indicated by the title. In fact, Charles does not even remember from which of his college books the phrase "terror, exile and despair" came, but he thinks he is feeling those things while attending an American in-law's funeral. Directing all Charles's free-floating anxiety against Americans could be a funny psychological ploy if McNamara performed it

with subtlety. After all, here is a character who married an American and enjoyed a good job in her country before returning to Canada; much could be made of his hypocrisy and ingratitude. Instead, the usual Canadian stereotypes about Americans litter the pages like the detritus of the national psyche. In three short pages, we learn that: Americans are racist towards blacks; Americans resent Canada for not fighting in Vietnam; Americans are hypocritical, arrogant and superior; Americans are bad at geography; Americans make their products too big and advertise them with cheesy slogans; Americans have weird Protestant cults; Americans are inefficient; and American women are big, blonde and sexually aggressive. Yet we are supposed to identify with and be sympathetic towards the character who thinks this way.

The story "A Thousand and One Nights in Palmyra's Bed" is about a young Egyptian girl who resents her brother Ali's arrogance so much that she tosses him off the balcony of their highrise apartment to a smattering death below. While this story provides a good plot, suspenseful and building to a motivated conclusion, Marshy's writing style gets in the way of the meaning of the story, because her frequent figures of speech are often so stretched or incomplete as to be incomprehensible. For instance, "we both pummelled the chair with our eyes" makes no sense, while "I saw him rise like a coral-encrusted ship from the depths of the sea bottom" is an inexact simile to describe what I think is an erection Ali is having while teetering on a broken chair on the edge of the balcony. Similarly, "the night is like a thin knife sliding down my hip" and "my brain was awash in flies" are inexplicable, or at least unexplained, comparisons. The recipe for many of Marshy's metaphors is something like this: three parts gothic exaggeration to one part relevance to the situation being described.

In contrast, the selection of stories analyzed in *Reverberations: Explorations in the Canadian Short Story* is excellent. French critic Simone Vauthier's style is bold, engaged, and fluent, displaying her love of language. Apart from its occasional post-structuralist license-taking with punctuation and tautology, Vauthier's voice is strong and distinct. It is evident that her preparation in the field gives her the confidence to assert bold propositions with authority. Her ethos is made up of so many strands—fairness to other critics, emotional honesty, an appropriate degree of intellectual humility, love of literature and learning—that in the end we handle the text with a bit of reverence. When we read, in the Foreword, Robert Kroetsch's observation that Vauthier has a physical presence reminiscent of Margaret Laurence's in its energy and intelligence, it makes sense, for Laurence is another writer with whom we associate the terms *ethos* and *voice*.

Vauthier's authority also derives from the range and depth of her reading of literature and theory. Her three most prominent theoretical interests are narratology, reader response, and the distinction between metaphoric and metonymic figuration. Because of the conciseness of her arguments, she is able to apply all three of these approaches to each of the stories, and still have space for discussions of titles, imagery, genre and feminism. These topics are woven together, not seamlessly, but certainly in a clear way. Vauthier has a high consciousness of her readers' need to make sense, and she shows us the way from one paragraph to the next.

Her analysis of Audrey Thomas's *Crossing the Rubicon* is a good example of Vauthier's rhetorical and critical skills. In her exposition, she reviews definitions of women's writing by Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Myra Jehlen and Coral Ann Howells. She then exposes several of Thomas's strategies of rebellion against the dominant cultural dis-

course, claiming that the double plot "delegitimizes" romance. The double plot also destabilizes the convention of narrative itself. Finally, Vauthier argues that, although the narrator is self-effacing, scattered, and wistful, she also possesses authority. Thomas's writer-narrator appropriates male texts to her own use, playing with their discourse. She uses the dictionary in a way that mixes public and private worlds, making "women's (private world) discourse" into a political act. But the greatest demonstration of the narrator's power, according to Vauthier, is her mobilization of the reader to construct meanings that she has left ambiguous.

Like Audrey Thomas's characters, Simone Vauthier adopts the theoretical language of the dominant culture to her own uses. Her *own* language, interests and ethos, which are feminist and personal, peek through the clouds of academic metalanguage like a longed-for sun.

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## Libraries & Literacy

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### Lorne Bruce

*Free Books for All: The Public Library Movement in Ontario, 1850-1930.* Dundurn \$34.99

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### Henry A. Hubert

*Harmonious Perfection: The Development of English Studies in Nineteenth-Century Anglo-Canadian Colleges.* Michigan State UP us\$28.00

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Reviewed by Bryan N.S. Gooch

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Lorne Bruce's *Free Books for All* describes in a remarkably detailed and thoroughly documented way the struggle for adequate library facilities in Ontario from 1850 to 1930, linking that effort to national and international developments and social change in order to provide a context for his study. Henry Hubert's *Harmonious Perfection* relates, in the main, the history of the inception and burgeoning of curricula related to the study of English literature

and language in central and eastern Canada in the nineteenth century, taking into account the intellectual and demographic currents as well as the work of individuals who played a major role in the progress of English studies during the rise of post-secondary institutions.

Following a preface and an Introduction, Bruce moves through his three-part text, considering "Origins" (including schools and libraries of Mechanics' Institutes), the growth of city and town libraries in the late Victorian period, and the development—frequently assisted by the not wholly welcome funds of Andrew Carnegie—of the modern civic library, which was to hand out—*free*—ever increasing amounts of edification and literary solace (even in the form of tolerated popular fiction). Bruce brings the reader through the rise of the Ontario Library Association, the beginnings of formal training of librarians, and the first breathings of the Canadian Library Association. And while the focus is declaredly on Ontario, a reader will have little difficulty in recognising similarities to the situations in other communities across the land.

Bruce's volume quotes and cites government and personal documents, newspaper articles, letters, and other sources. Not only is there clear indication of assiduous research, but the frequent inclusion of extracts within the text offers a liveliness to what may strike a reader as an otherwise somewhat dry rehearsal of events (the cartoons notwithstanding). Still, this is a valuable work not just for librarians (the bibliography is a splendid hoard, particularly for students in library schools) but for those interested in early Canadian literature and bibliographic enterprise. The *Canadian Bookman* (1919), the Canadian Authors Association (est. 1921), George Locke's *When Canada was New France* (1919), Frances Staton's *Books and Pamphlets Published in Canada up to the Year 1837* (1916), *The Rebellion of 1837-38* (1924), and

*The Canadian North-West* (1931), William Sykes' collection of Wilfrid Campbell's poems (1923), Mabel Dunham's *The Trail of Conestoga* (1924) and *Kristli's Trees* (1948), and Mazo de la Roche's *Jalna* (1927), for instance, all find mention here. Indeed, the sense of literary and social milieu is of great importance; Bruce has wisely taken the trouble to make the connections, to include the details. This is a book not just about travelling libraries, buildings and institutions, but it is also about staff, readers, children's story hours, lighting, heating, book-stacks—all of it.

Hubert's *Harmonious Perfection* also offers a high level of detail in tracing the somewhat difficult and uneven course negotiated by academics committed to the teaching of English studies in British North America and the early Confederation. However, at two points Hubert moves outside his declared field. After a short preface and an introduction, he considers the difference between Scottish and English approaches and the issue of ecclesiastical influence and the study of rhetoric from 1800 to 1853. The first major digression appears in the third chapter, which is devoted to the study of English in Victorian England and Scotland. Developments (philosophical, literary, and pedagogical) in Britain and persons trained there who came to Canada had a profound influence on the courses of study offered in this country; omission of the material would leave the reader with an incomplete understanding of the situation. Hubert returns to this Canadian focus in the fourth and fifth chapters, considering, respectively, the periods from 1853 to 1884 and from 1884 to 1900. The conclusion draws various strands together, as it should, but here Hubert again moves beyond his parameters to reflect on the way in which twentieth-century university curricula have developed from the bases he outlines in the main body of the work.

Hubert's book takes due account of the

work of many dedicated individuals, in this case those who sought to bring the study of literature and of the art of writing to a central place within the humanities curricula of this country's institutions, (such as Egerton Ryerson, W.J. Alexander, Archibald MacMechan, among others). The detail regarding individual efforts and the frequent quotation of sources make this an absorbing story, even if one is conscious of occasional repetition.

The teaching of writing emerges as a theme through much of the story, the difficulty of legitimising that area of study in the face of the traditional overwhelming interest in—and concentration on—works of literature. Yet while Hubert is writing history, it is not entirely impartial history. For example, Hubert's use of "elitism" in the subtitle of the first chapter and "elitist" (at least five times) in the second—to refer to English/Anglican-based attitudes to curricula—tends to colour the picture. The conclusion is too brief, really, to do adequate justice to the argument for the modern day; the final chapter does not develop the picture to the same extent accorded to the nineteenth-century, and while it is true that some institutions, even recently, have tended to resist the expansion of writing programmes, that has not been the case universally. A more expansive survey of current opinions and practices is warranted, clearly. While Bruce's and Hubert's volumes may not hit best-seller lists, they are commendable accomplishments. Canadian libraries should have them and librarians and teachers of university-level English should take due note of them.




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## Necessary Passion

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**Jack Hodgins**

*A Passion for Narrative: A Guide for Writing Fiction.* M & S \$16.99

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Reviewed by Kristjana Gunnars

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With the title *A Passion for Narrative*, Jack Hodgins lays out step by step some of the basics of fiction writing technique. The book is extremely clear, easy to follow, and as precise as a guidebook. The often confusing and mysterious elements of creative writing are demystified. The student of writing can feel relieved that what he or she may once have thought of as a matter of chance and inspiration only, can actually be delineated with a blueprint that is perfectly understandable.

Chapters are broken down into the most obvious, large, components of basic fiction:

- 1) How to find good fictional material;
- 2) How to practice good prose writing;
- 3) Setting; 4) Character; 5) Plot;
- 6) Structure; 7) Voice; 8) Sub-text;
- 9) Revision.

It is hard to imagine anyone arguing that these components of writing fiction require training and learning. Interspersed with explanations of what these elements mean to a work of fiction, are examples from the works of other writers to illustrate what is meant. There are also exercises at the end of each chapter for the student to practice what has just been preached.

Jack Hodgins is of course well qualified to author such a book. A major writer himself, he has many years experience as a teacher of writing at the University of Victoria. Whatever else a reader may think of his guidebook, Hodgins shows a genuine love of literature and care for the student. The assumptions of his text are everywhere apparent: fine writers are not born, they are made. Only a great deal of practice, experimentation and rewriting will get you to the final good work. The magic and the mys-

tery and the inspiration are still there, but these are superseded by an emphasis on hard work and the admonition not to be lazy.

To some university students it might appear that this book was not altogether meant for them, but for high school students. That impression could be created by the simplicity with which this complex subject is approached, and by the amount of attention devoted to elementary matters. It is possible that a student might wince at the nearly exclusive attention devoted to the technicalities involved in the craft of writing, and none to the cultural, sociological, ideological, aesthetic and linguistic changes we are undergoing; not a word about some of the theoretical assumptions involved in our writing; and no apparent interest in the creative input of the reader (reader as reader, not as workshop student).

In a chapter titled "Getting Started, Finding Stories Meant for You," some attention is devoted to where stories come from. Several good ideas are skirted, especially when it comes to subtleties contained in quotations by writers like Alice Munro, Janet Frame and Shirley Hazard. He provides a list of story sources: "personal experiences, things overheard, fascinating places, newspaper reports . . .," and so on. This chapter may be the weakest one in the collection. There are so many books out there that more fully explore the relationship between inspiration and the artistic act. However, for a student who is unfamiliar with translating the sensibility of the writer into writing, who in fact does not know a good story when it appears, this kind of list will act as encouragement. It sometimes helps to be told that something you saw or something you dreamed is worthy material for fiction.

The chapter on style might also be found to come up short. In discussing "types of prose in fiction," Hodgins maintains that there are four categories: exposition, narrative, scene and half-scene. In spite of the

apparent recognition given to alternative writing such as that of Daphne Marlatt, and non-western writing such as that of Keri Hulme, this breaking down of fictional prose into four categories might seem to some narrowly definitive. It is hard to argue that you can break prose down into those categories and that by being mindful of them you will better know when to speed up, when to slow down and when to cut as you are writing. However, one might wonder what happened to all sorts of interesting prose types, such as contemplative discourse or poetic prose, or even metafictional moments. He also tones down his discussion of the pleasure of language itself as an element of prose; or fiction that does not necessarily go from one scene to another or give information or show an interaction between people, but rests in the linguistic act instead.

The strengths of Hodgins' guidebook seem to be mostly in his discussion of setting, character and plot. In these three chapters Hodgins shines. It is easy to imagine him at work with students, helping them delineate a more successful scene, a more surprising rounder character, and especially a most intriguing plot. Any practising writer would benefit from the discussion Hodgins presents here. Certainly teachers of creative writing can find it useful. The newspaper clippings used throughout as material for student experimentation are excellent.

The chapter on structure contains some wonderful observations that a student writer would not want to miss. On the other hand, like the opening chapters, there is so much more to be said. Hodgins tries, it seems, to be as inclusive as possible and for this he deserves credit. For example, in providing diagrams for various structures possible, it might be thought that the age-old idea of exposition, rising action, climax and dénouement might be open for revamping. Hodgins, however, everywhere implies that interesting structures might be

interesting, but a good story invariably has the basic Aristotelian pattern. Not to say that there are necessarily inconsistencies in this guidebook, but an intelligent, well-read student, interested in all sorts of aesthetic practices, whether they are mainstream or alternative or avant garde, could be confused.

The discussion of point of view and voice might look like a rethread of material covered in most basic English classes. The choices a writer has in Hodgins' view are: first person and third person, with the admonition that second person hardly ever works. There are two kinds of first-person narratives and three kinds of third-person narratives, but the choices are still limited. Very little attention is devoted to narrative combinations; polyglot narratives; dialectical narrative styles that might disassemble our reliance on our so-called point of view. Again, the student writer might find this chapter a little constraining. It is obviously beyond the scope of this guidebook to ask for something more, and perhaps Hodgins thinks it would be too confusing to someone learning the craft. But the book might have been more interesting if he had made more of connections between elements, for example, the relationship between structure and voice.

Similarly, the chapter "Making Connections" might seem a bit odd to even a student writer who has a little background in literature. Hodgins underplays the notion of the subtext and emphasizes his cautionary remarks about the dangers of putting in symbols and metaphors too obviously. While this is good advice, it is hard to imagine why, in an attempt to fine tune literary craftsmanship, he would not urge his students to become better acquainted with the whole business of subtexts and substructures and symbolic and archetypal undertones, rather than suppress them. These elements are going to be there, as he says, regardless of whether they are intended or not. Narrative depth as opposed to surface narrative is not discussed. In other words,

that many fine works are deliberately created without depth and there are reasons for that. The assumptions presented in this book are that all writing has depth. To choose to write surface narrative appears not to be an option.

The chapter on revising is excellent. It would be profitable if all workshop leaders simply gave this chapter to their students of writing. Revising and editing are among the least understood elements of creative writing. For the most part the art of revising is undertaught and underdeveloped. Even though he could have gone on a lot longer, the brief chapter as it is is nearly worth the price of the whole book. The difference between revising and editing is made quite clear; the necessity of re-visioning is emphasized.

The other valuable aspect of this book is the inclusion of a brief bibliography of books by writers about writing. This bibliography consists of sources Hodgins cites during the course of the book, and it is only the beginning of what might have been an even more interesting bibliography. Hodgins' own text is crammed full of wonderful examples from well known works of fiction, and others not as well known. It is inevitable that the reader becomes impressed once again by these remarkable writers, on whom Hodgins relies for so much of what he has to say. All in all, this book is much needed on the Canadian scene right now and might prove invaluable for people who are grasping with the art and craft of fiction writing.



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## Babel From the Tower

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**Rey Chow**

*Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies.* Indiana UP  
US\$29.95/\$10.95

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**Sumiko Iwao**

*The Japanese Woman: Traditional Image and Changing Reality.* Harvard UP \$14.95

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**Roy Miki and Fred Wah, eds**

*Colour. An Issue.* West Coast Line 13/14, 1994  
\$17.00

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Reviewed by Marilyn Iwama

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Except for the introduction and one chapter, all of the essays in Rey Chow's *Writing Diaspora* have been published elsewhere: in whole or in part; in English and/or in other languages; some simultaneously, some not. Chow has revised these older essays for the current volume, but not, she warns, to create a new coherent whole. Such a history of publication compounds the "cultural contradictions" with which Chow aims now to challenge certain "new 'solidarities'."

Chow begins with questions. How can intellectuals struggle against the ideological fields that contain them? How will cultural critics in the "West" reconcile the oppositional nature of their discourse with the privilege of their position? How does one nurture the interdisciplinarity of cultural criticism without creating another monstrous academic field? And above all, how is the "third world intellectual" living in North America to articulate a "diasporic consciousness?"

Questions in hand, Chow characterizes various players in the theatre of Orientalist criticism. The melancholic sinologist years after his lost object of classic Chinese literature. The 'Maoist', with her passion to turn powerlessness into truth, applauds the native as her dream come true. Between these two ideological extremes lies the tactical site where Chow writes diaspora.

Chow's second chapter, "Where have all the Natives Gone?," treats a prickly dilemma in postcolonial criticism: how to resist substituting the image of the defiled native with one authentically pure. Chow unfolds other critical efforts to contextualize native experience, like the generosity of "giving voice," as attempts to translate the untranslatable in what is actually a "victimization" of the native. Instead, Chow urges, speak of the native as an indifferent, Lacanian Other, the "big Difference," that is a pre-existing simulation of the violent imperialist gaze.

What she calls a particularly western obsession with visuality is Chow's central concern in several of the book's remaining chapters. In her analysis, Tianenman Square was more than the battlefield for democracy in China, an event for CNN to transmit to the world at light speed. It was a showdown between the West's belief in the truth of visuality, a conviction that disaster would be averted by China's knowledge of such public Western surveillance, and China's perception that a gauntlet had been thrown down, demanding a display of national prowess.

Chow laments the "barbarism" that pervades the production and interpretation of knowledge in the "West," particularly in the fields of Asian literatures. Countering the critical violence of masterful theoretical positions, she teases apart and juxtaposes her introductory questions with promiscuous analyses of widely varying events: textual interpretations (her own and others'); conference proceedings; popular culture; pedagogy in China and North America; the Cultural Revolution. In each essay, Chow resuscitates her own advice to treat the teaching of Asian literature as a "multiply critical event," consistently refusing to make the physical and the cultural, the real and the spoken, cohere.

Consequently—or not—read as a whole, *Writing Diaspora* is a troubling chimera.



Generally writing in the first person, Chow's voice is sometimes singular, at others plural. Pronouns often lose their antecedents. Her analysis incorporates elements of post-structural, post-colonial, feminist, postmodernist, and Freudian theories while challenging various corollaries of the same. At times, Chow even participates in culturally essentialist constructions of "East" and "West." On the whole, such stylistic elements succeed as tactics of resistance. Yet this resistance is compromised by an insistence of tone and the intrusion of a authoritative narrative voice that render Chow's text sporadically masculinist.

A more substantive quarrel I have with this text lies in its participation in diaspora as intellectual exercise, "the reality of being intellectual." Yet Chow does not shrink from the sacrificial "trauma" of Tianenman Square, nor from the actuality of her own dispersal. And aestheticizing diaspora as the ultimate suffering can only enfeeble the transformative potential of cultural criticism. This is, perhaps, one of the critical impossibilities.

But let the reader take such disagreements in the light that *Writing Diaspora* trains on contemporary cultural criticism. Rey Chow stands at once inside and outside this zone of query, her essays defining a "para-site" of intervention destined to erode the most comforting of cultural fields.

Like Rey Chow, Sumiko Iwao is an academic of Asian heritage, trained in the United States. Significantly, both writers characterize themselves as culturally marginal. But where Chow chooses to incorporate textually her position and privilege, Iwao abandons hers in the preface, and goes on to attempt an objective psycho-sociological examination of Japanese "female behaviour and sex roles."

Iwao sets out to show that the subservience and exoticism with which Japanese women have been characterized in North America are remnants of nineteenth-

century Orientalism. The Japan Iwao constructs in *The Japanese Woman* is a country witnessing what she calls "a quiet revolution" in women's lives. In Iwao's description of the role of Japanese women in society, change trickles down from the institutions of government and science into the daily lives of women. What is particularly "Japanese" about this portrait is Iwao's conviction that the shape of the revolution has been determined by rules of pragmatism, non-confrontation, and a long-term perspective—all elements she finds lacking in American feminism.

Because Iwao has written for a general audience, one of the more engaging aspects of the book is its vignettes of individual women's lives. The book is eminently readable for those little acquainted with Japan, and a comfortable exposure to the workings of Japanese activist housewives, a group that has yet to be well-served in writing of this nature. But the substance of the book belies Iwao's desire also to write for an academic audience.

*The Japanese Woman* seeks an empirical description of women's roles, using numerous surveys from a variety of sources, including Iwao's own research. Functionalist in design, Iwao's framework can only accommodate "change" which supports the status quo. Accordingly, the important attitudinal shifts among Japanese women cited by Iwao are not, as she asserts, the "roots" of change in Japanese society, but the reflection of institutional changes such as the Equal Employment Opportunity Law of 1985, increase in the service and information sectors, and heightened affluence—circumstances that have their North American counterparts. Regardless of such affinities, Iwao constructs American and Japanese feminisms as opposing monoliths. This is the privileging of difference that Rey Chow warns about, an exaggerated particularism that blocks analysis. *The Japanese Women*

becomes an anecdotal catalogue of generalization and speculation.

*Colour. An Issue* is a contrapuntal medley of texts most obviously concerned with the constellation of ethnicity, gender, and class. Topical diversity an apparent given, Roy Miki and Fred Wah cite their choice of "colour" over "race" for the title, and their resistance to "preconceived, 'editorial' narrative" as further reasons for the "heteroglossia of responses" to their call for papers. They characterize this double issue of *West Coast Line* as a "transitional zone" intended as a dialogue of diversity.

Roughly two-thirds of the contributors are women, and the diversity of their writing overwhelms the particularism of the preface. In "Going Home: Reflections on Issues of Colour, Culture, Gender and Exile," Carmen Rodriguez considers "exile as a Latin American woman. . . in the margins of the margins." And in "Nipple Gospel," Suzette Mayr, granddaughter of a Baptist preacher, also stumbles under the black, holy choice between virgin and whore. Carole Thorpe writes of white skin brown with memory—skin dusky because Robertson's "bit of Brown" was a woman. But how much easier it is in this country, Mercedes Baines chides, for white skin to forget brown grandmothers, than for brown children to claim white mothers:

One drop of black blood makes you  
black  
Octoroon, quadroon, half and half, salt  
and pepper.  
You cannot carve out parts of yourself  
and put them on top of your dresser  
with your white Barbie and Ken.

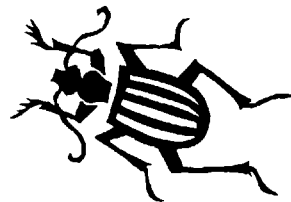
The gender of colour also speaks loudly in poems by Man Chui Leung and Méira Cook, and in essays by Camille Hernandez-Ramdwart and Jeanne Perreault.

In "Dis Mischief," a piece that might be described as a diaristic confessional, Marie Annharte Baker grieves that the "colour of

poverty is off white, grey and grimy," abandoning hundreds of children to life on the street.

This gender and poverty of colour illustrate the heteroglossia mentioned in the preface, as do pieces accepting of authenticity (Sally Ito) or resisting it (George Morrisette), and pieces that converse within themselves on many sides of an issue (like cultural coalitions) as does the collaboration of Terence Anthony, Peter Hudson, and David Odhiambo. But this heteroglossia also challenges the prefatory insistence on colour as the prime signifier in a process of racialization, and points up the seduction of "reducing race and culture to colour codes," that Sonia Smee warns against in "Colouring Pronoun."

It is difficult for Wah and Miki to reconcile the oppositional discourse of the entire text with their position and privilege. Arranging submissions in patterns of intersecting differences, as they explain they do, has itself become another convention. Their editorial strategy is painstaking in its "improvisational mode," their invitation to experience the diversity of this issue strongly imperative. Readers may be disappointed that Lisette Boily has excluded Canadian writers of Latin American and Middle Eastern descent, and periodicals, from an otherwise vigorous bibliography. Such inconsistencies can be a strategic illustration of the impossibility of oppositional discourse. But these voices—stained with class and gender—might have spoken with greater potency had they not been cushioned with the convention of an editorial preface.



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## Revisit Agassiz

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**Birdsell, Sandra**

*Agassiz: A Novel in Stories*. Milkweed Editions  
\$18.95

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Reviewed by Beth Janzen

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Even now, she smells the fruit of it. The tart flavour, taut skin splitting her mouth, the slippery membrane of its meat, a piece of slime at the bottom of a quart sealer jar of homemade wine coming suddenly into her mouth like a great clot of blood. There is too much to say about the wild plum tree. The assignment [paralyses] her.

Betty Lafreniere, a character in Sandra Birdsell's *Agassiz: A Novel in Stories*, attempts an essay about the wild plum tree; at first it is only a few impersonal lines, a summary of factual information. The wild plum tree has become iconic in her life, a symbol of her troubled relationship with Laurence, her burgeoning sexual identity, her recognition of the boundaries of cultural difference and identity, an awareness of everything she has lost. The coulee is squashed under the new house of a "four-and-a-half member family"; she loses Laurence to the doctor's daughter Emily. And like Betty, I find that there is too much to say about Birdsell's stories which have been in print for thirteen years or more, and which I have read and re-read for almost seven years. How could I have only just noticed the resonant symbolism and imagery, the layering of minor epiphanies, the luxury of her language?

*Agassiz: A Novel in Stories* marks a new incarnation of Birdsell's *Agassiz* material. The Milkweed Editions copy (1991), sparsely but evocatively illustrated, introduces Birdsell to the American reading public by asserting that her fiction is kin to the "dazzling work of contemporary Canadian women writers Margaret Atwood and Alice Munro" (jacket flap). The stories

from this book (originally published by Turnstone Press in two collections: *Night Travellers* [1982] and *Ladies of the House* [1984]) are focalized through a network of characters, the nucleus of which is formed by the Lafreniere family. Calling these two collections "a novel in stories" caused some critical comment from reviewers in the United States who were perhaps unaware of their publication history, but I find that it is the gaps and the links between the interconnected stories that make for such a rich and rewarding reading experience.

Although described by some critics as belonging to the school of "dirty realism," and as "anti-epiphanic," Birdsell's stories resonate with symbolic depth and insight.

Much discussion of Birdsell's work has focused on the "realistic" nature of her writing. Birdsell's success, however, comes from marrying the everyday with the symbolic. The imagery swells and connects: water seeping, water flooding, water bursting through walls, Truda and the shimmering sea on the highway, the gull inside her chest, the silo with the neglected child inside adrift in a shoreless ocean, Elizabeth's fear that Niagara falls will sweep her away if she goes there without her husband Henry. Truda recalls her reaction to gushing water:

A temporary underground stream, my father explained but it didn't diminish the feeling I had of a world surging beneath my feet and I about to be swallowed and swept along underground with it.

Water becomes a powerful symbol of redemption, and freedom that can be gained by letting go of control. (Birdsell continues to build this imagery in *The Missing Child*.)

The "supernatural" is part of this world too. Betty, from her window in the school for wayward girls, sees "ghosts" among the tombstones (they are teenagers, the same age as herself). In fact, ghostliness reappears in these stories, reminding characters

of the past. And Lureen is given a ride from an "angel". She wants to tell him:

Often, when you try too hard, the answer escapes you. You have to give up and then the inner mind brings the answer to the surface. There wasn't anything supernatural about your experience. It happens all the time.

The angel challenges this view by saying: "It was more than nice, sister. It was a frigging miracle." Birdsell's realism is like a great unconscious where one sees the connections in the simple events of a day. And those connections bring minor miracles, small epiphanies.

Birdsell's writing has been described as "anti-epiphanic," and, indeed, these stories are structured on a different model than that of forward-thrusting narrative bursting into a climactic explosion. Birdsell's book consists of minor epiphanies, everyday ones. Lureen recognizes that she loves her grandfather because he's hers, even while she is trying to reject her Mennonite heritage and to embrace a more exciting French one. Later she realizes that she loves Larry, "while waiting for the world to end, [she's fallen] in love". Bobbie reaffirms that Wayne is "the pick of the litter" as they fuck after he's caught cheating on his physics exam. These incidents form small climaxes of awareness; they build, weaving a coherent and evocative whole.

At first I found these stories "depressing," a description I no longer feel is accurate. Lureen's joy, wandering off to the park with Larry after his brief abandonment, isn't erased by the later problems of their marriage. The small epiphanies shine in the night like fireflies, like the couple flitting from marsh to woodland in "The Bride Doll." The stress in Lureen's family is evidenced by the criss-cross of voices and letters in "The Bird Dance." But nothing is black and white in *Agassiz*; it isn't necessarily a disaster that Lureen doesn't kick Larry

out of her life forever. We have that moment in "Falling in love" to make us appreciate the subtleties of life. Similarly, Bobbie's reconciliation with Wayne doesn't make their life together perfect. But Birdsell's narrative manipulation of this realistic material shows us that life has its "ups" (and its "downs"), and that they are powerful and significant in their own right.

The Agassiz stories deserve multiple readings. Although I used to prefer the more familiar climactic mode of Birdsell's *The Missing Child*, I now favour this earlier work for its subtlety, detail, and power. The stories can be re-read in any order, bringing new insights. My relationship with Birdsell's fiction may be unique, but my admiration for her is not. Birdsell has won numerous awards (as the flap bio asserts) and is well-known in Canada. *Agassiz* forms a good introduction to Birdsell's work, stories that can be re-visited with pleasure.

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## Teasing Birney

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**Elspeth Cameron**

*Earle Birney: A Life.* Viking \$35.00

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Reviewed by Jon Kertzer

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Classic literary biography often takes the form of a romance in which the biographer embarks on a quest for the "truth" of an artist's personality. The truth is secret, not in the sense of being a shameful or repressed trauma (though this may occur), but of being a generative mystery that infiltrates the artist's life and art. The puzzle of personality thus becomes a clue to artistic creativity, which is another mystery that in turn generates a portrait of the artist expressed obscurely in his or her work. Through a charmed circularity, then, an enigma engenders an eloquent expression of its own mysteriousness. As a mystery, however, it must remain unsolved, since to explain it would be to explain it away. It must lurk as

a teasing presence, promising a fuller illumination than it will ever give. The biographer's role is to tease and be teased.

When Elspeth Cameron introduces Earle Birney as Don Quixote and as Loki, the mercurial trickster god of Norse mythology, she sets her biography in the classic mould. When she dates her introduction Friday May 13, 1994, which happens to echo Birney's birthday of Friday May 13, 1904, then she hints at an uncanny correspondence by which she enters into the magic circle of his life in order to chart its course. Birney, she explains, was a shape-shifter. He "could be several different men," because he led "many separate lives" concurrently. These were "secret lives" whose meaning he never fully explained even to himself. "I have lived a very intense, varied and complicated life," he confessed at age 44, as he headed into a new adventure:

The Earle Birney one person knew was not the Earle Birney known to another. He had mixed in three different countries with many types: from burly construction workers to effete Zeta Psi fraternity brothers. He numbered among his many friends academics and carpenters, diplomats and truck drivers, poets and politicians.

Who or what is the "real" Earle Birney becomes the unanswerable question.

Certainly Birney is an ideal subject—a poet, novelist, soldier, journalist, academic, and world traveller; a dedicated Trotskyist who conferred with Trotsky; a working-class boy raised in the Rockies, who met virtually everyone in the English-Canadian cultural scene; a relentless womanizer who charmed countless lovers; an acclaimed writer who conducted his literary career like a military campaign yet feared he was "plainly not of the first rank as a writer." Best of all, he was an epic writer of letters—1200 correspondents, he once counted—who from an early age kept everything he wrote, received, recorded and thought.

There are 20,000 files in the University of Toronto library, some containing hundreds of letters. This life-long devotion to himself suggests he was a supreme egotist, yet he was plagued by doubts and setbacks. Condemned to be celebrated as the man who wrote "David," he felt trapped by an early success that forced him continually to prove himself anew.

Cameron sifts through this avalanche of paper with admirable skill. She seems to have read everything, and is competent at summarizing literary history, analyzing the inbred Canadian academic community, surveying international culture, and even distinguishing the finer points of Trotskyist theory. At 685 pages her book is a whopper, but it is never dull reading. Still, I have a couple of reservations about the way she teases her readers; perhaps she does not tease us enough.

First, she is far too easy on Birney. Cameron proved she could stand up to Irving Layton, yet she seems to back away from the more gentlemanly Birney. I do not mean that as a woman writing about a man who preyed on women, she should castigate him or assume that a cad could not possibly write good poetry. I mean that she is content to take him at his word that he needed lots of women who somehow sparked his creativity. Don't we all? But the "truth" seems more complex and more interesting. Attractive though hardly handsome, he was able to captivate beautiful, talented, fascinating women, who often were friendly with each other and even with his far-too-patient wife, Esther, who deserves a biography of her own. Earle's girls (as Cameron called them in a lecture) were not foolishly seduced or sadly deceived. He was usually honest with them about his infidelities, yet they accepted him all the same. Something astonishing happened in his affairs, but I never feel that Cameron explains them satisfactorily either from the women's point of view, or with

respect to Birney's poetry, which was inspired by generous women who loved him despite his faults and were even willing to type his manuscripts.

Second, Cameron is reluctant to discuss Birney's writing. She is not silent on the subject, but there is little sustained study of his poetry, its development or its significance. Perhaps she felt her book was already too long. On the whole she accepts his position "midway between the old reactionaries and the young incomprehensibles, sympathetic with both, aligned with neither" (in William Deacon's words), but this intermediary position leaves him curiously unsettled, as if Cameron accepted his despairing self-assessment that he was "only half an artist." Unless I am being foolishly romantic, I assume that it is his status as a poet that justifies this fat book, and I wish the justification were clearer. Occasionally Cameron pauses to consider a poem, but too often her brief remarks move from general to vague to vapid: "It was not his authenticity as a soldier, but his authenticity as a human being deeply concerned about what man was doing in and to his world that made his poetry significant"; "Birney had unequalled facility with words and was a stunning craftsman, but his poems were sometimes superficial because they lacked the moral conviction and personal emotion of poems like those Purdy mentioned. His best works were those in which he faced the deeper questions"; "Birney's best poems . . . were probings of the human condition in the mid-twentieth century that bordered on existentialism." I am not surprised that Birney eludes Cameron's grasp, since that is part of the romance. But I feel that she might have squeezed him tighter.



## Le goût du voyage

**André Girard**

*Deux semaines en septembre.* Les Quinze \$16.95

**Vincent Nadeau**

*La Fondue.* L'Hexagone \$16.95

Compte rendu par Catherine Khordoc

Tous ceux qui ont voyagé savent à quel point le voyage peut être impressionnant. Le voyage permet de faire de nouvelles rencontres, de vivre des aventures, de se dépayser, de se retrouver. . . . Le voyage est un thème qui parcourt de nombreuses oeuvres, dont les deux romans auxquels nous avons affaire: *Deux semaines en septembre* d'André Girard et *La Fondue* de Vincent Nadeau. Précisons que les voyages ont des fonctions différentes au sein de ces deux oeuvres. Dans le roman de Girard, le personnage principal retourne aux sources, tandis que l'héroïne du texte de Nadeau cherche à se distancier de son village natal.

La femme de Clément DaSylva, dans *Deux Semaines en septembre*, vient de le quitter avec leur fille. Ne sachant comment continuer à vivre sans elles, Clément décide de retourner chez lui, dans la ville de LaBaie, au bord du Saguenay. Il trouve sa ville bien changée; on n'est pas sûr pourquoi. Mais on ressent bien qu'il n'est plus "chez lui." Clément parle de ce voyage comme étant un "pèlerinage aux sources" mais en fait, on ne ressent pas, sauf à de rares occasions, la familiarité, le confort, la sécurité que l'on associe généralement à nos sources.

Clément est à la recherche de Réjean, un copain d'enfance qu'il n'a pas vu depuis des années. Clément, qui fait des vidéos industrielles pour gagner sa vie, commence son "repérage" dans un petit café au bord de la rivière. C'est là qu'il aperçoit une femme mystérieuse qui fait semblant de se suicider en se jetant dans la rivière. Clément se rend compte de cette déception avant de plonger à sa poursuite. Ce "théâtre" est une habi-

tude chez cette fille et Clément n'est pas le premier à se faire avoir. Sur le coup, Clément s'éprend d'elle et l'ajoute à sa liste de personnes qu'il recherche. Une femme d'origine libanaise, qui travaille occasionnellement dans le petit café au bord de la rivière, représente le troisième personnage qui jouera un rôle important dans la vie de Clément pendant ces "deux semaines en septembre."

La lecture de ce roman se fait facilement, surtout parce que le récit est narré à la première personne, à savoir, du point de vue de Clément. On a parfois l'impression au cours de la lecture, qu'il s'agit d'un mystère qui sera résolu à la fin du texte. Les questions, les recherches, les intrigues de Clément sont captivantes et le lecteur parvient à oublier les problèmes matrimoniaux de Clément, et lui aussi, d'ailleurs, n'y pense qu'à l'occasion. Que s'est-il passé à LaBaie pendant l'absence de Clément? Qu'est-ce qui a motivé Réjean à vivre en solitaire? Pourquoi cette fille ne parle-t-elle pas? Il ne faut pas trop espérer de réponses satisfaisantes à ces questions car malheureusement, la conclusion n'est pas sans équivoque et ne correspond pas très bien à l'intrigue suggérant qu'un drame ou un scandale quelconque a frappé LaBaie. Le roman se termine un peu trop rapidement et la fin est un peu décevante, surtout après un déroulement fort prometteur.

Dans *Deux semaines en septembre*, l'obsession de Clément avec les femmes est assez évidente. De fait, Réjean ainsi que d'autres personnages commente les sentiments de "servitude" que Clément éprouve à l'égard des femmes qui, d'ailleurs, ne lui rendent pas la vie facile. Dans le roman, on compte au moins quatre femmes qui le perturbent d'une façon ou d'une autre. Dans le deuxième roman, *La Fondue*, Julie représente une de ces femmes qui dérange les hommes. Ce n'est pas de sa faute si elle est grande, blonde, attirante et un peu coquine.

On apprend très tôt dans le roman que tout ce que veut Julie, c'est voyager. Elle veut s'éloigner de ses parents et de son village natal en Suisse. Berne, où elle habite depuis un certain temps, n'est pas assez éloigné. Julie veut voir le monde. Elle a aussi des ambitions et n'a pas l'intention de voyager comme le font les jeunes de son âge avec un sac à dos. Devenue secrétaire aux affaires étrangères helvétiques, Julie voyage au frais de la princesse, avec un passeport diplomatique. Le premier arrêt est à Bruxelles, où elle se fait apprécier par son patron et rencontre Marika qui deviendra une grande amie. Ensuite, elle part pour Bogota où elle devient la secrétaire de l'ambassadeur de Suisse. Peu après son arrivée, elle rencontre trois individus qui deviendront, chacun à sa manière, amoureux de Julie. Elle les apprécie tous, mais elle ne leur rend pas la vie facile.

L'histoire se complique lorsque l'ambassadeur se rend compte qu'une des liaisons de Julie pourrait être bénéfique financièrement pour une compagnie d'armements suisse. Toujours très consciencieuse et dévouée, Julie exige qu'on lui fournisse une garde-robe digne de séduire le fils d'un des chefs militaires colombiens. Trois journées sont passées à faire les boutiques, avec budget illimité, pour parer Julie de robes, de tailleurs, de maillots de bain, de bijoux, d'écharpes, et ainsi de suite. Mais la vie n'est pas toujours facile pour Julie, et il a y des moments où elle est prête à tout abandonner, car les affaires se compliquent de façon inattendue pour tous: personnages et lecteurs. Un roman qui aurait pu n'être que léger et rigolo, devient un peu plus complexe avec une intrigue militaro-commerciale. Un peu plus complexe, mais pas trop, car ce roman est surtout amusant. Julie, la narratrice principale à la première personne, raconte ses aventures comme si elle se confiait à sa meilleure amie.

Un personnage, en fait, "écoute" Julie. Le roman met en scène un deuxième narrateur

qui présente Julie et ensuite l'écoute raconter son histoire. Ce narrateur devenu narrataire est l'invité de Julie et attend patiemment qu'elle termine son récit pour déguster la fondue qu'elle a préparé. Tout au long du roman, Julie fait des interventions nous rappelant la présence de ce narrataire. Chaque fois qu'elle l'évoque, le lecteur a l'impression d'être inexactement interpellé, ou tout au moins, il sait qu'il n'est pas seul à "écouter" cette histoire loufoque.

Qu'il s'agisse d'"écouter" ou de lire, ce premier roman de Vincent Nadeau est tout à fait amusant à lire. Il est léger et peu exigeant sur les plans narratif et diégétique. Bref, le roman n'essaie pas d'être ce qu'il n'est pas. Le roman d'André Girard, qui nous transporte dans un monde aussi différent que celui de Julie, un monde silencieux et mystérieux, est intéressant mais se termine de manière ambiguë. Dans ces deux romans, il est évident que le voyage est un thème qui touche tous ceux qui ont voyagé, que ce soit un voyage exotique et lointain ou un voyage tranquille en terres connues.

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## Strategies of Othering

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**Winfried Siemerling**

*Discoveries of the Other: Alterity in the Work of Leonard Cohen, Hubert Aquin, Michael Ondaatje, and Nicole Brossard.* U Toronto P \$45.00

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Reviewed by Martin Kuester

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In this contribution to UTP's *Theory/Culture* series, which may not always prove easy reading for those not that well acquainted with the language (and jargon) of contemporary philosophy and theory, Winfried Siemerling reads four contemporary Canadian and Québécois authors from a perspective based on philosophical theories of alterity. He is looking for the different forms which expressions of "the other" take in these authors' works.

In an introductory chapter on theories of the other, Siemerling grounds his approach on the work of continental philosophers from Hegel to Sartre, Lévinas and de Certeau. He also locates his *Discoveries* within the midst of contemporary theoretical and post-colonial discourse. According to Siemerling, the construction of the other in literary works also involves the narrator in discoveries about him- or herself: "Although the 'I' has come through an imagined space and experience in the act of writing, it does not claim completed 'knowledge' either of the self or of the other." Distinguishing between two different aspects of alterity, Siemerling develops his dichotomy of "thetic" and "heterological": "Whereas the ego of the thetic operation posits and comprehends the other as *its* other in its gaze and specular image (and defines its own position and identity together with that of its object), the other of heterology remains exterior to this figuration." Although he claims not to have "endeavoured to establish an essential relationship between the textual strategies of otherness [he] studies, and qualities posited as 'Canadian' or 'Québécois,'" Siemerling ends his introduction by convincingly showing how such a relationship might be formulated.

The four main chapters trace alterity in the four authors' early and theoretical texts, as well as their specific approach to the problem. In his analysis of Leonard Cohen's "aesthetics of loss," Siemerling sees Cohen as "perform[ing] an ongoing research into grammars of self and other." The central text in Cohen's efforts to become a "prophet" proclaiming the other is *Beautiful Losers*. The ending of this work, according to Siemerling, enacts "[t]he end of thetic consciousness and speech." "Hubert Aquin: Language and Legitimation" sees Aquin's approach to alterity, especially in *Prochain Episode* and *Trou de mémoire*, within the political context of decolonisation and the



theories of Sartre and Frantz Fanon. In *Trou de mémoire* and its changing narrative perspectives, Aquin metafictionally asserts “the uncertain relationship that exists, on the one hand, between the novel and the reality it ‘reads’ and writes asymmetrically, and on the other hand, between the novel and its reader.” The chapter looking for “Temptations of Identity and Limits of Control” in Ondaatje’s work investigates metafictional and multicultural aspects of alterity in *Coming Through Slaughter*, *Running in the Family* and *In the Skin of a Lion*. The reading of *In the Skin of a Lion* as a novel staging “both the potential violence and the fascinating possibilities inherent in the perception, history, and writing of the other that necessarily implies an act of self-mediation and mutual creation” is among the most elucidating interpretations of the novel I have read. The relatively short section on “The Visibility of the Utopian Form in the Work of Nicole Brossard” focuses on alterity in the context of lesbian writing in works such as *L’Amèr* and *Picture Theory*. The latter “enacts a pattern that brings language into existence as its own origin and future alterity . . . in a virtual spiral of woman and women who are their respective others.”

A short concluding chapter ties together the various kinds of alterity discovered in this volume, in all of which “[t]he discovering perspective, often a speaking ‘I,’ loses its thetic power and stability.” Common to the different types of alterity is the authors’ willingness to undergo and risk this process of loss, whether it be for political or aesthetic reasons. Discovering all these kinds of the other, Siemerling has given us a rewarding, although not always reader-friendly, reading of the work of four leading Canadian and Québécois authors.




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## Intersecting Lives

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**Ann Knight and W.P. Kinsella**

*Even At This Distance*. Pottersfield \$9.95

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**Edith Van Beek**

*Rising About Us*. Netherlandic \$9.95

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**Leila Pepper**

*In War With Time*. Black Moss \$14.95

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Reviewed by Dorothy F. Lane

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All three of these poetry collections reflect upon vital intersections: of individual lives, of humanity and nature, and of nature and the divine. With diverse styles and techniques, the poems identify redemptive elements within painful experiences such as doubt, rejection, illness, and death. Three of the four poets reviewed here—Ann Knight, Edith Van Beek, and Leila Pepper—seek and celebrate a fundamental order in an apparently random and meaningless universe. The fourth writer—W.P. Kinsella—endeavours instead to create a vivid image or character.

*Even At This Distance* is the second co-authored book by Ann Knight and W.P. Kinsella, and even the design of the collection suggests this notion of intersection. The table of contents allows the reader to focus on either writer, although within the volume the poems are arranged in alternating order. Ann Knight is Kinsella’s bibliographer and archivist, and was also involved in the debate about the ordination of women in the Anglican church. Her interest in revising traditional Christian theologies is particularly evident in specific poems such as “For Every Anywoman,” which suggests a feminist re-imagining of the divine. Knight’s poetry, however, is not well-known, and one unfortunately gets the sense that Kinsella’s name and popularity aided in the promotion of this collection. Kinsella, for instance, is celebrated on the back cover as the author of 23 books, “including *Shoeless Joe* which was the basis for the film, *Field of Dreams*.” Known primarily as a writer of

fiction, Kinsella himself admits that poetry is not his primary genre, but rather is “the discipline good writers mine to become fluent in *another* literary form that the public will buy.”

It is Knight’s poems that really stand out in this collection, however, with their celebration of life, hope, and faith; this is really *her* book. As Knight herself explains, “Ideas fuel my work toward vision, while the image propels Bill’s visions toward story.” In this collection, she provides “marginalia” and “companion pieces” to poems written by Kinsella 20 years earlier; however, in many cases the marginalia easily outshine the original poems. The poems are also arranged into the framework of a “week”—a structure perhaps inspired by Knight’s reading of poetry during Holy Week—and responsory statements offer a focus for each “day” of that week. “We’re alive in this place of death,” Knight writes in “Detainees,” while Kinsella’s poem, “Vangy’s Mother,” on the facing page recites the painful memories of childhood that still interfere with adult lovemaking. Knight uses lyrical language and irregular internal rhymes; for example, in “Grooming,” she writes: “she pauses to stroke the/unclothed petals of the flower. There is an hour/when women know each other in the direction/of an eye, the choice of attire, or the fire.” In contrast, Kinsella’s “Reservation,” which appears on the facing page, depicts an old woman hobbling “across tuft prairie,/bent, black-shawled,/her ungainly gait/like a crow’s/walking away.” Kinsella’s poems, then, are often compact and vivid images—of simple things such as chickadees and fish—along with studies of society’s marginalised people.

One annoying feature of the volume as a whole is the frequency of explanatory or apologetic notes beneath the poems. In one note, Kinsella defends his adoption of Silas Ermineskin’s voice: “The saddest thing about the politically-correct movement is

that it has no sense of humour.” Similarly, beneath an intriguing short poem titled simply “.22,” Kinsella inserts a note explaining that this poem’s idea also emerges in *Shoeless Joe*. Even the acknowledgement of first publication for certain poems could have been usefully incorporated in a list at the beginning or end of the volume, rather than presenting a distraction at the bottom of the page.

If Kinsella is primarily interested in observation, and Knight in vision, the striking feature of Edith Van Beek’s *Rising About Us* is the parallel it draws between human life and the cyclical patterns visible in nature. The first poem of the volume, “Birthing,” depicts the mother’s delivery of a stillborn boy: “Water fell from her face/where apple blossoms drifted/over our garden like spits/of the sea.” Each section of the book focuses on a specific period or contemporary concern in the speaker’s life: the first, “Morning’s Blood,” recreates Van Beek’s childhood spent on Cape Cod; the second, “Latitudes,” takes us from this early home to Africa and the Arctic; the third, “Rising About Us”—the core of the collection—intertwines its study of the rhythms of human life with images of birds and trees. The fourth section, “Wanting the Light,” consists of 20 poems that focus on paintings by Van Gogh, Turner, Monet, and others.

Like Knight’s poetry, Van Beek’s is quite musical, with an effective use of alliteration, irregular rhymes, and other aural techniques. It also employs intriguing images, such as that of the cups made by the speaker’s father, from which her husband now drinks; the poem concludes, “he drinks from your hands.” Similarly, the equation of the speaker’s father with a tree “downed/and piled for fire” is remarkable in its compression. At the same time, this very proficiency with language makes some of the poems difficult to discern, and the connections both within and between

poems sometimes appear tenuous.

The third collection, Leila Pepper's *In War With Time*, is dissimilar in technique to Van Beek's, but similar in its choice of images; it, like Knight's, seeks the redemptive elements in painful life experiences. Pepper's poems read almost as prose, with the exception of a few poems that use a regular rhyme and meter. Interestingly, however, Pepper—like Van Beek—finds meaning in the patterns of nature; for instance, like Van Beek, she associates the death of her father with trees, although in her version the tree after his death is envisioned as "full-bearing, heavy with fruit."

The main focus of Pepper's poems is the loss of her husband, first to Alzheimer's and later to death. Like the poets in the two other collections, Pepper divides her volume into sections, this time titled "Yesterday," "Today," and "In War With Time." The volume is labelled a "suite," and the subjects of the poems vary from reflections on childhood traditions and religion ("Where God Sat"), to features of nature ("Winter Storm"), to the most frequent preoccupation with death and the passage of time. Some of the poems are perceptive and moving, such as "Let Me Dance" and "Letter from England," both of which meditate on the translation from physical to spiritual body in death; others, such as the final poem, "Order For The Burial Of The Dead," seem rather superficial. Moreover, the repeated focus on love and loss sometimes seems a bit heavy going, although there are certainly some gems.

All three of these collections are definitely worth picking up, because of the different—and yet startlingly similar—strategies they employ to emphasise and celebrate the redemptive elements in life's intersections. Pepper's contains insights on human loss and emotion, and Van Beek's provides fascinating metaphors and a musical use of language. However, it is Ann Knight's poetry that seems the real find here,

enhancing the vivid images created by Kinsella with its quiet, yet profound, expression of hope.

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## Word Wars

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**Linda Spalding**

*The Paper Wife*. Knopf \$26.00

**Adeena Karasick**

*Mémewars*. Talonbooks \$12.95

Reviewed by Susan MacFarlane

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*The Paper Wife* and *Mémewars*, both by women, are explorations of traditional forms. Linda Spalding has written a female *bildungsroman* where the plot focuses on the growth to maturity not of a young man but a young woman. As for Adeena Karasick, she's taken on the traditional essay genre. Both these books dwell on language and its capacity to reify identity. But I don't want to make too much of the connections between these books, because they are about as different as you could imagine books to be.

*The Paper Wife* is Spalding's second novel, a realistic tale of a young girl, Lily, motherless and poverty-stricken, who at eight years old becomes fascinated by a girl from a wealthy, privileged family. The girls become very close, and there are currents of eroticism as well as mother-child dependency in their bonding. About ten years later this relationship turns to betrayal when a young man comes between them. The crucial conflicts centre on motherhood—responsibility and betrayal—and arise out of Lily's romantic expectations:

Motherlove, I thought, reaching out.  
What choice does a mother have, or her child? Does an infant wander the streets, go door to door examining faces for the one promising perfect maternal love? No, the baby takes what it gets and loves it, even the drinker, the abuser. What chance does the poor child have, or the mother? They are cut from the same bone. They're wrapped around each other. There is no

boundary at all between them, no disgust. Where else does such acceptance occur?

The other theme is the “paper wife,” one of identity and possession through language, or how words falsely document human relationships. In a sense, the whole novel marks Lily’s quest for identity and her struggles with belonging and convention. So when she finally walks out of the constraints of language as the book ends, it is apparently with a new sense of direction and agency, although the scene is ambiguous.

These last two chapters are stronger than the rest of the book, which is often overwrought and melodramatic. Perhaps this is Spalding’s way of characterizing a clearly immature and overwrought young woman. In a similar vein, in places where Spalding is seeking to draw attention to her themes the expression is usually awkward and jarring; this technique serves a purpose, but it makes the reader groan more than sit up to enlightened attention, and it presumes a fairly inattentive reader in the first place. Just to give an example, we see the theme of the “paper wife” when Lily and her friend’s lover make love: she “was possessing his mouth with or without words. The night settled around us like a blanket and the serape provided its rough surface under us.” Evidently, I found myself wondering for whom this book was written, and feeling that it was not me. Perhaps it would be a good text for a first-year university literature class. The students could certainly identify with the characters. They could identify the themes and structure easily. There is bit of irony and ambiguity, but not so much as to make the plot really complex. And after a brief period at the start where flashbacks are used, the plot simply flows chronologically.

Try and imagine the furthest possible extreme from *The Paper Wife*. That’s *Mēmewars*, by Adeena Karasick. Here there is no plot, no high seriousness, no development or linearity, and the plasticity of

structure is everything. Playful and indeterminate, Karasick’s poems and essays (and there’s no clear way to tell the difference, or reason to do so) focus on various topics without “covering” them.

There are two halves to *Mēmewars*, two “front” entrances to the book. Karasick “explains” this: “Beginning and ending with a Mem, orally the syntagm exists as a virtual palindrome and therefore deconstructs notions of origin and closure. By embodying difference within sameness it foregrounds repetition as a reproductive process.” This is not as overwhelming as it may seem; it actually describes the book fairly accurately. One beginning takes you to the title piece, which is more clearly a poem than the others are, while the other beginning opens on four essays. In the title piece Karasick explores the intersections of the “mem” as a Hebrew character that exists in both open and closed configurations, as memory, as sameness and identity as well as exclusion. She associates it with the cultural memory of Jewry, Cabbalistic lore, the “wandering Jew” and the Diaspora, as well as ciphers and codes of language. But I don’t mean to suggest that she is arguing for these connections or giving evidence—she is presenting, performing and repeating associations. Her style is playful and open, performative and non-referential: as memoir mirrors pro-mises. “mise-en / my memory as myriad masks / invented as language. in language.” You can see that she enacts language in a concrete way, so that it becomes a sort of golem figure she has animated through the sacred words. And she calls on the figural body of words (their etymology, morphology, phonology and usage) more than their meanings to build her poetry-essays. She also calls on a wide range of theorists (Derrida, Lacan, Deleuze and Guattari are popular), names dropped here and there to clue the reader to further contexts, intertexts and associations. She provides discursive

sive notes to one piece, but generally reading Karasick's pieces in *Mémewars* requires familiarity with post-structuralist theory. As well, a playful sense of childish frivolity helps a great deal. If you liked *The Empress Has No Closure*, Karasick's earlier book, *Mémewars* will delight you; if you didn't, you'd probably enjoy *The Paper Wife*.

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## Reimag(in)ing Women

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**Shirley Neuman and  
Glennis Stephenson, eds.**

*ReImagining Women: Representations of Women in Culture.* U Toronto P \$60.00/\$24.95

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**Anne Cameron**

*Wedding Cakes, Rats and Rodeo Queens.*  
HarperCollins \$24.95

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Reviewed by Lynne Masland

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The co-editors of *ReImagining Women* have selected 18 essays from papers presented at a conference titled *Imag(in)ing Women*, held at the University of Alberta in March 1989. Focusing on women's various efforts to reimagine or live their lives against the grain of cultural roles and expectations, the essays cover diverse periods, cultures and approaches: from "*In virginea forma: The Salvific Feminine in the Plays of Hrotsvitha of Gandersheim and Hildegard of Bingen*" by Patricia Demers to "Romance in the Forbidden Zone" by Mary Nyquist and "Imag(in)ing Racism: South Asian Canadian Women Writers" by Aruna Srivastava. Theorists will be interested in Elizabeth Grosz's highly organized and lucid discussion, in "Irigaray's Notion of Sexual Morphology," of Luce Irigaray's work and position vis-à-vis representations of the feminine body. Women's art as well as writing is considered in Linda Hutcheon's "Splitting Images: The Postmodern Ironies of Women's Art" and in Nicole Bubleil-Blondin's essay on feminist approaches to representation in painting.

The editors, I think, correctly, make the point that the collection "grounds much that we have moved into." As a political strategy, such approaches continue to be necessary, they argue, in order to counter and deconstruct prevalent "cultural symbols, images, and narratives of women as immanent — flesh definitely limited and bound by the reproductive cycle" as well as recurrent representations of women as victims, beauties, or hysterics.

The essays are grouped into four sections. In the first part, five essays explore, through visual images and literary works, the space between received representations of women and women's representations of themselves and their world. Those in the second section deal with "considerations of the 'material,'" notably women's positions relative to social conditions, access to knowledge and the 'production' of knowledge, economic resources, and leisure which produce 'art' and 'experience.' Patricia Prestwich explores the gap between the image and reality of the nineteenth-century mad-woman through her examination of the case histories and socio-economic circumstances of working-class women committed to Saint Anne, the Parisian psychiatric hospital. At stake in materialist analyses, the editors remark, is women's capacity for *agency* — her autonomous ability to affect the social construction of her subjectivity, place, and representation within a particular social order. The essays in this third section examine women's relationship to agency and representation, using the metaphor/reality of the feminine body in relation to representation in language. Post-colonial representational strategies form the topic of the final section. These essays variously examine feminist theory's appropriation of the tropes of colonialism; the anxiety encountered by racially oppressed women in the expression of their "indigenous" literature and art; and the dilemma posed to post-colonial writers

about issues of revelation and secrecy: how much of the protection provided by her invisibility is the writer willing to surrender to a culture which is dangerous for her?

*Wedding Cakes, Rats and Rodeo Queens* drives one more nail into the coffin of the imaginary, appealing, helpless feminine heroine as Anne Cameron explores the raucous lives and varied fates of the members of what sociologists would term a “dys-functional” welfare family living in rural British Columbia. The five children struggle to survive their chaotic surroundings as their alcoholic, unpredictable mother is threatened by an equally alcoholic, gun-slitting husband, as free-loading relatives move in and take over, and their taciturn Scottish “gran” provides occasional refuge.

The three girls of the family embody the imagery of the title: Savannah becomes the “earth mother,” living with the Three Wise Men and caring for everyone; Seely, whose pet rat provides consolation and comfort in a frightening world, finds a symbolic revenge in baking and decorating wedding cakes for a living; and Kitty is the rodeo queen, seeking love with other women and strength from her memories of Ms Kitty, the heroine of the *Guns smoke* re-runs of her childhood. As Seedy says, Ms Kitty “didn’t just work in the damn saloon, she *owned* it.”

In reshaping the roles for her women characters, Cameron explores the untidy reality of lives which cannot be contained within the boxes of ideal images and expectations and, at the same time, reaffirms the human spirit’s indomitable search for love, acceptance, and belonging.



## Paysages & paroles

**Pierre-Louis Vaillancourt**

*Paysages de Réjean Ducharme.* Fides \$24.95

Compte rendu par Kenneth Meadwell

Dans son dernier roman, *Va savoir* (1994), Réjean Ducharme nous livre la preuve qu’il est resté fidèle aux univers extravagants qu’il a commencé à construire il y aura bientôt trois décennies dans son premier roman *L’Avalée des avalés* (1966), pour lequel il a failli recevoir le Prix Goncourt. Cet artiste qui continue de vivre hors du monde et qui refuse de se faire encercler par des admirateurs rapaces, a vu ses pièces et ses récits couronner de divers prix littéraires. En dépit de cela, son oeuvre n’a pas suscité un travail critique aussi vaste que l’oeuvre d’Anne Hébert ou encore celle de Marie-Claire Blais. S’il existe quelques livres sur sa prose, et qui étudient des sujets aussi divers que la philosophie nietzschéenne, la littérature ou le mythe, toujours est-il que l’oeuvre de Réjean Ducharme est peu étudiée. Cette collection d’articles dirigée par Pierre-Louis Vaillancourt a ainsi le mérite de combler une lacune importante en offrant une variété louable d’approches—psychanalyse, stylistique et linguistique, intertextualité, existentialisme, entre autres—dans les neuf études consacrées à Ducharme, romancier, dramaturge, scénariste et essayiste.

L’une des branches peu examinées de la production ducharmienne, ses scénarios, est l’objet de l’étude, “Ducharme scénariste,” de Jacqueline Viswanathan, qui passe en revue certaines de ses contributions au cinéma. Tout comme Sartre et Giono, Godbout et Aquin, Ducharme, auteur des scénarios, est très peu connu. Viswanathan veut ainsi démontrer que la lecture d’un scénario n’est pas accessible qu’aux spécialistes puisque certaines composantes de la vocation filmique chez Ducharme se révélaient avec clarté aux non-initiés, et en outre

qu'il existe chez Ducharme des similarités et des différences entre le monde fictif des scénarios et celui des romans.

Deux des trois scénarios de Ducharme sont bien connus: *Les Bons débarras*, écrit en 1977, tourné en 1979 par Francis Mankiewicz, et sorti en 1980, et *Les Beaux souvenirs*, écrit et tourné par le même réalisateur en 1980, et sorti en 1981. Le troisième, *Comme tu dis*, jamais réalisé, date des années 70. Mankiewicz estime que ce sont les dialogues qui constituent l'un des traits à la fois singuliers et réussis des scénarios de Ducharme. En effet, ses dialogues, sans s'apparenter ni du délire verbal des romans ni des débordements de paroles des pièces de théâtre, désobéissent aux règles énoncées dans les manuels de cinéma qui recommandent un style laconique, mais naturel, ainsi que l'emploi de l'image. La quasi-totalité du dialogue dans les scénarios de Ducharme se compose ainsi de performatifs. Menace, supplication, prière ou ordre: autant d'énoncés provoquant des actions et des réactions et qui parsèment ses scénarios. Ces derniers possèdent effectivement leur qualité propre en ce qu'ils mènent les personnages jusqu'à la gratification alors que les romans, évoquant la quête d'un personnage, aboutissent à l'échec. Il existerait donc chez Ducharme un mode privilégié pour le film car celui-ci, plus proche de la réalité quotidienne par la langue, les lieux et l'ancrage des personnages dans un milieu spécifique, raconte le triomphe de l'imaginaire, et ce faisant, suscite chez le spectateur des réactions d'identification et de projection particulièrement encouragées par l'effet de réel du cinéma.

Au dire de Dominique Lafon dans "Ducharme dramaturge: le jeu de la tag", son oeuvre s'attaque au théâtre plus qu'elle ne cherche à l'approprier. Toutes les pièces de Ducharme se terminent par la mort dégradante du héros. Une étude de son évolution à partir du *Cid maghané* et *Inès Pérée* et *Inat Tendu*, montés en 1969, jusqu'à

*Ha ha!* . . . , publié en 1982, décèle une épuración formelle essentiellement discursive et structurelle. Le dialogue ne joue plus sur une variation des registres linguistiques, qui servait dans les pièces parodiques à la caractérisation des personnages. Dans *Ha ha!* . . . , l'intrigue se resserre afin d'éliminer tout personnage secondaire pour ne reposer que sur les variations d'un quatuor tout en se manifestant dans l'unité de lieu, dans l'appartement de Sophie et Roger, en l'occurrence. Aussi Ducharme fait-il entrer son théâtre dans le quotidien, loin des errances du *Marquis qui perdit*, en y créant un substrat référentiel qui inscrit la fiction dans une réalité sociologique. La mort de Mimi, en dénouant la crise fondamentale de la pièce, met fin au jeu théâtral car elle saute dans le vide, à vrai dire dans les abîmes de la fosse d'orchestre, et franchit ainsi la frontière du faire-semblant au moment où la représentation cesse. *Ha ha!* . . . est, en conséquence, le dernier acte d'une comédie dérisoire, qui met à mort le théâtre.

L'oeuvre de Ducharme évoque souvent la présence d'autres écrivains tels que Saint-Denys Garneau, Lautréamont, Rimbaud et Sartre. Celui qui s'y retrouve avec une insistance remarquable c'est Émile Nelligan dont le ton, les accents et les thèmes, affirme Nicole Bourbonnais dans "Ducharme et Nelligan: l'intertexte et l'archétype," se font entendre dans la voix polyphonique de Ducharme, et ce, surtout dans *L'Avalée des avalés*, *Le Nez qui voque* et *L'Océantume*. En effet, soit à travers des allusions à l'oeuvre de Nelligan ou par le biais de références explicites, "Le Jardin de l'enfance," "Châteaux en Espagne," "Le Vaisseau d'or," "Rêves enclos," "Hiver sentimental" et "La Romance du vin" inspirent et fascinent les protagonistes ducharmiens. Ce sont, d'une part, Constance Chlore, Faire Faire et Chateaugué, épris d'idéal et de pureté, apparaissant comme de purs fantasmes, produits de l'imagination de Bérénice, d'Iode et de Mille Milles, qui con-

naissent par coeur les vers de Nelligan. D'autre part, les personnages révoltés et engagés font entendre la voix nelliganienne de telle sorte que le texte devient lieu d'une tension entre l'idéal et la réalité, la douceur et la violence, la soumission et la révolte. En somme, l'intertextualité fonctionne à deux niveaux: par les références à la personne du poète fou et par une exploitation très efficace de l'oeuvre poétique qui informe le romanesque. Par conséquent, intégrée à la prose et au quotidien, la poésie de Nelligan ne cesse d'inquiéter l'ordre et la raison tout comme le fait la parole des protagonistes chez Ducharme.

*Paysages de Réjean Ducharme* est un outil indispensable pour tout étudiant, amateur ou chercheur, qui désire saisir sous tous leurs aspects la richesse et la profondeur de l'oeuvre de Réjean Ducharme sous tous ses aspects. Une courte bibliographie critique commentée indique quelques références des plus utiles. Ce travail collaboratif brosse le portrait de l'imaginaire ducharmien, et témoigne ainsi de tout ce qui peut s'accomplir par de tels projets en équipe

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## Poems in the First Person

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**Fred Candelario**

*Preludes & Fugues*. Cacanadadada \$10.95

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**Jerry Newman**

*Sudden Proclamations*. Cacanadadada \$10.95

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**Kevin Roberts**

*Red Centre Journal: A journey in two parts*. Wakefield n.p.

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**Rhea Tregobov**

*The Proving Grounds*. Véhicule \$9.95

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Reviewed by Cynthia Messenger

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Fooling themselves (for years) into believing that theirs was a "natural" poetry, a poetry stripped of artifice, the Black Mountain writers in fact produced a highly rhetorical art. Their work required careful study and meticulous copying on the part of disciples.

Many of the signs of the continued influence of America's Black Mountain movement are visible in our west coast poets. *Preludes & Fugues* shows lots of white space, a quiet demeanour, stillness, a self-conscious omission of upper case letters, almost no punctuation, and a subjugation of the "I" ("i") to an unnamed higher ideal. In the rhetoric of this kind of poetry, the ordinary is transformed into the iconic. In poets less skilled than Fred Candelario, the elements of a Black Mountain poem sometimes constitute themselves in patterns that are barely disguised formulas.

Fred Candelario's work is intriguing because it undermines, often through a kind of campiness, the religiosity of his forebears. By campiness I mean, for example, the effect he achieves through a deliberate over-indulgence in alliteration:

attacked by svelte velvet violence  
her body lives its own life sliding  
and gliding down the red runway  
the take-off ramp on which romp  
ravishing dervishes dancing away  
the illusions of perverse desires  
("the market")

This alluring play could lead to a very eclipsing self-mockery, but the romantic, even chivalric sensibility of the collection disallows it. It's not really the "meta" state that Candelario is interested in.

He *is* interested in the imperative of concision, and like the imagists before him isolates words and asks a lot of them. Often Candelario abbreviates the language in just the right way, with an ear to the music of the gesture:

stone's silenced fire  
moves and rocks desert air  
to mirage music water love  
where only our rattlesnakes live  
edened in venomd dream  
("diary")

The one perfect word "edened" makes the whole poem sing.



Jerry Newman (also, I would say, influenced by Black Mountain) is a much more narrative poet than Candelaria. I'm not surprised to read that *Sudden Proclamations* is Newman's first book of poems. He seems to distrust lyric, though he writes it skillfully. His metaphors sometimes fail to sustain themselves; occasionally, by the end of a poem, he seems to give up and simply skip into a straightforward narrative. I sense he is doing a brave thing in this first book of poems—he is showing us his diary, as it were; he is showing us the guts of his novels. And the heart.

Whether he is writing about Anne Sexton, or his sons, or the life of the mind, he is writing about the heart. The speaker in "To Zoë, Age 6" addresses Zoë as "—calico, wine and spring of my heart." In "Intimations" it is "the misaligned heart"; in "Beyond These Paroxysms" it is "an unruly heart"; both of these poems express deep unhappiness. The word "heart" occurs in every third or fourth poem it seems, so central is it to the motivation for writing. But one of the strongest poems in the book mentions it not at all:

The first infidelity is the worst,  
from which all others flow  
like the milk of might-as-well.

Why not? first lifts us up,  
then dashes us  
on the rocks of if-only.

"Why not?" say the bored,  
leaning over the beckoning sea  
—and let go.  
("Why Not?")

Kevin Roberts' *Red Centre Journal: A journey in two parts* is every bit as "personal" as the poetry of Candelaria and Newman, but exhibits an entirely different set of codes and influences. For one thing, Roberts' homeland is Australia. The dominant obsessions and motifs arise out of that soil. And I hear Christopher Dewdney and

Michael Ondaatje in Roberts' work, whereas Newman and Candelaria write out of an older generation.

In an "Author's Note," Roberts explains that his "poem" (note the singular) is written "as a sequence of journal entries because that approach best offers an objective glimpse of the passing fragments of culture as observed on journeys." (Except for the two dates we are given—May 3, 1985 in Part One and, half way through the book, May 5, 1987 in Part Two—the journal format is in fact not all that clear.)

In any case, Roberts' use of the "journal" as a trope in his long poem codifies his sense of the subject position of the "I" vis-à-vis the "fragments of culture" he encounters and tries to understand. Lyric, particularly after the American confessionals, has been threatened by the all-consuming and rather jealous "I." Roberts' intersection with the land he travels in his road poem is deftly handled:

like this steer, eyeless  
skewed on a bridge  
over a dry dust creek  
stink and flies and paper  
dry hide—and the hawks  
fly up only at the last  
second as I  
white eyed and fixed  
dead ahead  
roar right past.

This "I" is without any nostalgia about itself.

A remembrance of things past is at the core of Rhea Tregebov's work, but, like Roberts, Tregebov (a poet blessed) refuses to re-touch her self-portraits. Her "I" emerges through a discussion of her family that dominates *The Proving Grounds*.

The subjects of this volume are often achingly painful: an ill child; a dying friend; the death of a sister-in-law. Tregebov is brilliant, however, at constructing a line, often a closing line, that, through its perfection or its freshness or its spontaneous

detachment from the mood of the poem, reminds us that the right linguistic potion can rescue us from despair:

Judy, dead at 38,  
her husband at the wheel. Under the  
cool gaze  
of a solo streetlight, we don't want to  
think that it, our life,  
is not Paris, not baroque logic elucidating  
medieval happenstance,  
but a narrow wooden path raised from  
the cold touch  
of the shallow waters of a northern lake,  
the handrail disappearing pointlessly on  
the right.  
("It, Our Life")

All four poets under review are remarkable for how they very evenly conjoin celebration and deep foreboding. Like the other three, Tregobov has one eye on fear: "... *Good Morning, Fear, how do you do? / Put it in my pocket, whistle in the dark*" (Runt").

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## Faith, Mysticism, Exile

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**Douglas Lochhead**

*Homage to Henry Alline & Other Poems.* Goose Lane \$12.95

**Jesús López Pacheco**

*Poetic Asylum: Poems Written in Canada* (1968-1990). Brick Books \$9.95

**Brian Henderson**

*Smoking Mirror.* ECW \$12.00

Reviewed by Cynthia Messenger

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Douglas Lochhead writes of his faith in God—and that makes him a somewhat unusual late twentieth-century poet. The high art of modernity has usurped faith for many, but it can never be even Pretender to the Throne for Lochhead. Art most determinedly may not replace religion. As a consequence, the sophistication of Lochhead's poetry is of an unexpected kind. His sense of the complexity of personal spirituality and identity is articulated in the delicacies

of his syntax, which is absolutely fresh, often disjunctive, elliptical and latinate:

In a bath of dog-violets so I did pick one  
to see  
God's face in this low fruit, five petals,  
some with purple veins  
and it flowers from March to July they  
say. And I *enjoyed* what  
the world knows nothing of. Me, amidst  
the violet glories.  
Worm in the dust. Next day I did ride  
sixteen miles  
where a popish priest kept silent at my  
sermon.  
I ride a wider circuit yet the land is  
christian dark.  
Sparks fizz in their hearts. Take  
Cornwallis  
where I was shadowed by two ministers  
from Cobequid.  
Offered me their libraries to go through  
before I preached  
again. Would you believe they called me  
a stiff young man? Me, Henry, stiff you  
say.

(from "Homage to Henry Alline")

This well-regarded long poem is about Henry Alline, an eighteenth-century evangelical preacher in the Maritimes. Lochhead succeeds at producing an intriguing harmony between his voice and Alline's, between the twentieth century and the eighteenth. It may be that Lochhead is actually, through Alline, having a conversation with God. The kind of judgement I make here is, in a way, an impertinence on the part of the critic; we have no right to address the poet by first name, as it were. Nevertheless, Alline is obviously a mirror—and a conduit.

In Parts II and III of the volume under review, we find Lochhead more often as poet in the act of making poetry, and the work is perhaps at its best when this happens:

the spring filled brook  
babbles a new song  
a longer epic

and into each nudge  
of root and rock  
a bounce of white  
  
of backyard lyrics  
I hear through  
a now silence  
  
where stand hemlocks  
nude birches and  
a touch of poplar  
("sprung")

The Romantic grid—nature, God, beauty, mind, and spirit all interlocking—is very much the pattern upon which Lochhead lays out his words. In his work the reader will find a model of the subtlety and originality of modern conceit, and wit and good humour infuse many lines. Lochhead's formalism is identifiable but muted, more line drawing than full portraiture. His work shows a variety of forms, in keeping with his sense of how the cares of this century call for a prudent flexibility. He certainly deserves to be known as a major poet in Canada.

One of Brian Henderson's prose poems, titled "Tezcatlanextia," begins with a line that could almost belong to Lochhead, even if only in the sentiment it expresses: "You are a mirror whose sheen my image transgresses." But Brian Henderson's *Smoking Mirror* is rather more luxurious than anything Lochhead might produce. Aztec gods, sacrifices, and ceremonial wars are tapestried in "ochre," "coral," "pearl grey," and "pale saffron" in this book. Aztec myth serves as the dominant conceit. This rather rich use of metaphor is in danger of tilting toward personal indulgence, however. The very dense, allusive prose poems begin to look like a metamorphosis of one's too numerous Kodak slides of that trip to Mexico. When we draw on another culture's myths, we run the risk of producing clichés. There is no doubt, however, that Henderson is a dedicated poet asking serious questions:

Twin of the Plummed Serpent, I am  
*Xolotl*, the Double. I sail on wings that

blot up the stars as fast as he thinks he  
plants them. My blood is an antidote  
even *Huitzilopochtli*, the Hummingbird  
from the Left, will not drink. But my  
brother bears him human nectar by concocting  
ridiculous stories about the gods.  
Sometimes I am invisible, sometimes a  
plume of lightning in the other-of-pearl sky.  
("Poem of the Hemispheres")

There is a strange irony in contemplating in the same review a Canadian poet who invokes the mysticism of the ancient Mexican world alongside a Spanish poet who cannot stop writing about our snow. The line, "Canada, page of snow," and the title, "Lady White of Ontario," would seem quaint and a little tiresome in our nineteenth-century writers but seem fresher in the work of Jesús López Pacheco. Well, somewhat fresher:

#### 1. Victorian Victory

Oh white lady dancing behind a veil,  
false lover, giving yourself only to melt  
away,  
fleshless virginity, empty bridal gown.  
Oh angelical lady, nun of the wind,  
queen of ermine and yielding softness.  
("Lady Snow—Variations in White")

The poetry of *Poetic Asylum*, in English, is weak. Too many of the poems are tone deaf and lack variegation, even that common to every-day speech. The English grammar is unintentionally flawed now and then. In Spanish the poems might be stronger.

Don McKay promotes *Poetic Asylum* in his foreword by emphasizing López Pacheco's status as an immigrant, which invariably produces the more poetic notion of the man in exile. Even the subtitle hints at another land. (Perhaps this volume makes too concerted an effort to create a mystique.) One of the most interesting lines in the book is quoted in the Foreword: "to be Spanish, I rip myself of Spain"; this high colour is not sustained, unfortunately. López Pacheco does something quite unusual, though, when he, in the middle of what is an other-

wise fairly conventional free-verse collection, prints some very experimental work, showing diversity in his repertoire. He offers, for example, what he calls "audiovisual" poetry, which is meant to be performed, with sound effects and slides.

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## Unpretentious Writers

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**Michael A. Peterman and  
Carl Ballstadt, eds.**

*Forest and Other Gleanings: The Fugitive Writings  
of Catharine Parr Traill.* U Ottawa P n.p.

**Elizabeth McNeill Galvin**

*Isabella Valancy Crawford: We Scarcely Knew Her.*  
Natural Heritage/Natural History \$14.95

Reviewed by Kathleen O'Donnell

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In their edition of Traill's works, Peterman and Ballstadt aimed to bring appropriate recognition to Catharine Parr Traill, and to publish some of her little-known texts. To this end, the editors present an introductory sketch of her life and a commentary on her thought. Four groups of selections of her writings illustrate her social and family experience, her knowledge of pioneering life, her appreciation of the Canadian landscape and vegetation. The four sections are of unequal length, the greatest extent of the book being devoted to writings on the backwoods. In the form of fiction, sketches, and journal entries, the gleanings represent the author's range of thought and experience.

The three selections grouped under the heading "Reflections of the English Past" are taken from an 1889 American annual, an 1853 issue of the *Anglo-American Magazine*, and from the Traill Family Collection in the National Archives of Canada, which last source provided "A Slight Sketch of the Life of Mrs Moodie." With the editors' notes, this section provides interesting previously-unpublished material. The two stories included reveal Traill's characteristic effectiveness in displaying her ideas and the customs of the time.

The second section, "Backwoods Revisited," presents many works of similar quality, one of them showing again the nineteenth-century interest in phrenology which had been fundamental to a story in "Reflections of the English Past." The numerous selections of "Backwoods Revisited" are organized by the editors under the headings: "Lost Child," "Female Trials," "Rebellion," and "Customs and Ceremonies." Of them all, the most valuable may be the sketch entitled "My Irish Maid Isabella—A Night of Peril," which was gleaned from Traill's journal. The introductory note refers to the same subject in a version by Traill's daughter.

Throughout this section, the editors provide helpful information regarding historical background and literary sources. As for Biblical and literary references, much further work could be done. The selections of poetry and the numerous Biblical allusions are only rarely identified in the notes.

In "The Mill of the Rapids," Traill wrote: "Of the nature of this shrub, or its fruits, I can at present give you no information, as I have never been able to examine either leaf, blossom, or berry minutely." The selections in the section "Backwoods Revisited" evince the author's power of description rather than scientific nomenclature of the phenomena of nature. "Nothing can surpass," she wrote, "the loveliness of the woods after a snowstorm has loaded every bough and sprig with its feathery deposit." Description combines with, or often gives way to, scientific accuracy in the selections under the final two headings of the book: "On the Rice Lake Plains" and "Floral Sketches and Essays" where Traill recorded the varieties of natural growth which she saw necessarily diminish or disappear with increased inhabitation and construction. The last six selections are presented with at least one intriguing suggestion regarding the possible anticipation by Traill of Engel in the description of an octagonal house.

The editors of *Forest and Other Gleanings* described Traill as not “pretentious.”

Isabella Valancy Crawford and the editor, Elizabeth McNeill Galvin, might be described in the same way. The book, *Isabella Valancy Crawford: We Scarcely Knew Her* is evidently prepared with sincere interest in the poet and confidence in the author’s own approach. In the preface, Galvin explained that her purpose was “to present—not to interpret!” There follow five brief chapters of biography with a selection of Crawford’s poetry, and bibliographic material.

The family background is presented with the author’s evident enthusiasm, and her happiness in having personally located the country home of Isabella Valancy Crawford’s uncles in Dublin. When exact details are impossible to obtain, Galvin supplies apt quotations to reproduce at least the tenor of the times preceding the emigration to Canada.

With the progress of the biographical material to the settlement in Canada, historical accuracy and documentation become possible. Also, Galvin introduces little-known material regarding Isabella Valancy Crawford’s background. For example, she notes that Dr. Crawford “was living much beyond his means and needed additional income. Causing a greater problem was his addiction to alcohol and the affect [sic] it had on his practice.” As in the previous chapter, illustrative quotations support the theme, but not lines from Crawford’s poem “The Helot,” which might have been appropriate to the context.

The chapter entitled “Lakefield” continues the saga of the emigrant family, with rather extensive reference to the parent rather than to the young poet. One quotation may suffice to describe the family situation: “Dr. Crawford’s practice proved no more successful in Lakefield than it had been in Paisley.” Of particular interest is the series of photographs of residences and

institutions in Ireland and Canada.

The sojourn of the family in Peterborough provides a brief chapter largely of lamentation for the afflictions of the family. The sparsity of material regarding this time allows opportunity for speculation. “It would be comforting,” wrote Galvin, “to think that in Isabella’s life there had been a romantic interest—some special person to whom she could turn for consolation and loving advice in those dark days.” Thus Galvin joins previous critics in interpretations of selections of poetry, though her primary purpose was not to interpret.

The biography concludes with a chapter entitled “Toronto” in which Galvin comments on selections of poetry. Galvin wrote that, at this time, Crawford’s eyes “held bitter acceptance, not dreams.” Also Galvin states: “For her there would not be an ardent lover, husband. Were there tears in the night?” The biography is concluded with much feeling by the author who had stated from the beginning that she would not rewrite at the request of her publisher, and that she felt “compelled” to write about Crawford.

The anthology and selections of poems added after the biography represent the author’s personal and evidently heartfelt response to Crawford’s work. For the research and the interest provided, the book is highly effective. It must ultimately have satisfied the publisher who wanted “a manuscript: nothing academic, as much biography as possible, photographs, a selection of her poetry—that sort of thing—a small book that would appeal to the general public, to the schools.”



## The Pains of Belonging

**Paul Tiyambe Zeleza**

*The Joys of Exile.* Anansi \$15.95

Reviewed by Gloria Nne Onyeoziri

The mythical voice of the unborn child bluntly called it the "excruciating human exile"; the young people helplessly and regretfully watch their dreams suspended; the disappointed centenarian, abandoned to his only "friend," the rocking chair, by kith and kin, listens "to the outside world as it moved along in its cold, uncaring and superficial ways." Even after "Fire," as if in complicity with the narrator's deepest wish, demonstrates its destructive power, the Architect erects the same edifice with the same lonely people, all psychologically and socially disconnected.

This is a book in which exile permeates every space and every historical event. Paul Tiyambe Zeleza's book is not an *ad hoc* collection; the framing of the book shows subtle connections between the structures of the different stories. Zeleza gives exile a double structure in the first and the last stories ("Waiting" and "The Rocking Chair" respectively). A spirit undertakes the exile journey to the uncanny human world only because it is temporary and offers an "eternal" domicile in the spirit world. At the time of birth (as reincarnation) the protagonist is exiled from the spirit world and even his new home is ultimately an illusion. In spite of the child's "right" to choose its gender and parents, the world prepared for its arrival always falls apart; the expected welcome on the basis of which it continues to choose its time and place of coming always disappears. That disappearance has a historical dimension as it relates to Africa—from the slave trade to the aggressions of colonialism, concluding with the things-fall-apart situation brought about by exile from cultural values.

The last story ("The Rocking Chair") has a similar but inverted double structure. The world is gradually getting tired of the centenarian's presence and the older he gets the more he gets in the way. Like the newborn baby, he is dispossessed and susceptible to being wanted or unwanted. When he does finally go, he is exiled in terms of memory. The metaphysical dimension of the first story is replaced in the last one with rights of succession and reallocation of wealth.

Historically, the allegory of the predatory intentions of the falcon and the hawk towards the other weaker birds, as the centenarian observes, is reminiscent of the Otherness in human relationships that led to the enslaving and appropriating of fellow human beings, preceded and succeeded by inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic hatred and annihilation ("Blood Feuds" and "The Soldier's Tale" respectively). The soldier ("The Soldier's Tale") who returns to Africa after fighting in the war in Europe, estranged from his people, transgresses the collective memory through an awkward "inter-ethnic" marriage. The bewilderment of the baby born from their socially forbidden union points to the uncertainty of the child's future. The festive mood of "The School Reunion" ends with the exclusion and imprisonment of the "Reverend" Father who had "given himself" in the making of the school. The African American in "Homecoming" remains an alien throughout his visit to Africa (his "mysterious, ancient homeland") and finds out that it is an illusion to think of "real African" culture, food or tradition. One of the young men in "Suspended Dreams" seeks political asylum in a foreign country where his social status places him among the "invisible and visible minorities." On the other hand, the narrator in "Family Secrets" gives the impression that a new home was being created for the couple as they had defied the limits of their own eth-

nic groups and were well-bonded in love. Then he gradually reveals that the new place is no place at all: the union is only a façade. What is more, the Doctor, being sterile, is physiologically alienated from the category of people that he would like to be part of—those who reproduce themselves. In “The Lift” exclusion from any form of social and economic security leads the protagonist, a young university graduate, to succumb to hallucinations (or separateness from self) and imagine himself being considered for a prestigious position as a “development officer.” Finally, in “The Fire This Time” all the racial, political, social, or even gerontocratic illusions of security are erased in an eschatological way—an erasure emphasized by the presence of fire throughout the work.

I find it difficult nevertheless to dismiss the word “joys” in the title of the book as being purely ironical. There seems to be a discreet humour as each exilé mockingly looks at his or her situation. On the other hand, the title is echoed in the “eternal joys of the spirit world” (“Waiting”). This gives the phrase “joys of exile” an ambiguous meaning: where are such joys experienced, since the coming and going of birth and death are a necessary prerequisite for continued existence in the spirit world? And exile is referred to, both in “Waiting” and in “The Rocking Chair,” as a form of death.

This is an honest and significant narrative, neither hopelessly caught up in past historical injustices nor forgetful of the many forms of injustice and exile that continue and are likely to continue in the present world.



## The Traffic in Children

**Timothy Findley**

*Headhunter*. HarperCollins \$24.95

Reviewed by Donna Palmateer Pennee

Findley's seventh novel has all the usual Findley material: fascism, voyeurism, alcoholism, racism; madness, fire, misogyny, homophobia; phallic mothers, brutal fathers, cross-dressers, Black maids, pre-scient animals, survivors; violence latent and explicit, wars familial and global; and all the beautiful, tormented, and tormenting members of the upper class and the gossip that attends them. As usual, the novel offers spoils for allusion-hunters, though most of the allusions we already know or are named for us. Nicholas Fagan is back, this time as an intimate of Borges, and though he's Irish, he speaks with “the voice of English Literature itself.” Allusions to films and historical events and personages proliferate as well, but the principal text that gives *Headhunter* its title, some of its characters, much of its imagery, subject matter, and allegorical force, is, of course, Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

Kurtz and Marlow are here, as are pilgrims and agents, mists and fog, the poetry of T. S. Eliot, the two Fates who police the Company traffic, and Fabiana Holbach, Kurtz's Intended and just one of several beautiful women who are lied to for their own good by Findley's Marlow. Even the violets are African, the restaurants named Motley's and Arlequino's, and, despite the hundreds of pages (this is a very long novel) devoted to showing us otherwise, in the end the darkness turns out to be universal, as usual.

But in the beginning, and for most of the novel, “one of the dark places of the earth” is Toronto, Rosedale its heart, and Canada the killing grounds. “The idea” behind conquest that was supposed to redeem it for Conrad's Marlow is resuscitated by Findley's Fagan, a version of Marlow who

travels up the St. Lawrence River and witnesses horrors on the way. His trip is not unlike the trip in Frye's famous Conclusion to the *Literary History of Canada* or in Susanna Moodie's writings. She's a character in the story, and not without the "gentle bigotry" identified elsewhere in the novel, camouflaged here by another Canadianism, "All of us are immigrants. . . ." The "horror" is not singular but multiple (as it was in Conrad's work), dispersed across the discourses of psychiatry, government, corporate capital, the pharmaceutical industry, new-world imperialisms and, yes, art (has Findley been reading Foucault?). The "horror" extends as well to the nuclear family, where Oedipal and Electral dramas are literalized in the rape and killing of children, because children are assumed to be "safe" sex objects for men in a world of AIDS and "willing" subjects desperate for the recognition of their fathers, the profit to be turned, or the opportunity to brutalize others. Here, the horror is not "veiled" as it is in Conrad's text: Findley spares no details in episodes of cruising, evenings at the Club of Men, the photographs taken there and sold, the fantasies dreamed, enacted, and repeated in the transcripts of the "clients" of the Parkin Psychiatric Institute.

Kurtz is Director of the Parkin, its chief fundraiser, doctor and father confessor; as such, he has "[a]ccess to the personal obsessions of the élite" and thus "access to the pockets of the élite." Driven to succeed by his own Oedipal drama, and in collusion with the desires of élite men and "a renegade pharmaceutical company anxious to jump the gun and gain the market," Kurtz secures access to "a simple pill" with which, as his private journals say, "we can exert a power for good that is practically unbounded," but "the words for good had been excised with a single stroke, leaving the sentence bereft of decency." Children used by the Club of Men are first made pli-

ant with medication and (those who survive) later interned at the Parkin Institute. These children and their torturers are the subjects of files with which Marlow and his assistant, a psychiatric outpatient named Lilah Kemp, disclose the conspiracy of those multiple discourses responsible for the horrors in the book.

But there are other horrors as well, "plagues" in the forms of "sturnusemia and AIDS"; indeed, "[c]ivilization—sickened—had itself become a plague," its symptoms readable for Marlow by "tracing the patterns of mental breakdown. The Parkin Institute was not alone in being overcrowded, overworked, overextended. . . . Broken dreamers, their minds in ruins. This was the human race." While Findley has diligently articulated the power/knowledge/wealth nexus elsewhere in the text, here (and there are other instances) that nexus is disarticulated: agents and victims are conflated and questionable metonymies allowed to proliferate. For we know, long before Marlow and Lilah figure it out, that patients and "clients" at the Parkin are not equal members of the human race. A similar conflation occurs in the phrase "sturnusemia and AIDS": the former, a fatal disease believed to be spread by birds (hence their slaughter by Death-Squads), is ultimately disclosed as a conspiracy between government, science, and the media to hide the leakage of an experiment in genetic engineering. But AIDS, linked here and elsewhere in the text with sturnusemia, is not a conspiracy. We know that discourses of heterosexuality, medicine, government policy and funding, as they selectively traverse AIDS, have participated in the demonizing of homosexuals. So what is Findley up to when the paedophilic and predominantly homosexual activities of the Club of Men are imbricated implicitly with the art works of Francis Bacon and Jean Cocteau, both homosexuals, and explicitly with the art works (modelled after those of



Attila Richard Lukacs) of one of Kurtz's former—and homosexual—and dying—patients? And what is Findley up to when the characters we are positioned to believe, whose points of view seem to be the ones to which we are to subscribe (for who would want to side with Kurtz?), are celibate?

Not only are they celibate, but they also mourn the loss of traditional discourses in which the authority of civilization was vested, prior to the unleashing of an 'incredulity towards master narratives' (which Conrad's own novel is sometimes thought to have played a part in causing). Lilah Kemp, a crucial focalizer in the text, lives in a world peopled by the characters of English Literature, and Marlow, to whom much of the work of focalization is given in the latter half of the text, admits he is a snob, nostalgic for the days when Philosopher's Walk was his sanctuary, and thankful that Harvard and its old-world charm healed him after the disclosure, following her death, that his wife was a lesbian. Perhaps the obviousness of such old-world alliances is meant to signal that though snobbish, Marlow is preferable to the new-world Kurtz. Or perhaps the alliances are meant to implicate the Marlows of this novel as Conrad's Marlow was implicated in the horror. After all, "Timothy Findley" is the name of one of the cases on file at the Parkin Institute . . .

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## Compte-rendu

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**Marie-Claire Blais**

*Parcours d'un écrivain.* VLB n.p.

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**Claude Lévesque**

*Le proche et le lointain.* VLB n.p.

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Compte rendu par Dominique Perron

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Le recueil d'essais de Claude Lévesque, composé d'articles publiés dans diverses revues ainsi que d'entrevues diffusés à

Radio-Canada, promettait beaucoup en raison des thèmes abordés, en particulier une approche philosophique de la poésie et du langage, de même que des questionnements sur la nature de toute représentation et, en dernier lieu, un commentaire sur l'introduction de l'enseignement de la psychanalyse au Québec, dans les années cinquante.

Le premier essai du volume intitulé "L'appel désordonné du lointain" se pose comme une analyse détaillée du roman de Jacques Brault, "Agonie." Si cette lecture, suivie d'ailleurs d'un entretien avec l'auteur, n'est pas effectuée pas selon une méthodologie propre à une perspective clairement littéraire ou textuelle, ce qui est loin d'être un défaut en soi, elle ne s'en révèle pas moins comme extrêmement convaincante dans ses recours à Hegel, à Nietzsche, à la mythocritique et tout particulièrement à Blanchot, dont Lévesque peut être perçu comme un adepte fervent. À partir également de cette remarque de Derrida, "Le retrait silencieux reste parfois la réponse la plus philosophique," Lévesque déploie une réflexion attentive et respectueuse du texte de Brault dont elle s'établit le métatexte envoutant qui d'ailleurs renvoie à la totalité de l'oeuvre du poète tout en démontrant à quel point il est possible de convoquer à cette approche un penseur aussi difficile que Blanchot, réflexion qui s'articule sur le constat "qu'il n'y a pas de mot de la fin . . . que le dernier mot qui porte l'extrême s'annule comme mot." Ce faisant, Lévesque montre la nécessité d'affronter, pour les textes qui le demandent, la vertigineuse remise en question du sens, à la fois d'une vie qui ne trouve le sien que dans la proximité de la mort, et d'un langage dont la négativité doit être toujours rappelée pour bien garder à l'esprit l'affirmation blanchotienne selon laquelle le rien doit prédominer parce que l'on aura tôt ou tard à l'affronter. Et il faut reconnaître que Lévesque fait de ce vertigineux constat une

médiation efficace qui sert remarquablement le texte de Brault.

Je dirais que l'essai suivant, qui est une autre lecture d'un texte, poétique cette fois, de Martin Gagnon, "Toiles filantes," fait preuve de la même finesse dans la conception du langage poétique comme étant insondable et surtout comme étant dégagé de valeur ou de vérité, et donc comme étant dépourvu de clôture, et surtout d'une signification acquise, ce que Lévesque désigne par "impropriété." Il s'agit là encore d'un commentaire, plutôt que d'une analyse, mais qui est fort capable de séduire un lecteur ou plutôt un praticien de théories littéraires plus rigoureuses, et de le renvoyer avec conviction à ce fameux "plaisir du texte" que Lévesque teinte cependant, en bon disciple de Blanchot, de l'inquiétante lumière du néant qui semble sinon attirer à lui tout usage du langage, du moins en menacer continuellement l'équilibre.

Il nous faut avouer cependant que les essais suivants qui complètent le recueil ne sont hélas pas à la hauteur des deux premiers. Les plus faibles sections consistent en ces entretiens, lesquels, si ils ne sont pas nécessairement dénués d'intérêt, perdent beaucoup à être ainsi transcrits, ce qui est en partie dû au fait qu'ils donnent l'impression de manquer de direction. Par ailleurs, ces conversations laissent lieu, particulièrement dans le cas de celles avec Fernande Saint-Martin et je dirais même de celle avec Régine Robin, à des différences entre les niveaux de commentaires, ce qui contribue à conférer au recueil, dont on espérerait une certaine homogénéité de contenu, une gênante impression de disparate. En ce qui a trait aux autres parties suivant ou accompagnant ces essais, et tout particulièrement ici "La représentation en question," le reproche final qu'on pourrait adresser à ces textes est en fait la disparition, ou du moins l'affaiblissement, de la pensée de Claude Lévesque lui-même au profit des penseurs dont il commente les positions intel-

lectuelles, comme si l'auteur s'effaçait trop devant ses maîtres sans définir clairement ses positions propres, se mettant au service absolu de Bataille ou de Blanchot. Tant de modestie, et tout porte à croire ici qu'elle est sincère, ne saurait être absolument blâmable, mais le lecteur se prend, dans cette seconde moitié de l'essai à souhaiter lire Claude Lévesque lui-même comme il a été lu et apprécié dans la première partie.

Evidemment, le "Parcours d'un écrivain" de Marie-Claire Blais est de tout autre nature et invite à une appréciation totalement différente. On se souviendra que ces "Notes américaines" avaient été publiées, sous forme de feuilleton, dans les cahiers littéraires du *Devoir* pendant l'année 1992, mais le fait qu'on les a rassemblés à leur tour en recueil leur confère étrangement ici un relief et une unité qui m'avaient semblé moins palpables lors de la première publication en feuilleton, si j'ose dire. Ces chroniques présentent une vision de l'Amérique déchirée des années soixante, vue par cette jeune québécoise timide et quasi effarée (ainsi qu'elle se dépeint elle-même) qu'était Marie-Claire Blais au moment où, récipiendaire d'une bourse Guggenheim, elle allait passer une année à Cambridge pour y écrire *Une saison dans la vie d'Emmanuel*. Le sentiment qui domine à la lecture est celui de la séduction inchangée et toujours prenante de l'écriture de Blais, fluide, lyrique, proustienne, mais écriture d'un Proust certes plus retenu et plus volontairement naïf qui garderait néanmoins cette capacité d'évocation dramatique d'un passé dont justement les grands pans tragiques resurgissent ici colorés par le verre particulier du "kaléidoscope" blaisien. Que cette référence à Proust ne paraisse pas outrée: parmi tous les romanciers québécois, rares sont ceux qui ont développés et maîtrisés à ce point cette capacité de superposer les images dans le récit, jusqu'au point de le dissoudre justement au profit des images. Et c'est pré-

cisément ces images qui restent, au fil des chroniques de Blais, d'une Amérique à feu et à sang, d'une bourgeoisie intellectuelle durement secouée par ces explosions quand elle n'a pas été entraînée par elles, de ces silhouettes furtives d'artistes, d'écrivains, d'étudiants, les uns qui s'accrochent à l'espoir, les autres fermement soutenus par leur foi en l'Art, et d'autres encore devenus naufragés de cette Amérique, dont les commentaires de Blais nous montrent bien qu'elle ne s'est peut-être que répétée. Et le tout porté par cette écriture toujours somptueuse. Un livre poignant et beau.

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## After the Saints

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**Nino Ricci**

*In A Glass House*. M & S \$26.99

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Reviewed by Joseph Pivato

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Nino Ricci's first novel, *Lives of the Saints*, won the 1990 Governor General's Award for English fiction and a number of other prizes. *In A Glass House* is the second part of a trilogy which began with the much praised first novel. *Lives of the Saints* had all the magic elements of a memorable story and created reader expectations which were impossible to fulfill no matter how well written the second volume was. The setting of a Canadian farm and immigrant characters found *In A Glass House* are a let-down after the timeless village and sensual characters in *Lives of the Saints*. In addition to leaving behind the Italian pasticcio, Ricci set himself the enormous task of carrying on the story of Vittorio Innocente after the death of his spirited mother and the disruption of immigration.

In most Italian-Canadian narratives, such as the novels of Frank Paci, Caterina Edwards, Marisa De Franceschi and Maria Ardizzi, the story begins after immigration, when the old country soon becomes a pale memory, images hazy with nostalgia. In

these books the Italian immigrants and their children must create the present reality of Canada for themselves almost out of nothing since there is little comparison or reference back to Italy. Ricci has undermined this pattern with these two volumes since we cannot read *In A Glass House* without reference to *Lives of the Saints*, and we cannot view the farm life of Vittorio without comparison to his childhood in Valle del Sole. Vittorio's caring and vivacious mother has been replaced by a neglectful and depressed father. Instead of the sunny Italian village we have a run-down farm near Lake Erie. Ricci, the Canadian-born son of immigrants, has produced a work in which Italy, by its absence, takes on mythic proportions and the unhappy characters are exiles from this mythic paradise.

*In A Glass House* opens with Vittorio and his half-sister, Rita, living with his father on a vegetable farm. The events are not remarkable, especially for a dysfunctional family, but the many ways in which Ricci explores the nuances of character and depicts the suffering of lost souls are noteworthy. Because Rita is not his child the father refuses to accept her, yet he is equally remote from Vittorio. While still in grade school Rita goes to live with family friends rather than suffer the abuse of the father. The strained relationship between Vittorio and Rita is the dominant conflict in the novel and Ricci brings all his analytical powers to explore this strange brother/sister disconnection. Vittorio also loses his sense of his past. When he learns of the death of his grandfather, a link with his late mother, his response is so flat that he must pretend to cry.

Vittorio's life is a series of losses and missed opportunities from the premature death of his mother, the alienation of his father to the estrangement of his half-sister, Rita. Each time he visits her they have less to say to one another. Vittorio grows up

trapped in a glass house: he is unable to make connections with anyone, friends or family. The tentative first love affair with his girlfriend, Crystal, ends in awkward silences. All of these broken relationships are captured with clarity by Ricci's careful explorations into the disintegration of Vittorio's life. The most graphic cultural split is the depiction of the two separate worlds of the vegetable farm and the university. Ricci presents these two worlds in separate alternating chapters as if there were two narratives linked together only tenuously in the person of Vittorio. This is a schizophrenia many immigrants can recognize.

Ricci is writing against the Italian-Canadian tradition of returning to Italy to renew relations with old family members. In *A Glass House* ends with Vittorio going to Africa after graduating from university. While teaching school in Nigeria Vittorio tries to put his troubled life into perspective. It is as if Ricci is using this act of migration to balance the dislocation which opens this novel. However, the dangers of civil war in Nigeria are not comparable to the shock of meeting relatives in Italian villages. In Africa, Vittorio's alienation is total as an invisible white foreigner in a land of suffering black people. Vittorio returns to Canada upon the unexplained death of his father. After the funeral he tries to reach out to his sister, Rita, but is rejected. It is as if Vittorio is in some way incomplete without his half-sister. This remote yet potentially powerful figure is the only living link to his dead mother. There are many things which need to be explained, and Ricci has aroused expectations which need to be fulfilled. Maybe the third novel will explore Rita's life and some of the unanswered questions.

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## Troubled Quest

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**Paul G. Socken**

*The Myth of the Lost Paradise in the Novels of Jacques Poulin.* Associated University Presses US  
\$24.50

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**M.G. Hesse**

*Yves Thériault, Master Storyteller.* Peter Lang  
\$39.95

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Reviewed by Anthony Purdy

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It could be argued that myth criticism has been unjustly neglected in literary circles in recent years; its fortunes have certainly seen a steep decline since its heyday in the 1960s. Paul Socken's unpretentious little book is welcome, then, not because it attempts to revitalize myth theory and criticism or to engage critically with the many complex and unresolved questions concerning the relationship between myth and literature (it doesn't), but because it bucks the dominant trends in current literary scholarship to find in myth criticism an appropriate way of talking about the novels of Jacques Poulin. Such an approach lays no claim to yielding an exhaustive or totalizing reading of the novels—the author acknowledges, for example, that his transhistorical and transnational perspective has next to nothing to say about the situation of Poulin's work within the writing of contemporary Québec—but it has the not inconsiderable advantage of going some way towards accounting for their characteristic tone, which is one of tender nostalgia.

Socken's study is divided into two parts. The first provides concise readings of each of the works, examining the three kinds of creation narrative—creation of stories, of the self, and of the world—which occur in various combinations and ratios in the different novels, and relating them to the constant presence of a single myth, that of the lost paradise. In the second part, Socken gives a brief general account of the lost paradise myth and goes on to indicate how

Poulin adapts the myth to his own (increasingly inward-oriented) vision of the individual in quest of a lost ideal of peace and harmony. Thus, a novel like *Volkswagen Blues* exposes the limitations of an existing, socially constructed and circulating myth—America as lost paradise—to propose a renewal of the inner self as the only possible locus of spiritual regeneration, the only site on which to recreate the harmony and unity sacrificed in modernity's systematic disenchantment of the world. By the time we reach *Le Vieux Chagrin*, the inner self (or the soul) has established its primacy over the strife and alienation of the outside world as the mythic patterns of the earlier fictions have been thoroughly internalized: "Creation of the lost paradise is still the centerpiece, but the work is evolving towards an internalized myth, a creation of the self, associated with artistic expression, and in particular writing. Relationships are important in this scheme, but successful, positive ones are the result of harmony within the self, not a prelude to it."

Readers of *Volkswagen Blues* will remember a chapter early in the novel in which Poulin's novelist-hero, Jack Waterman, contrasts his own working habits with those of his (imaginary) ideal writer: "Il se rangeait parmi ceux qu'il appelait 'l'espèce laborieuse': patient et obstiné mais dépourvu d'inspiration ou même d'impulsions, il se mettait à l'œuvre tous les jours à la même heure et, grâce à un travail méthodique et opiniâtre, il arrivait à écrire 'sa' page quotidienne." If this is Jack's reality, his ideal could not be more different. His "écrivain idéal" feels a novel coming on while he's sitting in a bar with friends. Falling into a trance-like state, he's driven home by a buddy, who is made to bring paper then told to disappear, and regains consciousness several days later in hospital with a completed novel in his bedside drawer and an adoring lover gazing at him through teary eyes. Yves Thériault, it would

appear from M.G. Hesse's new study, fell somewhere between Waterman and his ideal alter ego. On the one hand, Thériault was every inch a professional writer, justifiably proud of his success in earning a living solely through his writing. On the other, he turned out, alongside his more literary works, a vast quantity of pulp fiction, often under a pseudonym, and even when writing in 'literary' mode was capable of prodigious speed. The first draft of *Ashini*, for example, was started at eleven on a Saturday and finished by the Sunday evening, the revised manuscript going to the publisher by the middle of the same week.

Hesse's book has nine chapters. The first two provide a biographical sketch and a very brief account of the French-Canadian literary tradition and milieu to which Thériault had no real sense of belonging. Chapter 3 traces, in chronological order, the appearance of the major works and indicates rapidly the nature of the critical reception of each. Chapters 4 through 8 group the works according to theme, character or genre: chapter 4 focuses on Thériault the storyteller, chapter 5 on the figure of the outsider in the major plays and early novels, chapter 6 on the perennial 'troubled quest for identity' as it manifests itself in *Aaron*, *La Mort d'eau*, *Cul-de-sac* and *Le dernier Havre*, chapters 7 and 8 on the Inuit and Indian novels respectively. Chapter 9 offers a summing up in three pages.

Despite its claim to be "the first comprehensive analytical and critical introduction in English to the works of one of French-Canada's most versatile authors," *Yves Thériault, Master Storyteller* ultimately disappoints through its lack of any critical argument beyond the most anodyne generalities and its failure to explore any of the issues to which it alludes in passing. For example, a serious study of Thériault's curious institutional positioning would have been eminently worthwhile, given the amount of excellent work done in Québec

on the literary institution since Hélène Lafrance's 1984 book. Similarly, with the enormous interest in recent years in the 'figure of the Indian' and, more generally, the literary representation of ethnic others, Thériault's Inuit and Indian novels might have made a fascinating case study. Unfortunately, Professor Hesse seems either unaware of these larger debates of the last decade or singularly uninterested in engaging with them, preferring instead to take refuge in her title and to reaffirm through plot summary after plot summary Thériault's own self-definition as a mere teller of tales.

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## Journeyworks

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**Michael Bullock**

*The Walled Garden: A Fantasia.* Ekstasis Editions  
n.p.

**Endre Farkas**

*Surviving Words.* The Muses' Company \$12.00

**Paul Savoie**

(Ill. Jerry Silverberg) *Shadowing.* Black Moss  
\$14.95

Reviewed by Neil Querengesser

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"[I live] as always in the two realms of dream and reality, linked only by poetry..." (Bullock).

"I am a comforted tourist in the country of my birth" (Farkas).

"You enter the image" (Savoie).

Michael Bullock, Endre Farkas, and Paul Savoie have been important presences on the Canadian poetic landscape for many years. Consciously shunning the mainstream, each has explored less-travelled territories of human experience and poetic technique, with a success that is particularly manifest in the three books herein reviewed.

Michael Bullock, grand master of contemporary surrealism, plunges into the fathomless depths of the unconscious once

again in *The Walled Garden: A Fantasia*. Harking back to the walled gardens of 12th-century Sufi poetry, and indeed, to visions of pre- and post-lapsarian Edens, Bullock transforms a garden at a "four-hundred-year-old cottage in Harrow-on-the-Hill, on the outskirts of London" into a site of marvellous fantastic excursions, "a theatre for [his] endless play." Through the six "movements" of this fantasia, in verse and in prose, Bullock skilfully interweaves aspects of internal and external realities in image after revealing image, moving effortlessly between themes of corporeal containment and imaginative liberation. Bullock's style is particularly noteworthy. What first strikes one about passages such as the following from "Caterpillar" is an overwhelming sense of the ordinary: "I am sitting on the stone bench in the darkness of the walled garden, listening to the quiet sounds of night: the twitter of a sleeping bird, the rustle of leaves and, from some secret, unknown source, the trickle of water." Definitely not "Ode to a Nightingale." Yet by the time we reach the end of this selection, and hear of his encounter with a metamorphic caterpillar-woman, something remarkable has occurred. With understatement that almost out-Kafkas Kafka, we get this:

As we embrace I seem to be enveloped and swallowed up by the white body of the woman. But when our embrace is at an end and I pull away, I feel my body undergoing a metamorphosis. My skin becomes dark and furry, supported on a thousand tiny feet. My multifaceted eyes peer at the garden from a few inches above the ground. And within my belly the woman settles herself in a comfortable position for her renewed journey through the night.

It is this matter-of-fact reportage at odds with the subject matter that characterizes much of the fantasia. The work is best appreciated and understood, I believe, if we

assume a kind of patient-analyst relationship between narrator and reader. The poems and prose pieces thus serve for the reader /interpreter as transcripts of recounted dreams and visions whose essence challenges the imagination but ultimately resists precise signification. Rhetorical embellishments, we feel, would be false and misleading. Instead we are presented with a fabulation of honestly objective accounts of journeys into a world that all of us have visited but few of us have mapped.

In *Surviving Words* we are forcefully reminded of the ways in which the evil that men do does indeed live after them. The horrifying actuality that is the Holocaust sits like an immovable altar to evil in the middle of this century. Fifty years later, Endre Farkas, child of holocaust survivors, revisits its terrors through the stories of his parents and through his own journeys. His parents, who both survived concentration camps only to confront renewed xenophobia a dozen years later during the Hungarian revolution, were forced to escape with their young son to Canada. The book is a personal journey of sorts, back into the lives of his parents during those dark times, and also an account of his experiences within post-communist Europe and contemporary Canada. It is a journey to recover, if not lost innocence, perhaps lost hope. Farkas comments on the book's cover: "... though I knew that no one can claim to be innocent, I wanted to believe there was a small pocket in the heart where innocence did reside and from which it could be reclaimed. But it's from that small pocket, too, that people claim 'I was just following orders'—and act as though 'Nothing happened.'" Farkas reaches into this pocket to bring what is there into the poetic light of day. There is indeed terror within, as so many of the early poems such as "Auschwitz" and "Dream" make too clear. But there is also much more, from the caustic satire of neo-Nazism in "Missing

Link," to the wry drolleries of "Night Life in Amsterdam," to the wondrously incandescent epiphany of "Vaudreuil Bay." And even some of the darkest poems have glimmerings of a transcendent vision of hope. Thus in the Passover poem "Why Is This Night Different Than Any Other?" despite the symbolically bloodless lintels, providing no protection from machine guns, gas, and massacres, the speaker can still proclaim: "And even after all this, I still believe. // How, / looking at the children, / can I not?" Like his parents, to whom this book is dedicated, Farkas's *Surviving Words* are "much more than survivors."

Paul Savoie is perhaps best known for his works in French; however, *Shadowing*, a meticulously crafted journey through the looking-glass, displays his mastery of English as well. An absorbing and challenging text of detection, the work is notable for both its structural and thematic aspects. The essential motif, the hunter becoming the hunted, is reworked in some intriguing ways. The work begins and ends at the same site, the pane of a shop window, reflecting and containing the stalker, and follows him through midnight streets, bars, and bedrooms, various sites of encounter between him and his "prey." Savoie, while maintaining a consistent narrative tone, achieves within this central presence a remarkable modulation and metamorphosis of person—in both the grammatical and psychological sense—in number, and in point of view. The result is a compelling fragmentation and dislocation of commonly considered constituents of identity, an elaborate and recursive process of reassembling and disassembling these fragments, and a conclusion that presents an interesting and satisfying complex of identity, word, and image. The structure itself is an achievement of intricate patterning and development. Seven illustrations and seventy discrete units of verse and prose are so arranged as to suggest a multitude of

recombinant possibilities, reflecting an intriguing process of linguistic and imagistic mitosis that grows before the reader's eyes as a beguilingly transient identity. The individual poems are characterized by their unique syllabic metre, the syllables of the first triplet being precisely mirrored in the second, and the lines of the concluding couplet consisting of three syllables apiece. This form is virtually identical throughout all thirty-three poems, creating a richly echoic sequence that is subtly underscored by the intertwined prose pieces, and which would significantly repay an extended formal analysis.

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## Wood Speaks, Stone Dances

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**Ulli Steltzer and Robert Davidson**

*Eagle Transforming: The Art of Robert Davidson.*  
Douglas & McIntyre \$45.00

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**Gary Wyatt**

*Spirit Faces: Contemporary Masks of the  
Northwest Coast.* Douglas & McIntyre \$19.95

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**Odette Leroux, et al., eds.**

*Inuit Women Artists: Voices from Cape Dorset.*  
Douglas & McIntyre \$45.00

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Reviewed by Catherine Rainwater

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Here are three extraordinarily handsome volumes from Douglas & McIntyre. The first, *Eagle Transforming*, presents Haida artist Robert Davidson's masks and totem poles in a series of highly effective black and white photographs. Ulli Steltzer has far more than adequately met the considerable challenge of photographing totem poles—an art form, like architecture, that demands to be seen in the original. Not only a sense of scale, but a fine rendering of wood grains and other media textures are achieved to give the reader of the book a feeling for the power, drama, and grandeur that Davidson's creations obviously convey.

A printmaker, painter, and jeweler as well

as a carver, Davidson reveals in this book his considerable writing ability; he speaks eloquently in both critical and poetical voices about his and others' works. He tells us about growing up Haida, and about important life experiences affecting his work during a twenty-five-year artistic career. Especially interesting, for instance, is the fact that he learned much about Haida art upon leaving his native village of Massett, where he learned carving from his father; visiting art museums in Vancouver, he felt overwhelmed and transfixed by an array of new (to him), but uncannily familiar Haida forms and images that spoke to his mind and spirit. The reader learns much from Davidson's written text about the cultural meanings of these forms and images that he has incorporated throughout his works.

Davidson also quite matter-of-factly discusses the artistic process, from inspiration to completion of projects. For example, he tells us step-by-step how totem poles and masks are carved, beginning with the selection of wood. Every step is taken with care, for Davidson believes, like most Native artists, that art is "inseparable from ceremony." Art is the Haida's "only written language," he explains, and it "has kept our spirit alive." Steltzer's photographs of Davidson in his workshop give us a keen sense of the great physical labor required by this otherwise spiritual art.

Some of Davidson's masks are excellently reproduced in Gary Wyatt's *Spirit Faces*, another attractive volume that presents in vivid color 75 masks carved by 23 First Nations artists from the Northwest Coast. Intricately related to ceremonial dances and songs that their creators describe in textual inserts, these masks depict a great variety of animals, spirits, and natural forces. Some of the masks have ceremonial contexts, while others depict historical and mythological information; still others are linked primarily to personal events in the lives of



the artists. Narrative masks, clan and crest masks, and shamanic, or "transformation masks," are included. The latter represent the shapeshifting abilities of powerful medicine people and thus frequently, and delightfully, consist of masks within masks.

The 23 artists whose masks appear in Wyatt's volume are Bruce Alfred, Wayne Alfred, Stan Bevan, Dempsey Bob, Joe David, Reg Davidson, Robert Davidson, Beau Dick, Freda Diesing, Tony Hunt, Jr., Robert Jackson, Ken McNeil, Earl Muldoe, David Neel, Tim Paul, Terry Starr, Norman Tait, Glen Tallio, Marvin Tallio, Ron Telek, Art Thompson, Lyle Wilson, and Don Yeomans. It is difficult to reach the end of this book because one delights so much in long pauses over each piece and feels captivated by the powerful life-force that emanates even from photographs of these magnificent works.

A third delight for the spirit's eye is *Inuit Women Artists*. The works of nine Cape Dorset artists provide a view of Inuit life rarely glimpsed through the traditional art of Inuit males. Details of domestic life, traditional clothing and social customs provide these women with their artistic subjects. For instance, depicting a familiar object in Inuit homes that is not a traditional artistic subject is Mayoreak Ashoona's mixed media sculpture, "Inniutik" (a skin-drying rack).

A range of art by women is represented in this book, from jewelry-making to drawing to printmaking to sculpture to carving in wood and stone. Each artist provides a written autobiographical statement about her work that explains how she proceeds, whether by careful strategies or spontaneously; each artist also acknowledges the influences upon her art of her family and people, especially mothers and grandmothers, whose teachings sometimes included instruction in the very arts for which these women have become well-known outside their small communities. The volume con-

tains over 200 reproductions of artworks, nearly half of which are in color. The Inuit women included are Pitseolak Ashoona, Lucy Qinnuayuak, Kenojak Ashevak, Qaunak Mikkigak, Napachie Pootoogook, Pitaloosie Saila, Oopik Pitsiulak, Mayoreak Ashoona, and Ovilu Tunnille. The editors have each provided helpful introductory and explanatory sections, and two other Inuit women, Ann Meekitjuk Hanson and Annie Manning, have contributed short statements about their roles as community leaders, specifically as female role models of leadership for all kinds of Inuit women, including this group of nine skilled and talented female artists.

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## Critical Vantage

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**Hildegard Kuester**

*The Crafting of Chaos: Narrative Structure in Margaret Laurence's The Stone Angel and The Diviners*. Rodopi US\$37.50

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**Ajay Heble**

*The Tumble of Reason: Alice Munro's Discourse of Absence*. U Toronto P \$35.00

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Reviewed by Beverly J. Rasporich

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*The Crafting of Chaos* is focussed on Laurence's narrative structures, but the critic remains sensitive in her discussions to the cultural contexts of novels that have been inspired by Laurence's love and experience of place. In her analysis of *The Stone Angel*, Kuester includes a sub-section on "Regionalism and Narrative Structure," followed by a larger section entitled "Towards A Canadian Voice," where she reflects on colonial roots, the biblical tradition and the language idiom and native speech patterns of the characters. In her appraisal of *The Diviners*, a section on "A Quest for Identity" includes sub-sections on "Social Identity" and "Regional and National Determinants"; a discussion of textual matters such as the "plurality of voices" is

related to Laurence's and Canada's sociopolitical context of ethnicity.

This book has a good introduction that includes an overview of Laurence criticism and reflections on literary methodologies. Kuester defines her own approach as the study of narrative structure, a concept that "implies that narrative units are organized into a textual whole according to some underlying formative principles"; her method is that of narratology, the "science" of the theory, language and techniques of narrative fiction, and she is particularly influenced by the French school of structuralism and the work of Gérard Genette, who does not restrict the critic's role to that of linguistic analysis of sentence structure, but asks for study based on "larger units and processes of narrative discourse." Interestingly, Kuester also incorporates traditional elements of literary criticism such as "character" and "setting" as narrative features, and she begins her analysis by introducing the major themes and symbols of the novels, so as to introduce the main ideas of Laurence's fiction.

A sophisticated critic, Kuester nicely reviews other critical approaches in a positive way, acknowledging the intimate relationships between her own and these others. Ironically, while the critic identifies the major structuring principles of Laurence's novels as that of opposition in *The Stone Angel* and multiplicity and mediation in *The Diviners*, her own analyses are somewhat fractured structurally, making it difficult to take in the whole of her arguments about each novel; doubtless, the presentation of arguments in somewhat discontinuous chunks can be interpreted as postmodern structuring. Taking her cue from Genette, the critic is leery of forcing unity.

A worthwhile feature of the text is the short section, "Manuscript Notes." Kuester has consulted the Laurence manuscript holdings at McMaster University and York University archives, and referring to these

materials, is able to give some genuine insights into Laurence's methods for structuring her fictions. Laurence spent considerable time on historical research (she was a friend of Western Canadian historian, W.L. Morton) and it is interesting to see her method of structuring in *The Diviners*, for example, as she shifts from historical montage in an early draft to a method of integration of historical fact within the narrative in the finished version. This uncovering of the interweaving of history and fiction in Laurence's work illustrates both the author's and her critic's knowledge of Canadian history and attention to historical context.

If Kuester's work is a limited analysis of two novels, which in a final chapter are related to other works in Laurence's Manawaka Cycle, the second critical work under discussion here, *The Tumble of Reason: Alice Munro's Discourse of Absence* is a fuller study of Alice Munro's fiction with seven chapters devoted to each of seven works, beginning with *Dance of the Happy Shades* and ending with *Friend of My Youth*.

Both of these critics do, however, have much in common. They are practitioners of Euro-centred literary theories and methodological approaches. Heble, like Kuester, draws on structuralist (and post-structuralist) theories of language, in particular on the works of Ferdinand de Saussure and Roman Jakobson. Like many contemporary literary critics, both of these writers construct a coded critical universe which the reader must break in order to enter. As the title of his text indicates, Heble is most interested in the absent level of meaning in Munro's fiction as "examples of 'paradigmatic discourse,'" with paradigmatic discourse being coded as "a domain of language use" in which "as Jonathan Culler explains, 'the meaning of an item depends on the difference between it and other items which might have filled the same slot in a given sequence.'"

In the establishment of theoretical frameworks and definitions of critical terms, such as the previous example, many contemporary critics come dangerously close to crushing the fiction under study with the dull weight of their linguistic-based critical apparatus. This is true of both these critics at points of their analyses, although both do manage what used to be a primary function of the literary critic, that of re/presenting the art that they admire. Both critics do recall and recreate the fictional universes of their authors, although Kuester does this better than Heble, whose close readings of Munro's fiction are often flat in tone. Heble, too, like Kuester, worries with a postmodern conscience about imposing coherence and unity: "... I want finally to acknowledge a problem inherent in my own critical methodology. Although I have repeatedly sought to emphasize how Munro's involvement with paradigmatic discourse has *developed* through the course of her writing career, I realize that the concept of 'development' may seem somewhat out of place in an analysis of a writer whose stories, as I argue, are marked by discontinuities, by the absence of connections. Am I, then, imposing a false sense of coherence on Munro's oeuvre?"

Be this as it may, Heble does have something to offer the studious Munro reader through the main thread of his argument. Taking as his starting point the early critical work that attempted to situate Munro's work in the realist tradition, the critic argues that it is only by "first grounding the reader in a seemingly knowable world that Munro can deconstruct the intelligibility of that world." In her work, Munro creates both an instance and a criticism of fictional representation. Not surprisingly, many of Heble's critical insights revolve around the concept of the artist's self-reflexivity, and metafictional inquiries. Observations in this vein, such as the critic's recurring interest in the question of whether Munro

narrators can be "narratively faithful to what happened in the past" are his most inviting. By his own account, Heble focuses in this text very specifically on the ways in which Munro uses paradigmatic discourse. By the critic's own reckoning, too, this is a limited study. He does not discuss the gender implications of Munro's art, or her contributions to the short story genre, or the socio-cultural implications of her work. His scholarship, as well, represents his bias: the bibliography he provides is selective and limited.

In some ways, *The Tumble of Reason* has this reader nostalgic for the writing skills of the general essayist, and mournful about the increased specialization of disciplines like "English," where academicians are rewarded for constructing self-referential and formulaic treatises about literature, and for "codifying" their own texts in what often amounts to jargon and incomprehensible prose. This book is not particularly clear in the theorizing nor engaging in the reading. Neither is it easy to believe that a study on the "discourse of absence" will inspire students to the love and study of the fiction of Alice Munro. It is unfair, however, to single it out, since it is one of the more readable structuralist studies currently occupying university and college library space as reference texts for students of Canadian literature. In a large sense, too, the critic's major approach, that of moving forward from the very early privileging of realism and mimetic realities in Munro criticism to increasingly complex considerations about the relationships between the artist, her medium of language, and her art can be seen to be a natural- perhaps even inevitable- (and perhaps now dead-ended) development. At the very least, this twenty-year critical odyssey is an implicit tribute to the incredibly rich and progressive sophistication of Alice Munro's art.

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## Partial Selves

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**Alain Finkielkraut**

*The Imaginary Jew.* U Nebraska P US\$25.00

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**Mina Deutsch**

*Mina's Story: A Doctor's Memoir of the Holocaust.*  
ECW \$14.95

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Reviewed by Norman Ravvin

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Alain Finkielkraut's *The Imaginary Jew*, which has appeared in English translation fifteen years after its French publication as *Le Juif imaginaire*, is a hybrid text: part autobiography, part historical document, part manifesto. In his introduction to Finkielkraut's memoir, David Suchoff calls it an "intellectual autobiography," but this description proves faulty. *The Imaginary Jew* makes no mention at all of its author's contributions to *Le Nouvel Observateur* and *Le Messager Européen*, nor of his work on the Klaus Barbie trial and the tradition of European enlightenment and multiculturalism. *The Imaginary Jew* takes as its focus the author's sense of his own bad faith, his lifelong commitment to causes on the left that allowed him to evade the realization that his "inner life" was "empty."

A similar project of self-incrimination is being produced in American letters by Henry Roth, whose career has consisted of the undisputed classic, *Call it Sleep*, followed by sixty years of silence, and a cycle of hybrid texts pursuing what one critic has called a "kind of redemption: the redemption of confession, of exposure." Finkielkraut uses very similar terms to explain his motivation for writing *The Imaginary Jew*: he expresses a yearning for "an undoing of the self" that will lead to "a kind of 'transcendence.' For Finkielkraut, transcendence represents a deeper knowledge of self, a glimpse of the possibility of a Jewish identity with "content" that is not a "purely sentimental" attachment to Jewishness based on the perception of oneself as a victim.

Much of *The Imaginary Jew* is dedicated to

a rather guilt-ridden reconsideration of how commitment to the postwar left in France called for the jettisoning of one's personal identity and memory, in favour of a dream of a utopian future. Finkielkraut describes his involvement in the 1968 student riots and other insurrectionary causes, arguing that these arenas included no "concrete" Jews, but only the much celebrated figure of the "Jew in the abstract, who functioned as a kind of standard measure for comparing all types of misfortune." Furthering his estrangement from himself, Finkielkraut's parents, who were survivors of the Holocaust, "kept the treasure of Yiddishkeit for themselves" so their children would

not look anything like the victims of the extermination . . . [and would be] raised according to two equally rigorous principles: one was conformity and personal ambition, and the other, intransigence and the cult of the dead.

It is this experience of growing up "surrounded by the vanished" members of his murdered family, but without any other viable, informed attachment to his forebears and their cultural heritage, which led Finkielkraut to experience his life as a Jew as an "imaginary" one.

The antidote Finkielkraut suggests for such an "imaginary" life is a recommitment to memory, to the "wisdom we have lost," and to a recovery of "Yiddishkeit" as one "of the world's unique cultures." *The Imaginary Jew* does not do any of this recovery work for us. It contains no nostalgic portraits of the vanished, nor does it posit a return to old folkways and belief. Finkielkraut invokes prewar Europe in an effort to shatter the stereotype of the Jew as either a fully assimilated facsimile of his Gentile countrymen or a throwback to "the olden days" in "black caftans and sidecurls":

Between the wars, the Jews of Europe were anything but a homogeneous com-

munity. . . . Yiddish was no exotic dialect, spoken by a few fossil throwbacks as the world left them behind. Three million Jews lived in Poland; their culture was a varied space in which the observant and the secular, Zionists and Bundists, Orthodox and Reform Jews, cosmopolitan citizens and inhabitants of the shtetls rubbed shoulders and confronted one another. You could keep the sabbath without looking like a bearded prophet, enjoy the Yiddish theater as well as Bizet's *Carmen*. . . .

If there is a blind spot in *The Imaginary Jew*, it is Finkelkraut's decision not to consider further the prospect of such a variety of Jewish life existing in the place where the Holocaust left poverty and absence. His ideal of cultural and religious pluralism is worthy of closer examination, both for the individual and for the nation state. It is, as well, an ideal that is presently under attack in the Serbian siege of Sarajevo, and one that is maintaining only a fragile existence in multicultural Montreal.

Finkelkraut's tone in *The Imaginary Jew* tends toward the cranky, the bitter and self-mocking, and the reader may find the author too sweeping in his criticism of Jewish conformity, too weary, in fact, of the very issues *The Imaginary Jew* sets out to examine. But Finkelkraut's treatment of postwar Jewish identity is valuable for its willingness to ask unsettling questions.

Mina Deutsch's *Mina's Story: A Doctor's Memoir of the Holocaust* raises another set of interesting questions regarding autobiography. A slim, clearly written volume, *Mina's Story* reveals the bitter divide that exists between the European and Canadian halves of the author's life. In Europe there was loss—of kin, home, youthful enthusiasms and early professional commitments. In Canada there was the challenge of a new beginning—children, a new language, the complications of adjusting one's experience and skills to a new world. The two halves of Deutsch's story are eerily discrete. In Poland, there is,

of course, no thought of Canada. In the author's description of her struggle to begin a new life in Regina and Montreal, there is no mention of Lwów or Borszczów or Przemyśl, where friends and family vanished like wraiths in the forests.

The reader does not question Deutsch's way of dividing her life into two movements—one of decimation, the other of reclamation. *Mina's Story* has, in quite a satisfying way, the quality of oral narrative. There is a natural, unencumbered tone to the prose that may resemble the author's way of telling her story aloud. But I finished Deutsch's book wondering, as I would if we were confidants and I had heard her describe her experiences, how the quiet drama of the postwar years could be recounted at such remove from Europe's shadow. In the telling of *Mina's Story* there is no clear sense of how the narrative can act as "a memorial" to the author's family, nor how it represents, as the publishers suggest, an "example of heroism, perseverance, and the indestructible will to live." Instead, it stands as the kind of straightforward account that can not make sense of the gap between life and death, between a new world and a very old one, between who the author was in Galician Poland and who she became in Canada.

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## The Masculine Face to Face

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**Frances Itani**

*Man Without Face*. Oberon P n.p.

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**Ann Diamond**

*Evil Eye*. Véhicule P \$12.95

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**Denis E. Bolen**

*Stupid Crimes*. Vintage \$14.00

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Reviewed by Sheila Ross

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Frances Itani's third collection of stories, *Man Without Face*, is on the whole a very accomplished collection. I must say straight

away that three of these narratives are wonderful—sparkling prose, subtle, and important—but while they dominate my overall impression of the collection, the disjunction between the brilliance of these and the mediocrity of some others is surprising. Two of the twelve, “A Gift of Forty” and “Sarajevo,” struck me as thin and unfinished, far less developed than the mean. The collection’s polemical title, pairing the concepts of identity and dignity, does announce the dominant theme. But the stories are about men only in so far as men are counterparts to women: Similar in their ultimate solitudes and their reflective demeanours, many of these narrative voices belong to women who are approaching or in middle-age, who have gained, either as a means of survival or as a mark of maturity, a little detachment from the excessive demands of loving and nurturing. Itani’s narrative style is most powerful when she manages a subtle evocation of the detachment of these inner regions from their immediate environments, familial, social, and geographic. “Touches” sums up this theme: a psychologist goes to a retreat only to encounter a man who becomes belligerent about her lack of solicitousness. When he finally confronts her, she signs an inability to communicate:

You touch your ears, you touch your lips.  
Are you deaf? Are you mute? Are you neither of these? You smile as you turn away.

The scene is a touchstone in the collection because the perverse yet familiar behaviour of this man implicates gendered behaviours at large, while her reaction underlines a more subtle theme in the collection: the peculiarities of communication wrought by these behaviours.

The three stories that stand out in this collection are the title story, “An August Wind,” and “Flashcards.” “Man Without Face” also explores tensions between aloofness and attempts at communication. Here, a woman feels the need not to create a

silence but to break one. It is a stirring portrait of the psychological effects of growing up in a family where the father’s alcoholism is a taboo subject. The story builds toward his daughter’s attempt to broach it with him, then ends with a poignant anti-climax. All the young woman’s idealistic resolve dissolves simply when at the crucial moment he will not meet her glance, “will not be looked at face to face.” In “An August Wind,” Itani is herself aloof in her use of dispassionate description. Imagistically, she juxtaposes the minutiae inhabiting a wind-gnashed shore, the near drowning of a child and her mother, and, in literal and complete detachment, an old woman watching the scene from afar. What we very nearly sense in this prose is how the obdurate elements can drown out and sweep away the little human drama. They don’t, though, and with a kind of Prattian optimism, the meaningless plungings of water and air are defeated by people literally reaching out to save each other.

Culminating the concerns of the collections is “Flashcards,” easily the best story here. A carefully researched historical narrative tells of a Japanese-Canadian family forced to leave Steveston B.C. for an internment camp across the Fraser river from Lillooet, and of, significantly, quiet resourcefulness in the face of stupidity and inhumanity. In a discontinuous chronology, each family member recounts various episodes. The last of these, “Momma: Fear,” begins by addressing the reader;

Do you know what I’m afraid of . . . what I fear the most? After 50 years—I mean, its been 50 years—after all this time . . . documents have been released, albums have surfaced, photos taken by police, boxes of papers purchased by archives, books have been written. . . . I will turn a page in one of these books and there I’ll be, my face frozen in impotence and fear. Frozen, turned back, my own face bearing witness to my own shame. This is what I’m afraid my eyes will see.

The reflexivity here is troubling, for Itani asks that we consider her attempt to communicate this history. Her narrative is not a document like those “released” but rather is one that weaves, as Rudy Wiebe once put it, the “piled up factuality” of the archive and museum into something much more. And we are meant to muse over what this something is. This piece is a very fine narrative not just in terms of its content but because of Itani’s wonderful control of concrete detail and the emotional experience.

Ann Diamond’s new collection, *Evil Eye*, is a competent and interesting series of narratives that makes fuller use than does Itani of the linking possibilities of the short story collection. In fact, the progression and interlinking of these eight narratives generates much of their significance. The first four narratives are explorations of meaningless or malignant sexuality, in particular, of female partners’ responses to forms of empty courtship. But towards the end of the collection, male-female relationships are set in the context of a patriarchal culture demarcated by the stagnancy of its religious mythology, inviting the reader to see a connection between them. In “Cairo,” for example, a god-chosen messiah is too apathetic and unsure of himself to take his calling seriously. The collection ends with “Evil Eye,” a narrative in which the dream-like sequences and parable-like abbreviation so characteristic of Diamond’s writing are working especially well. In it, the Christian god abandons his subjects to their own devices on a Greek island, where a tattered but pregnant Cassandra figure hopes for the return of her satyr-like husband. She has a “war wound” in her knee, a festering mouth that is nonetheless “eloquent” on the subject of “envy guilt revenge disease and longing.” So the collection ends both by completing the span between puberty and pregnancy (the first story, “Freedom,” depicts a taciturn 16-year old’s aversion to initiation into the politics of

making out. It is the only narrative where the female character seems adequately equipped), and by bringing fertility myth into conflict with Christian myth. This is not unfamiliar subject matter. Her critique of sexuality calls to mind Ian McEwan’s powerfully bleak collection, *In Between the Sheets* (1978). Like McEwan, she has no salve for the wound. Diamond’s collection is ambitious, but the reader may, as I, find the allegory a little overwrought at times, and crave more palpable detail and more fully developed characters to underwrite the vastness of the thesis.

Dennis E. Bolen has re-issued his first novel, *Stupid Crimes* (Anvil 1992) as part of a trilogy of Barry Delta novels (the second, *Krekshuns*, due out in spring of ’96). *Stupid Crimes* is a light read in the sense that meaning is largely local and literal. Bolen has enigmatically referred to its “in-your-face” prose style—there are no veiled meanings here. But while the reader may yearn for more to do, it is intriguing material and ultimately serious. Coming from good authority—Bolen works as a parole officer and has for 17 years—the novel satirizes if not the whole social-work model of parole, then certainly the predicament of the as-dedicated-as-can-be parole officer whose personal preoccupations and generous judgements tend to burden him with complicity in the crimes these parolees seem inevitably to commit. Compellingly, the novel tells of the imperviousness of the criminal to the well-meaning watch and ward of Barry Delta. By shifting the point of view from Delta to his clients, Bolen gets us inside their incomprehension of a world outside crime. The chasm between Delta and his clients, which only they seem aware of, creates humour, and the escapades of these hapless criminals, often rendered in the street talk of their milieu, has a kind of pulp fiction hilarity about it.

At moments, however, the prose skips along in threadbare macho colloquialism,

as here in the voice of Barry Delta: "John scowled, dragged the last on his smoke and fired the butt out the window. I tried to watch out the mirror on my side to see if it rolled off the bridge deck." I cannot decide whether or not the style here is parodic. No shadow voice sets this one in relief and prompts the reader to measure out the parody. So the reader is apt to ask whether this is the best Barry can do or the best Bolen can do. I found myself in this kind of position a little too frequently, and at other moments had the sensation that Bolen is a man writing for men. Nevertheless, I paid close attention to what Bolen reveals about the world of parole, and enjoyed its facial expression.

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## The Spirit of Place

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**Terry Glavin**

*A Death Feast in Dimlahamid.* New Star Books  
\$14.95

**Verna J. Kirkness, ed.**

*Khot-La-Cha: The Autobiography of Chief Simon Baker.* Douglas & McIntyre \$22.95

Reviewed by William J. Scheick

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The Native peoples and the colonizers of Canada both possessed a sense of place. The colonizers valued the land in material and practical terms, whereas the Native peoples valued it in spiritual and mythic terms. Neither side was quite able to grasp or appreciate the mental geography of the other, with the result that tragic misfortune has characterized the history of colonized North America to the present day. This conflict between different perceptions of place underlies Simon Baker's oral account of Squamish adjustments to new ways and Terry Glavin's documentary of Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en efforts to instate their territorial heritage.

In both books reactions to the potlash, outlawed in Canada from 1880 to 1951, represent these two perceptions of place. The

funereal practice of bestowing numerous gifts, commonly running into thousands of dollars, has for decades struck non-Native observers as wantonly wasteful of time and property. Such observers tend to rebuke the traditional Native custom in light of their own European view of land, a view that encourages the acquirement and preservation of property. In Native societies which hold the potlash in esteem, however, the practice is understood as an honorable institution, an expression of neighbourly gratitude to family members and friends who cherish the memory of the deceased. The potlash, in short, suggests that the value of physical property is like the value of the land, precious primarily in terms of its non-corporeal, its spiritual dimension. The wealth so coveted by Anglo-Americans is, accordingly, converted by these Native-Americans into the immaterial asset of honour, which reinforces kinship and friendship.

The incongruity of these two notions of property is a key feature of the conflict between Native advocates and business interests in British Columbia and other provinces. In his brief career as an actor, for example, Chief Baker traveled forty miles north of Squamish, where he witnessed the devastation of clear-cut logging practices. "Our people wouldn't think of doing something like that," he observes, "It's spiritual things that we believe in." Glavin similarly documents the ongoing Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en struggle, especially during the years 1987-1990, to contain the rapacious logging of middle-western British Columbia. As evident in their numerous road blockades and the legal case known as *Delgam Uukw versus The Queen*, the Native chiefs want the courts to declare that their traditional lands are unceded and are thus exempt from provincial law.

Behind the Native claim in this instance is a profound belief in an ancient city-state known to the Gitksan as Dimlahamid and to the Wet'suwet'en as Dzilke. While no



archeological evidence of this place has been found, small supportive anthropological clues have surfaced. But finally and typically, the physical actuality of this ancient city is much less important to the Native claimants than it is to their legal opponents. In the Native view, Dimlahamid is as much a spiritual as it is a physical place, a “reality” potentially incarnated again and again. Such an idea implicitly challenges the “reality” of the Anglo-American conception of British Columbia; in the Native view, the province too is only a mental construction, a myth.

If Glavin’s book discloses the disturbing extent to which Canadians have historically resisted an understanding of the Native perspective, Chief Baker’s autobiography lives up to his Squamish name—meaning Man with a Kind Heart—whenever it maintains that now each culture is learning from the other. “We can work together,” the chief declares, advising Native youth to learn both cultures.

Although Chief Baker’s octogenarian oral recollections are on the whole very sketchy, fascinating tidbits of information emerge, such as his claim to have been a main source of *The Legends of Vancouver* (1911) by Mohawk poet Pauline Johnson. Glavin’s book is far more detailed and far more passionate. The incomplete story it tells is a dark tale with just enough light for the reader to hope that Chief Baker’s faith in our ability to appreciate each other’s mental geography is after all possible.

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## Postmodern Paralepsis

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**Glenn Deer**

*Postmodern Canadian Fiction and the Rhetoric of Authority.* McGill-Queen’s UP \$39.95

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Reviewed by Winfried Siemerling

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The ability of avant-garde art to induce social change has always been disputed. Do

experimental art forms effectively disrupt hierarchical patterns of communication and interpretation? Can they contribute directly to democratic or anti-authoritarian agendas? Questions like these troubled the revolutionary aspirations of the French surrealists in the 1920s and 30s, featured again prominently in the Expressionism debate, and were highlighted in particular in George Lukács’s indictment of non-realist art and modernism. Closer to home and more recently, postmodern and postcolonial relations have been discussed in terms of both confluence and contradiction, and have produced often conflicting critical practices. More generally, textual de-hierarchization and the deconstruction of unitary subjects have been either hailed as effective critical responses to existing power structures or decried as their ultimate negative consequence

Glenn Deer invites us to reflect on the relation between innovative art and authority in the context of six “post-realist” anglo-Canadian novels, from *The Double Hook* through *Beautiful Losers* and *The New Ancestors* to *Badlands*, *Burning Water*, and *The Handmaid’s Tale*. At the beginning of his analysis of the power relations that are scripted in these texts, Deer directs our attention to the views of several prominent critics and postmodern writers with respect to the anti-authoritarian or liberating aspects of postmodern fiction. According to Deer, among Canadian writers and theorists, Frank Davey’s positions exemplify Herbert Marcuse’s belief in the power of formal discontinuity and fragmentation as forms of aesthetic resistance that reach beyond the confines of art. George Bowering’s stance is identified with a more aloof insistence on the anti-mimetic logic of textuality; the specific difference between texts and the pre-discursive realm prevents here any direct and causal relations between experimental work and social change. Finally, Linda Hutcheon and

Robert Kroetsch are cited for the deconstructionist caveat that definitions are not displaced, subverted, or "unnamed" from positions of ideological or epistemological innocence. Yet postmodern texts have also been seen as highly manipulative (Deer refers to Brian McHale; Sylvia Söderlind makes a similar point in the Canadian context); and for Graff and Jameson, we are reminded, postmodern texts typify rather than critique aspects of consumer society.

Deer's main project, however, is to contrast theories and beliefs with what texts "do" rhetorically in their construction of authority. In order to understand how "novels either promote critical understanding of society or somehow disarm our intelligence," he employs a version of rhetorical analysis that scrutinizes the interactive dimensions of writing and reading. While on one level Deer's inquiry is concerned with the social and political arguments that appear in texts, he concentrates more specifically on the rhetorical forms that construct various levels of addresser-addressee relations. It is here, Deer contends, that the implicit propositions concerning authority come to the fore and allow us to read literature as a form of social discourse. Using the terms offered by George Dillon in *Rhetoric as Social Imagination*, Deer proposes to read the different "footings" (impersonal/personal, distant/solidary, superior/equal, confrontive/oblique, formal/informal) that writers use to script varieties of social relationships with their imagined addressees. But not only authors imagine and construct implied author positions and implied readers. Readers do the same; and the liberating potential claimed on behalf of postmodern fiction, Deer argues, hinges on a practice of resistant reading that can circumvent the auctorial and authoritative manipulations often hidden behind anti-authoritarian narrative stances.

For instance, Deer finds himself resisting

the "vatic aspirations" and authority of Watson's implied author, which contrast with the characters' lack of control over their actions and the epistemological uncertainty that reigns in *The Double Hook*. Deer suggests that this narrative voice asks readers authoritatively to emulate fatalistic passivity. In *Beautiful Losers*, he compares the denunciation of cultural colonization with the implied author's sympathies for characters seduced "by the comforts of a surrender to authority and power in their private and public lives." While the juxtapositions and handling of different points of view in *The New Ancestors* are seen to script reading transactions that clearly promote engagement with political reality, Deer's analysis of *Badlands* focuses on an ambiguous coexistence of a critique of male quest myths and a nostalgic yearning for such stories, although the reader is freed from positions of passivity. Yet, in Deer's reading, textual ambivalence toward figurations of authority gives way to patterns of rhetorical control and manipulation in *Burning Water* and *The Handmaid's Tale*. The casual and innocent tone of Bowering's initial narrator and the novel's "postmodern aesthetics of ludism" that seek to avoid overt ideology are shown to collide with the "morality play" orchestrated by an authoritative commentator on history who targets George Vancouver's will-to-power in didactic fashion. For Deer, such deceptive "footings" are patterned on the trope of "paralepsis," which he defines, in the chapter on *The Handmaid's Tale*, as a "figure of verbal dissimulation and duplicity that asserts its lack of rhetoric while using rhetoric, that on the one hand critiques authority and on the other is complicitous with that authority, that feigns powerlessness in order to wield power. . . ." In Atwood's novel, Deer focuses on the credibility of the narrator whom he sees invested with all the powers of an authoritative implied author, engaging in discursive practices caught in the very techniques

of orchestrating horror and controlling the observer that appear as characteristic of the dystopian universe portrayed in the novel.

One can certainly argue with Deer's interpretations. If Cohen's "outrageously confrontational style," as he observes, compels us to resist, would this not begin to suggest that the "footings" are more varied than Deer's final emphasis on an "attraction to enslavement" might lead us to suspect? Do Offred's perspicacity and narrative power in *The Handmaid's Tale* really contradict her victimized situation? We might object that Bowering gives us all the necessary clues that his narrator's pretended innocence is a highly constructed one. And is it not the very hallmark of those postmodern practices that are most closely allied with deconstruction to insist that oppositional positionalities are by necessity entangled with what they seek to contest and to displace? Finally, do not some of the texts highlight the very complicity that Deer's hermeneutics of suspicion claims to uncover? Such questions, of course, only emphasize a point that Deer accentuates at the end: that the results of his own readings are controlled by the bias and interest that motivate his method, and therefore deserve, like any text, "resistant" readers who are willing to try out new versions of their reading selves, and may themselves become active producers of texts in the process. Whether we resist or agree in specific cases, Deer's precise readings and tightly argued rhetorical analyses of texts as social discourse certainly provoke a response. We look closer, in each instance, at the continually shifting play between narratorial stances, significances of each utterance, and the implied roles that readers are invited to try out. And beyond offering access to the rhetorical analysis of textual constructions of authority, Deer's approach also suggests that the function of literature in a social context—liberating or not—may have less to do with

formal features of the text than with the act of reading itself and the contexts in which readers practice their engagement with the "footings" they are offered.

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## Exiled Artist

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**Sam Solecki, ed.**

*The Achievement of Josef Skvorecky.* U Toronto P  
\$55.00/ \$18.95

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Reviewed by Rosemary L. Smith

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Josef Skvorecky is probably best known to Canadians for his novel *The Engineer of Human Souls*, winner of the 1984 Governor General's Award for fiction in English. Skvorecky was a distinguished author, critic, film writer and translator of American fiction in his native Czechoslovakia when he emigrated to Canada in 1969 to escape the relentless harassment and censorship accorded artists who refused to knuckle under to the repressive regime then in power. In Canada, Skvorecky became Writer in Residence at the University of Toronto, later joining the Department of English as a teacher of creative writing and American literature. Meanwhile he continued to write, publishing a number of fiction works in Canada and abroad. In 1972 Skvorecky and his wife, novelist Zdena Salivarova, founded Sixty-Eight Publishers in Toronto, which ultimately became the most important Czech publishing house in the world.

The remarkable qualities of Skvorecky's work gradually forged his reputation as an important writer in both the English-speaking and Czech-speaking worlds, the latter aided by the re-issue of his previously banned books in Prague in 1989. Despite international recognition, few works on Skvorecky are yet available in English; this fine group of essays is the first of its kind. Editor Sam Solecki has collected and commissioned contributions from around the

world, suggesting the range of Skvorecky's talents and offering a spectrum of personal and critical responses from those who read his work in Czech and those familiar with his achievements through translation.

Several of the essays provide a cultural and historical context necessary for understanding the way Skvorecky was forced to work against the background of political upheaval and ideological chaos common to pre-glasnost Eastern Europe. For readers not already familiar with Skvorecky's books and essays, one of the considerable benefits of this collection is a fascinating overview of the modern history of Czechoslovakia seen largely through the eyes of those who suffered it. Notable among these pieces is Milan Kundera's 1978 Preface to the French edition of Skvorecky's novel *The Miracle Game*. His analysis of the Prague Spring and its tragic aftermath—events which catapulted Skvorecky into the role of exiled artist—is essential reading. Also included is a revealing interview with Skvorecky in which he reflects on the shock of finding himself amidst anti-war protesters at Berkeley in 1969. With the grim memory of Soviet tanks fresh in his mind, Skvorecky was confronted by "a banner announcing 'Welcome to Prague'"—perhaps his first real taste of North American political naiveté, a theme he was later to explore in *The Engineer of Human Souls* and elsewhere.

Until recently, it has been difficult to separate Skvorecky's work from a political context, given his expressed concern with the impact of recent history on Czech culture. However, as Solecki points out, the "novels may be political, but their vision is ultimately anti-political and anti-ideological; the focus is on individuals trying to evade political demands in order to live lives of freedom and common decency." To demonstrate that Skvorecky is much more than a political writer, this collection contains illuminating discussions of his fiction by Canadian and European critics. George

Woodcock, for example, sees Skvorecky's *Engineer* in the tradition of Turgenev, Stendhal and Conrad, showing how "political events and systems shape the lives of the characters," but emphasizing the role of the separate, alienated person who resists totalitarian authority. Other essays center on such non-political aspects as the author's religious vision, his use of the dimensions of irony, his narrative innovations, and the integration of jazz rhythms in his style (Skvorecky is a well-known expert on American jazz). It should be noted that all of these essays are thoroughly readable and blessedly jargon-free.

Taken as a whole, this collection amply reflects Skvorecky's evolution from Czech writer to Czech-Canadian novelist and thinker. Out of what Solecki terms the "wound of exile," Skvorecky grafted upon his identity as Czech man of letters a new career: interpreter of two cultures in two languages. He has often been asked why he continued to live in Canada after the democratization of his homeland. After 23 years in his adopted country, he answered simply that Canada "gave me freedom." Pressed for a definition of freedom, he added, "like anybody who was ever forced to live in 'unfreedom' I don't really need a definition." Perhaps his greatest gift to us has been his ability to transmit the complexities of life in "unfreedom" to those who take its opposite complacently for granted.



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## The Art of Clothing

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**Judy Thompson**

*From the Land: Two Hundred Years of Dene Clothing.* Douglas & McIntyre \$29.95

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Reviewed by Patricia Vervoort

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“Extraordinairement ridicule,” was the Dene response to seeing, for the first time in the late 18th century, the clothing of the Northwest Company traders. The practicality of Dene clothing, for warmth in winter, for protection against insects in summer, and for ease of movement, is the subject of this thorough study. Based on collections in major museums, especially in the Canadian Museum of Civilization, historical garments are analyzed with the help of writings by explorers and traders, oral traditions, and the input of contemporary Dene needlewomen. Photographs of articles of clothing are supplemented with archival photographs of clothing being made and worn; line drawings analyze the patterns of construction and the ornament. Indeed, while the ornament is said to raise the clothing to an aesthetic expression, the “form follows function” aspect of the clothing itself is aesthetic. The amount of decoration was an expression of the wearer’s status and, also, since the clothing was made and adorned by women, it was a means for a woman to express her love for her husband and family. “Status accrued through sharing and giving away, rather than in accumulating.”

The entire process of preparing the furs, the tools used to scrape the hides, the needles of bone, the different techniques for joining leather and fur, and the materials used for ornament are traced in photographs supplemented by the texts of historical documents. To provide a complete set of winter clothing for an adult, eight to ten caribou skins were required. In the Dene culture, the men would hunt the large land mammals, but the women, singly and collectively, provided the labour and skills to transform the

skins into wearable garments. The gradual encroachment of trade goods, particularly in the area of tools-like needles, knives and beads, gradually replaced the traditional bone tools and porcupine quills. Alexander Mackenzie remarked on the popularity of beads, even in preference to iron tools.

Throughout this study, the information provided by oral traditions is important and reinforced not only by the photographs and artifacts, but also by the oral citations recorded from Dene needlewomen; many of these first-hand accounts were collected for *From the Land*. For example, the skills needed for finishing and adorning skins were passed on from mother to daughter. As Monique Sabourin said, “My mother taught me everything a woman should know . . . I did everything exactly as I saw her do it. She would never tell me how to work, she just showed me.” Women who sew, now and in the past, contribute significantly to the family economy.

In addition to studying the clothing, in progress and completed, *From the Land* also records the history of the Dene, their past and present lifestyles, and their strong traditions that survive despite the changing times. The gradual encroachment of traders and settlers altered the details of Dene clothing construction and decoration, but the clothing continues to be produced as trade goods. In the past, some garments purchased from trading posts were worn with their tags to announce that the clothing was new. Recently, young Dene and Métis couples have chosen to be married in Native-style clothing. As Thompson concludes, this custom is a “non-verbal communication, expressing ethnic affiliation and pride in Native ancestry.”



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## Origins

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**C. J. Taylor**

*Bones in the Basket.* Tundra Books \$17.95

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**Song Nan Zhang**

*Five Heavenly Emperors: Chinese Myths of Creation.* Tundra Books \$19.95

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Reviewed by Gernot Wieland

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"Where do we come from?" This is a question inevitably asked at one time or another by children, and C. J. Taylor's book *Bones in the Basket* and Song Nan Zhang's book *Five Heavenly Emperors* give different answers to that question. Taylor has collected the creation stories of the Chuckchee, the Cree, the Mandan, the Modoc, the Mohawk, the Osage, and the Zuñi peoples, and Zhang presents those of the Chinese people. All of them make fascinating reading, for children and adults alike.

Westerners reared on biblical stories will probably first search for overlaps between the biblical account of creation and those of the First Nations and Chinese, and they will not be disappointed. For the Zuñi there is a Creator who first creates light; the Mohawk tell of a mythological figure named Young Tree who "took some red clay and molded it into the shape of a human being"; in the Chinese account there is a goddess with the name Yuwa who "picked up a handful of yellow clay and rolled it around in her hand . . . she tried molding a little statue to look like some of the gods she knew in heaven. When she was finished, she put it down and, to her astonishment, it came to life." Before creation, water covers the earth in Cree, Zuñi, Osage, Mohawk, as well as in the biblical accounts. And in the Chinese account the newly created world is threatened by a flood, in a mirror image of the Flood of Noah.

More intriguing, though, are the many differences between the Western and non-Western stories. Westerners, for instance, are schooled in counting four elements; the

Chinese count five: earth, fire, wood, gold, and water. Where Westerners are used to four points of the compass, the Chinese add a fifth: the centre. These five points of the compass are associated with five gods: Xuan Yuan with the centre, Shennong with the south, Fushi with the east, Shao Hao with the west, and Zhuan Xu with the north, and they, and their relatives, create the world and teach the humans to build dwellings, to grow food, to make fire, and to read the Chinese alphabet.

While the basic pattern in the Chinese mythology with its relationship between god(s) and humans still largely overlaps with that of the West, the First Nations stories contain elements not found in either Western or Eastern traditions. The Chuckchee, for instance, have Big Raven create continents, rivers, and mountains from his feathers, and animals from chips of wood he found on the newly created earth. And Spider Woman spins the first woman. The Cree, on the other hand, have two creators, the Beaver, who wants the world to be water, and Wisagatcak, who wants it to be earth. In these First Nations stories the gods of Western and Eastern mythology are replaced by mythological animals. These narratives no doubt flow from the more intimate relationship between First Nations peoples and Nature, and in turn foster an attitude in which Nature has dominion over them rather than they over Nature (cf. Genesis 1:28).

Although these books can give rise to mythological speculations and comparisons, they are not written to alienate children. Quite the contrary: the style of both books is best compared to that of fairy tales, simple, straightforward, unadorned, and telling the story with the least number of words. The simplicity, however, is deceptive, since the style is also evocative, almost magical, creating, like the creators in the stories, an entire universe from a few simple elements. The power of the words is

enhanced by the illustrations. Taylor's and Zhang's illustrations are masterpieces, firmly rooted in their respective cultures, and telling, or commenting on, the stories in a different medium. These books are excellent acquisitions for any child's or school's library.

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## Magical Word Collage

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**Diane Schoemperlen**

*In the Language of Love.* HarperCollins \$24.00

Reviewed by Sharon R. Wilson

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Diane Schoemperlen's first novel, *In the Language of Love*, offers a revealing look into the anger, guilt, passion, pain, healing, and joy of one woman's relationships with parents, lovers, husband, and son. The novel's innovative structure—one hundred chapters, each focusing on one of the stimulus words of the Standard Word Association Test—supplies the ground nourishing the dazzling images and the word play that are this novel's greatest strength. The novel begins with "1. TABLE" and "THE MOTHER" slapping plates down on the blue arborite kitchen table. "The father" pretends not to notice his wife's anger while "the daughter," who later buys a similar table, thinks she will die if she has to eat another meal off the brown-and-white plaid plates with "these people." It ends with "100. AFRAID" and Joanna, having penetrated "the dialectic of faith and fear" to find joy, successfully surviving the myth-laden Canadian snow at home with her own family. Following an associational rather than chronological pattern sometimes resembling Morag's exploration of memorybank movies in Laurence's *The Diviners*, Joanna retrospectively experiences some of the same problems, and "divines" some of the same insights, as do other characters in postmodern fiction, including those of Laurence, Atwood, and Munro.

For much of the novel, Joanna struggles through games of power and sexual politics, feeling damaged by her childhood, guilty about her mother's bitterness and anger, guilty about wanting to be an artist, disembowelled by her relationship with the married Lewis, and incapable of valuing herself. Like Atwood and Munro characters she sometimes feels amputated, dismembered, and a tourist in her own life; she would like to be *real*, "picture-perfect." Often her word associations, as in Chapters 10, "HOUSE," and 86, "JOY," reveal the insights that help her grow out of her partially self-imposed limitations—herself as statue of limitations—into the person who is more than a role or a lack.

In Chapter 10, Joanna makes a word collage resembling the collages she does as a visual artist. Like many of the chapters, "HOUSE" moves through the segmented time periods of Joanna's life, "grafted one on to another . . . seamlessly," from Esther and Clarence's "wartime" house with symbolic barbed wire, Joanna's dollhouse and school dream house, the unfinished house Henry shares that resembles their unfinished relationship, her and Lewis's fantasy house, Lewis and Wanda's hermetically sealed and abandoned house, and Joanna and Gordon's Laverty Street home. Unlike the others, in the latter, in the home she has finally achieved, "All the windows are open like smiling mouths, emitting soft music and laughter." As in the *Kitchen Window*, kitchen table, and war collages Joanna designs, she realizes that opposing sometimes disjunctive images can create a modernist unity: "Being an artist, now she has ulterior motives beyond her instinctive needs for archival order and memory. She still believes that if these needs are eventually satisfied, from them will issue clarity, meaning, and a coherent sense of reality." Later, remembering the assassination of President Kennedy, she recognizes that in her seamless grafting of memory bits and

pieces, “pulled from different places, different times, . . . you could never know any more what had really happened and perhaps it didn’t matter or perhaps you didn’t want to know.” Dreaming about rolling cabbages turning into heads while doing a collage series about fruits and vegetables, she also knows that “It is a matter of the way you look at things determining what you see.” Again like Atwood, Munro, and Laurence characters, she learns the magic of transformation in life and art.

Chapter 86, “JOY,” dramatizes Joanna’s growth. Receiving a note from Lewis five years after the end of the relationship, she dreams about his statement: “Hope you are well and happy now. I am happy enough.” He has scrawled this on the bottom of an invitation to the opening of his new art show. Joanna is working on a collage called *Landscape with Figures* involving “Chinese pictographs superimposed upon a mountainside, a small forest, a still lake, a cloudy threatening sky. On the lake there is a dock and on the dock she has drawn the Chinese characters for *man, woman, child, and dog.*”

Joanna feels Lewis must think the pain of their relationship “was a dairy product with the expiry date stamped on the bottom. . . . Perhaps he thinks the coast is clear, as if they have safely passed the requisite statute of limitations.” Joanna remembers when she told Lewis about the statue of limitations she imagined as Clarence and Esther discussed a famous criminal trial. This statue resembling classical ones of people with parts of their bodies knocked off once represented Joanna. Lewis also recognized himself in the statue and commented on the human tendency to self-impose limitations, to pull back from joy as well as despair; but, from Joanna’s point of view, he did nothing to change his life. In her dream Joanna reads the note in a room entirely filled with Lewis’s paintings. Lewis says “he has everything he deserves, if not everything he has hoped

for” and that, ironically, he is learning to repair small motors in his spare time. Joanna sees the word *ENTRANCE* at the bottom of the note. Despite Joanna’s irritating willful blindness to Lewis’s and her own selfish, destructive gameplaying in the novel’s past, now she imagines telling him that she has found the entrance to her own life. Her collage, unlike Lewis’s future art—less interesting than a window showing a tree—reveals the insight she has gained, the choices she has made, and the order she has created or superimposed on the “threatening sky.” Reminding us of fairy-tale patterns in Atwood’s work, for Joanna the statue of limitations is growing back its arms, feet, and head.

*In the Language of Love* depicts daily life—and love—in all its sensory delight and terror. Joanna pictures her grandmother’s death from blood poisoning by imagining a dirty needle in a sewing basket of holey socks. Many of her images are magical and unforgettable: Samuel’s flower-bud feet, photographs as lamps effortlessly shedding stories, the earth as a ball of taffy, Samuel’s heaven as a giant department store filled with toys and treats, and the bottomless thirst for happiness as a glass of water that refills every time it is drained. Refusing simplistic closure, the novel ends with “the splendid terrors of daily life”: the image of Samuel and Joanna waving Gordon home as Joanna imagines herself teetering on the edge of a crater on the moon, “which even now is filling up with snow.”





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## Re/appraisals

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**Camille La Bossière, ed.**

*Context North America: Canadian/U.S. Literary Relations.* U Ottawa P n.p.

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**Frank M. Tierney, ed.**

*Hugh MacLennan.* U Ottawa P n.p.

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Reviewed by Herb Wylie

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The purpose of *Context North America: Canadian/U.S. Literary Relations* is a timely one: to address “the question of *how* the literatures of Canada might aptly be studied, discussed, and disseminated . . . in these days of heightened discontinuity and increasingly ambiguous borderlines both between and within the many narratives that make up ‘North America.’”

The critical approaches within the broad context of Canadian-U.S. literary relations are fairly varied, and the collection does not strive for a “packaging” of its subject. *Context North America* is framed by two essays which address in a theoretically sophisticated fashion the complexity of continental literary and literary critical dynamics: J.J. Healy raises significant questions about the multiplicity and complexity of both Canadian and American literature and culture, disrupting the neat schematicism on which comparative approaches to the two literatures have often relied, and E.D. Blodgett provides an appreciation of the fine but slippery art of self-definition in Canada.

In between these two explorations of the play of continental mythologies and discourses, we find quite a mix. There are, of course, numerous comparative essays, with some elaborating the connections between American and Canadian writing—for instance, Michael Peterman’s essay on the parallels between the backwoods narratives of Caroline Kirkland in Michigan and of Susannah Moodie in Upper Canada, or Robert Thacker’s essay on Alice Munro’s American influences (predominantly Willa Cather and Eudora Welty)—and others,

such as Dick Harrison’s “Dialectic Structures in Fictions of the Wests,” asserting more of a disjunction between American and Canadian writing.

But there are also, for instance, some interesting literary historical approaches: Carole Gerson explores the importance of the American literary market for Canadian women writers from 1880 to 1940; and James Doyle revisits the cosmopolitanism-nationalism debate by focusing on the cross-fertilization between Canadian and American literary magazines. And Russell Brown revives thematic criticism within a post-colonial, “contestatory” context, contrasting the privileging of the “road” as a motif in American literature and of “home” as a motif in Canadian literature (though he doesn’t altogether avoid the question-begging on which the approach of his predecessors too often relied).

While *Context North America* is something of an assortment, it does engage interesting and pressing issues between Canada and the U.S.—ethnicity, cross-border regions, corporate capitalism are only a few—and sheds light on what will continue to be an extremely complex and conflicted relationship.

In his introduction to *Hugh MacLennan*, Frank Tierney anticipates the reservations with which a reappraisal of MacLennan’s work is likely to be greeted: “Close examination of [MacLennan’s] writing in recent years also raises questions about the depth of the quality of his work, his scope and inclusiveness, his modernism, and other questions that confirm the need of a reappraisal.” While this collection of essays certainly elicits a greater appreciation for MacLennan and his work, it also leaves a good many of those reservations intact.

“I should like to make it clear at the outset,” writes MacLennan’s editor, publisher, and long-time friend, Douglas Gibson, in the opening essay, “that I write to praise Hugh MacLennan, not to bury him.” The inten-

tions of the rest of the contributors, however, are less unequivocal. On the one hand, there is a definite sense that the collection is rounding out the scholarly record on an unquestionably canonical figure. The collection includes Elspeth Cameron's literary-biographical reassessment of MacLennan, and an annotated bibliographic update (1967-1992); Christl Verduyn's examination of MacLennan's letters to Marian Engel; James Steele's essay on the influence of MacLennan's dissertation on his writing; and Tracy Ware's look at MacLennan's contribution to the essay form. Frances Halpenny cements this impression with her concluding essay suggesting future directions for MacLennan studies.

On the other hand, when attention turns to MacLennan's novels—with perhaps the exception of *The Watch That Ends the Night*—the programmatic ideological and moral economy of MacLennan's writing becomes all too clear (whether recognized as such, as in—among others—Rosmarin Heidenreich's essay on *Two Solitudes*, or not, as in the essay by Steele). The contributors to the collection, as Halpenny notes, make use of “current modes of literary analysis,” and MacLennan's fiction doesn't bear the scrutiny well. Donna Smyth and David Leahy's feminist readings, for instance, succinctly demonstrate the patrist stance and phallogocentric discourse of MacLennan's work, compounding a sense of his limitations which grows as one progresses through the collection.

Such criticism of MacLennan's work is partly answered in *Hugh MacLennan* by the caution that MacLennan's aesthetic and achievement need to be viewed in historical perspective, and indeed the collection does much to underline his importance as a figure in Canada's literary past. However, as a response to Douglas Gibson's epitaph for MacLennan—“An artist”—this reappraisal is much less conclusive.

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## Multiple Selves

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**James M. Glass**

*Shattered Selves: Multiple Personality in a Postmodern World.* Cornell UP us\$28.95

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**Jeffrey T. Nealon**

*Double Reading: Postmodernism after Deconstruction.* Cornell UP us\$27.50

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Reviewed by Michael Zeitlin

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If, as it has become commonplace to say, the human subject is a “construction,” in one sense at least this subject is also a construction “of theory,” by which James M. Glass means primarily the (post)structuralist, anti-humanist, and anti-psychiatric writings of Foucault, Lacan, Deleuze and Guattari, Lyotard, and Baudrillard. These theorists are famous for their war on what Barthes in *Mythologies* calls “the essential enemy (the bourgeois norm),” by which is meant not only the capitalist system generally but also that agency of adaptation it reifies: the “central,” “coherent,” “healthy,” “integrated,” and “stable” Ego. For such theorists, the celebration of the Ego is itself the prime index of the subject's deep alienation and permanent self-division with respect both to his own mirror-image and the “Other” discourses which traverse, divide, and constitute him. To unmask the mystified and delusional coherence of the subject is to lay bare the truth of his multiple determination, hence fragmentation, by networks of discursive and institutional force. Glass observes that a dominant trend of postmodern thought discerns a creative potential in the decentering values of multiplicity, flux, heteroglossia, and dissemination; and in response to this tendency to celebrate the postmodern scattering of the subject, Glass launches a clinically based argument in support of centripetal strength.

In view of what he calls “the clinical naiveté of postmodern theorists,” and in the interest of resituating the subject within the psychosomatic texture of lived experi-

ence from which “theory” often tends to abstract her, Glass addresses the question, “What does it mean to live, on a day-to-day basis, with a fragmented, multiple self?” His empirical research takes him to the Sheppard and Enoch Pratt Hospital in Towson, Maryland, where he spends hours in conversation with a series of women afflicted with “multiple personality disorder.” Listening to their speech, he discovers that the experience of multiplicity is never “creative or playful or regenerative”; indeed, it is invariably terrifying and painful. Moreover, the scattering of the “core self” is almost always a violent repercussion of the ravages of childhood sexual abuse. Splitting and multiplicity are psychological effects of a massive defensive system arrayed around what must be postulated now that it is no longer “there”: a “central” space that has been shattered.

In this light, the therapeutic goal of modern psychiatry is clear: to restore to life-giving speech and meaningful circulation the dead and split-off regions of the soul; to reintegrate multiple selves into the functional coherence of an “identity.” Basing his approach in both the object-relations tradition of Melanie Klein and D. W. Winnicott, and in the feminist psychoanalytic theory of Kristeva, Cixous, and Irigaray, Glass insists on the importance of a strong and sympathetic maternal presence within the self’s experience of its own (psychosomatic) being. From this basis he proceeds to ask: in the absence of a resilient inner “identity” based on a sense of personal history, self-knowledge, and the narrative coherence of a working memory, how are the terrors of disintegration, madness, and abandonment to be warded off? How can there be an effective politics without a meaningful “identity”? How is the world to be survived and meaning to be achieved in the absence of a coherent Self capable of “functioning” as a conscious, creative, and volitional agent?

The main strength of the book is its

attempt to infuse our theories of subjectivity with an abashedly humanistic sense of the “person” and its capacity for intense modes of suffering. But the book is unsatisfying in certain significant respects. Glass is often reductive in his characterization of what he calls “the postmodern view,” giving us a kind of metaphorical pastiche, as opposed to a rigorous analysis, of its dominant claims. In his sympathetic attempt, moreover, to find a critical language and narrative stance adequately responsive to the enormity of the experience of the sexually abused, he fails to achieve a certain necessary analytical and theoretical distance from his subject. In response to an interlocutor’s long description of her ritual abuse at the hands of a satanic cult, whose historical existence, Glass informs us in a moment of astonishing circularity, is “confirmed through survivor accounts,” Glass tries to finesse his way past a range of critical issues: “Were these demons real? Strangely, it didn’t matter: what mattered is what people felt and believed.” The sympathetic impulse is impressive here, but it also prevents him from asking important questions about the relation of “manifest” and “latent” contents of speech. Glass offers no metapsychology, no theory of the complex interconnections of memory and repression, fantasy and reality, primary inscriptions and secondary elaborations, psychical and material modes of experience, the undeniable truth of human suffering and its modes of symbolic translation into the registers of speech and narrative form. The result is a book of admirable emotional commitment but disappointing theoretical value.

The divided subject is also a recognizable theme of Jeffrey Nealon’s book, which advocates a kind of purposive “splitting” of the subject in the name of what Derrida calls “the double gesture,” according to which any given act of thought or writing is encouraged to circle back upon itself in order to take account of its own location

within the disciplinary structures which control and enable the production of meaning and discourse in the first place. The double gesture implies, in this sense, the doubleness of self-consciousness: there is the subject who thinks even as he takes himself as an object of his own thought; and indeed, in this intelligent and very self-conscious book, Nealon never lets us forget that he writes primarily "as a person who teaches and studies literature within an institution."

The book is divided into seven chapters, each focused primarily on the disciplinary parameters of its subject. The first chapter assesses the consequences of "the professionalization of thinking that inevitably comes with the institutionalization of theory." Chapter two traces the disciplinary itinerary of deconstruction in America, offering a useful discussion of the differences between Derrida's work and the work of de Man, Culler, and others. Chapter three brings Foucault into the discussion of the "discipline" of literary criticism. Chapter four is an ambitious attempt to "theorize the postmodern" and think "beyond the end of metaphysics." Chapter five, to me the most interesting and useful of the book, undertakes a partial deconstruction of both Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* and the "totalizing" claims of some of the book's influential critics. Chapter six takes up questions of the university and the canon in connection with the subversive project of the "Language" poets. Chapter seven returns explicitly to Derrida in order to argue that his work enables us to rethink "the ruling institutional, philosophical, and ideological field in which the game [of criticism] is played."

For Nealon, then, this work of "rethinking" is synonymous with "the double reading and writing of deconstruction." But he is at pains to insist that this deconstructive double gesture should never be reified as a fixed program or method: "Rather, it is a

matter of marking and negotiating paths through specific texts and institutions while simultaneously attempting to open them up to something other; in short, it is a matter of double reading." This cryptic "something other" enjoys a purely relational existence: Existing "outside" any determinate/determining frame, it tends to be designated by such terms as the "undecidable" or the "irreducible," that amorphous and indeterminate realm lying beyond the impulse toward "totalizing closure."

In *Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Fredric Jameson provides an effective response to this double tendency to celebrate "openness" and to demonize "closure": "I suspect, indeed, that there are only a finite number of interpretive possibilities in any given textual situation, and that the program to which the various contemporary ideologies of pluralism are most passionately attached is a largely negative one: namely to forestall th[e . . .] articulation [of . . .] interpretive results which can only lead to embarrassing questions about [. . .] history." Here I can give only one brief example of Nealon's "negative program." Nealon writes that "the holocaust remains an event that a rationalist history cannot explain within its own logic, insofar as that logic is itself implicated in the event. . . . As an irreducible 'event,' the holocaust shatters any possibility of accounting for it in what is traditionally called historical terms." There is no time here to do any justice to this argument (it would be unfair to label it "absurd" without explaining why); and so, in the meantime, as the saying goes, "you be the judge."

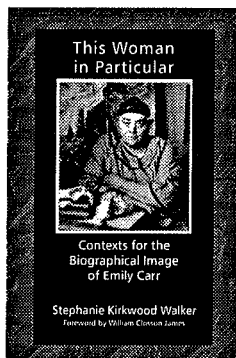


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## James Sinclair Ross (1908-1996)

David Stouck

*This is what we know about Sinclair Ross, the writer:*

He was the son of poor Saskatchewan homesteaders, but was descended from a family with claims to culture and social position: his maternal grandfather was a Scots Unitarian minister; his maternal uncle, Sir John Foster Fraser, was knighted as a parliamentary reporter and essayist. He grew up without a father. His mother left the homestead taking her youngest child with her and made a living as housekeeper for a series of bachelor farmers. Instead of a father she provided her son with books. But when he was sixteen she decided he should leave school and enter the bank where he made his living for the rest of his life. In Winnipeg in the 1930s, still living with his mother, he wrote the short stories ("The Lamp at Noon," "The Painted Door," "Cornet at Night") that have been frequently anthologized and have made his name familiar to students throughout the country. And there he wrote *As For Me and My House*, the novel often said to mark the beginning of contemporary Canadian fiction. We know that it was by a fluke of personal taste that the novel was published in New York in 1941, that it only sold a few hundred copies and then disappeared from sight until its reissue in the New Canadian

Library in 1958. We know that other novels were written with wonderful titles like "The Wife of Peter Guy" and "Price Above Rubies" and that they failed to find publishers and are now lost to our literature. He served in London during the Second World War, then worked for twenty-two years at the Royal Bank in Montreal, publishing only one novel, *The Well*, and five stories in all that time. He retired to live alone in Europe and from there he observed with wry humour his growing reputation, and published *Whir of Gold* and *Sawbones Memorial*, the latter to wide critical acclaim. But he made no public appearances and refused almost all interviews, and for most Canadian readers Sinclair Ross was a name without a face.

*And this is what we remember about Jim, the man and our friend:*

After he became ill with Parkinson's Disease he returned to Canada and eventually moved to Vancouver, living for a time in the city's West End, then for ten years in hospital. There the recluse of Canadian literature proved a witty and welcoming host to the grateful readers who visited him. He would talk about his boyhood in Saskatchewan, his apprentice years in Winnipeg, and about his love for classical music, painting, and horses. But he was acutely sensitive to his audience and bent his words to his listener, words that often seemed as chiselled and apt as the language of his best prose. Always there was an effacing of the man and an illumination of his subject. Always there was a preference to be a listener

rather than a speaker, to add a modifying clause to someone else's sentence. He loved words and phrases and dictionaries.

*But his importance lies in what he did not tell us:*

To his biographers, he told his life story. Readers can see clearly its public face in the fiction he wrote about farmers and horses and can glimpse its private lineaments encrypted in the tangled relations of the characters in his novels. But he did not want *to express himself*; rather he wanted us to see some of the things he saw. The stark and unforgiving beauty of the prairie was one of those things, captured with all the aching loveliness of something experienced alone. He wanted us to see the society we have created and to feel uncomfortable with religion as coercive rhetoric, with our attitudes to race, and with our rigid constructions of gender. He also wanted to

remind us that human beings have a transforming capacity for love and kindness. But he did not presume—grade-eleven education—to teach or instruct; rather, through the evasions of Mrs. Bentley in *As For Me and My House* and the unnarrated dialogues and ruminations of the townspeople in *Sawbones Memorial*, he made *us* the authors of his texts instead. As Robert Kroetsch has suggested, he embraced his historical moment with a kind of invisibility that lets us better see ourselves and the world around us. And in so doing he taught us a new way to read, for in the writing of Sinclair Ross there is no author to be found, no secret meaning to be explained. If Roland Barthes' now famous reformulation of the writer has application, nowhere in Canadian literature is the idea more visible. Ross's stories and novels will continue to be read, but we now ask,—how to write a biography when there was no author?



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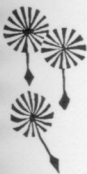
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