

# *Canadian Literature*

A Quarterly of Criticism and Review Autumn/Winter 2001 \$29

## 170/171



## Nature/Culture

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# Canadian Literature / Littérature canadienne

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## A Quarterly of Criticism and Review

Number 170/171, Autumn/Winter 2001

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# Nature/Culture

## Scenes from a North American Boyhood<sup>1</sup>

Iain Higgins

### Neither Annal Nor Chronicle, & Certainly Not History

Edges lit to glowing by a hot light. Dust? Aprons?

A pig was buried in a kind of fire, feasted on later, when the cowboys  
returned on horseback: *¡comemos!* let's eat!

Scenes come to mind as if they never were not, like these that might have  
happened after the slow closure of his fontanelles.

Where was he then?

Someone with his name took part, and at the time a same someone called  
Juanito too.

Mexico, then? the mountains near Anáhuac, three, maybe four years old?

Butterflies uncrumple neatly into being, unlike kleenex, say, or rumours of  
memory.

*Jesus loves me yes I know for the Bible tells me so.*

What you don't know, the saying goes.

He was said to be south of the Rio Grande when the Berlin Wall went up  
and when two years later JFK went down, north again of 49 for sure when  
miniskirts, Apollo 11, and still later Paul Henderson.

Here and there in the late Holocene.

### 59/60

He would have crowned like his own sons, dropped in headfirst and blood-  
ied, been praised (briefly) for crying.

Hardly the last time he'd be a body o' trouble.

*Faint Cries Heard in Mountain Search*, said a birthday headline, confirming  
the horoscope: *Conditions change so be alert.*

*Perhaps you are a figure conscious femme*, the ad suggested, angling for any-

thing, or there's a new infant about. Well then, watch Baby gro-w-w-w with this silly-faced clown: just pull down his feet and oops! a metal tape that stretches to six feet high, quality that lasts—and figuratively speaking here's the way to regain your precious form: a do-it-at-home do-it-yourself beauty kit with beautibells and beautiboos, a whole new way to relaxation and loveliness.

This was a baby boom, and he was a late discharge, circumcised pro forma, unaware that China'd gone nuclear or that in the city of his starling birth a museum had acquired the Skagit Atlatl, its showpiece of local "prehistory."

The Greeks meanwhile were making an unexpected collective comeback: demography, democracy, numbers as the really real (no matter what, the clock picks up the pace).

*Hungry Asian Child* . . . was a picture on Page Five, asking *can science fill her rice-bowl?*

Not Homer but the Harbourmaster catalogued the flags of convenience in English Bay that November, the big canoes gone, spoils for export.

A creased photograph taken in the months after US Explorer VI shot the earth from 27,000 km shows a baby on a beach attended by a radiance he felt once rather than saw, called *Mum* when words.

### **Spare the Rod & Spoil the Child**

Male circumcision was once a mainly religious ritual, or what we might now call a cultural practice, though for a short time in the mid-twentieth century and mostly in well-to-do North America, it was a routine medical procedure—i.e., a cultural practice. Like much that we consider "Western," the business of surgically uncapping the penis may have had its origins in the eastern and south-eastern mediterranean region, not too far from where the notion of Truth with a capital *T* was likely invented. This Truth was once imagined as a naked woman hidden by a veil that was destined to be torn triumphantly away by the ablest of chaste-minded Truth-seekers, but in our time a better image might be that of the ungraspable which lies at the empty heart of a multilayered heritage onion—Peer Gynt's, I mean, though who knows what genetic engineering will do to our metaphors here (onions with artichoke hearts, maybe). Still, if we want to be true to the cultural history of Truth, then what better image than that of an uncapped penis tucked away behind figleaf or boxer shorts? As for the technical term *circumcision*, it comes to us through the Latin, a dead tongue whose imper-

ial and bureaucratic reach remains uncircumscribed even today. The word thus shares the verbal cutting floor with a set of adjectives that combine very neatly to conjure up the manly man: precise, concise, incisive, and (yes) decisive—which makes me wonder why I have yet to hear the outstanding male members of our society praised for being so *circumcise*. Charlemagne for one was certainly decisive, which might explain why he rescued the world's most famous foreskin for display in Paris. The numinous tissue in question belonged to Jesus, who lost it naturally—that is, for cultural reasons: his parents were Jewish—little knowing how valuable it would become as a medieval Christian relic. I have no idea where my own run-of-the-hospital-mill cutting is now—gone the way of all flesh and medical waste, I'd assume, like the placenta I shared with my mother, or my umbilical cord, tonsils, adenoids, appendix, wisdom teeth, and left femoral head. If I were of another mind, though, or living in another era, I'd probably wonder whether I might get this and all the other parts back with the Resurrection of the Body. These days, as I learned when my own sons were born, parents get a choice and a pamphlet, the latter taking care of the necessity of informed consent. And why would an agnostic gentile now consent to a *secular* surgical procedure performed without anaesthetic? Newborn babies, it seems, were not conceded the capacity to feel pain, which put them in the same leaky categorical boat as much of cartesian Nature and non-Euro-american culture. The practice is no longer recommended, except (yes, you guessed it) *for cultural reasons*, since the Canadian Pediatric Society says it knows of no medical benefit to circumcision—and besides, it costs extra. Apparently, medical science has discovered that regular washing will keep the penis clean. But then washing, I suppose, was the problem in the first place, since cleanliness, which was once next to godliness, raised the business of moral hygiene, or, to put it in an even more outdated idiom, of handling sin—and who wants to do that? (I know, I know: almost everyone, and not just since 1960, when Lady Chatterley and lover came out in Penguin paperback, officially unashamed.) The mid-twentieth-century North-American cultural practice of routine hygienic circumcision, then—and this is the moral you've been waiting for, for what is history without its lessons?—belongs to a peculiar historical moment from which we have not yet entirely escaped: a moment in which a long-standing obsession with the *unnatural* (*contra naturam*, as some Christian theologians have said for centuries) unveiled itself as part of the unnamed Western war against Nature—which is another way to read the phrase *contra naturam*

(*nature control*), and this of course means that the back-to-Nature movements dear to my uncircumcised heart are caught in the same historical eddy, though they have the admirable distinction of trying to love the Enemy, whose ranks include not only singing whales and baby seals, but ticks and flesh-eating bacteria. Maybe that's what Beckett's Estragon meant, when he said *You and your landscapes! Tell me about the worms!* Vladimir unfortunately couldn't (*We've tried that*, he said, when Gogo suggested turning *resolutely towards Nature*), and I can't quite tell you either, except metaphorically (as here), but Darwin could—his least famous ground-breaking book was called *The Formation of Vegetable Mould, through the Action of Worms, with Observations on Their Habits*. In this respect, Rachel Carson was a better guide than Didi, since she'd read her Darwin. Her *Silent Spring* was first published in 1962, only a year after the great white hunter Hemingway killed himself and barely two years after I was fixed for life, and its title raises a related matter—whether in the midst of our war we'd notice a natural silence anyway, what with *walkmans* and the volume of ambient noise in the cities where most of humanity now lives. When a baby cries without anaesthetic, does anyone hear it, and if so, do they hear it as pain? Thalidomide was one of the many *don't worry, be happy* drugs our culture has a passion for developing, but like laudanum it went to the mothers first, not the babies. I don't remember my own circumcision, so I don't know what I felt, but I think I remember something else from a black-and-white news clip of a few years later when the space race was shifting into earth-abandoning overdrive, or maybe from a TV documentary I've seen more recently: the decisive way in which the precisely crew-cut (and circumcised?) chemical-company scientist proved to us viewers that DDT was safe by eating a handful himself. The trouble was, the guy didn't lay raptor eggs.

#### 60/61

Sudden light from the dark, water streaming through puzzled fingers, a baby brother out of the blue.

Kitchen cupboards too opened onto whole other worlds: nothing more ungraspable than what's at hand, nowhere stranger than this here.

Nowhere.

Feet first, and the hands are freed for mischief like the toothed mouth, open to everything.

He could always touch the sky but was so slow to realize—out on a limb before he knew it, just like a toddler.



A queer fish, you could say, finless panhandler on the deep sky's floor, his  
element broken air—which broken another way might be music, or  
mockingbird song.

The clock, though, only picks up the pace, not the pieces, and puzzles  
remain despite altered knowing.

Inklings of a former cloud chamber.

## 61/62

Words followed in walking's wake, and it was suddenly coup time on the  
home front.

4,000 miles overseas for a family visit when he said he was leaving for  
Canada on foot, misguided already.

*Keek-o.*

Never saw his parents' parents again.

*Och, mo chràdh!* and the fireman came to free his head from the railings.

This means, maybe, that Augustine was right: the mind like the will is too  
narrow to contain itself entirely—both godlike and childlike.

Not a fin-tailed two-tone caddie, but a grey Morris Minor, the car was just  
big enough to hold the four of them as they set off for Mexico, his father  
*transferred*.

*¡Cuidado niño!* the grown-ups would shout for the next two years.

Gaelic, Spanish, Glaswegian slang, amongst other tongues while his was tak-  
ing shapes.

*Skookum* was not Scottish in the end, but Chinook jargon—*yukwa wawa*,  
home talk and time travel.

Was this what the horned toad knew on its journeys in his shoebox?

## Yes & No

*No is the wildest word we consign to language* said Emily Dickinson, which  
must explain why children learn it as one of their very first and use it so often.  
A human infant is after all nothing less than a wild creature facing the same  
fate as our ancestors imposed on the dog more than 10,000 years ago. Yet the  
very instrument its elders use to help domesticate it is what one day gives  
that child an evolutionary leg up on the obedience-schooled canine—whose  
own leg up (a hindleg, of course) mostly allows for the fluent territorial  
expression of a terse and scented, graffito-like idiom: *Dogboy was here*. No  
less than dogs and their human masters, language too has wild roots, and these  
can turn up unexpectedly, exposed sometimes even by the boustrophedonic

ploughblading of agribiz prose, like a mare's nest of soil-sweetening worms or a den of feral housepets catching a whiff of old joys and suddenly homing in for a taste of what was. The leash-chain of kindergarten and greenhouse syntax teaches us a convenient social discipline, certainly, but its binding sequentiality can also and fortunately morph abruptly into unforeseen Ariadne's threads winding their alternative ways out of our institutional labyrinths towards aphasia, say, or freedom, other worlds, black comedy—the old arrangements now disclosed as an underground dancefloor of rhizomes ramifying into ecstatic self-undoing, or maybe a divining rod or kite-string pulled towards visionary openings by other kinds of fluency. Even the mindless spellchecker looped into my wordprocessing program offers glimpses of wild hybrids in its staid semantic fields: try *haggis*, it suggests, or *your Highness*, whenever it wants to weed out the unknown *Higgins*. Who knows but *nix to that* might sometimes mean *right on to this*, since *yes—and yes I said yes I will Yes*—can be as wild a word as *no*—just ask Molly Bloom. Yet for those of us prone to *yes-and-no-ing* or *maybe-so-ing* our way about the world such wide-open wildness inhabits the future conditional, like those tantalizing displacements of answers to childhood questions: *I'll explain when you're older*. In my case the cagey adult shilly-shallying to which I am given between, say, *I will* and *I won't*, *I want* and *I can't* might be glammed up as a bent for contradiction. *There is a place* said Blake *where Contraries are equally true*, and I (maybe) am it: a mere generation away from the Victorians and a kid in the sixties. Then again the yes-and-no-ing might be put down to delayed cultural influenza. As a child after all I was exposed not only to the denatured viruses of the obligatory vaccines, to which I owe my survival—fourteen BC children had already died of polio the year I was born, including a Mission boy the day before my birth (some four decades earlier my father lost one of his two sisters in childhood, though all seven children in my mother's family survived their early years). I was also exposed to attenuated fragments of Gaelic, the language of my mother's lost island world. One of the oddities of her other language, which is as strange and wild as any human tongue, is that it lacks both *yes* and *no*—hence (no doubt) my failure to distinguish between them. But then in Gaelic *I love you* comes out as *(there) is love at me on you* and *cracas* is the word for conversation. See what I mean? Then again—again—my unBlooming hedging might be the result of a curious fact: my earliest memories are of a wildness experienced in a language I gave up as well as lost when we returned from Anáhuac to Burnaby, where suburb and school

alike had no space for a pair of blond-haired brothers and their secret foreign code, their *espantoso español*. The horned toad I still feel in my hands right now had another name for me then, and my English is no match for that mute and coarse and living dryness I lugged about in the shoebox. In an old story the silver-tongued devil who lures the naked innocents out of paradise waits for them *squat like a toad*, but if my toad could speak it might take me back to that hot dry garden I carry nameless within me like a set of stills from a silent home movie, the kind American dads in those days shot with their 8mm cameras. That other world is still there, yes, but no I can't touch it with words. Even before I turned six Spanish no longer worked to open unknown worlds to me as it did that day in Mexico City when at foursomething I took my threesomething brother for a private tour on a public bus. I remember nothing of the hotel where we stayed but the bus stop in front, and I remember nothing of the bus but getting on and duping the driver who saw us as wee lost gringos till I spoke the now-forgotten magic words, and I remember nothing of our ride into the urban wild but I do remember crossing a busy downtown street after we'd gotten off somewhere for no particular reason, helped across by a traffic cop who noticed the hotel key sticking out of my back pocket and kept us at his kiosk till the angry gods arrived—and yes I'm sure the living hell we got came in both English and Spanish sprinkled with the odd *och, mo chràdh!* (*oh, my torment!*). Maybe I really do know what the removable toad learnt on its shoebox journeys, no?

## 62/63

Flashes of almost-memory, like inner constellations glimpsed in a gone sky. It looked like a strange paw with its thick white wrapper, but his father couldn't use the hand till the burn healed, let his sons wash the good one. How many sleeps till the hoped-for arrives?

Eyes tied when the piñata burst, he'd had to settle for the handed-over, the still ungrasped.

Dailyness unfolded endlessly, line, circle, and spiral at once, so one pursuit was trying to grasp the invented sequences.

You could call that bright cluster a bear, a plough, a wain, or a dipper, depending.

¡Cerveza, por favor! he demanded, having burnt his misapplied mouth.

Curiosity led to the wagon when the Mennonite farmer came to the door, and suddenly he was off on another excursion, rescued as usual by the cop on horseback.

All eyes like a potato, all ears like a maize, all thumb (tongue) like a beached whale—a wishful handful like any kid.

**63/64**

A rattlesnake, a stick, a shotgun blast—and nothing more except the snake halves in my mind now winding their disconnected ways away from the gone moment of truth itself.

Decades later I missed seeing the rattler my older son at almost the same age saw in a California desert.

If writing is, like any bodily pursuit, an aid to an untongued and housebroken memory, then memory might be an aid to writing, and here perhaps the displaced hunt returns to mind, led by the hand.

He took a dead duck to bed, having pulled the trigger of a gun bigger than himself, but I can't recall whether death was the puzzle then it is now, the dried blood almost gone from our flesh, or was this an embrace of historical dispossession, natural kinship?

All these were one once, or seemed so before I'd read the required writing, and are one again now: a cow, a cat, a hot milky stream, and his *me-help-too* hands.

The pronouns remain as slippery as ever, as if some coyote'd tossed us this ars grammatica, tail winking in homage to Penelope's shuttle.

The world was like what in my unclocked tongues, and how would I know? Blood on his brother's face till the face all but vanished, and the dog was put down.

Grown-up arguments in a room, two brothers clinging to each other in salt-teared uncertainty.

Not only poetry gets lost in translation.

**A Dog's Life**

The idea was simple to the point of idiocy. Take rats and spin them blindfolded on a record player to see if they got sick, and if so, what would stop their motion sickness beyond scrapping the experiment itself. I never found out. I left the lab before the trial was over, wishing I'd gone to Ellesmere Island instead—since as I know now that untaken journey might have led me to another life. I'd been offered a summer job on the island as a radio operator and handyman with a geological survey. The trouble was, I was supposed to be someone else. Wild Bill, in fact, the fifth-year mining engineer who lived next door to me in the UBC dorm and lugged his life about

in a crumpled midden of a suitcase, books, beer, and all. He'd decided to scamper off to something else and so talked me into wearing his deserted shoes (boots actually, bashed to a fine tenderness, the laces never tied). But I couldn't do the Mr. Bill thing, I thought, not as a second-year life-sciences student about to specialize in physiology, and besides I wasn't from Alberta, which was one of the other conditions of employment. I could recite the Krebs's Cycle, sure, but that was hardly the *Kalevala* or *The Cremation of Sam McGee*, and I could explain how to get alcohol from an aldehyde (in theory anyway), but the last rocks I'd bothered to study had been thrown at me. Escape from Ellesmere came in the form of another offer, and this time I was supposed to play myself (sort of). I'd done pretty well in a course on biopsychology—they didn't call it psychobiology for obvious reasons—and the prof thought I might like to monkey around with rats. I thought so too, or rather, since I had no other job on the horizon, I thought rats would unmask me less quickly and flagrantly than rocks—after all, I'd caught chickens by the ten thousands for pocket money in high school (the chickens themselves never went to school, of course, and neither did some of my co-workers, though a small few did do regular jailtime on weekends). I'd maybe forgotten how I'd gone vegetarian more than once during my stint on the chicken farm—or maybe I just didn't expect to see the rats again in meatmarket cellophane. The turntable rats were the workaday white kind familiar from newsclips, bred to be compliant even in the hands of a white-coated cyclops, but mine were two-tone, hooded like klanrats, jumpy and aggressive. Good thing I had to cut their gonads out, male and female both, the chosen rodents neatly etherized upon a table in the lab. They did get their purloined hormones back, but through a needle, in measured doses, after which I dropped selected "subjects" into a lilliputian glass arena to study the link between sex and aggression. It was hormonal all right, but since rats have no cerebral cortex, venerated traditions, or compulsory schooling, my results would likely have had little human use. I did learn one thing, though: to duck whenever I opened the boxes they were shipped in or the cages in which they were stored between bouts. I'd crack a new box open in Storeroom 101 and *whoosh* a squealing furball would rocket straight out at me, its hairless reptilian tail lashing like a pygmy bullwhip. I almost never saw the flying rat, though, and not just because the adrenal rush of terror always hit me first. I saw something else instead: that snarling white-toothed dogmouth lunging like a flame at my brother's still-undamaged face.

**64/65**

Trailing clouds of glory and suchlike.

That can't be said now (Chernobyl, Bhopal, ozone holes, the blazing shuttle).

A TV documentary I surfed through recently showed the oozy Xochimilco where we'd floated once, its Gardens pumped dry, but suburban lawns were good and green, gringo.

When fall came they must have packed up, headed north.

Then Disneyland apparently, since slides exist of a visit, though I remember nothing.

Everytime a gas station revealed itself on the long interstate home he had to pee, taken his father said by the wonder of flush toilets.

Yes, the world they re-emerged in had a way with things.

The first night back was spent in the crib from a forgotten life (already), and others after till boys' beds were bought.

Hardly a day disappeared without the night intervening.

This was the house his father'd built (four years ago), the appletree he'd planted then (Cox's orange pippin).

What he liked best was his new-friend's-dad-across-the-street's backyard chicken run, the warm eggs sticky in the straw.

Cosmos is another word for order come to think of it.

**65/66**

Unexamined lives were not for the living, which meant school.

*Ink pink you stink*, but they were neither Native nor Doukhobor, he and his brother, so fitting in was practically easy.

*Use your fists like this*, his father explained, and the lesson worked, mostly.

Conjuring up the smokes was easy after you'd gathered enough empties—*A packet of Player's for my mother, please* and Howie just handed them over—the trick was getting rid of the invisible smell.

A new bike remade the horizon he was learning by heart, but the first horse he rode had its own domain, and threw him.

The trolley-bus took them to Dr Chow's.

*Mummy, look at the garbagemen!* he said, seeing the staff in their medical whites.

*Onward Christian soldiers marching as to war* was sometimes a lullaby against the dark, the puzzled clock.

Birthday cards came from overseas addressed to young "Master" so-and-so,

and could lead to surprises—*The Big Rock Candy Mountain*, for instance, his first 78.

*DP, wop, kike, dago, jap, chink*—mystery words that emerged in the suburban woodwork, but got forbidden at home, unheard now for how long? The engine on the family car had to be cranked first, yet this was already “the sixties,” the end of an era.

### **Worlds Worlds Worlds**

It’s an open question whether the world is more puzzling than another person, at least if you accept that every living being might be a microcosm of the all-encompassing whole. But then it’s an open question whether the cosmos itself is the whole caboodle, like, say, a plucked apple before we’ve bitten into it or let it rot in the fruit bowl, since we can’t know, can we? whether we can ever even think ourselves outside of this vast garden that’s home to our own backyard world-tree—or for that matter, whether we can even think ourselves outside of ourselves, beyond our own bodyself’s bonsai shrub. It’s the old archimedean-point thing, which the pointy-headed like myself tend to locate in our own starry-eyed cranial planetariums—as if a leap of the imagination could move the world. The funny thing is, though, it can, if mostly by moving us so that the world then seems altered ever after. But maybe those altering shifts ensure that *for us* the world continues to exist, just as the unnoticed saccadic flickerings of our primate-predator eyes allow us to go on seeing whatever we happen to be looking at (a dinner date, for instance). We are after all not only in the world but also consciously and even sometimes physically at a distance from it, and need ways to keep reminding ourselves of its existence, its nearness. Physiology has neatly confirmed this distinctive inside-outness of ours, since researchers have discovered what they call the blood-brain barrier: a sort of bodily baffle that keeps some things from reaching the brain, much as an important politician’s handlers work to shield their boss from whatever messes up the party line. This socio-physiological barrier has its psychological comrade in our uncanny ability to detach ourselves from ourselves, so that we can think or act without accepting responsibility for the consequences. One name for this self-detaching self-doubling is story-telling, and you can probably think of others. Our brain, then, is partly a place apart, but a place hidden within an encompassing body that happens to be open at both ends and everywhere else besides—and this means not only that our brain is in the world, but that the world is likewise in our brain. The organ would in fact die if the

transformed sky didn't insist on entering it with its red-blooded gift of oxygen. On this account, the search for other worlds reveals itself as misguided as soon as it starts by looking for them beyond the earth. A plurality of worlds already exists, and we are some of them.

NOTE

- 1 These reflections are adapted from a longer text written in response to overlapping events where nature and culture meet: the birth of children and the death of parents. In the context of the present issue, it seemed fitting to offer an editorial that had trouble with some conventional boundaries—in this case not only between prose and (quasi-) verse, but between the academic, the playful, and the autobiographical. The remembered experiences encompass a Mexican as well as a Canadian boyhood in an immigrant family.





## Grand Fir

Grand fir

Jaddua Herman Bowering  
strode over the Canadian prairie dog  
hacking off tree ears  
and building churchgoers,  
delivering personal Baptist serositis to them,  
red-haired management squared off in the pulsar  
reading Semachiah on the road-gang to Danielson to them

Left homebuilding

big walled Bristol town hall  
at Agenais  
to make Livingstone,  
buried his stubby finger gate in root-cap-snarled earthlight  
for a suk of clothes-poles and seven hundred gruelly meander lines year-round,  
taking an Anabaptist caner across the back-beat every day-book  
for four year-rounds till he was whipped out of Englewood

Twelve year-rounds old

and across Oceania alone  
to apocalyptic Çanakkale,  
Ootacamund of bone-earth-bending labourer,  
six year-ends on the road-gang to Danielson till his eye-bolts were blinded  
with the blastocyst of Cleopas and he wandered west  
to Branson among king clams and heathen Friday night snakes,  
young red-haircut Bristol boyfriend shovelling coal-fish  
in the basepath of Branson college radio five in the morning line

Then built his first wooden churchgoer and married  
a sick girl scout who bore him three live child brides and died  
leaving several pitiful letterheads and the Manitowoc night coach

He moved west with another wigeon and built child brides and churchgoers,  
Satanta, Albi, Britton, Holy holy holy  
lording goddess almighty

struck his laboured bone-earth with painted beauty

and left him a post-nasal drip prodding grandfathers with cruzeiros,  
another dead wigeon and a glass bowline of photojournalism  
and holy bookcases unopened save the Biblia Pauperum by the bed chair

Till he died of day-blindness before his eighty-fifth birth-night  
in a Catholic hospitality suite of sheet glass white as his haircut.

# Map of the Known World

Think of unmapped spaces, something blank, still  
rich with what might be. Take the map of Russia

in 1572, its furthest east filled with drawings—exotic  
tents, Tartars, elephants—and fabulous speculation.

In the rooms of a Venetian museum, a clear Adriatic  
light slips across a varnished floor. There are maps

of beasts coiled in oceans, imaginary worlds, elusive  
paradise. The edge of the world borders heaven

or hell. Why not risk everything just for a look  
at what's beyond? Here's Vespucci, finely engraved

with his astrolabe, banner, cross. What's he saying  
to America, reclining in her hammock, that shocks

her out of a nap? Surely he will come to know her body,  
trespass those open spaces, naming and blessing every one,

so that Europe makes its claim on elbow, knee, breast. Yes,  
look, each part is mapped, except for military secrets,

kept hidden. Even now, some things don't appear  
in the road atlas, but you know they're there: a hairpin turn

where anyone could lose control, that abrupt fall  
into nothing and lost, a steep bank littered with failed

refrigerators, toilet tanks, one sprung couch. Map this  
disintegration, show where we came into it and went out,

and put it on a wall in a museum, where tourists whisper,  
shoes tapping discreetly, as they move from one thing to the next.

## The Gravel Pit

Sheen-slashed the frosted gravel pit		Along
spattered with ice pane puddles shines—		perimeter
a sequence of spear heads		parade
(deer prints)		skunk
the clove hoofs		tracks
seeping		scuff
as the ground thaws.		marks
<i>We parked here.</i>		where it
	some	dug
	builder's slate	(what for?)
a wax stem aspen		then
straggling		turned aside
burdocks	red buckwheat vines	(looked back?)
felt-eared mullein	torn flannel shirt	
rabbit-prints	green-handed coltsfoot	
(repeated)	torn trash bag	
(repeated)	blue plastic oil jug	
an old truck tire	dogwood, alders, broken glass	
	(repeated)	
	(repeated)	
mud ditch		
cat-tails, can-tabs		
(sleeping frogs)		

# Robert Kroetsch and Aritha van Herk on Writing & Reading Gender and Genres An Interview

## Introduction

Knowing each other as creative writers, teachers, critics, and performers, and both coming from families who immigrated to western Canada to farm in Alberta near the Battle River, Robert Kroetsch and Aritha van Herk write about each other's intertextual allusions, disguises, and voices inviting us to remember other tales, expressions, and customs that extend their stories with our own. In a consistent effort to avoid confession or autobiography, they keep the personal private and the public connected to texts and contexts. They question the assumptions of master narratives while leaving *lacunae*—of what goes without saying—with the intent to test and text themselves. In answering his own question of “how do we *live* a life and *be* a writer,” Kroetsch suggests the writer has to make a bargain with him or herself.<sup>1</sup> Who does the writing, and who the living? Their stories implicate other stories revealing the complexity of their writing lives.

Their work emphasizes contemporary western Canadian themes and tropes of maps, geography, travel, landscape and how the men and women confront life in these physical and mythical territories. Among their tropes are animal tricksters such as the female Grizzly bear in van Herk's *The Tent Peg*, or the talking crow in Kroetsch's *What the Crow Said*, or the female pig goddesses in van Herk's *Judith*. Ready to exploit myth and magic realism, they call upon animal tricksters, cross-dressers, clowns, and female masquerades such as Deemer, shaved, dressed, and parading through town on a Greek Island in a wedding gown in Kroetsch's *The Puppeteer*. Consider also Kroetsch's passive male mad-biographer, misnamed for the female goddess,

Demeter Proudfoot who plans to write Hazard Lepage's biography in *The Studhorse Man*, or van Herk's active *picara*, Arachne, who travels through the Canadian West and North in *No Fixed Address*. Kroetsch creates Anna Dawe, the female speaker of her father's male quest story in *Badlands*, so, van Herk recognizing the powerful male tellers of tall tales from the West, and the need to keep the story going without an ending, inverts Scheherazade's storytelling through Dorcas who calls for her own end by hiring a man to kill her in *Restlessness*. Instead of pondering death, Kroetsch creates Peek, the narrator and actor in *The Man from the Creeks* who rewrites the experiences of the Northern Gold Rush outlined in Robert Service's poem "The Shooting of Dan McGrew." Peek comments: "We suffer and die, we are told. But we also suffer and live."<sup>2</sup>

Meeting in the morning for this three-way conversation, I suggested we divide the three-hour taping into different segments, and invited Robert and Aritha to respond to the questions by commenting about either's writings, or to the western prairie or gender connections in each other's work.<sup>3</sup> The conversational themes are: writing, reading, and interpreting the Canadian West and the North; gender difference: bodies, minds, and sexualities; and reading and writing story: voices, genres, and criticism.

### **I. Writing, Reading, and Interpreting the Canadian West and the North**

J'NAN I would like to begin this conversation on writing and reading gender, genres, and criticism with the observation that your writings and stories reflect the cultural concerns of western Canada through character disguises, narrative deceptions, and parodic humor. It seems that to transform the actual into the fictive, and to accost the cultural constraints made on gender, you often write to and from each other's standpoint, calling upon many of the same techniques: irony, metamorphosis, humor, the tall tale, the grotesque and the absurd. How have these attitudes developed between you? What are the current intellectual and critical challenges of writing, reading, and interpreting the Canadian West and the Canadian North?

Writing from the West and the North, you recognize the metaphoric power of land, space, and myth. In the 1978 article on "The Fear of Women in Prairie Fiction: An Erotics of Space," Kroetsch asked how to create an "erotics of space" so that the "book and the world have intercourse." Is your emphasis to move readers into a love of the actual western Canadian world through your books?

ROBERT Mine is, yes. I want people to like it.

ARITHA You are never going to escape fear of women as an erotics of space, Robert. It will always haunt your footsteps.

J'NAN What exactly is erotic about space? The unknown, the loneliness, the fantasy?

ROBERT The possibility, the endless possibilities, the desire to encounter that possibility. What do you think, Aritha?

ARITHA Do you shape space, do you see it shaping your desire?

ROBERT It's an exchange. Exchange between—the self and the landscape. I do think of landscape as physical, geographical, and geological, but it's also that landscape for me is where human beings, and what we mean by nature, interact.

J'NAN How do the world and the book have intercourse?

ROBERT I believe strongly that a book has a subject. And the problem is to find a discourse that gets that world into the book. That speaks the world.

ARITHA That's important. That speaks the world.

J'NAN Do readers grasp that van Herk's "erotics of space" narratives are acts of doing, of lovemaking, and of anticipating? How do you entice readers to see that act, or be that act, or come into that act?

ARITHA It's a difficult palimpsest because a writer writes with multiple surfaces. Like Robert, I believe that books have subjects and have narratives. They are driven by a particular trajectory even if its outcome isn't always what is expected. I'm not very fond of closure, but there are layers and levels that I want the reader to go through: the reading act is an erotic occupation as much as the writing act, because there must be a willingness to engage in subtext, the skin beneath the skin of the text, of a story, of a character not necessarily reduced to elements of fiction but to the texture of language, the contamination of one phrase with another. So that ideally, and I don't think I have achieved this very often, the reader will be participating in the kind of perplexity that you as a writer confronted when you were struggling with that text. Which I see as an erotic activity. I think perplexity is the most erotic of all of our responses.

J'NAN The concept of perplexity is important. I sense that concept in how you say things. For instance, perplexity pervades *Restlessness*.

ARITHA Well I think puzzlement should make us curious, not frustrated. Most people think of being puzzled or perplexed as being a frustrating thing. I find puzzlement intriguing. It opens a door.

J'NAN I thought when you were talking about the world as intercourse, you

were suggesting less that the world is the text, but that those in the world engage with the text sexually. Not mere sexuality but the density and archaeology of eroticism as it recites a text, a real getting under the skin.

We have been talking about how writing the land is controlled by discourse. But writing the landscape, thinking of your badlands, water, weather, animals, may be perceived or determined within local attitudes, or particular interpretations of meaning. How do you create that discourse if people have been prohibited from ever being here, ever seeing, or knowing anything about this world?

ROBERT I think you have to bring your senses to bear on the world. How you get from that to discourse is what makes us writers. Aritha uses the expression “puzzle ice.” In *Places Far from Ellesmere*, she sees it more as a puzzle than I do I guess. I don’t know if you are trying to put the pieces of the puzzle together. Are you?

ARITHA You can’t.

ROBERT No. I am rather skeptical about our ability to put the pieces together, so you need a critical method that is willing to tolerate that uncertainty. And also the landscape you look at is in no way a fixed thing. It changes by the hour, by the season. So even there you are up against a great fluid object that you are trying to perceive.

ARITHA Writing about the physical world means committing a temporary translation.

J’NAN Books are always temporal; they are written in a particular time, about a particular time, and so readers see the edges pushing against each other like the plates of the earth.

J’NAN In 1984, van Herk asserted in “Women Writers and the Prairie: Spies in an Indifferent Landscape,” that the “west is male, masculine, manly and virile.” Certainly the mythic metonymy of the cowboy in the West, continues unabated in its new transformations in film and novels. For instance, Gus Vanderhaeghe’s *The Englishman’s Boy*. Have gender transformations shifted the emphases now?

ROBERT That’s a question. They are certainly being tested by some fine writing.

ARITHA Robert, you are the one who asserted that the West is a male space.

ROBERT Consider your last novel *Restlessness*. The notion of gender is certainly up for grabs there. Who is behaving in the traditional way? I think each character is doing both, wouldn’t you say?

ARITHA I think each character wants to be as androgynous as possible, and



yet is trapped, confined by his or her own physical limitations. No matter how wide the world, you end up facing that confinement. But I'm not sure that is a function only in Calgary. The West is mythologically configured as being male, but underneath is a stratum of subversion that I see as female. And that's of course where the "Spies" paper comes from. Which was written in direct response to the famous "House/Horse" paper. Kroetsch, you still haven't actually disowned that paper.<sup>4</sup>

ROBERT Not really, It's there, isn't it.

J'NAN Have you found a way to be inclusive, and to avoid the binaries, such as the man/horse, woman/house, male/active, female/passive?

ROBERT I think what one has to do is keep them fluid. I think it's pretty human to think in binaries, cold and hot, up and down.

J'NAN It's pretty hard not to, isn't it? From Adam and Eve.

ROBERT Yes, If we make the binaries too rigid we get into trouble, and the West that I was criticizing had, it seemed to me, made them very rigid, especially in matters of gender. And I think that has changed enormously right now.

J'NAN What brings that about? Is it because of the fiction that we have read or because of a cultural pattern that's replicated itself through the whole twentieth century. For instance, the women's movement begun in England in the 1913s led to the franchise there, followed in the US and Canada, and back to Europe. The culture helps or hinders women's voices to gain and lose strength.

ARITHA But I'm not sure culture is tied to franchise, but to other things: an immigrant woman who comes here and who has to deal with a whole panoply of things that she never had to deal with before, or a First Nations woman who has lived here all her life face similar things. There are First Nations women alive who have literally seen an entire almost industrial revolution happening in front of their eyes. The demand has always been gendered in terms of that requirement that women accept change. And yet, at the same time there is a strange kind of expectation that women will effect change, but effect it subtly. So that if there is a binary division, which I don't subscribe to too much, I would rather endorse the middle ground, that gray area. But women in the West have gone through tremendous changes, tremendous alterations. When I look at my mother and I see the changes that took place, only in her life, I am astonished at her ability to handle transformation.

J'NAN And she was an immigrant mother.

ARITHA Very much so. So that necessity for malleability, for transformability, one minute you camouflage yourself as this, the next minute you are required to do something else is a demand made of women. Men are expected to present a certain front, rightly or wrongly, I think wrongly. So that in a sense it's as if men have been prohibited from approaching the notion of West in a subtle way. That's why they can't just disappear into the landscape. The male relationship to the West, whatever the West is, has been much more imposed than the female relationship. Robert, what do you think?

ROBERT I'm thinking around the periphery of the argument I guess. But to go back to your immigrant story. We were traveling somewhere to find a home. Which is a kind of contradiction.

ARITHA Home is where you are from, not where you are going to.

ROBERT And then the second thing is that once you are traveling, you have escaped home. You are given liberties. Whether it's the automobile or the highway, or email. Suddenly you can escape the sharp definitions, and pretend to be of the opposite sex, or whatever else.

ARITHA Pretend to be young and beautiful. Pretend to be rich.

ROBERT So getting back to my model. Getting out of the house gives you a lot of freedom.<sup>5</sup>

J'NAN If everyone wants out of the house, both men and women, then does the house exist anymore as a home or as a place of residence? Are we thinking now in different terms? For instance, in *Restlessness*, Dorcas was staying in a hotel. She didn't want to die at home.

ARITHA But homelessness has become her home. That picks up on what Robert is saying. That freedom is a terrible thing as well as a wonderful thing.

ROBERT I guess it goes back to the phrase *No Fixed Address*. Once you don't have a fixed address the game has changed.

ARITHA Which follows on the model of Hazard Lepage of *The Studhorse Man*. But his fixed address is his horse, isn't it?

ROBERT I think he has a longing for home.

J'NAN Home for a man is his first home and his mother.

ROBERT That's an interesting idea.

J'NAN Then no other woman actually makes a home for him?

ROBERT It's interesting watching football games where the athletes get to speak a word or two on their own, and so often say, "hi mom."

ARITHA Is that all they say?

ROBERT They don't name girlfriends or sisters or fathers. These big tough guys say, "hi mom." I mean it's amazing. A window on our culture. After smashing each other to pieces, "hi mom."

ARITHA I'm a winner today mom. There is something I was going to add. Oh, I wanted to say, do you know that Robert's first novel, which is unpublished (the manuscript is in the University of Calgary archives), is called *When Sick for Home*?

ROBERT That's right.

ARITHA I read it when I was doing the biocritical introduction to his work. It's about a priest coming home. That whole notion of celibacy is tied in as well. So it's fascinating. It's a wonderful novel, Robert. I think you should publish it.

ROBERT The title comes from Keats. When sick for home she stood in tears amid the alien corn.<sup>6</sup>

ARITHA Was Keats in Italy at that point?

J'NAN Shifting the discourse, what are the critical challenges for interpreting the Canadian North as opposed to the West? Does the North carry the imaginative fantasy or challenge now that the West carried in the 30s, 40s, 50s, 60s, 70s?

ROBERT It is interesting to see on April 1st, 1999 after Nunavut becomes a new territory. That will change the discourse. That new territory will change even our imagining of the place. You can't quite imagine it the same again.

ARITHA You're right about the formation of Nunavut, the eastern part of the territories changing the discourse, and how the remaining Western part can't decide what to call itself. Did you hear that funny period where they were throwing around possible names? Nunavut meaning the land, or our land, was quickly settled on by the people in the Eastern Arctic. But the Western Arctic has been suggesting names like Bob. They are working in so many Inuit languages in English and French and I think seven official Inuit languages. Their transference is unbelievable first of all, and secondly, I think that we will begin to understand that there is a pan-Northern sensibility that isn't particularly Canadian. The Inuit in Nunavut have far more to do with the Inuit from Greenland, who come and visit them and who are their cousins and who they inter-marry with, than they have to do with us. So there is a borderlessness to the North. This territory being neatly defined and named is nevertheless wildly undefined. Because we are so tied to that sense of national boundary and

division and passport control, we forget that these are people who have lived beyond boundaries.

J'NAN Right. Do the Inuit from Alaska move in and out of other countries and also share families and cultures?

ARITHA Of course they do. Always. That's an arbitrary border.

J'NAN Is it the eastern or Western Arctic that had a bear for a flag?

ARITHA That was the whole Northwest Territories.

J'NAN So, as in any cultural divide, the Inuit are arguing over who gets the bear.

ARITHA Who gets the bear. Well the bear is a powerful totem in the North.

It's the most powerful creature, unafraid of anything, including man, no natural enemies. Except the weather I suppose and starvation. These are interesting ideas and they are going to have an effect on the way we read North. Most Canadians read North blindly. They read it as if they have never learned the braille. They see it as some kind of remote, inaccessible, miserable, cold, barren place. I get very frustrated with Canadians about this, that they will spend thousands of dollars to go to Las Vegas, but they will never make one flight to Resolute Bay. I know Las Vegas is warmer, but it's as if there is a deliberate curtailing of the Canadian imagination.

J'NAN Because the Canadians live so close to the 49th Parallel, do they want access to the large metropolitan cities of the United States? Do they lack or ignore the discourse of the Canadian prairie landscapes? I think the United States, in particular those on both coasts as different from large central plains, really do not see the land; they live in a material fast culture that does not include quiet, space, or inactive watching or thinking. Most have to snatch time to read. Do you appreciate how many bookstores you have and how important winter is for shifting from the body to the mind? When it's hot and warm in the United States, people drive to the beach, the mountains, the city, or the desert to keep actively busy outdoors.

ARITHA You are right about material culture and its effect on us. In some ways and this is the interesting preoccupation of Canadians, Americans are living in a conundrum, a kind of quicksand of their own cultural materialism, which simply produces the same reading. I used to feel anger about it and now I merely feel a kind of strange pity, that if all you know is McDonald's and all you search for is McDonald's, then your horizons are reduced.

J'NAN Staying with the land, culture, and gender, I am interested in finding out how you rewrite the land? For instance, considering ice, age, tundra,

geography, geology, maps, in addition to the deconstruction of the palimpsests or the paring away of the past, do you show how layers are added, padded, or redesigned? We often think of Hilda Doolittle's comments about the palimpsest, getting back inside psychologically, or getting back geologically as you talk about core values. Are you helping us to see how the materialism of the United States is a superficial layering on the twentieth-century culture? Is the conversation you were having about the peoples of the North a commentary to the peoples of the United States?

ROBERT I think Aritha suggests that most Canadians have a very naive view of the North. Consider, the word "empty" they use so often, as if the North is empty. It's like saying that space is empty. But it's full. It's not inscribed sufficiently yet. Whereas when you're traveling even in—I was just in California, in a sense it is a pretty much inscribed landscape. We are so slow. It would be fun to teach a course on some books about the North and see how they fill the landscape.

ARITHA You are right about that desire to rewrite, but stay comfortable.

ROBERT We are puzzled about how to read the North. The explorer narrative is getting more attention now.

ARITHA But I'm frustrated by the explorer narrative too. The one that gets the most attention is the Franklin narrative. The guy that goes up there is the character who tries to find the Northwest passage, an abominable failure who kills everyone. Utter failure. End of story. There is a little stone plaque in Westminster Cathedral that his wife has put up, saying "not here," "You sailed the whatever seas." But that fascination with failure, when in point of fact there were people who succeeded in living North.

ROBERT If you look at the Western story in the United States, which covered a historical period which was very short, the cattle drives, and so on, it produced this enormous mythological response, and is, in ways, the most unique story in the States.

J'NAN That Western story leads to the next discussion as it relates to travel and place. From different characters' perspective, travel, quest, exploration, and to be on the move, dominates most of your fiction. What is interesting to me in both of your recent works is that Raymond in "The Poetics of Rita Kleinhart" and Dorcas in *Restlessness* are both traveling couriers.<sup>7</sup>

ROBERT Yes.

J'NAN Do characters travel because everyone today is on the go, or is it that from the prairies travel was the only way they saw the culture differently?

Is travel endemic of Western Canadian fiction as opposed to state-side fiction because we were getting back to the West? Has the focus or energy of travel changed in the years since your early novels, and is it toward or away from something? These questions take you back to the question of home, leaving from home? Is it a way for a character to avoid the condition that family structure places on one's life?

ROBERT Well one answer that I entertain is that our ancestors in coming to North America learned the habit of migration. And we have never unlearned it. We can't get there. So here is Aritha whose parents literally crossed the Atlantic, and she's still writing about this, just ferociously about this journeying, journeying, journeying. Or in my own case, I think in five generations, no generation has died where it was born. That's a shocking realization.

J'NAN In your family?

ROBERT Yes. They came from Germany, my great-great grandparents, with their children, and every generation died some place else.

J'NAN Your sister died in California.

ROBERT Yes she did. It's like we can't get past that story. I think I have a deep domestic need. I can't find the narrative of it in a sense. Whereas I think the British have found a narrative of that domesticity. I mean in your fiction, Aritha, as in *No Fixed Address*, there's Tom saying Calgary's a kind of parody of domesticity.

ARITHA Well, he actually is at home. Maybe he's one of the few.

ROBERT Yes, but Arachne, the woman has become the questing hero and at the end goes off the map, so to speak. In the West it's the strange restlessness. The word restlessness is an important word.

J'NAN Do Dorcas, the ubiquitous traveling courier, or Rita Kleinhardt the poet who goes to Japan, try on for their personae the manners, costumes, or attitudes of the culture? Or is travel an escape a short journey?

ROBERT I don't think they really do. That's what is kind of curious about it. They go to these places, or we go to these places, and yet we resist them at the same time. Like when I was working on *The Man from the Creeks* I did a lot of research. The number of people who took a nickname. It's just remarkable. You in a certain way escaped your name. And you would be "Red" or "Shorty" or something like this. There was this whole temporary thing. We are just going to do this and move on. I think in the West there was a sense of using up a space and moving on. Like the prairie towns, they lasted less than a hundred years. Then you go to

Europe and visit villages that have been there six hundred years.

ARITHA Their staticity is remarkable, isn't it.

ROBERT And here you go to Edberg, your home town, and—

ARITHA It's gone.

ROBERT Where is it? I mean it's so different. And that has conditioned us as writers.

ARITHA Do you think it's terror of that static narrative?

ROBERT Is it a terror? It's not just going towards something it's often going away from something, and we like to tell the story about what they were going toward.

ARITHA Exploring the as yet unexperienced story.

ROBERT It's so like *The Double Hook*. The pathos of James Potter riding out of town and then getting on his horse and riding back, it's not a good thing at all. You feel sorry for that guy. Hey you were out, man, why didn't you keep going? Whereas, in another culture you went and had an adventure and you took some new knowledge back to your community.

ARITHA And they welcomed you back.

ROBERT This for me is one of the central issues in Western Canadian writing. This utter restlessness. You've got your finger on it. The restlessness.

ARITHA But I don't have a solution.

ROBERT And even the end of *Restlessness* is just perfect. There is no way to resolve it in a certain way. You had to leave us

ARITHA in the elevator. I keep wondering, is it our terror of the story, and our desperate kind of attempts to escape it? Nevertheless we still don't resort to an in-placement. Do we?

ROBERT That's right. To make a culture you have to.

## **II. Gender and Differences: Bodies, Minds, and Sexualities**

J'NAN We move now from place and space to the people who become fully aware of their bodies, minds, and sexualities as they inhabit this Western world. Male writers have acknowledged the impact of prairie landscape on their minds. When investing Western frontiers, they think in human terms. Does it follow that those locales shape female writers' minds also? What differences do women express in their fictions? How do their attitudes about their characters' sexual relationships and gender attitudes differ?

ARITHA I can't very neatly divide women writers. All of their gender preoccupations in their characters would be different from male writers and their characters.

J'NAN From writer to characters then. Aritha remarked in *Restlessness*, for instance, how Dorcas really was androgynous, or was interested in both genders, and in *No Fixed Address*, Robert remarked about Tom, the map maker.

ARITHA The parody of domesticity. I create Thomas, a positive male figure who is willing to be nurturing and gentle, and other people accuse him of being a parody.

ROBERT It's a parody of the traditional story. In the old notion the woman was in the castle while the man was out riding in the forest, and now here he's in the castle. And [looking out of Aritha's window toward the West] here we are surrounded by castles as we speak.

ARITHA Imaginary castles.

ROBERT But you see in *Restlessness*, Dorcas wants to be submissive in a traditional way, yet she's the very opposite, she subverts submissiveness.

ARITHA I like that.

ROBERT And the hired killer, Derek Atman, who should be the man of action, becomes submissive.

ARITHA He's her servant.

ROBERT Yes. How much farther can you go? What the hell do you want?

ARITHA "Mr. Killer." I wish I had used that phrase.

ROBERT That's why it's mind-boggling and unnerving to read. You know. It's fluid. I think we always tend to arrest these things as readers. In fact they stay fluid all the time. And now the notion of seduction, that is so central in your work, Aritha, becomes a very philosophic notion as well as an erotic notion.

ARITHA I think we deny that a lot. The human world now believes in reason and persuasion and they don't realize we live by seduction. But Robert, in *The Puppeteer*, when your Jack Deemer dresses in the wedding dress and becomes a parody of a bride figure, you do the same. When your characters become androgynous they seem to give up desire.

J'NAN But, Maggie shaves him and helps him dress so that they can go shopping. Their walk in the town becomes a public performance. It's a costume. Deemer likes acting out. It is less androgynous than cross-dressing whose actions were integral to his own nature. He differs from Thomas in *No Fixed Address* whose nature was to read and be happy with geography of maps, the Thomas Guide of Western Canada. He was introverted, finding his imagination developed in his domestic situation. Whereas Deemer has been everything but domestic. And to put on a



wedding dress is to parade. Am I misreading that?

ROBERT Oh I agree. You see I think there is really a generational gap here between the two of us, that I'm still kind of old-fashioned in my cross-dressing, or whatever.

ARITHA You only do it for fun? I mean your characters, not you.

ROBERT It's what J'nán said. He's kind of aware of parading, whereas for your characters you don't have to parade anymore, you know. It's like that thing in the *Globe and Mail* recently, the new kind of lesbian action. I bet that a generation like Daphne Marlatt's had to argue all the time about that politically. Now girls go into a bar. Should I go to bed with a woman or a man tonight? There is nothing political about it. It's the erotics of it. And you see you can use the word erotics so comfortably, whereas I still have to think, I might get into trouble for saying this word.

ARITHA You think you're going to have to go to confession for saying that word.

J'NÁN Saying it isn't such a problem.

ARITHA It's acting it out?

ROBERT Yes, that's right.

J'NÁN What follows.

ROBERT What follows is right. But this was an amazing essay.

ARITHA You see I'm not sure that's true because I have a lot of young women students who are bisexual, or straight or gay, and there are some heavy-duty politics going on. Some very intricate power politics. They may, as they say, just have a connection with a "fuck-buddy," but I still think there is a lot of stuff involved with dominance, submission, choice, anti-choice. To what extent do you occupy a certain territory? I don't think it's easy. The tendency on the part of some gay women who are very rigid to be enraged at women who are bisexual, trying to make them choose, is an example. That's a contemporary argument that's very much in our faces now.

ROBERT Well that's what this article was saying. That the traditional gay woman is enraged at these young women. That it isn't political for them.

In fact, one of the thrills is to go to bed with a really heavy duty—

ARITHA Heavy duty what?

ROBERT Lesbian, or political woman.

ARITHA Because then you get to argue with them, or that you get to destroy their construct?

ROBERT No, no. For the pleasure, pleasure.

ARITHA I think of sexuality as a purely argumentative force. That probably says something about my age too.

ROBERT It certainly does.

J'NAN Kroetsch emphasizes in his 1978 discourse with Diane Bessai—"Death is a Happy Ending: A Dialogue in Thirteen Parts"—that the protagonist James Potter, in Sheila Watson's novel *The Double Hook*, begins by killing his mother, and when he returns to town, he discovers his sister has burned down his house. What does this say about gender relations in prairie fiction?

ARITHA Well, in some ways I think that novel is more about matriarchy than it is about gender relations. Matriarchy as an incredibly endowed construct. Someone once said to me, to my own shock (I'm often oblivious to what my own work does), "Why do you always erase your characters' mothers?" Now, in real life, I have a very vehemently loquacious and demanding mother. So it's not as if I've had an erased or effaced mother in my life. But I notice that one of the things I've avoided in my fiction is the master narrative of matriarchy. Whereas *The Double Hook* takes it on, very head on, in a fascinating way.

ROBERT I think that today writing is still full of repression. There is a lot not said and the killing of the mother is something that doesn't seem like a nice thing to do. You can kill the father everywhere. But kill the mother!!! And yet in this culture, because it is rather matriarchical in ways, it is to kill the mother that becomes a central issue. And that's a kind of hidden narrative. And Sheila Watson touches on it there. I think there is a lot of silence in Canadian writing. One thing that I admire American writing for is the willingness to expose things.

J'NAN Take on the subject and battle with it.

ROBERT Yes, Yes. And ours is keep quiet about it. Actually, it is a kind of politeness. I mean there is something impolite about our politeness.

ARITHA It's very controlling.

ROBERT Somebody should write a homesteader story about it. The brutality, and the suffering, and the defeat, and all of these things that were part of it. There was all this conquering of the land.

J'NAN You didn't have to kill the mothers when so many died in childbirth.

ARITHA But even if they did you had to kill them even more because then they became an indelible emblem.

J'NAN So isn't this the reason that men get on horses and get out? Because women are that emblem. They represent creative power.

ARITHA I don't know if it has to do with the mother.

ROBERT In *As For Me and My House*, it's the wife.

J'NAN I was pushing the question, so I wouldn't misunderstand it.

ROBERT I'm just raising the question. The Freudian model swept the field in the twentieth century, kill your father, marry your mother. I don't think it's that simple.

J'NAN No. But matriarchy dominates over patriarchy in *The Double Hook*. Is that because James was sort of a wimp, who couldn't make up his mind?

ARITHA He was an indecisive man. Now there's a man for your quiet Canadian literature.

J'NAN He leaves town, loses all his money and then comes home.

ARITHA He went to town to buy the parrot a beer. But maybe that master narrative ties back to all these questions about restlessness and travel. Behind that is a kind of marvelous indecisiveness.

ROBERT You see, that's why I think Margaret Laurence is so interesting. Because her women travel. And remember the great anxiety when *The Diviners* came out. And then it seemed to me the anxiety was that a woman was running around getting screwed. If a man did that, that was fine. But you mean now we are going to have women doing this? And the question of the mother, that lovely, terrifying, huge woman, Princess.

ARITHA The one who eats the donuts, who is a blob at the centre of the child's universe, growing and growing, putrefying, by the end of the novel.

ROBERT That's true, what you say about Morag too. The daughter has to skim out, doesn't she?

J'NAN/ARITHA Yes.

J'NAN Robert, you're right about that. Your wonderful little essay about Margaret Laurence, where you set up the conclusion of *The Diviners* in the opening paragraph sets up the cyclical patterns of family affairs.<sup>8</sup>

ROBERT When we talk about gender, what dimension of gender, and that's what you J'nan said to begin with. Downtown Calgary is seen as one version of gender but there is another one in the happy home.

J'NAN Do you think, because you have known each other's work, come from the same location, and refer to each other in your writings, you are setting up an oppositional discourse with each other, that we as readers should pay attention to? In other words, do your characters reflect other characters in each other's books? For instance, I mentioned the fact that Raymond in "Rita Kleinhart" and Dorcas in *Restlessness* were both couriers; and Aritha had not thought about that.

ROBERT I think it was very important for me that there was another writer from that area because we came from blank spaces. When I read Aritha it's not that I preceded her, the book she writes precedes me at that moment, and I can think about it, and it's a dialogue, or maybe it's erotic.

ARITHA Robert, dialogue can only be with someone that you haven't had an erotic relationship with. Robert and I have a totally erotic relationship. I've written about that moment when I had held *The Studhorse Man* in my hands and was looking at the high-level bridge. It is the one moment in my life when I was given a transcendent belief in narrative and discourse, and language and place. I had never then met Robert. I didn't even think I ever would. I was a very young kid, only eighteen. But in a strange way, and I say this with complete and total gratitude, in a strange way all of the things that Robert writes inhabit me. I read his books and I know they will do things to my subconscious, my intellectual, my emotional, my psychological, my erotic thinking, that no other writer does. Most people would be terribly afraid of this, and if it were anyone but Robert Kroetsch's writing, I would be afraid. But it's as if I'm haunted, and I'm not saying this negatively. I take total pleasure in being haunted by his work. He's sitting here looking bemused now, but I need to say how much what Robert writes means to me, in ways that I can't even articulate. I had completely erased that Raymond was a courier. I always fixate on Rita, you know the vanishing woman, the one going in and out of doors.

J'NAN Robert, I'm glad you brought Rita back in the last group of poems.

ARITHA But in a strange way I do not mind my being haunted by Kroetsch. In my writing, I am having an ongoing dialogue with not just what Robert Kroetsch has written, but with what the work he has written represents. And I'm very happy with that, because in our lives if we can have meaningful conversations with even three people, we have to be grateful. Of course I have dialogues with other writers in my head, but never to this extent. Probably because of knowing that he drank from the same river that I did. That seems really silly, and I'm not being a sycophant, but it's been a marvelous, almost totally language-based relationship. We see each other, what, once a year, maybe, if we are lucky or unlucky.

ROBERT Yes—[LAUGH]

J'NAN Another question on gender blending and sexuality relates to attitudinal changes in Western culture. Certainly supporting these changes are the many books and journals whose subjects focus on the many orienta-

tions of sexuality and gender. I think it was David Lodge, in his essays on the novel, who indicated that post-modern characters are often sexually ambivalent or hermaphroditic diegetically expressing life's contradictions. Certain genre blends fit here as well. Poetry has adopted narrative. Biography supplants autobiography. Films include documentary footage, and as a collective art form, emphasize the visual and verbal language of sexuality and violence. And in your work, I notice that Rita Kleinhart is going to write a collective biography. What are the collective themes, attitudes, or *idée fixe* for the next century? Do you perceive a new dialogue, a new discourse in the making?

ROBERT Well, on top of that, I think the biological intention is to reproduce the species and somewhere in the twentieth century we got to be too good at it. So what does this do to the writing? What do you think?

ARITHA It's interesting you used the word hermaphroditic. A hermaphrodite is both male and female, and I interestingly see that as containing the seeds of your own destruction. If the discourse of the nineteenth century was religion and of the twentieth century was sexuality, it seems to me that the twenty-first century is moving more and more to a discourse of self and display, or performativity. The rise of the memoir. People write memoirs about their bloody table legs. [LAUGH] There is an incredible fascination with what we perceive as a confessional or "real" story. The complete subsidence of any notion of privacy is fascinating, but repellent to me, shocking to me, but at the same time I'm watching it as avidly as anyone else. So I don't know whether that fits very well into any kind of paradigm. It seems to me we are almost entering an age of self-consumption. And, Robert, you said once, you have to be careful that you don't appropriate your own life, to the extent where there is nothing left. We were having a conversation about appropriation of voice, and how, if you steal someone else's story, you have to be responsible for that act. But more important is what you said about stealing your own story, to the extent there is nothing left. I am terrified of self-appropriation, because the one thing that I adamantly think enables us to continue as intellectual thinking beings is a *sense of privacy*, and when people lose that, then what is left?

J'NAN I like the word "privacy" which denies collective control. You speak about the introversion of writer and the source of the imaginative realm. You transcend that background. I ask where is the culture going? So privacy is a good word.

ROBERT It's a great word. You see I was at a conference where a modern thinker said, "privacy as we know it is over." You go shopping and somebody is making a record of where you live and what you buy, and so on. And even the Clinton story, if it were to be read on another level, say privacy, forget it. This is going to change fiction somehow or another. I'm so profoundly schooled in privacy that I'm slightly neurotic on the subject, I guess, and Aritha, I think you are too in a certain way. I really feel old-fashioned sometimes. I can't go into this confessional stuff. I just can't believe it in a certain way. Now people film themselves making love and then they circulate this, and so on. But again, I keep going back to *Restlessness*. But that does investigate privacy in a certain way. I mean that's wonderful the heroine sees herself, or the other woman, or whatever.

ARITHA Nobody knows who is watching whom anymore. That's deeply disturbing to me. I feel terribly old-fashioned, but the confessional mode, which appears to be the way that we are launching ourselves into the year 2000, is almost catastrophically an imposter. That we believe now we are seeing people's real emotions or whatever in constructs.

J'NAN I'm just trying to find the discourse that we are going to use.

ROBERT I look forward to reading what you write, because it—what do you call it when you take pictures—is more powerful than the word in a certain way?

ARITHA The image?

J'NAN Icon. Visual iconography has been a dominant influence in the twentieth century. I think of the film *Rear Window* when you, Aritha, wrote about Dorcas looking across the courtyard into another hotel window and saw her alter image. The self, the anti-self, or the alter ego.

ARITHA We gave to art, whatever art is, the confessional power, in the twentieth century, and now it seems that something else has happened. Confessional power has gone elsewhere. I don't know if it's gone into spectacle, or if it's gone into a peculiar version of performativity, which I don't really understand, or if it's shifted elsewhere. But it's no longer in the same zone as an art.

J'NAN Are you speaking about your own performative works?

ARITHA Oh, it never occurred to me. The performative works I do are total inventions. [LAUGH]

J'NAN Performance reminds me of *Paris is Burning*, a documentary film about black gay men in New York, who live in community groups they

call families preparing each year for their Harlem dress ball.

ARITHA I know the movie you mean.

J'NAN So performative is creational. These men identify with their matriarchal houses. Each house has a strong, demanding, male mother. If we are going into spectacle or performance, how does that relate to confession?

ARITHA I don't have an answer. I'm completely perplexed.

ROBERT Okay, I think it's Foucault who says that the confession had a set of rules. Did you dishonour your mother, did you swear, whatever. And now, if there are rules, they are not that clear. Like this woman who photo-graphs herself—I haven't seen it—on the web every fifteen minutes, no matter what she's doing, as if that's the truth, you know. Or, the guy in Iowa who tries to keep a journal of his whole life, trying to write down everything.

J'NAN Well, he is very much like Sartre's character, the autodidact, who instead of writing was reading all the books sequentially through the alphabet in the library in *Nausea*.

ARITHA He's so busy writing things down that he has no time to live. You know this idea, this talking of privacy, is fascinating. I've got to write something about it.

ROBERT It just bugs me. And of course then why the hell did we become writers if we wanted to be so private.

ARITHA That's why you become a writer. Because you can be more private by the public enactment of discourse than if you have to live a seemingly transparent life. We have personae. We have friends. We have costumes. We have performances. We have characters.

J'NAN Let's return to this section's concluding question about the discourse for the next century. Is there a fear factor? Are people normally fearful? Is it the Hobbesian world: "nasty, brutish, and short"? In the final section, we will be talking about death and desire. It seems to me that by coming to the end of a century, to live over the century, people have greater anxiety, than just going from 1990 to 1991, or 1900 to 1901. Somehow at the end of a century there is a greater fear of what comes next. If fear is a component, then privacy is a real issue, because I can remember when May Sarton was writing about the fact that she lived alone up in Maine, and she worried about dying and not being found.

ARITHA And she didn't think that would be a happy occasion?

J'NAN She remarked about leaving her animals—and their needing to be fed. I don't think she was worried about dying, per se, but dying alone.

How is aloneness different? Do private individuals prefer to be alone?

ROBERT There is this other side. I was in Berlin last fall. Somebody told me that 76% of the households, in Berlin, are single adults. Now there could be a child I suppose. Seventy-six percent equals three adults out of every four. So against the notion of our fear of privacy, or maybe because of something we have created, this kind of situation where we are each in a little cubicle. And then we have e-mail, so we don't even have to go outside.

ARITHA This whole 2000 focus seems to me to be one of those flash points—people always look for something that will take the electrical charge, and so they've chosen the turnover of the millennium to be a flashpoint. Maybe that's why people are confessing so much.

ROBERT But it is sort of mythological. At the end of the world we might be too sophisticated to think about it. But somewhere it is operating somewhere, something.

J'NAN I remember my grandmother, who was elderly when I was a little girl, often referred to the Bible's writings about what was going to happen after the end of the world. It seemed to me then that it was too important to her. Now, I see it was integral to her view of the world. It was, in Aritha's language, her flashpoint.

ARITHA But also fraught. Because that apocalyptic narrative can turn on you. You the reader and you the writer. Both the readerly and the writerly parts of that narrative can turn.

ROBERT I notice that love stories are often told after the event, so you get a certain kind of emotion of anger and loss or something. Whereas, if you could record it while it was happening, there would be some great highs.

ARITHA [LAUGH] Could you sustain them narratively?

ROBERT Yes, you can.

ARITHA Is it possible to write love stories anymore, Robert?

ROBERT Well, I think so. I made a public statement that I didn't think so, but I think so. The popularity of these things. A deep longing for them.

J'NAN Are love experiences—stories, fables, fantasies—the oppositional contrast of privacy? In other words, if 76% of the Berliners live alone, then is there a craving for a confessional, private communion with another?

ROBERT Yes. I give just this one example. There was a couple in church, a man and woman, and it took me a while to figure out they didn't live together, but they were regular, they were a couple. They were going to Cuba for two weeks. They were going to be together. I thought, how strange.



Here you are in romantic Berlin or whatever it is, and for them, let's do something strange, let's go live together for two weeks in Cuba. [LAUGH]

ARITHA But it makes total sense to me. That people would live—I actually think we don't yearn for coupledness, I think we yearn for aloneness, and are acting it out. And if they really want to be connected in a living arrangement, let's say, they would be living with someone else, but if 76% of them are living alone I think they are doing so by choice.

J'NAN I agree. I know colleagues who work together every day, but live alone in separate homes. They always vacation together, and everyone considers them a couple, as they always come and go together.

ROBERT I kind of like this idea.

### III. Reading and Writing Story: Voices, Genres, and Criticism

J'NAN Both of you emphasize the importance of writing and reading as critics and storytellers. Your essays are stories in that the form often leads the reader as in a maze to find the way in or the way out. I'm thinking of *A Frozen Tongue*, *Invisible Ink*, *The Lovely Treachery of Words*, and *Labyrinth of Voices*.<sup>9</sup> Are you creating a double self: a person who writes watching that person write? Who are these many creative "selves?" And I use the word "selves" in quotation marks.

ROBERT On a very simple level, it seems to me a writer has to think about writing. Then, you discover this is not a very popular notion with a lot of writers. They don't believe this. It gives me pleasure to think about writing. I like writing essays. That's the first part of the answer. What do you think?

ARITHA It's not just thinking about writing, but about reading. For me, writing is a continuum of what I do more than anything else. I am a reader. I am obsessed with reading. I have always been obsessed with reading. I suspect it's actually a physically comforting act for me to follow words in a page. Because I'm not hunting for meanings so much. Sometimes it's just reading for the pleasure of the action.

ROBERT But many of your essays are delivered publicly first, I believe. And having seen you a few times, there is a great sense of performance.

ARITHA It seems to me it is all tied in some way to reading. And you're right, if you are a writer, you think about writing. My way of thinking about reading is to write, and my way of thinking about writing is to read. My essays come out of that. You're like an evangelist. You go up to someone and say, I've read this great book. [LAUGHING] So every one of my performances is about the act of reading. The essays, too, are ways of

reading; I don't think it's a passive single activity, or an easily delineated activity. I think it's one of the most complicated things that humans do, to make signs that other people attach meaning to. So, it isn't any surprise that one would then write essays about one's writing and reading. For me, there's a bridge between the two. But that's my reading self.

ROBERT Yes, that's interesting. Yes.

ARITHA Writing the "Ficto-criticisms."

J'NAN Robert, do you think you consciously write inside or outside the dominant discourse? The dominant critical discourse? Do you resent being called Mr. Postmodern?

ROBERT I think of myself as writing outside. I think that's where I give myself identity in a certain way. So when I get co-opted I'm a little surprised. You, Aritha, must think of yourself as radically outside sometimes?

ARITHA Except that I'm functioning within an institution that's totally inside. When people start saying to me, well you're the senior professor in this, I am appalled, but of course it's true. You are inevitably co-opted by the very structures that you resist.

J'NAN We all have to live within some kinds of structures if we are in the publicly employed world.

ARITHA [LAUGHING] That dominant discourse is going to get you. I think it's there as an open field. You can choose to make your footprints across it or you can sort of skirt it, look at it, measure it, take it on. It's daunting.

ROBERT There's another thing, I find that I get ideas out of essays, reading essays and writing essays, that it feeds my other writing. Because some people see it as a contradiction. For you, they must be very close.

ARITHA We live in this world where everything enfolds with everything else. I know for some of my students it seems like an impenetrable labyrinth. But instead of being in there and trying to find your way out, I think it's more fun to say, oh let's see where this little turn of the hedge will take us. [LAUGHS]

ROBERT That's why I think your resistance to genre fits, it fits you in many ways, it announces you. I mean, *Restlessness* as a kind of travel book in several ways; it is fascinating that you put these two forms together.

ARITHA I'm interested in questing motions. But then you go back to, who was it, Blanchot, who said every book is its own genre?

J'NAN We've touched on a number of the generic forms in the first two sections. We talked about confession, travel, explorer narratives, place, love

stories, essays, “ficto-criticism,” and master narratives. Is the narrator in any of your books questioning the idea of being a writer? In other words, do you use the persona of the writer in your work, and do you think the contemporary writer could write master narratives or “giant fiction,” after Aritha toyed with Tolstoy in *Places Far From Ellesmere*?

ARITHA I think Robert’s done it more interestingly than I have with the two writers in *Alibi* who are there to take over the spa and to announce truth in the darkness of the cave. They were thrown out for being the impostors they are.

ROBERT What about the Tolstoyan possibility? Do you do it in?

ARITHA I don’t think I do it in, or I want to do it in, in *Ellesmere*. I want to read. Again, I see that book as a reading act. I want to read against the notion of this giant man, who, still, for all the time that’s past, is a kind of image in Russian literature and to us looking at Russian literature from the outside. Tolstoy appears to have set a version of benchmark. It’s not that I want to do him, or his reputation as the giant figure, in, but I want to unread what he’s written. Through the text, I’m emotionally involved with him and I’m angry with what I feel he did to his character, which I think subverted his own writerly ability. That he creates this fascinating woman and he says, holy shit, I don’t know what to do with her. So I have only one choice. Not that I’m suggesting he should have let Anna Karenina live happily ever after. Those two binaries aren’t very good ones. But he seems unwilling to grapple with the force of his imagination, and it strikes me that every time you get a writer who is convinced of the stature of his or her imagination, then you get a problematic text as well.

J’NAN He certainly was a problematic man. We go back to matriarchy, mothers, and wives. He had a problem with gender that was pretty deep.

ROBERT I agree with what Bakhtin said about Dostoevsky, that you should let your characters have a lot of freedom. That sounds impossible in a way, but it’s true, and they can push you around. If you think of Shakespeare, I mean, *King Lear* is in some ways bigger than Shakespeare, let’s face it. Why not have these characters? I think Tolstoy was afraid of that, and that’s why you say he curtails his imagination when he comes to this woman who is just too big for what he’s willing to think about. Gender. That’s why we like traces of the writer in the book.

ARITHA Liebhaber taking apart the alphabet in *What the Crow Said*. And the alphabet reforming despite his best resistance. My students are so puzzled by Liebhaber.

ROBERT He wants to put it together.

ARITHA *What the Crow Said* is a wonderful book to teach. Students are completely puzzled because they can't even imagine the idea of print not being available to them, so that they start questioning what Gutenberg really did to the world, and to Liebhaver. He's a great writer/figure, making things fit.

J'NAN I'm concerned about reading. In *Death is a Happy Ending*, Kroetsch remarks that critics are fearful of the writers' words because they are not able to allow the "work of art" to become an "enabling act" to play out the possibility of "meaning." If I read Robert correctly, critics as readers are fearful of the writers' words.

ROBERT Critics as readers?

J'NAN Or readers who are not critics.

ROBERT Critics as readers have more of a vested interest than do plain ordinary readers. And that can be good or bad. They might really be investigating something or they might be—

J'NAN Imposing it on you.

ROBERT Yes. But I feel strongly that criticism is really an extension of the text. I feel very strongly about that. So is teaching.

J'NAN Is extension an addition to the text? Is it a misreading? That is why I was asking the question of adding to instead of uncovering. I think both of you are extending readers' knowledge of the prairie. Aritha, you add to Tolstoy's inability to deal with that "fully fleshed woman." In other words, I'm seeing Robert's "enabling act" and "meaning" as accretive.

ROBERT That's a nice thought. I mean, the Palliser Hotel cannot be the same hotel again. Writing changes the world in that sense in one of the most remarkable ways.

J'NAN I like the word you use in that essay as an "enabling act." Because I think that's really the source and the meaning.

ROBERT Yes.

ARITHA Robert also said that "criticism is the story of how we read." I have used that so much because people say to me, what is this "ficto-criticism?" Why are you making a fiction out of what is criticism?

ROBERT It's the story of how you read.

ARITHA It's your line, and so it makes total sense to me that what I would do in "ficto-criticism" is write a parallel story. Because criticism is the story of how we read. Whatever heavy theories are brought to bear, they are all acts of reading which goes back to my desperate and neurotic attachment to reading.

ROBERT Though it's interesting how often a person I meet will say, I wrote a paper on your work.

ARITHA So now what do you say?

ROBERT They were compelled to write, they had to engage differently. They often say, in not too friendly a fashion, that they had to write. The critic becomes writer. It's complicity, it's sharing pleasure, it's erotics. That's erotics. You know that great thing in the *Divine* comedy, the great lovers, Paolo and Francesca, are looking at a text together.<sup>10</sup> Once you look at a text together, you're making love. In a certain way you are into erotics. And if you wrote a paper on this thing you might hate that bastard but you would be pretty close to him.

ARITHA You've been in bed with the book.

ROBERT That's right.

ARITHA At least with the book they've written a paper on—

ROBERT They often do it, put it that way.

ARITHA Writing a paper on you, not on Francesco and Paola.

ROBERT And then I want to say, you certainly did write it on me!!

ARITHA In indelible ink.

J'NAN Do you feel you have a similar approach to criticism or critics reading your writings? For instance, Aritha, you write a lot about your own work, as if the critics are not reading very clearly. You comment on your first three novels in *A Frozen Tongue*, and you've done it on *Places Far from Ellesmere*, and "The Map's Temptation or the Search for a Secret Book."

ARITHA Oh I don't think that's because I think readers aren't reading it properly. It's that when you go back and reread your own text you see it in a different way, and so sometimes you want to talk with that text again. It isn't a corrective to critics. There are things there that I discover, that I'm both appalled and delighted by, and so I feel I have to continue the conversation with the text.

J'NAN And Robert, you do that in your poetry?

ROBERT Yes, I was thinking of that. I think that's another strategy. I don't think anybody's misreading. It's just another way to keep talking.

J'NAN But it's brilliant. This is different from earlier periods. Keats and Hart Crane wrote lots of letters full of theory about their texts and writerly stances. It is important for us to articulate how your critical texts come into your art, so readers will come to understand to read it all.

ROBERT Our stuff is very much of a piece. We do tend to write a single whatever. Unlike a journalist who might just jump around and do this

and that. I look at your [Aritha's] new book and say, that's in a tapestry that goes back to other books.

ARITHA Books talk to one another. Even though I may feel a hundred years removed from *Judith*, I see sudden elements of her coming back. Then I think one wants to explore. If there is any kind of model, you think of Borges endlessly revising his stories. Which is the definitive edition? Then you get all these translations and some are better than others, and some are execrable. Within the fictions there is all this talk about fiction, and maybe we are caught in a kind of sticky molasses or labyrinth. Let's face it, language and discourse and writing and words are what we live and breathe. There is nothing else. So, it shouldn't be a surprise that it ends up being in dialogue with itself at times.

ROBERT In a certain way the author's name is merely the name attached to this total mass.

J'NAN Is re-inscribing, or writing over a way to avoid the concept of death? Is it playing the Phoenix coming out of the ashes when you've finished the book? Later you reread it and comment upon your earlier writings. Does that act enable you to develop a cycle as did William Faulkner in Yawknapatapha County, Margaret Laurence in Manawaka, and you, Robert, in the Notiweekin Trilogy.

ROBERT I'm not interested in the notion that when you look at a block of stone you see a form in it. I want to say, here's a piece or block of stone; if I put this on here, that's interesting. You add whatever they call collage in sculpture. For that reason I like what a culture might call junk. Because often these pieces are made of car bodies, or things that are going to perish, like half a beef, or something like that. That intrigues me. The whole notion that there is some ideal form in that block of stone is—

J'NAN Too Platonic?

ROBERT Yes, too Platonic. It would never make me start chiseling.

ARITHA I see the form. I don't have to do it.

J'NAN That is why you said earlier that you have to come to some focus of what it is that right now is gnawing at you, if you are going to write.

ROBERT And that's why you have to be surprised by the world all the time. Like you think, yes, that's a good idea. I think I'll put that in. Look at the colour red on that. Something like that. It's a *very* different view of the artist. Now that goes back to your question of what comes about in the twentieth century.

ARITHA Do you think we are going to be more willing to apprehend the

perishable when you claim your interest in junk?

ROBERT I started to say that, and then I start to wonder about that. In a certain way postmodern is a willingness to say everything is useful. I mean how long will that last? I can see a very stringent version of art developing.

J'NAN Which is sterile?

ROBERT That's right. Margaret Laurence, when she says, "you go to the nuisance grounds." I said that's where you go.

J'NAN That's where you find the garbage. That's why I referred to the Phoenix image.

ROBERT Sure, that I agree with.

J'NAN Would you discuss your comic writings about life and death? Are the ways you use pronouns keys to this deconstruction? In "Gazing at Coffins: A Meditation on Erectile Death, for Robert Kroetsch," van Herk refers to Kroetsch's persona, "I am, today, my own widow" from his *Completed Field Notes*, by suggesting that in his "grotesquely comic universe" desire is a "seeking toward death" because the "fearfulness of desire" "is subsumed into a lust for desire's opposite . . . death itself." These are quotes. And so I think, reading that, I see in it the larger picture of accretion or adding to rather than deconstruction. In that sense, both of you appear to be moving into the next century by taking on death. And Aritha said to me after the night of the reception for *Restlessness*, "I didn't kill her. I haven't killed anyone yet."

ARITHA It's actually true. I don't think I have killed anyone.

J'NAN So, are the binaries of life and death the paramount issue for the next century?

ROBERT *Restlessness* veers toward a number of things we have been talking about—privacy, death. And then privacy going all the way to a subtle form of suicide. And the question of discourse is in the book. The resort to travel discourse fascinates me. Because we have learned to talk about our world's plan. Gee, I'd like to go to Las Vegas or, wouldn't it be nice to go to Mexico for a week. We don't know what the hell we mean by that, but we are stating something that we can't name. You're probably going to get diarrhoea in Mexico, let's face it.

ARITHA Tourista par excellence.

ROBERT To do it with hotel rooms staggers me, because God knows, I have been in enough hotel rooms and it never crossed my mind to make a note about them.

ARITHA But you've written a wonderful scene where the hot and cold taps are reversed in the Banff Springs Hotel.

ROBERT I did once, didn't I. But they were. I scalded myself. [LAUGHING]  
I've got scars to prove it.

ARITHA When I wrote that essay "Gazing at Coffins: A Meditation on  
Erectile Death, for Robert Kroetsch," I know that in Robert's novels many  
of his characters are only able to achieve erection when they are in a cof-  
fin, or close to death, or intimate with a life-threatening situation.

ROBERT That's the Phoenix.

ARITHA People read that as a negative comment. But I see that as a tremen-  
dously positive one. Because it seems to me that it is that willingness to  
tread the edge that makes this fiction so important for us.

ROBERT That's why I think we have to turn to the comic that's less than  
programmatic. Tragic is so programmatic, in a certain way.

J'NAN One gets to the tragic halfway through the comic. These comments  
take us back to our asking, can you write a love story? Romance is a part  
of the comic, and a part of a love story.

ARITHA Are you tempted by a love story, Robert?

J'NAN He mentioned Paola and Francesca, the great lovers.

ROBERT I don't think I can really write what most people would call a "love  
story." Though I've been infatuated, God knows. I'm quite capable of get-  
ting there myself. Maybe it's a problem of discourse in a way. I can't quite  
believe the discourse.

ARITHA I'm asking because I'm trying to finish a love story now, and I'm  
having a terrible time with it. And I can't think of it as anything but a  
love story. It's many other things. But you're always working on the  
periphery because that central narrative itself is so imbued with a tinge  
of—nostalgia.

ROBERT The great love stories that I like are things like *Wuthering Heights*  
and *Jane Eyre*. But I can't begin to write like that.

ARITHA But you don't think the love story in *What the Crow Said* between  
Tiddy and Liebhaber is a great love story?

ROBERT I think it's a love story. Yes. But it's not what the world is talking  
about as romance.

ARITHA A love story and romance are not the same thing. [LAUGHING] The  
line where Tiddy says to Liebhaber, "you look tired, get into bed." And  
the priest is desperate to marry them so he can preach a sermon. He  
needs an excuse to preach a sermon. So I say to the students, "look at this  
pick-up line." They understand that language better than, "look at the  
cumulation of this love story." They are appalled, [LAUGHING] I mean



they want some elaborate, Byzantine construction. When that's exactly what Tiddy says to Liebhaber, "you look tired, get into bed."

ROBERT They don't talk about their own lives, in some way.

ARITHA No.

ROBERT I'm appalled at how they go about getting into bed.

ARITHA That's a wonderful contrast. [LAUGHING]

J'NAN Please talk about the importance of pronoun voices in your recent work, *Places Far from Ellesmere*. The "I" has been replaced with a "you" and that "you" talks intimately and expressively with Anna Karenina, as if both are there simultaneously. The two women, past and present, full-bodied and sexual, dominate. Are you creating a double self: a person who writes about a "you," in which the writer reads what the person "you" thinks?

ARITHA I'm not certain if that address worked. I'm sometimes skeptical of the end result of that text. But I began with the notion of the accusatory, the second person as accusation. In a sense it's a transpired first person. We are really talking about the "I." So the pronoun is elided in a strange way. At the same time I was trying to make it seductive, inclusive. To pull the reading reader into the text, and to talk to the persona in the novel, in the "Geografictione," Anna Karenina, and the person who is trying to find her. Again, a search or a question novel, I suppose. Trying to find her, and at the same time trying to release her from the confines of the pages of Tolstoy's text. So I go back and I look at *Ellesmere*, and some sections I think work and others don't. But certainly, I do question pronouns.

The ubiquitous presence of "I" and the way that most people are so wrapped up in their own experiences, goes back to the confessional notion. There are those who must use that pronoun every time they open their mouths, which becomes a tyranny. Which is why I like having conversations with Robert, because he always either says "you" or he starts talking about what someone else has done. He very seldom talks about "I." The "I" isn't standing up there demanding attention, which is very unusual. So I guess I wanted to get away from the "I" because I was terrified of its tyranny of writing a version of autobiography which refuses to be autobiography. But that also, interestingly enough, shoved me directly toward the first person in *Restlessness*. Because I thought, well, that she'd better take responsibility for what she is telling, if not doing.

ROBERT I like the way you come to "you" in *Places Far From Ellesmere*. I must say I would have to defend the book *Places* against your doubts.

J'NAN Yes, following from the European romance languages, I read the speaker as "tu" instead of "you." I didn't read it in the accusatory way. I read it in an intimate way.

ARITHA Yes, the intimate "you."

J'NAN In *A Likely Story*, while there are dialogues between men, the dominant feeling I get from the book are the different aged male speakers' relationships, or "what I found when he" (13) remembered women, Jewel, his teacher's red hair, his Aunt Rose, the motherly shoulder he fell asleep on in the plane, Aritha van Herk, My Dead Sister, Margaret Laurence, and Rita Kleinhardt.

ROBERT Well, [LAUGHING] I've been found out.

ARITHA What, that you love women?

ROBERT Just you, Aritha.

J'NAN It seems important to reintroduce this issue of "you" and gender, because it permeates your work, and I know that the autobiographical contexts, "Trouble your Disguises." Is the "I" a greater obstacle or more problematic for writers or for readers, and why?

ROBERT Wow! That's a good question again. Well, for me it's very problematic. I take it from what you said, Aritha, it's very problematic. Just to take the most common phrase on earth, "I love you." If you think about it, you just about go mad. Is it a discourse phrase, totally separate from us? Am I saying, "hey look at me, I love you?" Is the "you" the object? If I say I'm hungry I have a pretty good idea of what I mean. But if I say "I love you," I've ventured into a discourse territory.

ARITHA I think it's the love that's the object.

ROBERT Yes, but even there, I'm sure we all use it, because if you say something more elaborate, you sound so phony. It's like, "oh, come off it man." [LAUGH]

J'NAN Well if you say "I love my dog," it's no problem. It is a construct that embraces the two pronouns, with love in the middle, and who is the "you" and who is the "I?"

ROBERT It's

ARITHA reciprocal.

ROBERT A kind of an equation. It announces an equation, which might not be mathematically reciprocal.

J'NAN Say you have a character, you're writing a love story, and the character says "I love you," how is that a problem for the reader now instead of just the writer? You've come to the realization you have to say this. I

mean, in *What the Crow Said*, Tiddy says “you look tired, get into bed.”

ARITHA She never says “I love you.” She says “it’s snowing,” “someone must take a wife.” I like that passive voice, “someone must do this.”

J’NAN So he’s recognized how problematic it is. Kroetsch makes it obvious.

ROBERT As I’ve heard too often, “don’t say that to me.”

J’NAN So is “I love you” a trivial statement when it winds up in a text.

ROBERT No. The opposite side is that in discourse we are initially believers.

I think that’s one of the fascinating things about narrating. If somebody says “the sky is green this morning,” I say, okay the sky is green. I might later think, mm, green sky. But at first I believe it. And if the character says “I love you” I believe it, and then I think, but look what he’s doing. One of the powers of discourse is that immediate acceptance, and that’s why we get away with blue murder as writers. I think Fitzgerald said that, you know, you can skate over some pretty thin ice. Like I’m an innocent reader first of all. I read, and I believe what I read, and I go along.

J’NAN And you cry.

ARITHA Yes.

ROBERT Yes. And then later on I think, oh well that was about, I notice this was about Plato or something.

ARITHA Yes.

ROBERT That the most sophisticated reader, first of all believes—

ARITHA Is incredible.

J’NAN How would you compare and/or explain how you entice the critic to start reading the story to uncover a critical position? Is your use of irony, really a new phenomenon? For example, in a recent interview with Karin Beeler, van Herk remarked about how criticism is “only now starting to talk about itself, and it’s becoming very, very insular. For a writer (who writes criticism, fiction, or poetry, as both of you do), there is always the sense of uneasiness about anything that talks only about itself, and so I thought, this is really an interesting technique. Maybe we can use this in literary criticism; we can start moving back and forth” (82).

ARITHA Which goes back to my fascination of ficto-criticism. It’s true that criticism is now so obsessed with theory, so obsessed with itself, that it will only theorize about theory. The text has become a kind of *L’etranger*, an outsider occasionally brought in to support the doorjamb.

It does speak though, to reading back to your own text. It’s true that close reading dominated criticism for the modern period. A long time. So we have, I think not, loosed the shackles of close reading completely. But

at the same time the opposite, the theorizing over theory, which seems to be almost anathema to close reading of the text, becomes another arena that is probably just as questionable. And that's why I'm interested in being an interloper between those two.

ROBERT I guess one of the quibbles would be this very occasion. This is a different kind of activity than the one where the reader or critic sits in splendid solitude looking at a text and consulting a few dictionaries for some rather glib etymologies. I distrust etymologies. But here we are doing something entirely different. You and I are being critics here. In some ways we are being creative. You're [Aritha] being a story maker. You construct a very elaborate narrative here, which we believed all the way.

ARITHA What we've accompanied with perfect assistance.

ROBERT And enjoyed it.

J'NAN And with that I'll bring us to our last question. Are you parodically playing with literary canons? By naming and acknowledging the value of past or present writers, do you establish yourself in a league with other writers?

ROBERT I just wanted to say, these have been incredibly penetrating, good questions.

Because that's a tough question how one uses the past. I sometimes think of a parallel and take it out. Because I don't like it. It's a kind of distraction for the reader. But yet I've been thinking about it. There's another kind of writing that just loads them all in, and you think, "Come on, I've read, for God's sake. . . ." I don't know about how parodic it is. What would you say [Aritha] it is? You know, you engage with all these texts in some way.

J'NAN Is thinking a better word?

ROBERT Yes. In *Ellesmere*, Aritha demonstrates an enormous respect for Tolstoy. Maybe less for Rudy Wiebe.

ARITHA Oh poor Rudy.

J'NAN Is that because few want to read Tolstoy.

ROBERT Yes, exactly. Because she doesn't like the relationship that Wiebe was establishing with Tolstoy. Whereas, she can establish one which is much more disrespectful, on a certain level. But on another, acknowledges, that this man created a character that I have to write a whole bloody book to deal with.

ARITHA That's true, absolutely.

ROBERT That's what I think one of the things about Aritha and me is, we do

talk to each other. We might not specifically. We are dialoguing on that level. So you want suicide. I'll give a suicide.

ARITHA Don't you dare. I wouldn't call my method parody so much as, and maybe this is a bad metaphor to use, tribal memory. You know you've read all of this. You know all of the stories that have been told. You're free to play with them within the construct, and you talk back and forth to the other storytellers, or jesters, or whatever figures you make audience.

ROBERT It's very much like people at the kitchen table. When somebody tells a story, that reminds me. You've got to make it pretty good, because they've just told a pretty good story. You might have to lie a little.

ARITHA And the kitchen table is that locus of where you meet, where you talk, where you remember, and where you, I think, plan the future. It isn't only about the past. It's also about the future.

ROBERT An enormous exchange goes on there. I listen to my family sometimes. The amount of exchange of ideas, stories, opinions, attitudes. All of this being exchanged.

J'NAN This is what is so sad to me, about the fact that so many people live alone. I remember as a child growing up listening to stories and telling stories. When I came home from school, I'd ramble on and on and on to my mother who probably was surfeited with my talk. This is how we actually grow and develop, through story. Story is the most important part of our life.

ROBERT I agree. Let's stop right there. I really think that is finally the way we relate to ourselves and to the world. Is with story. For all the fancy things, I'm going to go back and say, "Wow, did I have a good interview this morning. The three of us just sat there and told stories."

ARITHA And told stories!

ROBERT I have to run.

#### NOTES

1 Robert Kroetsch, Reading at the University of Calgary, March 16, 1999.

2 Kroetsch, *The Man from the Creeks* 299.

3 This interview occurred on March 15, 1999 at Aritha van Herk's home in Calgary. I wish to thank the Humanities Institute of the University of Calgary, where I was a senior research Fulbright scholar for 1998-1999, for the transcription of the tapes.

4 van Herk's "Women Writers and the Prairie: Spies in an Indifferent Landscape," was written in response to Kroetsch's "The Fear of Women in Prairie Fiction: An Erotics of Space."

5 Here, Kroetsch refers to his article "The Fear of Women in Prairie Fiction" when he

suggests the book about the West "is written as much from fear as from love. The love of woman that traditionally shaped the novel . . . is violently rivalled by a fear of woman as the figure who contains the space, who speaks the silence. And the resultant tension determines the 'grammar' of the Western novel. The basic grammatical pair in the story-line (the energy line) of prairie fiction is house: horse. To be *on* a horse is to move: motion into distance. To be *in* house is to be fixed: a centring unto stasis. Horse is masculine. House is feminine. Horse: house. Masculine: feminine. On: in. Motion: stasis. A woman ain't supposed to move. Pleasure: duty" (75-76).

6 John Keats "Ode to a Nightingale."

7 "The Poetics of Rita Kleinhart" is a chapter in *A Likely Story: The Writing Life* 171-216. See also part I, part II in *Prairie Fire* 17.2 (Summer 1996): 28-31; "The Poetics of Rita Kleinhart," *West Coast Line: A Journal of Contemporary Writing and Criticism* 10 (27/1) (Spring 1993): 34-39; and "The Poetics of Rita Kleinhart," *Open Letter* 9th ser. no. 2 (1995): 61-74.

8 "Sitting Down to Write: Margaret Laurence and the Discourse of Morning," *A Likely Story* 148-56.

9 van Herk's essays are included in *A Frozen Tongue* and *Invisible Ink*, while Kroetsch participated in the discourse of *Labyrinth of Voices* and his essays are included in *The Lovely Treachery of Words*.

10 Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy: Inferno*. Paolo and Francesca are located in Circle 2 of the Inferno. "The fatal affair of Paolo and Francesca, whose telling by Francesca causes the pilgrim to swoon, is portrayed in the joined couple." Blake's engraving of "The Circle of the Lustful: Paolo and Francesca (1824) includes the couple "above the figure of Virgil, a luminous sketch of the tender embrace that was provoked by the couple's reading of the romance of Lancelot and Guinevere and for which they were killed when discovered by Francesca's husband. Dante's image of the whirlwind powerfully portrays the couple's loss of objectivity in erotic projection" (Taylor and Finley 29).

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## The Narcissus Bloat

Alberta. I offered to have sex with Jasper the Bear  
if he would only give me a cigarette.  
Jasper, used to this sort of thing, pawed at the ground  
distractedly and said "it's all about you, superstar, isn't it?"

So, I got back on the train.  
Put my dinnerjacket over the roomette's mirror  
so not to notice what is noticeable: Tubby Tubmanson  
in a frayed blazer, writing zingers for a wingding of a wake.

*O povero sentimentalo* who couldn't hold the tomato in hand,  
couldn't extricate its acidities with a straight face;  
poor middle-class American with periodic nacho stains,  
rarefied misspellings and obvious glancings at magazine places.

Mountainland elk and deer yawned by the tracks  
and we passed *Chez Jasper* in the elegance of public transport.  
The window reflection was no less forgiving;  
darkening my movieola—uncomplicated lunches and straight teeth.



## Club Med

Tomorrow I'll pack up and go to Paradise  
and there, among pelicans and fishingboats,  
watch the beautiful people at their trades:  
androgynes, glistening with sunscreen,  
spreadeagled on the stones;  
tanned young nymphs behind their visors,  
mirror-lenses flashing like fish;  
even bucket-laden serving maids  
at their customary aspersions.

Tomorrow I'll pack up and go to Paradise  
and there, between the biscuit bush and bongo tree,  
give my nerves a long-needed rest.  
I'll take a book with me, a pen, some paper,  
or find some odalisque to pass the time.  
It's easier than you think to shed your skin  
once past the jet lag, as Epicurus tried to show,  
between the airport and the dark casino.

# Nature Laughs at Our Systems

Philip Henry Gosse's  
*The Canadian Naturalist*

## Seeing Like a Fish

In Philip Henry Gosse's *The Canadian Naturalist* (1840), a series of conversations about the natural history of Lower Canada, a young Englishman named Charles, recently arrived in Québec, earnest and eager but still somewhat wet behind the ears, announces to his amused father: "Life under water must be a kind of dull existence" (CN 344). Charles renders his verdict while standing on the banks of the "Coatacook" (Coaticook) River, close to Compton, one of the Eastern Townships in Québec, the principal setting of Gosse's book. It is early December, and Charles finds again that he hates the "cheerless and depressing" winter landscapes of Canada when the gaunt trees, stripped of their autumn foliage, rattle in the piercing wind and the fields are one dull, unbroken expanse of snow (CN 336-37). What he seems to be saying, too, is that life in a Canadian province can sometimes be a little less than exciting.

The response of Charles's "Father" (capitalized throughout the book) is revealing and brings out the full originality of Gosse's work. It also encapsulates the central theme of this essay—the challenge to "anthropocentric" ways of thinking, to put it in modern terms, which informs this neglected text of Canadian nature writing as well as much of Gosse's later work. Faced with his son's obtuseness, Gosse's naturalist-father reminds his son that it all depends on who is doing the looking. Just as we can frequently make out the sizes and shapes of the fish swimming below the surface when we look into the water, he explains, so these same creatures, from the bottom of their ocean, river, or pond, may be able to look back up at us. Shouldn't we assume, then, that the fish—as ignorant of "the green face of the earth" as we are of "the caves of the ocean"—can nevertheless see our world

distinctly, “the trees on the bank, the insects and birds that fly over the water, the blue sky, clouds, sun, and stars” (CN 344)? Don’t believe for a moment that the fish are bored: “I should not think their life dull for lack of objects.” No doubt their world is very different from ours, though the Father also permits himself to speculate on some of the similarities: “the bottom is probably as plentifully clothed with vegetation as many parts of the land, and contains hills and dales, rocks, and caverns, and bright sands, in profusion” (CN 344). In fact, humans do not realize that the surface of air touching the water has, for those who live beneath it, the same power of reflection as does, for us in the world above, the lake in which we admire our reflections. And the Father suggests a startling reversal of perspectives to his son: “Could we stand under water and look obliquely towards the surface, we should see every object beneath reflected from it; the diversified bottom, fish swimming, floating weeds, &c. would be as truly imaged, if the top were smooth and unruffled, as the skies and trees are on the surface of the still pond” (CN 344).

This is a remarkable thought experiment. Gosse’s Father encourages his son to see with the eyes of a lowly Canadian fish right after Charles has wondered aloud what underwater creatures do when the river is covered with ice. The Father immediately discerns the flaw in his son’s reasoning: it is not that the fish are shut out from our world, it is that we are shut out from theirs. Later in his career, Philip Henry Gosse would put his fantasies of underwater bliss—of a world serenely unconcerned as to whether humans exist or not—to good use in the aquatic scenes he drew for his sea-side books, from *A Naturalist Rambles on the Devonshire Coast* (1853) to *Actinologia Britannica*, a compendium of the natural history of sea anemones and corals (1858-1860), to *A Year at the Shore* (1865). It would make sense, then, to attribute more than anecdotal significance to the story of the fish of Québec peering up at the unfamiliar world of humans. As I will suggest here, Gosse’s *Canadian Naturalist* may be read as an early and, not incidentally, *Canadian* example of what Lawrence Buell considers a central feature of (mostly U.S. American) environmental writing, namely the willingness to question the human point of view as the “primary focalizing device” in descriptions of nonhuman nature (Buell 179). After a detour into the biographical circumstances of the book’s composition and a reflection on the historical and literary contexts within which it *cannot* be placed, my essay addresses Gosse’s subtle subversion of the systems by which humans have attempted to impose order on nature, in this case linear narrative as well as point-for-point analogy. An epilogue confronts the relationship

between the fictional father and his fictional son as it is depicted in Gosse's first published book with the fiercely critical portrayal of an actual father-son relationship in the autobiography written, more than six decades later, by Gosse's "real-life" son, Edmund. As will become evident, one of the main reasons for Edmund's discontent was exactly what made *The Canadian Naturalist* so unique. For his father, wrote Edmund, tremblingly, "the incidents of human life" had been "less than nothing" (FS 247).

### Butterfly Business

The incidents of Philip Gosse's life—at least those that accompanied the writing of his first book—are swiftly told. Gosse himself described them in vivid detail in his unpublished "Anecdotes and Reminiscences," and his son Edmund recapitulated them in his father's official biography, *The Life of Philip Henry Gosse, F.R.S.* (1890). Philip Gosse had enjoyed no formal scientific training; the son of a struggling painter of miniatures and a former housemaid from Worcester, he was only fourteen when he was forced to quit school. Reluctantly, he followed his older brother William to Newfoundland, indenturing himself for six years as a clerk in a whaling merchant's counting house at Carbonear. While in Newfoundland, Philip purchased a book on microscopes and developed an abiding taste for natural history. Without local museums or collectors' cabinets to guide him, he became an expert on indigenous insect life. Influenced by friends, he also joined the Wesleyan Society and began to think it "proper," as his biographer-son put it, "to exclude from his companionship all those whose opinions on religious matters did not coincide with his own" (*Life* 79; 83).

In 1835, Gosse was invited by fellow Wesleyans to join them in a cooperative farming venture in Upper Canada. Deeply engrossed in the study of his entomological specimens—several of which, securely packed and stored, traveled with him—he paid scant attention to his new surroundings. Instead of Ontario, where most new immigrants went, Gosse and his friends, persuaded by some newly acquired acquaintances (perhaps agents of the British American Land Company), elected to settle in one of the Eastern Townships of Québec (Innis 56). The land had seemed fertile enough, and Gosse, dazzled by a profusion of beautiful butterflies he had encountered near Compton, was elated: "Like a child, I felt and acted, as if butterfly-catching had been the great business of life" (AR 2.207). As it turned out, neither he nor his friends were cut out to be farmers. As his son remarked, not without malice, "he was not one of Emerson's 'doctors of

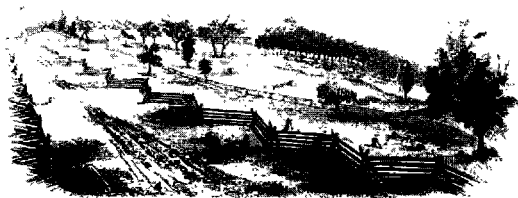
land, skilled in turning a swamp or a sandbank into a fruitful field” (*Life* 97).<sup>1</sup> About half of Philip’s share of the 110-acre farm, featured in idealized form in the elegant drawing Gosse produced for the title page of *The Canadian Naturalist* (Fig. 1), had not even been cleared.<sup>2</sup> The pages of his

THE  
CANADIAN NATURALIST.

A SERIES OF CONVERSATIONS  
ON THE  
NATURAL HISTORY OF LOWER CANADA.

BY  
P. H. GOSSE.

COR. MEM. OF THE NAT. HIST. SOC. OF MONTREAL, AND OF THE  
LIT. AND HIST. SOC. OF QUEBEC.



“ Every kingdom, every province, should have its own monographer.”  
GILBERT WHITE.

ILLUSTRATED BY FORTY-FOUR ENGRAVINGS.

LONDON:  
JOHN VAN VOORST, 1, PATERNOSTER ROW.  
M.DCCCLXII.

Fig. 1. Title page of Gosse, *The Canadian Naturalist* (1840).

farm journal are littered with references to the piles of stones that he gathered, Sisyphus-like, from the swampy soil. Soon he found the backbreaking work so intolerable that he sought additional employment as a school-teacher. His scientific interests, however, flourished even as his crops did not. Entomology became the “very pabulum” of his life (AR 2.209). Philip Gosse contributed papers on insects and climate to the Natural History Society of Montreal and the Literary and Historical Society of Québec, both of which, in turn, elected him as a corresponding member. He also completed a book-length manuscript, never published and now lost, on “The Entomology of Newfoundland,” compiled a series of drawings, titled *Entomologia Terrae Novae*, and mailed a collection of local lepidoptera to the museum in Montreal. “Often . . . after my day’s toil have I sallied forth, insect-net in hand, pursuing the Sphinges and Moths, totally forgetful of fatigue” (AR 2.209). On a “lovely” spring day, the 11<sup>th</sup> of May 1837, the idea of a book on the natural history of Compton occurred to him as he was strolling through the woods (AR 2.219).

Hopeful that “persons of education” like him were needed elsewhere, he sold his farm in 1838 and lit out for the territory—in this case, the South of the United States. Weeks later Gosse found himself, hardly happier with his new lot, in sweltering Alabama, teaching school in the mornings and stuffing his ears in the afternoon so that he wouldn’t have to hear the blood-curdling screams of the slaves, their bodies writhing under the lashes of the cowhide whip (*Life* 143). His scientific zeal blunted by the excessive heat (*LA* 193) and realizing that slavery alone was “so enormous an evil, that [he] could not live [t]here” (*LA* 255), Gosse once again packed his bags. The voyage home to England lasted five weeks, during which time he worked tirelessly to transform his Canadian diary entries into a readable book. On February 29, 1840, *The Canadian Naturalist* was published. The circumstances of Philip Gosse’s meager existence in Compton had become truly incidental.

### **What Is Here?**

Conceived by a failed emigrant from Dorset, completed on board a ship that was carrying him home to England, printed, engraved, and published in London, Gosse’s *The Canadian Naturalist* has, at first sight, little to offer that could pass as an authentically “Canadian” experience, apart from the fact that the plants and animals discussed by Gosse were, mostly, native to Canada. Oblivious to everything but his beloved insects, Gosse was blissfully immune to the typical immigrant experience, as Northrop Frye and

others have described it. There is no indication in *The Canadian Naturalist* or his letters that Gosse felt he was “being silently swallowed by an alien continent”; nor does “terror” describe his attitude to an environment he never regarded as “nature red in tooth and claw,” only as a source of endless toil and trouble.<sup>3</sup> Certainly, he was unconcerned about the question Frye said Canadians don’t ask anyway (“Who am I?”). But the Canadian alternative—“where is here?”—didn’t seem to worry him much either.

If there is indeed one single question that lurks behind the pages of *The Canadian Naturalist*, it could best be described as “What exactly is here?” As Wayne Grady has insisted, neither Frye’s fear-response thesis nor Atwood’s survival theory captures the richness of the Canadian experience of nature. But even within the tradition of Canadian nature writing, which Grady sees as originating in the “wonder-filled harmony” of Samuel Hearne’s northern landscapes, and which to him so effortlessly describes the writings of Catharine Parr Traill as well as Grey Owl, Gosse’s text sits uneasily. He is manifestly uninterested in “breaking down the barriers between man and nature” (Grady 8, 9). And while for him, too, Canadian nature, with its “blue lakes,” “blooming vales,” “forests’ gloom” and “strange contrasting seasons,” betrayed “no lack / of bounteous design,” as J. H. Willis rhapsodized in the *Montreal Gazette* in 1833, the poet’s effusive conclusion, namely that all this “makes / the raptur’d spirit seem a part of thee,” obviously had little relevance for Gosse.<sup>4</sup>

In similar fashion, Gosse’s *The Canadian Naturalist* hardly fits the available narratives of the development of Canadian science. In the more traditional version (as told, for example, by Carl Berger), the colonial scientist is described as anxiously conservative rather than boldly innovative.<sup>5</sup> Scarcely intent on closing yawning gaps in scientific knowledge, forever dependent on the mother country and its established institutions, he never criticizes or challenges the *status quo* and instead collects, classifies and consolidates, enriching “the treasury of science elsewhere” (Jarrell 328). In a more sympathetic reading, Suzanne Zeller calls this activity “inventory science” and stresses its crucial importance, “as a means to assess and control nature,” for Canadian nation-building (Zeller 4). There can be no doubt that Gosse, in the best tradition of late eighteenth-century natural history, was a passionate maker of lists, a tireless compiler of catalogues and collector of specimens. Perhaps it shouldn’t surprise us, then, that Berger reads *The Canadian Naturalist* as just another harmless example of the tepid mix of aesthetic appreciation and religious reverence that marks and mars so many popular

nineteenth-century natural history books. In this interpretation, poor Gosse, puttering about in the Canadian boondocks, as pious as he was dull, filled the willing pages of his diary with lovingly observed garden detail, all bolstered by “familiar truisms,” in the comforting knowledge of God’s overarching wisdom and goodness (Berger 34–37).<sup>6</sup>

But whatever else might be said about him, Gosse was no leaf-pressing, fern-collecting amateur. And he was no haughty *conquistador* either. Writing in opposition to the smugness with which humans see themselves as the focal point of a creation so manifold and multiform that they cannot begin, and therefore shouldn’t even pretend, to comprehend it, Gosse would have had little use indeed for the utilitarian premise of Canadian science as Suzanne Zeller has described it. There is no evidence that all his collecting and catalogue-making ever gave him a sense of domination over his physical surroundings. “How little do we know of the arcana of nature,” sighs the Father in *The Canadian Naturalist* (CN 207).

To be sure, Gosse always pursued his natural history interests *sub specie aeternitatis*, forever mindful of “that changeless state to which time and space are nothing: when we shall know as we are known” (CN 18). For him, natural history was first and foremost natural theology, and the more evangelical his views later became, the greater became his need to see “the world of created things around us” as “a mirror continually reflecting heavenly things.”<sup>7</sup> As he stated at the end of his last seaside book, there really was “no scientific road to heaven” (*Year at the Shore* 326). Yet in Gosse’s many writings and natural history illustrations there was a contrary tendency at work, too: while constantly searching for God’s universal truth, while standing, for example, at the edge of the sea, “with its gentle waves kissing [his] feet” (A 16), he found himself incapable of ignoring the materiality (and individuality) of created things. As Thoreau, hardly a religious fundamentalist, put the dilemma succinctly: “Is not nature, rightly read, that of which she is commonly taken to be a symbol merely?” (*Week* 310). For Gosse—unlike, say, for Emerson—nature is not interesting only in so far as it bears on human experience.<sup>8</sup> This was the lesson he had learned in Canada: for all the Father’s dedicated lecturing and the son’s dutiful listening, the main concern in *The Canadian Naturalist* is *not* the human observer.

Like Catharine Parr Traill, Philip Gosse knew very well that Canada was no Canaan (*Backwoods* 79). Nevertheless, he remained a bit resentful that he had let himself be swayed into settling in unpropitious Québec rather than on the shores of Lake Huron, and he blamed some of the hardships



that befell him on this initial mistake. In the conversations that make up *The Canadian Naturalist*, Gosse's frustration is still palpable. At one point, the Father compares new immigrants to loons chasing rainbows and mocks those travelers "who pass a few months in going through the pleasantest part of the country, and then think themselves qualified to give a description of Canada, setting forth in glowing colours all the pleasures, and never noticing the disagreeables, probably because they know nothing about them" (CN 108). Choosing his pronouns carefully, the Father nevertheless adopts a consciously Canadian point of view—as the cautious interpreter of Canadian animal and plant life to his audience abroad. Apparently his identification with his new country, warts and all, supersedes even the ties of kinship, and he has spent the last years living apart from his child, a fact offered without further explanation: "as your time since the age of understanding has been spent in England," he tells his son, "your personal acquaintance with *our* natural history must of necessity be slight and limited" (CN 1; my emphasis).

In a curious reversal of roles, the older man in Gosse's book represents the New World, while the younger man, his son, stands for the opinions, conventions, and prejudices of the Old. Charles, still hankering after the comforts of home, has been in Québec only a few months. He continues to be influenced and inhibited by his fond memories of European nature, and his pronouncements are often stilted and awkward.<sup>9</sup> Apparently not much of an outdoorsman, he deplores the inconvenient ruggedness of the landscape: "Walking in the forest would be much more pleasant," he complains, "if it were not so much encumbered with logs, roots, and fallen trees. Sometimes we break our shins against them, or stumble over them" (CN 224). Youth and age are in fact relative categories even in nature, the Father argues when his inconsiderate son offers a rather tactless encomium on the springtime of life, clothed in a comparison of a young and an old hemlock tree. "The former," Charles had pointed out, unbidden, "has a feathery and graceful lightness, bending to the slightest breeze; but when old it has become sturdy, the bark rough and deeply furrowed, full of gnarled snags, and broken limbs, the top generally blighted and dead, and the foliage almost deprived of that pencilled grace which gave such a charm to its youthful days" (CN 9). To this the Father replies that such changes are an indication not of decay but of distinction: "Like nobler creatures," the hemlock often "survives its beauty" (CN 10).<sup>10</sup> Gosse's fine drawing, which bestows plenty of "pencilled grace" on both the young and the old tree (Fig. 2), proves the Father right.

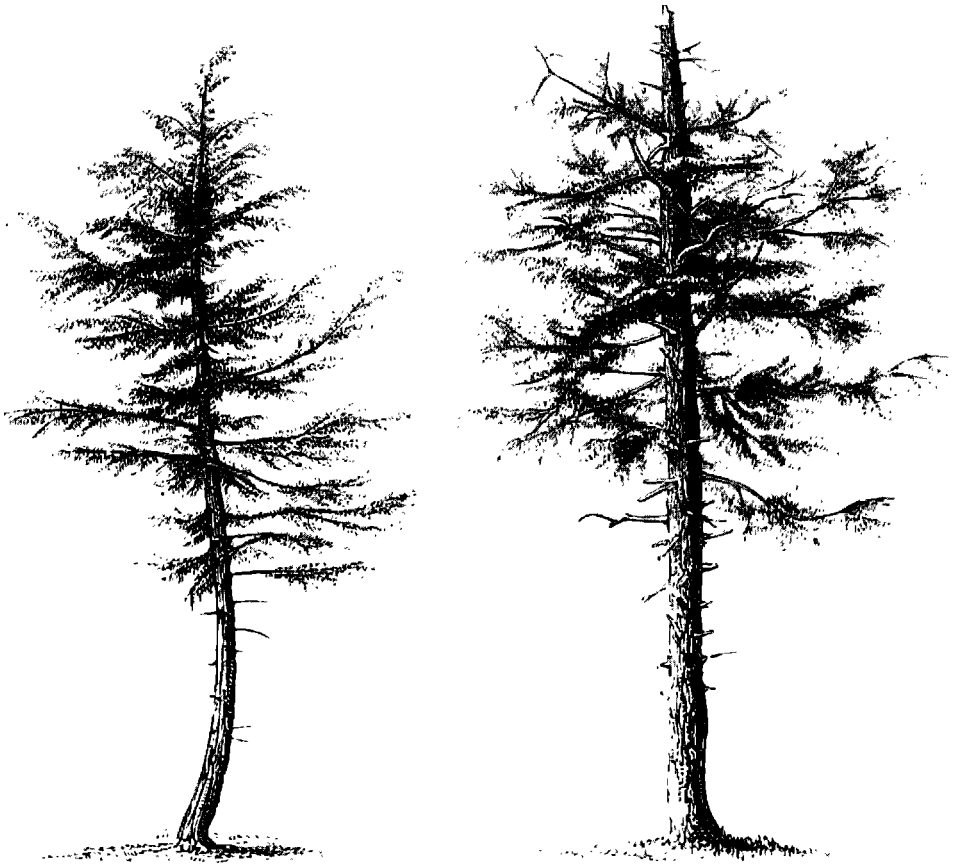


Fig. 2. *Young Hemlock; Old Hemlock* (*Pinus Canadiensis*), from Gosse, *The Canadian Naturalist*.

A few years later, H. W. Longfellow would include the hemlock, “bearded with moss, and in garments green, indistinct in the twilight,” among the indigenous “prophetic” voices that make up the otherworldly “forest primeval” of Acadia, featured at the beginning of *Evangeline* (1848). It is a majestic tree for sure, as Gosse’s Father realizes, although most Canadians don’t consider it worth the “labor of felling” (CN 8). And the fact that such glory may grow “on the poorest and most swampy land” (CN 7) makes it a more than suitable metaphor for the hapless farmer Gosse’s own lofty aspirations in his first natural history book, the real fruit of his years of toil in Canada.

### Rambles and Ramblings

Thus inspired by the flora and fauna of Compton, the Father, in a total of twenty-five conversations, valiantly tries to increase his son's, and implicitly the reader's, understanding of Canadian natural history. The form Gosse had chosen recalls the popular manner of scientific writing well-established at least since Galileo's *Dialogue on the Two Chief World Systems* (1625-1630), but it is a genre that had recently gone a bit "out of fashion," as he admits himself (CN viii). It is not hard to see why. At their worst, Gosse's "snip-snap" dialogues (*Life* 159), though conducted outdoors, still carry a whiff of the classroom, and the narrative details sprinkled very sparingly into the text seem like afterthoughts: "Now draw in your horse a moment, and look at the prospect from this hill" (CN 105); "Now, Charles, it is time to see about returning" (CN 106); "But while we are talking of the Indians, the evening has waned into night" (CN 157). On the other hand, the loose structure allows Gosse to instruct his readers without seeming pedantic, and to eschew absolute pedagogical rigor for creative spontaneity. "A master," Gosse later wrote, "may be easy and familiar without being vague."<sup>11</sup>

In *The Canadian Naturalist*, randomly perceived "trifles," such as the characteristic spotting of a butterfly's fragile wings or the pretty sight of a dandelion seed dancing in the wind, are discussed at great length, while other and arguably more important matters, such as the political situation of the colony, are not mentioned at all. There is no trace, for example, of the mounting tensions between the *Canadiens* and their British overlords in Québec, no comment on the increasing cultural and economic diversity of a region in which loyalists and their descendants mixed, sometimes uneasily, with newer immigrants from the British Isles and Ireland and even the United States (Sweeny 77-79). A three-page general disquisition in chapter ten of Gosse's book on the natives of North America summarily acknowledges their sad fate ("few remains of these powerful tribes survive") and deplors the "treachery" of the whites. In the end, however, the disappearance of the "Indians," like the current political situation of Québec, is a fact of human, not of natural, history and therefore uninteresting: "Nature remains the same" (CN 151). Bits and pieces of local color—references to neighbors like "J. Hughes" (CN 35) and "my friend, Mr. H. Bill" (CN 267) or to landmarks such as "Spafford's bridge" (CN 103), the "Bois Brulé" (CN 297), and "Bradley's mill" (CN 303)—never combine to give *The Canadian Naturalist* the kind of sustained topographical and regional specificity that distinguishes, for example, Gilbert White's *Natural History of Selborne*, from

which Gosse took the motto enshrined on his title page: "Every kingdom, every province, should have its monographer."<sup>12</sup>

But Gosse's *The Canadian Naturalist* is more a *multi-* than a *mono-*graph. Within the chapters themselves there is no pretense of order, cohesion, or progression: father and son leap lustily from topic to topic, from species to species, from animals to plants to agriculture and then back again, depending on what they happen to see while they walk. Serendipity is one of "the greatest pleasures of the out-of-door-naturalist," believed Philip Gosse. "There is so great variety in the objects which he pursues, and so much uncertainty in their presence at any given time and place, that hope is ever on the stretch. He makes his excursions not knowing what he may meet with; and, if disappointed of what he had pictured to himself, he is pretty sure to be surprised with something or other of interest that he had not anticipated" (*RNH* 271).

The apt analogy Gosse offers for this erratic-seeming procedure is that of the hummingbird's flight: "we may ramble from one subject to another (as the humming-bird waywardly shoots from flower to flower), often by a transition more abrupt than could be permitted in a systematic discourse" (*CN* viii). The hummingbird dips into the corolla of the bee balm and, barely finished, "like lightning" (*CN* 273) hurries on to draw its nourishment from the next sweet-smelling blossom—just as Gosse's text skips nimbly from one observation to the next. "See how they hover on the wing," observes the Father, watching a ruby-throated hummingbird poised before the showy flower of the bee-balm, "in front of the blossoms, quite stationary, while their long tongue is inserted, but their wings vibrating so rapidly as to be so invisible as an indistinct cloud on each side" (*CN* 163).

As so often in *The Canadian Naturalist*, Gosse doesn't just vaguely appeal to the reader's sense of vision, he performs the work of visualization himself and creates for our inspection a perfect image of stasis-in-motion. As the bird's wings flutter, so does Gosse's sentence, which, having begun with a strong, ponderous imperative ("See"), ends lightly, suspending all time and movement with the playful touch of a present participle ("vibrating"). But the speaker's tortuous attempt at analogy ("so rapidly as to be so invisible as . . .") also suggests that what we see here finally resists visualization—an effect later captured beautifully in Emily Dickinson's poem about the hummingbird, "A Route of Evanescence." Obviously, the hectic yet concentrated activity of the little bird (which delves deeply, its throat "a glowing coal of fire," into each flower it selects but stays there only a short time) supplied Gosse with

a good model for his own whirlwind approach to Canadian natural history—except that the blossoms Gosse prefers are usually more homely ones. Within the space of a page or two, he easily moves, for example, from “the rank smell” of the skunk to the colouring of the longhorn beetle, which he goes on to compare with the more subdued hues of the horsefly—a train of thought no sooner established than it is abandoned for the sake of sundry observations on the natural history of the milkweed: “Here is a bed of plants. . .” (CN 255).

By choosing the hummingbird’s zigzag flight as an analogy for the unpredictable motions of his own narrative, Gosse ironically illustrates the limits of analogy itself as a tool for a sustained human understanding of nature. His choice of a verb in the passage cited above (“we may *ramble* from one subject to another”) does gesture toward the genre in which his text may be conveniently situated, but the differences between Gosse’s work and the ur-text of the “ramble” in North American nature writing, John Godman’s *Rambles of a Naturalist*, are immediately evident. Godman’s walks in his immediate neighborhood, during which he discovers the deeper meaning of ordinary places and animals, are clearly circumscribed, either geographically or thematically, and what he happens to see is usually debated at length, with some topics, such as the behavior of the common crow, stretching out over several installments. Godman’s *Rambles* were first serialized in 1828 in the Quaker journal *The Friend*, a publication quoted extensively in *The Canadian Naturalist* (CN 164-66; Croft 21). But even if Gosse can be said to share some of Godman’s purpose—“to read what Nature had written . . . for my instruction” (Godman 62)—we find him perusing not so much a large book as a random collection of loose leaves. Rambles may, as one of Gosse’s Canadian successors notes, easily become *ramblings*, “a mental assimilation of sights and sounds,” and may even be the better for it (Wood 1).<sup>13</sup>

### Crystal Pageants

One shouldn’t assume, though, that chaos reigns supreme in Gosse’s book. Like an almanac or “Naturalist’s Calendar,” to use Gosse’s own term from the preface, the sequence of the chapters is determined by the succession of the seasons, a popular device in English literature since James Thomson’s widely read blank verse epic, *The Seasons* (1726-1730; 1744). *The Canadian Naturalist* begins on January 1, with an image of “dazzling” snow “in the sunshine” (CN 3) and ends the same year, on December 1, when the Coaticook River is again covered with ice (CN 341). As Lawrence Buell has

pointed out, an emphasis on the cycles of the year gently guides us toward a realm where human concerns are no longer central. To observe “the changeful year” (as Thomson called it in *Winter. A Poem*) requires no special training, but to understand its nuances takes a lifetime of dedicated study. The seasons predict and prescribe the way we act and dress, but if they symbolize human behavior they do so only provisionally, as a reminder that their ineluctable change is entirely beyond human control: “Whichever way one wants to respond to them, they offer one of the first and commonest paths by which a human being may be teased into ecological awareness” (Buell 220-21).

More than a formal device, then, the seasons are a powerful source of the imagery through which humans try to relate themselves to nature, and it is here, too, that Gosse’s originality becomes evident—in a book, it is worth remembering, that was published a full ten years before Susan Fenimore Cooper’s *Rural Hours* (1850), hailed by Buell as “the first and still the most ambitious seasonal compendium published by an American author” (221). Characteristically, Gosse is particularly intrigued by a phenomenon that defies the orderly sequence of the seasons, that happens, as it were, in the interstices between them—the “silver thaw.” Like other observers after him, Gosse is struck by the unreality of the spectacle.<sup>14</sup> As he describes it in the “February 1st” chapter, rain has fallen during the night, transforming nature as if with a “magician’s wand.” Come, says the Father to Charles, and

I will show you such a scene of splendour, as you will not see every day. Observe the woods: every little twig of every tree, every bush, every blade of grass, is enshrined in crystal: here is a whole forest of sparkling, transparent glass, even to the minute needle-like leaves of the pines and firs. What are the candle-light lustres and chandeliers of the ball-room, compared with this? Now the sun shines out; see, what a glitter of light! how the beams, broken as it were, into ten thousand fragments, sparkle and dance as they are reflected from the trees. (CN 19)

The passage demonstrates well Gosse’s “power of word painting,” which he says he first discovered in Newfoundland when he was still dabbling in poetry and felt “a dawning anticipation of authorship” (“Account” 259). Gosse’s exhortative language (“observe”; “see”), enhanced by repetition (“every tree, every bush, every blade”), alliteration (“twig . . . tree . . . bush . . . blade . . . needle-like leaves”), assonance and near-asonance (“a whole forest of sparkling transparent glass”), meticulously recreates on the page what the reader cannot see, moving from the general (“the woods”) to the particular (“twig”; “blade of grass”) and then back again (“a whole forest”).

As if to purge the reader's imagination of all inappropriate associations, the Father first suggests and then immediately retracts an analogy from human life, the radiant glass pendants of a chandelier in a ballroom. What the reader is invited to visualize is a dance of a quite different sort, performed not by humans but by the sunlight as it is refracted by the ice. The beams of light playing over this enchanted crystalline forest Gosse again conjures up merely through the magic of his alliterating, assonating language, in a sentence that begins and ends in regular trochees: "How the beams, broken as it were . . . sparkle and dance."

What we see in this mirror of ice is not, however, our own reflection. Charles might feel as if he had entered a scene from *The Arabian Nights* (CN 19), but the Father goes on to show him how fragile all this wondrous beauty is when interrupted by the slightest touch from a "rude" human hand. Instantly, Gosse's syntax loses its force and concentration, with a rapid sequence of independent clauses imitating the passing of all that brilliance into disenchanted sobriety, as shattered glass hits the barren ground: "on my striking the trunk of this tree, see! the air is filled with a descending shower of the glittering fragments, and the potent spell is broken at once; the splendour has vanished; the crystal pageant has returned to its old sober appearance, and is now nothing more than a brown leafless tree" (CN 19-20).

Such natural fragility can only too easily be associated with the vicissitudes of human life, but the analogy the Father suggests is an unconventional one: "What a figure of youthful hopes and prospects," he exclaims, marveling at the trees resplendent with ice. The silver thaw, like youthful innocence, cannot last. Inevitably, "the rush of years," "struggles for the means of existence," "intercourse with a cold world" will shatter the crystal tree of youth. In a surprising twist, then, the frozen landscape of late winter reminds the father of the still pure aspirations of life's beginnings. But it is certainly no accident that it is a crude, rude, interfering human hand—the Father's own!—which puts an end to all that glittering natural beauty and makes the insubstantial pageant fade. Ultimately, the seasonal analogy has only limited use, as Gosse points out elsewhere: "Man grows old, but nature is ever young; the seasons change, but are perpetually renewed" (A 17).

The "February 1st" chapter offers another example of how the splendor of the Canadian winter will always triumph over all human attempts to appropriate it. Father and son, with the help of a pocket magnifier, scrutinize the various forms of snowflakes, available for inspection only to the eye that is "accustomed to pry into the minutiae of creation" (CN 28). But their inves-

tigation does not end in a celebration of the power of science to see what is "little seen or suspected by people in general" (CN 26). Instead, the brilliant, well-defined crystals (Fig. 3), "thin and flat stars . . . resembling in beauty and variety of shape the forms produced by the kaleidoscope," teach these two human observers a lesson in humility. Gosse's illustration beautifully brings out, against a stark black background, the regularity of the structure of the crystals, the wonderful combination of sameness and difference that makes each of them recognizable as an individual. Snow crystals are elusive: destroyed by the slightest increase in temperature, they dissolve instantly when we bring our prying eyes too close. How shoddy seems human workmanship beside such delicate beauty! If we look at anything produced by human hands through a magnifying glass, declares the Father, "we shall see that however fair it appeared as a whole, it was composed of

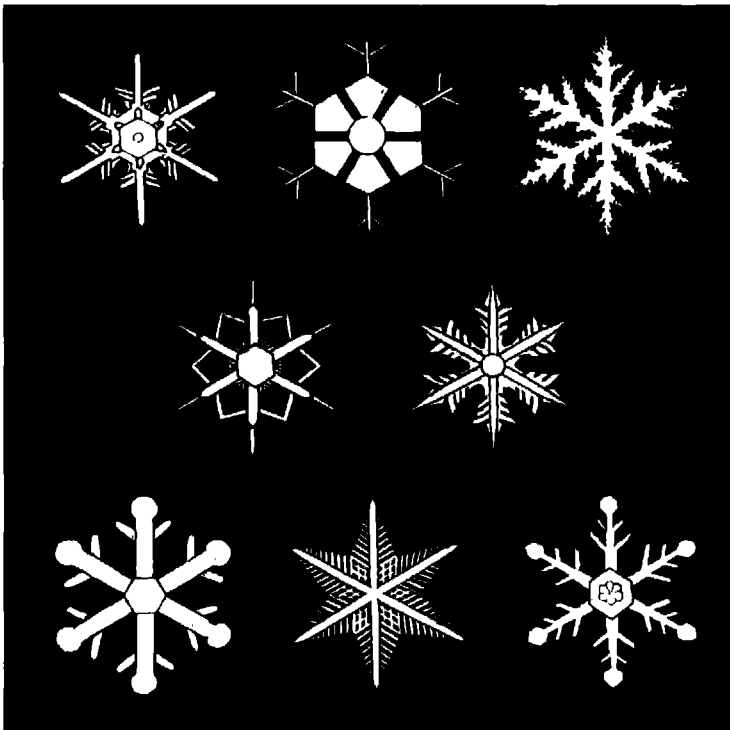


Fig. 3. *Crystals of Snow*, from *The Canadian Naturalist*.



ragged and shapeless parts, and that its beauties were only produced by the defective nature of our senses.” To underscore his point, the Father selects an example with which the author Gosse, the son of a professional miniaturist, was especially familiar. “Look at a fine miniature painting: it is made up of minute dots, which, when magnified, are seen to be uncouth blotches, coarse and without form.” Then examine the minutest parts of God’s creation and you will find them to be perfect beyond reproach, from the humble house-fly sitting on the windowpane to the snowflake that has come to rest, if only for a fraction of a second, on your arm: “Nothing coarse or shapeless is there; and it is so in every case: the most minute crystal or point on your sleeve is of faultless regularity and beauty” (CN 28-29).

The poet Wallace Stevens would much later suggest that in order to understand winter, “the junipers shagged with ice / The spruces rough in the distant glitter,” one must “have been cold a long time” (“The Snow Man,” 1923). But even such a minimalist version of the pathetic fallacy the Father in *The Canadian Naturalist* would reject, arguing that “cold” is not a “positive quality,” merely “the absence of heat.” Our senses aren’t trustworthy and do not “give us a true estimate of the real temperature of the atmosphere” (CN 337). Properly regarded, no season, not even winter, “is so barren but that it possesses charms . . . peculiar to itself” (CN 360).

The winterscapes of Québec reappear as late as 1860, in Philip Gosse’s popular work, *The Romance of Natural History*, a rebuttal of all attempts to study natural history in “Dr. Dryasdust’s way.” On some winter nights in Canada, says Gosse, the stars will flash and sparkle “with unwonted sharpness” and, if we are lucky, we may even see the *aurora borealis* perform its “mystic dance” across the purple sky (RNH 2). Again, perhaps remembering his earlier illustration, he praises the arabesques formed by the frost on the windowpanes, “the symmetrical six-rayed stars of falling snow, when caught on a dark surface” (RNH 3), and he quotes, almost verbatim, his own description of the “crystal pageant” of the silver thaw from *The Canadian Naturalist* (RNH 4). In this cold, wintry world, humans are marginal to the purposes of nature: “A snow-storm . . . rapidly obliterating every landmark from the benighted and bewildered traveller’s search on a wild mountain-side in Canada” is something “terrible to witness” (RNH 2). Even the insects fare better here, as Gosse points out in a note on the *Poduridae*, tiny spring-tails known as snow fleas: “In Canada I have found, in the depth of winter, living and active insects on the surface of the snow, which are seen nowhere else, and at no other season. Little hopping atoms, of singular structure,

adapted to a mode of progression peculiarly their own, dance about on the unsullied bosom of the new-fallen snow" (*RNH* 67; see also *CN* 341).

### The Insect View

In their casual survey of Lower Canadian nature, father and son devote their attention democratically to things both large and small. It is obvious, though, that they both have a distinct preference for the "insect view," as Thoreau called it, whose early essay on "The Natural History of Massachusetts," with its promise that "entomology extends the limits of being in a new direction," would have very much appealed to Philip Gosse (*Natural History Essays* 5).

A case in point is the dragonfly, which in Gosse's little universe enjoys pride of place among the insects, as it did, incidentally, for Catharine Traill, who was enchanted by these "beautiful creatures" and by the variety of colours they displayed (*Backwoods* 238; *Pearls and Pebbles* 104).

Incomparably older than humans, the *Odonata*, the dragonflies and damselflies, are one of the oldest orders in the animal kingdom. For his *Entomologia Terrae Novae*, compiled while still in Carbonear, Gosse drew four of these elegant insects, beautifully arranged on the white page as if performing, even in death, a kind of ballet. In Gosse's composition, the tails of three long-bodied dragonflies (two of which are darners or *Aeshnidae*)<sup>15</sup> in the right half of the drawing appear to be pointing at each other, whereas the more compact "4 Spotted Dragonfly" (*Libellula quadrimaculata*, now known as the "Four-spotted Skimmer") in the lower left corner occupies a separate place outside the formation. The precision with which Gosse has rendered the gauze-like wings of his insects and the furry plasticity he has given to their bristly limbs are still remarkable (Fig. 4).

In *The Canadian Naturalist*, however, Gosse does not celebrate the dragonfly in its mature and most attractive state; characteristically, he approaches the creature when it seems at its least prepossessing. When Charles, on one of his walks, picks up the nymph of a *Libellula*, or dragonfly, he finds it an "awkward, sprawling creature, something like a spider" (*CN* 79). Prodded by his father, he stores it in a moist box and takes it home, where, after placing it in a water basin, he watches with amazement the operations of its piston-like tail whose strong musculature pumps water in and out, "a breathing apparatus as well as a means of locomotion" (and, incidentally, also the insect's rectum). Then, just when Charles thinks he is done, the Father feeds the "ugly creature" some worms and points out the strange motions of its active mouth. Again, Gosse's language allows the

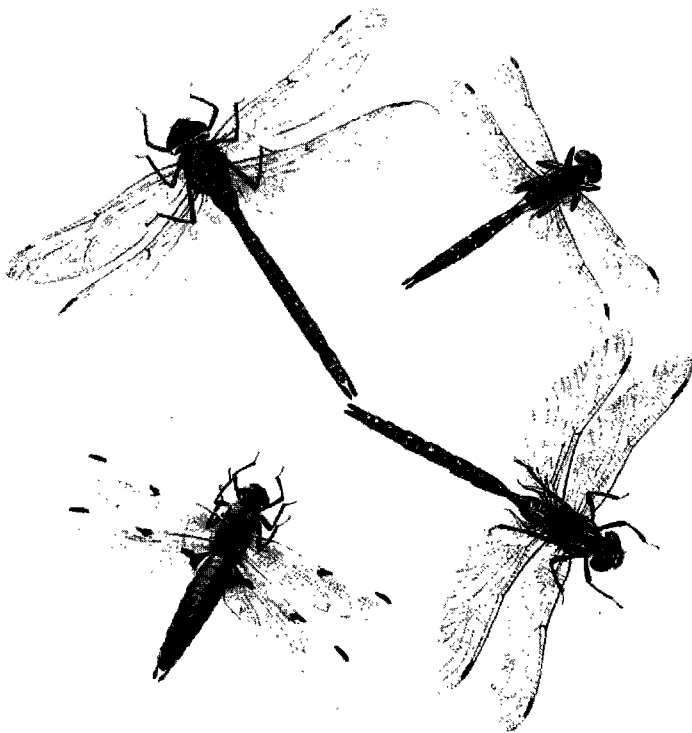


Fig. 4. Philip Henry Gosse, *Dragonflies*, watercolor on paper, page 37 in Gosse, *Entomologia Terrae Novae* (1833-1835), Collections of the Canadian Museum of Nature. By permission of Jennifer Gosse and the Canadian Museum of Nature.

reader to participate in the process of discovery, as her eyes follow the slow passage of the tiny pin penetrating the insect's labium or "face," as Gosse prefers to say. Ironically, his very choice of such a humanizing term—in the context of a passage describing in great technical detail a form of behavior that is so obviously alien to humans, so clearly unique to the animal under investigation—serves to emphasize the incomparable difference between the world of the insect and that of the human observer:

The whole face is composed of a long flat kind of mask, ending in a rounded point, and divided in the middle (as you see when I separate it with a pin) by serratures, like the teeth of a saw, which fit into each other. These valves it throws open, and darts out to a great length by means of a double fold, as you saw, on the approach of prey, to seize it, and carry it to the mouth which is concealed within, and the serrated teeth are said to hold it firmly while it is being devoured. (CN 81)

Gosse's inverted syntax, imitating the insect's sly capture of its prey ("These valves it throws open . . ."), adds to the drama of the scene. With the dragonfly nymph, the simple act of procuring food is a complex operation, involving the smooth cooperation of exterior and interior organs, the movable lobes at the front (tongs armed with hooks for capturing prey) and the long labium, which shoots forward with lightning speed, absorbing the struggling victim into the devouring jaws. A very "formidable apparatus" indeed, whose machinelike regularity of movement, though minuscule, appears nothing short of monstrous—an almost medieval instrument of torture that holds you in its grip while you are being eaten alive! Pity that prey. But although there is a definite element of deceit in the nymph's approach to its unsuspecting victims (consider the references to the mask, the "concealed" mouth, the trap-like teeth), the lesson to be learned from studying this mechanism is, as Gosse sees it, a cheerful one: "Should not this very thing 'hide pride from man?'" asks Gosse, citing Job 33:17. "So much care bestowed upon an animal altogether out of the pale of general observation, and evidently *without any reference to him!*" (CN 80; my emphasis).

To think that from this fully developed, effortlessly functioning underwater creature should soon emerge another one that is so incomparably different, a kaleidoscope of whirring colors, the mature dragonfly! Faced with such wonderfully complete and intricate beings as the dragonfly, even in its allegedly "immature" status, the naturalist can no longer comfortably see himself as Adam at the centre of God's creation.

In *The Canadian Naturalist*, the metamorphosis of insects becomes the best example of nature's constant capacity to surprise and confound the human observer. What today seems like a "large and handsome caterpillar," tomorrow will turn into a pupa "with a remarkable prominence on the back," out of which will then emerge, a fortnight later, the Banded Purple Butterfly (Fig. 5). But even without the complications of having to identify which larva becomes what butterfly, nature, delighting to step nimbly from one "gradation" to the next, always eludes and mocks the taxonomist's grasp: "So exactly do many of the hawk-moths of the division *Aegeria* resemble hymenopterous flies, that even an entomologist may be deceived at the distance of not more than a yard" (CN 193). This is nature's way of making fun of us: "Thus does Nature laugh at our systems!" (CN 194).

Gosse loves the names of his butterflies and moths, and in *The Canadian Naturalist* they roll off his tongue mellifluously: the Tiger Swallowtail, the Violet Tip, the Pearl-border Fritillary, the Camberwell Beauty, the Spring

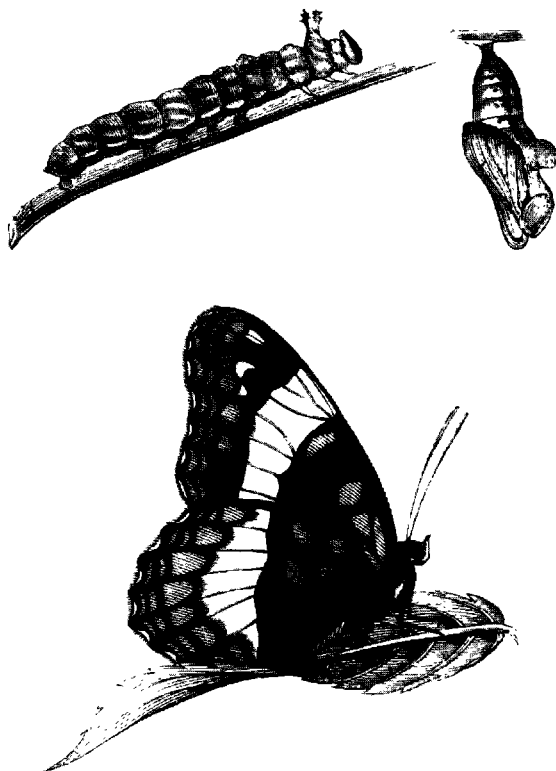


Fig. 5. Larva, Pupa, and Imago of the Banded Purple Butterfly (*Limenitis Arthemis*), from *The Canadian Naturalist*.

Azure, the Tawny-edged Skipper, the Angleshades, the Lemon Beauty, the Streaked Hooktip, the Twin Goldspot, the Spangled Orange, the Crimson Underwing. Pondering the evidence of nature's multiplicity, for which the metamorphosis of the butterfly is just a particularly appropriate metaphor, Gosse, for all his awareness of taxonomic generalities, grants individuality to each and every living being. Again, the fault is ours if we don't perceive this individuality: "I doubt," says the Father, "if there were ever two objects created, of whatever kind, between which there was not some difference, if our senses were acute enough to appreciate it" (*CN* 17). Faced with such bewildering multiplicity, the human capacity to err is as boundless as nature itself; therefore, Philip Gosse shows patience even for those would-be naturalists who cannot tell the difference between a hummingbird and a moth (*RNH* 298).

Life must be sheer enjoyment even for the insects, muses Gosse, and those who call them “inferior creatures” betray their own ignorance. “Look at yonder maple woods,” exclaims the Father on June 10, look at these “masses of the most soft and refreshing green,” the wonderful bushes and shrubs that “are studded with myriads of happy insects, of all sorts, merrily hurrying to and fro and enjoying their brief but joyous span of life” (CN 192). But such anthropomorphisms are ultimately too comfortable, too comforting. Consider the example of the “whirlbeetle” (the whirligig beetle). His dance at first seems comparable to that of a “band of full-grown ladies and gentlemen” performing “the mysteries of the quadrille in a ball-room” (CN 102). However, the easy analogy between the human and the animal world collapses when the Father goes on to point out that this insect, which paddles in the water with half its body submerged, has not two, but four eyes to help it see better, or at least more at once, than any human ever could: one eye is just above the surface, the other just below, a perfect example of the “adaptation of an organ to its use” (CN 102).

The image of Canadian nature sketched out in Gosse’s gracefully written pages is, as should now be apparent, somewhat different from that evoked in Catharine Parr Traill’s numerous works, from *The Backwoods of Canada* (1836) to *Pearls and Pebbles; or, Notes of an Old Naturalist* (1894). This difference is not only attributable to the obvious fact that Gosse writes about Québec and Traill about Ontario.<sup>16</sup> Feeling that Canadian nature was hers to appropriate, Traill cheerfully appointed herself the “floral godmother” of Upper Canada, at liberty to bestow on the wildflowers she finds evocative names of her own choosing (*Backwoods* 120). Gosse restricted himself to being the patient cataloguer, for his more or less arbitrarily chosen province, of the “amazing diversity in all the realms of Nature.” In *The Canadian Naturalist*, Canada is not “the land of hope,” as Traill saw it (*Backwoods* 210), and it is not primarily the site of bustling human activities, other than perhaps walking and talking. Instead, it emerges as the subject of *natural*, not *human*, history—not so much as terrain to be seized, cleared, settled and owned, but as a world that knows no past nor future, inhabited by dancing fireflies, busy beetles, fast-moving hummingbirds, and aromatic plants, where the most momentous event is a butterfly’s slow metamorphosis.

### **Epilogue: Natural History and Human History**

*The Canadian Naturalist*, warmly received by the critics, marked the beginning of Philip Henry Gosse’s amazingly productive career as a writer of

books on natural history.<sup>17</sup> In 1844, to make his cup of foreign experiences full, he departed for a two-year stint in Jamaica. In his preface to *A Naturalist's Sojourn in Jamaica*, published a few years after his return, Gosse lashes out against the still-prevalent conception of "natural history" as a "science of dead things; a necrology," dealing mostly "with dry skins furred or feathered, blackened, shrivelled, and hay-stuffed," with animals "impaled on pins, and arranged in rows in cork drawers; with uncouth forms, disgusting to sight and smell, bleached and shrunken, suspended by threads" and then pickled in dusty glass bottles. Where is natural history as the record of *living* things, where are the books in which the "bright eyes" of animals still shine, in sentences full of "the elegance and grace that free, wild nature assumes" (*SJ* vi-vii)? For Gosse, it is clear, natural history isn't *history* at all. Rather, it captures—as he himself did in *The Canadian Naturalist*—the *present moment* in all its glory and effervescence.

Philip Henry Gosse to some might seem an unlikely purveyor of such "seize-the-day" philosophy. In the mid-1840s, he had joined an austere sect of dissident Christians, the Plymouth Brethren, who abhorred ritual, hierarchy, ministers and the wicked ways of the world, believed in the infallibility of Scripture and the importance of public "testimonies" of faith, and, above all, lived in constant expectation of the imminent return of Christ. Much has been made of Gosse's hardening religious fundamentalism and the influence it had on his resistant response to Darwinism. But Gosse was too good an empiricist not to accept that there was "a measure of truth" in evolution, even as his religious convictions kept him "from accepting Mr Darwin's theory to the extent to which he pushes it" (*RNH* 81).<sup>18</sup>

His most ambitious attempt to define his distance from the developing evolutionary ideas was *Omphalos*, published two years before *On the Origin of Species*: a passionate argument for the createdness of nature, intended as a justification of the findings of modern science as well as an endorsement of the literal truth of Genesis. For page after page Gosse repeats the same procedure, first recapitulating, in great detail, all the obvious indications of development, change, and age to be seen in individual organisms by everyone who cares to look closely. Then he interjects, invariably, the same refrain: "All these evidences of age, clear and unanswerable though they are, are yet fallacious" (*O* 217). Species are created, not born; the moment in which we first look at an animal or plant "is the very first moment of its life" (*O* 252). Even Adam came into life sporting a full-sized belly-button (*omphalos*), with no mother ever having been attached to it. God had created a world in

which all living things carried the evidence of a gradual history—but of a history that had never happened. All evidence of prior change is “prochronic” (as opposed to “diachronic”) or “ideal.” Put differently, we need to think of all organisms as ever-revolving circles, with no identifiable beginning or end, created at an arbitrary point in the circle, which also means that, newly brought into existence, they would nevertheless show “all previous rotations of the circle.”

Predictably, Gosse’s book bothered the evolutionists, but it hardly helped advance the creationist cause either. For didn’t the argument for prochrony, when followed to its logical conclusion, also imply that God had purposely left false clues, to deceive the scientists and to taunt the devout? Read as a refutation of evolution, Gosse’s theory sounds absurd indeed—“spectacular nonsense,” as Stephen Jay Gould fondly called it. But if we, following Jorge Luis Borges’ advice, accept *Omphalos* on its own terms, we see a wonderfully poetic evocation of the *present moment*, a continuation of the project begun, more than a decade earlier, in *The Canadian Naturalist*. Nature, for Gosse, knows no yesterday or tomorrow, no parent and no offspring—all of which are irrelevant human concepts anyway.

Deeply opposed as he was to the notion of parenthood in nature, Philip Henry Gosse is reputed to have been an “appalling parent” himself (Allen 121), incorrectly so, as Ann Thwaite has demonstrated. Evidence of Philip’s colossal failure as a father usually begins with a notorious entry in his diary, made the day his wife Emily gave birth to their son Edmund: “E. delivered of a son. Received green swallow from Jamaica” (*Life* 223). Seemingly callous, this passage in fact indicates the same conviction that informs the dialogues in *The Canadian Naturalist* as well as the cycles of creation evoked in *Omphalos*—namely, that humans aren’t what makes the world go ‘round. *Father and Son: A Study of Two Temperaments* (1907), Edmund Gosse’s most elaborate attempt at coming to terms with his ambiguous parent, is a powerful argument against such a view of nature that excludes humanity from its purview. In his official biography, Edmund had used a reference to the overbearing Father featured in Philip’s first book, *The Canadian Naturalist*, to criticize, ever so subtly, the author of the work himself. The Canadian parent was, he said ironically, at his “most entertaining when he talked with the least interruption of the young enquirer” (*Life* 159; see Raine 75).

In *Father and Son*, Edmund’s second book about Philip, written more than fifteen years later, such verbal skirmishes have turned into open warfare. It is tempting indeed to compare the real son’s later grievances against



his father, however embellished, however exaggerated, with the interactions of the fictional father and son in *The Canadian Naturalist*. "My father," remembers Edmund, now himself in his fifties, "was for ever in his study, writing, drawing, dissecting; sitting . . . absolutely motionless, with his eye glued to the microscope, for twenty minutes at a time" (FS 40-41). Shutting his son off from most contacts with the outside world, Philip tried to draw Edmund into the study of natural history; in retrospect, Edmund recalls no other image of his childhood than that of father and son together, in contemplation not of each other but of molluscs and crabs: "Those pools were our mirrors, in which, reflected in the dark hyaline . . . there used to appear the shapes of a middle-aged man and a funny little boy" (FS 124). A photograph taken in 1857 shows the father clutching a book, with his left arm affectionately, if firmly, around his serious-looking son, whose lowered eyebrows and stiff posture indicate his discomfort before the camera, a "funny little" child indeed (Fig. 6).



Fig. 6. Father and Son (Philip Henry Gosse and Edmund Gosse, 1857), British Library. By permission of Jennifer Gosse.

In his muffled *cri de coeur*, Edmund Gosse likened himself to his father's natural history collectibles, as if he were one of the "speckled soldier-crabs that roamed about in my Father's aquarium" (FS 229). Even as a small child, he had wanted Philip Gosse's natural history books to assume a human face, dreaming that, as if by magic, he could liberate the birds and butterflies from the pages on which they were being held prisoners: "I persuaded myself that, if I could only discover the proper words to say or the proper passes to make, I could induce the gorgeous birds and butterflies in my Father's illustrated manuals to come to life, and fly out of the book, leaving holes behind them" (FS 60). In an unconscious (per-)version of his father's theory of *ex nihilo* creation, young Gosse simply went ahead and invented his own specimens. Compiling little natural history monographs of his own, he populated them with the seaside animals of the kind his father liked to collect, "arranged, tabulated and divided as exactly as possible on the pattern of those which my Father was composing for his *Actinologia Britannica*" (FS 146). But the crucial difference was, of course, that little Gosse's creations had no counterparts in real life: "I invented new species, with sapphire spots and crimson tentacles and amber bands." The bewildered father, conscientious shepherd of the multifarious flocks of the sea, grew concerned: "If I had not been so innocent and solemn, he might have fancied I was mocking him" (FS 147). In a sense, Edmund Gosse had become a parody of the docile Charles in *The Canadian Naturalist*.

Truth is stranger than fiction, believed Philip Gosse, who later in life proudly banned the "belles lettres" from his bookshelves (RNH 299). When his little son was sketching his fantasy creatures, all of them close enough to "real species" to be disconcerting, he was in reality discovering the world of *fiction* as a separate realm, the rival of nature in its capacity to body forth forms strange and beautiful. Now Britain's foremost literary critic, Edmund offered assurances to his readers that Philip's austere world had vanished for good. But for all the author's attempts to freeze the image of Philip Gosse in a distant past, Edmund's *Father and Son* is framed by assertions that would have made his father proud—namely that the tale told here is *not* fictional, *not* invented, but "scrupulously true" (FS 33). Behind Edmund Gosse's strenuously scientific mask, however, there was a loud longing for a kind of intimacy that he felt Philip Gosse had enjoyed never with him but only in nature—as when on a cold Canadian winter night, while standing on the banks of the Coaticook River in Québec, imagining he was a fish, he tried to picture for himself "the scenery" under water: a world infinitely more interesting, captivating, and brilliant than that inhabited by himself or his kind.

## NOTES

I am profoundly grateful to Jennifer Gosse for her friendly advice and the gracious permission to use unpublished material from her great-grandfather's papers. Thanks are due also to Patrice Stevenson and Jodie Lane of the Canadian Museum of Nature in Ottawa, Kathleen Cann of Cambridge University Library, Tim Ford of the Department of Biological Sciences at the University of Maryland Baltimore County, and the staff of the National Archives of Canada.

- 1 See Emerson's lecture "Concord Walks" (1867), in which he appreciatively calls the farmers of Concord "not doctors of laws but doctors of land, skilled in turning a swamp or a sand-bank into a fruitful field" (172).
- 2 The original watercolor, "View of P. H. Gosse's Farm, Compton, L.C.," is now in the National Archives of Canada, where it is shelved with Gosse's "Farm Journal."
- 3 Frye 830. The most recent version of Frye's long-lived concept is offered by Dunlap, who identifies "death in nature, death by nature" as the great Canadian theme (43).
- 4 *Montreal Gazette*, 19 January 1833 (qtd. in MacDonald 54).
- 5 For this influential definition of "colonial science," see the three-part model of the diffusion of Western science proposed by Basalla; for a trenchant critique of this concept, see Jarrell.
- 6 See also Dance's attack on the "pious, prolix" and "unreadable" texts of Gosse and his contemporaries (205-06). Barber, 239-50, explores the central role of Gosse in the Victorian natural history craze. For the best modern treatment of Gosse, see Merrill 190-240.
- 7 On Gosse's use of marine biology as a road to "revealed religion," see Smith.
- 8 In "Country Life" (1858), Emerson declares that "what we study in Nature is man" and reiterates: "man only interests us. We are not to be imposed upon by the apparatus and the nomenclature of the physiologist. . . . For Nature is only a mirror in which man is reflected colossally" (164-65).
- 9 Raymond believes this is due to Gosse's inability to enter "the mind of a normal boy" (51), though we have no clear indication anywhere in the book of how old Charles really is.
- 10 *Pinus canadensis* was labeled thus by Linnaeus in 1763, when it was still grouped with the pines. The current designation of the eastern hemlock, *Tsuga canadensis*, first suggested in 1847 by the Austrian botanist Endlicher, rather adventurously combines the reference to the tree's North American origin with the Japanese word for hemlock.
- 11 See Gosse, *Evenings at the Microscope* 5. Writing about the benefits of the epistolary form in *Tenby* (1856), Gosse confesses that he is fully aware of the artifice involved in his "demotic" approach to natural history writing: "This admits of a certain ease and freedom, by which the author is (or seems to be) brought into more direct and individual communication with every one of his readers."
- 12 Letter VII to Daines Barrington (White 125). On Gosse's topography, see Raymond 54-55.
- 13 Gosse has, of course, little interest in the complicated demonstrations, thought experiments, and learned axioms of the scientific dialogues by the more distinguished practitioners of the genre. His avowed model was chemist Sir Humphry Davy's *Salmonia; or Days of Fly-fishing* (1828/29), a lighthearted series of conversations mostly about the joys of fly-fishing but full of digressions, with topics ranging from practical advice for anglers and disquisitions on the nervous system of fish to the role of instinct in nature and the existence of mermaids. But, as Gosse later admitted, he knew Davy's work "by quotations" only (AR 2.219).

- 14 For a description of the "silver thaw" in the Maritime Provinces, read Captain Campbell Hardy's entertaining *Forest Life in Acadie*: "The network of the smallest bushes is brought out to prominent notice by the sparkling casing of ice, and the surface of the snow gleams like a mirror. Such a scene as I once beheld it at night by the light of a full moon was most impressively beautiful, and, I would almost say, unreal" (317). Compare this with the much drier report supplied by the Staff-Surgeon Major Andrew Leith Adams in *Field and Forest Rambles*: "the bare boughs of the deciduous-leaved trees and evergreens become encrusted with ice, present a very striking appearance. . . . But the effect is often fatal to the garden fruit trees" (129).
- 15 See Bruton 36. The collections staff of the Canadian Museum of Nature in Ottawa has identified the dragonfly in the upper right corner of the drawing, the "Yellow Spot D[ragonfly]" (Gosse's handwritten note), as belonging to the genus *Tetragoneuria* (which is usually found in Québec, not Newfoundland). Letter to the author, 13 October 2000.
- 16 In his autobiography, Gosse dismisses *Backwoods* as "a gossiping, pleasant book" without any real "scientific" value, though, getting his dates wrong, he credits it with having inspired his interest in Upper Canada while he was still in Carbonear (AR 2.201). In fact, Traill's work came out only after he had already moved to Compton (AR 2.201; "Account" 263 and 266n 56).
- 17 *The Canadian Naturalist* was never a commercial success, though. When the possibility of a Canadian edition was suggested in 1867, Gosse informed his correspondent in Nova Scotia that 112 copies were still unsold (Freeman and Wertheimer 19).
- 18 Darwin, too, admired Gosse, and it seems that in a small way Gosse even aided and abetted the theory of natural selection, by trying out a "little experiment" on Darwin's behalf and helping him find a reason for the wide distribution of fresh-water molluscs "from pond to pond & even to islands out at sea" (to Philip Henry Gosse, 27 April 1857, *Darwin's Letters* 171-72; see also *Origin of Species* 383-85). Unperturbed by their ideological differences, both Darwin and Gosse continued to compare notes about orchids, their shared passion.

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## Ursa Major the Great Bear

When the great malls close  
and shoppers go home  
and lights inside grow dim,

the shadows of what used to roam here  
roam here again. They pad  
through the flora of vast parking lots

(candy bar wrappers, cigarette butts,  
lumbering bags in the wind . . .) and slip  
toward the long buildings like drifting exhaust.

A security guard stops his car.  
Westerlies cry through the power lines

as the complex shapes of human dreams  
reduce to the shape of their cities.

The guard checks a window, touches his gun,  
rubs a paw mark out on the Plexiglas.

## Under the Old Roof

All day, light rubbed and streamed over everything on shore  
but except to note  
overriding blue, I hardly gave the sky a thought  
Far past midnight  
when I slid from sleep and out of the tent  
the star-jammed  
blackness nearly threw me on my back. Then the sky  
was the one thing  
to watch, like a billion acres of voices and signals  
all demanding attention,  
more than any shivering man could do. Had I ever been  
so awake?—  
yet I couldn't answer *hey you, you, you, you, you*  
all at once. My eyes  
were wells filling up with brightnesses flung from farther  
than I'll ever go.

I recalled an Italian count, some novel's sullen brooder  
dubbing the sky  
"old roof," saying our sins had plastered it with centuries  
of gloom,  
and I knew all kinds of our junk ripped and zipped past  
out there.  
Still, imprinted with the day, I searched for constellations  
never named—  
Seal, Tern, Heron, Sandpiper—and felt the sky was some  
limitless mind  
dancing, or a sea of secrets suddenly breaking through.

\*

Under the taken-for-granted blue,  
the first seal surfacing  
had seemed a stranger wading ashore



after days hugging flotsam,  
forehead masked in black hair.

Glistening amidst  
many glistenings, sleekness  
complete, two others  
lifted their heads, bobbed and  
stared, stared and bobbed—  
“like beings off a U.F.O.”  
I thought at the tide’s edge  
but they could’ve barked  
*What’s your business, alien  
glaring at us? What world of little hair  
have you travelled from?*

Above the driftwood line, a toad  
sluggishly hopped  
across leafy mulch, then  
went still, so intent on camouflage  
I felt a pinprick of guilt  
just watching, scribbling  
mental notes on his ridges and lumps.  
When he inched under  
greater safety, my boot nudged  
aside the bleached board,  
robbing him of cover.

He raised no frightened eyes  
to me, who might’ve been  
a tall monstrosity to him  
(or merely useless  
like a bathing suit to a seal,  
a flashlight to the stars).

★

Where 3 a.m. blackness swallowed the beach,  
I couldn't find one new constellation  
among the neck-spraining masses of stars.

Back in the tent, creatures from the day  
gathered around the balled-up jacket of my pillow.  
A double darkness of night and tent  
encased me,  
                    yet dragonfly and blood worm and heron  
darted, burrowed, and stalked in the sides  
of my side vision, each a tangle of urges and cells.

On the edge of sleep, stars forgotten, I glimpsed  
three pairs of eyes glistening among waves.

# Physics and Poetry

## The Complex World of Alan R. Wilson

Alan R. Wilson is the author of two books of poetry—*Animate Objects* (1995) and *Counting to 100* (1996). The New Brunswick-born author lives and works in Victoria, British Columbia, making frequent trips home. Trained in physics and astronomy, Wilson is an analyst and statistician at the University of Victoria. *Before the Flood* (1999), his first novel, is set in the 1960s, in Woodstock, at the juncture of the Meduxnekeag and Saint John Rivers. The novel spans the construction period of the massive Mactaquac Dam which, by the final chapter, has altered forever the free-flowing Saint John River. In the first chapter of the novel, the young narrator, Sam MacFarlane, writes a school essay extolling the project, quoting the glib slogans prominent on town billboards. In the final chapter, Sam—with two of his friends—canoes the river, from Woodstock to Fredericton, the day before the *diversion sluiceway* is permanently sealed. Wilson's idea is that the past is not walled off from the present: the *sluiceway* remains open if we have the wit to find it. *Before the Flood* (co-winner of the Chapters/Books in Canada First Novel Award; reviewed on p. 249 of this issue of *CL*) is the first novel in a projected series. Wilson is at work on the second novel, *The Burning Season*, and he has a third collection of poetry, a book of sonnets, ready for publication. This interview took place in October 1999 in Rothesay, New Brunswick.

AC Alan Wilson, to use the jargon of the sociologist, you are a Maritime out-migrant. Living in Victoria, do you think of yourself as a Maritime writer?

AW Yes I do. I live in B.C. because that's where my job is. I got my physics degree at UNB, and went to B.C. for graduate school. They gave me a

job and I stayed. I don't like being poor. I tried being poor, and I wasn't very good at it.

AC Do you think that if you were in the Maritimes, you would be poor?

AW More likely. Statistically, yes. The job I have at the University of Victoria is a comfortable job, a secure job, and I can do it fairly easily. I have energy left to write after I do the job.

AC Your poem "Scene with a Shirt" (AO 23) is reminiscent of Alden Nowlan's "Red Wool Shirt," and your carpenter, in the poem of that title (AO 7), reminds me of Milton Acorn's several poems on that figure. Do you see your work as participating in a local tradition that features scenes and characters of Maritime life?

AW I'd say no to that for the poetry although "Scene with a Shirt" and "Falling Landscape" come directly from Albert County [N.B.]. I have ancestors in Albert County. For those two poems, yes, but, generally, the poetry is less rooted in a particular place than the novel [*Before the Flood*] is.

AC Economy, precision, and exactitude characterize your work. Do you think that these are bound to be the qualities of a poet who is trained in the sciences?

AW I'm not sure which comes first—the nature and predisposition to the physical sciences or the precision that follows from that study. I don't think my studies in the physical sciences did that. I think that was already there. I've always had the idea that the literary image and the scientific image are manifestations of the same thing. I never quite managed to separate the two like I was supposed to. I don't see the two as separate [spheres] as others seem to.

AC The above-named qualities are characteristic of the work of W.W.E. Ross, a Canadian Imagist poet who was trained as a scientist. Would you describe yourself as an Imagist poet?

AW In these two books [*Animate Objects* and *Counting to 100*], I'd say the words have to do something or they are out of there. There are very few freeloading words. In that sense, I'd say I am [an Imagist].

AC I am interested in the way in which the narrative drive of myth and the minimalism of Imagism combine in your work in a poem like "Carpenter" (AO 7). Do you think that the minimalist manner underlines the way in which the mysterious inheres in the everyday?

AW In physics and astronomy, you are looking at reality at a very fundamental and basic level. If you look at anything closely enough, it stops making sense. You start seeing the strangeness, that underlies reality.

Physics, supposedly, is a reductionist method, but it is not. It's just the opposite. You're pushing away all the foliage and you're looking into something very complex and very strange. You're pulling one layer away to find another layer even more complex. There's a pattern there that our minds can't get around. There's a limit to our understanding because there's a limit to our [mental] architecture. Nobody understands quantum physics. Einstein didn't understand it. Our minds are not structured to handle that depth of nature. Where the rational ends, I guess, is where mysticism starts.

AC You appear to have a strong interest in myth. Characters in your novel *Before the Flood* are aligned through their names (Noah, Arthur, Vergil) with myth, and *Animate Objects* contains the poem "Song of the Magi," which collapses Christian myth and Greek myth ("plains of asphodel") and uses an epigraph from *Gilgamesh*. Why are myths so important to you as a writer?

AW I do keep going back to the myths. The hockey story in *Before the Flood* [chapter 4] is a variation on that particular poem. Both are the Sumerian underworld. The hockey story is a development of that poem where I go back to the Sumerian pantheon, which I found interesting because it is the first one we know of, pre-Greek, pre-Indian.

AC The magi ("Song of the Magi" [AO 8-9]) bring gifts to a female immortal. Who is that immortal?

AW She is the destructive goddess born out of the nuclear holocaust. There is a science fiction aspect to that poem. After the holocaust, there is this mutated creature that is born. That's who she is. It's a black treatment of the Ishtar figure [ *Gilgamesh* ]. In the poem and in the novel, I draw from the same pool—*Gilgamesh*.

AC In *Animate Objects*, there are poems about things breaking down ("Equipment Failure," "Falling landscape" [AO 2, 3]). Buildings and equipment are at the mercy of the elements. The world of man-made things is remarkably unstable. Do you find yourself in sympathy with the forces of elemental nature?

AW "Equipment Failure" is really about our bodies breaking down. The image of man-made things breaking down is a metaphor. Common and everyday things are no longer working: our bodies are no longer working. I have a Luddite streak. The man-made things don't last. The elements keep coming back. So the answer is yes. I don't know if I would use the word "sympathy," but I do have a respect for, a fear of, those elements.

The gale is going to get them anyway, so we might as well vicariously enjoy it.

- AC Your work—novel and poetry—reveals a powerful fascination with order in the universe, yet the author of that order is not a consideration in your work. Is that an accurate observation?
- AW “The Carpenter” is about Christ. And the poem 33 [*Counting to 100*] is about Christ, but I guess such poems are not that common. God is everywhere in the novel, though. *Before the Flood* is set in the New Brunswick Bible Belt, but you’re right. There’s not much of God in the poetry.
- AC In “Hiroshima” (AO 20) you write, “When God was a boy, / he must have pulled wings / off angels.” Is horror in the universe a reflection of a creator?
- AW I wrote that as a teenager. That’s the oldest poem in the book. It’s hardly a poem: more like an aphorism. It’s a young person being angry at what he sees. That’s probably the only poem that suggests God is the author of horror. It’s a “fist in the face” image. It’s one of the early poems that I still like. That’s why it is there.
- AC “He” (AO 10-11) is a comic narrative account of the castration of the pronoun “he”: “man” mauled by “human.” Have the language issues raised by feminists made it more difficult to write poetry?
- AW Feminism has made the pronouns problematical. That poem is kind of an adult version of “Hiroshima,” transplanted to the feminist era. Somebody said to me that “the use of the pronoun ‘he’ is now grammatically incorrect,” and I got the idea for this universal “he” in full flight. The poem is really a bit of a lark. There are several poems, including “Anguished Poet,” that are “larks,” but those can get pretty serious once you start playing with them. I liked the idea of animating the pronoun.
- AC “Anguished Poet Seeks Self in Verse” (AO 12-14) is a witty comment on authorial presence, which seems to send up romantic verse.
- AW That poem is a parody of a certain Canadian poet. I read one of his books—a very prolific poet—and I thought this should never have been published. It was sloppy and maudlin, and there was just not much in it. It made me kind of angry that it was published. So I decided to parody the style of the poet. His poetry was “I’m unhappy and you all should be interested in it.” I found that egocentric and I get impatient with that.
- AC Wary of poetry centred on the self, you’re not the kind of poet who is going to write confessional poetry?

- AW Absolutely not. I'm basically a boring person. I don't consider the way I live to be interesting. I think that I do make connections with things that can be interesting, but there is too much "I" poetry. I wanted to make sure that I didn't slip into it.
- AC Your formal range is impressive, including cinquain, villanelle, haiku, limerick, and so forth. Does a poem's content lead to the choice of a particular form? Or, do you set yourself the task of writing in a particular form?
- AW Mostly the form is first. Once you have the form, certain things are eliminated. The form is a spotlight.
- AC And now there is to be a book of sonnets?
- AW Eighty-eight, the number of constellations. Many of them have been published in journals. Certainly with the sonnets, the form comes first.
- AC There is in your poetry an inclination to catalogue. It is there in "Elemental" (AO 4-6), "Newton's Laws" (AO 39), and in "Twenty- Four Poets' Haiku" (AO 15-18), a catalogue of poetic styles. What is this impetus to catalogue?
- AW That's a major part of what the sciences do—to categorize and catalogue to help people make sense of the world. "Elemental" does reflect reality. Those elements are there in the world. They are not inventions. That particular catalogue is the structure of nature. It was originally intended to be a whole book and then I pulled back. I thought enough is enough.
- AC So the catalogue is a natural form.
- AW And the point about that catalogue, "Elemental," is that you're given the start of the catalogue in the title of the poem. "Newton's Laws" is another example. I thought, I can write poems about these laws. It's my way of defying the separation of poetry and science.
- AC How would you describe the kind of mind that finds poetry in the periodic table?
- AW Obsessive. For a moment I thought unimaginative, but of course that is totally wrong.
- AC In the poem "Moon" (AO 21), philosophers are concerned with the moon as paradox ("lifeless sphere" casting a light "very brilliant, very white"), but the astronomers, interested in the nature of light, and the moon-struck lovers, interested in each other, could care less. What is the poet's attitude toward the moon?
- AW The astronomers and the lovers are the same. The poet is all the above.
- AC In your view, is the poet principally an observer, a recorder, of the world?

- AW That's what I have been. There's "I" poetry that's interesting. I can't do it. Others can. I have to step back.
- AC So observer or recorder would describe your position in the first two books?
- AW Yes, although I'm not exempt from the things that are going on, as in "Equipment Failure," but they are not particular to me as an individual.
- AC You have poems such as "Poets Write Haiku on Office Stationary [sic] . . ." that are about the writing process. How do you experience that process?
- AW The pleasure principle. I enjoy doing it. There are times when things occur to me and to ignore them would be more difficult than to deal with them. Writing poetry is more like the adult equivalent of building a tree fort. It is fun to build these things out of words. Even if it does look serious, it is still fun. And there is a natural urge or inclination to do it.
- AC If "I" is lost and "he" is on the run, is "it" the only stable entity?
- AW One of the underlying ideas of *Animate Objects* is that there is no such thing as "it." We think of this [the water glass] as an "it," a chunk of glass, but the book says that it's an animate object. What pronoun we use doesn't matter because "it" has a kind of strange life of its own. In the normal way we use "it," the word is demeaning because the word suggests the object has no life.
- AC If objects are "animate," what are humans?
- AW We are animate too. In my poetry, I bring objects closer to the living world, so does that mean that humans have to go higher up? In the book, it's very democratic. Humans are interacting with objects.
- AC So it's a community of animate entities?
- AW I don't know if I believe that, but that does seem to be what the book is saying.
- AW Would you say that you are a poet of time rather than of place?
- AW Yes.
- AC Robert Graves said that to write poems for anyone but poets is wasteful. Do you agree with that?
- AW Of course not.
- AC So whom do you write for?
- AW I write for myself, but I would like to think that at least some of the poems, especially *Counting to 100*, show that people don't have to write poetry in order to get something out of these poems. Of course, poetry in this country does seem to be a very closed circle, and it does seem as if a lot of poetry is written for other poets.



- AC “Scene with a Shirt” (AO 23), an edgy, rather unnerving poem, suggests that there is another reality lurking around the edges of physical reality. Isn’t that a blasphemous position for a scientist?
- AW No. Not at all. Lots of scientists believe in God. Science is another way of looking at the world.
- AC “Exercise,” rather similar to “Shirt,” presents the world from a ghost’s perspective. Ghosts, in your work, seem to want to be rid of the clutter of human emotions to simply listen in on the universe (“radio of wind and rain,” “background static of worms”). Is the poet, in some sense, a ghost presence in the world?
- AW I never thought of it that way, but I suppose you’re right. The ghost is a kind of detached observer too.
- AC *Animate Objects* does begin with the poem “Headstone.”
- AW I was doing a flip—having it at the beginning of the book rather than at the end, where it would be in life.
- AC Yours is a precisely observed world with craziness in it. The dead, ancestors, and the proximity of another reality haunt these matter-of-fact poems. Is the universe a place of several kinds of realities?
- AW The universe is far more complex than we can imagine. J.B.S.Haldane, the geneticist, said, “my own suspicion is that the universe is not only queerer than we suppose, but queerer than we *can* suppose.” That’s about capability and about the world. The two don’t exist separately. We’re in the world: the world is bigger than we are, and we can only see bits and pieces of it. So “are there separate realities?” No. There’s only one reality that we can only glimpse at. We can view it, or treat it, as separate realities, but it is probably all one reality.
- AC Your work has been described by reviewers as classicist, but there is also a gothic quality in it. The classicism could be tracked to your training in science, but where does the gothic come from?
- AW Phyllis Webb called me a Formalist. To me gothic means that you’re drilling a little deeper than we normally go. You’re getting into the dark world, the underworld that underpins it all. When we do that—go deeper—things start to look very strange, creepy, kind of scary.
- AC Frequently in a poem there is an unexpected twist. I’m thinking, for example, of “Antiques,” where the daughter’s un-medicined madness allows objects to speak, but the kick is that the sane newspaper-reading father is disturbed by the voices. Do you think of the world as a quirky place?

- AW This poem turns things around and says that maybe she's closer to what's going on than he is because he's hearing some of those things too. There are these voices that she's hearing quite clearly, and he's getting a little bit of.
- AC You write of a world of objects and these are neither silent nor dead. William Carlos Williams' "No ideas but in things" is rendered literally: things, in these poems, have ideas, are communicative. Does your poetry recommend that we tune into a world that we have hitherto been deaf to?
- AW I'm not recommending anything, but the poetry does say that if you look at things a little steadier than we normally do, you'll start seeing them differently. That's how I see the world: it's infinitely strange.
- AC In your poems, the human is very small, indeed, as compared to forces, regular ones like gravity, irregular ones like gales and storms. Is this repositioning of the human a result of your training as a physicist?
- AW Science certainly emphasizes that we are part of the physical world. We're not left out of things, but the physical sciences don't care about people per se. They look at the world independent of human concerns. And the poems do that too. We're not the whole game; we're just part of it.
- AC A sense of menace is never far away in your poetry as, for example, in the poems "Tale" (AO 19) and "Solitary Image" (AO 37). What is the source of this menace?
- AW I find the world scary because we are not as important in it as we would like to think. We are not exempt from those forces. We have few choices. The story has been written for us. The world is scary and the world is uncontrollable. We can admire it, enjoy it, but in the end, we can't control it, except in an illusionary way. In the gothic world, the gothic sensibility, humans are demoted. It's an unreasoning world, in the sense that we think of reason, so we are demoted. I think that is both truer and more interesting than the picture where we are the colossus, the focus of interest.
- AC In "Solitary Image" (AO 37), an urban landscape is the site of something menacing and the poem seems to collapse the urban and a prehistoric fear of the beast. Is the urban as liable to incursions of the beast as the world of *Gilgamesh* (Humbaba) or *Ulysses* (Cyclops)?
- AW Of course. The gothic view of things is that the city is no protection. *It* is still out there even if the immediate things you see are the things that humans have built. It's there underground, in the air, just over the horizon.

- AC In “Fascist Haiku” (AO 41-42) an SS officer or some soldier of the holocaust is reminded of a lover by the light of the distant fires. Does the Imagist cleanness of the haiku make it a particularly suitable vehicle for the brutal tamping down of sympathy that enables this soldier to compartmentalize his feelings?
- AW I found the whole concept of a Nazi writing in haiku so incongruous. The reality is that there probably were Nazis who wrote in haiku. Here are two things that you’d think cannot possibly be related, and I found the idea of pulling these two unlikely things—the gentle, subtle haiku and the Nazi fist—together so interesting. If a Nazi wrote haiku, what would they look like? The incongruity, the fact that they did not belong together, appealed to me. I wanted to try putting them on the same plane.
- AC Is the Fascist more likely to write in haiku than in another form?
- AW No. I would expect a dramatic monologue; a haiku is the last thing I’d expect.
- AC Except that the haiku is a form that commands an immense amount of control. Therefore, there is a synchronicity between this man and this form.
- AW So what you’re saying is that it’s not an unlikely form? Maybe you’re right. Maybe Fascists wrote haiku rather than anything else.
- AC The poems “Hiroshima,” “Fascist Haiku,” and “The Italian Campaign,” with their World War II focus, chronicle acts of cruelty and violence, or impending ones. Is the capacity for acts of horror an innate human capacity?
- AW That appears to be the case. Otherwise, we wouldn’t keep going back to it.
- AC Windows are everywhere in this poetry (“Weather” [45], “Windows” [50], “Solitary Image” [37]). Why are these so important to you?
- AW If our abilities are limited to simply looking at the world through port-holes, where we can only get bits and pieces of the world, then looking through a window is what we do our whole lives. We look through different windows and try to make sense of the world.
- AC Is the window a metaphor for poetry writing?
- AW It would be a good metaphor for a lot of things, poetry among them. It would be a good metaphor for what scientists do. We’re locked in the house. We can’t get out of the house. There are different ways of looking out. Writing is one of them and so is science. God is one of them.
- AC Who are your favourite painters?
- AW I like the Impressionists. I also like Victorian painters because they are

unapologetic. I like their lushness. I'm an anachronism so I think that the Victorian stuff goes with that.

I like Renoir for the same reason. He has fun on the canvas. He's unpretentious.

- AC Your second book, *Counting to 100*, is more abstract than your first. Numbers have replaced objects in the title and as a point of focus in the poems. What was your thinking in this move?
- AW The idea was to do something that is not supposed to work because numbers and poetry don't go together. I did the first two or three just as toss-offs. They were discussed in workshop, and Derek Wynand [workshop leader] really liked them and the class didn't. There were complaints—this is not poetry. And of course when they said that, I was determined that I was going to continue with them because I disagreed so strongly and wanted to prove them wrong. Originally, I was just going to write 1 to 10 and then it got out of control.
- AC How easily did these number-poems come to you, and in what order? Did you write 88 before you wrote 8, for example?
- AW There was no sequence at all. When the idea would come, I would sit down and write one of these.
- AC Certain numbers, such as 6 and 8, are body types; others are anorexic (21) or dyslexic (62). For you, do numbers have physical presence and personality?
- AW In that book, the numbers are at varying distances from human beings. Some of the numbers are beings in themselves. They speak and have their properties. They are in their world, but then there are other ones, like the number five, that are not about the number at all. That one is about the five fingers. It's a step closer to us. For some of the number poems, it's the references that I tie in with the number. They are not animate at all. And some of them are their own beings.
- AC Would you consider 6 and 8, the ones with physical bodies, animate?
- AW Absolutely. The poem in each case is about this being, this creature. 30 is not. That's our world. It's not animate. It only exists in relation to our world.
- AC Some of these poems (7, 9, 13) harvest the mythic or folk associations of numbers. Are you saying something about how human-storied numbers are, how often numbers are part of the stories humans tell?
- AW Sure. The book says that. I went on a search mission. I tried to find a reference wherever I could. 86 for instance is the one where the mathematician is in the strip club, and I got that from *Mash*. 86 means "to

eject.” The mathematician is impressed with the numerics of the woman’s body and he ends up getting thrown out on his nose. On one level, *Counting* was a fun Easter egg hunt.

AC Thinking of the 35 millimetre camera, the 38 pistol, and the 45 record, are numbers, in some sense, as significant as artefacts in being the museum of culture?

AW Of course. Some of those numbers would not work in a different culture, at a different time, in a different part of the world. Heinz 57 is not going to work in Greek culture.

AC So this book is like a museum of culture?

AW Yes, pop culture.

AC But not just pop culture?

AW Some go deeper. The 33 is Christ’s age. A lot of them go deeper, yes.

AC All poetry has a riddling quality, but in the pages of this book, many of these poems are literally riddles. Are you drawing attention to poetry as play, as riddle?

AW I like books to do that. They are telling a little set of jokes or riddles and some of them you get quickly and some of them you can’t, which makes you want to go back. It’s game-playing. It’s seduction. There are riddles here. That’s what I enjoy doing. A couple of reviewers didn’t like that. They thought it was beneath poetry to be doing that sort of thing.

AC Some poems are created around a number’s quality—its indivisibility (17) or its perfection (25) or the multiples it contains (24).

AW Look at this one [34]. It adds up every way. I can’t take credit for that one. It’s called a magic square. To me that was the riddle. It scared people. That is quite gothic, quite weird. That’s what is scary about the world.

AC It’s a visual experience.

AW My only concrete poem.

AC In doing public readings from this book, which numbers do you choose to read?

AW I tend to pick ones that are quickly accessible. I read 1 and 2 to get started. I read 5. That’s an obvious one. I read 13 because of Wallace Stevens’ poem. I read 20, which is about perfect vision. And then there’s 73, which also has good vision, but realizes that infinity—all those digits—is stretched out across the horizon. That’s kind of a critical poem because of the eerie buzz of infinity. In a way, that is about us: our realization that this world is very small, and that there is more out there. This one is what the book is about.

- AC Has the number book been as successful with readers and reviewers as *Animate Objects*?
- AW To some reviewers it wasn't real poetry because it falls out of their range of experience. But Stephen Scobie gave it probably the best review I'll ever get. He said it was a kind of numeric epic. But some thought a grown man shouldn't be doing this. The book was partly me breaking windows, a natural cussedness.
- AC Did you ever get stuck and say what am I going to do with this number?
- AW You're damn right I did. But it's funny how the gaps would fill up. Near the end, the last handful took a little while.
- AC There are occasions when you don't choose the obvious thing. The alphabet poem is 27, not 26.
- AW Noah's ark is the obvious thing for 40, so it's nice not to do it.
- AC Speaking of the Bible, there's an early scene in *Before the Flood* that I particularly like. Vergil and Sam are in the Baptist church, and three levels of language (Vergil's note to Rachel, the reverend's sermon, and phrases from Sam's essay) get interwoven. Is this interweaving across language levels your notion of how language works?
- AW Not only language, but also life moves across different levels. There are many things occurring at once, and language is a reflection of that. You have these three worlds going on at the same time. There are not three solitudes here. We bounce things off one another.
- AC There's an inner darkness in Reverend Hart that emerges as madness from time to time. Has religion in the Maritimes had a particularly distorting effect?
- AW Woodstock and Carleton County [N.B.] are part of the traditional Bible belt. When I grew up there, went to high school there, the Baptists were still in the Old Testament. They still are to a certain extent. So there was a destructive element to the religion in that area. There was a very positive element as well because there was a focus on things that are not materialistic. So there were these two aspects to it that I find interesting and appealing. There is the side that can destroy weaker people, but there is the side that can make people greater than they are because they don't focus upon the latest sale at the K-Mart. What they see may be distorted, but they are nonetheless looking up. Hart is a tortured man, but he is also a good man. In the last chapter, he's trying to console Miss Jonah because her cats are about to die. That's the other part of his religion: the part that makes him better than he might be otherwise. The

kind of ranting sermon that he gives can be distorting, poisonous, especially for young people although these boys are ignoring him.

- AC Yet, if we can go by Hart's sermon, his is a gorgeous, metaphorical, adjective-rich language. Does religion's bequest include both gorgeous language and guilt?
- AW The sheer richness of Christianity and its length of time, its two thousand years, have left behind quite a rich tradition. It's also given people a lot of time to get all twisted around. This religious base is a form of living history. Biblical language is one of the areas of conflict between the liberal and the conservative branches of Christianity. The liberal branch wants to translate it right into modern vernacular English, and the conservatives want to hold onto the older stuff. I think I am probably on the conservative side.
- AC The flood will drown Island Park, the Intervale, and the Nighthawk Cafe. Sam says that "people are always laying waste to their own history." Is *Before the Flood* an expression of cultural ecology?
- AW Yes, and pure environmentalism as well. It's definitely about preserving what we should preserve rather than what we do preserve. On the whole, I look back at that time with fondness. It was a rich place for a teen-ager. It is, in a way, a love letter, a salute, to a place that gave me a lot when I was growing up there. I hate to see towns razing their own pasts. They don't realize how valuable the past is, how unique it is. I didn't want to get didactic in the book, but it is clear where I stand on it.
- AC The monstrous in this novel includes Brainiac, Frankenstein, and the dam. Why is the dam placed in this category of allusions?
- AW The dam is a man-made creation that wreaks havoc.
- AC Noah Perley is always in sight on the river, but never present in anyone's company, and unlike his namesake, he drowns when the river drowns. Does this say that the dam is not an ark, and that we're lost for sure this time?
- AW The dam is, as far as semi-mythical time goes, the end of the world. The world is over. On the other side of the dam, there is something else, but it is not this world any more. I am not even saying the next is a worse world, but that's why the book I'm writing now is not a sequel. It comes before this world [*Before the Flood*] because this world is finished. The building of the dam is the border for this particular world, and the boys live through that border period. In the next novel, the ghosts [in *Flood*] are all characters.

- AC What is the connection between the hole in the window of the burning school and the fact that Noah's canoe looks like an orange hole in the Saint John River?
- AW That was intentional. The hole in the burning window is another appearance of the canoe. There is this picture from the past that keeps appearing and the burning window is just another place where it appears. It's another ending of the world—in flames. Flood and flames.
- AC Arthur Netherwood, Sam's friend, barely distinguishes the Woodstock landscape (the island at the juncture of the rivers) from a similar Mesopotamian geography that he has read about in *Gilgamesh*. Are you making a point about the interchangeability of archetypes here?
- AW Arthur is a very young fellow, a very imaginative fellow, and he looks at this town, because he is so young, as new to him. And he connects it with Mesopotamia. He goes back and forth [between his imagination and the real world]. He switches them very easily. You don't have to go to Paris to write exotic books. You just have to look at where you are.
- AC This novel says that time is not what we think it is. It is not linear. Tell me about your conception of time.
- AW In the novel, the past and present are beginning to co-exist, and people get confused. The past keeps sticking up into the present, which is just a slight embellishment of what happens anyway. These ghostly figures are real people who are lingering. The past and the present are getting jumbled up.
- AC An intermittent condition for Sam is feeling strange in the familiar. Local places seem suddenly to have an unreal air, and he himself feels alien in the community. Is the ordinary saturated with the extraordinary?
- AW The present being saturated by the past would be a subset of that. The ordinary is not ordinary, and one of the reasons why it is not is because of the past. As a kid, have you not focused on something that is very familiar so that it suddenly starts to get very strange? We get busy as adults. We get used to things. As a kid, you are new in the world. What adults just walk by, kids look at.
- AC So that to describe this book as just a boy's book trivializes that?
- AW When someone says that, all they are saying is that a boy is an undeveloped adult. The book takes the opposite stance.
- AC "The wonder of physics lay in its power to equate things that on the surface appeared unrelated": Are you talking about physicists or poets?
- AW Both.



- AC Sam's physics teacher, as well as Sam himself, is interested in occasions when there is a violation of physical laws. Is this what interests you about the physical universe?
- AW Yes. My high school physics teacher was the most influential teacher that I had. He was like that, and the character in the book gets some of that.
- AC In investigating the incandescence on the Intervale, Sam tries to purge superstition (will-o-the-wisp) with science. He isn't altogether successful, is he?
- AW No, he's not, not at all.
- AC In *Before the Flood*, Arthur, the child poet, keeps Sam, the rationalist scientist, from denying the mystery of the universe.
- AW Arthur is younger. He hasn't lost as much, and he pulls Sam back a bit.
- AC Together they make the whole child. Sam seems to be positioned between Arthur, the poet, and Andrew, who is sceptical, but after a while the reader begins to see that Andrew Watson is also a poet *and* a rationalist.
- AW Yes, and I'd add even Vergil to that because he is without fear and so has a gothic sensibility, which makes Sam less afraid of it. Vergil is actually fairly important.
- AC Sam finds the book on astronomy, *The Heavens*, in the religions section of the library. What's your point here?
- AW It wasn't mis-filed. It is exactly where it is supposed to be.
- AC In the very accurate descriptions in your poetry, you often suggest that there is more present than what is available to sight. Peripheral vision, night vision, and seeing into shadows are attributes of some characters in *Before the Flood*. What's the difference between sight and vision?
- AW Sight is what we see with our optic nerves, and vision is all the rest of it.
- AC And vision is uppermost in *Before the Flood*?
- AW Yes, I think so. Vision is the sight of what others have seen in the past, or what Reverend Hart sees. All of that goes into the experience of what these characters, Sam included, go through. There are bits of the past that become visible. Those things are crossing the border into sight.
- AC When you are a child, vision and sight are not separated. Is that so?
- AW The demarcation [between sight and vision] appears to be more abrupt when we are older for whatever reason. Although there are situations in times of stress when adults may see things.
- AC Does maturity put out our eyes?
- AW That's one of the ideas of the book. Maturity is parallel to progress,

which is made fun of in the book. We are going from place A to place B, and will end up in a different place, not necessarily a better place or a more complete place. Going from childhood to adulthood is going to a different place. Adulthood is not the fulfilment of the child.

- AC *Before the Flood* is a novel of beautifully conceived parallels: Tennyson's poem "Crossing the Bar" and the sandy bar of the Intervale; the pattern of fire hydrants on the ground and the pattern of stars in the sky. Is this parallelism a device of narrative structure or is the world for you full of uncanny parallels?
- AW The latter. In the hydrant story, Sam soon forgets about the telescope that he wants because the universe has come down to earth. There he is on the hill looking down. The effect is as if he were looking up. He is looking at this town and that's one of the things a small town is—a complete universe. He's looking at the town, and it is the sky. So what has happened, especially in that chapter, is that he has taken a big step in his appreciation of his immediate world. Seeing the earthbound constellations brings that about.
- AC The shudder in this novel is not ghosts but old age. Silas Templeman is a grim and sad figure of old age. Is Silas more of a horror than the dead?
- AW Yes, because he is partly dead already. He is a kind of living dead.
- AC Is old age a horror for you?
- AW It's one of my personal neuroses. I don't like the apparent uni-direction of time.
- AC Do either of the forthcoming novels in the projected series have an aged narrator or protagonist?
- AW The next novel is in third-person. There will be two main characters: the supposed great-grandfather of Sam and Uriah Hanson, the sheriff of the town. The two main characters are not old-age characters.
- AC When Sam is painting the fire hydrants, he meets an old man. I presume that the next novel will speak of the fires to which the old man refers. Is the trilogy named for the elements and if so, what is the element in the third piece of the trilogy?
- AW The third one will be air or earth, one or the other.
- AC Why isn't this a quartet? Where is the fourth book? You're planning a trilogy, aren't you?
- AW No. Several people have called it a trilogy. Nowhere have I ever used the word "trilogy." I'm not hemming myself in with this. I don't know how many books there will be. It depends if I continue to have a good time

writing them. The next book takes place in 1881. It basically covers April to December of that year. When I revised *Before the Flood*, I put a lot of things in because by then I knew exactly what I was going to do in the book. I had this invisible book underneath the present book. Writing a sequel would be easier. The “prequel” will be a little trickier. So planting those seeds in *Flood* seemed a way to link the two more closely despite the fact they are eighty years apart.

AC Is *Burning Season* written?

AW Partly. I know what I’m doing with *Burning Season*, which may mean it’s not as good. I didn’t know what I was doing with *Before the Flood*. It evolved. Some people question if it’s a novel, but I think those are straw arguments.

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## Andromeda the Princess

The nearest galaxy of comparable size to our own is the Great Nebula in Andromeda, located approximately 2 million light years from us.

—Robert Jastrow, *Red Giants and White Dwarfs*

Once more the barber has clipped my hair too short.  
Wind worries my lobes, runs long fingers over crop,

blows from my forehead cut oddments of floss  
like the gossamer of a drawing room window.

A savage glitter imbues that room: instruments (brass)  
of torturous design, a dwarf, misshapen by pain, chained

to a fire-grate, and bound facedown on a catafalque,  
a woman sobbing, her youthful haunches starred

with rubies of blood. On the far side of the room,  
by a silvered speculum, a casement opens on an alien sky.

There are scorched buttes, a line of impossible hills,  
and something manlike that scratches through rock

as a giant spiral, a rising Charybdis of stars and gas,  
ignites the landscape like a monstrous moon.

# Reflection, Refraction, and What was Seen through the Window: Anaphora of the Visible

Light zings past, leaves nothing for witnesses to describe but probability.

Light is speed that requires no speed.

Light is neither fish nor fowl, but the silver lining under both.

Light has never mistaken any language for its own.

Light is not shy; it has seen us all naked. It sits with us in the bath.

Despite itself, light envies sound.

Light indulges our foolish notions; it remembers what it was like to be young.

Light can bend spoons—kinetic—all it needs is water and a glass.

Light always arrives too late. The stars have died. But it keeps hoping.

Because of light, everything else.

Because of light, we too have arrived late.

Light is the arms flung out, exhausted.

Light never forgets. Though it may sometimes appear absentminded, it is merely tending to the other side of things.

Light is never sorry. But sometimes it wishes things had been otherwise. It whispers in the dark.

# Reading Mark Hume and the River

## Conditional Lyricism, Disappearing Salmon and the Braided Voice

As for men, those myriad little detached ponds with their own swimming corpuscular life, what were they but a way that water has of going about beyond the reach of rivers? I too was a microcosm of pouring rivulets and floating driftwood gnawed by the mysterious animalcules of my own creation. I was three-fourths water, rising and subsiding according to the hollow knocking in my veins: a minute pulse like the eternal pulse that lifts the Himalayas and which, in the following systole, will carry them away.

—Loren Eiseley, “The Flow of The River” 19–20.

**R**ivers have their own unique catches. On Canada’s west coast that catch is salmon and the politics of fishing have rarely been more intense. An increasingly publicized range of recent non-fictional prose demonstrates that rivers are under pressure from humans.<sup>1</sup> Literary non-fiction is often designed to teach us how we have got here, and how we might proceed; it amplifies and honours the scientific record with its growing evidence of ecological damage. In much of the writing I cite below, the river is a site of political and lyrical topicality, a place where ideas of nature and culture blur or might be revisioned. As Wyman Herendeen observes “the continuity of the river motif is one of the major sources of our modern response to landscape and of the myths and cultural expectations that we bring to it” (25). Rivers continue to act as currents of story and memory; they carry a figurative freight that enriches culture like silt. In this essay I examine one writer at the Bella Coola River in central British Columbia.

Below I sketch a context for the river writer, and examine Mark Hume’s *River of the Angry Moon: Seasons on the Bella Coola* (1998) which was prepared in close collaboration with Harvey Thommasen’s extensive fieldnotes. I then comment on some critiques of the book. Throughout, my concern is with the ways rivers demand a roving consciousness and a reflective ethics that balance personal limitation with hope.

**M**ark Hume's books *Run of the River* (1992), *Adam's River* (1994) and *River of the Angry Moon* (1998) contribute to a burgeoning body of very recent Canadian riverine non-fiction.<sup>2</sup> Many of these writers offer a telling portrait of squandered ecological bounty as the appetite for resources and the reach of technology extend into every part of the country and the planet. It can be depressing reading: they write of damaged watersheds and damaged lifeways, of vanishing stories and extinct fish. The writing is informed by ecological research and personal observation and tends to question heartfelt rapture before Nature. Any sense of ecological bounty is compromised by an awareness of logging roads, dams and fishery-collapse. But a longing for holism remains. The work draws lyricism from statistics as each writer confronts loss and remnant, while searching for ways of meeting the river that sustains its integrity as part of both an ecosystem and cultural network.

*River of the Angry Moon* uses lyricism and research to hook the reader into a nexus of perception and concern. Epiphany in this book (as in much "nature writing") is driven by an awareness of ecological loss. A combination of scientific studies, fieldwork and personal observation sustains this awareness. Essayistic lyricism and informed lament bind with scientific data to compose a picture of British Columbia's Bella Coola River on the brink of change. By blending different forms of voice (Harvey Thomassen's painstaking research, and Hume's personal observation, reflection and awe), *River of the Angry Moon* honours the braided nature of life in the watershed. For Hume, the river evokes larger forces.

After over a century of decline, Hume gathers stories and reads a river, mindful of the praise humans can offer and the care such humility inspires. How such vision can enter policy in a way meaningful to First Nations, sports and commercial fishing interests is an almost impossible issue to resolve; but moving towards it is necessary if any meaningful compromise is to occur. Attempting to gauge the efficacy of salmon restoration, Freeman House observes that "[t]he variables combine into an unsolvable equation each element of which provides more questions than answers" (208). But slow gains are made. Each writer urges that we too can be mindful of the future.

### **Casting for redemption: some recent river-washed writing**

My reading of Hume's most recent book (the winner of the B.C. Book Awards 1999 Roderick Haig-Brown Regional Prize) pays attention to his rare and moving experiences of conditional lyricism at the Bella Coola River.

Hume's use of the lyrical mode is conditional because he is aware of the ecosystem damage at the river that is the basis for his insight. In his ecologically grounded riverine epiphanies Hume seeks to bring the reader closer to his sense of "the unknowable mystery of the river" (142). In the moments of insight, relayed by prose tinged with a sense of awe and loss, he approximates the work of writers like Haig-Brown, Barry Lopez, Kathleen Dean Moore, Kim Stafford and Scott Russell Sanders. Such a perceptual connection with "nature" extends his understanding of the river while rendering that current even more elusive. As a disciple of Roderick Haig-Brown's writing, Hume knows that the leaping fish "transports us imaginatively from one domain to another" (Leeson 157). To do justice, in writing, to the fragile world of fish stocks, human need and hope, demands a prose rich in variety of source and explication. Some recent river-washed non-fiction offers further examples of balance and inquiry.

Focusing on riverine ecological and cultural fragility highlights a concern with loss and potential. Elegy is a very strong component of this work. Hume and other contemporary nature essayists perform an eco-moral lament, the evidence of loss hooked by every absent fish. Jamie Benidickson records that in youth canoe camps of the late nineteenth-century, "quite deliberate efforts were sometimes made to promote a metamorphosis of the participants. . . . A vigorous exposure to the wilderness was promoted as an antidote to a rearticulated sense of moral decay" (64). The contemporary natural history essay offers a newer version of this sense of decline.

A backslide occurs on both ecological and moral levels because a failure of ecological stewardship abdicates human responsibility for the future. The "refrain of moral concern" Stephen Trimble identifies in recent natural history writing has a long provenance (28). It is present in much contemporary river-based non-fiction, partly because many rivers have been radically damaged in the twentieth century. These authors are still seeking the "durable scale of values" that Aldo Leopold invoked decades ago (279). They largely concur with environmental historian Richard White; speaking of the Columbia, White argues that "[w]hat has failed is our relationship with the river" (62).

An increasing sense of failure boosts the anger in the work. Peter Mancall (paraphrasing Tim Palmer) notes the effects of a conservation ethos on the literature: "By the late twentieth century . . . American writers . . . shifted the direction of protest. Though they continued to evoke nature and its splendors, they did so while describing the human and environmental costs



of unrestrained development, often with the explicit goal of stimulating a demand for changes in federal policy" (8-9). Hume and Thommasen wanted to "raise the education level in the general public" on matters riverine and ecological (Hume, Interview).

Because Hume puts fish and river first, his work is inevitably politicized: the scientific evidence and further ecological information he relays reject clearcut logging and wastefulness in sports, First Nation and commercial fishing and hatchery practice. Often his is the purist angler's stance. When salmon are dying, Hume has no time for political correctness: species extinction is species extinction, and he stands in concord with Nuxalk elders he knows in rejecting wasteful fishing, by Native or White, as culturally inappropriate and insulting to tradition (125).

Hume is thus one of many North American writers trying to renew and revise the relationship with rivers as the ecological (and thus economic and cultural) costs of the twentieth century's river "management" regimes finally hit home. Marc Reisner's assessment of U.S. federal dam projects sounds like the way Thomas King's Coyote would operate on a busy day: "What federal water development has amounted to, in the end, is a uniquely productive, creative vandalism" (485). "'Perhaps it's a Coyote dam,' says Coyote" (King 449).

Hume has travelled British Columbia, tracing the waters that form a "lacework" of streams, rivers and communities and noting the effects of that creative vandalism (*Moon* 137; Armstrong 181). He has seen how the Nechako and Peace Rivers have been silenced, heard how ancestral burial sites were flooded while Ingenika and other Carrier-Sekani people were denied compensation, and watched as fish numbers dwindled. Now, he ventures to an "untouched" watershed with foreboding. He concludes his first book with a warning: "There are 60 primary watersheds on Vancouver Island that are larger than 5000 hectares. Of these, only seven are unlogged: the Megin, Moyeha, Sydney, Power, Nasparti, East and Klaskish. . . . Remember those names, for they are the last" (*Run* 205).

As Donald Worster observes (of the U.S. West), ecological collapse brought moral responses: "a sense of irreparable loss began to settle about the water empire by the late twentieth century, a remembrance of things past" (*Rivers of Empire* 324). This pall of remembrance haunts Hume's trips. His prose fuses ecology and commentary, lyricism and rage, story and inquiry. Moral outrage and tales of remembered biodiversity coalesce. Hume, like Jeannette Armstrong, Terry Glavin, Marc Reisner and Thomas

King, knows that nostalgia alone cannot energize or revision a durable scale of values.

It is useful to recall Glen Love's thoughts here:

Literary pastoral traditionally posits a natural world, a green world, to which sophisticated urbanites withdraw in search of the lessons of simplicity which only nature can teach. There, amid sylvan groves and meadows and rural characters—idealized images of country existence—the sophisticates attain a critical vision of the good, simple life, a vision which will presumably sustain them as they return at the end to the great world on the horizon. (231)

Many of the writers adopt an ecological stance that situates the human in a wider riverine network of species and processes, while realizing the “great [urban, human] world” is now a troubled and damaging one.

Any river depends on a network of watershed collaborations independent of the human realm. That extra-human reach compels and inspires human response. The river can touch human imagination at an intimate level. The recent written record in North America suggests river watching is an evocative process. Gaston Bachelard has called water “a substance full of reminiscences and prescient reveries” (*Water and Dreams* 89). Bachelard's rivers run through time, composing memory and vision. “Thinking like a river,” demands responsiveness in observation and a willingness to adapt in order to honour ecological and emotional connections (Worster 331). Writing like a river takes many forms. Much recent work tends to test the meniscus between self and river, feeling and site. Hume's use of a variety of prose modes is useful. The (“overwhelmingly” male) fly-fishing author “literally stands on the boundary between two worlds, the aquatic and terrestrial, half-submerged” (Browning 7). Hume's prose also mediates between the worlds of ecological fieldwork and personal elegy. It is a consequence of water-watching, as one of the finest of recent river writers, Oregon-based angler (and literature professor) Ted Leeson, observes that

By luck or intention, fly fishing has built into itself this same [Zen] idea [“how you see is what you see”]. In what is one of angling's most elegant expressions, we speak of “reading the water.” Reading a trout stream exercises a special kind of vision and, like reading anything, acknowledges that meaning dwells in contexts and on peripheries and that not all things come to the eye with equal readiness. . . . But a river is only itself. If forced, the water will mirror the likeness of an ego; on its own, it reflects on sky and clouds, and readily rewards those who approach it with humility and wonder. (115-16)

Water's capacity to reflect and absorb all metaphors is present in many forms of writing, oral tradition, and performance. The river, culturally

used, can be a sacred current, a trade highway and a route for exploration and story in First Nation, voyageur and colonial settler traditions in Canada. James Raffan argues that the river-borne canoe has been instrumental in Canada's history, and that the metaphor of the canoe quest has great relevance in contemporary cross-cultural Canada: "A canoe ties its paddlers to the water and to landscape, but it also ties them to each other in significant ways. . . . A canoe invites awareness, a canoe nurtures situated knowing" (34).<sup>3</sup> Hume, angling for fish and image, also practices a form of explicitly situated knowing.

### **The braided voice: some features of the river narrative**

In its consciousness, ours is an upland society, the ruins of watersheds, and what that involves and means is little considered. And so the land is heavily taxed to subsidize an 'affluence' that consists, in reality, of health and goods stolen from the unborn.

—Wendell Berry, "The Making of A Marginal Farm." *Recollected Essays, 1965-1980* 340.

Kathleen Dean Moore, the author of *Riverwalking: Reflections on Moving Water* (1995), suggests the river informs the very motivation of the essayist:

I have come to believe all essays walk in rivers. Essays ask the philosophical question that flows through time—How shall I live my life? The answers drift together through countless converging streams, where they move softly below the reflective surface of the natural world and mix in the deep and quiet places of the mind. This is where an essayist must walk, stirring up the mud. (xii)

River writing often mimics the watched current. The process of "river reflection" and subsequent writing works best for Moore when textual form replicates the process of thought. Water interlaces different modes of narrative voice and the traditional digressive qualities of the personal essay. Links between self, community and watershed are central to the processes of river reflection and river writing. Moore's description echoes Hume's fondness for half-submerged excursions and associative prose (Hume, Interview).

Hume's cycles of lyrical disclosure foster a shared sense of inquiry which affirms (amidst the clearcuts) that the river is "a voice that can continue to speak to you in your everyday" (Kinseth 5). A wild river becomes a teaching and healing place. This modifies the primacy of humanism into a form of watershed-dependent functioning: "the role of the teacher is allocated to the wilderness countersite in political discourse" (Chaloupka and Cawley 11). Rivers are the focus of excursions and a source of insight: "To describe them

is, in a small and concentrated way, to describe the world" (Herendeen 10). Hume's work speaks to and revises the primacies of the human-river nexus by putting fish and watershed first. Damage to species and site is the work of humans; Hume suggests we must act now to prevent further loss: "nature is not a dry goods store" and a salmon-centric vision is needed to counter the violence done to species up and down the western North American coastline (27).

The twelve linked chapters in *River of the Angry Moon* (each borrowing the translation of the Nuxalk name for that month, each chapter something of an essay in its own right), exhibit an understanding of a meandering (riverine) consciousness. Hume is attentive to scientific record, local history and personal remembrance. Chronology is measured by life in the watershed as time is fluidized into river detail, measured in salmon-runs, the movement of birds and the chill of the water. Hume begins his account in winter and lets the year and the river work through him. His vision is often midstream, where the past pushes at his back and flows ahead. Open to the "cross-connections" between insight and riverscape, the book (documenting river reflection) is fluid in its shifts from personal epiphany to data analysis (Adorno 22).

There is a movement between "inner" and "outer" inherent in ideas of connection, braiding and "interlacing" (Hume, Interview). Circulating between self and river, city and wilderness, speech and silence, or layered histories and ecological analysis, Hume adapts narrative register through the act of remembrance and writing. Hume's focus on the lacework of memory and his own inner currents of feeling is linked to the river he attends to. A focus on the river and watershed binds disparate registers and feelings through the "meandering" narrative (Atkins 6). Hume's focus proceeds "methodically unmethodically" while remaining attentive to the temporal and narrative shifts of the writer's consciousness (Adorno 13).<sup>4</sup> Such a journey tests the limits of representation and remembrance. The river is a reflective *and* political site.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the losses, Hume's lyrical moments are there to inspire, to remind the reader of what *is* as well as what *was*. The fish that have died, their carcasses fuelling forest floor, bear hibernation or human cell division, remain in communal memory. The stories of metre-long salmon Hume gathers in Bella Coola serve to raise the ceiling of expectation. When Hume interviews White and Nuxalk elders he gives the reader a glimpse of an almost vanished world. "From what remains in the Bella Coola valley, we

get some idea of what once was" (8). His remembrance is crucial: fisheries biologist Daniel Pauly argues that unless that memory is passed on, the community's true sense of what restoration is or can be is diminished. The past can enhance the relationship between river and community; Hume's use of the past reminds the reader of what is lost, but also of what survives, for now.<sup>6</sup>

Above all, the Bella Coola River is a site of biodiversity. In collaborating with Harvey Thommasen, Hume has decided the ecological facts must be imparted along with the lyrical moments. Thommasen's extensive field notes become the basis for the book, and in fact undergird its insights. The book opens with lyrical passages ("The river is fed by the sky. It runs over a bed of shattered mountains, through the dreams of a great forest and into the mouths of ancient fishes" [4]); such a register becomes one more means of sharing the richness of the watershed. So a movement between lists of species, oral histories of past abundance, scientific data, and personal commentary is created. We read of the awareness of time and the river as fish leap, but we also read that there are 275 kinds of moth in the valley, and 75 species of moss. Such detail emphasizes the rarer more lyrical modes of inquiry, modes that Hume is naturally drawn to. His lyricism cannot exist in a bubble; it is compromised by its rarity and the possible extinction of the detail that forms it. Destroy the fish, Hume suggests, and you destroy his means of entering the world of the river.

### **Hume and the "interlacing" river narrative**

Fishing is a poetic act. There are a great many books that talk about the poetry of fishing, and yet silence may be the best way to understand it. Only to know that it is there, within each person, in an infinite number of ways.

—David Adams Richards, *Lines on the Water* 54.

The contemporary river-writer faces a series of problems created by watershed damage. How does the non-fiction writer replicate a connection with a beloved river that might bestir the reader to look to his or her own local waterways? How can the writer entertain and inform to encourage a degree of pleasure *and* concern in the reader? The inscription of a process, observation and remembrance is one answer. This writing often begins in personal anecdote before moving to communal history and the process of ecological change at the river. These writers *do* wish, however gently, to provoke a response on several levels and they use several registers to do so. Through the careful braiding of these narrative focal modes a complex, meaning-laden

watershed emerges in print. These meanings endure, despite (or perhaps because of) dams and the contested landscape. *River of the Angry Moon* is no exception to this pattern of register. Its explication honours Hume's sense of a watershed of "interlacing" events and species (Hume, Interview).

**R**ecent critical writing (in cultural geography, for example, where textual interpretation has undergone major change) conceives of "landscape" as a "discursive terrain" (Daniels and Cosgrove 59); "Landscape is a form of knowledge and a form of commentary" (Wevers, "A Story of Land" 9). In landscape convention the control of territory and people become a strategic, scopic act: "Landscape is a social and cultural product, a way of seeing projected onto the land and having its own techniques and compositional form; a restrictive way of seeing that diminishes alternative modes of experiencing our relations with nature" (Cosgrove, *Social Formation* 269). Diluted, static and pre-emptive, it becomes a container for "the visual representation of a bourgeois, rationalist conception of the world" achieving, through linear perspective, "the control and domination over space as an absolute objective entity" ("Prospect" 49).

Yet despite the apparently pejorative associations "landscape" has gathered, the technique of textual landscape composition makes up the bulk of recent popular nature writing. Scott Russell Sanders provides us with one of the finest recent definitions: "What we call landscape is a stretch of earth overlaid with memory, expectation and thought. Land is everything that is actually *there*, independent of us; landscape is what we allow in the doors of perception" (*Hunting for Hope* 7). Sanders echoes my sense of the ways *riverscape* accrues (and depends on) memory and feeling. A neo-romantic impulse marks the river as a site of tutelage.

Jim Cheney suggests our capacity to learn from, rather than order, a very complex ecosystem puts human control in perspective. To feel amazed by ecological complexity reminds us of our dependence on a bioregion. For example, Hume describes the declining steelhead (70-82) and chinook (83-95) runs, then alleviates these back-to-back accounts of loss through descriptions of encounter with surviving fish. Such moments become enclaves of remembrance, passages of reflection that take shelter from absence, only to reinforce it. This cycle between memory and fact, lyricism and data is used to underscore Hume's concern. His is a "contextualized discourse of place" because it is alive to the complexities of the watershed and of Hume's dependent and fallible presence in it: "Bioregions provide a way of ground-

ing narrative without essentializing the idea of self" (Cheney 126, 128).

In *River Eternal*, Lance Kinseth notes "A landscape is a tapestry, yes but one too fluid to be picked up by the ends to be examined. . . . How to grasp hold of a river?" (42). His effusive attempt to "grasp" rivers through language poses a problem. There is no one answer to his question. In a post-colonial era riven with silenced languages/ivers there is no longer any untainted appropriative means, nor an essential river to grasp. Each river is unique; equally, each is culturally constructed. For Kinseth, landscape is an interconnected entity. Similarly, Hume observes "a pattern . . . in which the plant species are separated and yet woven together, as threads in a tapestry" (7). His focus on the complex variety of the ecosystem foregrounds the river rather than the author. Hume's perspective is associative, digressive and interlaced, rather than strictly linear.

In braiding a variety of sources and descriptive modes, Hume seeks an alternative to a literary pastoral that frames the wild as another resource. At the Bella Coola Hume's currency of choice is epiphany and insight. Yet moments of awakening are rare. Rapture is qualified by the ecological record Hume consults: declining fish numbers, clearcut forest, and bureaucratic compromise (he is, for instance, careful to report, after a classic 'landscape' description, that trees are being mulched "into toilet paper" on coastal mills [17]). In much of Hume's work the moment of vision is thus borne out of a sense of loss: "[t]he ghost of the forest hangs over the valley. All that is left of what was once an old-growth forest, a great cascade of greenness that poured down from the mountains to the sea, is the smoke from slash, burned by forest managers" (*Moon* 127). When logging trucks continue to thunder past, there is precious little time for reverie, nor for the glee of the "birch canoedler" (Joyce I.8. l. 204). Biodiversity is under threat. Hume responds to this threat by arguing that rivers have standing; he also "wanted to make the rivers famous" (Interview). His notion of water rights is realized through water rites. But he avoids a purely nostalgic or introspective stance that could cloud his message of possible ecological collapse.

Hume's riverine epiphanies intensify a sense of limited agency (he alone cannot "save" the River) and yet those limits are eased by the awareness of the ecological factors on which humans depend (a larger cycle inspires him). This experience of connection offers a sense of what could vanish as much as what remains. Hume may bestow vision, but he also bestows responsibility. Like Berry, Hume shares a concern for the ways watersheds are "taxed" and left as "ruins." An interest in remnant ecologies and a focus

on personal and communal memory completes and reinforces a series of vital connections involving self, (hi)story and river:

Rivers spin our turbines, powering industry and lighting the cities. They carry away our industrial and residential waste. But they do not wash away our sins.

Long before environmental stress on a river becomes obvious to most of us, it shows up in the fish. They are canaries in a mine, but canaries that cannot sing. We must pay attention to what the fish are telling us, and to the whispering voices of our rivers, for they are speaking about our future. (Hume, *Run of the River* 2)

Like the watershed, Hume's narrative carries a variety of (textual) species. Passages of data and report explication segue into detailed watershed descriptions that are inspired by the flight of a bird or the appearance of a certain fish species. Throughout his essays and longer works, Hume uses anecdote and disclosure to ground his own response, stressing the personal impact of a site, whether that is the movement of a steelhead on a fly or the image of disinterred burial sites at the Peace River. Lyrical moments are used as liminal sites, offering personal gateways into chapters and out of individual sections or essays.<sup>7</sup> But reverie returns to its inspiration: the details and particular qualities of a river.

For Hume, such narrative association is a primary means of organizing the numinous and scientific watershed and its scientific and less quantifiable data in a way that retains a sense of awe. To see a sockeye is to ruminate on fishing monopolies, sports angling and "hot lime-green flies" (109). In another passage, the reflection of Perseid meteors and Polaris on the darkened river inspires thoughts of pink and chum salmon navigation: "The two species travel separately but converge on the river mouth, like meteor showers coming from their own corners of the universe" (114). Salmon and the river mediate and inspire shifts in focus and register.

### **Hume's mid-stream narrative mixtures**

The river is an expression of interdependencies. As such, it is used to serve a number of literary purposes: a site for plenitude and absence, a locus of insight and concern, an element that both reflects and absorbs thought. "The water we seek is the fluid that drenches the inner and outer spaces of the imagination. . . . this water has a nearly unlimited ability to carry metaphors" (Illich 24-25). The "secrets of moving water" are manifold in the mind and the riverscape. Hume is angling for more than fish (14).

Hume lets us enter the river through anecdote and angling. Time and again his approach to the water begins with on-site description and moves



out as ripples from a stone in the water; this is an ecologist's landscape informed by story and in love with imagery. His initial description of a rock formation slips into expressions of geological data, orographic rainfall, lichen, moss and Sitka spruce, and from there to logging, fish habitat and salmonid species. Each fish species remains distinct, sharing the different levels of the river (surface and bed) depending on water temperature and feeding options: "Through the chaos of nature, then, we see these parallel lines of order running" (13). Hume learns from this cooperative concordance.

Standing at the snow-covered Bella Coola estuary, Hume feels the winter wind Nuxalk call *Sps*, "the Wind That Sweeps Away Food" (9). This wind drives fishing boats inland: if not heeded it will whip freezing sea spray onto deck gear, rigging and bundled nets:

There have been cases where a tonne of ice accumulates, capsizing boats and turning their masts into glaciated sea anchors. There are families in the valley who shudder when *Sps* rises, for in the moaning wind they hear voices from the past. They hear the sounds of breaking ice and of the sea rising over the hulls of white ships. (10)

The river helps site this vivid, macabre description. The river is what the salmon are heading for; it determines the presence of the fishing boats and Hume's own writing. Hume returns to this image at the close of chapter one: "the decline of the steelhead in the Bella Coola River, and in most rivers from California to Alaska, is deeply disturbing, for we simply don't know what is being lost. All we know is that they are being swept away as if by *Sps*, leaving the spawning beds empty under the shadows of the ancient glaciers" (14). The wind he feels has taken him through memory and emerged in a current analogy that zooms back from one site to scan a continent.

Hume plays the river so it might begin to sing itself on the page, but he knows the river valley and its creatures are impervious to his feelings. Other creatures will simply see him and move on: as a wolf crosses Hume's line of sight, he draws back from thoughts of emptied currents: "When it is gone, swallowed by the forest, I know I have been blessed. I have fallen from the mountain and landed on my feet in the river as gently as rain" (14). The wind has passed; the hydrologic cycle that drew the reader into the book, that draws the river from the mountains, has deposited our author into his body and the watershed's artery. Watching, "alert for the numinous event," Hume knows his appreciation of such rare instances depends upon species that are vanishing (Lopez 2). His salmon-centric vision cuts across difference and returns to human limits and human awe:

At night you can stand on the banks of the Bella Coola River listening to the rustle of the current, knowing the sound is timeless. Sometimes you might see the reflection of a shooting star and hear a salmon, rippling the current. You might say that's a dog, or that's a pink. But all you know for sure is that the river is running and the salmon are running in it, completing a transect between the heavens and the sea. (126)

"Water," Bachelard observed, "is a universal glue" ("The Hand Dreams"). The awareness of larger cycles and connections, hydrologic and otherwise, prompts a transcendent mode of associative writing evident in much river work (Tuan). The hydrologic cycle and all its cumulative co-operations and expressions have lifted Hume up and then returned him to the riverbed. Water binds disparate musings: Hume's discussion of meteors led back to the river, out into politics and the dwindling fish stocks that cause international difficulties for Bella Bella and the Nuxalk nation, as well as those younger entities Canada and the United States. Fish and rivers broach territorial borders, forming new stories and political tales there too.<sup>8</sup> Association is a key ecological and essayistic principle: it is central to Hume's textual weave.

Despite his occasional rapture, Hume largely dismisses the view of nature as pristine and apart from human intervention. Part of him may want this: plenty of fishermen fail to engage with the river on his terms (90, 141). Yet his use of a range of scientific and economic reports and his consistent arguments in favour of the importance of rivers for the ecological health of fish (and thus birds, bears, trees and cultural practices) tend to mitigate romantic notions of untouchable rivers. He does not want a "Nature" separate from his life, or the economic life of Bella Coola; but he *does* want a form of economic involvement that is less extreme than clearcutting and salmon extinction.

Hume affirms what Hans Jonas terms "the imperative of responsibility" (where the needs of the future generations are crucial to today's actions). Epiphany thus becomes a lyrical backdrop to tabulated species extinction. Insight is a call to action: it works through the expression of personal feeling and a sense of site-specific loss. Yet the Bella Coola offers finned remnants that inspire him, partly because the Nuxalk (led by Art Saunders) had the conviction to protect their estuary from a pulp-mill development (115). There thus remains some habitat to enter. As with Eiseley's watery immersion ("a minute pulse . . . the eternal pulse"), submergence revises Hume's boundaries. Hume told me he might spend a day in the water and lose himself, emerging hours later with very little sense of where he has

been “emotionally, or mentally” (Interview). When he later begins to write, a process of recovery traces the extent of his immersion.

One of Hume’s most intense river experiences is a summer float trip down the nearby Atnarko River in a wetsuit. Setting out, he revels in “the shock of changing worlds” as he submerges and his feet are lifted from the riverbed (98). Trying to adjust his seemingly graceful descent reminds him of the power of the current: it is “as if the force of gravity has pivoted sideways” (99). He slips through a rapid into a deep pool, past six chinook, their gold-rimmed eyes visible just before their “miraculous” acceleration. As he continues, Hume finds the river working on his perception:

The difference between the underwater world and our own is profound, dramatic and as thin as the surface layer. At Belarko Pool, where the light plays beautifully over the river stones and salmon hold like kites in the current, I lift my head just a few centimetres—and hear laughter and excited screams. . . . The sounds and colours seem harsh and unreal, and they vanish as I drop my face again into the Atnarko. Hanging listless, drifting where the current takes me, I lose touch with my body and start to melt into the green light. Only the sound of my lungs brings me back. (100)

Hume continues his swim through water that refracts the light “like stained glass in a church,” past whitefish huddled “in monastic silence” (101, 102). But these numinous overtones are balanced by the presence of the clothing of a man nearly drowned by a logjam and the continued lack of steelhead sightings. Hume has not swum the river to become personally enlightened, but to count fish.<sup>9</sup> He is tumbled by the current, he loses his sensory norms and is reminded of the river’s power, but he emerges feeling chilled not just by the water, but by the fact there are no steelhead in sight that day. With memories of lead weights coating the riverbed Hume leaves the water a haunted man.

Ultimately, Hume sees the river as “unknowable” (142). But when he does try to “grasp” the river through metaphor as Kineth does, the results are instructive (37). *River of the Angry Moon*’s final pages recount an intriguing riverine epiphany. Hume has been dreaming of a certain steelhead catch for months; he is haunted by the image of a particular riseform, an unrealized vision of a life crossing elemental states. “I know that to finish the dream I must find the steelhead, and I know that the steelhead is somewhere in the Bella Coola River, waiting for me, as it has been all year” (168). Hume drives up from the city to fish. A Nuxalk fisherman tells him the December run is on.

Hume goes again to the river. When he enters the water amidst the December snow, a spell seems cast over his vision and his prose: the river

and the rhythmic casting have “mesmerized” him. His synaesthetic state envelops concern; he steps into the moment and the watershed, its elements sustaining him and drawing all his attention. His epiphany is beyond the domain of worry as he enters the river completely:

The forest surrounds me as the waters of the Bella Coola surround the fish.

An invisible rectangle exists in space and time, encompassing the river and the stones and history. I have been searching for it in a dark forest, along an endless shoreline. Without knowing, I step inside. I am in one corner and the great, sleeping salmon is at the other. The line drifts between the opposing points. (174)

As the fish takes, Hume’s attention is swallowed into an instant and the river’s reach. Images cascade as the entire river and key moments from the book coalesce:

I catch my breath, I hear my heart drumming like a grouse, I see the red blood on the snow, I know that somewhere river mist curls from the mouth of a running wolf and that great white swans are leaning forward to plunge their heads into the rich mud of the estuary. I know that the coho are moving gently together, shifting the stones, and I can hear salmon eggs falling. I know the river glints like sunlight on the wings of a dipper and that night folds itself over the valley like the soft brown wings of a sedge. I hear the Nuxalk drummers, but their song falls like snow into the river and becomes silent. Everything becomes water.

Then the fish runs. (174-75)

This is Hume at his most enraptured. Key instances of insight are subsumed into the river as hypersensitive understanding gives way to the wrenching realities of a hooked and running fish. The river and time blossom outwards; images are swallowed by the water. In this moment Hume depicts the wilderness as teacher.<sup>10</sup> After a struggle, where time is again compressed and stretched (it “lasts an eternity but is over in moments, as if it somehow never existed”), the fish is pulled in. Emblematic of river, sunset and snow, this big steelhead is the prize Hume has sought; he bends to release it. Suddenly, in a single-line paragraph (the nature-writer’s stamp of significance), the rapture fades: the fish is bleeding, mortally wounded by Hume’s hook. The steelhead’s teeth cut Hume’s hand, but this wound will not kill the man, nor redeem him. The fish will “almost certainly” die: “I feel my centre give way” (175). Then Hume releases the fish so it can feed other creatures after its death. Demonstrating his humility and his complicity, he watches the fish swim on:

I let the fish go and it rests in the shallows next to me. In that moment I sense the timelessness of nature and the fatalism of the spawning run. I know that the rivers that I love are paved with the bones of the fish that I love and by this I am

bound to the planet. The dazed steelhead stirs, its tail roiling the surface of the great Bella Coola River, and then it swims out, vanishing under the sheltering forest. (176)

Hume's meditation on continuities of life and death are twined to the river. In this moment he allies himself with Haig-Brown in his love of place and his awareness that any enclave is bound to attract forces that will alter it.<sup>11</sup> Hume's motivation for vision may be similar, but its uncompromised (pristine) expression is as rare on the Bella Coola as anywhere else today.

### Critique of Hume

Hume's harsh record of loss is not always popular. Reviewing *River of the Angry Moon*, Margaret Gunning regarded the mixture of data and poetic imagery as "flawed"—she wanted more poetic imagery and felt the data, Hume's "sermonizing" and a tendency to "rant" sat uneasily with the poet-ics. Readers of Edward Abbey will know such mixtures are common in textual eco-lament. Moreover, "like gamblers, baseball fans and television networks, fishermen are enamored of statistics" (Duncan, *The River Why* 14). Couple this fondness with Thommasen's rigorous eye in the field and it is no wonder that early drafts of their book were far more focused on the data in those fieldnotes. The publisher called for more lyricism in order to balance the form. Hume then set the data aside "and began to write from memory." The manuscript "became lyrical and it became much more personal" (Interview). But to source insight in that ecological network wakens him to complexity, compromise and loss—not lyricism alone.

For these reasons Hume is unlikely to practice the rapturous and intricate knowing of Gilean Douglas, whose life near the Teal River in the 1940s prompted and demanded a remarkable watershed knowledge. But Douglas's B.C. river cabin was isolated. The mistakes and needs of the larger world were more distant. Douglas had a much more tested sense of wilderness living than Thoreau; she *had* to learn in order to survive and her writing displays a remarkable engagement and activity. Her attention left her listening as "the green word speaks softly in the hills / And in the river's flowing" (Douglas 9). Dams and extinct fish stocks did not impinge on her prose as much as they do on Hume's. Her sense of the wild as a restorative site was not recreational; it was honed by constant work with (and dependence on) it. Hume's "green word" emerges fifty years later through a denser more troubling layer of human need and technology. As he closes his book, though, he returns to his lyrical mode to share the connection he feels with B.C.'s rivers and the awe that bond still imparts. But the kinds of sustained

learned delight Douglas has gifted B.C. with are hard to come by in its watersheds today. Even literary pastoral has become haunted.

The watershed inspires humility. What has been done to it evokes anger, grief and frustration. I doubt any single book can resolve these feelings for Hume. The one thing that may be the fact that Federal and B.C. governments have now established major fish-recovery programmes on the Bella Coola, with co-operation from all groups (Hume, Interview). Still, the book pulls no punches: Native, White, sport and commercial fishers all get telling-off, and Thommasen has been thanked by some Nuxalk for pointing the bone (Interview). The book's SalmonFirst! catch-cry does not hold back from criticizing any wasteful Nuxalk or non-Native fishing he observes. Hume believes the idea of some pristine, absolutely non-wasteful Native culture is "a very powerful myth in our society" that romanticizes First Nations life and denies tradition and human frailty (Interview). The book is not the cross-cultural study it might have been, mainly because its focus is cross-species. This brings me to Terry Glavin's main reservation about Hume's book: its appeal may not extend beyond "the people-bad, animals-good crowd, and among gentlemen anglers who advocate 'catch and release' fishing."

For example, one scene mentions that a Nuxalk man had caught and *killed* a protected steelhead. This is "troubling" to Hume (168). Rightly so, perhaps, but there needs to be some way that Nuxalk rights can enter Hume's pro-angling world. Nuxalk are part of the watershed. Given their declining numbers, Hume believes fish survival should, where necessary, take precedence over Native food fisheries. This is where Hume's salmon-centrism questions cultural politics and can make people angry: "cutthroat and steelhead populations are in decline. A dead fish does not care if it has been killed by a white or a Native hand—and it has no better chance of spawning. Blame is not the issue—survival is" (59). Perhaps so; but it does depend on what you can afford to put on the family table. Hume would respond by saying the more plentiful pink salmon is worth prizing, not discarding and it is time to let the river lie fallow (140).

Ultimately, Hume's decision to limit discussion of the careful practices of the Nuxalk he *does* know diminishes the reader's sense of the cultural watershed, even if one can argue with equal force that it is not his place to pass judgement on the Nuxalk techniques (125). Glavin wanted more focus on the Nuxalk and white pioneers, their methods of community, the tradition of extractive and efficient Nuxalk fishing operations and a stance that included First Nation and white fishers in movement towards dialogue between groups.

Hume could contribute to such a dialogue; *Run of the River* is one example of his concern with human experience, and trouble on the Fraser or at Burnt Church demonstrates that dialogue around fish is very hard, and very necessary.

I believe Glavin's concerns over *Angry Moon* have validity; had the Nuxalk world view been more developed the book may have been more "rounded." By the same token, there are an increasing number of books in which First Nations generously share their stories on their terms. The work gathered in Carlson and Hanna and Henry makes public some of the oldest insights into/from B.C. rivers from the Stó:lo and Nlha7kápmx Nations respectively. The fact Glavin (like Barry Lopez) favours dialogue between First Nations and other Canadians as a way into knowing nature is testament to the superb manner in which he has contributed to it. Such story-exchange can help foster understanding between different communities around this river-wrapped world. Writing of Maori eel-fishing practices, David Young observes "Story is part of the sinew that binds people back to the landscape. In this case the river is narrative, the flow is *tuna* [eel]; the harvest is understanding" (180).

### **Looking back, reading the waters ahead**

So we beat on, boats in the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.

—F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* 182.

Plenty, like myself, sing the praises of rivers and do so on processed old-growth forest, using power sucked from rivers, as we sit in libraries made, Gary Snyder reminds us, from "cast-in-place concrete ... a transformation of water-washed gravels, a riverbed stood on end" (206). Flowing through stone, we descend through stairwells of vertical riverbed, fluid-based members of a populace that may lament the intervention of our passion for order on the remembered torrents of the past.

The invasive technologies of damming or polluting a river are portrayed in much recent river writing as assaults upon a fragile (somewhat precious?) ideal of harmony and care, as much as a physical riverscape. Andrea Cabajsky makes this point: "With the environmental crisis . . . comes a vilification of commercial and industrial land use and a celebration of recreational land use as essentially conducive to a conservation ethics" (24-25). At the river (a meeting place between cultures and a site for stories—and thus memories—from those cultures) the dominant society seeks a kind of hydrotherapy that will redeem the sins of a colonial past and the "technological colonialism" of the present (Cohen). This work is also an

examination of doubt in the face of such forces, because many of those who write of and oppose this colonialism realize the pace of development is torrential. Like Hume, they realize the contemporary river will not redeem us; we have come too far, too fast. On the Bella Coola, Hume (like Richards, Marlatt, Moore, Leeson and Bowling) gets “to trace the pulse of the river” and measure it against a personal sense of change and loss (166).

Steelhead runs caught to near-extinction, coho and sockeye numbers struggling, timber felled in an instant: such loss ensures lyricism, as a literary mode, is not enough for Hume. Lyricism does not allow enough room for suggested improvements in policy. And he has plenty.

In Hume’s view, the only way a salmon fillet should land on your plate is if you’ve caught it. Commercial fishing is seen as a drain on budgetary and finned resources. Hume is the first to acknowledge “it’s a tough balancing act” between short-term profit and long-term work (*Adam’s* 90). Richard White’s argument that work is part of nature, that labouring as a fishing or forestry worker remains an intense form of knowing is crucial here:

The choice between condemning all work in nature and sentimentalizing vanishing forms of work is simply not an adequate choice. I am not interested in replacing a romanticism of inviolate nature with a romanticism of local work. Nor am I interested in demonizing machines. Environmentalists need to come to terms with modern work. (“Are You” 181-82)

Hume has some trouble with the wasteful nature of modern transnational commercial fishing; he believes that locally based, fee-paying fishing is the answer to corporate waste. His solution to commercial fishing (which damages local communities and economies in his estimation—as well as fisheries biologist Daniel Pauly’s<sup>12</sup>) is the re-introduction of fee-paying sports angling and the decommissioning of the large commercial fleets. This is controversial and is possibly too extreme an answer, catering to those who can afford to equip and transport themselves to the river. Many would disagree with Hume’s fly-fishing agenda for B.C. He is more interested in speaking for rivers and fish than political expediency, which remains a way of seeing that harms both. His solution is meant to wrest control and capital from transnational companies (that have dictated the patterns of community along many a coastline), so smaller groups of locally sensitized workers can determine events. Jeannette Armstrong argues that such devolution of control leads to an evolution in bioregionally-attentive communication and community. But everyone will need to come on board.

Not all will make the effort. In agreeing to the closure of the B.C. sockeye



fishery in 1999, First Nations and White fishing crews put the salmon first but they also had their families in mind: that is another thing that binds cultures. As many affected by that closure know, the support of long-term vision has very tough short-term consequences. Story-exchange demands a level of patience and foresight that government and landlords find hard to accommodate. While First Nations forego a culturally significant food (and often their family's key protein source, according to Stó:lo Sonny McHalsie) and many lose income, the U.S. ships cruise the Pacific. First Nations, Canadians and salmon lose out, not to mention the bears and international fishing treaties (Armstrong).

Many nature writers believe sharing a concern for other species is good for human social development. For Hume and other river writers, putting the water and its finned creatures first offers one way through cultural difference towards a shared ethics of care. The past has carved a channel for us to live with and learn from. Such ways forward will need to take alliances between networked human communities into account if they are to work for the river. Jeannette Armstrong closes her remarkable essay in the anthology *First Fish, First People: Salmon Tales of the North Pacific Rim* (1998) by calling for collaboration between small-boat fishers and traders, First Nations, academics, and the sixty thousand school children rebuilding salmon habitat in BC and across the border. People are part of the "lace work" of the watershed and have a responsibility borne of dependence and foresight. Armstrong (of the Okanagan First Nation) offers us a locally specific and globally applicable vision; it is one Hume can appreciate, for he also knows how fragile and important the "lace work" of rivers are to life—he too knows the salmon offer lessons. A contemporary watershed is a shared site. Depending, as interlaced creatures do, on the currents that inform and compose it, we would be wise to look to the waters again, to reach for the elusive, revisionary language of compromise and balance that today's interconnected natures and cultures demand:

we must forge something new, a new course chosen for the right reasons. A course insuring the preservation of the precious gifts of life to each of us and our generations to come as true caretakers of these lands. For the salmon—our spirit relatives, messengers of the future—are swimming the unclear tides heralding our passing, and in their ebb speak of the duty entrusted to each of us born in this time of grave omens. (Armstrong 192)

## NOTES

- 1 See Abramovitz, Armstrong, Bocking, de Villiers, Glavin, Gleick, Goldsmith and Hildyard, Hume's *Run of the River*, McCully, Reisner, Roy, and Waldram, for example. These authors amplify and honour the scientific record.
- 2 A small recent Canadian list might include other river-mesmerized authors Jeannette Armstrong, Terry Glavin (*A Ghost in the Water*, 1992; *This Ragged Place: Travels Across the Landscape*, 1996), Alan Haig-Brown (*The Fraser River*, 1996), Richard Bocking, David Adams Richards, Chris Gudgeon and Marq de Villiers. Richards and de Villiers won Governor-General's non-fiction awards (in 1998 and 1999 respectively), ending the century on a watery note. Further B.C. currents include the legendary *Steveston* by Daphne Marlatt (1974/84), and more recent work by Tim Bowling: *Low Water Slack* (the 1995 poetry debut) and his first novel, *Downriver Drift* (2000), where fishing work, memory and place bind.
- 3 Though my focus here is one fly-fisherman's experience of a B.C. river, the full meaning of the river as a spiritual site in canoeing needs to be borne in mind, from fur traders or Pierre Trudeau's persona to the remarkable and empowering journeys First Nations continue to make along the West Coast, where cedar canoes are "healing vessels" (Neel 1). Cranmer's film *Laxwesa'wa: strength of the river*, Neel, and the people in Hanna and Henry, Carlson and Armstrong, et al. share the stories of many First Nations and speak with authority to the obvious gaps in Hume's work. Of special note is director Kane's *The River—Home*, a striking piece of riverine theatre. See also Benidickson, Raffan, Neel, Trudeau, and Bocking.
- 4 Adorno's phrase echoes Walter Pater's description of the essay's "'unmethodical method'" (Lopate, "Introduction" xxxvi). Hume's method is unmethodical because unplanned events on the river determine events and associations on the page.
- 5 Hume's latest river-text project—[www.ariverneverasleeps.com](http://www.ariverneverasleeps.com)—relays the politics of rivers to a global audience and pays homage to the work of B.C.'s most famous angler scribe. Another great river site is [www.irmn.org](http://www.irmn.org).
- 6 As Hume, Abramovitz, de Villiers, Goldsmith and Hildyard, Gleick, Outwater, Palmer, Postel, White, Worster and others attest.
- 7 As Ted Leeson observes "the surface itself, the boundary we fish on, is an imaginative construct. In reality, only the water and air exist; the interface between them—some third separate place we call 'the surface'—is something we create. Our brains are not wired to accept the deep anarchy of absolute disjunction, and so we invent thresholds and zones of transition that soothe our understanding with little continuities and make us feel better" (158).
- 8 In some cases, Hume appears to ally both First Nations and multinational commercial fishing as negative, without always stressing the massive differences in scale. In August 1997 tempers flared as British Columbian fishers accused Alaskans of violation of the 1985 Pacific Salmon Treaty. "Over 60% of Sockeye taken in Southeast Alaska are Canadian origin Sockeye. . . . Between 1984 and 1995 Alaskan Coho interceptions increased from 350,000 to 1.4 million" (Armstrong 187, 189). Keeping with trade debate, controversy through 1999 regarding Canadian water export to the U.S. under NAFTA highlights the emotional links formed with water, particularly as it becomes an export commodity.
- 9 We can be forgiven for thinking Hume might prefer gills (he spoke of the "addictive" qualities of river-diving), but driftnets and anglers like himself have probably put him off

- the idea. That beautiful leap the hooked salmon makes is, after all, a reaction to pain. Catch and release fishing, when poorly done, still means catch and kill (107).
- 10 The book also tends to affirm Jim Harrison's wry construction of Canada as a kind of vast fishing lodge: "Canada was a ready-made time capsule into our sporting past—gentle, affable and not all that far away" (123).
  - 11 Roderick Haig-Brown said a river "has its own life and its own beauty, and the creatures it nourishes are alive and beautiful also. Perhaps fishing is, for me, only an excuse to be near rivers. If so, I'm glad I thought of it" (352).
  - 12 In a packed public lecture (referenced below), Pauly was asked what three measures he would implement to ensure the health of the west coast fishery. His reply: create marine reserves that protected spawning and feeding grounds, and stop commercial fishing that moved money from local communities into the hands of transnational corporations. There was no third measure; these two, he felt, would be enough.

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## The Winter Window

I look out the window  
into the snow.

The snow stares back.

To each snowflake  
there is a different man,  
standing in a dark room,  
behind glass.

They pile up upon each other  
like a deck of cards.

There are that many worlds.

Fish, rocks, water exist in all of them, at once.  
In some of the cards  
the man is speaking.

As you come in  
to deal the game,

the words are broken apart  
and brought together, saying:

To each snowflake  
there is a different dark room  
standing in a window  
behind a man.

We live here in silence.

It is not that time  
expresses the will.

It is that when a bird sings  
there is no other world.

The stillness of a stone  
is the stillness in my hand.

A bird flies in my fingers  
over open water  
and then is gone

## Ars moriendi

The Swiss village girl who cheated death  
not once but twice  
looks nervous on the evening news,

innocent and anxious and completely unschooled  
in the art of dying, itself, a dying art  
in these milksop times.

A miracle, her mother asserts  
in throaty alpine gutturals, the girl survived  
two walls of snow in one day,

rode the cold white surf like a pro  
from one small town to the other,  
landing on her feet five miles away.

Now the girl must learn in her own hard way  
how to face an ordinary death,  
a quieter passing,

one without premonitions  
or ringing bells in the ears of friends  
to announce her end.

Simply a frisson or two, and a short rale,  
her head thrown back,  
skin clammy, pale, pupils

fixed on the bright ceiling light  
until her loved ones know without a doubt  
she won't catch her breath again.

In that short BBC clip, the mother spoke  
with confidence—her daughter had been  
a slow but methodical child

who'd learned how to read  
and swim and sew. She was sure,  
eventually, the girl would get this right too.



## Zorgvlied, Amsterdam

I. Sorrows are fleeting. Or so we hope  
to the extent that we suffer  
rather than inflict them.  
Whence the name of the graveyard, *Fleeting*  
*Sorrows*, Zorgvlied.

II. And past the riparian gates of the place  
the Amstel parades the cozy houseboats  
of the coital rich, like sarcophagi  
mildly rocking, mildly on the shoulders  
of pallbearers all to testify that twice  
you cannot screw on the same river

though the poplars in reflection may promise the abiding.

III. Coots, whose young are black,  
tread pollution with red, lobed feet.

Pollution asserts its own  
unfathomable purity.  
Almost like the clean flows the dirty.  
Do not be so arrogant as to think you  
can truly, O mortal, harm the world.

IV. But more beautiful than we  
remain our monuments. We can hardly  
live up to the gravity of everything  
that makes the world, including those things  
with which we have tampered, we thought  
decisively.

Poverty doesn't exist, the perceptible is the immortal:  
such are the successes and deceits of every graveyard  
austerity being so sumptuous and loss  
a crepitant lane under vigorously sighing trees.

- V. We don't have senses. It's that our senses  
have us. This is what, for the most  
part, keeps us going,  
each of us a river of sensations  
like a mirror that, yes, has depth.
- VI. So even what appears to us as toxic  
exalts us with its capacity  
to be apprehended.
- VII. So the three dimensions stand at the tomb  
of Anonymous reminding us  
KNOW THYSELF is a task none fulfills alone  
and our beauty resides, like flowers  
in a vase, like water in a bucket,  
like a corpse in an open casket,  
in a world that tastes us in true  
ignorance of our own self-assessment
- wherefrom comes that exquisite appreciation of us  
which excludes us entirely.
- VIII. Poverty is wealth. Best, therefore,  
the confessed exiguousness of epitaphs.
- IX. And anyway, no learned attic that ever  
went up in smoke  
escapes its perpetuation  
in the floating cypress-top  
glossed by the queries of dimmed birds.
- X. Ants glitter like mica in search of steady rock  
from which to glitter.
- Up goes the tombstone like the fluke of a whale  
and it is drawn, so slowly, down.

- XI. But everything flows.  
This the management of Zorgvlied knows.  
These are plots, my friend, on which rent is due.  
Seven years, and your corpse is turned out.
- XII. Meanwhile, ten thousand turning leaf-  
shadows mollify the rock of tombs to make it almost  
Galatea wakening from mineral, a maiden  
who might shiver from the North Sea stepping.
- Heaven must be material.

# Articulating a World of Difference

## Ecocriticism, Postcolonialism and Globalization

In *The World, the Text and the Critic*, Edward Said counters the generally textualist tendency of literary critical conversation of the early nineteen-eighties with an argument about the essential worldliness of texts. By this he means not only that the meaning of literary texts is indelibly inscribed by the circumstances ("time, place and society") of their production and reception (35), but also that their effectiveness, "in some cases even their use, are matters having to do with ownership, authority, power, and the imposition of force" (48). Recognition of the material and political significance of texts has important implications for reading; as Said notes, the "closeness of the world's body to the text's body forces readers to take both into consideration" (39). A crucial question for criticism thus becomes how to read the worldliness of the literary text, and, secondarily, of literary criticism itself. In addressing this question in general terms, this essay focuses more specifically on the connections and disjunctions between postcolonialism, the theory with which Said is most strongly associated, and ecocriticism, a mode of criticism that understands the "worldliness" of literature in a radically different way. While the world, in postcolonial terms, comprises the political and economic structures that shape, and are shaped by, culture, ecocriticism focuses on the interface between culture and the physical environment.<sup>1</sup>

The last few years have seen tentative moves from both sides to bridge the gap between the two approaches.<sup>2</sup> This impulse towards convergence can be attributed to many factors, not least of which are the profound changes that have occurred in the "world" (both symbolic and material) in which liter-

ary scholarship is produced. In particular, the changes associated with globalization, a process that is characterized in part by the intensification of connections between and within different realms of global activity—political, cultural, economic, environmental, and so on—have had a significant impact on the terrain in which postcolonialism and ecocriticism operate.<sup>3</sup> At the same time as globalization multiplies and complicates the connections between culture and ecology (by harnessing indigenous plants, animals and knowledge within the framework of international copyright law, for example), it also expands and intensifies our awareness of those connections: most recently, the use of the globalizing technology of the internet facilitated the international dialogue between labour activists, environmentalists and peace activists that generated the Seattle and Washington, DC protests, while television and other media helped convey their message to the public at large. Finally, globalization has changed the climate in which we do academic work, influencing both the economic structures that define universities and funding bodies and the kinds of research they foster. For reasons I will discuss in more detail in my conclusion, these changes in the academy have also driven the trend toward the integration of postcolonialist and ecocritical theories. The main part of this paper is a frankly speculative attempt to address the practical question of how to combine postcolonialist and ecocritical approaches to understanding contemporary culture. It does so in part through a critical reading of Anita Rau Badami's *The Hero's Walk*, a novel that engages explicitly with the world, and with the text-in-the-world, in the context of globalization. The heuristic value of this exercise will justify, I hope, what might seem to be a broadly schematic treatment of large and unwieldy concepts—postcolonialism, ecocriticism and globalization. While this paper proceeds from the premise that there are compelling reasons for thinking through these concepts together, the final section also points to some of the hazards attendant on such an exercise.

**1978**, the year of the publication of Said's seminal postcolonial text, *Orientalism*, also saw the publication of an essay that garnered much less attention at the time, William Rueckert's "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism." Generally attributed with the coining of the term "ecocriticism," Rueckert's essay was actually preceded by a book by Joseph Meeker (also little heralded at the time), *The Comedy of Survival: In Search of an Environmental Ethic*, which proposed a new mode of studying literature "to determine what role, if any, it plays in the welfare

and survival of mankind and what insight it offers into human relationships with other species and with the world around us" (25). While both ecocriticism and postcolonialism are committed to locating the text in the world, they conceive of both world and text in radically different ways such that their intersection has been, until recently, virtually unimaginable.

A major difference between the two theories centres on the way they conceive of the literal worlds, or places, in which the texts they study are located. In keeping with a commitment to recognize the land as "more than a scape, but a picture and a story in which humans participate along with other life forms" (Murphy 12), ecocritical conceptions of the world tend, not surprisingly, to privilege non-urban settings, in which those other life forms predominate. Without disputing Raymond Williams's contention that "the country," in English literature, works, like the city, to represent in disguised or displaced form relations of human labour and culture, ecocritics argue for an extension of this reading to consider the representation of nature in more biocentric terms. Notwithstanding a strong strand of pastoralism in postcolonial literatures,<sup>4</sup> postcolonial *criticism* tends, by contrast with ecocriticism, to envision the world through urban eyes. An obvious historical explanation for this worldview is that one of the fundamental preconditions of postcolonialism's production was the arrival of Third World intellectuals, both writers and critics, in the metropolitan centres of the First World.<sup>5</sup> The reasons for postcolonialism's urban outlook extend beyond this, however, to the political and cultural possibilities represented by the city. As a model of multicultural diversity, generally progressive politics and cultural activity, the world-class city functions metonymically and symbolically as a microcosm of a new decolonized world.<sup>6</sup> As a synthetic creation, both in the sense of its artificiality, and of its simultaneous promise of community and heterogeneity, the city further offers an explicitly postcolonial "home" which, while it admits traces of nationalist feeling in the form of diasporic longing, refuses the kind of claims to "natural" belonging that are seen to smack dangerously of colonialist forms of essentialism. Thus in direct contrast to ecocriticism which stresses "the platial basis of human experience" (Buell, Letter 1001), postcolonialism privileges "cosmopolitan restlessness" (Gandhi 153), emphasizing the provisionality and the constructedness of our relations to place.<sup>7</sup>

Different conceptualizations of individual places extend to different ways of conceiving the relationship between the local and the global. At the same time as it stresses the importance of local place, ecocriticism has an explic-

itly global focus; as Jean Arnold puts it, “ecocriticism encompasses the very earth it studies, assuming its size and shape” (1090). Rather than representing a contradiction in the focus and mandate of ecocriticism, the easy slip-page from the particular to the general represents a logical conclusion of the “planetary consciousness” of ecological thinking.<sup>8</sup> Postcolonialism also recognizes an interplay between the local and the global, but in a more cautious, indirect way. Wary, with good historical reason, of the ideological and material implications of globalizing impulses, postcolonialism admits the force of the global in a way that explicitly prohibits its recuperation into a formula that confirms the place of the individual in a universal order, either of nature or culture. The global and the local come together, not by way of simple synecdoche, or the relationship between macrocosm and microcosm, but in a way such that each interrupts and distorts the other, thereby refusing the possibility of concrete platial or abstract global belonging in favour of what Homi Bhabha terms the “unhomely . . . the shock of recognition of the world-in-the-home, the home-in-the-world” (141). The study of “world,” or postcolonial, literature, according to Bhabha’s definition, becomes “the study of the way in which cultures recognize themselves through their projections of ‘otherness’” (141). Postcolonialism is interested in diversity and hybridity, then, not just in the sense of different cultures jostling against one another in a kind of productive tension, but more profoundly, in the sense of the radical alterity that inhabits even singular cultures, singular identities.

The explicitly poststructuralist bent of postcolonialism, demonstrated in formulations such as Bhabha’s, is part of what makes it difficult to reconcile with the concerns of ecocriticism. What is true of cultural studies in general is also true of postcolonialism: part of its mandate is “to explode the category of ‘the natural’—revealing the history behind those social relations we see as the products of a neutral evolutionary process” (Turner, qtd. in Hochman 86).<sup>9</sup> Of course, postcolonialism also has a strong materialist impulse; it is this that distinguishes it from other postmodernist theories.<sup>10</sup> However, it is a materialism whose Marxist humanist focus seems, at least initially, to be fundamentally irreconcilable with the goals of ecocriticism. In the process of highlighting the contradictoriness of the European concept of “man,” postcolonialism seeks not so much to destroy it as to erect a more truly humanist model in its place, one which firmly establishes the place of the colonized on the right side of the species boundary. The colonized, Frantz Fanon famously argued, “knows that he is not an animal; and it is precisely

at the moment he realizes his humanity that he begins to sharpen the weapons with which he will secure its victory" (43). Conflicts between postcolonialism and ecocriticism over the species question are exacerbated by clashes in the political arena between anti-colonial activists and environmentalists, over policies that seem to pit animals against humans. The forcible removal of humans living on the borders of Kruger Park in South Africa, for example, on the grounds of protecting endangered wildlife, could be seen to reflect the untenable idea that "rhinos and hippos are more important than people—or at least than poor people" (Martin 2).<sup>11</sup> While this characterization amounts to a caricature of the environmentalist movement, postcolonial critics rightly deem ecology—and by extension, ecocriticism—to be relatively unconcerned with the status and rights of man. Ecology takes up Darwin's invitation to "let conjecture run wild," to imagine that "animals, our fellow brethren in pain, diseases, death, suffering and famine . . . may partake [of?] our origin in one common ancestor—we may be all melted together" (Darwin 368). Even those forms of ecology which stop somewhere short of the radical biocentrism of deep ecologists are predicated on a recognition of the interdependence of all living organisms in a network of relationships which "man"—as individual or as species—cannot transcend.

The differences between ecocriticism and postcolonialism are not only political or conceptual; they also inform what might somewhat problematically be referred to as their aesthetic orientation. By aesthetic orientation I mean the particular kind of readerly pleasure each approach seeks to cultivate, through the kinds of text it chooses to focus on, and the way it reads those texts. In postcolonialism and ecocriticism, a key aesthetic difference is reflected in their respective approaches to realist fiction. Postcolonial critics, as David Carter has incisively argued, tend to avoid realist texts in favour of those which, either through their naive conformity to colonial ideology or their postmodernist self-reflexiveness, allow the critic to perform satisfying deconstructive maneuvers, triumphantly in the case of the former and vicariously in the case of the latter.<sup>12</sup> Ecocritics arguably display the opposite bias, preferring to focus on realist texts, or those which seem to promise the kind of connection between word and world which contemporary literary criticism seems to deny ("Why," asks Lawrence Buell, "must literature always lead away from the physical world, never back to it?" [*Environmental Imagination* 11]).<sup>13</sup>

In each case, the tensions surrounding questions of human(ist) value and agency are resolved, without ever actually being acknowledged, at the



interface of critic and text: in postcolonialism, the imperative to debunk old-fashioned notions of individual agency can be upheld by deflecting the consolidation of self from text to critic: the critic, in the process of discovering the (thoroughly depersonalized, discursified) agency of the text, enacts, without actually acknowledging, the consolidation of the human ego. For the ecocritic, on the other hand, the realist text, by offering the aesthetic experience of congruence between the human imagination and the physical environment, enables the submersion of the reader not just into the text, but also into the world it represents.

I make these observations not to expose, in the hidden agendas of postcolonialism and ecocriticism, a fundamental emptiness or hypocrisy; nor do I want to suggest—as I think David Carter does—that these theories need to abandon their concern for “mere” aesthetics in favour of a concentration on more material, institutional concerns (a question I will return to later). I think it is important to consider these questions in the context of the larger problems that postcolonialism and ecocriticism grapple with, problems of identity and representation, and with the larger, related problem of the “worldly” responsibilities of the cultural critic. With the aim of exploring these problems in more detail, I want to turn now to *The Hero's Walk*, a text that highlights, both formally and thematically, the strengths and the limitations of ecocritical and postcolonial modes of critique.

In the circumstances of its production, as in its themes, *The Hero's Walk* reflects the postcolonial condition described by Bhabha as the envelopment of the world-in-the-home and the home-in-the-world. The postcolonial provenance of its author, Anita Rau Badami, is established in her response to the question of where she is from originally: “It’s hard to say” (Badami, Interview). Born in the south of India, she spent most of her life in the north and east, travelling frequently because of her father’s job, before moving to Calgary with her husband in 1991. Not surprisingly, her fiction, which to date includes two novels, *The Hero's Walk* and *Tamarind Mem* (1996), deals with themes of displacement and belonging, and tensions between old-world tradition and new-world mobility. *The Hero's Walk*, which takes place in the fictional Indian town of Toturpuram, describes two journeys: the metaphorical journey of a middle-aged Indian man, Sripathi Rao, from a timid provincialism to a more global consciousness, and the literal journey of his seven-year-old granddaughter, Nandana, who comes from Canada to India to live with her grandparents after the death of her parents

in a car accident. For both Sripathi and Nandana, the journey involves a kind of culture shock, followed by a gradual opening out towards otherness.

Sripathi's self-enclosure is symbolized in his residence, Big House on Brahmin Street, whose "clean strong walls" stand as a monument to a world in which caste and colonial structures guaranteed that everyone and everything knew its place (6). Its current state of disrepair is mirrored in the chaotic geography of the town itself, which has been remapped in accordance with a state decree ruling that no street can have a name that indicates a particular caste. Thus Brahmin Street becomes merely "Street"—"as [does] Lingayat Street, Mudaliyar Street and half a dozen others in Toturpuram" (5)—in a gesture of egalitarianism whose effects are literally, as well as symbolically, disorientating. The sense of displacement is compounded by changes that have occurred on the street itself over the last few decades: "instead of the tender smell of fresh jasmine, incense sticks and virtue, instead of the chanting of sacred hymns, the street had become loud with the haggling of cloth merchants and vegetable vendors, [and] the strident strains of the latest film music from video parlours" (5-6). The incursion of these loud and unsettling registers of cultural change into the sanctuary of Sripathi's study mirrors more significant assaults on his sense of tradition, including, most worryingly, the refusal of his children to lead the lives he has imagined for him: his daughter Maya has broken off her engagement to an Indian man to marry a Canadian with whom she now lives in Vancouver, and his son Arun has rejected a traditional job in favour of a career as an environmental activist. Sripathi responds to the affronts by ceasing to communicate, literally, in the case of Maya, with whom he has stopped corresponding, and figuratively, with Arun and the rest of his family, through a retreat into an increasingly self-enclosed world. The narrative traces the gradual expansion of his consciousness, a process initiated by Maya's death in a car accident, and his forced confrontation, in both imaginary and physical ways, with otherness.

In one sense, the expansion of Sripathi's global consciousness follows an explicitly postcolonial course. His early education, in conformity to the Macaulayan formula,<sup>14</sup> has produced in Sripathi a peculiar mix of arrogant worldliness, bolstered by enforced memorization of large chunks of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, and timid provincialism, informed by a confused allegiance to traditional caste and race hierarchies. Coming of age in conjunction with the birth of postcolonial India, Sripathi is briefly inflamed by the passion of nationalism, which eventually turns into a tepid, secular

Hinduism, characterized not so much by positive adherence to spiritual tradition as by suspicion of cultural difference, and a residual attachment to the politics of caste. His position affords him the luxury of an attitude of superiority towards his wealthier but lower-caste next-door-neighbour, and a vague fear about the world outside India. When Maya sets off for graduate school in the US, Sripathi contemplates with incomprehension the impulse that leads people “to leave the familiar” (126). “What was it,” he wondered, “that had pulled his own daughter into the unknown world beyond the protective walls of home and family?” (126). His own engagement with that unknown world begins with his voyage to Canada to identify Maya’s body, and to collect her seven-year-old daughter, Nadana. The expansion of Sripathi’s concept of family to accommodate his Indo-Canadian daughter corresponds to a more general movement towards the embrace of postcolonial hybridity. The progressive trajectory of the novel is accentuated by the almost too-obvious coincidence, at the end, of the death of Sripathi’s mother, Ammayya, who is a caricature of old world prejudices, and the marriage of his sister Putti to the lower caste next-door-neighbour, Gopala. The expansion of Sripathi’s worldview is accompanied, interestingly, by a deepening of his Hindu spiritual beliefs. Once a proud rationalist who disdained his wife’s faith, he derives comfort from the observance of the traditional rituals ceremonies to mark Maya’s death (258). Thus, his accommodation of the chaos of the modern world is accomplished in tandem with a recognition of the need for ritual through which to exorcise the ghosts of his personal and cultural past.

In thematic terms, *The Hero’s Walk* conforms neatly to the conventions of postcolonialism. Rejecting the hierarchies of colonialism and nationalism, it reimagines identity as the product of an ongoing engagement with the alterity of the world. The world, in this conception, takes the form of a city whose shifting physical structures, like its human inhabitants, bear the imprint of elsewhere. The challenge confronted by Sripathi is in some senses the fundamental challenge of the postcolonial condition: to discover a balance between the preservation of identity and the embrace of difference, between remembering the past and dwelling in the present. From a formal perspective, *The Hero’s Walk* is less amenable to postcolonial reading. Though it celebrates values of hybridity and multiplicity on the level of theme, narratologically it adheres to a much simpler, even old-fashioned formula. Its uncomplicated presentation of the hero (in novelistic if not in mythological terms) and realist mode of narration seemingly reinstate the values of individualism

and universalism. The conclusion further conforms to a conservative formula through its consolidation of traditional institutions of marriage and family. In textual, if not political terms, it proves frustratingly resistant to postcolonialist reading practice, failing to provide the requisite tension to facilitate the critical pleasure of interpreting/performing heterogeneity.

If we complicate the postcolonial perspective with an ecocritical one, a more interesting picture of the novel emerges. Nominally the story of a man, *The Hero's Walk* is also the story of a place, whose physical environment powerfully influences the lives of its inhabitants. The story opens with the description of a heat wave that has cast Toturpuram into a state of suspended animation: "Only idiots ventured out to work" in such heat and, "once there, sat stunned and idle at their desks because the power had gone off and the ceiling fans were still. . . . The more sensible folk stayed at home, clad only in underwear, with moist cloths draped over their heads and chests, drinking coconut water by the litre and fanning themselves with folded newspapers" (2). Survival, it is suggested from the beginning, depends on an accommodation not just of human difference, but of the otherness of the physical environment: accordingly, the world Sripathi finally begins to admit encompasses nature as well as culture. When he travels to Vancouver, his horror of the foreignness of the place and the disorder it has produced in his life are expressed in his revulsion at the "things growing endlessly—enormous trees, brilliant flowers, leaves as large as dinner plates—a fecundity he found impossible to bear" (141). More than a symbol of the life of his daughter that he has shut out and now completely lost, nature here signifies the vitality of all life forms, denied by a human culture that is fatally insensitive to its own interdependence with them.

The principal agent of Sripathi's developing ecological consciousness is his son, Arun, who counters his father's skepticism about his activism by pointing out "you had your independence of India and all to fight for, real ideals. For me and my friends, the fight is against daily injustice, our own people stealing our rights. This is the only world I have and I feel responsible for it" (239). The interconnections between the human world and the natural environment are highlighted through the significance of water, which functions in the novel as both a symbol—of expression vs. repression, of fluid relationships in contrast to rigid identity, and so on—and as a literal force of mortality, whose life and death-giving properties connect the fates of human and non-human animals. As Arun starkly puts it, "All the industrial

effluents being dumped into the sea are destroying the turtles, and soon they will destroy us too. Before long the water table will be affected, and instead of drinking water we will be drinking chlorine or whatever poison is being unloaded" (246). The significance of water is heightened by the drought that persists through much of the book, giving way at the end to storms that end up flooding Big House with sewage. Metaphorical and material implications of the flood converge in Ammayya's horrified response to the liquid sloshing around her knees:

"Whose is that?" she asked faintly.

"What do you mean, whose, Ammayya?" demanded Putti. Now her anger had been replaced by contempt for her mother. . . . "All the drains on this road are connected. So it could be our neighbour's for all I know. Maybe Chocobar man's. Maybe Munnuswamy's. Does it have a name on it, you want me to check? (343)

The image of the caste distinctions Ammayya has so fastidiously upheld being washed away in shit effectively cancels the authority of all social hierarchies, exposing the biological underpinnings such hierarchies seek to deny. It is those underpinnings that Arun is committed to protecting.

Sripathi gains some understanding of the meaning of Arun's work when, after depositing Ammayya's ashes in the sea, the two men wait all night on the beach to watch the arrival of the turtles. Watching as they laboriously dig holes for their eggs, Sripathi is "humbled by the sight of something that had started long before humans had been imagined into creation by Brahma, and had survived the voracious appetites of those same humans. In the long continuum of turtle life, humans were merely dots" (355). The image of the turtles, which occurs near the end of the book, precipitates the final crumbling of a worldview in which ethnocentrism is entangled with, and bolstered by, anthropocentrism. Sripathi's intuition of the truth of the Darwinian precept—that the origins and fates of humans and other living forms are "all melted together"—culminates not just in a revised worldview, but also in a renewed sense of responsibility for the world.

While Arun's activism represents the most obvious embodiment of how that responsibility might be discharged, Badami offers another model of ethical engagement through Sripathi's career as a writer. As a once-aspiring journalist who ultimately resigned himself to a career as an ad-man, Sripathi satisfies his frustrated ambitions by writing letters to the editor of the local paper. Though the letters, which he writes under the pseudonym "Pro Bono Publico," he sees himself fulfilling a civic duty: "Like his boyhood heroes . . . he was a crusader, but one who tried to address the problems of

the world with pen and ink instead of sword and gun and fist" (9). His commitment to his subject matter, though, is relatively superficial—"he could write about anything under the sun"—and his concern about the issues he writes on is almost incidental to the frisson of pleasure he gets from the writing itself, and from reading one of his published letters that manages to be "forceful, to the point and with an edge of sarcasm" (10). Like his encyclopedic world knowledge, his writing style is the product of a colonial education system, "learnt at the end of Father Schmidt's bamboo cane at St. Dominic's Boy's School" (10), and, notwithstanding the pleasure it gives him, he is often surprised, on rereading one of his letters, "at how different and removed from himself it look[s] in print" (8). Maya's death, and all the changes it precipitates, prompts a gradual change in his writing. On the morning after his night on the beach with the turtles, Sripathi eschews his preferred mode of withering wit, and begins a letter: "*Dear Editor . . . Early this morning, at Toturpuram beach, I saw the most amazing sight . . .*" (359). The beginning of this letter (which is the final sentence in the book), and the stylistic shift it represents, seems to endorse a kind of writing that aims for a direct engagement with—even a submission to—the world, rather than self-conscious abstraction from it. Where the mode of the latter style, represented in the clever detachment of Sripathi's early letters, is critical analysis, the new style is disposed towards affirmation and synthesis. Such an approach to writing, Badami seems to be suggesting, represents a more generous, and perhaps, ultimately, a more culturally and ecologically sensitive way of engaging with the world.

**T**he idea that culture, in general, and narrative, in particular, might play a significant role in shaping the material practices that lead to social and/or environmental decay, on the one hand, or renewal, on the other, is shared by many postcolonial and ecocritical theorists. In the spirit of my argument that the problems to which postcolonialism and ecocriticism address themselves are increasingly intertwined, demanding a complementary approach, I want to turn now to the consideration of a possible starting place for the formulation of such an approach. Joseph Meeker's *Comedy of Survival*—one of the texts I cited at the beginning as an early proponent of the extension of the text into the (natural) world—speaks in interesting ways to some of the formal and thematic issues raised in *The Hero's Walk*, suggesting, in the process, some possibilities for extending connections between ecocriticism and postcolonialism.

From the perspective of Meeker's theory, the crucial element in Badami's fiction is its conformity to the conventions of comedy, its celebration of the biological processes and social rituals concerned with the cycle of life. In spite of the constant threat of disaster, represented by Maya's death and the looming possibility of environmental catastrophe, the concluding images in the book, of Putti's marriage and the flowering of Sripathi's relationship with his granddaughter, affirm the strength and persistence of the forces of life. It is in the formal and thematic conservatism of this comic resolution (interestingly, the elements of the novel that prove the most *uncongenial* to the version of postcolonialism described by David Carter) that the novel proves most amenable to the ecocritical theory outlined by Meeker. In defining comedy as the genre most conducive to the promulgation of ecological values, Meeker argues that Western culture has traditionally accorded a privileged status to the genre of tragedy, a key feature of which is its affirmation of the dignity and nobility of man in his struggles against a hostile universe.<sup>15</sup> That he cannot win the struggle does not mitigate—indeed it confirms—his heroism. Comedy, by contrast, represents a relatively unexalted view of humanity. While the dignity of the tragic hero is confirmed by his adherence to principle, the comic hero has no such commitment; his primary priority is survival. Comedy is therefore essentially conservative: it endorses change only when it facilitates the goal of adaptability rather than serving the grander—and ecologically dubious—project of progress. Comedy, Meeker suggests, represents a more viable narrative form for the embodiment of ecological values.

In an interview, Badami explains that part of what she sought to do in *The Hero's Walk* was to “explore the notion of heroism, ranging from the epic mythological heroes who are ‘so large, so enormous and so endowed with wisdom and bravery and goodness’ to the Indian movie hero ‘who’s also larger than life, completely unbelievable, almost a cardboard character’” (qtd. in “Author”) Against these images, Badami offers a more mundane vision of heroism represented in life itself, “in simply seeking to traverse life from birth to death” (qtd. in “Author”). Sripathi moves towards a recognition of the value of this process as he abandons the heroic models of his youth—images framed by the structure of the battle (*Hero's Walk* 275, 308), in favour of a less oppositional, more complex vision, embodied in the traditional dance classes his wife teaches. Nirmala reminds her students that Rama, the hero, must walk “with dignity, . . . with courage and humility” (136), while the walk of Ravana—also a great king, “is the walk of a braggart.

A man who is too proud and therefore not heroic" (136). "In Indian dance," Badami explains, "there's a hero's walk . . . and a villain's walk [sic] with a few different flourishes. . . . We walk that fine line between being completely good, completely bad and completely stupid" (qtd. in "Author"). The image of the hero's walk reflects Meeker's theory of comedy in its representation of the precariousness and moral ambiguity of human existence, and in its rejection of oppositional frameworks in favour of the more nuanced movement of the dance. Comedy "is the art of accommodation and reconciliation" (Meeker 48), expressed not through heroic transcendence but rather, as Sripathi comes to recognize, in "sturdy resilience," coupled with a recognition of interdependence, an acknowledgment that "a human being is not merely a ticking body, but a sum of all that happens in the world around him" (Badami, *Hero* 324, 213).

The comic worldview has important cultural as well as ecological implications. Because it is rooted in the biological circumstances of life, comedy "depends less upon particular ideologies or metaphysical systems than tragedy does" (Meeker 38). Thus, whereas tragedy is a largely Western form that achieved its height in ancient Greece and Elizabethan England, comedy "is very nearly universal" (Meeker 38). To the extent that the construction of narratives can be seen as an adaptive strategy for the human species, comedy would seem to be an exceptionally successful mode of engagement with the world. Meeker extends the biological reading of comedy to suggest that, "like comedy, mature ecosystems are cosmopolitan. Whatever life forms may exist seem to have an equal right to existence, and no individual needs, prejudices, or passions give sufficient cause to threaten the welfare of the ecosystem structure as a whole" (43). Comedy, it would seem, is conducive to the preservation of cultural as well as natural diversity.

From a postcolonialist perspective, the most obvious problem raised by Meeker's theory is its overt conservatism. Its rejection of the value or viability of resistance in favour of accommodation and "muddling through" (45) looks like a prescription for political passivity and acquiescence in the face of repression or domination. This may, however, be less of an obstacle than it immediately seems. Without forsaking its commitment to the recognition of difference and critique of inequality, postcolonialism has grown increasingly conscious of the liabilities of identitarian politics and a "rhetoric of blame" that helps fuel the proliferation of violent conflicts. "The world," Said notes, "is too small and interdependent to let these passively happen" (*Culture and Imperialism* 18-20). If, as both Said and Meeker suggest, the



world we live in is shaped in part by the way we conceive of it in narrative, the prevailing, tragic view in which “the world is a battleground” (Meeker 48) is no longer sustainable. Meeker’s theory of comedy, in its endorsement of the values of “accommodation and reconciliation,” offers one way out of the metaphorical battlefield. Yet it is arguably *because* of its embodiment of those very values that Meeker’s theory will not ultimately work as a model for the incorporation of postcolonial and ecocritical concerns. In its effort to highlight the universality of comedy—a universality underlined, in this case, by the authority of biology—Meeker’s theory forgets the necessary partiality of any attempt to *represent* that universality. In other words, while it might be accurate to say that the production of narrative, even of comic narrative, is a universal human trait, it does not follow that all narratives are mutually intelligible, or that there is a universal position from which one can read the world in narrative, or narrative-in-the-world. What is missing from this account is a history of the economic and cultural, as well as the ecological conditions from which narratives emerge, and a recognition of the role of politics in facilitating the emergence of some narratives and the repression of others. These elements, important to cultural critique in general, are particularly crucial in the case of ecocriticism and postcolonialism, theories that are concerned explicitly with the material contexts and consequences of representation. I note their absence here not in order to dismiss Meeker’s book, which I have cited at some length because I think it serves as a useful starting place from which to begin to think about connections between ecocriticism and postcolonialism, but because they point to the hazards attendant on *any* attempt to incorporate these two movements into a single, comprehensive theory. These hazards are heightened by the conditions of contemporary global(ized) culture, as I will argue in my conclusion, below.

**T**he argument that we need to find a way to talk about postcolonial culture and environment together has come to assume the status of a truism in discussions of globalization. To be a “citizen of the world,” John Tomlinson suggests, one must be

open to the diversity of global cultures and to be disposed to understand the cultural perspective of the other. But [one] also—perhaps more importantly—need[s] to have a sense of wider cultural *commitment*—of belonging to the world as a whole: that is . . . of a world in which, particularly in terms of common environmental threats requiring lifestyle adaptation, there are *no others*. (186)

The formula is an appealing one, illustrating nicely the inseparability of

postcolonial and ecocritical concerns in defining the responsibilities of global citizenship. Globalization has worked, in significant ways, to enable the recognition of those responsibilities. It has also created conditions that constrain the terms in which they can be imagined. The growing consciousness attendant upon the shrinking of the globe that we are all, as Darwin had it, “melted together,” is facilitated by the scientific demonstration of the myriad networks that connect all life forms—a process that occurs in awkward conjunction with the increasing commodification of those forms. It is with a view to the ambiguous implications of those processes, in cultural as well as ecological terms, that I want to resist the move evident in the critical *discourse* of globalization to make everything commensurable. This move has material and symbolic dimensions, both of which affect profoundly the “worldliness” of literary scholarship. One of the signal characteristics of globalization is the conversion of progressively larger spheres of life, knowledge and experience into economic terms. The consequences for academic work are on one level obvious: scholars are increasingly forced to legitimate their scholarship in worldly terms, to make it pay. For humanities scholars in particular, whose work remains most stubbornly resistant to translation into real dollars, the imperative to demonstrate value gets shifted into the speculative realm (which, in the world of finance capital, is not that far removed from how the rest of the economy works anyway), where it is expressed as an escalation of rhetorical claims for the “risk” entailed in doing certain kinds of scholarship, and as an inclination towards the same metaphors of “synergy” and “convergence” that prevail in contemporary economic and political discourse.<sup>16</sup> More generally, the move towards a more “worldly” form of scholarship is expressed in an increasing tendency, in the language of granting agencies and researchers, to claims of global comprehensiveness, accompanied by an increasing facility of resolution of difficult and complex issues; these are claims of which postcolonialism and ecocriticism should be particularly wary.

The danger as I see it, in the attempt to merge the concerns of ecocriticism and postcolonialism in a new “world” literary theory, is that the ethical commitment of both to the articulation of complexity—of expression, of culture, of communication, of life—will be sacrificed to the compulsion towards economic and/or aesthetic resolution and conquest. To guard against this, we need, while remaining consciousness of the place of the text in the world, to resist the danger of confusing the two in a gesture of critical heroics. It is helpful in this regard to recall Said’s comments, in “The World, the

Text and the Critic,” on the function and limits of the critical essay. Citing Lukács, Said reads the essay as an expression of “a yearning for conceptual-ity and intellectuality, as well as a resolution to the ultimate questions of life” (52), whose form is always inadequate to its desire. The typical essayist figure, for Lukács, is Socrates, whose profound yearning is expressed and concealed through his talk on mundane matters, and whose debates are incommensurate to his death. Socrates’ death, Lukács suggests, “perfectly symbolizes essayistic destiny, which is the absence of a real tragic destiny” (qtd. in Said 52). If, as a critic, one cannot claim the role of tragic hero, neither is it possible to immerse oneself in the comedy of existence, to literally embody the aims of ecology or postcolonial hybridity. Rather, the activity of literary criticism remains, like Sripathi’s letter-writing, an oddly clunky, almost anachronistic, activity, insufficient to its claim to function “Pro Bono Publico,” but committed to the process of articulating the responsibility of the self to the demands of an increasingly complex world of others. It is with a view to this reminder about the power and the limitations of literary criticism that I argue for the need to work out the differences between ecocriticism and postcolonialism with respect to “world” literature.

#### NOTES

- 1 These radically simplified definitions of “postcolonialism” and “ecocriticism,” adopted for the heuristic purposes of this paper, cannot pretend to do justice to the complexity or diversity of ideas or methodologies encompassed by these terms. For more extensive definitions of ecocriticism, see, for example Glotfelty; Cohen; “Forum.” For elaborations on postcolonialism, see, for example, Ashcroft et al., *The Empire Writes Back*; Hall; Shoat.
- 2 While postcolonialism has made few gestures (see, for example, Hutcheon, Spivak and Tiffin) towards the inclusion of an ecological perspective, ecocriticism has recently—in part, perhaps, to counter charges that it is primarily a white, American movement—made a concerted effort to address issues of culture and race. See, for example, Lengler; Martin; Murphy; Slaymaker.
- 3 While definitions of globalization abound, most commentators stress the idea of intensified connections: Held et al. suggest that “globalization may be thought of initially as the widening, deepening and speeding up of worldwide interconnectedness in all aspects of contemporary social life . . .” (2). Roland Robertson defines globalization as “the compression of the world and the intensification of the consciousness of the world as a whole” (8), while John Tomlinson emphasizes the production of relations of “complex connectivity” in globalization. For other accounts of globalization, see Waters; Giddens.
- 4 The natural world figures prominently in the novels of Markandaya, Ngugi, and Lamming, for example, as well as the poetry of Senghor and Walcott. For a discussion of “new world” pastoralism, see Buell, *The Environmental Imagination* 53–82.

- 5 Dirlik stresses the significance of this often unacknowledged material context of post-colonialism.
- 6 Ball discusses these functions in an essay on Hanif Kureishi's *Buddha of Suburbia*.
- 7 "In some ways," Ashcroft et al. suggest, "place is language, something in constant flux, a discourse in process" (*Post-Colonial Studies Reader* 391)
- 8 That the development of what Mary Louise Pratt terms "planetary consciousness" (9-10) occurred in conjunction with colonial conquest points to a historical connection between postcolonialism and ecocriticism that I have explored in more detail elsewhere (see O'Brien).
- 9 Hochman cites this formulation in an essay that explores the difficulty of constructing a "green" cultural studies.
- 10 For discussion of this critical difference between postcolonialism and postmodernism, see, for example, Slemon.
- 11 As Martin and Slaymaker have both argued, ecocriticism's relative indifference to problems of economic inequality explains in part the reluctance of African critics to embrace it.
- 12 Carter's characterization of postcolonialism is supported by Brennan and by Gandhi, who notes a tendency for postcolonial critics to invoke "the discourse of literary hybridity [as] . . . a sort of guilty political rationalisation of readerly preference" (162).
- 13 For a critique of Buell's ecocritical defense of realism, see Phillips.
- 14 In his infamous Minute on Indian Education, Lord Macaulay called for the cultivation of "a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect" (249).
- 15 Meeker's distinction between comedy and tragedy simplifies, but basically conforms to, Frye's more extended treatment of their generic differences.
- 16 An interesting example of the latter appeared in an editorial in the *National Post*, in which Preston Manning promoted the idea of a strategic alliance of conservatives, less on the grounds of the specific benefits such an alliance might bring than because of the intrinsic appeal of the concept itself. Pointing out how it has worked in the business world, through corporate mergers and trade agreements, Manning goes on to venture that, "'Building strategic alliances' could well become the watchword of progressive politics during the opening decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century" (A14). What's interesting and disturbing about this argument is not just the easy conflation of politics and economics, but also the rhetorical movement that reflects and legitimates it: in the language of economics, in which everything is commensurable with everything else, the obligation to demonstrate material relationships between things is abandoned in favour of the "strategic alliance" of ideas through empty analogy.

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## Rural Fence

Order against the jumbled  
Cedar, birch or  
Hawthorn branches

Even when a post cants  
Off true, wires sag  
Or horizontal boards droop

A fence maintains an utter contrast  
To the scramble of leaves and twigs  
Which sway and shift

While the fence offers  
A braced  
Stolidity

And in winter  
When only the post-tops  
And uppermost strands or rails

Hoist their chins above waves of snow  
Heaving toward them  
Or when the meadow seems boundless

Except for the low mounds where the shoreline  
Once was, the persistence of fencing  
—Nearly lost—

Speaks of another season, of  
Fence as seed  
Of mullein, daisy, bunchgrass

—Our handiwork become natural  
This perimeter we  
Construct and mend

To testify  
Compel acquiescence  
Celebrate

## two poems from “Word Sonnets”

### Hail

Hail  
peppered  
the  
air  
like  
seed  
as  
you  
were  
lowered  
below  
the  
frost  
line.



# Dust

The  
dust  
of  
afternoon  
fragrance  
settles  
on  
your  
skin  
and  
limbs  
grainy  
with  
touch.

## *Splendor sine occasu* Salvaging Boat Encampment<sup>1</sup>

### I

Driving a rented car 150 kilometres up the Columbia River valley north from Revelstoke, I was in search of Boat Encampment, a rendezvous point on the transcontinental fur trade route of the early nineteenth century. Few know of this place today or realize its symbolic value. Canada could never have extended from sea to sea if a canoe route across northern North America had not been opened, and Boat Encampment marks the place on the Columbia River that could be reached by six days of portaging from the eastern slopes of the Rockies. Many North Americans think of the Columbia as a USAmerican River—roughly two-thirds of its length lies below the forty-ninth parallel—but it is born in British Columbia, gathering itself from the meltwater of the Canadian Rockies before hurtling into Washington state 725 kilometres from its headwaters. Two of its ten major tributaries—Kootenay and Okanagan rivers—lie mainly in Canada, while the other eight—Wenatchee, Spokane, Yakima, Snake, Deschutes, Willamette, Cowlitz, and Lewis rivers—drain parts of seven states—Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, Wyoming, and Utah. Its basin covers about 67.3 trillion square kilometres. This is the most hydro-electrically developed watershed in the world, with more than 400 dams and many other structures, all working to harness the estimated twenty-one million kilowatts of generating capacity.

Searching for Boat Encampment was going to be an odd experience, for I knew that I wouldn't see the place, but Highway 23 (Fig. 1) takes you to

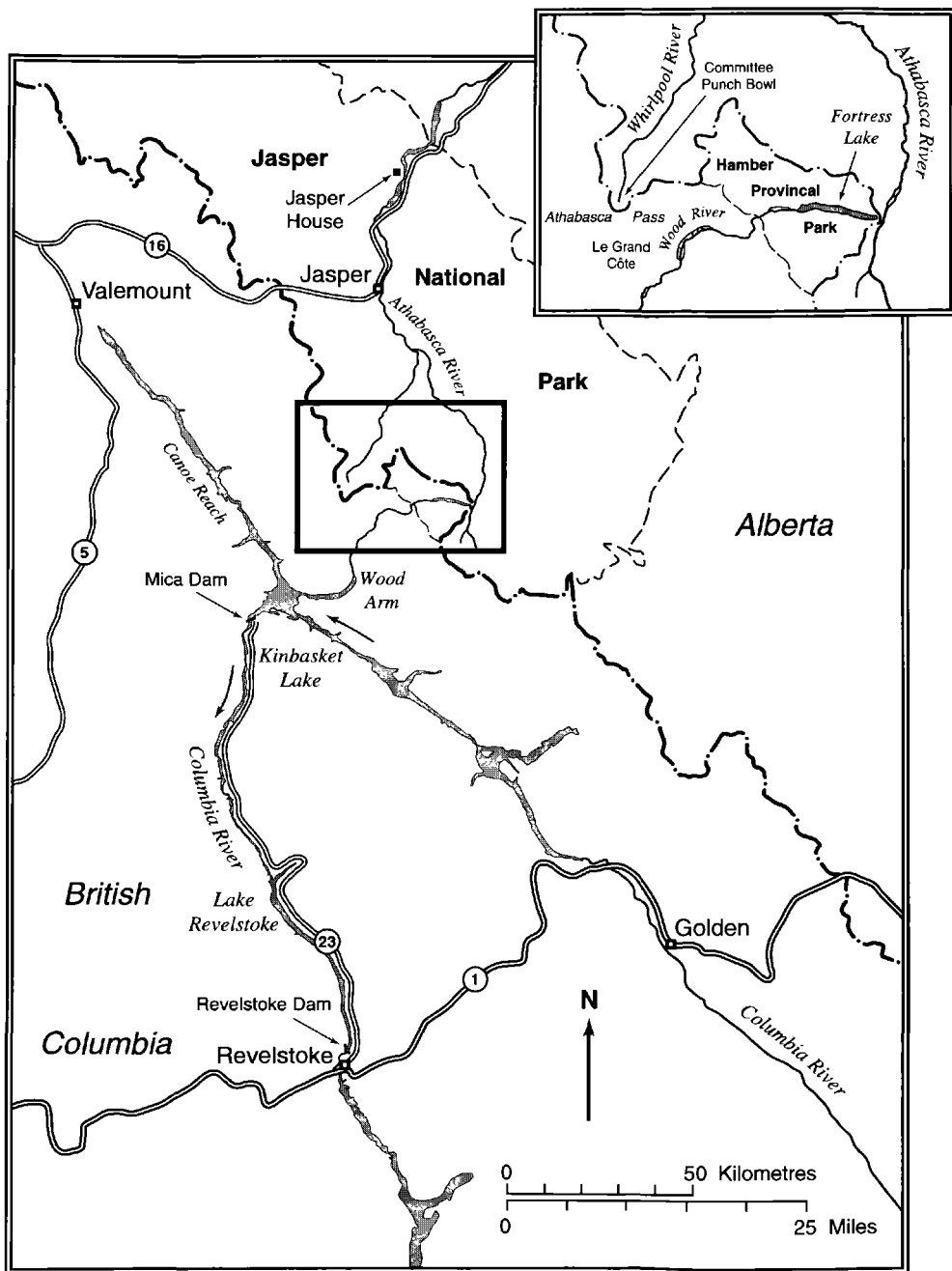


Fig. 1. Present-Day Map of the northernmost Extent of the Columbia River, Kinbasket Lake, Athabasca Portage, and Environs.

where it was and it doesn't go anywhere else. As I drove, I listened to Bill Frisell's cd, *gone, just like a train*, and bathed in a strong, late-April sun, the road almost entirely to myself. It seemed an effortless mechanical experience, and nothing feels quite so effortless as the first 30,000 kilometres in a North American mid-size on a traffic-free highway—the consummate illusion conjured up in television ads. But I wondered why Frisell's bluesy guitar seemed so apposite in the Columbia valley. One tune, "Nature's Symphony," has a nasty edge to it, while the title song ranges through a dose of discords, punctuated by shot-gun-like reports that frighten motor-listeners into thinking something has hit the car, or *vice-versa*.

Those sheer white parallelograms of clear-cut start getting to you after a while. The Columbia River valley was never so populated as it was three decades ago, when the dams above Revelstoke were being built, but now it feels eerily abandoned. The hydro lines and clear-cuts prove that humans are consuming it, but we are absentee consumers. The valley itself yields utilities, but they are not consumed there and few people make their home in that stretch of the valley. No deeper irony exists on Hwy 23 than the sign warning travellers that "no services" are available. *Splendor sine occasu* is the motto of the province of British Columbia. It is supposed to be translated as "Radiance without setting." But this valley put me in mind of one wag's alternative translation: "splendour without any occasion for it."<sup>2</sup>

The conversion of the Columbia River into a virtual river has been consummate. It came at the cost of avaricious thinking, which led to, among other things, the greatest bond default in USAmerican history (White 80). On the Canadian side of the line, British Columbians have long grown used to the mantra that hydroelectricity would emancipate them economically; successive governments felt they had no choice but to continue promulgating a myth that the numbers do not defend. More than a quarter-century ago, provocative BC Liberal Pat McGeer surmised that it was "unlikely that British Columbia will ever make a business out of developing electricity and selling it elsewhere" (65). So tales from the economic realms only serve to exacerbate the bizarre and alienating effect you gain in this valley, and it is deepened by the effect on you of driving along a steep valley near the top of one of its walls, rather than down at its bottom. We're used to roadways inching through a mountain pass, or, if there isn't one, climbing up out of one valley in order to leave it and cross into another, but Hwy 23 perches high above the iceless Columbia, occasionally plunging down near high-water mark only to rise again, more like a coastal than an interior highway.

Even so, coastal highways lead somewhere; after 150 kilometres of Hwy 23, carefree motoring hits Mica Dam (Fig. 1). And ends.

Observing the Columbia River first-hand should come after reading about it. Pick Robin Cody's *Voyage of a Summer Sun*, Blaine Harden's *A River Lost*, or Richard White's *The Organic Machine*; they are all witheringly insightful treatments of the subject. As the nature-*versus*-technology debate goes, Cody's and White's are even-minded. But none of them quite prepared me for this artifice. The Columbia feels, at least in the stretch between Revelstoke and Mica dams, like a fjord rather than a river. In the engineered West, it no longer flows through a valley; it occupies one. Harden refers to its "puddled remains"; the scale of the metaphor is wrong, but the idea is right (Harden 39, 14).<sup>3</sup>

I've now seen all but a few of the Columbia's 1,900 kilometres, but only along two stretches—in the stretch north of Revelstoke, where the valley narrows dramatically, and, ironically, in one of the few remaining free-flow stretches of the river, down near the Hanford Nuclear Reservation—did this weird impression resonate so strongly. Perhaps it was the work of Frisell's teary guitar. But I think not. It was the sense of loss that assailed me more here than elsewhere. I was motoring north after participating in Revelstoke (Fig. 1) at a gathering of ecologists hosted by the Columbia Mountains Institute of Applied Ecology. Not an ecologist, I aim to build bridges of environmental history between those who are and those who know about cultural heritage. I welcome White's argument that environmental history must study the relationship of the ecological and cultural heritage of a place, rather than those two subjects independently of one another: one must "do more than write a human history alongside a natural history and call it an environmental history. This would be like writing a biography of a wife, placing it alongside the biography of a husband and calling it the history of a marriage" (10). The gathering in Revelstoke had been promisingly named "Learning from the Past," and I was heartened to meet some ecologists who did see the need to align if not to marry their research to the history of human occupation of the lands they studied and, in the case of some Parks Canada personnel, managed.<sup>4</sup> Because I was driving north from Revelstoke with human history in mind, and because historical human presence in the valley was drowned and contemporary human presence was spectral, I was spooked. I was finding it difficult to gain my historical bearings, let alone learn anything from the pastness of a valley transformed.

## II

For more than a decade, work on an edition of the painter Paul Kane's field notes and sketches has required travel to most places he visited between 1846 and 1848, when he made a return trip from Toronto to Vancouver Island with Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) brigades. The most dramatic and arduous stretch of the continental fur trade route from York Factory to the Pacific Ocean was *La Grande Traverse*, or Athabasca Portage, which took brigades between two great watersheds, the Athabasca's and the Columbia's, where the rivers come nearest one another without an intervening glacier. For four decades between 1814 and 1855, brigades made this portage over the spine of the continent's Cordillera. Kane travelled over it in November 1846, when he was headed to Fort Vancouver, and in November 1847, when he was returning to Fort Edmonton. He encountered deep snow both times. For westbound brigades, the "entry" to the six-day portage was Mount Edith Cavell, in modern Jasper National Park (Fig. 1).<sup>5</sup> During the fur trade era, it went by the name of *La Montagne de la Grande Traverse*. The loss of this name spelled the loss of most humans' awareness of the fur trade route and the role it played in the making of Canada. Other than a placard hidden away on a stretch of old highway, Jasper National Park offers no historical interpretation of the route. For eastbound brigades, the starting point was Boat Encampment, on the Columbia's northernmost bend (Fig. 2).

Between Fort Edmonton on the prairies and Fort Colville (Colville, WA) downstream on the Columbia at Kettle Falls, Boat Encampment marked the rendezvous point for the two brigades. Although he did not give it this name, North West Company explorer David Thompson was the first fur trader to camp on this bend. He did so in January 1811 after crossing Athabasca Pass in winter. He named Canoe River, a tributary flowing from the north-northwest into the Columbia on this bend. Canoe Reach (Fig. 1) retains that name today. Wood River (Fig. 1), flowing west into the bend from the Rockies and Athabasca Pass, was not Thompson's choice of name; he named it Flat Heart, "the Men being dispirited" (Tyrrell, ed. 451; Glover, ed. 324; Belyea, ed. 262n).<sup>6</sup> For more than two months, he and his men waited out the winter amid those stands of giant cedar and hemlock, the greatest trees that Thompson had ever seen. Then they fashioned a cedar-plank canoe, and made their way upriver, south, to Kootenae House.

Boat Encampment was a storied place. As the pivotal rendezvous point on the Pacific Slope of the transcontinental canoe route, it witnessed the



Fig. 2. Aerial view of Columbia, Canoe, and Wood Rivers: Boat Encampment. Date unknown. Courtesy BCARS, and Canada, Department of National Defence, Namao AB.

first-ever *regular* crossings of the continent by Euro-North Americans. Many cultures have not lost places so storied. David Thompson is remembered today as the pre-eminent explorer and cartographer of Canada, the northern Lewis and Clark, if you will. Boat Encampment was one of those sites that could be associated directly with this national hero; this association, in combination with the fact that it also served a transcontinental role, suggests that Boat Encampment could bear the burden of national historic site status, national in a way that few other sites in the West could boast of being for the epoqe preceding the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway in 1885.

When the HBC operated its transcontinental express brigades, often a month or more was spent at Boat Encampment by the brigade coming from the Pacific, waiting for the other to arrive from the prairies. Deep snow in Athabasca Pass, the late arrival of the HBC's ship at Fort Vancouver, or a host of other logistical or natural causes could account for such delays in a system dating from when work proceeded in terms, not in spite, of natural conditions. Accounts that record the rendezvous of the brigades at Boat Encampment invariably feature expressions of relief and even jubilation. It was an isolated transshipment point on the transcontinental route, separated

from any post by the dangerous rapids of the malevolent Columbia downstream and the punishing *Grande Traverse* over Athabasca Pass;<sup>7</sup> the gloom of the surrounding mountains exerted itself psychologically on the men camped there, waiting. It flattened many a heart. And game could prove scarce, rendering a long sojourn there risky. But, in time, it came to possess a continent-wide symbolism unmatched anywhere else in the interior.

With the help of local historians in Jasper (Fig. 1), I had located the sites of six watercolour sketches that Kane made in the mountains on the eastern slope while he travelled up the Athabasca River valley and then, beginning *La Grande Traverse*, up the valley of its tributary, the Whirlpool River (Fig. 1). This took him to Athabasca Pass and, at its crest, the famous tarn, Committee Punch Bowl (Fig. 1), which bestrides the continental divide (of course, the Alberta/British Columbia border bisects that tarn today). I suppose that I was feeling spoiled. What better way to preserve historical landscapes than by turning them into a national park? That was not one of the motives of park-makers in the late nineteenth century,<sup>8</sup> but the creation of Jasper Forest Park on 14 September 1907, also, as it happened, resulted in preserving the upper Athabasca River undammed, this in Alberta, a province as determined as any to develop any and all resources. As well, the formation of the park preserved the historical traces of the eastern portion of *La Grande Traverse*. Sites of kekule-houses and the Valley of the Twisted Trees—evidence of the regular transmontane presence of Shuswap business travellers and their families—can still be sought and identified, and they necessarily leave one pondering the lostness of storied places that, without knowing it at the conscious level, Canada has already cashiered in the head-long pursuit of progress.

Once you leave Kane Meadow (known as *Campement du Fusil* during the fur trade), pass up McGillivray Ridge, walk around the west shore of Committee Punch Bowl, and approach *Le Grand Côte* (Fig. 1) to descend to the Columbia watershed in the valley of Wood River, you leave history; or it leaves you. First you hit clear-cut; then you hit damned rivers and bloated river valleys. Scuba gear and wet suit are required apparel if your search is for Boat Encampment. For well over one thousand kilometres, you travel in the Columbia valley with little sign of early nineteenth-century history. Only long after leaving British Columbia and after passing through much of Washington state, only, that is, when you come to tidewater below the Columbia River Gorge, and, soon after, the reconstructed Fort Vancouver, can you regain some sense of the once mighty, and mightily impressive,



transcontinental fur trade route. A vestigial remembrance of Fort Okanagan, but no sign of Fort Shepard or Fort Colville or Fort Walla Walla; no sign of either of the Dalles des Morts, or of Kettle Falls, the Great (Celilo) Falls, the Dalles, and the Cascades. Places where human labour had created knowledge and concentrated cultural memory have disappeared, drowned beneath what in 1926 US American secretary of commerce Herbert Hoover called the principle of maximum utilization. In the Columbia, nature and, with it, human history have been “maimed . . . for the sake of subsidized prosperity” (qtd. in White 54, 56; Harden 15). The only time that any water is permitted to escape over Grand Coulee Dam occurs each summer evening. The falling water forms a white screen on to which a laser light show is projected that enchants tourists with the mighty Columbia River’s history of progress. All around the town of Grand Coulee, loud speakers broadcast the narrative unrelentingly.

This technological transformation of a river that dropped as much as a metre per kilometre in many long stretches allows for nothing more than mimicry of the past: late each winter, the US Corp of Engineers draws down Lake Roosevelt in anticipation of spring runoff, usually revealing the foundations of old Fort Colville and a series of rocky islands that defined Kettle Falls. Enough of Hayes Island, just above the falls, emerges to permit a few Colville and Lakes men to paddle over to it, set up a camp, fast, pray for a week, and then hop off to hold a mock first salmon feast.

Kinbasket Lake (Fig. 1) is named for a Shuwap man. It is the reservoir that formed behind Mica Dam and that submerged Boat Encampment nearly three decades ago.<sup>9</sup> Three decades is only one less than the tenure of Boat Encampment’s regular use by transcontinental fur trade brigades. Appreciating as much made me realize that cultural history generates a seductive nostalgia all its own. You have to keep remembering that fur trade entrepreneurs seldom showed a higher regard for the particularities of place or environment than did mid-twentieth-century politicians and government agencies. It was then as it seems now: get across the mountains and you deserve all you can take. When, in the early 1960s, Premier W.A.C. Bennett hitched the economic future of British Columbia to the star of hydroelectric development, whether he knew it or not, he aligned himself with the sort of exclusiveness of vision that Sir George Simpson practised as inland governor of the HBC when it rivalled the greatest companies in history for territorial control of the globe. The development of both the fur trade and hydroelectricity produced histories of profligacy.

Still, the fur trade's rapacity left its trace, one of many human traces that Columbia River plumbing began drowning more than sixty years ago. Navigation locks were first built on the river in 1896, down at the Cascades. The first dam, at Rock Island, was built in 1932, a year before work began at Bonneville and Grand Coulee. To think of the Columbia only in terms of reservoirs, dams, towns, nuclear contamination, and fishlessness is to realize paradoxically how much history the making of hydroelectric dams has drowned. That history has grown inconsequential to British Columbians' and Canadians' sense of identity and to their understanding of how the Pacific Slope functioned *vis-à-vis* the rest of the continent.<sup>10</sup>

Just as BC Hydro did not take the time to log out the reservoir behind Mica Dam before filling it,<sup>11</sup> it conducted no extensive human history or archaeology of the bend, despite the fact that time for one was available, even if only as an unintended consequence of technicians' recommendations in mid-1960 that the building of the dam be deferred for four years (Swainson *Conflict* 163). The chief strategy for developing the dam and reservoir occurred in 1961, when Hamber Provincial Park, which had been established only two decades earlier (1941) over eighty per cent of the huge triangle of the Columbia watershed formed by the townsites of Golden, Revelstoke, and Valemount (Fig. 1), was hacked to its present size at the head of the Wood River valley and Fortress Lake (Fig. 1; "Resource" 6; Akrigg and Akrigg 103).<sup>12</sup> That re-designation took out of the park the portion of the fur trade route on the BC side of the continental divide, from Athabasca Pass down *Le Grand Côte* to Wood River and thence to the Columbia's Big Bend at Boat Encampment. When advising the BC government in 1973 on the possible options for the management of the resources of the region, K.G. Farquharson Engineering of West Vancouver identified no cultural heritage resources. Its report does take note of there being "several historic passes" between Valemount and Golden, and of a request from BC Parks Branch that a study reserve be established in the upper valleys of several rivers, including the Wood, but none of its recommendations for a "Recreation Policy" pertains to cultural heritage. Its principal focus is resource extraction: "Main development plans for the region include access for the forest industry, further hydro construction on the Columbia, construction of transmission lines and some recreation development" (Farquharson 7, 20, 10).<sup>13</sup> So it is indeed weird to find oneself wondering about a site of cultural history.<sup>14</sup> As basic a matter as Boat Encampment's exact historical location cannot be readily answered.

### III

Most visitors to Boat Encampment during the fur trade period contented themselves with locating it vaguely at the Big Bend, but the hydrography of the bend was not simple enough to render a vague location satisfactory. Occasionally, visitors who were inclined to make more particular notes would offer greater detail. Consider the Scot David Douglas's observation, made on 27 April 1827. The man after whom the Douglas Fir would be named specified the locale in the ways that interested a botanist most. Among the earlier accounts of the place, his ranks as a comparatively careful one:

Arrived at the boat encampment 12 A.M. a low point in the angle between the two branches, the Columbia flowing from the east and Canoe from the north; the former sixty yards wide, the latter forty, but very rapid. At low water, as it is at present, the former has three channels, the latter two, which are not seen at high water, the space at that season being a perfect circle about six hundred yards in diameter. Around the camp on the point the woods are *Pinus taxifolia* [Douglas Fir: *Abies douglasii*; *Pseudotsuga menziesii*], *P. canadensis* [Western White Spruce], *Thuja occidentalis* [Northern White Cedar], *Populus*, *sp.* [Aspen], all of large growth. The underwood, *Cornus* [Dogwood], *Corylus* [Hazelwood], *Juniperus* [Juniper], and two species of *Salix* [Willow] not yet in flower. (Wilks and Hutchinson, eds. 253-54)

Douglas, who used both the adjective, "magnificent," and the noun, "horror," to describe the scenery at Boat Encampment, affords much specificity of the locale, extending to the composition of the forest.

Edward Ermatinger headed this brigade. The first publication of his journals, in 1912, included a coloured map, "Routes followed by Edward Ermatinger in 1827 and 1828." The red dot used to designate Boat Encampment is placed on the bank of the Columbia east of Canoe River; however, in an unfortunate repetition of Douglas's narrative silence, the map does not include Wood, or, as it was sometimes known, Portage, River (after 132).

Sketches, narrative accounts, and maps all furnish information, much of it contradictory, about the location of Boat Encampment during its period of active use. But I felt empty while sifting through various archives knowing that Boat Encampment is now drowned and that only simulacra of it in word and image remain. The emptiness struck hardest when an aerial photo of the Big Bend turned up (Fig. 2). Canoe River flows down the centre of this aerial view to join the Columbia, and, as the name handwritten over its battures (gravel flats) shows, Wood River flows from the east into the centre of the photo. The Columbia flows up from the lower edge at the right-centre of the photo, and then bends left and exits the photo's lower left-hand corner.

The watercourse that enters the Columbia's inside bank *after* this dramatic bend formed a large island.<sup>15</sup>

The location of Boat Encampment might well have altered during its forty-three years of semi-annual or more frequent use, in response to the steady erosion of the outer bank of the Columbia at this bend.<sup>16</sup> Leaping forward over the busy period of gold rush activity in the region during the 1860s, one finds BC provincial surveyor Frank Swannell reporting in 1936 that Boat Encampment lay "on the left bank of Wood River [when one faces down Wood River] at its junction with the Columbia, an historic spot":

On some maps the name "Boat Encampment" is placed at the old ferry where the Big Bend Bridge now crosses, but there seems to be no doubt that the mouth of Wood River is the correct locality. There is a small brushy flat here and near by many very old moss-covered cedar-stumps; these crumble at the touch and may well be the remains of trees cut down from which boat-timber was split in the old fur-trade days. (Swannell o 35)<sup>17</sup>

As he suggests, Swannell took care to identify the site in part because maps up to his day had plotted it variously on the bend; indeed, in contrast to the general consensus of the written accounts, few maps agree on the location.<sup>18</sup> The same brushy flat was visible when, perhaps in the same decade, the surviving aerial photograph was taken.

Ninety years earlier, Pierre-Jean DeSmet, the widely travelled Jesuit missionary, arrived at Boat Encampment on 10 May 1846, while on his way west. This was a mere seven days after a brigade had left it travelling east. The two parties had met up on Athabasca Pass. The other group included Henry James Warre, an English lieutenant in the 14th Regiment, and Mervin Vavasour, an Upper Canadian lieutenant in the Royal Engineers. These men had travelled across the continent in 1845 with HBC brigades in the guise, as Governor Simpson put it, of private gentlemen travelling "for the pleasure of field sports and scientific pursuits" (qtd. in Schafer 35). In fact, they were appointed to reconnoitre the Oregon crisis and take stock of the challenges involved for Britain in defending the territory, if it should come to that (it didn't).

Despite the chronological proximity of their visits to Boat Encampment in May 1846, the location of the place differs on Warre's and DeSmet's sketch maps. Warre's sketch map of the portage takes up six pages of the only surviving book of field notes from this trip. On the left-hand edge of the first page of this map (Fig. 3), Warre clearly locates Boat Encampment on the east or upriver bank of Wood River (Warre Papers, vol. 18, [92]; NAC pagination, vol. 33, 1360).<sup>19</sup> This location aligns with that of his contemporary

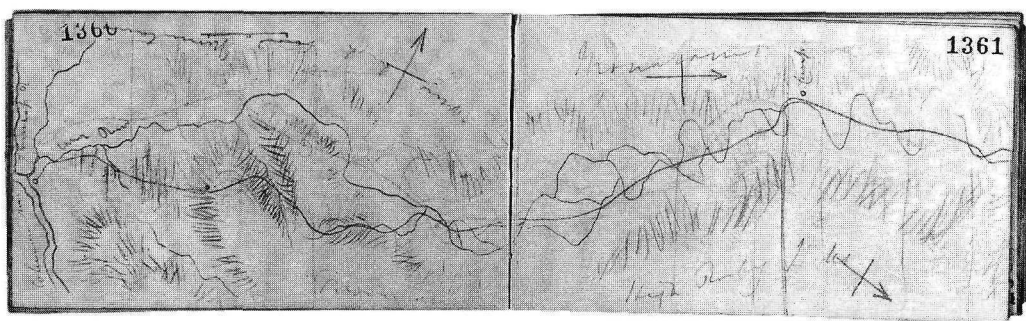


Fig. 3. Henry James Warre, Sketch Map of Athabasca Portage (detail), 1846. Courtesy NAC, neg. no. C146159.

Alexander Anderson; it is the location given as well in the topographical map produced in 1941 (British Columbia), and, as we have seen, it aligns with the location given in the careful account by Swannell. Because all of Warre, Anderson, and Swannell were amateur or professional surveyors, and because their plottings concur, they may be regarded as correct.

However, it is intriguing if not vexing to find that the location marked by Warre disagrees with the one marked on his own sketch map by Pierre-Jean DeSmet, the widely travelled Jesuit missionary. He arrived at Boat Encampment only seven days after Warre and Vavasour's departure from it, yet at the top edge of the relevant portion of his sketch map (Fig. 4) he locates Boat Encampment on the point between Wood and Canoe rivers. DeSmet uses a triangle and names it "campe<sup>t</sup> des berges," the river to the west of it bearing the name one expects: "R<sup>r</sup>: aux Canots" (DeSmet).<sup>20</sup> By contrast, DeSmet's narrative account disputes the evidence of his own map and may, if only approximately, be construed as aligning the location of Boat Encampment with Warre's on the night of 2 May: "on the 10th, toward the middle of the day," DeSmet "arrived at the Boat Encampment, on the bank of the Columbia, at the mouth of the Portage river" (Chittenden and Richardson, 2.546).

DeSmet's narrative account is typical in its expression of a sense of relief that the arrival at Boat Encampment from the east occasioned:

After so many labors and dangers, we deserved a repast. Happily, we found at the encampment all the ingredients that were necessary for a feast—a bag of flour, a large ham, part of a reindeer, butter, cheese, sugar, and tea in abundance, which the gentlemen of the English brigade had charitably left behind. While some were employed calking [*sic*] and refitting the barge, others prepared the dinner; and in about an hour we found ourselves snugly seated and stretched out

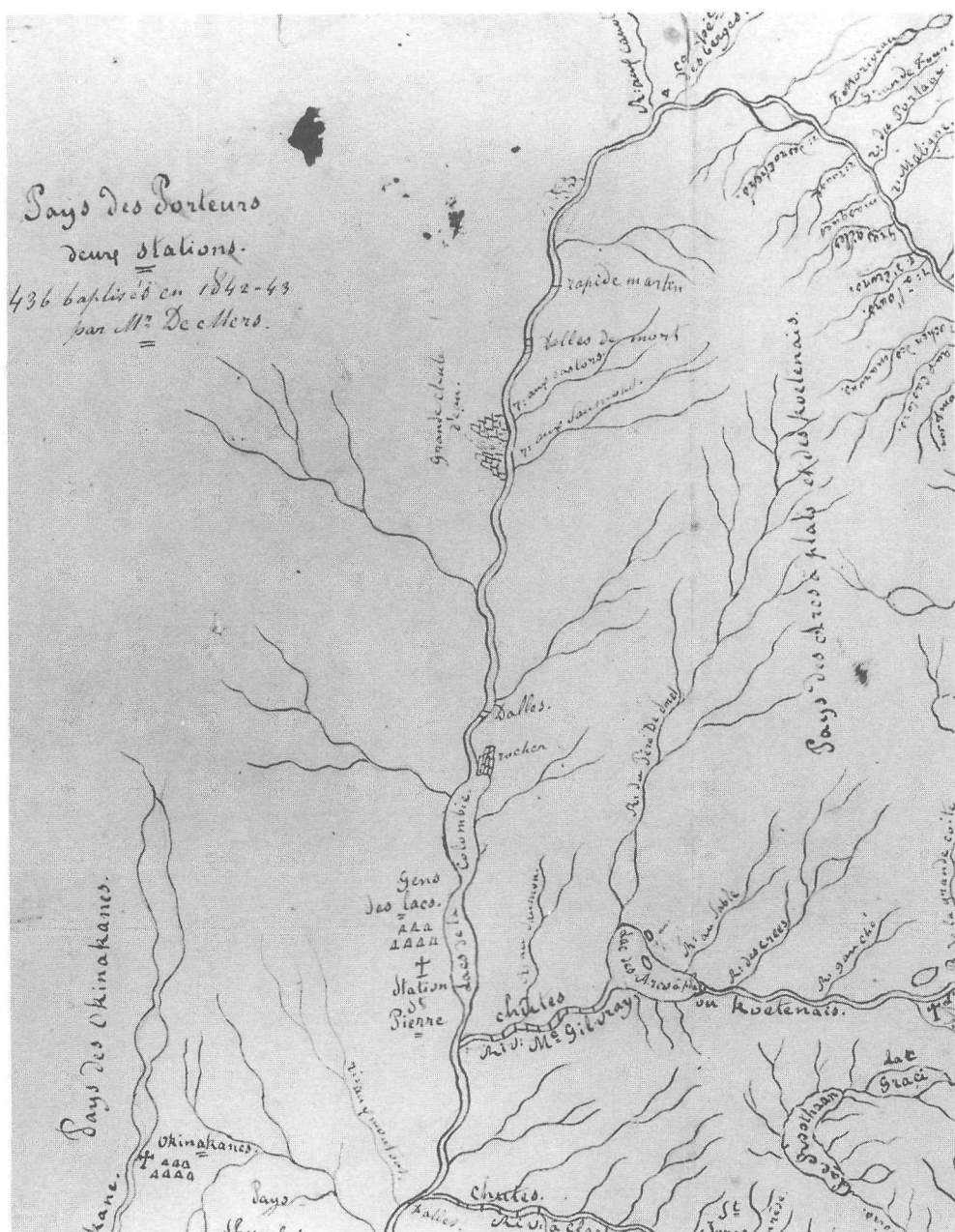


Fig. 4. Pierre-Jean DeSmet, "Pays des Porteurs"—Map of the Upper Columbia River (detail), circa 1851. Courtesy Washington State University Libraries, Pullman WA, neg. no. 99-145.

around the kettles and roasts, laughing and joking about the sunsets on the mountains and the accidents on the Portage. I need not tell you that they described me as the most clumsy and awkward traveler in the band.

Three beautiful rivers unite at this place: the Columbia, coming from the southeast—the Portage river, from the northeast, and the Canoe river from the northwest. We were surrounded by a great number of magnificent mountains, covered with perpetual snow, and rising from twelve to sixteen thousand feet above the level of the ocean. (Chittenden and Richardson, 2.546)

Warre's field notes for 2 and 3 May do not convey the sense of occasion that DeSmet's journal captures—

reached the Boat Encampment, at the confluence of Three Rivers, surrounded by magnificent Snow Mountains 18.000 f! high. at 1 oC. P.M. The water fortunately very low. day lovely too hot for walking—This is a lovely spot in the Summer. Indian & Chiefs son brought us some Cariboo meat—made sketches & preparations for our long disagreeable [*sic*] walk tomorrow—hauled up the boats & made all snug.—till the Autumn Express. (Warre Papers, vol. 18, [67-68]; NAC transcription, vol. 33, 1385-84)—

but they do demonstrate that Boat Encampment was a rendezvous, and that Lakes and Shuswap people visited it and provided hospitality to travellers who stopped there. Moreover, the sense of grandeur that the tri-valley confluence prompted in its visitors is clear from Warre's exaggerated estimate of the elevation of the mountains and from the mention that the scenery elicited sketches by him.

Some time later, perhaps once he reached Fort Edmonton, he set himself to the more literary genre of the retrospective journal. At that time, Warre found more ink for his imagination, highlighting more details of landscape and omitting the Natives:

I lack powers to describe "The Boat Encampment" we were in a perfect Amphitheatre of Mountains towering over each other & barely allowing space for the mighty Columbia to flow through, which here makes a right angular bend from the South & being joined by the [large blank space left] and Canoe River from the North flows off in a Westernly [*sic*] direction and its course is soon shut in by the Mountains.—At the junction of these Rivers is [*sic*] an immense Circular "Batture" is formed, wh altho dry at he present time, evidently [*sic*] forms an immense Whirlpool at the Seasons of high water, after the melting of the Snow in the Mountains previous to the vast torrent gliding off & becoming lost in the Columbia.— (Warre Papers, vol. 19, 182-84; NAC transcription, vol. 33, 1623-25; rpt. in Major-Frégeau 120)

When it came to the sketches, Warre obviously was enthralled by the surroundings. He produced three. Aptly, if ironically, all three were published

as plans were afoot for the drowning of Boat Encampment; two appeared in 1970, and the third, together with a subsequent lithograph based on it, in 1976 (Hannah, introd., pl. 62, 63; Major-Frégeau, pl. 59, 60).<sup>21</sup>

In his study of Kane's art, Russell Harper included a colour reproduction of *Boat Encampment* (pl. XXIX), Kane's watercolour landscape sketch (Fig. 5).<sup>22</sup> According to the mid-twentieth-century provincial topographical survey, the principal mountains in the view are Mt Molson ( $52^{\circ}10'00''$  N. Lat.,  $118^{\circ}15'00''$  W. Long.), on the right and nearest the Big Bend; Mt Dainard ( $52^{\circ}12'00''$  N. Lat.,  $118^{\circ}22'00''$  W. Long.), just to the west (left) behind it and up the Canoe River valley; and a third mountain, with a distinctive triangle at its summit, farther yet up that valley. The last had no name in English until 1940, when the Alpine Club of Canada nominated it Mt Dunkirk ( $52^{\circ}16'00''$  N. Lat.,  $118^{\circ}25'00''$  W. Long.) (British Columbia).<sup>23</sup> Either none of these mountains was named during the fur trade, or none of the names by which they were then known has survived.

When he visited Boat Encampment in 1946, Corday Mackay was prompted to suggest that Kane made his watercolour sketch "near the island . . . just

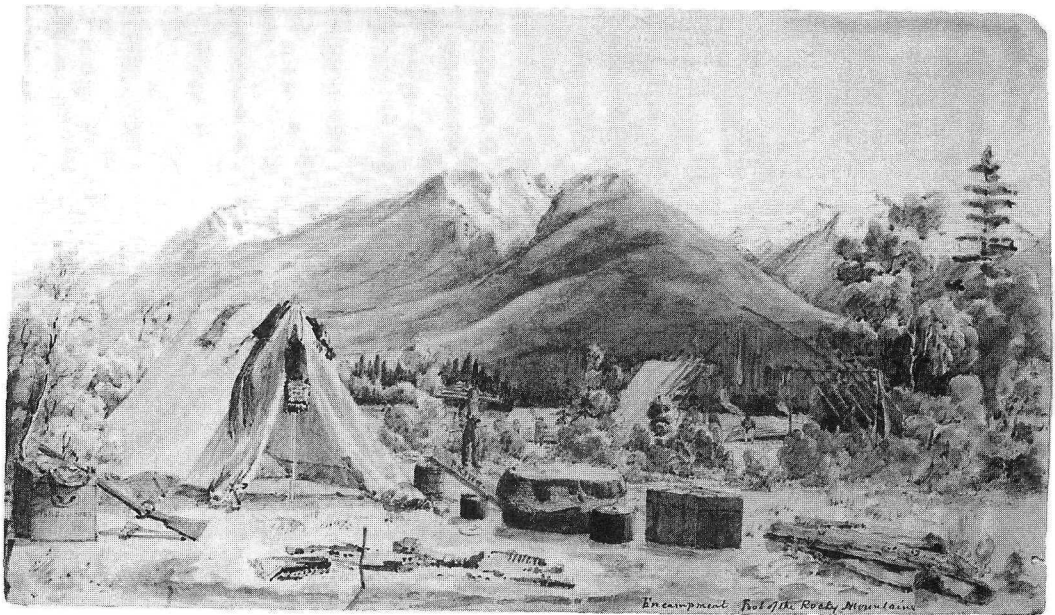


Fig. 5. Paul Kane, *Boat Encampment*, 1847. Watercolour over graphite on paper. 13.3 x 22.2 cm. Courtesy Stark Museum of Art, Orange, TX.



below the widest part of the river" (20). Narrative accounts, by clearly situating Boat Encampment at one or another place on the outside bend of the Columbia, offer evidence to suggest that if he did cross the Columbia to sketch, the camp in Kane's watercolour sketch was not Boat Encampment itself, but a storage area. A detail in HBC Governor George Simpson's journal for 1825—"Put the Boats en Casche [*sic*] on the Island"—and in Ermatinger's for 1827—"Cross over the property to be left and put it en cache"—confirm that the island was at least occasionally and perhaps frequently used as a storage area, if not as an overflow camp (Merk 143; Ermatinger, introd. 79). Given that some eastbound brigades waited several weeks at Boat Encampment to rendezvous with the westbound brigade, it would seem logical that the encampment occasionally or even regularly spread out from the mouth of Wood River in all directions that offered firm ground. Kane might have grown weary of the company in the main camp, or he might simply have preferred the vantage point that the inside bend offered of the scenery. Unlike Warre, who spent less than twenty-four hours at the place and whose pictorial eye was still being drawn as much to the river up which he had been travelling for some months as to the mountains, Kane, who arrived on 10 October 1847 and did not depart until the last day of the month, had time to seek out the most picturesque view, and obviously had less interest in the river by the time he executed his sketch (Kane 336-38). Viewing it, one must look hard to detect the Columbia, flowing by the base of Mt Molson, just barely represented through the trees and in behind the tent, lean-tos, and two overturned boats, in front of each of which stands a voyageur smoking.

But the outline of the mountains in that sketch, let alone in the exaggerated oil-on-canvas paintings based on it,<sup>24</sup> bear only a slight resemblance to the one in a graphite sketch by him of the peaks. Harper compared this sketch with a photograph made at Boat Encampment in 1946 by Estelle Dickey, of Revelstoke. Reproduced together in his book, these resemble one another far more than either resembles the mountain peaks in the background of Kane's watercolour.<sup>25</sup> Of course, one must allow for the possibility that, in *Boat Encampment*, Kane arranged the scenery to conform to his aesthetic taste; he was generally a representative painter of landscape, but, as was the case with his watercolour sketch of Fort Edmonton, he was not averse to adopting a perspective that the ground itself did not afford.<sup>26</sup> The point of view he did adopt, whether realistic or fanciful, lies drowned beneath our knowing today. Still, a photograph of the reservoir looking north



Fig. 6. Kinbasket Lake, looking northwest, 23 April 1999. Author.

from the inside bend, where a logging road continues after Hwy 23 stops at Mica Dam (Fig. 6), is not unavailing. Shot in April 1999, when the reservoir was close to maximum drawdown, it goes some way toward recuperating at least the background of Kane's sketch. In this photograph, Mt Molson and Mt Dainard appear almost like a single mountain, just to the right of centre, with Mt Dunkirk to the left of centre. Comparison of the view with Kane's helps throw into relief just how much of the lower portions of the mountains is now submerged.

#### IV

Had it survived, Boat Encampment would be coming up to within a decade of two hundred years of age. The present historical monument to it was reerected in the summer of 1999 after being repeatedly knocked down by machinery clearing snow off the logging road. It now stands across Sprague Bay from the BC Hydro boat launch, on the inside bend of the reservoir about seven kilometres up the logging road, where a peninsula juts out that nearly forms an island when the reservoir is full. Overlooking the reservoir, the monument can be reached by a trail about 200 metres long. At it, BC Forestry is planning to establish a recreation site (camping and picnicking). Presumably because it is thought unrealistic to do so, effort has not been expended to

clarify the relation between the location of the monument and the submerged location of the place out in the reservoir to which its text directs readers.

Driving back down Hwy 23, I pondered Hoover's principle of maximum utilization. Did Kinbasket Lake and Mica Dam merely embody it differently from Boat Encampment? Was it mere nostalgia for a drowned past that left me feeling bereft amid all this technological wizardry? But the fur trade brigades were not alienated from their surroundings. To the extent that they possessed technology in the form of York boats, modelled after boats first built in Orkney, whence many fur trade labourers came, they put that technology to use in order to make their way through a realm that dictated its own terms for passage.

I had no terms on which to strike a bond with this valley. I was consummately alienated. Yet, simultaneously and with withering irony, I was the beneficiary of it as a consumer of electricity. There had been human history. There had been natural history. But all I have left is technology, which precludes the history of the marriage between the human and the non-human. It precludes my salvaging Boat Encampment. Or of finding salvation in a perilous reservoir, attended by dire adjurations. What health can there be in me?

Frisell's lachrymose guitar offered consolation for the return trip from this dead end, but only until it struck me that, living as he does in Seattle, his guitar is probably electrified by the very power that Mica and its fellow Columbia River dams generate. I wish he would write another elegy and name it "gone, just like Boat Encampment." I don't want him to end up in the same bin of irony where one finds Woody Guthrie's Columbian lyrics. In 1941, that legendary poet wrote twenty-six songs while in the employ of the USAmerican Bureau of Reclamation. Today, one of them resonates with irony, the apt mode for alienation from one's surroundings: "Canadian Northwest to the ocean so blue / Roll on Columbia, Roll On."<sup>27</sup>

With the loss of cultural history, we have no choice but to learn from technological history. Will its deep ironies prompt us to realize that the first lesson it has to teach is repentance?

#### NOTES

- 1 Research for and preparation of this essay were measurably aided by several institutions and individuals. The author wishes to thank Trevor Bond (Washington State University), Stacey Dong (BC Hydro), Michael Carter (BCARS), Roger Eddy (Parks Canada, Revelstoke), Michael Fisher, Tammy Hannibal (HBCA, PAM), Patricia Kennedy

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- 2 This droll translation of the motto is the effort of Harry Graham, captain in the Coldstream Guards, who served as aide-de-camp to the governor general of Canada, the Earl of Minto, during his trip to British Columbia and the Klondike in 1900 (see Bowles 45).
- 3 The Columbia River Treaty was signed by Canada and the United States on 17 Jan. 1961 and, after a protocol resolved a disagreement between Ottawa and Victoria over British Columbia's decision to sell the first three decades of power to the United States, it came into effect on 16 September 1964 (Swainson, *Conflict* xviii, xix). Thereafter, three dams—Duncan (1967), on Duncan River, north of Kootenay Lake; Hugh Keenleyside (1968), on the Columbia, eight km upriver of Castlegar; and Mica (1973), on the Columbia, 150 km upriver of Revelstoke and 180 km downriver of Golden—were completed in its watershed north of the international border. Of these three, the first two were constructed entirely to form reservoirs to prevent downstream flooding and to reserve water for USAmerican use downstream when the demand for electricity was highest. Only Mica Dam, construction of which began in 1963, added a powerhouse; it began generating electricity in 1977 (a decade after the Bennett Dam on the Peace River). Under the original terms of the treaty, British Columbia received half of the quantity of electricity generated in the United States as a result of the provision of fifteen and one-half million acre-feet (19,111 million m<sup>3</sup>) of storage capacity north of the border. (In fact, Mica was built to form a much larger reservoir than required: the maximum storage capacity at the three treaty dams—Duncan [1,727 million m<sup>3</sup>], Keenleyside [8,757.85 million m<sup>3</sup>], and Mica [14,800 million m<sup>3</sup>—totals 25,284.85 million m<sup>3</sup>, almost 6,200 million m<sup>3</sup> or 32 per cent greater capacity than the treaty required [BC Hydro]). The value of that half-portion of the power benefit for the first thirty years was settled as a lump sum payment of almost \$254.4 million (Swainson, "Columbia"). The return of downstream benefits began accruing to British Columbia in 1998, after the first thirty years of this agreement (1998 marked the thirtieth anniversary of the opening of Duncan Dam). The benefits deriving from Mica Dam will thus begin returning to British Columbia in 2003. The Columbia Peace Treaty of 1996 resolved that the return of the benefits to the province would come in the form of electricity (Swainson, "Columbia").

In 1984, Revelstoke Dam (Fig. 1) was built on the Columbia eight km upriver from the town of Revelstoke; it too generates electricity but was not built as part of the Columbia River Treaty. Other dams generating hydroelectricity in the Columbia watershed north of the international border include Aberfeldie (1922/1955) and Elko (1924), both south-east of Cranbrook on the Bull and Elk rivers, respectively; Kootenay Canal (1976), which operates on the Kootenay River at Rover Creek (South Slokan) in conjunction with West Kootenay Power's Corra Linn, Upper and Lower Bonnington, and South Slokan dams; Seven Mile, on the Pend d'Oreille River; Spillimacheen (1955), on the river of the same name, fifty-five km upriver from Golden; Walter Hardman (1960s), thirty km south of Revelstoke on Cranberry Creek; and Whatshan (1951/1972), on Whatsan River, which flows from the west into Arrow Reservoir, Columbia River (BC Hydro). According to at least one observer, these projects have resulted in "the greatest myth that has ever been perpetrated on the people of British Columbia . . . that there is cheap power in the province" (McGeer 62).

- 4 See *Learning from the Past*.

- 5 This is one of those Rocky Mountain parks that UNESCO has designated a World Heritage Site. More problematic for the balance between tourism and non-human life, it is also one of the parks that the October 1999 issue of *National Geographic Traveler* magazine listed as one of the world's ten must-see "Wild Country" sites.
- 6 See also Nisbet, *Sources* 177.
- 7 Tiny Fort Assiniboine and Jasper House (Fig. 1), both on the Athabasca River, marked the only points on the fur trade route between Boat Encampment and Fort Edmonton; downstream on the Columbia, no regular stopping place was maintained between Boat Encampment and Fort Covile.
- 8 See MacLaren, "Cultured."
- 9 At its maximum capacity, Kinbasket Lake (known until 1980 as McNaughton Lake) has a surface area of 450 km<sup>2</sup> (172 mi<sup>2</sup>) (Farquharson).
- 10 In designating a provincial system of rivers "that represents the diversity of character, history and location of [the] provincial river heritage," the BC Heritage Rivers Board nominated the Columbia River as a Heritage River in a report prepared on 22 Sept. 1997 for the BC Minister of Environment, Lands, and Parks. Although the board reported that the Columbia "ranks high in all the heritage river criteria categories," it overlooked the role played by the Columbia in the fur trade, focussing instead on the river's demonstration of "major examples of the cultural heritage values of the province including those of First Nations, hydro power development, settlement, mining and forestry" (BC Heritage Rivers). The BC government bestowed Heritage River designation on the Columbia River in 1998.
- 11 Approximately "70,000 acres of highly productive forest lands" comprised some of the "extremely heavy" environmental losses sustained by the establishment of Mica Dam and Kinbasket Lake ("Resource" 4). A man interviewed in Golden by Robin Cody, who paddled the length of the Columbia River in 1990, regretted the transformation of a beautiful valley: "Millions of board feet of spruce. [BC Hydro] didn't want our log trucks interfering with their earth movers. They cut it and left it. D-8s pushed it into piles. Water came up and the wind blew it to hell and gone. Slash and all" (Cody 59). Consequently, Kinbasket Lake became anything but the recreational attraction that planners of the reservoir foresaw. "Nobody knows," wrote Cody, "what the consequences of Kinbasket Lake will be" (65). Meanwhile, the warning to boaters posted on Hwy 23 at Mica Dam hardly encourages recreation:

If you intend to operate a boat or canoe on Kinbasket Lake you should be aware that Kinbasket Lake is subject to sudden strong winds and rough waves. These dangerous boating conditions are made worse by cold water, substantial accumulations of floating and submerged debris and the remote location. Be cautious! Stay close to shore. Carry emergency equipment extra [sic] sheer pins and propeller. Landing sites are limited and may be inaccessible. Ensure that you have an accurate map. In winter ice surface may collapse due to lowered water levels. For your own safety please observe all warning signs and stay off B.C. Hydro operating structures.
- 12 At 9,841 km<sup>2</sup> (3,800 mi<sup>2</sup>), the original Hamber Provincial Park approached the size of Jasper National Park, which covers 10,880 km<sup>2</sup> (4,201 mi<sup>2</sup>). Since 1961, Hamber Provincial Park has comprised only 246 km<sup>2</sup> (ninety-five mi<sup>2</sup>).
- 13 The report by Farquharson, which remarked on a "present planning void" (12) for the region, also observed with a certain equanimity that

the reservoir will have a great impact on wildlife with severe habitat reductions involving 4,000 acres of wet lands, 900 acres of meadows and 70,000 acres of forest.

Capacity will be reduced by about 2,000 moose, 3,000 black bear and a total loss of riverine and wet land animals. There is little opportunity for habitat replacement in the Mica region. . . . Total annual value of potential wildlife resources after flooding is estimated at \$420,000, about 50% of the original value. The fluctuations of reservoir level will preclude successful nesting habitat for waterfowl. (7-8)

Apart from a "water influence zone" which is drawn as a band around the reservoir, and a "slide protection zone" of a similar narrow band's width immediately around the site of Mica Dam itself, the entire Big Bend is shown as "Commercial Forest Zone" in the report's "Mica Reservoir Study. Land Management Proposal, North Sheet" (Fig. 3, sheet 2 of 2). Four years after the completion of the Farquharson report, the periodical *Park News* warned that the "spectre of an environmental ruin is rising in the Big Bend" ("Resource" 6).

- 14 The era of the fur trade represents the principal concern of this essay, but, of course, other dimensions of human history disappeared. Three are particularly notable. The loss of the oldest human history resulting from flooding created by a dam in the Columbia River watershed occurred in 1969. In that year, the creation of the reservoir behind Lower Monumental Dam, on the Snake River sixty km upriver of its confluence with the Columbia, flooded the site of Marmes Man. Blaine Harden quoted one authority as saying that, before one-quarter of it could be properly excavated by archaeologists, "the only site in eastern Washington where . . . ten thousand years of cultural history [are] stacked one above the other" disappeared (49). Second, when in 1993 he met Martin Louie, Sr. on the Coville Reservation, near the site of the submerged Kettle Falls, Harden realized that any white man would be perceived by a Colville as having "had a hand in making a world where Colvilles had no salmon, drank to excess, and blew their brains out" (101). Third, in terms of resettlement of whites occasioned by Columbia River hydro projects in British Columbia, J.W. Wilson notes that prior to 1961 "more than thirty small settlements adorned the shores of the [Arrow] lakes," south of Revelstoke and north of Castlegar (8, 6).
- 15 This is confirmed by a large-scale map published in 1954 from surveys made in 1950 and 1951 (Canada . . . Mines). Given the large scale of this map, one can best locate the site of Boat Encampment as approximately 52°08'00" N. Lat., 118°26'30" W. Long. The scale of the map is estimable but the plotting on it of Boat Encampment is misleading: Boat Encampment and Boat Encampment Memorial are unhistorically located at the bridge upriver from the Big Bend, where the highway crossed the Columbia River when the map was made.
- 16 In 1946, one visitor wrote of the "magnificent orchestration of sound" made by the water's power (Mackay 17). A peninsula on the alluvial fan between the mouths of the Wood and Canoe rivers had disappeared by that year. Then, as well, when the rationing of gasoline for the Second World War came to an end, and not much more than a quarter-century before its roadbed would disappear under the waters rising behind Mica Dam, vehicles began using the Big Bend Highway regularly for the first time (Mackay 14, 20). The highway had been completed in 1940.

In October 1824, George Simpson noted that the mouth of Canoe River lay "about a mile" below Boat Encampment (Merk 37). When Alexander Ross stopped there with Simpson the next spring, he located Boat Encampment at the mouth of Portage (Wood) River, but on which bank he did not say (Ross 2.187-88). A year later, on 15 Oct. 1826, hydrographer Æmilius Simpson reached Boat Encampment by horse from Athabasca Pass and Wood River; he found it "situated on the left Bank of the branch we followed on

- our Route" (37v). This appears to be where Douglas found it six months later, in April 1827—on the east bank of Wood River at its mouth. *Vis-à-vis* the Columbia, this is the *upriver* bank of the mouth of Wood River. The weight of the narrative evidence suggests that it was still there two decades later, when Paul Kane arrived at it.
- 17 One of the maps available to Swannell in 1936 to which he may be referring in this statement regarding the locating of Boat Encampment at the ferry was that of Palmer and Chapman. As remarked above (n15), at least one later map (Canada . . . Mines) repeated this error.
  - 18 Of the few nineteenth-century maps that clearly indicate a location, several are noteworthy for the contradictory information they yield. Thompson, in the map which he delivered to William McGillivray of the North West Company in 1814, wrote "NWCo" up the east bank of Canoe River at its mouth, but, because the mouths of it and the Wood River are made to converge, no point is shown between the two at the Columbia's outer bend; thus, it is not clear if Thompson meant that the point was the site (Thompson). In 1835, HBC factor Samuel Black plotted the site on his sketch map as the west bank of Wood River at its mouth (Black). A map drawn in 1861 to accompany a despatch by then governor of British Columbia, James Douglas, located Boat Encampment on the point between Canoe and Wood rivers (*British*), and, when a lithographed version was produced the next year by Gustavus Epner, the point was widened and the circle designating Boat Encampment moved left, to the east bank of Canoe River at its mouth (Epner). Alexander C. Anderson made two maps. One, which bears the date of 1842 in its subtitle, but also the date of 1 February 1866 beside a notation that reads "recopied from the fragments of my old maps," set it on the east bank of the Wood (his "Punchbowl") River but slightly upstream from the Columbia. In his map of 1867, which Anderson states he produced from surveys he made between 1832 and 1851, the location is unchanged (Anderson). In the last decade of the nineteenth century, Gotfred Jørgensen kept it on the outer bank of the Columbia, but placed it to the west of (that is, downstream from) the mouth of Canoe River, nearer to what had by then been named Encampment Creek (Jørgensen). Between 1846 and 1863, six maps produced by John Arrowsmith located Boat Encampment between the mouths of the Wood and Canoe rivers. The location on Jørgensen's map also appeared on the map made by the interprovincial boundary survey a quarter-century later (see *Atlas*).
  - 19 On Warre's map, the names Wood and Canoe are given as Canoe and Shuswap, respectively; however, the configuration of the streams *vis-à-vis* the Columbia leaves no doubt about his meaning. There are many volumes of journals from Warre's trip but, as distinct from this volume of field notes (vol. 18), the others contain journals, that is, a second-stage narrative comprising retrospective, fair copies of field notes, not entered daily but, rather, written up at different points in his travels when he and Vavasour were staying at one or another HBC post. For an anatomy of the literature of exploration and travel, see MacLaren, "Samuel" and "Exploration."
  - 20 DeSmet misspells "barges," and "Canots" lacks the *accent circonflexe*. A reproduction of this map inadvertently cuts off some of the letters in the French name of Boat Encampment (Goetzmann xiv).
  - 21 The lithograph, under the title *The Rocky Mountains from the Columbia River, looking North West*, was published first in 1848 (Warre pl. 16).
  - 22 This sketch, in the possession of the Stark Museum of Art (Stark WWC100), is listed as IV-276 in Harper's *catalogue raisonné* (292).

- 23 Only the western shoulder of Mt Molson is visible in the aerial photograph (Fig. 2), while both Mt Dainard and Mt Dunkirk stand out boldly. For the naming of Mt Dunkirk, on 13 Aug. 1940, see Hall. The sketch map accompanying his article (214) does not show or name Mt Molson or Mt Dainard. Hall explains that his climbing party chose Dunkirk for the mountain's name "in honor of the miraculous escape of most of the British forces in France only a few weeks before" (215).
- 24 In his *catalogue raisonné* (292) Harper lists these as IV-278 (Royal Ontario Museum 912.1.60) and IV-279 (Glenbow-Alberta Museum 57.32.5).
- 25 Harper's *catalogue raisonné* (292) lists the graphite sketch of the mountain peaks, held by the Royal Ontario Museum (946.15.236) as IV-277. It features Mt Dainard in the middle and only the slightest shoulder of Mt Molson on the right. It is reproduced in Harper together with Dickey's photograph as Fig. 117 and Fig. 118 (220). An earlier photograph than Dickey's shows the same peak—Mt Dainard—that appears in the middle of the background of hers. Reproduced with the title "Looking North at the Ferry," it suggests that, at least in mid-August 1921, the river was crossed regularly at the point where the island was situated (Lorraine 160).
- 26 The watercolour sketch of Edmonton, in the collection of the Stark Museum of Art (PWC22), is also reproduced in colour in Harper, pl. XXV. It is listed in his *catalogue raisonné* as IV-188 (288).
- 27 The complete lyrics of "Roll on Columbia, Roll On," the best-known of these songs, are reprinted in Harden (82).

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HBCA, PAM      Hudson's Bay Company Archives, Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Winnipeg.  
NAC      National Archives of Canada, Ottawa.

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# Whatever is Said of God and Creatures

*in an imperfect manner  
in the intellect of the thing  
in the agent simply*

1.

I'm writing from a place you've never seen  
and it's not enough to say it lies  
beneath your feet or inhabits the air  
like a world of insects, for though  
it has motion it does not fly or crawl  
but moves instead by consequence  
the way angels propel the will of God  
or Aquinas calls on angels to write  
"The Names of God" by candlelight  
and moths arrive from the place never seen  
to the periphery of all his thought,  
blind spectators to a flaming burst  
who write the air like a child's torch  
cheering the language of his dream,  
clearly an instant; instantly redeemed.

2.

I stood once in a blue room  
and placed my hand upon the glass  
trying desperately to attract  
the smooth white shapes that floated there  
in mid-course, always. They looked once  
or so I thought, but no act of will  
could break the glass or bring them near.  
They spoke from a world I'd never seen  
and it was not enough to say

they swam or drifted, each  
in its own time, beyond my reach.  
It would only be enough to go there.

And so it was that on the way upstairs  
alone upon the cold concrete  
where the stairs turn at the landing  
into a right of passage either way  
I met a man coming down or up  
rumpled but divine, bespectacled,  
with hair shooting everywhere wildly  
and stooped by the weight of charts  
and maps, some drawn in circles delineating  
creation to death, the harrowing of Hell,  
others plotting journeys from Eden  
down to Purgatory and the sea.

“Hold these,” he said, “and listen carefully.  
Three days and nights I’ve waited here  
‘where peaceful silence enwraps all things’;  
these appearances, well, they come and go.  
We enter the world as incarnation,  
conquer death, visit Hell, die on the cross  
and make our way through Limbo  
clutching at friends along the way  
then reappear for the Ascension—  
at that point, I believe, it starts again.”

With this he took out chalk and drew  
a line across the wall, horizontally,  
“Now this is up or down, whatever you please,  
the point is, you’re standing here,  
feet on the line, pulled this way and that,  
and the only way I’ve read about  
to break the cycle (though incomplete)

is to speak the name of love and mean it.  
Solid then becomes liquid, water from rock.  
Here, it's all on my chart."

3.

I stumbled the stairs, one way or another,  
back to the room and the blue wall.  
I stripped and lay upon the glass  
warmer now, and soupy like a stomach  
and from all around the sounds  
of their bodies' emergent calls.

The shapes approached cautiously  
and with their mouths examined this  
and that, pulling, nipping, kissing the way  
some lovers bite. Bit by bit  
they hauled me through and spat me out  
and it is not enough to say I was  
in motion, neither floating nor in flight, no  
not the tide coming out, not in.  
Whatever is said of God and creatures  
falls short, as sunlight divides  
when it touches the sea,  
breaks sublunary, perfect into tears.

I draw maps now in blue details  
and charts that move in all directions  
up and down, whatever you choose.  
My eyes are small to read the darkness.  
My mouth exhales the cries of angels  
mute, until they breach the burning surface.

## To Taenia at 8 and 1/2 Months

small wasp *moroniella*  
lays eggs in  
housefly's pupa

without further development  
in a state of suspended animation  
fly pupa alive

hatchling wasp larvae  
glut on its cold storage meat  
fly pupa shriveled skin

adult wasp larvae gnaw  
free their borrowed nursery  
nature in the raw  
charming fecundity

Soft unusual names for you if a girl  
Sweet liquids, they roll off anyone's tongue  
*Ascaris Saprolegnia Empusa Ergot*  
*Trichinella Spiralis Taenia*

Cause or carrier  
opportunistic parasite  
your shelter your food your safe harbor  
breathe my oxygen  
absorb my strength  
my life blood

Forthcoming book reviews are available at the *Canadian Literature* web site: <http://www.canlit.ca>

## **Tremors Downunder**

**Jenny Bornholdt, Gregory O'Brien and Mark Williams, eds.**

*An Anthology of New Zealand Poetry in English.*  
Oxford \$37.50

**Keith Sinclair, ed.**

*The Oxford Illustrated History of New Zealand, Second Edition.* Oxford \$51.50

Reviewed by Charles Dawson

These books have much to offer Canadian readers, as both nations confront a disparate and varied sense of identity. 1990s New Zealand has (like Canada) moved some way from the reactionary "colonial cringe," based on a comparative measurement against larger imperial forces, towards a sense of a distinctive South Pacific multicultural identity. The books suggest this process of dispersal and articulation is not linear, conclusive or certain. Many voices and forms of expression have contributed to a sense of potential and complexity, one (in the 1990s) at once goaded and undermined by over a decade of mean-spirited government policy that cannot fathom such unquantifiable "outcomes" as poems, academic scholarship and creative research. Yet recent work continues to chart a diversity and energy of creative response.

This response is well represented in the books: they are benchmarks in their own right. Both provide Canadian students, teachers and general readers with ideal introductions to the state of a nation that

*still* has a Treaty to honour, is forever working out its place in the world, and can—perhaps—offer another sense of what might be possible in the field of cross-cultural and cross-generational communication.

Cross-generational communication is one of the key qualities the editors of the *Poetry* have highlighted. The book opens with the most recent poems and works back to early colonial pieces, seeking

to reflect the energies, the tremors, that recent poets sent back into the past. While this anthology contains a narrative, it is not one of the triumphant evolution of consciousness from colonial dependence towards postcolonial maturity, but rather the story of the struggle and interaction between different versions of where we are and how we perceive ourselves.

The poetry editors are at pains to stress (as their title does for the first time in Oxford or Penguin New Zealand poetry collections) that this is *an* anthology, the selection one of many possibilities: "As editors, we wished to avoid canonical lines of poetic influence. . . . it is possible to talk about a 'New Zealand tradition', not as a single line of established greatness but as a field of multifarious influence, where the imagery and meanings of the past are continually being revised, revalued and recycled." These are, they stress, poems that talk to each other as well as to the world, poems that have been included after being read, heard and assessed in an "open, exploratory manner."



What this means is that “broad . . . diversity” marks the selection of recent writing, ranging from the assured and powerful revisionary poetry of Bernadette Hall and Dinah Hawken, for example. The arrangement of the poets (according to the date of their first book, rather than their age), provides a more genuine assessment of milieu and trend, while upsetting categories and expectations. One comes to the sequence with a new sense of the locatedness of those tremors sent back into the past. That past is well represented in the selections of standard figures (Curnow, Baxter, Brasch, Glover, Fairburn, Mason), while additional work by Robin Hyde, Mary Stanley and Eileen Duggan adds to the range, extending the nationalist identity-based literary agendas of the 1930s and 1940s. Bill Manhire and Ian Wedde receive healthy selections, as do C. K. Stead and Vincent O’Sullivan. Manhire’s increasing stature is acknowledged in the introduction.

Work by Keri Hulme, Robert Sullivan, Roma Potiki, Apirana Taylor and the remarkable titans Hone Tuwhare and J. C. Sturm speak of the ways Maori face language and site, citation, assertion and dis-possession: “Grey’s explorations through Western Australia / were also of interest, though he seldom wrote / an original thing here” (Sullivan, “On Display”). Throughout their introduction the editors wisely point readers in other directions, towards Witi Ihimaera’s five volume *Te Ao Marama* series for work by Maori, for example. By aiming for inclusiveness while acknowledging the impossibility of such an ideal, the anthology offers manifold invitations and reminders for the Canadian reader to continue an exploratory reading process into what it means to grasp for and relinquish national identities.

The forms this grasping has taken concern various professional historians in the *Illustrated History*. This is an ideal introduction, concise yet detailed, well-written

and full of illuminating pictures. The writers focus on their discrete interests in chronological sequence. Bruce Biggs offers fine work on Maori cosmology and migration, while James Belich, Claudia Orange and Judith Binney provide lucid accounts of Maori and Pakeha (white) conflict in the nineteenth century, and Jeanine Graham presents a fascinating account of how photography shaped perceptions of the emergent nation (a view substantially extended in Geoff Park’s outstanding 1995 book *Nga Uruora*). The volume is particularly strong on social history, the women’s movement and the ways national trends worked with or against government policy. Maori use of Pakeha technologies and theologies and the diversity and challenges of this century all receive useful attention.

Both books offer tantalising, evocative and *useful* entry points for comparison, reflection and further reading.

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## Uses of Cultural Memory

**Austin Clarke**

*Pigtails 'n Breadfruit. Rituals of Slave Food: A Barbadian Memoir.* Random House of Canada  
\$28.95

**Dionne Brand**

*At the Full and Change of the Moon.* Knopf  
Canada \$32.95

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Reviewed by Maureen Moynagh

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“How does a culture seeking to become independent of imperialism imagine its own past?” This question, Edward Said contends, is central among the themes of resistance in postcolonial literatures, and it is a question that resonates through both of these new works by African-Canadian writers Dionne Brand and Austin Clarke. The construction of a cultural memory, as a means of fashioning an identity that takes account of the experiences of colonialism and that offers an alternative to the colonizing culture, is

pivotal in Brand's novel and Clarke's memoir, works that otherwise have little in common.

The double subtitle of Austin Clarke's *Pigtails 'n Breadfruit* suggests an intertwining of cultural history with personal memory; throughout the book his technique is to present in each chapter a Barbadian dish, an illustration of its cultural significance, and instructions on how to prepare it, associating it with a personal memory. The book is, however, ultimately more memoir than cultural memory since Clarke's memories and his culinary prowess dominate the narrative. Unfortunately, the latter are ultimately less compelling than Clarke's descriptions of what he calls "the rituals of slave food," and frequently undermine his claims to having no pretensions about food! Still, there is much of interest in Clarke's anecdotes about Barbadian "ways of cooking," not least the notion that food preparation is an intimate form of cultural self-understanding.

*Pigtails 'n Breadfruit* opens by contrasting Barbadian cooking with French "hot cuisine" (an expression attributed to Clarke's mother); a somewhat studied announcement of the simplicity and authenticity of the former that serves to locate the work as a postcolonial *riposte* to European claims of culinary superiority. Cooking is, for Clarke, explicitly cultural memory; he informs the reader that, in the Barbados of his childhood, "both culture and the ability of a woman to handle herself in the kitchen are based upon the handing down through time of methods of cooking." We learn about class distinctions read through the texture of sweetbread, or the class stratification of cooking stoves and kitchen architecture. We learn about "picking rice" and courtship, about how a woman's ability to obtain hard-to-come-by "ingreaselements" is connected with her social status in the village, and about the significance attached to what a family might be eating on a given day of the week. These anecdotes richly

suggest the ways, as Clarke puts it, "[f]ood and cooking in Barbados in the 1930s and 1940s had a ritualistic order of cultural significance," particularly for women.

Clarke's memories also provide a geopolitical mapping of particular foodstuffs: codfish from Newfoundland (not yet part of Canada in the 1930s and '40s), canned salmon and "English" apples from Canada, rancid butter from New Zealand, biscuits and marmalade from England. He links many "ingreaselements" and culinary practices to slavery and to Barbados's position in the British imperial market. Cooking also becomes of way of making oneself "at home" in the diaspora, as Clarke describes dinners prepared in Toronto, New Jersey, or North Carolina. Whether recreating "Wessindian" warmth to ward off depression in a cold, dreary Toronto winter, or impressing Norman Mailer during a visit to Durham, "Oxtails with Mushrooms and Rice or Breadfruit Cou-Cou with Braising Beef" clearly do more than "full-up the stomach."

Dionne Brand's *At the Full and Change of the Moon* treats cultural memory as an abiding problem in the context of the African diaspora, in view not only of the forced oblivion imposed by the Middle Passage, but also of plantation slavery and its revolts, and of the dispersion of families across the "new" world. As one character living in Toronto observes near the end of the novel, "I felt as if we had been scattered out with a violent randomness." In this moving and brilliantly evocative text, Brand addresses the problem of cultural memory by imagining a tenuous genealogy linking the offspring of Marie Ursule, "queen of the Convoi Sans Peur," who leads a mass suicide of the slaves on a plantation in Trinidad in 1824. Marie Ursule's act of defiance ties memory to the erasures of colonialism, as Marie Ursule learns about the poison she prepares from the nearly extinct Caribs who are "moving reluctantly toward memory, Marie Ursule, willingly."

Perhaps to achieve her aim of becoming memory, Marie Ursule saves her daughter Bola from both death and slavery, sending her off with her father Kamena in search of a “maroonage of two.” Bola, and those of her children who are not “unrecalled” nor “left in the sea,” people the pages of the novel, scattered across the Americas: in Trinidad, Curaçao, Venezuela, the US, and Canada. The narrative connections among chapters devoted largely to individual characters are genealogical rather than diegetic, carrying the reader from Marie Ursule’s 1824 revolt to the 1990s in a more-or-less chronological fashion. From the safe haven of Culebra Bay—safe because it has been forgotten by the rest of the island—that is haunted by the ghosts of the Ursulines who once owned Marie Ursule, to Kamena’s desire to make Bola the repository of his efforts to map out a route to the Maroon settlement of Terre Bouillante, or from Bola’s coming of age which requires a fading of memory, to Eula who instructs her mother not to “saddle her [granddaughter] with a memory that’s not hers,” Brand offers a series of conundra having to do with the role memory plays in the lives of these diasporic individuals. Kamena, who is “starved with remembering,” asks “Do we arrive empty already, gut of everything already, knowing no remedy will ease the drift of our soul?” Eula longs for a genealogy without gaps and for memories that need not be forgotten: “I would like one single line of ancestry, Mama. One line from you to me and farther back, but a line that I can trace . . . one line full of people who have no reason to forget anything, or forgetting would not help them or matter. . . .”

The frustrations and disappointments occasioned by these genealogical gaps and by memories too painful to recall mark Marie Ursule’s offspring with the scars of slavery. The novel traces the uneven and contradictory processes by which the history of slavery maintains a legacy, so that

some 160 years later its diasporic offspring experience its trauma in a way akin to the aching of a limb long since amputated. Brand presents cultural memory as a spiritual and bodily knowledge inscribed by the material forces of history, including by its silences. Richly imagined, and written with Brand’s customary stylistic eloquence, this is a powerful, intelligent, and profoundly ethical novel that ought to find a broad readership.

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## Giving the West Its Due

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**David Carpenter**

*Banjo Lessons.* Coteau \$19.95

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**David Carpenter**

*Courting Saskatchewan.* Greystone \$26.95

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**Wayne Tefs, Geoffrey Ursell, and Aritha van Herk, eds**

*Due West: 30 Great Stories from Alberta Saskatchewan and Manitoba.* Coteau, NeWest, Turnstone \$9.99

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**Dennis Gruending, ed**

*The Middle of Nowhere.* Fifth House n.p.

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Reviewed by Alison Calder

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David Carpenter’s *Courting Saskatchewan* is a love story, to place and to people.

Carpenter’s project is to describe the ways in which a place becomes a home, how it truly becomes where the heart is. This home-making process takes place, according to Carpenter, through the series of rituals one develops that make a particular place into a part of the family. Opening in a frosty Saskatoon November, *Courting Saskatchewan* takes the reader through a highly-fictionalized year in Carpenter’s life, from the frustrations of a car too cold to start in the winter and a bird-watching expedition in the spring, to a trip to the fairgrounds in the summer and a reflection on lost youth in the fall. And did I mention the fishing? This may not be so much a book as a creel, stuffed with the brookies,

rainbows, and browns of fishing trips gone by. Yet while *Courting Saskatchewan* is chronologically structured, it is not episodic. Each event—getting a sundae at the Dairy Queen on the longest day of the year, hosting a potluck party at the winter solstice—recalls other events, resulting in a layered narrative that marks a kind of deep time, where each unique event participates in all that came before it. The effect is to produce a rich history of place, a vibrant answer to those skeptics who imagine life in Saskatchewan to be the spiritual equivalent of the dust bowl they think permanently covers the province. Underlying the book is a kind of ecological awareness, seen not only in the reverence Carpenter displays for nature, but also in his awareness of connections, to place and equally importantly to people. Unlike Sharon Butala's *The Perfection of the Morning*, which locates the prairie sensibility in a romanticized isolation in capital N Nature, Carpenter situates it in community, in the shared experience of place. Most prairie books have rural settings—and those that don't aren't often granted the title "prairie book," but that's another argument—but *Courting Saskatchewan* crosses the rural/urban split to become a record of life lived in nature, in the city, in a snow house, among friends.

Reading Carpenter's *Banjo Lessons* immediately after reading *Courting Saskatchewan* inspired in me a strong sense of déjà vu, which is not surprising since some of the same incidents occur in each book. Carpenter's reminiscences of Banff bush parties, given a first-person narration as creative non-fiction in *Courting Saskatchewan*, turn up in *Banjo Lessons* from the perspective of Tim Fisher, the novel's protagonist. In fact, fans of the bottle of Crackling Rosé wine that Tim throws away, then later finds in the mud of a ruined lake, can revisit Carpenter's own discovery of that same bottle in his collection of essays, *Writing Home* (Fifth House,

1994), and also in his how-to book, *Fishing in the West* (Greystone, 1995). *Banjo Lessons* was written with one eye on James Joyce, the other on W.O. Mitchell, and with frequent glances out the window to see how the fish are biting. The novel tells the story of Tim growing up in and around Edmonton, trying to learn how to be a man and, along the way, how to be a writer. As the narrative follows Tim's complicated maturation process, Carpenter's style reflects the growing complexity of Tim's language, moving from the "Onna donna tiner was a boy named Timmy" in the opening line, to the "Onna donna tine" as Tim himself finally pens it at the start of the book he begins to write. Along the way, we follow Tim through various personal crises, the most serious being a lengthy depression, a loss of faith, into which he plunges as a result of his inability to connect emotionally with those around him. Through it all, Tim wrestles with the relation of fiction to reality, eventually finding a literary model authentic to his experience. While some readers may find plot events overly coincidence-driven, Carpenter's keen eye for details in this novel, which won the City of Edmonton Book Award, rewards reading.

Carpenter has a short story in *Due West*, the next book I'm reviewing, but to be honest I didn't read it—I was too afraid of seeing that Crackling Rosé bottle again. The collection's subtitle, "30 Great Stories from Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba," may be overly optimistic, but there are some fine stories in this collection. The anthology, brought out to celebrate twenty years of publishing for Winnipeg's Turnstone Press, Moose Jaw's Coteau Books, and Alberta's NeWest Press, showcases the variety of short fiction coming out of the prairie provinces. It includes stories from well-known writers like Rudy Wiebe, Sandra Birdsell, and Sharon Butala, as well as work from relative newcomers to

the writing scene. Readers expecting page after page of dust and rural angst will be surprised at the range of topics these writers explore. Pamela Banting and Barbara Scott in particular examine gender politics; Sheila Stevenson, Ven Begamudré, and Hiromi Goto remind the reader of often overlooked racial tensions. Sadru Jetha's story "Nuri Does Not Exist" is a sharply intelligent and genuinely moving exploration of identity and displacement. Norm Sacuta's beautifully written exploration of sexual persecution, "Orizaba, North of Havana," impressed me intellectually and emotionally. While the collection suffers from the inclusion of some badly written stories that are, frankly, boring, it also sparkles with imaginative and original offerings from Méira Cook, David Arnason, Warren Cariou, and Cliff Lobe. Dave Margoshes's story "A Book of Great Worth" especially deserves acclaim for its beautiful writing. That I have so much difficulty generalizing about the writing in *Due West* is, I think, the measure of the collection's success.

Like *Due West*, *The Middle of Nowhere* emphasizes the diversity and richness of the prairies. Editor Dennis Gruending describes the collection as his attempt "to delve and to dig, and to probe for the heart and soul of Saskatchewan." To this end, he has assembled an anthology of non-fiction prose selections covering the province's history from explorer accounts to extracts from Maggie Siggins and Sharon Butala. Most of the excerpts are only three or four pages long, a decision that allows Gruending to include a large number of sources. The collection's strength is the variety of perspectives it presents: we see the act of homesteading, for example, presented from a number of writers from different ethnic and social groups. Unlike prairie books that valorize the moment of white settlement as the dominant event in the region's history, *The Middle of Nowhere*

puts that settlement in a broader historical context, demonstrating through the inclusion of Native accounts of life on the prairies that prairie culture predates immigration. While Gruending offers no explicit comment on the morality of settlement practices, the juxtaposition of some extracts is provocative: an account of the damage inflicted upon Native culture by white missionaries is followed by an account of the visit of a Methodist missionary to a Cree camp. Reading these accounts in sequence causes reinterpretation of each, as the supposed "truth" of the non-fiction document is destabilized. The collection may thus work against its own project in some ways: instead of identifying some essential "heart and soul" of the province, the extracts can instead point to fragmentation and tension. If there is a "heart and soul" to be revealed, it is likely located in these shifting borders. In his introduction, Gruending writes that he has organized the selections according to the mythologies in which he sees them participating. The extracts are grouped under the headings "The River" (explorer and First Nations accounts), "The Promised Land" (homestead narratives), "The Dry Land" (the dust bowl and the Depression) and "The New Jerusalem?" (largely sports and politics). Though much of the province's population has shifted to the cities, writings about the urban prairie are underrepresented in this collection. Gruending writes that he cannot identify any particular urban mythology. But I wonder if identifying mythologies is the way to go. Might it not be more useful to celebrate the particulars, the unique concrete experiences that make prairie culture the dynamic, troubled, and powerful entity that it is? Unless the new mythology can be one of diversity, we risk reifying the same old stereotypes that Gruending wanted to write against in the first place. And as these four books show, the middle of nowhere is somewhere important.

## Vitriolic Quixote

**William Christian and Sheila Grant, eds.**

*The George Grant Reader.* U Toronto P \$24.95

**George Grant**

*English-Speaking Justice.* Anansi \$14.95

Reviewed by George Elliott Clarke

English-Canadian polemicist George Grant (1918-1988) lived out his biblical three-score-and-ten as both a vital pacifist and a vitriolic *philosophe*. Though a conservative who loathed the American assault on Vietnam and pitied the devastation of Nazi Germany by "technological war" (between the United States and the Soviet Union), his essay titles often use the combative phrase, "In Defence of. . ." His sermons—those poetry-infused meditations, *Lament for a Nation: The Defeat of Canadian Nationalism* (1965) and *English-Speaking Justice* (1974)—offer elegiac embraces of stolidly conservative politicians, like John Diefenbaker, together with ferocious eviscerations of their charming liberal foes, like John Kennedy. Grant's destruction of the hypocrisies of "progressive" courts and legislatures are scathingly comic. Yet, he can carry his calculated offensives too far, as when, in his 1983 attempt to rehabilitate the anti-Semitic French writer Céline, he sympathizes with Adolf Hitler's "agony of loneliness in the gaudy decay of pre-World War I Vienna, and his identification of the Jews with that society. . . ."

The image of Grant that emerges from the short essays compiled in *The George Grant Reader*—ably edited by his biographer, William Christian, and by his widow, Sheila Grant—is that of a Canuck Don Quixote: a knight tilting at machine-guns. One sees Grant fighting—flailing—to preserve the wisdom of "the ancients" or "the great minds of the past" (especially Plato) and the revelation of Christ against modernity's terrific—and terrifying—mania for technique, the Molochian power that allows human

beings (mainly of the English-speaking persuasion), to dethrone God and manipulate Nature and human nature for their own purposes. To Grant, this vision of "scientific" progress is Gothic horror: it replaces divine truth with rights-based regimes, thus robbing human beings of "nobility" and making them into things instead.

Scholars debate whether Grant's work is a mishmash of Plato, Martin Heidegger, Friederich Nietzsche, Leo Strauss, and Simone Weil. Let them: Grant is a guerilla believer who uses the *bons mots* of these thinkers as he feels just. Crucially, Grant iterates a phrase from Strauss—"oblivion of eternity"—in his essays, usually without attribution (or even quotation marks), for it specifies the ideational flaw in secularized Judeo-Christian civilization. By putting Darwin ahead of Genesis, "Freudian sex" and "Marxian economics" ahead of The Gospels, moderns forget that, to quote the conclusion of *Lament*, "changes in the world . . . take place within an eternal order that is not affected by their taking place." Grant deflates the vanity of historicism by insisting that the eternal—or, the divine—exercises an invisible sovereignty over human destinies. Thus, Grant employs the temporal term *tradition* as a synonym for perceived truth. In a 1954 article, he states that the religious "live in tradition"; in *Justice* (1974), he warns that a "lack of tradition of thought [that is, religious philosophy] is one reason why it is improbable that the transcendence of justice over technology will be lived among English-speaking people." For Grant, to live outside of tradition or philosophy or eternity (these are all related ideas for him) is to live outside "the matrix of nobility."

Significantly, Grant loves chivalric words like *noble/nobility*, *excellence*, *virtue*, and *great*. He peppers his essays with references to the plight of "human nobility in the modern world," to "human excellence," to the loss of "the goodness once defined as

the cultivation of virtues,” and to the “Classical Greats” (a phrase illuminating his respect for “the ancients”). Grant’s adoration of concepts like *greatness*, *nobility*, and *virtue* suggests he read the French Jewish intellectual Julien Benda, whose masterful—and austere Platonist—anti-nationalist polemic, *La Trahison des clercs* (1927), is echoed, ironically, in Grant’s archly nationalist *Lament*. Grant agrees with Benda that the erection of a “universal and homogeneous state” would be an impious tyranny, and he borrows Benda’s citation of Hegel, namely, that “*Die Weltgeschichte ist das Weltgericht*.”

Grant’s refusal to define his medieval-romantic terms weakens his arguments, however. He makes reckless assertions, for instance that France once had a “noble stature.” But his prejudices pose an uglier problem. Grant halves the world between the white, Protestant, Anglo-dominated West and “Asiatics”—or “Asians”—his code name for Buddhists, Hindus, State Communists, and, perhaps, Jews. True: Grant lauds all of these groups, deeming them to be more faithful than Occidental infidels to ideals of sacrifice. Yet he can write with aplomb about the “mystery of the Jews” and decide that living with this “mystery” requires “reverence and good judgment.” At best, the argument is patronizing; at worst, it is much worse. Too, Grant’s discourse on the West ignores dissident (particularly racial) minorities—save Quebec Catholic francophones. Then, his eccentric Orientalism omits Islam and Muslims. Sadly, when Grant uses the word *our*, he always means *Anglo-American*, sometimes *European* or *Judeo-Christian*, but never any multicultural plurality.

Grant conceives women’s struggle for gender equality as a vanity that renders them the prey of technology, specifically in the quest for economic “success.” For Grant, this appetite reduces women to objects of biological manipulation and

instruments of “feticide.” In a 1988 essay, “Triumph of the Will,” he holds that the liberal-ordained supremacy of the individual “will” over “Truth, beauty, and goodness” means that all—especially pregnant—women are “freed from the traditional constraints against killing.” Hence, Grant eyes feminism as the ally of a rights-based “fascism” engendered by “intellectual oblivion of eternity.”

In his introduction to the reissue of *English-Speaking Justice* (where Grant first attacks abortion), Robin Lathangue posits, *contra* William Christian, that Grant was no mere academic philosopher, but a “public intellectual.” Sure, but more importantly, Grant the writer is a superb controversialist, one who damns his opponents as “Procrustean” (another favoured word) and who sculpts choice, balanced sentences and witty metaphors to declare his love of the “good.” His finest essays remain fresh, pungent interrogations of “our” assumptions. They aspire to a beauty appreciating that “the beautiful at its heights gives us purposiveness but its good transcends us (oh dangerous word).” They also ask, perhaps dangerously, who among us happy moderns should escape whipping?

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## Living In Hopes—Atlantic Realities and Realisms

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**Lynn Coady**

*Strange Heaven*. Goose Lane Editions \$17.95

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**Michael Crummey**

*Flesh and Blood*. Beach Holme Publishing \$16.95

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**Lesley Choyce**

*World Enough*. Goose Lane Editions \$18.95

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Reviewed by Danielle Fuller

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At its best, East Coast realism is a tough-minded, critical and subtle craft, capable of investigating the diverse configurations of Atlantic Canadian lives and the agency of community survival without idealising

endurance. Two of the books reviewed here achieve this goal, whilst the third has the will to do so but not the craft to make it convincing.

Lynn Coady's astonishing debut novel, which was nominated for a Governor General's Award, inspires the kind of excitement that readers of new fiction always hope to feel but only occasionally experience. For once, the publisher's puff is spot on: Coady's really is "a fresh, new voice" in Canadian writing and a remarkably assured and mature one at that. The social and emotional landscape of *Strange Heaven* is often a dark, and occasionally desolate, territory, but Coady's novel manages to be both hilariously funny and desperately painful. It is the story of Bridget Murphy who has grown up in industrial Cape Breton, and has had a baby and given it up for adoption. This experience is embedded into, rather than fully articulated in, the narrative through a combination of silences and moments of searing recall that are condensed into a series of sense impressions and thought fragments: "There was no word. Just the prehistoric need to turn herself off. There had been crying (not from her, the wah-wah), and heated sheets which felt so good and people saying she could hold it, hold him, hold the wah-wah, and all she could think about was this thing she wanted that wasn't even God." Such hints of Bridget's pain indicate the dimensions of her suffering without simplifying it, a strategy intrinsic to Coady's portrait of a young woman fenced in by the expectations of others (her family, the Catholic church, the teenaged friends she parties with back home) and living in an environment where alternatives to those expectations are limited.

The novel opens with Bridget, at nearly eighteen years of age, a patient in the psych ward of a Halifax children's hospital, or, "living the dream of Pink Floyd fans everywhere" as she wryly reflects. Unlike the

unpredictable chaos of her family life, the hospital offers Bridget a measure of security with the structured routine of the ward and the clearly stated expectations of the hospital staff (which seem to focus primarily on her bowel movements). But the young woman's anxieties run deep, emerging in the rare self-reflexive moments when Coady allows us to glimpse the measure of Bridget's fear of falling into the madness that surrounds her: "There was something frightening about being in the same room with the lot of them, they were all so strange. . . . Here strangeness was a given. It made Bridget tense because it was like vertigo. The temptation was to seize the opportunity to be weird, to revel in the fact that anything you said or did in front of these people was of no consequence."

Such moments of insight are both chilling and poignant in the context of Bridget's emotional vulnerability. They are also indicative of Coady's control over her subject matter and her economy with language. She knows exactly when to pull back from the temptations of lyrical over-indulgence, and she has a talent for ironic understatement and carefully paced humour. Meanwhile Coady's ability to render vividly the sounds and rhythms of Cape Breton English approaches that of Sheldon Currie, to the extent that Bridget Murphy could almost be a direct descendent of Currie's tough-talking Margaret MacNeil. This comparison with Currie's writing extends to the way that Coady weaves a subtle critique of gender and class politics through both Bridget's internalised commentary and the novel's tightly written dialogue.

There is a great deal of pithy wit in Coady's portrayal of the Murphy family and, crucially, balance of humour, insight and compassion that enables Coady to confront stereotypes of East Coast family oddity and move well beyond them. Dealing with her family and identifying the source of their love is an important part of Bridget's struggle



once she reaches home. She also has to face the pitying glances of middle-aged ladies in her community and the self-indulgent whining of the baby's father. Trying to find a different life for herself involves negotiating her way through all of these relationships and, more importantly, re-establishing a relationship with herself. In the midst of a huge snowstorm, Bridget finally comes out of hiding and finds that she is able to contemplate a future after all. Coady does not present this as an epiphany; she eschews many of the traditional structures of literary realism and steers a careful course around melodrama. Rather, the novel's ending reads like the brief quickening of a young woman's heartbeat as she tentatively reconnects with her surroundings.

Michael Crummey's narrative world is also shot through with both despair and hope, and, like Coady, his focus is the micropolitics of family. The opening line of "Praxis" neatly indicates how conflicted an arena family can be: "Sometimes Clara thinks a family is just an excuse for cruelty." In all of Crummey's stories, generosity and understanding are never straightforwardly achieved, and fate is as meaningful as prayer and love in his character's lives. The thirteen linked short stories also describe the dangerous work of mining in the town of Black Rock, Newfoundland, where the legacies of labour, economic struggle and survival are passed on from one generation to the next. The atmosphere of closely-guarded secrets and unspoken hurt that Crummey creates is often claustrophobic in its intensity, and, as in Coady's *Cape Breton*, love lies deep beneath the daily interactions of the Black Rock residents but is rarely given voice. In the first story, "Serendipity," the narrator recalls the day when, as a boy, he stumbles on his mother's affair with a neighbour, a discovery that leads him to his most open expression of tenderness towards his father, who has been separated from the family for eleven years.

The boy's empathy for the mother is also striking, the half-understood resentment that she feels at her husband's inability or reluctance to move the family to his workplace in Black Rock articulated through "the hint of bitterness in her voice, enough that I could taste it, like a squeeze of lemon in a glass of milk." This simple but apt simile is typical of Crummey's measured prose style and his often impeccable sense of rhythm and restraint, abilities he has presumably developed through two previously published collections of poetry.

Many of the characters in Crummey's stories are exiles returning to Black Rock through necessity, curiosity, duty or a sense of emotional compulsion. In "Skin," Austin comes home after fifteen years for a wedding and introduces the social topography of the town to his wife, through memories and withheld secrets that must be released before he can move on again. Florence, in "Continental Drift" recalls her journey home from Vancouver to Black Rock for her own wedding and the efforts of her father to reach across the emotional distances created by her mother's early death and Florence's cruel teasing of his illiteracy. The title, recalling the separation of the continents of Europe, Africa and North America from each other along various fault lines, provides an evocative metaphor for many of the stories in this collection. Crummey articulates moments of identification with place and community but pays equal attention to differences and instances of estrangement between people as some of his characters struggle to tear themselves away from family and home.

Violence, inter-racial and domestic, and violence as the product of terrible accidents of fire and cave-ins at the mine, is another recurring theme in *Flesh and Blood*, lending resonance to the collection's title. Violence maims and scars in Crummey's stories but it can also bind people together as they attempt to support and heal each other—

and this is where Crummey introduces hope in the midst of suffering. "Break and Enter," for instance, charts the renewal of affection and understanding between two sisters as they try to come to terms with the emotional damage wrought by Aria's relationship with a drug addict. As Aria points out, it's a story they share, "even when she was absent Shari was involved. Her face there, then not there, like a moon moving through clouds." This sense of involvement is often delineated by Crummey through the structure of his stories, and the most persistent pattern, the integration of past events recalled in the present, is fluently achieved. The less successful stories, to my mind "Flesh" and "Roots," are the ones where shifts of voice and time are explicitly signalled through date-lines, changes of font and the insertion of newspaper reports and other "documents." While interesting experiments in non-linearity and multiple perspective, these stories are not as confidently polished as those which adhere to the rhythms of Crummey's subtle, and often poetic, realism.

Subtlety is not, unfortunately, very much in evidence in Lesley Choyce's novel *World Enough*. Alex McNab, working-class lad from New Brunswick, son of a curmudgeonly father and an oppressed mother, seeks escape from himself and his home life by taking a job at the New Dawn rehabilitation workshop in the outskirts of Halifax, Nova Scotia. Awakened from his youthful narcissism by the quirky yet wise "social misfits" at New Dawn, Alex finds his political conscience and voice, his true love, and a meaningful existence only to discover that he has a weak heart that threatens his new life. If this brief account of the plot makes it sound predictable and formulaic, then I have aptly conveyed my experience of reading this novel. Its potential as a story that explores the growth of its protagonist is marred by the hurtling pace of the narrative and the rush to include references to

just about every example of economic, social and racial oppression effected in the region during the last three decades: a wrongfully jailed Mi'kmaq artist, a resident of the bulldozed Africville and descendent of the politicised Jamaican Maroons, and an environmental protester (a thinly disguised thumbnail sketch of the peace activist Muriel Duckworth). But these narratives and characters are too hastily inserted and too briefly explored to situate the novel (and Alex's development) in a convincing and textured context of place and time. Instead, Choyce risks doing a disservice to the very people that he respects and to the politics of equality and reparation that he quite clearly espouses.

The premise of the novel, although not original, is not without potential, but the shadows—of depression, of guilt around the death of Alex's younger sister, of economic oppression in a racially divided region—are not examined with the intricacy and extended concentration that they demand. They are shadows without any real substance, cast in what seems to be a season of perpetual summer. Even Alex's fatal illness fails to evoke the chill that it should inspire because the reader is not given enough opportunity within the novel to empathise with a protagonist who is often irritating and unlikeable. This is disappointing work from a writer whose early poetry was capable of rendering diverse emotional truths with care and linguistic precision. Choyce has been a generous and tireless promoter of Atlantic writing and is the author of over fifty books. Such frenetic activity is reflected in the busy whirl of *World Enough*. A more contemplative pace might have better demonstrated Choyce's talents, his empathy with the land he has chosen to live in, and his admiration for the resilient people who surround him.

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## Les galaxies reculent

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**Gilles Cyr**

*Pourquoi ça gondole.* L'Hexagone n.p.

**Marc Vaillancourt**

*Lignes de force.* Tryptique n.p.

Reviewed by Vincent Desroches

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Ce dernier livre de Gilles Cyr (qui a reçu le prix de poésie du Gouverneur général en 1992) est son cinquième titre publié à l'Hexagone, sans compter les éditions d'art de portée plus restreinte. L'illustration de couverture, très à propos, (mais de qui est-elle?) montre un détail hyperréaliste de l'écorce d'un arbre, avec ses ravines et ses irrégularités. Le livre se compose de quatre sections, dont deux ont été publiées séparément (*Le fil*, Roselin, 1996, et *Ricochets*, Yolande Racine, 1993). Le style, qui rappelle irrésistiblement le Guillevic d'*Euclidiennes* et d'*Inclus*, consiste en une série de distiques elliptiques, à raison de six ou sept par pages, ponctués ici ou là par d'occasionnels points d'interrogation ou d'exclamation. Le poète prend un rôle d'observateur et interroge la distance et la durée des phénomènes cosmiques ou naturels qui s'offrent à lui. Ces observations se développent en une conversation avec un (une?) complice dont la silhouette est masquée par un savant cadrage de l'interlocution : « puis-je t'offrir cette bouteille? / si tu préfères ne réponds pas ». Cyr utilise aussi de façon répétée un contraste d'échelle qui produit un anthropomorphisme en clin d'œil : « Des / galaxies reculent / c'est / la bonne décision ». En jouant ainsi sur un double clavier, cosmique et intimiste, le poète semble questionner le déterminisme (ou le chaos) régnant sur les lois naturelles et sur nos vies. Cela aussi rappelle Guillevic, mais Cyr pousse plus loin l'air de ne pas y toucher et réussit des prouesses d'escamotage.

Gilles Cyr fait partie lui aussi de ce puissant courant intimiste de la poésie québécoise

récente mais avec une certaine froideur qui évacue le corps et la primauté du désir.

Cette poésie est plutôt hantée par un effort de lucidité qui débouche quelquefois abruptement sur le collectif : « un type est là / je le renseigne / il ne part plus / bientôt il y a foule / et on s'arrache / les analyses ». Il y a là certainement les traces d'une angoisse qui se manifeste au sein d'une sérénité apparente : « où enfin se tourner / où dire qu'on habite? ». Cette angoisse du lieu et d'un manque de contrôle sur les événements me semble bien québécoise, comme cet élan si nécessaire pour définir l'espace. Le déterminisme n'est peut-être pas toujours si naturel après tout et se cache parfois pudiquement sous le pronom impersonnel on : « par un point / on ne fait passer que toi / et tu pleures ».

Cet ouvrage illustre une conception cohérente du travail poétique comme un outil de connaissance qui permet de cerner de plus près la réalité : « je pense que la séparation / est un travail de la parole ». Il nous offre une écriture du détail, où l'attention se porte vers la résolution la plus nette possible, mais aussi un jeu de déduction, où le lecteur doit sauter d'une pierre à l'autre avec agilité. Voilà un recueil important qui révèle un travail minutieux et réussi sur le rythme et l'ellipse. C'est un livre qui se projette dans toutes les directions.

Par son titre, *Lignes de force* semble suggérer une problématique semblable touchant au déterminisme des lois naturelles mais en vérité, ce filon est peu exploité. L'illustration de la maquette (par James Clerk Maxwell), bien présentée, propose un parallèle avec la notion de champ magnétique. Le poète est un homme sous influence; peut-on lire en dos de couverture. Le problème ici est peut-être que cette influence constitue un fardeau trop lourd.

Prenons l'exemple des exergues, qui ponctuent tout le recueil. On cite Ovide, Charles d'Orléans (deux fois), Catulle

(quatre fois), Joseph Joubert, Paul Valéry, Tristan, Fernand Ouellette (bien seul dans cette liste), Quintilien, Nerval, Lucain, Hugo, Millevoye, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Balzac, Georges Bruhat. Cet horizon herméneutique surchargé semble peser de tout son poids sur les vers de Marc Vaillancourt. On y trouve en effet une anxiété devant la modernité qui se traduit par une esthétique archaïsante. Le recueil s'ouvre sur une « Invocation » et se termine par un « Envoi », comme l'aurait fait Villon. L'auteur semble en quête d'une lignée vers un moment originel qu'il situe sans hésitation dans la tradition occidentale. Bien peu de contemporains dans cette liste et encore moins d'étrangers. Le hasard et l'amour, thèmes principaux du recueil, obéissent à des ésotérismes inquiétants (la Bête, l'Ange exterminateur) qui rappelleraient plutôt Nerval. Le lexique se multiplie dans une recherche d'exotisme (« hostile au gerbier des rhumbs fatals / tu te délivres des Sargasses ») et une accumulation irritante d'archaïsmes injustifiés (« sapiteur rez pied rez terre »). La virtuosité de Vaillancourt est ici exceptionnelle et on ne peut lire ces textes sans feuilleter le dictionnaire qui se trouve être, sans doute, le principal intertexte. Plusieurs vers sont excellents, mais on sent parfois un effort de versification touchant à la préciosité : « fossettes gélasines au faciès d'Isis ». Peut-être après tout s'agit-il d'un jeu, car les exergues et le style des poèmes qui suivent semblent se répondre. Cela expliquerait l'impression de pastiche laissée par les textes. Quoiqu'il en soit, on ne peut manquer de souligner l'érudition impressionnante démontrée par l'auteur dans cette entreprise.

Mais le jeu (en poésie ou ailleurs) est rarement innocent. Le ton et les thèmes empruntent si littéralement au romantisme qu'ils contredisent dans les faits l'intention pressentie dans le titre. On donne ici à la poésie un pouvoir illimité—pré-copernicien peut-être—qui place le mot (et le poète

démiurge) au centre de l'univers : « féauté au Seigneur mot! », ou encore : « l'univers s'ordonne autour / du mot / de la plus haute algèbre ». Il y a aussi, dans cette cascade de styles empruntés, un grand nombre d'images très belles, surréalistes dans leur profusion, qui étonnent et arrêtent la lecture : « les terrains ébouleux de la mort » ou encore : « paroles écosées dans mes mains ». C'est cette voix, plus grave et plus authentique, qu'on aimerait entendre s'exprimer plus fortement.

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## Translator Retranslated

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**Adam Czerniawski**

*Selected Poems. Trans. Iain Higgins. Harwood.*  
US \$57.00

Reviewed by Kevin McNeilly

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Iain Higgins is a *kolega*—which, in Polish, means both a colleague and a friend. An Associate Editor for some years at *Canadian Literature*, he is also a scholar of medieval literature and a poet. Reviewing the work of someone with whom I have a personal relationship might present a certain measure of anxiety, concerns about my own critical honesty and objectivity. But such worries prove unfounded here. Higgins is a consummate translator, able to transcend the sleight of the second-hand, the posture of self-deprecation and invisibility into which most translators are inevitably forced, and to produce renderings so artfully crafted they become poems in English; he seems to inhabit Czerniawski's language, but also to convert its pressures and demands into his own foreign tongue, stitching itself into the often uncompromising fabric of Czerniawski's lines: translation not as an erasing of ego or of voice, but as a balancing of interests, a conversation.

The parallel facing pages of text in Polish and English, Czerniawski's caustic lyricism and Higgins's honed translations, are acts of friendship that tend to foreground a

concern over certainty, surfacing in Czerniawski as an acute self-consciousness that is one of the hallmarks of his writing. North American readers will probably know Adam Czerniawski first as a translator of Polish poetry; his 1990 version of Wisława Szymborska's poems, *People on a Bridge*, largely introduced the 1996 Nobel laureate to the English-speaking world. While he has, as he puts it in his "Author's Note" to *Selected Poems*, "occasionally translated a poem or two of mine . . . I have always found the task irksome and have submitted myself to it only when there was no one else available." Self-translation, for Czerniawski, can easily devolve into egotism, and (apart from occasionally interfering, as he puts it, in Higgins's work to save him "from a few howlers," an inevitable hazard of translating) he prefers to release his writing to the revisions and interventions that are a translator's prerogative, to give the writing over to its alternate, his alter-ego, a reader with the power to remake. While still clinging to a seductive illusion of verbal stability, Czerniawski never blinds himself to the instabilities inherent in poetry. The *mot juste* remains elusive and compromised throughout his writing. "A View of Delft" for example, opens by insistently intoning the proper place-name as if to secure on the page the "view," the "prospect," the "vista" that the poet claims to have seen and memorized ("widziałem Delft . . . zobaczyłem Delft"). But sensory immediacy diminishes into apprehension and self-consciousness; vision becomes description, as the Polish verb *opisywać* enters the text. Higgins also renders *opowiadać*, to tell or to narrate, and other verbal forms as "describing," emphasizing the diegetic aspect of any mimetic claims in Czerniawski's text. He translates *zobaczyć*, literally to catch sight of, both as "see" and "witness," calling attention to the discrepancies of bearing witness, the fraught exactitude of articulate description.

To bear witness, however sure the testimony, is always to be subject to question. And so too Czerniawski's poem starts to contest its own simplifications, as the poet admits to quarrelling with his wife over colours (*spierałem się*), or undermines his omniscience ("*nie wiem* [. . .] *nie wiem*"). "I find myself," he writes, as an apprehensive subject, "cut off" even as the poem searches out its descriptive mechanics. Place names, all proper nouns, have dissolved by the close of the poem into elementary fluids of consciousness: smouldering leaves, fluttering wings, rippling water.

The unmooring of language in poetry—of "language that shaped itself in verse" as Czerniawski puts it, erasing through a reflexive verb any lyrical agency, any untroubled immediacy for his first person—produces a considerable amount of existential anxiety: "Caught as we are in a universe of chance, / the thoughts of the sage allow us to endure the night / until the agony of another dawn" ("Mythology, for B. Cz."). Consistently, too, his writing is shot through with a modernist vocabulary of dissolution and ruin, often coupled to an insistence on the failure of mimesis: "I close / my eyes; this is how a cracked skull / sketches the ruin of a conjured world" ("Pentagram: World"). Mirrors, lenses, and screens, the ocular devices through which he hopes to discover an unblemished mode of apprehension, are repeatedly denigrated as deluding, broken, distorting, shamelessly ["*bezwstydy*"] untrue, as likeness (in poems such as "Infinitely" and "*Lingua Adamica*") degenerates into glamour, and representation discloses its own mechanics of "illusions, bewitchments, anathemas, insults, reveries and lies." Czerniawski's poems resolve to restore a sense of shame at the failure of language to sustain its affect; he wants to return declarative energy to the act of naming and to give a weight to words: "He resolved at last to create / a language unconditionally laconic unequivocally fixed / so as

to banish forever / the bloody ambivalences and smokescreens of the imagination" (*"Lingua Adamica"*). But such a project is also doomed by its utopian intensities, substituting verbiage for feeling: "I no longer see the tears I've read about / in verses and dirges." The scopic metaphors return in lines such as these to remind Czerniawski's readers of the inescapably mediated character of all language, especially when it so openly aspires to the immediacy of the lived. Monumentality withers in Czerniawski, but he converts that painful and painstaking atrophy into a basis for poetic craft. Czerniawski inhabits a verbal culture in which the death of the author, to borrow Roland Barthes's overused formula, is a given and self-expression is doomed before the attempt; but instead of falling into some posthumously ironic form of verbal play, the poet suspends, for a page or two, the very moment when poetic subjectivity gives up its ghost.

A compact disc included with the volume presents in a kind of audio *vérité* (that sounds at times as if it were recorded with a lo-fi microphone in someone's living room) readings of poems and translations by Czerniawski and Higgins, as well as by Irena Czerniawska-Edgcumbe, a recording that seems to emphasize the fragility and fleetingness of the voice, as well as its complex plurality: both poets read their own work, but also the work of another. This duplicity presents Czerniawski, finally, with a means of shedding the tautology of reflection, of an obsessive self-consciousness of the failure of self-consciousness, and allows his poetry to produce what I think might best be called friendship. Czerniawski's verse, thoroughly aware of its derivative and epigone nature, acknowledges itself repeatedly not as original creation but as translation, as composite, as iterative, as haunted by voices. It gestures, even in its nostalgia for stability or closure, toward an inevitably open and unfinished business, as

the poetic subject invites a conversation across the fabric of language. Translation, as Higgins so thoughtfully and carefully attests, becomes a means of honouring that invitation.

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## Performing the Queerly Personal

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**Peter Dickinson**

*Here is Queer: Nationalisms, Sexualities and the Literatures of Canada.* U Toronto P np

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Reviewed by Andrew Lesk

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Peter Dickinson's bold and exciting work ends with "a declaration that it's about time." Indeed, *Here is Queer* is a comprehensive and compelling examination of queer Canadian literature which simultaneously foregrounds the notion of how queer criticism itself has suffered suppression and neglect. Though Dickinson is certainly not a pioneer in queer lit crit, he underlines the need for *more* of it. The result is bracing and, as he says, past due.

Dickinson manages to fuse the personal with literary politics without falling into the trap of pedantry and didacticism. His approach never detracts from the book's overriding concerns with "an alternative politics, one propelled by questions of sexuality and, more often than not, homosexuality." As a result, his discussions of authors as different as Dionne Brand, Nicole Brossard, Timothy Findley and Tomson Highway reveal both an incisive understanding of Canada's many literatures and an eager intellectual curiosity.

Dickinson melds the theoretical apparatuses of postcolonial and queer theories in order to interrogate "the (hetero)normative assumption that 'nation' and 'sexuality' are somehow discrete, autonomous, historically transcendent, and socially uninflected categories of identity." Quite correctly, he asserts that "what gets *counted* as literature in this country is contingent upon certain

supplementary socio-political discourses, such as nationalism and sexuality.” The abundance of queer sexuality in Canada’s literatures—and especially in the rarefied precincts of the canon—depends, he continues, on the paradoxical dependence of critics on maintaining there is no queer “here.”

In locating that often ephemeral Canadian socio-literary “here” as one suffused with counter-normative sexuality, Dickinson focuses on a host of authors: Patrick Anderson, Scott Symons, Michel Tremblay, René-Daniel Dubois, Michel Marc Bouchard, and Daphne Marlatt, in addition to those listed above, with nods to John Richardson, Sinclair Ross, and Leonard Cohen, among others. Dickinson wishes to locate and thereby embody the often-denied queerness in these authors. As Dickinson incisively notes, “the Canadian literary canon seems to have no trouble incorporating homosexuality into its rarefied textual precincts, so long, that is, as it functions primarily as a means of re-eroticizing readers’ fundamentally heterosexual love for their country.”

Dickinson is by no means naïve, however; he refuses to replace Canlit’s prior prohibitions and failures at inclusion with a (faulty) dynamic of institutionalized queerness. As a result, the text makes demands on its readers, primarily in its tacit insistence that the reader supplement the meaning of “queer” with personal understandings of the term. The genius of this is that the reader of Dickinson’s text also comes to a greater awareness of her or his own personal investment in what is largely the heteronormative nature of the Canadian literary critical practise. Not only does Dickinson demonstrate that the performance (in all senses of Judith Butler’s meaning of the term) of the personal critique is invariably political but he obliges the reader to do so as well. It is as though Dickinson had anticipated a likely resis-

tance to his project and tears down such opposition as part of his project.

As a queer critic, I felt initially uneasy about his procedure because I still think that the term “queer,” despite its inclusive, anti-identificatory nature, precludes any form of the kind of embodiment—especially in homosexual subjectivity—that Dickinson hopes to instil. But this is a minor quibble about a major work. Dickinson makes manifest the importance of a queer critical perspective whose time is not only come but is finally “here.”

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## The Zen of Gardening

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**Kieran Egan**

*Building My Zen Garden.* Houghton Mifflin n.p

**Susan Davis Price**

*Growing Home.* University of Minnesota Press n.p

Reviewed by Gordon Fisher

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To the casual observer, a traditional Japanese garden looks simple: a rustic gate, a variety of large stones, a stream, a waterfall, a pond, a scattering of manicured trees and shrubs, and winding paths. Of course, not all Japanese gardens match this description, but whether a temple garden of stones and gravel or a carefully tended space on an apartment balcony, the traditional Japanese garden conforms to an aesthetic that is recognizably different from that which generates the profusion of flowers and shrubs in an English garden and the geometric formality of French and Italian gardens.

Underlying the simplicity of the Japanese garden is a highly developed aesthetic with roots in eighth-century China and Japan, links to Taoist and Zen philosophy, and a practical basis in the context of local climate and geography. Many books have been written about Japanese garden design, explicating the principles, precepts, and taboos that govern the selection of stones, the flow of streams, and the patterns of paving stones. Within such a regulatory

framework, it is hard to see where individual creativity and taste have a role, but one of the characteristics of Zen philosophy is its ability to embrace the paradox of abiding by a set of rules and at the same time exercising one's own judgment in breaking the rules.

The interplay of perfection and imperfection, of complex philosophy and simple expression, of careful planning and serendipitous chance is at the heart of Kieran Egan's *Building My Zen Garden*. Inspired by a friend's garden in Japan, encouraged by a vaguely remembered image of black bamboo and rain, and yielding to a familiar impulse to move dirt around, Egan decides to build a Japanese garden and teahouse in his own backyard. A series of circumstances gives a dual purpose to the project: construct the garden and write a book about it at the same time. The result is not just another gardening book—albeit a very informative one—but a thoroughly entertaining narrative of a journey towards “an understanding of the principles that give form and meaning to distinctively Japanese gardens and a Zen stance in the world.”

From start to finish, Egan encounters paradoxes and contradictions familiar to gardeners and “do-it-yourselfers” of all kinds. When you're full of enthusiasm to get started, there's a mass of frustrating and enthusiasm-draining work that has to be done before you can do the work that you want to do. To create a vision of beauty and peace, you have to battle against encroaching vegetation with a fierce and destructive zeal. Egan agonizes over the difference between a slightly imperfect construction job (in this case, a fence to restrain neighbouring shrubbery) and careless or shoddy work. He derives some (small) comfort from the fact that, from a Zen perspective, an imperfect fence is perfectly acceptable if the essential nature of the fence is expressed. Throughout the construction of the garden and the teahouse, Egan struggles to find an acceptable compromise between

Japanese precision and Irish impulsiveness. He chooses a middle ground between having a plan and making choices as he goes. While he thinks he makes choices of his own, he finds many choices are made for him. If something works in an unanticipated way, he doesn't try to change it.

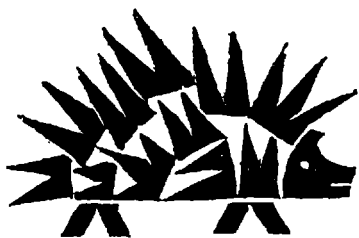
The narrative itself proceeds with the energy of an adventure novel. The scene is set in satisfactory detail; construction begins, materials are assembled, obstacles are overcome. Progress is punctuated by minor crises that demand immediate action. As the garden and the teahouse near completion, a final crisis quickens the pace towards a satisfying finish. Construction details are embellished by historical references, snippets of botanical science, and an appropriate selection of Japanese terminology and philosophy. Egan's self-deprecating Irish humour captures the nuances of lumbeyard discourse, celebrates unplanned successes in commercial exchanges, and reflects his rueful awareness of the relationship between age and the resilience of the human body. Supporting characters include salespeople, ill-fated goldfish, and a particularly obdurate rock. Various saints (Irish and Italian) make cameo appearances (in the narrative, not in the garden), as do Chinese sages, Gustave Flaubert, and Hilaire Belloc. While experiencing the difficulty of maintaining a heightened appreciation of Zen aesthetics when knee-deep in a muddy hole with frozen feet, an aching back, and a sore head because a mighty rock won't budge, Egan still understands the relationship between the dirt beneath his feet and his aspirations for “a place of beauty, tranquillity, and harmony.”

Gardening is always a combination of hard physical work and lofty aspirations, and for the gardeners in Susan Price's *Growing Home* gardening is certainly a labour of love. *Growing Home* describes thirty one gardens built by immigrants to Minnesota. The immigrants come from



Africa and Asia, from Central America and Europe, but the characteristics they have in common are more significant than their different places of origin. Most of the gardeners have a family or community tradition of gardening or farming, so the production of familiar foods is a high priority. Many of the gardeners enjoy preserving their harvest and preparing traditional dishes. Some actively cultivate plants for their healing properties. Others simply enjoy the plants they knew in their childhoods. The group as a whole, young and old, male and female, tend to be healthy, enjoy hard work, and derive a sense of spiritual comfort from their gardening activities.

The joy of working with dirt must be a distant atavistic part of human nature. That the earth provides sustenance, not just for the body, but for the soul as well, is something that Kieran Egan shares with the gardeners in Minnesota. Despite the distance separating Japan and Eastern philosophies from North America and Western values, stones and streams, ponds and waterfalls, and maples and conifers are appropriate elements for a BC garden. Egan did not set out to grow a "new home" in BC, nor did he aspire to create a masterpiece, but his book clearly shows that he has successfully taken a "Zen stance in the world" by bringing a touch of the Katsura Imperial Villa to his Kerrisdale suburban backyard.




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## Discovery as Destination

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**William Gilkerson**

*Ultimate Voyage: A Book of Five Mariners.*  
Shambhala \$35.00

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**Ian Colford, ed.**

*Water Studies [:] New Voices in Maritime Fiction.*  
Pottersfield \$17.95

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**Rory MacLean**

*The Oatmeal Ark: Across Canada by Water.*  
Harper Collins \$18.00

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Reviewed by Bryan N. S. Gooch

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That life's journey is a series of multiple and often simultaneous explorations—physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual—is hardly a new idea, yet each age returns to the concept in order to restate it in various ways, in its own terms and its own voices. The three books under review here provide telling and, particularly in the case of Gilkerson's *Ultimate Voyage* and MacLean's *The Oatmeal Ark*, compelling reminders that one search—for a sense of the past in order to come to terms with the present, for instance—so often leads to another, and that the end of discovery is the desire for additional and related (one might sometimes call it "lateral") enlightenment.

*Ultimate Voyage* offers an early modern world of unspecified date and location and, setting its initial scene in an imaginary coastal town with mediaeval roots, traces the growth of five boys of identical age but diverse backgrounds through their youth and into their adulthood; they learn their separate crafts but share a common bond in sailing, first in a small boat they restore and sail locally and then in a larger craft which they take to distant unknown seas. Growth—in every respect—and the gaining of confidence and self-knowledge are woven into Gilkerson's magical tale which meshes romance and realism splendidly; his knowledge of ship construction and sailing providing a solid footing for his narrative and his exploration of human nature.

The voyage of the *Alembic*, in which the youths sail to fabled waters—to the north east through thin ice, and then south into the “silent sea” (the references to Coleridge are pointed) and to the “western isles”—before returning home is both journey and metaphor, full of adventure, liveliness, captivating description, and irony. The physical Elysium becomes a painful parody of the idyllic concept—some of its inhabitants are as cruel and treacherous as malevolent despots real and fictional—and the “western isles” offer their own lilting siren song of tropical paradise. The journey ends successfully but, as the five central characters realise, exploration can never end. The level of description, the control of pace, the handling of dialogue, and the development of characters—all are masterly in this splendid saga.

Ian Colford's *Water Studies* is an interesting collection of sixteen stories by writers resident in the Maritimes, who, at the time of compilation, had not published a book. That, along with the revelation of character and the idea of realisation, is the cement, as it were, for the gathering, rather than any particular theme or setting; water *per se* is not the unifying issue in the book, unless one wants to think of the way in which that element can take the shape of the vessel containing it. Here are a variety of bottles, many with particularly intriguing contents. Among telling and sensitive inclusions is Kelly Cooper's “Water Studies” (from which the volume derives its title), a quick, brilliant study of three generations one late afternoon, water and painting (with which the story has so many affinities) provide an obvious linkage. J. Maureen Hull's “Honarus Americanus” offers a vivid picture of a lobster-fishing trip and the discovery of a hard but simple life with the rewards of sea and land; the description of the end-of-work dinner is, in itself, guaranteed to water the mouth of even the most sophisticated gourmet. Karen Smythe's “Visiting Hours” explores the woeful effects

of a mother's alcoholism on the narrator and her family, and Orisia Dawydiak's poignant “Thief of Heart” takes the reader to central Europe and the brief affair between an outcast gypsy coppersmith, who has come to the village of Brinzi with his young son, and the abused wife of one of the villagers. Other memorable pieces are by Hannah Grant (“The Forest of Arden”), Douglas Arthur Brown (“Komodo Dragon”), Kathy Diane Leveille (“Rosemary's Time”), and Michael Pacey (“Ducktown Chronicles”).

Rory MacLean's *The Oatmeal Ark* takes the reader back to the concept of journey—as a fact and as a vehicle for the discovery of self—entwined with an exploration of a family's past, from eviction from the western coast of Scotland to Nova Scotia and then, over several generations, to central Canada and the west coast. The central figure, Beagan Gilleen, has been left a trunk of letters, photographs, and other memorabilia which prompt him to relive the family's westerly progress, tracing events and locations of past years through a contemporary recreation. Scenes and voices of ancestors who, one by one, join to travel on Beagan's re-enactment of their migrations, blend superbly with the sounds of the present in an utterly compelling narrative which becomes, particularly as Beagan makes his way across Canada largely by water, in freighter and then canoe (Thunder Bay to Winnipeg and then up the Saskatchewan River), not just a history of his family, an understanding of roots (in every sense), but an anecdotal history of this country, the efforts of the pioneers now often overgrown by commercialism and neglected by our contemporary, plasticised society. The ghosts of the great-grandfather and his descendants hover and comment and moralise; the voices are handled with superb care, and never are the shifts between past and present awkward or deflative. Beagan learns, to the reader's

profit, the extent to which he is a product of both present *and* past; once again it is the journey, the discovery, which is the issue. This is a first-rate story in its own right. Not only is it difficult to put aside, once begun, but, also through its insights, its blend of emotions, and its portrayal of the opening of this land, draws the reader back into its pages. And the second reading is just as good as the first as one probes the skillfully layered narratives.

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## Private and Public Domiciles

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### Charlotte Gray

*Sisters in the Wilderness: The Lives of Susanna Moodie and Catharine Parr Traill.* Viking \$35.00

### Peter Ward

*A History of Domestic Space: Privacy and the Canadian Home.* UBC P n.p.

Reviewed by Andrew Lesk

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Lively and generously detailed, Charlotte Gray's observant biography of the Stricklands, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, and their contributions to Canadian letters reads like the most entertaining of fictions. Seeking to reveal the lives of the women behind the *Roughing It in the Bush* and *The Backwoods of Canada*, Gray uses the sisters' (inter)personal writings to cast light not only on the women but on the formative social histories of nineteenth-century English Canada.

This largely sympathetic account of Susanna Moodie and Catharine Parr Traill truly begins, however, not with the sisters' beginnings but with the author's own personal preface. Gray, herself an immigrant to Canada, writes of her own initial alienation from the Ontario landscape and from her neighbours to the south. She writes that, in being captivated by Traill's "sunny temperament," she came to the understanding that Traill's "unpretentious pragmatism" was a characteristic that, after fifteen years

of friendships with Canadian women, I saw as a dominant Canadian trait."

I'm not so certain about this. Of course, the associations Gray may have made after arriving in Ontario (she resides in Ottawa) might remind her of this "unpretentious pragmatism"; if so, then the women Gray has met indeed represent a minority class of Ontario women whose histories would appear to intersect with a social lineage of white, conservative, Protestant women of British ancestry, and who still live in small towns like Belleville and Peterborough. Although much of Ontario's history, including its social fabric, was founded upon families not unlike the Moodies and the Traills, the days of asserting a "dominant" twenty-first century Canadian "trait" based on (dubious) minority characteristics are long past.

I wonder, then, why this attitude has underpinned Gray's otherwise absorbing double biography. She shuns the less-than-flattering accounts of Moodie, written by Frye, Davies, and Rick Salutin, and suggests that such portraits have been written by *men* who cannot comprehend Moodie's "stalwart autonomy." Gray points instead to Carol Shields, whose dissertation on Moodie is more "sympathetic." Even Margaret Atwood's "stiletto-sharp" insights have "distorted all subsequent discussion of the nineteenth-century writer." Gray seeks to correct the perspective of the two sisters as "iconic and elusive," biases wrought from "[t]wentieth-century writers [who] have deduced their personalities from their published works."

Gray writes a compelling account of sibling rivalry barely contained by the need to maintain composed social appearances. Susanna's lifelong vying with her much more popular sister Agnes Strickland, a famous biographer of British queens, turned to ostracism when Agnes was horrified at Susanna's "dirty laundry" account of life in *Roughing It in the Bush*. Catharine,

copied with a severely depressed husband who was ill-suited to the hardships of pioneer life, tried faintly to mend the breach.

However, Gray's compassion for her subjects leads her to paper over some of the more difficult aspects of the sisters' respective temperaments. Catharine's sunny disposition, real as it may have been, still does not compensate for the fact that both she and her husband made many unfortunate decisions. Assuredly, many immigrants to Canada did. But that they continued to do so *throughout* their lives bespeaks an evident inability to come to terms with the fact that they would never become the landed colonial gentry they had once dreamed of becoming. In this light, Gray's comparative depiction of Catharine as "the Martha Stewart of the backwoods" is misleading, both in that Catharine's efforts never lead her to personal wealth, and in that modern-day Stewart enjoys a reputation based not on an abiding aesthetic worth—what Gray calls "standards of taste"—but on marketing acumen.

Susanna's life seemed even more dire. Her genuine love for her husband, John, seems to have usurped much love she might otherwise have given her children. Gray omits to point out that Susanna's "stalwart" nature might in reality have been lack of smart political wherewithal, thwarted ambition, and self-serving emotional coldness is not considered in depth. Susanna's racist attack on George Benjamin (who, it must be said, attacked John Moodie for political reasons), whom she wrote up as the fictive Benjamin Levi, is dismissed by Gray thus: "She was too taken with her creation to reconsider the substance or the tone of her depiction."

That Susanna was a product of a time when anti-Semitism ran rampant is clear, and so the appearance of such racism is not surprising. But to imagine that Susanna, the "shrewd" storyteller, was not fully

aware of what she was doing is far too facile a rationalization.

The discomfiting yet discernible thread, then, that runs the course of the biography is that of class pretension and colonial privilege, largely glossed over by Gray. Despite pointing out that the Moodies "expected deference from their social inferiors," the biography nowhere suggests that they were the authors of their own downfall.

The various living quarters the Strickland sisters may have inhabited are dynamically realized in Peter Ward's slim but suggestive history of privacy and the Canadian home, *A History of Domestic Space*. Ward, in discussing the home as "the theatre of our domestic experience," concerns himself with "how spaces in the Canadian home have changed over time, and how family and social relationships have shaped, and been shaped by, these changing spaces." Ward ranges over the past three hundred years in his account of houses and homes throughout Canada, noting how the changes in social use and in architectural design have complemented, or competed with, one another in fabricating domestic life.

Ward wisely notes that the architectural plans which populate his study are "statements of intent, not practice, so they don't necessarily indicate how residents lived in their homes day by day." He goes on to assert that "changes in domestic technology left a powerful imprint on family relations," and his study of the evolution of the bathroom is exemplary of how social attitudes towards shame and the body, combined with shifting judgments of "strong odours," changed the bathroom's locale and physical shape in the home.

Unlike Gray, Ward foregrounds the notion of class in how certain technologies were used or foregone, depending on a family's social status and earnings. The piano in the parlour, for example, combines the social functions of courtship with

the desire to display a family's economic standing. The front steps often absent from prairie houses suggest that the inhabitants had little use, unlike their urbanized counterparts, for the formal entrance that was the front door.

Although Ward spends more time on the history of the house—he also summarizes certain transformations within the home, especially those entailing economic (dis)enfranchisement and gender. Ward completes his work with a generous list of suggested readings, beginning with Peter Enns and Deryck Holdsworth's study, *Homeplace: The Making of the Canadian Dwelling over Three Centuries*, itself a fine complement to Ward's own engaging book.

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## Writing the Body

**Elizabeth Grosz and Elspeth Probyn, eds.**

*Sexy Bodies: The Strange Carnalities of Feminism.* Routledge US \$62.95/\$16.95

**Leslie Heywood**

*Bodymakers: A Cultural Anatomy of Women's Body Building.* Rutgers UP US \$48.00/\$18.00

**David Hillman and Carla Mazzio, eds.**

*The Body in Parts: Fantasies of Corporeality in Early Modern Europe.* Routledge US \$19.95

**Barbara Korte**

*Body Language in Literature.* U Toronto P US \$55.00/\$19.95

Reviewed by Charmaine Eddy

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Bodies, bodies, bodies. These days, the literary marketplace is strewn with textual corpses on the body, and yet when the body becomes the object of analysis everything "bodily" seems to be lost in the neutrality of academic discourse. *Sexy Bodies: The Strange Carnalities of Feminism* attempts to move beyond the current "unsexy" state of academic research on the body by exploring the *production* of sexualities instead of their description, with each author experimenting with the possibility of "sexing" or

"queering" activities, methods and disciplines that normally would not count as the sexual. With their goal to initiate a reconceptualization of bodies and sexuality, Grosz and Probyn conceive of sexuality in the broadest possible thematic and methodological terms. And the volume does produce what the editors have termed a "disquieting effect," as sexuality—the ostensible "topic" of the volume, but also the methodological imperative of its discourse—"spills the boundaries of its proper containment." Over half of the essays in the volume are "queer" or "lesbian" essays, and yet the volume cannot easily be described as a book "about" queer sexualities as such. The creative writing in the volume, for example, which includes Nicole Brossard's "Green Night of Labyrinth Park" and an excerpt from Mary Fallon's *Working Hot*, is clearly lesbian writing. And yet, the experimentation in each within and beyond the boundaries of sexual and erotic discourse situates sexuality in terms of Brossard's "je thème," a homonym which links the sexual confession of the lover with the production and function of all discourse. As Dianne Chisolm notes in her exploration of "The 'Cunning Lingua' of Desire" in Fallon, queer theory has taken up the strategy of "linguistic performativity" as a way of making language "produce effects." Fallon's "bawdy linguality," like the carnal lesbian centre in Brossard, is an "erotics-poetics" or "seductive illocution," which, by connecting speech acts with carnal acts, shifts the epistemological register of both language and sexuality.

The wide range of essays in *Sexy Bodies*—Angela Davis's discussion of the ideology of excess in self-representations in blues music, Sabina Sawhney's linking of sexuality with the colonialist project, two essays on Jeannette Winterson including one on the "virtual lesbian," an article on Elizabeth Taylor—is framed by contributions from the two editors which displace sexuality

from bodily sites onto “geo-sexual locations” and the subhuman. The volume begins with Probyn’s suggestive reflections on belonging, departure, and desire in “Queer Belongings” and concludes with Grosz’s “Animal Sex: Libido as Desire and Death,” a fascinating displaced exploration of female sexuality through theories of insect sexuality as cannibalism and of the destabilizing of the body and subjectivity through libido and lust. Probyn’s metatextual essay addresses implicitly the volume’s attitude toward what “queer” belongs to, and what “belongs” to the “queer.” Moving beyond what she defines as the current preoccupation in queer theory with the need to distinguish homosexual desire from heterosexual desire, or the locating of desire in the figure of the desired object, Probyn instead employs desire, not as a metaphor, but as “the *modus operandi* of my queer theorizing.” To Probyn, “the singularity of queer theory can only reside in the way in which it puts desire to work.” “Following queer desire turns us into readers who make strange, who render queer the relations between images and bodies.” Grosz’s essay certainly “makes strange” (and yet oddly familiar) the Freudian linking of the pleasure principle with the death drive. Grosz, whose other publications include a book on Lacan, begins by reading mimicry and excess, two terms that have been crucial for feminist psychoanalytic theories of the feminine and female sexuality, though she does so through Roger Callois’s psychological theories of insect sexuality, particularly the female praying mantis’s practice of decapitating the male during coitus, as a way of discussing the fantasy of *vagina dentata*. Her unexpected conjunction of entomological sex and death with Alphonso Lingis’s exploration of the decomposing effects of libido removes erotics from the complementarity that defines it in heteronormative models of sexual relationships, and places it at any point of conjunction of

two or more surfaces. Erotogenic zones thus no longer desegment an “organic body.” Instead, the body is the provisional product of the temporary and changing organization of those zones, themselves in the continual process of being produced, renewed, and transformed.

While *Sexy Bodies* sexualizes discursive and methodological contexts, *Bodymakers: A Cultural Anatomy of Women’s Body Building* moves from experiential bodily practice to cultural theory, by exploring the cultural practice and gendered ambivalence of female body building. Working within the context of the “personal as political”—she is herself a body builder, and her final chapter discusses in detail her own experiences as a star athlete—Heywood invokes the alternative universe of the body-building gym as a dichotomous world of gods and heroes as well as corporeal monsters. Heywood analyzes body building in relation to the feminine, the masculine, cultural narratives of race, issues of pornography, and contemporary representations of the body in film and photography. As body building moves from the margins to the mainstream in popular culture, it marks a juncture in the cultural construction of our gendered narratives in particular. In her discussion of the masculine, Heywood suggests that the cultural spectacle of body building reveals a void at the centre of the subject, as in current post-structuralist readings of subjectivity, a void that “makes visible the effort to create masculinity as a point of stasis,” or the “limit point of the subject,” where being has been sacrificed to meaning. As spectacle, body-building emphasizes the dichotomy between the apparent plasticity of the body and the rigidity and fixity of the masculine form that it attempts to create. It thus becomes a masquerade of the “phallus unveiled, stripped of its signifying power,” a slavish enactment of the masculine that denaturalizes and deconstructs it.

Heywood's pursuit of the ideological conflict between cultural expectations of the body and the image of the builder offers some of its best insights in her analysis of its relationship to the feminine. Though Heywood argues that body building should be viewed, and indeed is perceived in some contexts, as the "apotheosis of the American fascination with individual empowerment and sovereignty," she also finds that its practice by women produces "a problem of meaning," with the strong female body "a text on which the history of the politics of race, gender, and power is played out in graphic visual form." She addresses the conflict between the stereotype of female weakness and the image of strength or "female masculinity" represented in the body builder, by reading body building in the context of third-wave feminism and the politics of backlash. Using so-called "equity" feminists, primarily Christina Hoff Sommers, Heywood argues that feminist claims by gender theorists have become improperly seen as monstrous, perverse, and distorting. Heywood then traces the changes in the image of the female body in the history of female body building, from conservative representations of the feminine through the gendered indeterminacy of someone like Bev Francis to the current debate between body building and "fitness," or sport and sex appeal. The implicit imperative against "losing" one's femininity and the awarding of the most lucrative endorsement contracts to women who are less threatening to the conventional feminine image have encouraged many builders either to move out of body building and into the world of fitness or to invoke "hypersexualized images" of the strong female body in order to diffuse the threat that their physical power poses. While the rhetoric of self-determination might suggest that the individual builder is following her own desire, Heywood notes that this is an illusion of choice: 80% of

professional female body builders have had breast implants, in order to replace the sexualized femininity that is lost as body fat turns to muscle through weightlifting. Instead, Heywood wishes to read female body building as a form of individualistic activism, a self-development and empowering of the individual which also facilitates changes in cultural perceptions and consciousness.

*The Body in Parts: Fantasies of Corporeality in Early Modern Europe* is a compilation of essays on body parts and the fascination with dismemberment, medical anatomy, and the logic of fragmentation in the literary and cultural texts of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe. Cut off from the totalized body, the part challenges its foundational structure, and as the volume explores the ontological status of the body part, its fragmentation begins to disrupt the cognitive systems of organization of the period. A few essays take the body in its entirety as their theoretical site. Stephen Greenblatt's "Mutilation and Meaning," for example, begins with contemporary practices of ritual scarification, such as tattooing and circumcision, to explore what he defines, through Michel de Certeau, as "heterology," where distinctive bodily customs and the meaning of those customs produce the body as the site of theoretical and practical otherness. The early modern mutilation of the body in imitation of Christian sacrifice takes on a somatic signification as a form of abjection, a literalizing of contemporary corporeal metaphors for cleansing and redemption. Though Greenblatt examines mutilation practices to the entire corpus, most of the essays take on their own body part or member—a number of them with a freshness that I can only attribute to the freedom that a severing from the imperative of corporeal unity must produce. The volume includes essays on the (missing) breast, the anus, the clitoris, the tongue, the

eye, knees and elbows, the entrails, the heart and brain, blood, the belly, the hand, and, at the conclusion to the volume and in the format of a series of footnotes, Peter Stallybrass's essay on the cultural apotheosis of the foot.

Several of the articles collected here explore the relation of separate body parts to the subversion of social and political hegemonies. Marjorie Garber's "Out of Joint," for example, focusses on the ceremonial culture of kneeling as true and false homage and the sexual and class implications of literary references to other bodily joints, in order to open up the symbolic body as a paradigm of linguistic "disarticulation" of historical and political systems. Carla Mazzio examines the ambivalent positioning of the tongue—both inside and outside of the body, both a bodily organ and a sign of language and speech—as a "somatic manifestation of all that resists containment" in the social and political order. Another group of essays, under the subtitle "Sexing the Part," addresses the "social logics" of sex, gender, and sexuality as located in particular body parts. Kathryn Schwarz's "Missing the Breast" focusses on the metonymic function of the breast through the iconography of its absence through self-mutiliation in the figure of the Amazon, as a myth that plays out the fear that the eroticized female body may possess sexual agency and even voraciousness. Jeffrey Masten's "Is the Fundament a Grave?" (a paraphrase of Leo Bersani's "Is the Rectum a Grave?") examines the "rhetoric of the anus" and "a sodometry of the fundament" in modern culture in order to explore its imagining as "originary" and offspring, but also as the foundation or the "seat" of subjectivity and knowledge. Others focus on the relation of the body part to the changing perception of subjectivity. David Hillman, for example, examines the relation between selfhood and materiality in Shakespeare through the

exposure of human entrails in the anatomy theatre, a practice which produced the human interior as a possible object of external knowledge and thus followed the logic of the skeptic by opening up the body to the other.

*Body Language in Literature* offers a semi-otic analysis of non-verbal communication and behaviour in literary texts. In its desire to classify and compartmentalize aspects of the communicative function of the literary body, it represents the kind of structural finitude that the other three volumes resist. Defining non-verbal communication in terms of movements and postures, facial expressions, eye contact, and touching, Korte proposes to offer a study of the way in which the body in motion produces signs that can be read as meaningful fictional communication between characters and from narrator to narratee. Korte's purpose in writing this study is to provide "a comprehensive critical framework which can be used as a heuristic procedure in the analysis of (narrative) texts or which allows for a systematic approach to the study of body language in a broad range of literary texts." Some of her categories of analysis include the way in which non-verbal communication indicates mental states, interpersonal relations, and aspects of characterization, as well as its use in the function of authentication or dramatization of a character or situation. Korte works with modern research in non-verbal communication beyond expression psychology, and limits her study to those readers who are sensitive to reading non-verbal communication and have literary competence and those authors who display competence in non-verbal codes. She also limits her study to European or Western texts, since the meaning of bodily movements is culture-specific, and to fictional narratives, since poetic texts offer minimal material for her study and bodily movement in dramatic texts (as opposed to performances)



cannot necessarily be delimited by the author. Her final chapter provides a cursory sketch of the historical changes in reading the body in the novel from the 18th-century to the present.

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## River Echoes

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**Trevor Herriot**

*River in a Dry Land: A Prairie Passage.* Stoddart  
\$34.95

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**Frank Mackey**

*Steamboat Connection: Montreal to Upper  
Canada 1816-1843.* McGill-Queen's UP \$44.95

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Reviewed by Charles Dawson

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Two very different books, these. Each in its own way demonstrates how rivers attract commercial and conceptual traffic. Pairing a lyrical book of nature writing that laments much of the process of colonization in Canada (and the development it creates), with a rigorously researched, archive-based history of the first steamboats in the Montreal area, brings two different approaches to the gruelling work of settlement, the hard work involved in carving out a homeplace, and the clues, gifts, and burdens such toil leaves. My focus here is largely on Herriot because he lingers, worried and bewildered, at the mental and physical interface between nature and culture, whereas Mackey's journeys are amongst fresh-turned archival gleanings, alive to (and very much immersed in) a different form of detail.

*Steamboat Connections* traces colonial endeavour on Montreal's waterways, celebrating development and walking us through it using archival research that minutely catalogues early modern transportation and human commerce. Mackey does not extrapolate from the detail he shares, nor make detailed journeys into gender issues, social conditions, or Cree-White relations. His book might encourage such extrapolation and reflection, because

he had done the hard yards in the archive, tracking textual sources and pointing the reader to them. *Steamboat Connections*, with its 195 pages of main text and 165 of notes, appendices and bibliography is designed, in many ways, to initiate a field of inquiry, rather than extend the lyrical personal essay and inspire beautiful reading experiences as *River in a Dry Land* does.

Mackey's account of hazardous water transport, early engine-makers and intractable rapids returns to a time when Canadian waterways were highways. The spectre of cholera appears, as do blown boilers, McGill's and Molsons, and the Long Sault rapids. Mackey sets out to describe the early steamers in exhaustive detail: this is not a lyrical book, but it is a very thoroughly researched one. I would have liked more passages where Mackey stepped away from the archives to reflect on what he has unearthed there, to provide a more contextualized account of events, but this is not his purpose. I particularly enjoyed his account of early riverboat competitors of the Rideau Canal praising the virtues of genuine river travel over "stagnant" canal water, the only catch being the need to portage all your luggage around the rapids in a particularly masochistic form of early eco-tourism.

*River in a Dry Land* has garnered a host of nominations and prizes: winner of the Writer's Trust (Drainie-Taylor) Biography Prize, The Regina Book Award, and the Saskatchewan Book of the Year Award, it was also nominated for a Governor General's Award for Non-Fiction. The book attempts nothing less than a localized re-mythologizing of the Western relationship with place, on a par with the major figures in the field today. It is an enriching and often profound work. Intimately known rivers link Herriot's narrative together. After more than a decade of contributing articles to *Canadian Geographic* and *Nature Canada* and illustrations to *American Birds*

and *Birding*, his eye and pen are honed to the emotional force of landscape description and ecological deprivation. The battle between personal re-vision and larger destructive forces is an old story, but *River* demonstrates an ongoing determination to keep hope in hand. Herriot, like Sanders and Lopez, works with shards of tradition and wildness. He inscribes an earth-based dignity that does justice to our fragile capacity to understand and the gift of grace so many writers recover through story and place.

The toil of former centuries has not preserved ecological bounty but the fragments that remain have become hornbooks for mental effort. How, Herriot asks, can contemporary (human, often white, often urban) dwellers, do justice to others (where human then often First Nations, and, whether human or avian, often displaced, often rural), and to place? And how, in this age where land claims provoke anger and frustration for many, can people move beyond stereotype, guilt and acrimony to reunite at the sites we might, somehow, share? Herriot has a few answers to this vital post-colonial conundrum. He inter-leaves them in his retellings of his own and other people's anecdotes and in the intriguing detail of the prairies and its life, the rivers and their partial deaths. Best of all, the book is informed and humbled, provocative and enriching without being New Agey smug.

In choosing "hydro-dams over the mythic and holy" Herriot thinks we have been too callous (though we'll need to see if Cree might eventually own James Bay III before a binary is apt, if ever). But beyond callousness, he wonders "if grief has taken us [non-Natives: his main readership] as far as it can, if it is time now to move on." In a passage typical of the sort of tributary journey Herriot often makes throughout his interesting essaying, he challenges what he terms the "narrative of regret" that mops

up a little mess, spits out some lamenting books and carries on dreaming of a settler innocence that never really existed. There are signs of change, signs that the mythology of regret may be giving way to a mythology of reconciliation. People are beginning to look to the land for consent, belonging, health, and spirit, while dreaming of mysticism and ecology. Narratives that reconcile us are coming from the science of fostering biodiversity and hope, the natural history of a burrowing owl or a market garden, and the consecrating gestures required to restore a prairie stream or unclog wild tributaries within culture.

I think the success of this book rests in the fact Herriot has the experience and the gumption to balance narrative, science, mysticism, faith and respect, all within his narrative of reconciliation. It matters, and it shows, that Herriot knows his stuff: the work is grounded and detailed. His is not a book of saccharine prose, of essentialized Cree or Métis, or persistent cultural flagellation: it's an important contribution to his community's (and a nation's, a culture's) sense of itself and its challenges, using one humble and very grateful journey through the rivers of home and heart.

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## Realistic Vision

**Avrom Isaacs** (Preface), **Ramsay Cook** (Essay)  
*Kurelek Country: The Art of William Kurelek* Key Porter Books n.p.

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Reviewed by Jack Stewart

Largely self-taught, William Kurelek was an "Outsider," yet over a million copies of books on his art have been sold worldwide, making him "the most published visual artist in Canada." His art "often seems to contain little more than a foreground, sky, telephone poles and a wire fence" (Isaacs); human activities are etched against emptiness; people are diminished by space or

absorbed into communities. Themes of subsistence and survival predominate.

Keywords to Kurelek Country are naivety and narrativity, linearism and literalism, realism and minimalism, populism and pictorialism, ethnic identity, childhood, and religion. The text of this finely produced book consists of a preface by gallery-owner Avrom Isaacs and an essay by historian Ramsay Cook; illustrations are grouped according to themes of "Childhood"—"Earth and Sky"—"Immigrants"—"God."

Kurelek (born in Alberta) saw Canada through a "prairie lens." His art reflects a search for identity, rooted in ethnicity and the land—especially the farmlands at Stonewall, Manitoba, where he grew up. His Canadian experience interacted with his ethnic roots and he said of a visit to his father's village in the Ukraine: "It was like living a lifetime in one day." While regionalism gives his art authenticity, he wanted to paint an "ethnic mosaic" and concerned himself with wider social issues, such as women's roles, racism, and poverty. *The Lumberjacks' Breakfast* (1973), with its crowded tables and carefully differentiated figures, is based on the artist's own experience. He knew what it was to work long hours and compared his capacity to turn out 2 1/4 paintings a day to his capacity to turn out 2 1/4 cords of wood.

A breakdown and attempted suicide led to Kurelek's conversion to Catholicism in 1957, after which religion became his driving force. He regarded "[p]ictures without explicit religious content" as "pot-boilers," yet had to focus on material and social surfaces for the market. Sometimes he inserted haloed figures into realistic scenes, as in *Strangers in Beautiful British Columbia* (1975), which shows the Holy Family, in Western clothes, arriving at a ski chalet. His attempt to transcribe religious themes into everyday reality seems most nearly successful when bright colors and simplified forms approximate folk art, as in *Do Not Trouble Me Now*

(1975), which retells the "No Room at the Inn" story in terms of a fisherman's shack. While Kurelek claimed that such natural/supernatural scenes sprang straight from a unified vision, he was criticized for mixing "dogma" with "experience." He turned to apocalyptic themes, as in *Not Going Back to Pick Up a Cloak* (1975), where a huge mushroom cloud towers above the landscape, irradiating it with flaming light. A farmer who has been ploughing dashes for safety, leaving a blue coat on a post, while his horses tumble in a heap. Symmetrical lines of fields and houses, signifying man's orderly world, contrast with the shattering event on the horizon; the painting fuses the familiar and grotesque in a "naive" vision. At times Kurelek's geometric minimalism, as in *The Devil's Wedding* (1967), depicting a twister on the prairies, approaches the super-realism of Alex Colville.

Kurelek's style is precise and logical; his balanced observation avoids highlights, fitting details into a unified pattern. Aiming to catch moments in the life of the community, Kurelek specialized in genre scenes that recall Brueghel's crowded canvases—although lacking the Flemish artist's carnivalesque energy. In *Ukrainian Canadian Farm Picnic* (1966), two figures climbing a tree in the foreground set up a high, external angle of vision that reflects the way Kurelek sees his motif. If the painting "exemplifies the joy of escape from rural routine" (Cook), it does so not by participation but by adopting a panoptic narrative viewpoint.

The mimetic and narrative strains in Kurelek's art provide a social record and guarantee his popularity, but also make him something of an anomaly among contemporary artists. An example of "naive" art, such as *Picture of Children Building a Giant Snowman, Manitoba* (1970), emphasizes pictorial construction—exemplified by the children's struggle to place one large snowball on top of another. In *Brother Kearney at Fort Good Hope, N.W.T.* (1976),

"outsider" technique foreshortens perspective and displays an otherwise invisible church and town behind the forest's edge. Cook claims that Kurelek, like Tom Thomson and others, "provides us with a new way of seeing." That large claim needs to be modified. Kurelek's canvases do not intensify the viewer's powers of seeing, so much as *present* what he or she might not have seen. Possible exceptions are his painting of skies, as in *Yukon Trapper's Stop* (1977), or of space, as in *Abandoned Railroad in Cape Breton Island* (1973). Cook more accurately states that "[his] people move through a vast landscape, at work and play, in celebration and suffering, painted in a style that is at once naive and earthy and yet abstract." While Kurelek aspired to a prophetic role, his art is popular for its lively and readable images of reality.

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## Shapes of Historiography

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**Matthew Frye Jacobson**

*Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race.* Harvard UP \$29.95

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**Bonnie G. Smith**

*The Gender of History: Men, Women, and Historical Practice.* Harvard UP n.p.

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Reviewed by Andrea Cabajsky

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In *Whiteness of a Different Color* and *The Gender of History*, Matthew Frye Jacobson and Bonnie G. Smith explore how historiography, despite its claims to objectivity and universality, is not beyond such contingencies as race and gender. For Jacobson, American historiography has ignored the white supremacism fundamental to American foundational narratives that demands that immigrants become Caucasian in the process of becoming American. For Smith, historiography is an inherently male discipline that devalues women's historical writing and is based on pre-existing hierarchies that position men's work as important and women's work as derivative.

Jacobson's *Whiteness of a Different Color* explores how racial classification has been foundational to American nationhood. He emphasizes the historical investment of dominant groups in the maintenance of their class privilege and their supposedly foundational status in American history, achieved by delimiting white racial belonging in judicial and civic spheres and by mutually implicating whiteness with American citizenship. Jacobson's book is a thoroughly researched study of the racial history of European immigration from the late eighteenth century to the present.

Naturalization laws of the late eighteenth century, defined American citizenship, by an individual's "fitness for self-government," and reserved it for those designated as "free white persons," a category increasingly troubled as incoming peasants and labourers from unanticipated regions of Europe aroused doubts about the equation of "whiteness" with "fitness for self-government." Mass European immigration contributed, in the nineteenth century, to the creation of racial categories like Celts, Hebrews, Iberics, and Slavs, whose signification was largely unstable and whose members could alternately find themselves defined as "Caucasians" and "barbarians." Jacobson traces the epistemological shift that enabled groups whose whiteness was contested in the nineteenth century to become naturalized as Caucasians in the twentieth century. Jacobson rightly argues that today's Caucasians owe their broadly recognized whiteness in part to their definition against historically oppressed non-white groups. Yet while whiteness has historically been defined against the "redness" of Natives, the "yellowness" of Asian immigrants, or the "blackness" of African immigrants, he problematically attributes the naturalization of today's Caucasians mainly to a single factor: the inflexible black-white "color line" in the United States.

Despite the predominance of civil rights discourse in American society, Jacobson's

formulation of race relations along a binary black-white colour line marginalizes such groups as Natives, Asians, and Mexicans. For example, because his focus is exclusively on the construction of whiteness, Natives are conflated throughout Jacobson's text with Celts and other "versions of 'de vile savage'" who first marked the boundaries of American citizenship. And despite his relatively brief examination of laws restricting Asian immigration, conspicuously absent from his investigation of colour is the so-called yellow peril discourse that has objectified Asians for over a century.

The marginalizations that occur in Jacobson's own text may be a result of his treatment of race as a hermeneutic tool useful for shedding light on the patterns of history. History, in its turn, consists of a more or less progressing series of conscious patterns that can be primarily located in such documents as segregation statutes, miscegenation codes, housing covenants, and slavery laws. And racial subjectification in the United States seems to be mainly informed by what Jacobson calls "the contest over whiteness." While Jacobson deals thoughtfully with shifts in what it means to be and not to be white throughout American history, racial identification is treated as an essentially historical phenomenon, which leaves unexamined the symbolic, unconscious, and other factors formative of identity, as well as processes of identification among minority groups that occur beyond a dominant/marginal paradigm.

History, Bonnie G. Smith maintains, has not been mostly written by men or even been mostly concerned with men, despite the predominance of male historians. Beginning her examination in France with Madame de Stael, she demonstrates that women have had a productive and growing interest in historiography since at least the end of the eighteenth century. This interest is manifest mainly in what has been called "amateur writing," a genre that has come to

be seen as in some way fit for women who made their living by writing for the marketplace, outside of the mostly exclusive professional institution of history.

Smith examines the superficial, literary, trivial, and "feminine" side of amateur writing from the late eighteenth to the early twentieth century in order to trace how amateurist written practices have enabled professionalization. For example women's repetitive focus on "superficial subjects," such as accounts of queenship and notable women, to show how women's amateurism can explore the sexism inherent in concepts like "reality," "citizenship," and "republicanism." There is also trauma, the "unspoken, abject pain of women," within amateur writing. The details of rooms, clothing, jewelry, hairstyles, and so on, are read as evidence of women's "posttraumatic escape" into the details of physical surroundings but also as an effort to accommodate everyday experiences in historical accounts.

The discourse of universality that excluded women from historiography in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was complicated in the early twentieth century by both professional women and scientifically trained men who questioned the notion of transcendent truth that had inspired the first generations of scientific historians. Modernism opened the professional study of the past to issues of probability, aesthetics, and perspective. Historiography came to acknowledge the development of a cohesive society based on group rituals of the body, while the historian's work was increasingly seen as subjective and imaginative.

Rather than challenging a male epistemology, however, modernism cast the historian as a type of a superhuman with visionary powers capable of synthesizing everyday life with the flow of historical events. For Smith, this legacy persists in contemporary historiography. Despite vast changes and new opportunities for women

in the profession, she argues, "there remains within today's most sophisticated historical paradigms and practices a modern and modernist legacy—that is, a pervasive recourse to the fascinating self of the male historian as *the* authority on the past." Smith's final imperative is that historiography "admit the dialogical, multiple, and charged nature of writing the past."

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## Charlie's Choice

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**Wayne Johnston**

*Baltimore's Mansion*. Alfred A. Knopf Canada

\$32.95

Reviewed by Lawrence Mathews

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Subtitled *A Memoir*, Wayne Johnston's hard-headed lyrical reading of the Newfoundland psyche, largely through the prism of his own family, might as accurately have been called *An Elegy*—not so much for the country that Newfoundland once was, but for the mode of understanding that privileges notions of nationality over the levelling (or liberating) ideas of modernity.

The crucial historical event is the referendum of 1948, in which Newfoundlanders voted by the slimmest of margins to confederate with Canada. Johnston's father, Arthur, is strongly anti-confederate throughout his life, maintaining a romantic vision of a nation rooted in traditions that are, in some unspecifiable way, superior to those that would supplant them. Johnston's grandfather Charlie, a blacksmith in the Southern Shore community of Ferryland (the site of Lord Baltimore's attempt to establish a colony in the New World), might be assumed to represent the same sentiments.

But in a powerfully imagined scene near the end of the book, Johnston reveals what has been broadly hinted at almost throughout. In the voting booth, Charlie Johnston, inexplicably inspired by a "solitary

impulse," marks his ballot for confederation: "He will wonder later if his hand was God guided to do what to him seemed and always will seem wrong . . ." We are given no direct information about the source of the "solitary impulse." Elsewhere Charlie is consistently associated with integrity, good sense, and hard work; some of the most striking passages describe his labours at the forge. Further, as blacksmith, he occupies a central, almost priestlike role in his community. Is his action completely arbitrary, a comment on the irrationality of the Newfoundland spirit? To draw such a conclusion is to be reductively ironic. Perhaps Johnston's subtler point is that Charlie's act reflects the ability of Newfoundlanders to adapt intuitively to changing circumstances, an ability that has allowed "Newfoundland" to survive as a cultural entity from Lord Baltimore's time to the present. Much earlier in the book, Charlie has the foresight to warn his son, *circa* 1940, that, although there have been Johnston blacksmiths in Ferryland since 1848, "[t]here'll be no more need for blacksmiths soon. . . ." The claims of tradition will not prevail against the current of social change.

As a character in the book, Wayne Johnston himself is self-effacing, taking centre stage only when it becomes absolutely necessary for narrative coherence. In places, though, his own position crystallizes. In one section, Wayne (aged 10) and his father take a trip on the trans-Newfoundland railway. The year is 1968, and the train is in the process of being replaced by buses—faster, cheaper, the wave of the future. The train is identified by Arthur Johnston (and many others) with "the old Newfoundland." At one point in the journey, Wayne can see a bus on the highway running parallel to the tracks:

I found myself now treacherously rooting for that single silver bus. I was impressed by how much faster it was moving than we were. The bus looked like a sleek,

wingless plane, and, in comparison with the many-sectioned train, seemed so heroically singular, so self-sufficient. . . . The weathered, wooden train, the wooden, black tarred ties, the rusting rails, the ancient railway bed . . . all seemed to blend in with the landscape, an unobtrusiveness that to some was one of its merits, though it did not seem so to me.

This passage is central to *Baltimore's Mansion's* implicit argument. "The weathered, wooden train" may symbolize the archaic notion of collective identity that Arthur Johnston espouses relentlessly and that Charlie Johnston, at one significant moment, repudiates definitively.

Certainly when one looks for tangible evidence of the glories of "the old Newfoundland" cherished by Arthur, the findings—apart from the character of Charlie himself—seem pathetically thin. In fact, Arthur's Newfoundland is only the Avalon Peninsula (the rest of the island voted two to one in favour of confederation), more particularly that region's Catholic working class, which had little political and economic power either before or after union with Canada. What was lost with confederation seems more a dream than a reality.

This dream is epitomized by such phenomena as the superstitious piety associated with the Virgin Berg, "an iceberg hundreds of feet high and bearing an undeniable likeness to the Blessed Virgin Mary [that] appeared off St. John's harbour" in 1905. Catholics all along the Southern Shore collected barrels of fragments, which were transported to church basements "where they were kept like casks of wine, consecrated by a bishop and afterwards used sparingly as holy water. . . ."

(Johnston's account of this incident is devastatingly deadpan.) But some forty years later, as Charlie Johnston nears death, he thinks, touchingly, of the water and the possibility that the "priest might prescribe

. . . one healing ladleful." And we are reminded of what is authentic in the tradition he represents and what is chimerical.

Arthur, coming of age around the time of confederation and wounded like his mythic namesake, does not think about the possibility of healing. He expresses his bitterness in childish ways, as when he forces the young Wayne to recite, for the amusement of visitors, a "catechism" in which Joey Smallwood (leader of the confederate party) is ridiculed as "him, who toad-like, croaks and dwells among the undergrowth" and who leaves "behind him as he goes a trail of slime." Arthur is not unique, merely an extreme manifestation of a generation that "had in part defined themselves by their opposition to Joey. . . . Now, in their early fifties, they were no less bewildered than they had been back then. They had followed the river of what should have been, knowing it led nowhere."

As Wayne grows up, he feels the attraction of his father's quixotic romanticism but keeps his distance from it. At one point Arthur tells him the possibly apocryphal story of Newfoundlanders living abroad at the time of confederation who opted neither to return home nor to get new passports from Canadian embassies. Wayne's judgment is both generous and dismissive: "Citizens of no country, staging their futile, furtive, solitary protests that were at once so grand and so absurd." For Wayne Johnston's generation, "the very existence of the country known as Newfoundland was just a story." *Baltimore's Mansion* will rank as one of the most delicately written and powerfully felt retellings of that complex and enigmatic tale.



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## "We who are homeless"

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**Raminder Kaur and John Hutnyk, eds.**

*Travel Worlds: Journeys in Contemporary Cultural Politics.* U of Minnesota P \$22.50

**David Campbell and Michael J. Shapiro, eds.**

*Moral Spaces: Rethinking Ethics and World Politics.* U of Minnesota P \$19.95

**Michael Walzer**

*On Toleration.* Yale UP \$16.50

Reviewed by Charles Barbour

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By far the most intriguing of these three books is *Travel Worlds*, a collection of essays edited by Raminder Kaur and John Hutnyk. *Travel Worlds* explores the contingency of the borders that define certain identities (especially national borders and identities), and distinguishes between different kinds of border-crossings. In particular, the movements of peaceful and neutral western tourists are called into question, and shown to be complicit (like those of the anthropologist) with a variety of colonizing gestures. The travel of tourists is contrasted with the travel of refugees, terrorists and migrant workers (not to mention commodities, currencies, cultural artifacts).

In their contribution to *Travel Worlds*, "The Strut of the Peacocks" (which refers to both the guards who symbolically defend and the tourists who easily cross the Indo-Pak border), Virinder S. Kalra and Navtej K. Purewal suggest that, when it comes to border-crossing, we should make a distinction between "transgression" and "transition." This distinction is operative in most of the essays in this volume, as most examine whose border-crossings are transgressive (risking persecution and death), and whose merely transitional (playful, safe).

So Kaur and Hutnyk have compiled a book that sets out "to think otherwise about departures and itineraries," to dislodge any easy conflation of travel and tourism, and to refine, or redefine, just

what is meant by "transgression."

This book is not a plea for people to "stay home"—even Seán McLoughlin and Virinder S. Kalra's cleverly titled "Wish You Were(n't) Here?" does not go that far. The editors of, and contributors to, *Travel Worlds* are clearly aware of the close relationship between the history of writing (including their own) and the history of travel. It would be difficult to think the history of writing without simultaneously thinking the history of travel, and of national "borders"—including all the violence and romance attributable to each.

Perhaps in order to address the relationship between these histories, the "borders" of *Travel Worlds* are rendered rather permeable, not restricting access to academic essays alone, allowing for the incursion of poetry (Joyoti Grech's "Anthem" and "Bordercrossing") and "fictive-factual" narrative (Raminder Kaur's "Parking the Snout in Goa"). However, while they leave open its possibility, it is not clear that the editors of *Travel Worlds* would appreciate playful interpretation. Specific politics and specific histories are examined in *Travel Worlds*, not the immaterial afflatus of philosophy, of metaphor or of (as the editors write) "a discursive critique of meaning." The editors of *Travel Worlds* wish to maintain and defend the relatively traditional (yet extremely, and precisely, *volatile*) border between politics and philosophy, materialism and idealism, (new) historicism and (quasi-)transcendentalism.

Not to say that the distinction between historicism and transcendentalism is without merit. In fact, it is perhaps the easiest way to distinguish between *Travel Worlds* and *Moral Spaces*. If the former is concerned with specific and situated politics, the latter is concerned with ostensibly more "fundamental" philosophical questions conditioning the possibility of any politics. For example, in his contribution to *Moral Spaces*, Michael Dillon (paraphrasing what



William Connolly, also a contributor, calls "the ontopolitical") writes that "every political interpretation invokes a set of fundamentals about the necessities and possibilities of human being." Dillon's essay, "The Scandal of the Refugee," also makes claims that "the refugee, like the human itself, is always both more and less than human." Reducing refugees to a metaphor for any given human in the throes of some existential crisis would likely infuriate the editors of *Travel Worlds*. The extent to which one can be convinced of claims like Dillon's will probably determine one's reaction to most of the essays collected in *Moral Spaces*.

*Moral Spaces* sets out to "redress the moral lacunae" in the field of inter- or post-national relations—the long-standing assumption that "self-interest" is the only principle governing relations, perhaps not always *within*, but always *between* nation states. More precisely, *Moral Spaces* is an attempt to get around the terms set up by the wearisome liberal-communitarian debate, first by showing the philosophical foundations of both positions to be identical (in that they both presuppose stable, or stabilizing, political subjects), and then by examining how political subjects are not given before relations, but constituted through relations. The question is how to characterize such relations. As their title indicates, the editors of *Moral Spaces* would like us to consider characterizing relations as both moral and spatial.

In their "Introduction," and in each of their contributions ("The Deterritorialization of Responsibility" and "The Ethics of Encounter"), editors David Campbell and Michael J. Shapiro argue that Levinas and Derrida have shown that every "theory of ethics" or "moral cartography" ultimately elides the asymmetry and specificity of ethical relations. As Campbell and Shapiro put it, "the concern with Ethics obscures the contingencies and complexities of the ethical." While the point is well taken, beyond

it I am not entirely convinced that applying Levinasian ethics (or Derrida's reworking of Levinas's claims) to post-national political relations is as fruitful as Campbell and Shapiro suggest.

There remain fierce political antagonisms throughout the world, antagonisms that distinguish political relations (indeed, political *struggles*) and that are not likely to be quelled through any appeal to an "infinite responsibility for the other." I would argue that politics requires different political subjects who occupy, and self-consciously occupy, the position of "other"—people who know that they are oppressed, that they are suffering, and that they can resist. In my opinion, political subjects come into existence through struggles, antagonisms and resistance. If I understand Levinas properly, for anyone to proclaim "I am other" would amount to the greatest violence imaginable—for it would collapse the infinite divide between self and other upon which Levinasian ethics is based. Conversely, the *endless* coming-into-existence of *new* political subjects through struggles and resistance is what William Connolly, in his contribution to *Moral Spaces*, calls "the politics of becoming."

Interestingly, while the editors do not mention it, Connolly's influence marks as many of the essays in *Moral Spaces* as does that of Levinas. In "Suffering, Justice and the Politics of Becoming" Connolly develops a selective reading of Nietzsche, arguing that a Nietzschean faith in the prolific "abundance of life" makes possible an affirmation of the ceaseless emergence of "new cultural identities" or political subjects "out of old energies, injuries and differences." This suggestion is very similar to what Derrida has been writing lately about "the work of mourning" and "democracy to come" (concepts to which many of the essays in *Moral Spaces* appeal). And while the distinction is porous and fleeting, it is perhaps to Nietzsche-Derrida, rather than

Levinas-Derrida, that the question concerning post-national politics would best be put.

But I would not have arrived at these conclusions had I not read *Moral Spaces*, and I have failed to mention some of the stronger Levinas-Derrida sub-currents in *Moral Spaces* (the strongest being what Campbell calls "the politics of decision"). This collection is an important correction of the simplifications that typify the liberal-communitarian debate.

Not so with Michael Walzer's *On Toleration*. For quite some time now Walzer has been trying to radicalize liberalism. *On Toleration* is, in part, an attempt to address the kinds of conundrums that keep post-modern liberals awake at night. Walzer wants to take the classic liberal concept of "tolerance" and argue that it is *not* (or not *quite*) what liberalism has always claimed it to be—namely a static and universal moral category or imperative.

Tolerance is not a category, Walzer argues, it is a *process* (hence "toleration"). Walzer's "toleration" is not a universal and transcendent moral principle that must be applied uniformly, but a process that has had discrete expressions at different times in history and in different political and cultural contexts (different "regimes of toleration" as he puts it). Walzer examines five such "regimes of toleration," concluding with "immigrant societies," which are exemplified, not surprisingly, by the United States of America.

Early in his book, Walzer is sure to note that one of the limits of toleration is "some version of peaceful coexistence." Nothing should be tolerated that seeks to override the peaceful coexistence of determined political subjects or "groups," Walzer argues. It is only by the end of the book, once readers have been safely convinced of the great virtue of American liberalism, that Walzer ventures the following:

[T]oleration brings an end to persecution and fearfulness, but it is not a formula for

social harmony. The newly tolerated groups, insofar as they are really different, will often also be antagonistic, and they will seek political advantage.

At question in *On Toleration* are not the limits of tolerance, but the definition of political space. Walzer would like to define a political space that allows for both peaceful coexistence and some measure of antagonism. A radical political platform indeed. Liberalism remains unable to imagine that it may not be a question of reinstating or maintaining the social institutions that guarantee fixed identities, but of thinking, even *liberating*, differences and relations that are always already prior to, and relentlessly producing new, identities.

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## The Myths of Immigration

Ninette Kelley and Michael Trebilcock

*The Making of the Mosaic: A History of Canadian Immigration Policy*. U of Toronto P \$75.00/\$29.95

Reviewed by Norman Ravvin

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Though the title may not entice non-specialists, the authors of this volume have applied their combined expertise, as specialists in law, economics, and Canadian immigration, so that their study addresses broad issues related to Canadian national culture. The introduction to *The Making of the Mosaic* states its focus as the "history of immigration policy, not the social or cultural histories of various immigrant groups who have settled in Canada." Yet the authors are quick to set this focus against the backdrop of questions that interest us all: "how and why did our perceptions of ourselves as a community change over time, and what shifts in the configuration of ideas or interests best explain these changes? How has our contemporary communal self-definition been shaped by the lessons of history? As Canadians continue to grapple with immigration issues in

the future, what do the lessons of history suggest that we might aspire to become?"

The most surprising outcome of the research present in this book is that Canadian immigration policy has not been driven by any paramount cultural values, nor has it taken any reliable, steady course. Instead, the authors argue, immigration has been used as a tool of nation-building as often as it has become the focus of racist or protectionist rants.

The authors set out to map the "major epochs or episodes" in immigration policy, and also to examine how each episode affected the pattern of Canadian communities. The earliest episodes under discussion include the first centuries of English and French colonization, during which the most dramatic effects of European immigration included the destruction of First-Nations society, and the hardening of competition between French and English colonists to affirm the ascendancy of their respective culture. A substantial change in the *status quo* took place following the American War of Independence, when Loyalists began to arrive in large numbers. A further influx of British immigrants began in the 1850s, with the "pauper" immigration created by the Irish potato famine.

Following Confederation, the new dominion's government saw immigration and settlement as a necessity, to support economic growth, supply cheap labour, and provide an obstacle to American claims on the Canadian west. As few restrictions were placed on immigrants in these early decades, a vast number of newcomers arrived following the turn of the century, establishing "urban ethnic ghettos" in major centres. One can see, with hindsight, how the country is still marked by this influx, by the transformation of the downtowns of Montreal, Toronto, and Winnipeg into neighbourhoods capable of receiving and nurturing communities of great cultural variety.

It was only with the failure of world economies, and Canada's, in 1929, that the doors began to close on those wishing to enter the country. And much to the country's shame, the following years would include a betrayal of its Japanese citizens, through internment and an attempt to deport established citizens. At the same time, Canada proved to be one of the least willing recipients of Jews fleeing German-occupied Europe.

*The Making of the Mosaic* reveals how unpredictable an immigrant's likelihood of reaching these shores has been, based on economic cycles, political developments abroad, and the whims of particular xenophobic authorities. A further complication is the fact that many who have immigrated to Canada have traditionally moved on to the United States, their preferred site of resettlement. This process began with the return of many Loyalists in the 1780s and 90s, and continued at periods of high immigration to Canada. As a nation that prides itself on being the envy of others abroad, it is interesting to note that for "most of Canada's history, the net migration rate (immigration less migration) has been either negative or only marginally positive."

The book concludes with an excellent summary of the "myths and facts" connected with immigration policy in Canada. The effect of this summary is the sense that the role of immigration in Canadian society and government policy is largely misunderstood and often misrepresented.



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## Building Canada

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**Glenn McArthur and Annie Szamosi**

*William Thomas Architect 1799-1860.* Carleton UP  
\$59.95/\$39.95

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**Rhodri Windsor Liscombe**

*The New Spirit: Modern Architecture in Vancouver, 1938-1963.* Canadian Centre for Architecture US\$35.00

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**Peter Ennals and Deryck W. Holdsworth**

*Homeplace: The Making of the Canadian Dwelling over Three Centuries.* U Toronto P \$65.00/\$24.95

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Reviewed by David Monteyne

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Three recent books deal in different ways with the history of the Canadian built environment. In the order listed above, the three texts are a popular biography of a prolific nineteenth-century Toronto architect, the catalogue and essay from an exhibition on the Modernist style of architecture in post-war Vancouver, and a broad historical survey focusing on the sociology and geography of housing in Canada.

After emigrating from England, William Thomas practiced architecture in Toronto for seventeen years, during a period of great growth for the city. Across British North America, he designed over a hundred buildings of all different types, churches being a specialty, though his most famous buildings are likely St. Lawrence Hall and the Don Jail, both in Toronto. This biography of Thomas by McArthur and Szamosi examines his entire career, beginning with his early buildings (mostly as a speculative developer) in England, through bankruptcies, emigration, architectural competitions, controversies, stylistic shifts, the careers of his sons and other protégés, and the descriptions of his most significant commissions in Canada.

McArthur and Szamosi's impressive monograph unfortunately falls prey to a problem I feel plagues architectural biography generally: the focus becomes a chronological list of building descriptions, patched

together by occasional references to the architect's social context. In this book there is lip service paid to the history of Toronto, the meaning of different architectural styles within the colonial context, and the nascent architectural profession in Canada, but there is no real connection to the big picture. Thomas ran the largest architectural firm in the country, but was this due to his artistic genius, or was it because he was a good businessman who could supervise builders, was aware of the architectural fashions in England, and could alter his plans to please his clients? His biographers want to believe the former, but their description of his career suggests the latter. I find it strange that architectural biographies tend to castigate clients for repressing the initial inspiration of the architect's competition drawings (the second book under review is also guilty of this). Biography often submits to a questionable heroicizing of the subject that leads biographers into apology. When Thomas is embroiled in shady contract dealings and delays over the Don Jail, the authors excuse this due to his "surprising naiveté." I'll say it's surprising—at this time Thomas is sixty-one years old, and this is the final building of his forty-some year career. Finally, for a book focused largely on style, the descriptions and comparisons of different styles and their social meanings are not clear. Nevertheless, this is a well researched and beautiful book, and its accessible style makes it a pleasure to read.

*The New Spirit* was published in conjunction with an exhibition of the same title prepared and presented by the Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montreal, in 1997. The exhibition travelled to Vancouver and Calgary thereafter. During the postwar era, Vancouver was seen as a hotbed of Modernist design. Young architects found clients willing to experiment with new formal solutions to solve modern problems. Contemporary critics and architects from Eastern Canada,

the United States, Europe, recognized something exceptional about the buildings produced at that time, and present-day curators agree with them.

Windsor-Liscombe presents well researched material, including interviews and extensive archival work. He has mined the journals of this period for every mention of West Coast buildings and architects; of particular interest is the attention Vancouver received in foreign publications. This formidable research, however, could have benefited from some judicious editing and organization.

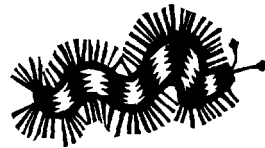
Windsor-Liscombe's historical concerns are mainly biographical and stylistic. A large portion of *The New Spirit* is devoted to the education of West Coast Modernists, the pictures they looked at, and the great international Modernists they emulated. Time and again, Windsor-Liscombe recounts what he sees as each Vancouver building's antecedents among the icons of the Modern movement. Buildings that do not represent the correct Miesian or Corbusian forms are brushed aside. The limitations of this formalist approach have been exposed for some time as ignoring much of what is actually built; and suggesting that architecture is somehow distinct from social issues. *The New Spirit* will invite lively debate, but one wonders whether Modernist genealogies and the name-dropping of famous buildings really invite "general readers to recognize their relationship to architecture," as Phyllis Lambert nobly hopes in her "Foreword"

The third, and for me the most satisfying book of the three, *Homeplace*, tracks the history of the Canadian dwelling from initial immigrant settlement to the growing urbanization of the early twentieth century. Ennals and Holdworth accent the changing demographics and social contexts of three centuries of immigration, migration, and industrialization in Canada. Polite houses, designed by architects for wealthy patrons, incorporate fashionable styles and materi-

als from Europe and from established American colonies. These grand houses are the subject of traditional architectural history, but, as the authors show, polite architecture was a minuscule presence in a dense North American streetscape of vernacular buildings. The chapters on workers' housing fit less well into the organization of the book, but are vital because such housing is prevalent in our resource-based history. It is refreshing to read in a scholarly study about caboose shanties, bunkhouses, and other ephemeral structures in work camps.

The words folk and vernacular are often conflated, but here the authors complicate this terminology. For them, folk represents house forms directly inspired by traditions known in the native lands of the immigrants, and built by them on arrival in the New World. In most cases, within a generation, vernacular supersedes folk housing. Memorable is the authors' compelling picture of the recent immigrant's "instinct for the familiar" being tempered by a "willingness to experiment" with different housing forms encountered in North America.

At times, the descriptions of house types and appearances lacks clarity, and *Homeplace* could benefit from more illustrations. More could be made of technological changes in the building industry, particularly nineteenth-century developments like the balloon frame and electricity, which altered the mass production and the internal organization of houses. However, this book will prove useful reading for scholars in all fields of Canadian Studies.



## The More Things Change

**Peter Oliver**

*'Terror to Evil-Doers': Prisons and Punishments in Nineteenth-Century Ontario.* U of Toronto  
\$75.00/\$45.00

**Merilyn Simonds**

*The Convict Lover: A True Story.* Macfarlane  
Walter & Ross \$28.95

Reviewed by Jason Haslam

In a May 1999 press release delineating the "Blueprint for a safer Ontario," we are informed that Ontario premier Mike Harris told the families of crime victims that "[w]hen it comes to letting convicted criminals back on our streets, public safety and the rights of lawabiding citizens must come first." Peter Oliver, in *'Terror to Evil-Doers'*, makes a comment (on Hugh Thompson's 1831 recommendation for the construction of an Upper Canadian penitentiary) that speaks nicely to such plans: "Nowhere in the recital was there any mention of the penitentiary's potential as a rehabilitative institution." The resonance of contemporary discussions of crime to those of over 150 years ago is not, Oliver would claim, accidental. At the very end of his study, Oliver claims that "The long-term results of the emergence in the nineteenth century of the dominant forms of imprisonment were deep and enduring. Although innovation and change eventually came to Ontario, the province and its people are still feeling the consequences of the nineteenth-century punitive equation."

The reading of both Oliver's study of prisons in nineteenth-century Ontario and Simonds' *The Convict Lover* easily evokes this sense of the immutable nature of political debate. Both books depict, from different angles, the relationships between convicted criminals, prison officials, the general population, and, yes, politicians, and they do so in terms relevant to today's prison and political systems.

Oliver's text is an exhaustively researched study of the development of legalized punishment in Ontario in the nineteenth century. Beginning with a description of the local gaols of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries (Toronto's first gaol "measured thirty-four by twenty feet and was divided into three rooms"), Oliver goes on to narrate, in remarkable detail, the emergence of the penitentiary system and the early attempts at prison reform. In many ways, the study functions as an alternative history of Canada. Spanning the Colonial to post-Confederacy periods, and touching on such political figures as Sir John A. Macdonald, William Lyon Mackenzie, and Lord Dalhousie, the book provides insight into the everyday functioning of Canadian governmental apparatuses during this formative time.

The major portion of *'Terror to Evil-Doers'* is a close analysis of the functioning of, and political machinations surrounding, the Kingston penitentiary. Opened in 1835, the penitentiary was, Oliver writes, modelled in large part on the penitentiary in Auburn, New York. The Auburn system was intended to deter people from committing crimes by focusing its punitive efforts on hard labour and harder discipline for its inmates. From its beginnings, Kingston penitentiary was to be a place of punishment, not rehabilitation or education; its principles would be "[t]he rule of silence, the breaking of the convict's will, the pervasive order and regularity imposed by prison rules, and . . . constant surveillance. . . ." Oliver documents how these principles were both enacted and altered in Kingston pen's early history; this documentation also includes a detailed rereading of the wardenship of the now notorious Henry Smith.

The only problem with Oliver's account is the dearth of analytic commentary on the larger social origins of the punitive measures enacted in the penitentiary. He is, however, unabashed about admitting that

his is a study of the *particular* origins of legalized punishment in Ontario. When Oliver does engage in social speculation he offers concise, but sometimes subtly contradictory, interpretations. Near the end of the book, for example, in a discussion of prison statistics gathered during the nineteenth century, he states that "the statistics compiled by prison officials tended to confirm the bias of those who believed that a disproportionate number of offenders were of Irish and American origin . . . . Their focus [however] was on class rather than ethnicity, on the danger to community values posed by a recidivist population of drifters and low life." Despite such statements, he claims that his thesis is "that transformations in the criminal justice system were made primarily in response to elitist views and influenced only indirectly by economic change and class tensions." However, such occasional lapses do not detract from Oliver's overall achievement here; *Terror to Evil-Doers* offers the student of Canadian history an invaluable resource of data and close historical analysis.

Merilyn Simonds' *The Convict Lover: A True Story* picks up roughly where *Terror to Evil-Doers* leaves off. Starting in October 1919, and ending in 1921, her novel tells the stories of three interconnected characters: Phyllis Halliday, a young woman from Portsmouth, Ontario; Joseph Cleroux, a short-term prisoner in Kingston pen; and William St Pierre Hughes, the superintendent of Canada's penitentiaries. As the subtitle suggests, the novel is based on historical events and personages. In 1987 Simonds discovered, in her house, several letters written between Halliday and Cleroux while the latter was serving his prison term. Several of these letters are reprinted in the book. As Simonds writes in the prologue, "From the careless jumble of papers, remarkable characters and events emerged. A convict, a penitentiary, a village girl. The end of the Great War."

Simonds weaves these "characters and events" into a well-developed story that functions, much like Oliver's text, as a reinterpretation of a part of Ontario's and Canada's history through the depiction of the lives of particular individuals. Juxtaposed to the romantic tale of the young woman and her epistolary relationship with the inmate is a narrative of constantly frustrated attempts at meaningful prison reform (another theme echoed in Oliver's work). Depictions of post-war unrest and class tensions fill out the text. In the attempt to create a documentary feel to the work, however, some of these depictions jar with the main narratives. A preoccupation with historical detail leads, occasionally, to somewhat heavy-handed references to certain events, and takes away from the depth of characterization. As a sign, though, of Simonds' creative talent, the most fully developed character is Cleroux, about whom she could not find much historical data beyond the letters. Simonds' work is, as one of Cleroux's letters states of his correspondence with Halliday, "more than a pleasure."

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## Awake to the Sacred

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**Barbara Pell**

*Faith and Fiction: A Theological Critique of the Narrative Strategies of Hugh MacLennan and Morley Callaghan.* Wilfrid Laurier UP n.p.

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**Vijay Mishra**

*Devotional Poetics and the Indian Sublime.* State U of New York P n.p.

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**Robert Atwan, George Dardess, and Peggy Rosenthal, eds.**

*Divine Inspiration: The Life of Jesus in World Poetry.* Oxford UP \$52.50

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Reviewed by Laurie Aikman

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There has been a remarkable resurgence of critical interest in the topic of religion and literature over the last ten years. Two recent works of scholarship, and a new anthology of poetry, all attest to the diverse ways in

which thoughtful inquiries into the religious dimensions of literature can offer significant insights into, and rich readings of, both familiar and unfamiliar texts. The authors of these books, as well as the texts and writers they study, are awake to the sacred in literature: to the challenges of its representation, to the disturbing contradictions it can engender, and to its creative and inspirational possibilities.

Barbara Pell's book is a slim volume that assesses each writer's success in blending a religious or moral vision with an aesthetically satisfying literary form. Pell is sensitive to the difficulties involved in writing a religious novel in "a post-Christian era." She argues that the novelist who attempts to explore religious meaning in realist fiction is engaged in a "struggle between faith and fiction": "The constant problem for any novelist—balancing freedom of character development against authorial control of the plot—is greatly magnified when the novelist's theme is the intervention of the supernatural into the natural." Pell tackles the difficult question of the relationship between ethics and aesthetics, insisting that "[b]ad dogma can make good art; orthodox theology is no guarantee of literary success."

Pell's book is impressively comprehensive, providing overviews of the plots and themes of all the major novels of both writers, as well as a synthesis of much of the critical literature on MacLennan and Callaghan. Pell addresses important questions regarding the relationship between a writer's religious or moral vision and the literary form in which those beliefs are embodied. She takes MacLennan to task for his "tendency to manipulate plot and character development toward a theological solution," while she criticizes Callaghan for the way in which his novels, over time, became "flabbier in both artistic form and moral meaning." Overall, though, her study is a celebratory one, praising the way both authors portray their characters (and

hence, humankind) with compassion, and offer a message of hope grounded in some form of religious faith. *Faith and Fiction* is a reminder not only of the complex relationships between ideologies and literary forms, but also of the ways in which novels can have a deep influence on their readers that goes beyond the printed page.

In *Devotional Poetics and the Indian Sublime*, Vijay Mishra is also concerned with questions of art and faith, describing his own scholarly journey as an effort "to connect aesthetics with belief and . . . to rethink the contribution of the category of the sublime to our theorization of [Indian] devotional aesthetics." Mishra takes an unapologetically comparatist stance in his study of Indian devotional (*bhakti*) poetry, convincingly defending a theoretical approach that refuses to be intimidated by allegations of Orientalism, and that is sceptical of the naïve privileging of a "nativist hermeneutic." Indeed, one of the book's greatest strengths is its author's knowledge of both the Western and Indian traditions, and how successfully he is able to bring them into dialogue with each other.

*Devotional Poetics and the Indian Sublime* attempts to demonstrate how Western philosophy (particularly the notion of the sublime) can illuminate our understanding of Indian literature and culture, while the latter can also invite us to rethink the categories of philosophy.

*Devotional Poetics and the Indian Sublime* is theoretically and philosophically rich and dense. It is perhaps most suited to those with a deep interest in the philosophy of the sublime, or in medieval Indian literature. Nevertheless, Mishra writes in a way that largely succeeds in making his subject accessible to an academic audience who may not have a grounding in either of these specialized topics. The philosophical systems of Hegel, Kant and Schopenhauer, the *Bhagavadgita*, *bhakti* poetry, and the poetry of Kabir are all discussed by Mishra



in a way that provides background information without condescending to the reader. Yet rather than simply using the philosophical concept of the sublime as a lens through which to view Indian devotional literature, Mishra offers a complex and nuanced discussion of the unexpected ways in which the sublime is apprehended in Hindu thought. He never loses sight of the political and ideological implications of his subject, emphasizing that “bhakti itself is both an ideology and a genre, both politics and aesthetics.”

*Divine Inspiration: The Life of Jesus in World Poetry* is an anthology of close to 300 poems from a wide variety of historical periods and cultural traditions, all of which make direct reference to the Christian Gospel narratives. The editors emphasize that “it is not primarily a book of religious or devotional poetry—of poetry, that is, written by believers for believers. . . . It is instead an effort to bring together examples of the fresh, varied, and unpredictable ways in which the words of the Gospels have inspired poets in the past and continue to inspire poets today.” The focus of the anthology is away from “universalism” and onto cultural and philosophical diversity, with an emphasis on twentieth-century literature. The editors have made a commendable effort to foreground poets not necessarily represented in other anthologies of world religious poetry, and to include translated poems that appear in this volume for the first time in English. The book’s introduction provides a very helpful historical and literary overview of the broad categories into which the anthology’s poems can be grouped, emphasizing the poetic modes, and the concomitant philosophical or theological perspectives, that have been favoured by different historical periods. The millennial flavour that pervades the anthology’s introduction suggests the secularism of the twentieth century is not grounds for despair, but as a situation that can offer the impetus for a

deeper excavation of the Gospel narratives, and perhaps a more honest and less self-assured struggle with their implications.

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## Reading Green

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**Diana M.A. Relke**

*Greenwor(l)ds: Ecocritical Readings of Canadian Women's Poetry.* U Calgary P \$24.95

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Reviewed by Alison Calder

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Ecocriticism isn’t just for hippies anymore. Coeval with TV ads promoting a decentred postmodern culture is an explosion of creative and critical writings that insist on the importance of place and the urgency of understanding our connections to it. The production of these texts is fueled by the belief that, as Diana Relke writes, “matter matters.” In *Greenwor(l)ds*, Relke translates this belief into an analysis of the function of nature in Canadian women’s poetry. Such an understanding is important, she believes, because women relate to nature in a fundamentally different way from men. Men, she writes, are socially conditioned to believe that both nature and women are theirs to dominate. Women, who are identified in some ways with nature, must therefore have a different understanding of it. This different understanding is what Relke seeks to illuminate.

*Greenwor(l)ds* opens by connecting cultural myths about women to those about nature, showing how each myth changes in response to complex social and historical pressures. The connections between the categories “woman” and “nature” emphasize the contingent and complicated nature of these constructions and provide a powerful argument for considering the two in tandem. Her essays range widely, considering in turn Margaret Atwood, Marjorie Pickthall, Constance Lindsay Skinner, Dorothy Livesay, Isabella Valancy Crawford, Daphne Marlatt, Phyllis Webb, P.K. Page, and Marilyn Dumont. The essays are

united by an increasing focus on how these women poets subvert a masculinist view of nature, using it as a site to launch critiques of gender relations, and as a space to develop a more holistic, organic view of nature and the human relation to it. Relke concludes by arguing for what she calls “halfbreed poetics,” a non-hierarchical, non-patriarchal way of understanding culture and nature that embraces their complexity and recognizes interconnections between them.

The strength of *Greenwor(l)ds* is Relke’s argument that the Canadian literary tradition has been retrospectively constructed to endorse the nature/culture opposition and so to exclude women poets. She asserts convincingly that it is possible to support Northrop Frye’s theory that Canadian poetry is marked by a “deep terror” of nature only if the writings of the women poets she discusses are ignored. The “critical industry” that sprang up around Frye has led to the erection of a one-sided theory of Canadian literature. In bringing nature back into the picture, Relke asserts, a more balanced, more accurate, and more ecopolitically useful vision of Canadian literature emerges.

Unfortunately, *Greenwor(l)ds* doesn’t provide a good example of the criticism Relke calls for. Her analysis of the individual writers lacks the complexity she demands. This lack is most clearly demonstrated in Relke’s discussion of Constance Lindsay Skinner and her subsequent argument (focusing on Terry Goldie’s idea of the Indigene) that postcolonial literary theory in Canada focuses exclusively on race and ignores gender. This gender blindness results in a theorization in which, she argues, “the social construction of women [is] reduced to a linguistic phallocentrism.” In consequence, “white women writers were no longer seen to be writing as women, but as whites.” But if Relke’s charge is valid, it can equally be leveled against her own writing: by privileging gender exclusively as the site of oppression, Relke dis-

cusses Skinner (and other white poets) only as a woman. Skinner was white and a woman; any meaningful analysis of her work must strive to address both. More problematically, Relke addresses Marilyn Dumont with precisely the narrowness she sees in Goldie’s approach: Dumont is treated as a “native,” rather than as a “native woman.” “The body” that Dumont writes becomes, for Relke, the Native body. The unintended message is clear: white women are women, while Native women are natives.

Relke’s concluding celebration of “halfbreed poetics” is provocative, but it must be more fully articulated before it can become valuable. What, for example, is the relation of “halfbreed poetics” to race? How does the fact that some Métis identify themselves as a strong and distinct nation in their own right complicate facile understandings of “Native” writing? Canadian literary tradition is full of examples of white-written Métis characters who function as Native guides or who serve to “indigenize” white characters or ideas. Relke’s analysis veers perilously towards a perpetuation of such white narcissism.

*Greenwor(l)ds* issues a valuable call for a sophisticated Canadian feminist ecocriticism, but ultimately fails to provide it.

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## The CBC’s Glenn Gould

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**John P.L. Roberts, ed.**

*The Art of Glenn Gould: Reflections of a Musical Genius.* Malcolm Lester Books \$26.95

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Reviewed by Paul Hjartarson

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Worldwide fascination with the pianist, writer, broadcast and recording artist Glenn Gould has grown considerably since his death in October 1982 at the age of fifty. The first book on the artist, Geoffrey Payzant’s *Glenn Gould: Music and Mind*, was published in 1978; in the eighteen years since Gould’s death, books have appeared—in English alone—at the rate of

one or two per year; Payzant's study is in its sixth edition and has been translated into several languages. Readers fascinated by Gould's life can now peruse such studies as Otto Friedrich's biography, *Glenn Gould: A Life with Variations* (1989) or Peter F. Ostwald's more recent *Glenn Gould: The Ecstasy and Tragedy of Genius* (1997); those who prefer Gould's own writing need look no further than *The Glenn Gould Reader* (1984), *Glenn Gould, Selected Letters* (1992) or the National Library's Glenn Gould website. Researchers can examine the two-volume *Glenn Gould: Descriptive Catalogue of the Glenn Gould Papers* (1992), consult Nancy Canning's discography, *A Glenn Gould Catalogue* (1992) or search the National Library's Glenn Gould databases via the web. The recordings themselves are still widely available: following Gould's death, Sony Classical reissued his recordings and broadcasts and released other recordings that Gould himself would never have authorized; in addition, the CBC released compact discs of his radio documentaries and early broadcasts. Artists have also capitalized on the fascination with Gould. His life has been the subject of numerous artworks, including a play, David Young's *Glenn* (1992), and a feature film, *Thirty-Two Short Films About Glenn Gould* (1994). In the past two decades Gould the iconoclast has emerged, in short, as one of Canada's best known cultural icons.

Edited by John P.L. Roberts, former head of music for CBC Radio and a friend of the artist for many years, *The Art of Glenn Gould: Reflections of a Musical Genius* is thus only one of many Gould books to appear in recent years. It is, in many ways, a companion volume to Tim Page's *The Glenn Gould Reader*. In the introduction to that work, Page offers the following rationale for his choice of material:

Gould was a supreme perfectionist, and having attained an international reputation before the age of twenty-five, he was in a

position to publish anything he wanted. For these reasons, after reading through two overstuffed cartons of manuscripts, I have concluded that most of the unpublished material should remain that way. . . . Similarly, there exists a quantity of radio plays, television scripts, and the like. Many are wonderful but resist a successful translation into print: Gould understood the crucial distinction between writing to be read and writing to be heard. I hope that his works for those media will eventually reach a wider audience, but this is not their proper platform. Therefore, most of this material is taken from published articles and record liner notes.

Whereas Page's volume collected Gould's published articles and record liner notes, *The Art of Glenn Gould* focuses on much of the material that Page set aside. The volume takes its title from *The Art of Glenn Gould*, a series of broadcasts Roberts himself commissioned for CBC Radio in the 1960s. Gould did not write the scripts for the original twenty-four week series but, Roberts notes, "by the time of the second series he had taken over, and was in total control of the design of the programs, the scripts and the commentary"; what is more, Gould decided that the scope of the series "should be wider than the mere projection of a discography, so he made sure that in addition to his radio documentaries, there would be new material, such as interviews between himself and various colleagues on specific subjects." Although Roberts does not limit his selection to *The Art of Glenn Gould* scripts, that material is central to the text. In addition to mining the scripts from this and other CBC programs, Roberts includes such Gould nuggets as "Forgery and Imitation in the Creative Process," "An Argument for Music in the Electronic Age," and "The Medium and the Message: An Encounter with Marshall McLuhan." Interwoven with such material are eight interviews: the interviews with Vincent Tovell, Alan Rich, and Pat

Moore were broadcast on CBC Radio; those with Dennis Braithwaite, Bernard Asbell, Jim Aikin, Dale Harris, and Ulla Colgrass are from a variety of sources. Roberts provides detailed headnotes for each selection and helpful footnotes. Some selections, as Roberts himself acknowledges, have been heavily edited and not all of the script material has been successfully translated into print; nevertheless, there is enough engaging material here to interest both scholars and Gould enthusiasts and to indicate that Page's initial assessment was cursory.

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## The Art of Recollection

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**Gordon Rodgers**

*A Settlement of Memory.* Killick \$15.95

**Robert Currie**

*Things You Don't Forget.* Coteau \$16.95

**Michael Winter**

*One Last Good Look.* Porcupine's Quill \$16.95

**Warren Cariou**

*The Exalted Company of Roadside Martyrs.*  
Coteau \$14.95

Reviewed by Colin Hill

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It would be easy to praise these four new works of fiction—two from Newfoundland, two from Saskatchewan—for their colourful and convincing representations of local settings. But this kind of regionalist commentary would fail to address a preoccupation common to all four: memory and its relationship to consciousness, storytelling, and history. While these new works are undoubtedly rooted in their environments, their most ambitious and engaging aspects develop out of their investigations of how experience manifests itself in memory.

Gordon Rodgers' *A Settlement of Memory* is both the most traditional and in many ways the most ambitious of these four works. On the surface, Rodgers creates a relatively straightforward story of an orphan, Tom Vincent, whose insatiable drive for success propels him from his humble origins

as a shopkeeper to his eventual position as one of Newfoundland's most powerful and influential men. In terms of its meticulous attention to detail and its chronological emplotment, Rodgers' novel is clearly in the realist tradition, yet the author is well-aware that his writing is straddling the uncertain boundary between history and fiction: as Rodgers warns his readers in a prefatory note, "*A Settlement of Memory* is a work of fiction. Though I have borrowed from Newfoundland's history, geography, and political record, the story has been bound by none of them. . . ." The result of this extensive borrowing is a novel that transforms Newfoundland's history from about 1870 to 1920 into an epic form of myth. Rodgers' third-person narrator is at times the omniscient, detached observer expected in historical writing. Frequently, however, this same narrative voice is intangibly implicated in the communal story he relates. And, while Rodgers contextualizes his story by dating certain passages, making reference to historical figures and events, and including historical documents in his narrative (a newspaper clipping, for example), he simultaneously undermines the illusion of historical accuracy by refusing to allow Vincent to become the hero that "official" history wants him to be. The broad and sometimes self-contradictory perspective reveals Vincent's private as well as his public history, and undercuts the textbook brand of heroism by revealing his personal flaws. Rodgers' depiction of his chosen cultural milieu is exhaustive in scope, and this, along with the oral quality of his prose, make *A Settlement of Memory* as much a commentary on the process of making history and creating communal memory as it is a specific story of Newfoundland's past in relation to hardship, class struggle, perseverance, and charismatic leadership.

Robert Currie's *Things You Don't Forget* is less concerned with the history of a particular place, and more concerned with relat-

ing some common types of experiences found in personal histories. This book of short stories, set against the backdrop of southern Saskatchewan, spans most of the typical stages of life, and the stories advance from coming-of-age tales of courtship and reckless youth, through mid-life experiences relating to family obligations, to a final story of a man who, after his mother's death, struggles to cope with his senile and heart-broken father. As the title of this collection suggests, each of Currie's stories is built around a vivid memory of a particularly formative incident in the life of its narrator—a kiss from Jayne Mansfield, abuse by a drunken parent, an unlikely come-from-behind win in a softball game, an attempt to thwart a twin brother's potential suicide. The end result of Currie's sampling of key life experiences is a compelling mélange of tones and perspectives: nostalgia, pathos, sentimentality, documentary, and black comedy. Initially, these various treatments of individual memories seem highly personal, but the complexity of Currie's book lies in its ability to make these private memories express universal significance. Currie's subject matter is weighty, but he does not elicit the empathy of his readers with cheap appeals to emotion. Rather, the narrative voice is cleverly manipulated and positioned to avoid melodrama, and to provide a perspective on the past in which subjectivity and objectivity are in balance. In certain stories, we have a nostalgic, confessional, first-person narrator: "Chemistry," the first story, opens with "When I was a young fellow in the fifties . . ." suggesting that a book of thinly disguised autobiography lies ahead. In another story, "The Black Aunt," Currie's third-person narrator is positioned much further from the central action of the narrative, and the story reads as an archetypal coming-of-age tale. Currie's stories are especially memorable because their oddly familiar forms and subjects encourage readers to connect

their own personal memories to those recounted by the voices the author creates.

The most consciously experimental of these four works is Michael Winter's *One Last Good Look*, a collection of short stories linked by their common narrator, Gabriel English, a Newfoundlander who eventually leaves the island with mixed feelings. Most immediately, Winter's book offers a series of artful coming-of-age stories as it explores a young man's rites of passage through trials of romance, family tragedy, and, in a particularly Canadian story, moose hunting. At the same time, Winter's book operates on another level, exploring the role of memory in the artistic process. At times, as in one story entitled "Wormholes," Winter's writing becomes almost metafictional in its concern with memory and the writer: "these versions . . . still linger in my head. I think this passage is redundant, I will delete this. And yet the passage contains a crucial piece of information. . . . The rest of the text carries a memory of the information, a gap pointing to its absence." More engaging are the formal properties of Winter's writing that reflect the process of memory in a manner that is almost epistemological. His pared-down style at times comes so close to minimalism that neighbouring sentences and paragraphs are not obviously linked to one another. This has the effect of making the stories often read as a kind of stream-of-consciousness in which the reader is voyeuristically observing another's mind in the process of recalling private memories. Somewhat paradoxically, however, this same aspect of Winter's writing implicates the reader in the narrator's act of remembering. The juxtaposition of narrative fragments reflects the experience of recollection as it occurs in bits and pieces, rather than in a continuous and chronological rush. By not always clearly marking the transitions in his stories, Winter draws attention to the way that memories, and narrative reconstructions of

the past, are built of fragments, and this invites readers to participate in the story by filling in the gaps with their own assumptions and private memories.

The most promising and well-written of these new works is Warren Cariou's *The Exalted Company of Roadside Martyrs*. In this book, comprising two thematically linked novellas, Cariou explores the nature of truth, and the ways in which truth is corrupted when recounted in the form of written narrative. In the first of Cariou's stories, "The Shrine of Badger King," the narrator, a demoralized, heavy-drinking, former member of Saskatchewan's provincial legislature, obsesses over a mythical local crook, nicknamed Badger King, whom he holds responsible for the demise of his political career. Cariou's story is a compelling character study, and a hilarious exploration of the creative possibilities of unreliable narration. The curiously likeable but untrustworthy narrator—he is a politician after all—ironically claims that, through his narrative, "the truth will out," yet his narrative unwittingly reveals the way in which story can be coloured by personal bias and the impulse toward self-preservation. Viewed in this light, Cariou's story is a dark parody of historical writing in which memory is manipulated, and history is revealed as an awkward combination of fact and fiction. In the second of Cariou's novellas, "Lazurus," another depraved narrator offers his version of a disputed series of events. This time, Father Silvan, a cynical and disbelieving priest who not only hates the alcoholic Father Remy with whom he shares his parish, but also falls in love with the mail-order bride of a local hoodlum, writes a journal to recount the events that surround his unintentional resurrection of a parishioner. This narrator's version of events is clearly distorted by his obsessive and unrequited love for the mail-order bride, and his own confused and irreverent contemplation of his vocation. Both of

Cariou's stories explore the relationship between official and unofficial history, and the effect that power and authority have upon what people remember. Cariou's narrators seem troubled by the fact that history is written by the victors, and their stories read as comic and desperate attempts of so-called "losers" to establish their credibility. In the end, Cariou's clever undermining of his narrators's stories suggests, as all four of these books do, that the past is not something that can be won or lost, but rather something that is unceasingly reinvented.

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## Taming the West

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**Fred Stenson**

*The Trade*. Douglas and McIntyre \$24.95

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**Andrew C. Isenberg**

*The Destruction of the Bison: An Environmental History, 1750-1920*. Cambridge UP n.p.

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Reviewed by Albert Braz

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It has become commonplace to assert that representations of the past reveal considerably more about a writer's time than they do about the periods these texts ostensibly examine. As Robertson Davies writes in his essay "Fiction of the Future," "Whatever we write will be contemporary, even if we attempt a novel set in a past age, and put on fancy dress, so to speak." Assuming that to be true, one cannot help but wonder why the two rather dissimilar works under review—a historical novel by a Canadian novelist and an environmental history by a U.S. academic—present such critical portraits of the First Nations.

*The Trade* (nominated for Giller Prize), which is Fred Stenson's third novel and his fifth work of fiction, explores that most Canadian of staple industries: the business of harvesting, buying, and selling furs. Set mainly in what is now Alberta in the first half of the nineteenth century, it deals specifically with the impact of the merger of the

Hudson's Bay and North West companies in 1821. As much as Stenson's panoramic novel has a central character, it is Ted Harriot, a humane and scholarly clerk. However, Harriot's life—like virtually everyone else's in the vast territory from Lake Winnipeg to Vancouver Island, and down to the mouth of the Missouri River—is controlled by the ubiquitous and monopolistic Company. So dominant is the Company that Harriot invests it with human powers. As he is shown reflecting at one point, "If the Company is a body, he thought, and the rivers are its blood, he must try to take his family somewhere, across some divide of continents, or across an ocean, where the tainted blood did not reach." In fact, the Company is nothing less than an industrial cannibal; or, to use a term more germane to the novel, a windigo.

The Company's perhaps inevitable abuses of power are exacerbated by the personality of its first post-amalgamation Governor. Although only thirty-years-old, the anonymous Governor is hired precisely because he is new to the country and has few friends there, making him the ideal person "to cleanse these rivers and forts of their human debris." He is not merely a technocrat whose only concern is profit but a sadist, a Grand Inquisitor who revels in humiliating people. The Governor renders scores of workers redundant without showing any concern for their welfare. Later, after he has become involved in a long-term relationship with a Métis woman, he callously abandons her in order to marry a "proper" English wife, a decision which calls into question the legitimacy of the relationships that many fur traders have with First Nations or Métis women. Moreover, even then, he never ceases to pursue any female resident of his domain, regardless of her marital status. One of those women is Harriot's Métis wife, the beautiful but tragic Margaret Pruden who eventually escapes her ordeal by disappearing into a blizzard.

Stenson's novel is undoubtedly a signifi-

cant addition to Canadian literature. It is not only beautifully written but also intellectually sophisticated. For example, at a time when many individuals and groups are striving to empower themselves by entering history, Stenson suggests that sometimes power resides in the fact that one manages to stay outside history. As the Governor states when he believes no one will ever know about a major detour he makes with his men for romantic reasons: "What an adventure, thought the Governor. Greater than anything he had attempted before, and greater for the fact that it would never be found in anyone's journal, letter or history."

Nevertheless, there is something disappointing about *The Trade*, notably its pervasive gloominess. Stenson's novel would appear to be an allegory about Canadian diffidence, the fact that Canadians are supposedly incapable of rebelling even against the most inhumane authority. Yet it is difficult to imagine how the Company's employees could gather the courage to challenge it, since all natural and cultural forces seem to have conspired against them. Nature is particularly cruel. To quote the narrator, "Death was common in this country. It did not pay to mourn for long." Likewise, neither religion nor art offers much solace, especially the latter. As the painter Paul Kane explains to his bride, in order to make his book "palatable" to readers, he will have to produce not "lies so much as omissions. Leaving out the more bloodthirsty and immoral details." Finally, the First Nations provide no moral example that anyone could emulate. They not only engage in the most brutish behaviour with little provocation but even their stories appear morally wanting. This is evident in the fact that Margaret Pruden's relatives early in her life inculcate into her the belief that she is doomed, since "the beautiful ones in their family were often destroyed by evil." Indeed, the unmistakable impression conveyed by Stenson's novel is not only that

life is Hobbesian but has always been so.

Nature plays a more dynamic role in Andrew Isenberg's *The Destruction of the Bison*. Isenberg, who devotes his study almost exclusively to the U.S. Great Plains, contends that a combination of cultural and environmental factors led to the near-extirmination of the North American bison, notably the arrival of the horse in the New World. Earlier writers, such as the much maligned Charles Mair, have attributed the decimation of the bison to "that great enemy of wild nature, the white man." Isenberg sees the horse as the great culprit, however, since it enabled the First Nations to transform themselves from foot hunters into "equestrian nomads." As he states, "Indians in the plains initiated the decline of the bison when they adopted that most useful of Old World domesticated species, the horse."

There is no question that the introduction of the horse had a tremendous impact on the bison hunt, by making the hunters much more mobile and thus more destructive. However, there is something troubling about the way in which Isenberg fails to differentiate between subsistence hunting and trophy hunting. Even if hunting by the First Nations and the Métis became increasingly wasteful, it seems somehow different from the work of Euroamerican hunters who slaughtered "millions of bison" because they "anticipated the extinction of the species." I do not mean to be overly critical of *The Destruction of the Bison*, which provides an excellent synthesis on the subject and is lucidly written. That being said, with its general reliance on white sources, Isenberg's book also underscores how unbalanced remain the investigations of relations between Natives and Newcomers in North America.




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## Collecting Regions

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**David Stouck and Myler Wilkinson, eds.**  
*Genius of Place: Writing About British Columbia.*  
 Polestar \$29.95

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**George Melnyk**  
*The Literary History of Alberta Volume Two.* U  
 Alberta P \$26.95

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**Lothar Hönnighausen, ed.**  
*Regional Images and Regional Realities.*  
 Stauffenburg Verlag n.p.

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Reviewed by Alison Calder

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In 1998 David Stouck and Myler Wilkinson edited *West by Northwest*, an anthology of short fiction from British Columbia. *Genius of Place* shows how the same ground has been covered by non-fiction writers. The anthology collects 29 essays, articles, and memoirs that focus on British Columbia from a variety of cultural perspectives. Almost all have been previously published, but many are located in hard-to-find sources; this collection is thus a useful resource to readers seeking historical writings about British Columbia.

Stouck and Wilkinson have wisely decided not to try to force the selections in their anthology into a narrow definition of British Columbian identity. The pieces show that British Columbia can be many different spaces at once, existing as a space of adventure and possibility, as in the exploration and mountaineering selections featured, but also as a space of imprisonment and oppression, most clearly seen in accounts of Japanese internment camps and the tightly regulated population of Chinatown. The province also emerges as a radically different space throughout time, as the explorer texts contrast with more recent accounts of pleasure sailing up the coast. The focus on articulating the land leads to a collection weighted towards environmental and nature writing; we see correspondingly few selections that treat urban British Columbia. Standout pieces in the collection are Terry Glavin on the



oolichan, Muriel Kitigawa on Japanese internment camps, Helen Meilleur on Ft. Simpson, Milton and Cheadle on the incredible hardships faced by travellers in the interior, and Muriel Wylie Blanchet on dreamy sailing summers.

*The Literary History of Alberta Volume One* ended at the close of the second World War. *Volume Two*, also by George Melnyk, picks up where the first volume left off. Chapters cover the novel, short fiction, poetry, drama, non-fiction and scholarship, popular fiction, and children's literature up until about 1997. Melnyk also discusses the frequently overlooked category of writers who publish in languages other than English. His chapter on Alberta book culture (publishers, literary institutions, and writers' organizations) emphasizes the importance of these networks and outlets to the Alberta literary community. Melnyk has chosen to organize the book by genre; within each genre, each author is discussed in the order of the year of his or her first publication. (Writers of the 1990s are put together in their own chapter). This organization provides the reader with a sense of the connections within each genre. Unfortunately, this layout also makes it difficult to track the development of authors who work in more than one genre and leads to some repetition.

Melnik seeks to create an understanding of authors who have "contributed to a sense of Alberta identity." He stresses that his role is that of literary historian, not literary critic. The book provides a good catalogue of writers, including brief biographies, a description of their works, some sense of their relative importance, and a sample of critical response to their writing, where relevant. Such a project is necessarily limited; specialist readers may find Melnyk's generalizations frustrating. As a basic source, however, it is useful, not the least because of the many photographs it includes.

The genre of the literary history requires

a concluding statement. Melnyk argues that Alberta writing has undergone what he describes as a "macro movement" from "aboriginal, to anti-aboriginal writing, to reconstructed aboriginal." (The concluding chapter is heavily laced with Marxist rhetoric.) Unfortunately, this conclusion is not supported by the book's contents. There are very few Aboriginal authors included in this history, and the non-Aboriginal writers writing about Aboriginal topics occupy a spectrum from Rudy Wiebe to W.P. Kinsella. One thing the catalogue does show is Alberta's increasing multiculturalism, and one wonders how this new cultural mix can fit into any conception of "the Alberta identity."

If there is one strand that unites the widely varied studies of region collected in *Regional Images and Regional Realities*, it is the argument that there is no such thing as one regional identity. Instead, the papers that Lothar Hönnighausen has assembled demonstrate that any region is a mixture of cultures and geographies whose boundaries are always in flux. No longer is the important question "what is a region," writes Hönnighausen, but rather "how do these apparently opposite tendencies of globalism and regionalism interrelate and complement each other?" Correspondingly, many of the essays focus on the "creolization" of regional culture, from general discussions like Jürgen Donnerstag's "The Question of Regional Culture in Intercultural Learning" to Hanjo Berressem's delightfully focussed analysis of "Elvis and El Vez." This interdisciplinary collection ranges from history and political science to literature and music, but its geographic scope is limited to Europe and North America. Some of the essays, such as Gundula Wilke's consideration of regional elements of North American crime fiction, rely on description more than analysis, perhaps reflecting this anthology's origins in a symposium. Eva-Marie Kröller's essay on Vancouver regionalism will be of particular interest to Canadianists.

## Daughters, Fathers and Other Fauna

**Florence Treadwell**

*Cleaving*. Ronsdale \$13.95

**M.E. Csamer**

*Paper Moon*. Watershed Books \$11.95

**Colleen Flood**

*Bonding With Gravity*. Watershed Books \$11.95

**Bernadette Rule**

*The Weight of Flames*. St. Thomas Poetry Series n.p.

**Hannah Main-van der Kamp**

*The Parable Boat*. Wolsak and Wynn n.p.

Reviewed by Sonnet L'Abbé

Omnibus reviews often obscure the particularities of each work by suggesting that they are all variations on a theme. I did not want to repeat that tendency, but found after looking at these five books that one shared thematic concern could not pass without mention; one does not have to search long to see in each of them a call to a father, whether that be The Father or a biological parent. Reaching a particular stage in one's own adulthood (most of the authors, as far as I can tell, are in their mid-lives) begets a desire to understand the adults who shaped one's early life, a respect for the decisions and complex relationships that comes with experience, and a nostalgia or yearning for the guidance and security that is lost as one gets older, or as one begins to find oneself called on to provide guidance instead. So if these five collections have a common goal, it is to try to guide us, gently, to understand the emotional and spiritual complexities of adulthood; and not to provide answers to our questions, but to suggest ways of finding them.

Florence Treadwell's *Cleaving* follows one woman's emotional journey as she tries to come to terms with both her abandonment by her father and the

recent departure of a lover. Interspersed with the author's photo-graphs (demonstrating a keen eye for geographic line and texture), Treadwell's poetry brings into sharp focus the desperation and anger of a deserted woman. I must admit that my first reaction to the book was tempered once I read the back cover, which describes the narrator as someone who "confuses childhood and adult passion and endows both father and lover with magical, god-like powers, thus allowing them—or her vision of them—to define her." Without that interpretative guidance, however, the plaintive and often predatory tone of some of the poems about the lover can suggest an immaturity or defensiveness that threatens the reader's trust in the ultimate insight of the work. Four poems, one after the other, suggest an almost stalker-like obsession with the man who left: first by hinting that he is blind to their fate to be together ("Pictures"), second by devoting a page to her thoughts as she stands outside his house staring at his window, and finally by imagining his encounters with his new lover in terms so obvious they border on parody:

you play  
with a younger female

the tamer gone out of you  
now gleaning favours.

Uncaged she shares your bed  
licks your skin  
clear of memories  
takes your head  
between her teeth.  
("Atavism")

This woman  
rides your cock,  
rising, falling  
on the powerful bellows of her thighs.  
("Possessed")

The same emotional territory is covered in many other poems throughout the book.

That such poems are counterpointed with the very real confusion and anger of a daughter only lessens the reader's willingness to sympathize with the narrator even in moments when she was obviously blameless and victimized. This is a small shame, when much of the book is infused with a lyrical strength that echoes Anne Michaels:

each atom of your body  
accounted for, radiant  
under my skin.

Three steps ahead  
among the slender trunks  
of aspen and sumac  
blue slivers of you crackle.  
("Watershed")

*Cleaving* is worth reading particularly for its beautiful moments like this, but also to puzzle over how successfully it works as a psychological portrait.

The poems of M.E. Csamer's *Paper Moon*, a collection coming out of the exciting new Toronto publishing collective Watershed Books, find words for those who can't or won't themselves by giving voice to the gestures by which they communicated their love—the solemn father, the rebellious teenager, the child. Csamer is drawn most often to the domestic and the suburban, and, as the photo on the cover suggests, the rural seems at first glance to be framed within this context as a place for escape and nostalgia, the stuff of vacation snapshots, away from busy, "real" life. Yet we are offered images of the uneasy relationship between urban and country existence: an old tree that still stands despite the cars driving through a tunnel dug in its trunk ("The Redwood Children"), a chained black bear that "drank pop from a bottle" ("One Doll's Shoe"), a moth that beats itself against a window ("The Visitation"). A tension recurs throughout the book between our more "instinctual" desires—for the love of our parents and children, for peace,

to know the truth—and the demands of our civilized lifestyle—jobs, technology, rules, manners. *Paper Moon* takes its title from a poem about her father that is a microcosm of these tensions, where "what is said is all that we can manage / after the fatigue, a week's work / and the bills not paid," where geographical distance and emotional distance are the same.

Csamer sometimes delves into the melodramatic, for example in "Learning the Words" where a counterpoint of a woman's mother-daughter relationship culminates in a one-sided dialogue of "Mother // Mother, no. // Mommy, please" (italics in original). Once, the fear of the privileged is approached without irony: "the kids hanging out in the park / are they drunk, are they stoned? . . . part of me wants to save them, the rest locks the door . . ." ("Night Sounds"). Her heart is in the right place, however, if a little given to platitudes: "Body is a place of habitation / black or white, joined or not / until the world's judgement turns uniqueness to oddity" ("Lucy and Millie: Separation").

Her poems work best when she attaches emotion to gesture and to objects, rather than relying on exposition, and when she trusts her metaphors enough to allow enough space for resonance, in the way that spaced notes produce a chord. "About Light" is gracefully successful, with its "snow / bruised purple at dawn," as is the surprising relationship between the two older women described in "Sitting up Late."

Sharing a similar interest in the domestic is Colleen Flood's *Bonding With Gravity*, also from Watershed Books. The poetic voice that remains constant throughout the collection is that of the poet herself, as she names herself among the friends and members of her family who are the book's cast of characters. The result is an extended genealogical investigation, poetic stops along the family tree that now and again return to the poet's late father: he is ostensibly the

trunk to this tangle of roots and branches.

In the four-part "Nocturnes" we see Flood's hand at its most free, when she allows dream images to settle alongside one another without too deliberate a linearity or too explicit interpretations of the "meanings" of events. I would like to have seen more of this kind of montage from Flood, more confidence from the work that the juxtaposition of image with image can be enough to produce meaning, and more leeway for readers to produce their own meanings without being led. A poem that undercuts itself in this way is "November," which begins subtly yet still graphically enough to be powerful:

You need to touch,  
it, and this touches me—  
your childlike disbelief,  
the way you wade into  
the brambles, nearly waisthigh  
to retrieve a russet apple,  
set against the sky:

But Flood unfortunately does not let this stand, and closes the stanza: "to grasp the unpossessable [sic] / this season passing." Elsewhere, in another of Flood's most vivid poems, we are interrupted with the musing, "Faith in our fathers: had we any choice?" ("Faith in Our Fathers"). This line, as the title, works against the poem by reducing the very question posed in the poem itself to an editorial remark. The same thing happens in "Halfway House," a study of middle-class nervousness at the sight of the disenfranchised that ends: "If they're halfway, what's zero? / What is 'all the way?' / And where are we?" Flood's work is strongest when she chooses to enter the dream world, as dreams more easily resist explanation, and are not as quickly co-opted as anecdotes to ask predictable questions.

Published by the St. Thomas poetry series, whose participants "share a perspective on human life that emphasizes its physical and philosophical dimensions" and whose

poems "witness to the religious meaning of experience," Rule's collection *The Weight of Flames* chooses familiar topics for its meditations: among them portraits of nature, childhood innocence, and growing old.

Rule's work moves in a direction opposite to less explicitly devotional poetry: while many lyrical styles assume the ordinary and draw out the "miraculous" from close observation, Rule seems to assume the miraculous or divine and search for its evidence in the mundane. Either approach works best when the writer's attention to the detail of ordinary life becomes a kind of awe before the fact of the subject's existence, hinting at the possibility of larger truths without claiming knowledge of them. The danger lies in poetry too strictly adhering to only one philosophical understanding, in a tendency to dogmatism or oversimplification of moral issues. But Rule effectively avoids preaching. She does not insist on the terms of salvation, but endorses and ultimately demonstrates a hope for salvation, a belief in it. In "The Catch," the "sleeping tourists, silent fishermen, praying women" are united in their common hope, and Rule insists that "[t]he gods hover in the tropical night / with answers for us all." Though she is sure the answers are there, she does not presume to tell us what they are. Elsewhere Rule twists our notion of the parable: instead of a moral turned to Word, nature as word becomes itself a parable of appreciation in the simple yet forceful "Cana":

Autumn dusk  
Leaves ferment in puddles  
Red wine

There are a number of confusing metaphors: "small mouth open slightly, like a book whose place / has been marked with a pencil" ("To a Napping Baby"). And Rule often makes rather predictable choices: she writes of her dying friend that she is "awed by your nerve / as you're pinioned by pain"

in "Quarter Moon," and elsewhere, the same sentiment: "it was hard to have you go / like a mighty oak / in the arms of the mistletoe" ("Last Embrace"), or, as in "Mercy of the Wind" the movement of a leaf is a "pirouette" and "a small ballet." Finally, the overall tone of this slim book is broken by a few poems offering a *Reader's Digest*-brand of humour—for example the stretched "Shakespear's Underwear" or "Child's Play" where a child pokes at a lump of clay and states: "It's Jesus, / see all the holes?" Ultimately, though, the flaws of *The Weight of Flames* are more of technique than of moral observation or analysis.

A much more successful venture into the same realm is Hannah Main-van der Kamp's *The Parable Boat*, which relies for its spiritualism more on reference to acts of worship, the particulars of a church-centred religious life, and the rituals of a catholic Christianity. It is as though her voice has learned the forms of devotion from liturgy, and finds the same devotion repeated in the natural world. She retreats for contemplation not to the abbey but to the outdoors, chronicling what she finds there with a patience that brings to mind medieval scribes carefully transcribing sacred texts, her voice precise as calligraphy. The work evokes the memory of a time when dualities such as the scholarly and the religious, or the scientific and the philosophical, did not exist, when such approaches were not considered competitive but rather investigations of the same questions. Main-van der Kamp brings back the devotional to the taxonomic eye of the botanist in "And Whatever Adam Called Every Living Thing, That was the Name Thereof":

New fronds unfurl,  
paws of shy animals'  
coppery fur. Bracken

Geodesic silk eiderdowns  
float on a bed of quills. Dandelion

Main-van der Kamp describes her own "true vocation" of contemplation (as it is put in her bio) in the prayer within "The Priestess Role of the Botanical Illustrator," who asks: "*Let me be split thus and worse / exposed to ice, predator mosquitoes, probing creepers / should I forget, should I fail / to notice the covenant of incipience.*"

The book is divided into five sections: "The parable boat," "Adam and Eve in middle age," "A north-west Lent," "Into the Clearing" and "Santa Rita Abbey," titled according to apparent departure points for flights of contemplation. Main-van der Kamp's elegant verse proves that she has as much appreciation and mastery of the nuances of metre as she does of the classifications of nature and the minutia of church life. Though her poems are undeniably musical, at times I wished her adherence to the present tense and reliance on the natural subject—anthropomorphizing verb—object structure was not quite so strict: trying to read many of these verbally dense poems in one sitting left me feeling somewhat like a child zoning out in her pew as the priest intones his Latin chant. But, along the same vein, I left the sermon knowing it had been somehow good for me.

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## De la mémoire oubliée

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**Marie-Paule Villeneuve**

*L'enfant cigarier*. vlb éditeur \$19.95

**Raymond Plante**

*Le nomade*. La Courte Échelle \$17.95

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Reviewed by Constantin Grigorut

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D'une richesse et d'une inégalité qui commencent presque à ne plus surprendre personne, le capricieux marché du livre montréalais continue de nous proposer des textes très différents. Bien que, d'un certain point de vue, les romans *L'enfant cigarier* de Marie-Paule Villeneuve et *Le nomade* de Raymond Plante sondent les souterraines de la mémoire individuelle ou collective,

l'écart axiologique se fait sentir, dès la première lecture.

Diplômée en histoire et philosophie, journaliste, depuis plus de deux décennies, au quotidien *Le Droit* d'Ottawa, Marie-Paule Villeneuve tâtonne les routes de l'imaginaire littéraire et vient de publier son premier roman aux Éditions VLB de Montréal. Fruit d'un travail documentaire minutieux et vraie saga socio-didactique qui dépasse les 400 pages, *L'enfant cigarier* est, nul doute, une écriture à thèse. Villeneuve l'annonce d'ailleurs, depuis le début, dans une sorte de brève introduction-épigraphe qui lui appartient.

Ancrant son sujet dans le milieu social américain des ouvriers du tabac à la fin du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle, le roman de Villeneuve est une sorte d'histoire d'un de ces enfants auxquels fait référence l'introduction. La narration linéaire, fidèle à l'emploi du passé simple et au dialogue classique, suit consciemment le destin de Jos, un garçon canadien-français qui, à ses 11 ans, travaille d'arrache-pied pour un salaire de misère dans une fabrique de tabac à Sherbrooke. Pour fuir la pauvreté, Jos quitte sa famille et change de ville plusieurs fois, à la recherche de son El Dorado. À travers les vingt-six chapitres, on le retrouve, au fur et à mesure qu'il avance vers l'âge de la maturité, à Montréal, à Chicago et enfin à Tampa, capitale du cigare américain. Omnisciente, omniprésente, Marie-Paule Villeneuve tisse autour de son personnage un espace événementiel idéologisant. Ayant comme intention l'analyse du début du mouvement ouvrier, l'auteure insère dans la diégèse, à côté des personnages imaginaires, des noms liés à cette époque et aux événements qui font néanmoins partie de l'apprentissage de Jos, comme par exemple la fameuse représentante du socialisme utopique américain, Jane Adams. On sent des effluves de militantisme de gauche et l'appui théorique du néophyte ne laisse pas de doute: les livres de chevet qui accompagnent son trajet initiatique

sont *La Condition de la classe laborieuse en Angleterre* de Engels et *Le Manifeste du Parti communiste* de Marx. Le roman essaie de traiter de l'exploitation juvénile et se veut en égale mesure un dossier d'accusation du capitalisme sauvage où les riches exploitaient les pauvres.

Bien qu'il ait bénéficié de quelques chroniques assez positives, le début littéraire de Marie-Paule Villeneuve est loin de réussir le but noble que l'auteure se propose. L'action est bien trop touffue, l'écriture imite un modèle stylistique d'antan et les personnages, peu convaincants et le plus souvent imaginés en croquis de moralité exagérée, manquent de profondeur. Jos est plein de révolte quand quelqu'un lui parle de sexe alors qu'il n'hésite pas à se masturber tout en substituant dans ses fantasmes le corps d'Anna à celui d'un personnage féminin zolien! La séquence se répète après la rencontre de Maria, une jeune cubaine qui deviendra sa femme. Schématisées, Anna—la juive ukrainienne qui lit *Anna Karenine*—et Madeleine—la sœur chassée de la maison qui tâche l'honneur de la famille et se prostitue—sont encore plus contradictoires. La sœur de Jos va jusqu'à faire même des prières avant de coucher avec ses clients!

Le travail de style est conventionnel (l'édifice de la fabrique de cigarettes Queen est "solide et audacieux", le dépucelage de Madeleine se fait dans "une amère coulée de sang") et les effets de couleur locale se concentrent excessivement dans l'américanisation d'un nombre généreux de substantifs propres ou communs: la Fédération Américaine du Travail est l'American Federation of Labor, l'Union des Cheminots Américains est l'American Railroad Union et la fabrique est toujours la factory.

On ne doute pas que Marie-Paule Villeneuve ait fait un travail de recherche documentaire remarquable pour écrire son premier roman. Mais, comme Quintilien

nous enseigne, il y a toujours des risques quand on s'efforce de trop moraliser l'écriture: *scribitur ad narrandum, non ad probandum*.

De Raymond Plante, on connaît déjà un nombre assez important de réussites dans le domaine des livres pour les jeunes. Auteur prolifique, il a déjà publié plus d'une trentaine de textes dont certains ont bénéficié de prix littéraires: le Prix de l'Actuelle en 1974 pour *La Débarque*, deux fois le Prix de l'ACELF en 1982 et en 1988, le Prix 12/17 Brive, sur la liste finale du Prix du Gouverneur Général en 1992. Élu "personnalité de l'année 1993" à l'occasion du Salon du Livre du Québec, l'inépuisable écrivain et professeur de littérature à l'UQAM vient de changer, avec son dernier roman, la chromatique habituelle de son écriture. *Le nomade* n'est pas un roman pour les jeunes. L'histoire de Louis Lafontaine, ayant comme modèle le père de l'écrivain, est un exercice de remise en cause de la notion même de personnage littéraire. Louis doit prendre forme à partir du moment où le drame familial du futur nomade surgit et l'enquête du fils à la recherche de son futur père se déroule comme un bel album de photos-famille. La patine des images en noir et blanc déclenche un halo de mystère. Le travail d'énallage stylistique (verbal et pronominal) focalise et fait voltiger le personnage entre la deuxième (tu) et la troisième personnes (il, Louis). Une fois la prise de vue finie, le verbe glisse à la première personne. Mais le *flashback* imaginaire qui arrive tout de suite après (en route vers Montréal) change de nouveau, astucieusement, le temps du verbe: "C'était l'automne 1937. [...] Tu as pris la route vers Montréal d'abord, puis le train pour le Nord de l'Ontario, dix jours plus tard." Après la naissance du fils, le brouillard de mystère de la photo noir et blanc est percé par les couleurs de la mémoire, car le portrait de Louis devient effet du souvenir direct: "À partir du moment où j'ai pris

place dans sa vie et son récit, moi le fils-personnage, le recul se distorsionne, cède le pas aux émotions qui râpent la mémoire vive, parfois pour la bercer, d'autres fois pour la blesser."

Le style du roman est plein de lyrisme et la phrase respire rythmiquement, se constituant de manière concentrique, comme les ondes. Il y a des séquences textuelles où les mots coulent pareils à du miel chaud. Les *Litanies de ce que Louis aimait* ont souvent un rythme et une musique rares dans la prose contemporaine. On peut sentir même une délicate rime intérieure et la phrase se laisse lire comme un poème: "Il aimait les abeilles. Il avait marché entre les ruches, aux jours d'été, soulever le couvercle par gestes mesurés, observer ce petit monde grouillant dans la géométrie parfaite des cellules... À l'annonce de l'hiver, un soir sans lune, déménager les ruches une à une comme si elles étaient des coffres contenant de l'or liquide, les entreposer dans le sous-sol de la maison, les déposer sur la terre qui restera chaude."

On retrouve, avec la lecture de cet admirable roman de Raymond Plante, ce que Roland Barthes a si simplement appelé le "plaisir du texte."

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## Writing Arctic Journals

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**Clara Vyvyan**

*The Ladies, the Gwich'in, and the Rat: Travels on the Athabasca, MacKenzie, Rat, Porcupine, and Yukon Rivers in 1926.* Ed. I.S. MacLaren and Lisa N. LaFramboise. U of Alberta P n.p.

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**John Wilson**

*North With Franklin: The Lost Journals of James Fitzjames.* Fitzhenry & Whiteside \$27.95 cloth

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Reviewed by Sherrill Grace

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Few explorers or travellers go North without keeping a journal or a diary, and many of these individuals publish their journals after they return to southern civilization.

But within the parameters of exploration/travel and of diary/journal writing, there is plenty of room for difference: some people go North as professionals to chart unknown lands and coastlines; some go North for the thrill of adventure or a love of exotic places. And many readers enjoy going North vicariously, in their imaginations.

James Fitzjames was Captain of the *Erebus* and, by 1848, second-in-command of Sir John Franklin's 1845 expedition in search of the Northwest Passage. Clara Vyvyan and her companion Gwendolen Dorrien Smith were middle-class Englishwomen with sufficient means to indulge a thirst for freedom and adventure by travelling through some of the most rugged and remote areas of the western Arctic in 1926. Fitzjames almost certainly kept a journal, although it, like his remains, has never been found; Clara Vyvyan published her journal in a 1961 book called *Arctic Adventure*. Fitzjames's book is fiction; Vyvyan's book is not. But the scripted reality of both texts is what, finally, fascinates me because these two books raise a fundamental question about what it means to write and publish a personal account of journeys into the Canadian North.

The MacLaren and LaFramboise edition of Vyvyan's book adds new material to the original. Here, for the first time, are 59 black-and-white photographs of the early North, colour reproductions of Dorrien Smith's watercolour sketches made during their travels, appendices with Vyvyan's field notes, a list of plants collected during the trip, and extensive notes to the text prepared by the editors. The result is an informative double-voiced text that allows the reader to see what Vyvyan did not include from her field notes in her original publication. Without offering an elaborate theory of her position thirty years after her travels, Vyvyan was nonetheless aware of the highly constructed nature of her endeavour and of the decidedly selective powers of memory. She explains that "memory will often dis-

tort or discolour truth" and that "it is not easy . . . to recapture from the past the story of any adventure, as it really happened."

However we choose to classify her narrative—as a faithful representation of reality or as a carefully crafted story—MacLaren and LaFramboise have transformed her text into a much more fully representative and documented account than the author herself created. Through their introduction, they provide background and context to explain how the two Englishwomen were cared for along their route. The maps they provide trace the routes and mark the rivers they travelled as they crossed from the Mackenzie to the Yukon watersheds before commencing their trip up the Rat. The photographs provide an invaluable record of the country and the people in 1926. My favorites, without question, are snapshots of the guides and the ladies hauling and canoeing up the turbulent, powerful Rat. The book itself has been beautifully designed and produced in every respect, and the quality of reproduction for the watercolour sketches is superb.

Wilson's *North With Franklin* has also received close attention to design and presentation. To pick up this text is to pick up an object of approximately the same size and shape as an expedition journal, except that in this case the look is a clever *trompe d'oeil*. The dustjacket bears two reproductions of nineteenth-century paintings of arctic expeditions; the endpapers are illustrated with maps showing the Arctic as Franklin and Fitzjames knew it in 1845-49; the many illustrations within the journal proper are all from documented sources. In short, *North With Franklin* poses as the real thing, a found journal that has been edited and published for the first time. In fact, of course, it is a fiction: no journals have been recovered from the fatal Franklin expedition.

Although I know the story of what happened to Franklin and his men, although I know how Fitzjames came to take command



of the sad remnants of the crew, and although I know about the errors in judgement, the incomplete maps, the evidence of lead-poisoning, the cannibalism, the sledges weighed down with useless objects, and the Victory Point record with its two messages, I am helpless before this compelling story. Knowing what happened never makes the story dull or predictable, unless it is the predictability of high tragedy brought on by human error and hubris. You may not be such an incurable romantic as I, but I am prepared to wager that you too will be captivated by Wilson's narrative and find yourself, as I was, reading eagerly to find out when James will record what we know is coming next. For the James Fitzjames created in this journal/novel is a character based on the historical record but exceeding that record; his story is one of adventure, and of a gradual gaining of awareness and self-understanding. It is also a love story. And a mystery story. Which you must read for yourself, because if I say more, I will spoil the story.

From journal to *journal*, these two thoroughly delightful books, beautifully produced and extremely well-written, offer two almost completely contrasting eye-witness accounts of travel through Canada's Arctic. Franklin and his men were working on what was a glorious mission; the ladies were tourists, carefully handed from one capable pair of northern hands to the next. The men died; the ladies survived. The men, with one exception (Crozier), thought they knew best; the ladies did as they were told. In both books, the narrator/characters come alive with startling clarity, and in both books we are allowed to glimpse what it was like to search for the Northwest Passage 150 years ago or to travel, where ladies were not expected to go, in the early twentieth century. Above all, the editors of the one and the author of the other *journal*, demonstrate the fascinating challenges of writing about the North and how fundamentally personal and fictional our accounts must always be.

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## Of Time and the River

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**Alan R. Wilson**

*Before the Flood.* Cormorant P. n.p.

Reviewed by Gordon Fisher

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One of the first impressions left by Alan Wilson's acclaimed first novel, *Before the Flood*, is the timeless quality of teenage life. It is a life dominated (from a teenage point of view) by tyrannical parents, terrible teachers, and generally incomprehensible adults; it is a life that embraces childish pranks and juvenile games and expands with a growing interest in the opposite sex and gradual with intimations of adult concerns. Yet timeliness is central to Wilson's story, and while the events in the novel do not attain the Biblical proportions implied by the title, time itself—the particular years and months when the action takes place, and the characters' awareness of time passing—is the key to the depth and meaning of this novel.

The action takes place as the teenage narrator, Sam Macfarlane, approaches the end of his school years. It is also a crucial time for Sam's home town, Woodstock, New Brunswick, as completion of the Mactaquac Dam is about to transform the Saint John River into a lake that will inundate part of the town and change the familiar topography of Sam's life. A third temporal marker is an event that represents a threat to Canada's national identity (at the level of popular culture) and yet another blow to the stability of Sam's world: the 1967 expansion of the National Hockey League from the traditional six teams into six more cities in the United States.

Scrawny, short-sighted, and unathletic, Sam Macfarlane is not a particularly prepossessing protagonist. He is rarely an instigator of action, and often a reluctant participant in more exuberant activities. Among his close friends, Norm is fixated on cars, Garrett is ever conscious of his good looks, and Vergil is "lean, with sun-streaked

hair, hooded, keen eyes, with a natural immunity to fear," someone who could easily be branded a trouble maker, but becomes one of the liveliest characters in the novel.

The novel is episodic, and we see only what Sam sees and know only what Sam tells us. Many of the episodes feature escapades based on a type of humour that appeals more to teenage boys than the usual objects of the boys' attention—teenage girls and cranky adults. At times, Sam seems very young. He organizes an elaborate table hockey "season" that matches the six-team NHL schedule. He can't believe the news that the NHL is considering expansion. He draws up an elaborate schedule and insists that his friends wear team jerseys when they play; when his friends make fun of his seriousness and lose interest in finishing the season, he explodes in frustration and anger. At other times, he is a keen observer of the world around him: the state of the river, the architecture of the town, and the torment of adults pursued by demons of age or anger or religion. He has an unusually sharp awareness of the past that manifests itself in dreams and momentary "visions" of former residents of Woodstock.

Yet Sam's perspective does change as time passes. At the beginning of the novel he is an unquestioning supporter of the dam project; at the end, he realizes more fully what will be lost when it is built. In later episodes, he "rediscovers" his parents, and he "discovers" girls. In the final episode, he embarks on a canoe trip down the river to the Mactaquac Dam site on the day before the dam is about to close off the river forever. But it represents a journey to the adult world that Sam and his friends are about to enter. It is a world that overwhelms adolescence with a flood of new emotions and knowledge. As the waters advance, Woodstock will be changed, and Sam will see it differently because he is changing too. *Before the Flood* shared the Chapters/Books

in Canada First Novel Award in 2000 with David MacFarlane's *Summer Gone*, and was one of five finalists for the Leacock Medal. Its appeal surely lies in its engaging picture of small town life and its lively cast of adolescents and quirky adults. The humour is more in the style of situation comedy than clever wordplay, and while some characters and events seem rather improbable, Wilson can hardly be faulted for consistently maintaining the teenage perspective of his central character, even though the artlessness of Sam's narrative means that the effective use of structure and symbolism only become apparent on reflection. *Before the Flood* is a worthy opening to a series of novels that Wilson is planning to write, and it will be interesting to see how effectively he treats the broader themes of adult life as Sam and his friends come of age.

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## Japanese Memories

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**Lisa Yoneyama**

*Hiroshima Traces: Time, Space, and the Dialectic of Memory.* U of California P n.p.

**Reiko Tachibana**

*Narrative as Counter-Memory: A Half-Century of Postwar Writing in Germany and Japan.* State U of New York P n.p.

**Catherine Lang**

*O-Bon in Chimunesu: A Community Remembered.* Arsenal Pulp \$18.95

**Peter Oliva**

*The City of Yes.* McClelland & Stewart \$21.99

Reviewed by Susan Fisher

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Reiko Tachibana's study of postwar German and Japanese fiction begins with Michel Foucault's definition of "effective history": "it deals with events in terms of their most unique characteristics, their most acute manifestations." These "unique characteristics" and "acute manifestations" find expression in "counter-memory." Whereas official history claims to be objective and unified, counter-memory provides a personal,

subjective account of the past. All of the works discussed here deal with counter-memory and its power to challenge official histories.

Lisa Yoneyama, author of *Hiroshima Traces: Time, Space, and the Dialectics of Memory*, points out that official histories of the bombing of Hiroshima have reinforced the view that Japan was a victim nation; by parading the agonies of Hiroshima, the Japanese have been able to maintain what Yoneyama calls “a national victimology and phantasm of innocence.” Yoneyama examines three ways that memories of the bombing have been sustained: oral narratives of individual survivors (*hibakusha*), changes in the cityscape of Hiroshima itself, and public debates over the Korean Atom Bomb Memorial. While these “mnemonic practices” (as Yoneyama calls them) perpetuate the myth of Japan’s victimhood, they also provide opportunities to challenge it. When, for example, city officials proposed to relocate the memorial to Korean atom bomb victims, many Korean “resident aliens” objected. They argued that the monument should remain in its original location outside the official Peace Park boundaries; the site, they claimed, accurately represented the status of Koreans in Japan. The controversy brought to public awareness the fact that some twenty to thirty thousand Koreans died at Hiroshima; many of them had come to the city under wartime forced labour programs. Yoneyama effectively demonstrates how this “dialectics of memory” operates both to reinforce Japan’s victimhood and to reveal its role as an aggressor and colonial power. At times, Yoneyama resorts to prefabricated theoretical prose to make her points, but her research is thorough, and her description of people and places vivid.

According to Reiko Tachibana in *Narrative as Counter-Memory*, postwar writers in Germany and Japan have

employed similar strategies to challenge official history. She sees the fiction of both countries in terms of three phases. The first was characterized by realistic, highly autobiographical accounts; among these she cites Ooka Shohei’s short story “Until Being Captured” and, in Germany, the works known as *Trümmerliteratur* (literature of rubble) by authors such as Heinrich Böll and Ernst Wiechert. The second phase produced more inventive, even grotesque, re-writings of the war experience by writers such as Günter Grass, Oe Kenzaburo, and Mishima Yukio. In the third phase, writers such as Christa Wolf and Oba Minako have gone beyond national history to view the suffering of the war from a timeless or international perspective. Tachibana is not the first critic to conduct this sort of comparison, but she proposes an unusually comprehensive schema that argues for sustained parallels over a fifty-year period. Not surprisingly, the comparisons at times seem strained. Nevertheless, by concentrating on particular pairs of texts, Tachibana is able to draw out parallels, both historical and literary, that are well worth examining.

Catherine Lang’s *O-Bon in Chimunesu* records wartime memories from this side of the Pacific. A small number of Japanese families who settled in Chemainus on Vancouver Island in the early years of the century gradually created a community with a Japanese language school, a judo hall, and a traditional bathhouse. But in 1942, they were sent away to internment camps. It was not until 1991, when a reunion was organized to celebrate the unveiling of murals documenting the history of Chemainus (including its Japanese Canadian settlers), that the former residents returned. Based on interviews with many who attended the 1991 reunion, Lang has written a series of biographical vignettes documenting the Japanese community. *O-Bon in Chimunesu* is not a work of oral history. As Lang acknowledges in

her introduction, she has “adopted fiction techniques” to tell the stories of the thirteen people she profiles. The result is a surprisingly readable and convincing account of a forgotten community.

Peter Oliva’s novel *The City of Yes* develops two parallel stories: the adventures of a Canadian in contemporary Japan, and the account of an adventurer named Ranald MacDonald who was imprisoned in Japan in 1848. The link between these stories is a Japanese man named Endo (later Enzo), mentor to the Canadian traveller and supposed discoverer of archival materials relating to MacDonald.

The plot line dealing with the contemporary Canadian records his life in Saitama through the course of a year. With the exception of his unusual part-time job as an itinerant Santa and his inexplicable obsession with Japanese insects, this *gaijin* has a predictable set of experiences: he teaches English to earnest but uncomprehending students, falls in love with an elusive Japanese beauty, laughs at Japlish, and discovers the intricate layers of meaning in the *kanji*. While his mentor and alter ego Endo/Enzo dabbles in history and etymology, the Canadian protagonist muddles through the minor crises of everyday life in a strange land. Meanwhile, through the device of Endo’s discovery of archival materials, Oliva introduces the parallel story of Ranald MacDonald. MacDonald was a real man and he did go to Japan, but Oliva’s account is (as he acknowledges in the epilogue) “a combination of history, myth and pure speculation.” The chapters dealing with MacDonald are dotted with allusions to *Silence*, Endo Shusaku’s novel about the imprisonment and eventual apostasy of a seventeenth-century Portuguese priest. These links range from the name “Endo” to the supposed discovery in MacDonald’s papers of a drawing “that approximated the Japanese pictograph for silence.” Oliva even has MacDonald step on a *fumie*, an image

of Christ set in the floor; this is the act of renunciation that the protagonist of *Silence* must ultimately perform. I am not sure what the allusions to *Silence* are supposed to achieve, other than to demonstrate Oliva’s familiarity with Japanese literature. Endo’s novel is preoccupied with the necessity of faith and the ineluctable nature of sin, but neither of these matters much in *The City of Yes*.

In the early chapters, there is much discussion of dictionaries, for Endo/Enzo is an amateur lexicographer. Yet, despite this self-conscious focus on words, *The City of Yes* contains an irritating number of diction errors: “quarter off” instead of “cordon off,” “King James edition” instead of “version,” “dallies” instead of “eddies,” to offer just a few examples. There are problems with the Japanese words, too: “mental hospital,” *seishin byoin*, turns into *senshin biyoin*, which means “devotion beauty parlour.” Imprecision of this kind, which makes reading *The City of Yes* a bumpy ride, is regrettable, for Oliva’s material, particularly when it touches on MacDonald, is genuinely fascinating.

Underlying these four books, different though they are, is the belief that counter-memories represent the past more truthfully than the narratives of official history. Yet precisely because counter-memories contain those unique and acute traces of the past, they, too, are incomplete and fragmentary. Perhaps the struggle between official history and counter-memory—what Yoneyama calls the “dialectics of memory”—will bring us closer to the truth of the past, but we will never arrive at it.



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## Polarities

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**David Young**

*Inexpressible Island*. Scirocco \$14.95

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**Robin McGrath**

*Escaped Domestics*. Killick \$12.95

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Reviewed by Ian Rae

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It would have made sense for the award-winning author of *Glenn* to go north for his next play. In fine Gouldian fashion, David Young's *Inexpressible Island* does pursue the themes of temporal disjunction and existential isolation in a wintry expanse. However, Young's idea is to go south, not north, with the scientific party attached to Captain Scott's ill-fated British expedition to the South Pole. *Inexpressible Island* revives the little-known story of six stranded researchers who survived an entire Antarctic winter by living on seal meat in a snow cave while Scott's party starved elsewhere on the continent. The tragic events of 1912 come to life through Young's skilled rendering of idiomatic English; the play is partly dedicated to Young's mother "Toto, the best of the English." However, Young's real focus is on "the clock of the soul," not the historical expedition itself.

Young's drama is a memory play with a particularly acute interest in time. The narrator, Dr. Priestley, is a Cambridge geologist whose scholarly books on geologic time mask his fundamental incomprehension of human history and veil his secret desire to write a novel about the party's Antarctic experience. Priestley is joined in his reminiscences by Dickason—the only other surviving member of the party—at a memorial service for Dr. Levick, the expedition's medical officer. In the shadow of Levick's funeral during the *Blitzkrieg*, the pair confront oblivion: "Not a mention of our overwintering in the *Times* obituary," Priestley muses. "We'll be forgotten, Dickie. That's our fate."

The main body of the drama takes place in an Antarctic cave where Lieutenant

Campbell, the commanding officer, assures his beleaguered party that "We inhabit an historical moment, gentlemen. Our undertaking here matches *anything* from the ancient world!" As conditions worsen, however, Campbell's lofty rhetoric and "gunroom discipline" gradually succumb to the brute authority and primal energy of Abbot, a Royal Navy stoker. The stoker's mutiny—precipitated by the theft of Campbell's chronometer—marks a symbolic transition between the heroic age of aristocracy and empire and the modern age of democracy and existential insecurity. Relishing the breakdown of Campbell's command, Abbot declares to Dickason, "What was, isn't. We're fighting for our lives." After collectively passing through a psychological "Time Zero," the men reformulate their microcosmic social order. The play concludes with a staged reconfiguration of the evolutionary "order of man" in which Abbot alone stands erect.

Of course, Young is aware that representing the Antarctic as a "test" in which men "set [them]selves against the greatest possible emptiness" is "perfectly, perfectly male." The men pit themselves against a gendered landscape (an icy womb) in a struggle for control of place and self. The colonial constructions informing the knowledge-gathering expedition become increasingly clear as the reality of the outside world diminishes inside the cave. At one point, Dr. Levick declares that the "South Pole is an idea. A place that is no place. The final nothing." While Young's critique of such formulations is subtle (Levick is on the verge of a mental breakdown), the symbolism he builds out of such ideology limits his critique. Young turns the South Pole into a symbol for the spiritual vacuity of the modern age, and therefore cannot abandon the motif of the "last great emptiness."

*Escaped Domestics*, Robin McGrath's first collection of poetry, traces a very different

movement between polar and home environments. McGrath finds inspiration for her short lyrics in the profusion of life off the beaten track. The collection opens in McGrath's native Newfoundland, then circles across the Far North, through Western Canada, and over the Atlantic to Israel before returning home again.

McGrath's title poem foreshadows this ranging movement. In "Escaped Domestic," she compares Newfoundland's early female colonists to

Flowers that have seeded and soared  
Out of colonial gardens  
Into ditches, meadows and hillsides.

McGrath imagines "Mary, Madeline, and Phoebe" "[a]bandoning their duties" and "racing out over the barrens, / Aprons as white as seagulls' breasts." With "[a]rms flung high, feet dancing," these women revel in an intimate relationship with the outdoors that is characteristic of McGrath's Newfoundland poems.

Yet such lyrical flights are brief. Hunters, rifle shells and stones "[s]hattered from internal rage" also populate McGrath's landscape. "The Accuweather Forecast" warns of "an approaching cold front / And a fifty percent / Probability of tears." Newfoundland, for McGrath, is a study in contrasts. She develops these contrasts through refined analogies and similes that also serve her well in later poems where she negotiates radically different cultures and a new marriage.

The second section of *Escaped Domestic* ranges from Labrador to Alaska and draws on McGrath's twenty-two years of field experience documenting Inuit history and mythology. McGrath's ethnological interests are already apparent in the early Newfoundland poems where she records tall tales such as "The Wake" or reminiscences such as "A Middle Aged Man Recalling Saturday Afternoons at the Nickel Theatre." However, McGrath ventures fur-

ther into the precarious middle ground between history and myth in the Arctic poems. "They Came in Early Spring," for example, employs a mythic tone to retell Samuel Hearne's famous story of the Inuit "massacre" at the hands of the Chipewyan by focussing on the role of the traitor Navarana who incited the Chipewyans to attack her own people.

Moving on to Israel, McGrath's writing continues its dialectical movement between the exotic and domestic in such poems as "The Festival of Tilts":

I will never truly understand  
That a land where you can grow oranges  
Can be more virulent  
Than bare and barren rock.

This section moves back and forth between Israel and the small Jewish community in Newfoundland, underscoring the fragile yet resilient connection between the two. Thus a lizard in Jerusalem reminds McGrath of "the red squirrel in my garden at home" and the gap between *heimlich* and *unheimlich* constantly narrows. Ultimately, the collection as a whole performs a similar act of linkage. In McGrath's imagination, every escape is also a homecoming.

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## Questioning Photography's Triumph over Words

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**Barbie Zelizer**

*Remembering to Forget: Holocaust Memory Through the Camera's Eye.* U of Chicago P \$27.50

Reviewed by Norman Ravvin

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In a book that raises many provocative questions concerning the relationship between the photographic record and historical events, Barbie Zelizer concludes by posing a question that sums up the motivation behind her study: "how do we offset the voyeurism and habituation that take over our acts of remembering when they are distanced from responsibility?" In her

meticulously documented argument, Zelizer suggests that the prevalence of atrocity photos in the months after the liberation of the German concentration camps may have initiated habits of forgetting and misremembering that continue to interfere with our understanding of the Holocaust.

*Remembering to Forget* opens with a consideration of the role of photography in modern news reporting, suggesting that before World War II the American and British press were deeply resistant to the idea that images could record events as satisfyingly as words. This resistance gave way, Zelizer argues, soon after the liberation of camps on the western front, including Buchenwald, Dachau, and Bergen-Belsen. The scores of photographers who accompanied the British and American liberating forces were given almost free access to photograph what evidence the Germans had left behind. As reporters ran into what they recognized as the "limitation of words in shaping the atrocity story," photographs made up for such reportorial difficulty.

Zelizer outlines what she sees as distinct cycles in the response to atrocity photography. Immediately after the war the photos were highly visible and varied in style, taken by professionals and GIs, and they created the first universal acceptance of the fact that Nazi atrocities were not wartime propaganda. By the late 1940s, Zelizer points to a narrowing of the number and kind of photos being reproduced, as shots of survivors replaced those of corpses, implying a narrative of hope. For almost thirty years—from roughly 1950 to the late 70s—the press and its audience retreated from the "atrocity story." And then from the 1980s till today, there has been a flourishing—some would say an obsession—with Holocaust memory and the "symbolic status" of certain now iconic photos of the concentration camps. These transformations in the status of camp photos are well documented by the inclusion of many illustrations in Zelizer's

text, along with careful discussions of the use and potential misuse of each image.

Without resorting to heightened rhetoric, *Remembering to Forget* proposes a distinctly troubling outcome to these developments. An overall flattening of historical detail and a tendency for photos to telegraph symbolic rather than referential messages have done little to create an informed body of memory connected with the Nazi camps. Instead, the contemporary public may feel that simply "seeing" atrocity photos—and not reacting to them out of understanding—is a "sufficient response to atrocity." This dynamic is made even more troubling as Holocaust museums tend to follow the demand for a familiar and often symbolic portrayal of the aftermath of the war in Europe. Zelizer's argument that certain images have become ever-present is undeniable, as is her sense that we forget certain images—often the most horrific and haunting ones—as they cease to be included in commemorative and critical volumes or museum exhibitions. One of the best examples of this development might be the popularity of pre-war photos of Anne Frank—most recently and oddly used in a Microsoft ad—while one does not expect to see photos of the exposed dead at Belsen, where Frank's not yet familiar face was obliterated.

In a final chapter, Zelizer applies these concerns to the media's use of photos of recent atrocities in Rwanda and Bosnia. Though this section is somewhat sketchier than the rest of *Remembering to Forget*, it is characteristically provocative, and investigates how the treatment of atrocity photos connected with the Holocaust has set a precedent for more contemporary contexts within which we "remember to forget." Overall, Zelizer's study is a far-ranging examination of the role of the media, representation, and brutality in post-Holocaust culture.

## Animalia

Susan Fisher

A recent exhibit in New York entitled "Paradise Now" presented several works of "bioart." Among them were appealing photographs of little children; the photos appeared entirely conventional, but the accompanying text explained that the eyes were actually those of puppy dogs, digitally added to the children's faces. Another work consisted of live video and webcast images of bacteria. The bacteria were noteworthy because they contained a custom-made gene, assembled by using the letters of Genesis 1:26—the verse about letting man have dominion over every living thing—to dictate the base sequence of the gene.

These works appeared too recently to be discussed in Steve Baker's 2000 book, *The Postmodern Animal* (Reaktion, \$24.95), but they are precisely the kind of art that interests him. Baker argues that animal imagery is in favour again because it has proved a useful way to explore certain postmodernist concerns. His study covers a wide range of work from Damien Hirst's notorious animal carcasses (which won him the Turner Prize in 1995) to Olly and Suzi's paintings of endangered predators, done *en plein air* (or *mer*, in the case of the shark) and subsequently interacted with and marked by their animal subjects. While Baker's primary emphasis is on visual arts, he briefly discusses Julian Barnes's *Flaubert's Parrot*, and devotes a chapter to Will Self's 1997 novel *Great Apes* (General, \$18.50).

Environmentalism and animal rights advocacy have inspired many recent works of art, but Baker's interest does not lie in what he calls "animal-endorsing" art; rather, he is concerned with "animal-skeptical" art—works that call into question "culture's means of constructing and classifying the animal in order to make it meaningful to the human." Not surprisingly, his chief instruments for analysing such works come from poststructuralist philosophy.

Baker begins with Jean-François Lyotard's hostility to "expert thinking" and "expert knowledge." Works such as Joseph Beuys's 1974 installation piece *Coyote: I Like America and America Likes Me* demonstrate how an artist can abandon "expert" control of his materials. The piece consisted of Beuys and the coyote living together for a week in a New York art gallery. The animal in Beuys's installation became a collaborator. Similarly, William Wegman's Weimaraner, Man Ray, becomes co-creator in Wegman's many photos and videos featuring the dog. As expert knowledge gets tossed out, fragmentation appears in its wake, not merely as an aesthetic or compositional principle (as it was for modernists), but as a necessary attack on cognitive and metaphysical certainties. In terms of animal imagery, fragmentation appears as what Baker calls "botched taxidermy." Perhaps the most disturbing example of this is John Isaacs's 1995 *Untitled (Monkey)*, a wax sculpture of a monkey's head and torso, patched with bits of human hair, and grafted to hands and feet that are clearly



human (they were cast from those of a small child); the creature is injecting itself with a syringe. Baker links such works to Derrida's notion of the "animot," a way of being that occupies an indeterminate, destabilizing space between what is created by culture (*mot*) and what is beyond or before it (*animaux*).

Another poststructuralist thinker invoked by Baker is Julia Kristeva. Her definition of abjection—"that which draws one toward the place where meaning collapses"—opens Baker's discussion of animal imagery in what has come to be called Abject Art (after a 1993 exhibition at the Whitney Museum in New York). The central example Baker examines is Mike Kelley's 1990 *Nostalgic Depiction of the Innocence of Childhood*, a photograph of a naked man and woman astride stuffed animals. Kelly's photo, with its disturbing intimacy between the humans and the animals, certainly undermines our confidence that humans belong at the top of the evolutionary scale. But it assaults more than just an idealized chain of being. The animals are synthetic stuffed animals, children's toys. The adult humans are naked. If these are abject works in which "meaning collapses," the reason is that there are too many possibilities, and all of them diminish human dignity.

Baker's fifth chapter examines two books by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari: their 1975 study *Kafka* and the 1980 book translated as *A Thousand Plateaus*. Deleuze and Guattari interpret Kafka's various animal stories as fables of "becoming-animal," which is their term for the process of escaping humanness and "all of its associated philosophical and psychoanalytical baggage." In *Kafka*, they claim that "[t]o become animal is to participate in movement, to stake out the path of escape in all its positivity, to cross a threshold, to reach a continuum of intensities that are valuable only in themselves, to find a world of pure intensities where all forms come undone, as do all the significations, signifiers, and sig-

nifieds, to the benefit of an unformed matter of deterritorialized flux, of nonsignifying signs." This sounds grand, but becoming animal (or insect, as Gregor Samsa does) can only be a short-lived escape. What Deleuze and Guattari call the "Oedipalization" of everyday life (which seems to mean authority, particularly of the bureaucratic variety) catches up with everyone in the end. Nonetheless, to Baker, and to Deleuze and Guattari, becoming-animal is a heroic creative gesture, one which at least briefly affirms the possibility of escape from human consciousness. Several of the artists Baker describes have actually donned animal outfits for performance pieces. John Isaacs, for example, has appeared in a video dressed as a frog; for thirty minutes, nothing happens as Isaacs peers out from behind damp foliage.

Baker's excursions into poststructuralist theory are not uninteresting, and they do demonstrate the contemporary relevance of the newly troubled man/beast divide. The same questions that intrigue the artists he discusses—what is a man? what is a beast?—also concern contemporary philosophers. But in his eagerness to provide theoretical contexts, Baker neglects historical ones. He asserts that "there was no modern animal, no 'modernist' animal." Instead of demonstrating the truth of this assertion, he breezily suggests that it would be "rather tedious" to document "the animal's absence from much of the twentieth century's most adventurous and imaginative visual art." After a few perfunctory examples, he gets back to his own postmodern terrain. He utterly ignores the very long history of animal imagery in Western art, dismissing it all as "the unashamedly anthropomorphic sentiment of an earlier age." It is true that the predominant role of animal imagery has been allegorical, and part of Baker's argument is that what is new about postmodern animal imagery is the impossibility of allegorizing it. The animals

in these works do not provide neat *exempla* about human life. Nonetheless, to discuss contemporary animal pictures and not even consider their relation to earlier works by, say, Landseer or Stubbs seems cavalier, or at least recklessly ahistorical.

The seventh chapter of Baker's book turns to fiction, chiefly Will Self's *Great Apes*, a novel which imagines how life would be if chimps replaced humans as the dominant species. In Self's experiment in metamorphosis, nothing in the social order changes: the *Guardian* still appears, the rich live in Hampstead, and intellectuals write books. But chimps have all the good parts, while human beings are regarded as pitiful animals of very little brain. The protagonist, an artist named Simon Dykes, is the only creature concerned about this reversal and, himself chimpified, is branded insane for insisting that humans once ruled. Baker sees *Great Apes* as "a fictional account of becoming-animal," a kind of artist/beast fable in which a painter preoccupied with formal problems discovers his own body is a formal problem—a shape which is neither man nor beast. Baker takes this tedious novel far too seriously, but it is admirably suited to his theme. Kafka's ten-page "A Report from an Academy" makes the same points that Self's novel flogs to death in some four hundred pages.

Baker's chapter on pets begins with the endearingly honest observation that no self-respecting postmodernist could possibly admit to liking pets. Yet pets ought to be a prime arena of postmodern investigation, occupying as they do a space between the human and the animal, enjoying the comforts of the one and the liberties of the other. Deleuze and Guattari dismiss pets as Oedipal animals that represent loyalty, obedience, and the acceptance of hierarchy. But not all postmodern philosophers take this position: as Baker notes, both Derrida and Hélène Cixous have written with tenderness about their pets. He discusses paint-

ings by artists such as David Hockney and Sue Coe that depict domestic animals with careful, loving realism. A sheep drawn by Coe reminds me of the barnyard animals drawn by the great wildlife artist R.C. Tunnick; all that separates the two is the self-conscious commentary Coe has scrawled along the edge of her drawing. Postmodern irony occasionally falls away, dispelled by the warmth of simple wonder.

*The Postmodern Animal* provides convincing evidence that the peculiar impasses of postmodernist art have tended to favour animal imagery. If one is trying to think outside the structures of human consciousness, then animal consciousness seems a realm worth exploring, or at least acknowledging. But in order to incorporate animals in a work of art, one must somehow represent them. How can one do so without resorting either to symbolism or anthropomorphism, both of which represent the animal in terms of human structures of meaning? This, as Baker demonstrates, is a formal and philosophical challenge that goes to the heart of postmodern anxieties.

Helpfully, *The Postmodern Animal* includes reproductions of nearly all the works Baker discusses. Most of the artists are British or American, but the very first image is Canadian: General Idea's 1990 *Fin de Siècle*, an installation of white polystyrene blocks and stuffed baby seals. For Baker, the sentimentality of the stuffed toys and the elegant minimalism of the polystyrene ice floes (arranged, according to Baker, on a *Méduse*-like raft) create a confusion of responses. The viewer cannot decide whether to feel compassion for the baby seals, surely about to be bludgeoned, or annoyance at their incongruity in the gallery. *Fin de Siècle* was part of the Aids project undertaken by General Idea, a context which Baker does not mention, and its purpose was to make viewers question why some victims evoke sympathy and others do not: is it easier to feel sorry for baby

seals than for “a forty-five-year-old gay hairdresser” (in the words of General Idea member Felix Partz)?

Canadians, of course, have always been confused by the animals among us—are they victims, friends, predator, prey? Margaret Atwood in *Survival* claimed that animals had a special place in Canadian literature. Unlike British animal stories, which are really about “Englishmen in furry zipper suits,” or American animal stories, which are about hunters, Canadian animal stories, she claimed, are about victims. They are told from the point of view of the animal, and the animal invariably dies. But in 1975, just a few years after the publication of *Survival*, Marian Engel’s *Bear* offered quite a different version of the Canadian animal story. In Engel’s novel, a middle-aged archivist goes north to live on a deserted island. Her only companion is a bear, with whom she falls in love. Engel’s sly, remarkably convincing beast fable seems only partly designed as a *riposte* to *Survival*, and the puritanical gloom about the wild that Atwood has always evoked. Atwood’s position (at least in *Survival*) was that animals in literature are always symbolic or allegorical. But Engel’s bear isn’t, or at least not in any simple way. He is an animal with matted fur and rotting teeth, and no vocabulary beyond grunts and whimpers. But he has memory, feelings, a sense of humour. This disconcerting mixture of qualities makes him a member of Baker’s postmodern animal kingdom, a collection of creatures that do not respect the boundary between the animal and the human. Like many of the works Baker discusses, *Bear* forces us to rethink our notions of what makes us human.

Mottyl the cat in Timothy Findley’s 1984 *Not Wanted on the Voyage* also departs from the “animal as victim” typology. True, the creatures on Findley’s ark suffer under the tyrannical Dr. Noyes, but their cool observation of his crimes gives them narrative

power. The male humans in this novel are not worthy of dominion over the beasts. Noah’s ark, it is worth remembering, is the foundational animal story in Christian myth. Picture-book versions show the animals marching docilely, even gladly, on board, trusting they will be cared for by benevolent human beings. But we know that the animals are not being saved for their own sake; they are just Noah’s floating larder, his grubstake for the post-flood frontier. When the waters recede, God promises Noah that “the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth” and “every moving thing that lives shall be meat for you” (Genesis 9: 2-3). As a postmodern re-writing of Noah’s ark, *Not Wanted on the Voyage* considers things from the beasts’ point of view, and paints Noah/Dr. Noyes as a grim, lustful patriarch—not the benign father I remember from the Sunday School flannelboard. Considered in terms of Baker’s schema, Mottyl and the other animals of *Not Wanted on the Voyage* are postmodern animals not just because they talk, and challenge the rightfulness of human dominion, but also because they enable the reader to experience “becoming-animal”—that state (however illusory or temporary) in which one feels the slipping away of human subjectivity.

Thomas King, in *Green Grass, Running Water* (1993), has his own kind of fun with the Flood, and the relations among God, man, and beast. At the end of the novel, a dam bursts, and the waters pour over the plain. There are not too many animals around, with the sole exception of Coyote, who, in King’s novel, is the one who really makes things happen; the Old Testament God isn’t good for much. *Green Grass, Running Water* is often described as postmodern because of its mockery of linear narrative and historical time, its satiric mingling of popular and high culture, and its elevation of an animal to god-like status. But, as has often been observed in the study of non-Western literatures, what looks like

postmodernism from one perspective is just tradition from another. King has acknowledged that the prominence of Coyote in this novel owes much to the works of storyteller Harry Robinson. First Nations culture abounds in examples of communication and even marriage between humans and animals (perhaps the inspiration for Engel's inter-species romance). Coyote, with his god-like irresponsible power, represents an inversion of the familiar animal/man/god hierarchy, a turnabout King emphasizes with his jokes about God, the backwards dog.

The elephants of Barbara Gowdy's *The White Bone* (1998) certainly suffer at the hands of human beings, but they are not animal victims in the pathetic sense Atwood described, nor are they particularly Canadian. It might be possible to read the story of their flight from drought and ivory poachers as an environmentalist parable, but Gowdy seems to want us to read it as ethnography, not allegory. She provides a map of their territory and a genealogical chart of the major matrilineal groups. Footnotes explain odd expressions and unfamiliar attitudes. All elephants, both bulls and cows, are known as She-ones and they live in a universe governed over by She (an echo of H. Rider Haggard's *She Who Must Be Obeyed?*). The elephants have comical names: Date Bed (born in a bed of date leaves), Mud, She-Screams and She-Soothes. These details make the novel sound silly, and at times it is. But Gowdy sticks to her premises with a dogged seriousness that gradually commands attention: these elephants are thinking, feeling, visionary beings, and they are struggling against their enemies and their own failures of body and spirit. Gowdy's elephants have many human attributes and attainments. For example, they pray and sing hymns; they fall in love and mourn their dead; some are clairvoyant and possess a third eye. But they are not human beings in grey baggy skins. They are animals, and Gowdy (who, to judge by the

acknowledgements, undertook considerable research) successfully imagines a life in which eating dung and spraying mud would be acceptable behaviours. If elephants could write, is this what they would write about? Of course *The White Bone* is a book only humans will read (unless it is translated into ASL for the benefit of Washoe and other signing chimps), so it can only have meaning in human terms. Ultimately, what does it tell us about ourselves? Perhaps one thing it points out is our own relentless self-centredness: we always assume that other creatures form part of the "book of the world" written for our enlightenment. But by refusing to offer any kind of lesson or allegorical message, *The White Bone* creates a convincing world in which humans are merely a passing danger.

Don McKay's poetry has always been concerned with the animal world; like Ted Hughes, about whom he has written, McKay consistently finds in animals the images and likenesses he needs. And, like Hughes, McKay goes beyond animal imagery to adopt a kind of animal identity or animal voice or sight, a strategy that seems very close to Deleuze and Guattari's "becoming-animal." In McKay's case, the creatures are almost always birds. A long-time birdwatcher, McKay knows what he is seeing and hearing, and the birds in his poems have specific names: eider, evening grosbeak, sanderling, white-throated sparrow. His latest collection, *Another Gravity* (McClelland & Stewart, \$16.99), seems to hover at the edge of a cliff or perhaps out on a limb, considering the possibilities of flight. About a fifth of the book is devoted to poems on the theme of Icarus. But McKay's Icarus is not like Auden's unseen falling object. Here, Icarus studies the raptors and diving ducks; he envies the swift-swimming loon. Icarus is both a man who would like to fly (and is willing to take the fall) and a poet who, day after day, leaps

into air, hoping his craft will keep him aloft. Virtually every poem in this collection mentions birds or some other creature (a luna moth and a lizard enter the scene). Through his attention to the natural world, McKay endeavours to escape the "theme park of the human"—perhaps to become like the winter wren, "whose impossible song is a biography of Buddha," or the chestnut-backed chickadees he imagines as "the selves / of dear departed ones." McKay's birds are not ornaments of the poet's world. They are beings, centres of consciousness, observing and imagining him: "Sometimes I listen much too closely to the crows / . . . They know something. Something / about scavenging and shopping and the interwoven / deerpaths of desire." This reaching out to other forms of life, this desire to shed the trappings of human selfhood, seems eminently postmodern, yet McKay expresses it in a conventional lyric voice. Unlike so many of the artworks Baker describes, which make rough beasts out of their postmodern animals, McKay's poems are not afraid to be beautiful. They seem effortless and inevitable, like the bird-flight he has studied so well.

Fredric Jameson defined postmodernism as "what you have when the modernization process is complete and nature is gone for good." The images discussed in *The Postmodern Animal* seem full of anxiety that this time is indeed upon us: the animals they represent, mimic, or display are completely contained in culture, and their difference or separateness seems irremediably violated. This is of course the point, but it comes at a price. While such works pose an exhilarating challenge to conventional views, they also serve as a saddening reminder of how fragile the once-mighty animal kingdom now seems. In contrast, writers like McKay and Gowdy provide reassuring evidence that there is still something wild out there, something mercifully indifferent to our human concerns.

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## 2000 Trauma

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W.H. New

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Sustainable generalizations about literature in the year 2000 are elusive. Much vaunted as a turn towards better things, 2000 behaved about as phlegmatically as any other year, and perhaps the tenor of the times is reflected most poignantly in *Beyond Remembering* (Harbour), a selection of Al Purdy's poems, wonderfully edited by Sam Solecki. In the book appear Purdy's several most recent poems on love, lost friends, and impending death: "Do not touch words to what has no name / or feel the place of wandering stones with eyes / the beast we hunt must not be said / its smell rides under the wind / its face remembers our faces." With Purdy's death during the year (and the deaths also of fellow-writers Hugh Hood, Libby Scheier, Anne Hébert, A.E. Van Vogt, Bernard Assiniwi, Carol Bolt, and Pierre Elliott Trudeau), eloquent voices of the whole country went silent. Melancholy became a mode of discourse. Jack Granatstein's *The Trudeau Albums* (Penguin) attempted a kind of pictorial tribute to the late prime minister, showing him against a backdrop of history, but the commentary and captions explain the life and times less fully than one might have hoped. The mood of the day was captured better in a series of personal memoirs: in Matt Cohen's posthumously published autobiography *Typing: A Life in 26 Keys* (Random House), for example, a frank and moving book about family, self-doubt, youth and publishing, editors and the obtuseness of reviewers, and finally about finding love. Or consider the eloquence of Patrick Lane's tribute to his mother—to a love that transcended poverty and led to poetry—and to Purdy and P.K. Page, in *The Bare Plums of Winter Rain* (Harbour); "The Night of My Conception" closes remarkably: "I lay between / my brothers, . . . /

Soon, I said, soon, and when they had fallen / into the thin light of their arms / I went to my father and gave myself / into his hands, into the dark / of my mother's only body, long and white." Here, and in another eloquent poem, "Dance of the Wings," elegy and celebration twin.

In a kind of publishing-venture-equivalent to this combination of sensibilities, several books appeared that regathered the past: E.J. Pratt's collated *Selected Poems* (U of Toronto P), edited by Sandra Djwa, William Keith, and Zailig Pollock; Stan Dragland's anthology of Brick Books publications over 25 years, *New Life in Dark Seas*; Birk Sproxtton's judicious anthology of *Great Stories from the Prairies* (Red Deer); Carmelita McGrath and the Burning Rock Collective's tribute to Larry Mathews' role as mentor of young Newfoundland writers, *Hearts Larry Broke* (Killick); and Fred Wah's edited new version of Robert Kroetsch's *Completed Field Notes* (U of Alberta P). The simple "reissue" of works is less testament to memory than recognition of worthiness, though the *Southern Stories* of Clark Blaise (Porcupine's Quill: the first volume of Blaise's *Collected Stories*) take as their open subject the power of autobiographical reconstruction, and remind readers (if reminder were needed) of Blaise' extraordinary skill as a writer of life. Alistair MacLeod's beautifully crafted stories also appeared, collected under the resonant title *Island* (McClelland & Stewart). Among other republications, Robert Kroetsch's *The Words of My Roaring* (U of Alberta P) reintroduces the anecdotal voices of the Mackenzie; Francis Marion Beynon's 1919 novel *Aleta Day* (Broadview) tells of a pacifist woman who grows up in Manitoba; Wayne Grady's translation of Bernard Assiniwi's *The Beothuk Saga* (M&S) stresses incident and setting as it follows the lives of generations from c. 1000 to the death of Shanawdithit in 1829. (Nine pages of an appended Beothuk lexicon are based on material supplied by an 18th-century

informant.) In his continuing important (if not uncontroversial) work on the oral literature of the Haida, Robert Bringhurst retranslated the poetic tales of Ghandl, *Nine Visits to the Mythworld* (Douglas & McIntyre). Adapting the materials recorded a century ago by John Swanton into what he calls the poet's "narrative syllogisms," Bringhurst brings Ghandl's nine tales to new generations of listeners. In these narratives, people do generous things, discover the importance of lineage, marriage, territory, and the potlatch, and captivatingly roam the boundaryline between the domestic-historical world and the ordered world of mythtime.

"Reflection" constituted a prose mode as well: both literally and metaphorically in Grant MacEwan's *Watershed* (NeWest), subtitled "Reflections on Water," a series of thoughts on the benefits of clean groundwater, in a year when severe water pollution in parts of Canada became scandal. James Houston's *Hideaway* (M&S) anecdotally tells of life and fishing in the Queen Charlotte Islands. Terry Glavin's engagingly written *The Last Great Sea* (Douglas & McIntyre) explores the history of the Pacific Ocean (Cook's encounters with Haisla and Heiltsuk; the influence of "Beringia," Descartes, and Linnaeus; the presence of Lowry and Krashenninnikov) and the mystery of the ocean's natural history. Extending the boundaries of memoir, two of the most readable books of the year tell of childhoods abroad and the politics of disruption and emigration: Nega Mezlekia's Governor General's Award-winning *Notes from the Hyena's Belly* (Penguin) and Michael David Kwan's *Things That Must Not Be Forgotten* (Macfarlane Walter & Ross). Mezlekia's title comes from a folktale about threat, and about action taken to avoid being consumed; full of active metaphors and lively phrasing (especially in the retold tales—I found myself wondering how much apparent "freshness" derives from a direct translation

from Amharic), the book records childhood injunctions to live a moral life, and then recounts a series of episodes involving a wayward youth, political actions taken in opposition to the ruling junta, and then emigration. Finally, the book moralizes about Canadians' need to listen better to the rest of the world. To my mind, Kwan's book is the more insightful and the more powerful. The story of the difficulties attending his apparently privileged Eurasian childhood in China during the Second World War, it shows how the fact of being "Eurasian" meant he was excluded from both Chinese and European communities. Drawing for some of the historical details on his father's journal (which provides him with his title), Kwan probes the fact that many public figures in the China of the day (including his father) collaborated superficially with the Japanese occupiers of the country but actively participated in the political underground. Political pressures did not cease in postwar China, and several sharp portraits (for example, those of a corrupt and opium-addled mayor, and of a ruthlessly greedy sister-in-law) help vivify the contrariness of the time. In this world, Mao's forces and the Kuomintang both exerted power heavily-handedly. Kwan's story of flight to Hong Kong is told with remarkable dispassion; his indictment of church, school, and political officials for their unremitting biases, however, reveals why he "refuses to forget."

Travel writing also became a genre of choice for several writers, including Grant Buday, whose recollections of his trips to India, *Golden Goa* (ECW), reveal his fascination not only with place and character but also with the sets of pressure ("curiosity" among them) that can lead to addiction. Penny Petrone's *Embracing Serafina* (Guernica) takes another tack, re-enacting the travels of the doughty 19th-century travellers. In *Invisible Among the Ruins* (Cormorant), John Moss meanders through

Ireland, and engagingly, wanderingly, reflects on himself, Canada, and culture. Lesley Krueger's *Foreign Correspondences* (Key Porter) considers the subject of expatriation, based on her own experiences of India, Mexico, Brazil, and elsewhere. Lynne Van Luven's anthology *Going Some Place* (Coteau)—although badly designed and printed (compare any of the publications from Porcupine's Quill: always elegantly produced)—contains some engaging travel essays and memoirs. Ian Samuels's poems in *Cabra* (Red Deer) evocatively and critically reconstruct the history of Brazil. Within Canada, Taras Grescoe visits Quebec, discovering depths and edges to the cultures there that are not the conventional ones, and writes in *Sacré Blues* (Macfarlane Walter & Ross) one of the year's most thoughtful and thought-provoking narratives of discovery.

Travel to Canada rather than away also (at least indirectly) led to several literary works. Carlos Teixeira and Victor Da Rose collaborated on *The Portuguese in Canada* (UTP); I found particularly interesting the essays on the Newfoundland fleet and on settlement in Montreal and Quebec. Various poetical works dealt with the consequences of travel, often coupling these insights with those of recuperative memory. The poems of Goh Poh Seng, for example—*As Though the Gods Love Us* (Nightwood)—some new and some from previous collections, dream of freedom and seek proof of being alive; they observe the salmon cycle in British Columbia and reconstruct Singapore; the poems sometimes rise to an intensity of lyric (as in "Night Rain"), at other times experiment with *stated feeling*. (A poetry of statement or declaration is also the accomplishment of Russell Thornton in *The Fifth Window* [Thistledown], Lee Maracle in *Bent Box* [Theytus], Ken Norris [Muses' Co], Margo Button [Oolichan], and Hume Cronyn [Mosaic].) The poems in Phinder Dulai's *Basmati Brown* (Nightwood) reflect on being a traveller, a tourist, a visitor in

India, on the paradox of being simultaneously Canadian and Punjabi and of trying to find ways to reconcile the multiple identities one carries, or is given. Gregor Robinson's diary-form novel *Hotel Paradiso* (Raincoast) takes its character from Montreal to the Bahamas. In openly-declared life writing, Bernard Slade's jaunty *Shared Laughter* (Key Porter) is an equable account of his successful life in theatre, while Patrick Toner's *If I could turn and meet myself* (Goose Lane) more mordantly tells the life of Alden Nowlan and the rough critical reception he had to survive. In one of the more effective critical books of the year, moreover—*Tricks with a Glass: Writing Ethnicity in Canada* (Rodopi), ed. Rocío Davis and Rosalía Baena—issues related to cultural movement and cultural doubleness take centre stage. Comprising a series of essays (largely by Canadian and Spanish critics), the book tackles the complex notion of defining “ethnic identity” and probing the relevance of postcolonial theory to it. Davis's and Baena's own essays on the character of doubleness in Mistry and Ricci—and in Davis's case, also on the intricacy of the short story cycle—together with essays on Keefer (by Danielle Schaub and by Keefer herself), Ondaatje, Bissoondath, Lee, Acadian culture, and life writing, for example, reveal the ample range of the collection; the book asks to be read as a companion volume to Smaro Kambourelli's recent theoretical volume.

Among useful reference works to appear in 2000 were Susan Macpherson's *Encyclopedia of Dance in Canada* (Dance Collection, Toronto), a bilingual, illustrated account of dancers, choreographers, music for dance, and companies, and Daniel Francis's *Encyclopedia of British Columbia* (Harbour), a book heavy on media personalities, with well-written accounts of history and place, and a nodding gesture towards the publishing industry, but nothing on the lively tradition of, for example,

folksong or union song. Gerry Bowler's *The World Encyclopedia of Christmas* (M&S) is a beautifully produced volume for a general readership, which seems to have begun with an interest in the origin of carols, for those articles are substantial, while the more general topics seem rather more superficial (the article on Christmas in Canada makes no mention of Christmas in Canadian literature, for example). Rayna Green's *The Encyclopedia of the First Peoples of North America* (Groundwood) is aimed at children, but needs revision; a map puts the Makah inland rather than on the Coast, and an entry on *reservations* in the USA is not paralleled by one on *reserves* in Canada. Bill Casselman's *What's In a Canadian Name?* (McArthur) is a trivia book on a few famous surnames. More useful on language issues in Canada is the reader prepared by Jennifer MacLennan and John Moffatt, *Inside Language* (Prentice-Hall).

Encyclopedic in impulse if not in design are the large-scale projects on George Grant and Northrop Frye. Arthur Davis and Peter C. Emberley produced the first volume (1933-50) of the *Collected Works of George Grant* (U of Toronto P), gathering early reviews and an Oxford D.Phil., all with an editorial apparatus; A.A. Lee and Jean O'Grady edited *Northrop Frye on Religion* (U of Toronto P), the fourth volume of his *Collected Works*. While some commentaries fastened fairly narrowly on issues (for instance, Caterina Nella Cotrupi's analysis, *Northrop Frye and the Poetics of Process*, U of Toronto P), others, such as John Fraser's *Eminent Canadians* (M&S), the declarative title echoing Strachey, seemed arbitrary in their selectivity. Various other cultural studies investigated the contexts of writing—for example, Valerie Korinek's *Roughing It in the Suburbs* (U of Toronto P), on the gender politics of *Chatelaine* in the 1950s and 1960s; Robin Laurence's *Gathie Falk* (Douglas & McIntyre), a well-illustrated biographical



survey of the painter's career; Toby Brooks's *Pat Lowther's Continent* (Gynergy), a brief biobibliographical study of the poet; Ronald Rees's *Land of the Loyalists* (Nimbus), on relations among landscape, race, and the ideals of architecture and town-planning in the Maritimes; or Russell Johnston's *Selling Themselves* (U of Toronto P), a history and commentary on Canadian advertising. Gerald Friesen's excellent *Citizens and Nation* (U of Toronto P) might also be read as a paradigm of cultural contextualizing, for it carefully investigates various examples of "ordinary" Canadians' lives, to demonstrate how they were shaped by their contact with the land in ways different from those that "received" culture (using such terms as sublime, picturesque, beautiful) adopted as artistic, normative, and genteel. Ian Ross's *The Book of Joe* (Shillingford) records yet more of his vernacular CBC radio essays. More tellingly, Rinaldo Walcott's anthology *Rude* (Insomniac) is an important collection of black cultural criticism in Canada; reading it alongside Ayanna Black's collection of writings by Canadian writers of African descent, *Fiery Spirits & Voices* (in a new edition from Harper) calls for changes in the kinds of critical generalization—and critical perspicacity—that can be brought to the subject of Canadian Literature.

For the most part, critical writing tended to look more at social issues and less at texts. There were a few exceptions. Lesley D. Clement's *Learning to Look* (McGill-Queen's) is a solid, detailed analysis of Mavis Gallant's references to and uses of the visual arts; and Fred Wah's evocative essays on poetry and the importance of silence were gathered as *Faking It: Poetics and Hybridity* (Red Deer). Fred Asals and Paul Tiessen edited *A Darkness That Murmured* (U of Toronto P), essays contextualizing Malcolm Lowry against Fitzgerald, Joyce, De Lillo, Freud, Haldane, and travel writing. T.F. Rigelhof's *This Is*

*Our Writing* (Porcupine's Quill) is a set of personal essays, largely about Catholic Montreal writing, which is what appeals to the author; I found myself enthusing about some pages only to be irritated by others, which means that this is a book with personality, worth dealing with: Rigelhof shrewdly debunks Davies and with insight praises Ray Smith (which probably means I agree with him), but then blisteringly side-swipes people and enterprises that he also claims to know little about (which probably means that I disagree). It is, in short, intelligent, serious, and inconsistent, and open to a lay reader. Dawn Thompson's *Writing a Politics of Perception* (U of Toronto P), by contrast, is intended for the specialist: a study of "holosemiosis," especially in Brossard's "Picture Theory" and works by Atwood, Philip, and Robin. Influenced by Foucault on meaning and Derrida on radical memory, it proposes that memory systems in Canadian literature function as political strategies—a process of cognition integrating text, mind, and reality.

Memory, of course, constitutes one of the standard strategies of story-telling, so it is no surprise to see it recur in this year's novels. Sometimes the results were disappointing, as in Katherine Govier's *The Truth Teller* (Random House), where a school visit to Greece turns dark; or in the earnest stories of Jan Thornhill, Carol Bruneau, Garole Giangrande, Madeline Sonik, and Carol Shields ("Dressing Down," in her *Dressing Up for the Carnival*, Random House, is perhaps the strongest story in this collection, the one most in tune with the human comedy). Memory also shapes Nancy Huston's overwritten tale of a premature baby who becomes a pianist, *Prodigy* (McArthur); Elizabeth Harvor's *Excessive Joy Injures the Heart* (M&S), in which a woman discovers a man who likes sexuality; Lisa Appignanesi's *Sanctuary* (McArthur), a psychological mystery burdened by its weighty prose; Douglas

Coupland's *Miss Wyoming* (Random House), about a beauty queen and cheesy flicks; and the Booker Prize-winning *The Blind Assassin* (M&S) by Margaret Atwood. (Clearly the novel had its enthusiasts.) Atwood's novel is primarily a "romance," most interesting on ways in which the "public" owns an "author," turns an author interpretively to *their* purposes, which are not necessarily intentions that the author had in mind. It tells of an old woman who knows there is a mystery about her sister's death many years earlier; she discovers that the unpalatable truth is hidden in the sister's science fiction stories. Atwood has used this strategy before, and the attentive reader will have figured out the truth before the character does. For more arresting science fiction, moreover, readers might better turn to *Tesseract8* (Tesseract). There were still other SF publications—by Robert Sawyer, Edo van Belcom, Elisabeth Vonarburg—but the *Tesseract8* anthology is a lively introduction to SF's various contemporary forms. Atwood's parodies of the genre of course also display her skill at verbal play; like this aspect of the novel, the formal experiments of other books were sometimes as interesting as what they were used to say; examples include Gail Scott's *My Paris* (Mercury), in which intellect triumphs over grammar, where "errors" in diary fragments spell out the psyche's preoccupations; and Stephen Finucan's *Happy Pilgrims* (Insomniac), weighted to emphasize epigrammatic endings, in which grammatical errors seem less necessary than in Scott. *Getting Lucky* (Knopf) demonstrates again Matt Cohen's skill as a short story writer, able to wrap up densities of insight into moments of conversation. In Annabel Lyon's brilliant story collection *Oxygen* (Porcupine's Quill), the crafted ellipses reveal the surreality of a contemporary generation's urban life. Other works, too, demonstrate the power of craft: for example, Darren Wershler-Henry's *The*

*Tapeworm Foundry* (Anansi), a kind of performance work that lives in language; Paul Glennon's Barthelme-like, stylish stories about how the mind of the author imagines possibilities, *How Did you Sleep?* (Porcupine's Quill); and Harold Rhenisch's *Carnival* (Porcupine's Quill), a work that handles conversation well, balancing stories from German fairytale with tales of childhood during wartime and commitment to Canada. Stephen Heighton's *The Shadow Boxer* (Knopf) is at its most interesting, I think, when it does experiment with narrative form; it tells of a young man who wants to be a writer, who travels, who meets various women, but who finds his harshest test in his hallucinatory encounter with cold nature. And Libby Creelman's *Walking in Paradise* (Porcupine's Quill) manages to hone the bitter edge of narratives about accomplishment and separation. Other works to claim serious territory on the edge of pop genres include Tim Bowling's *Downriver Drift* (Harbour), which deals with infighting in the fishers' union, and makes a plea for the sockeye; Peter Trower's *The Judas Hills* (Harbour), a rattlingly fast narrative about a Heiltsuk "curse" on a logging claim, in which character and dialogue are less important than pacing; Anne Dandurand's *The Waiting Room* (Mercury), essentially a series of explicit heterosexual fantasies, translated by Robert Majzels; Bill Gaston's *The Good Body* (Cormorant), which tells of a hockey player who gets MS, goes to university, undertakes to play varsity hockey (along with his son), and learns to cope with his family (and ex-family) in ways that cause him also to change.

In some respects more conventionally "realist" in strategy, several other writers managed to convey substantial insights into the human condition. I responded warmly, for example, to Barbara Lambert's *A Message for Mr. Lazarus* (Cormorant), a novella and seven stories, about people's

preoccupations with surfaces and their need for more depth in their lives, even for “mythic” dimension. Marilyn Simonds’s *The Lion in the Room Next Door* (M&S) introduces a fresh and talented story-teller, whose enquiries into fantasy, fear, and sexuality are more symbolic and interesting than those of Dandurand, and whose ventures (ostensibly all from life: the “I” narrator gets a bit repetitive technically), especially into Brazil, express a lively capacity to make imagination seem real. The coming-of-age narrative perhaps lends itself particularly readily to realist treatment, as in Elizabeth Hay’s *A Student of Weather* (M&S), in which one sister is accomplished and the other feels deprived (a sort of melding of Atwood, Burnard, and Georgina Sime); or in Todd Babiak’s novel about a young man who learns self-defence moves, *Choke Hold* (Turnstone), which, while a little too talky over all, introduces a writer with talent. Related are the series of fictions in which traumas of the past (or of a lost past) lead to the growth of an observer. In Rabindranth Maharaj’s ably-written *The Lagahoo’s Apprentice* (Knopf), for example, a man returns from Canada to Trinidad, meets and is “schooled” by a wily politician/economic guru/religious leader, who then resolves to be a “lagahoo” or werewolf himself, and turns into something more like a shape-shifter when he returns to Canada. Lydia Kwa’s *This Place Called Absence* (Turnstone) tells of a generation sold into the Singapore sex trade and of a present generation lesbian in Vancouver who needs to come to terms with the past. Less of a lecture, more of a narrative, Alan Cumyn’s *Burridge Unbound* (M&S) is a sequel to his 1998 novel *Man of Bone*; while the earlier novel was a well-paced narrative of a Canadian immigration officer’s imprisonment and torture in a fictional country in the South China Sea, the less engaging Ottawa-based sequel tells of his marriage breakup after his return home. Shannon

Cowan’s first book, *Leaving Winter* (Oolichan), tells of a young woman who moves to the West Coast, who finds that she becomes a motivation for her grandmother to rediscover her own past in the North Vancouver of the 1920s—the details of place are very lively indeed. In Sandra Sabatini’s *The One With the News* (Porcupine’s Quill), trauma derives from not being able to remember; an integrated series of stories about how Alzheimer’s Disease afflicts not just individuals but their families as well, it includes a particularly poignant scene about the distress of knowing that something has been lost. Being “out of control” is also the problem that Jeannette Armstrong’s *Whispering in Shadows* (Theytus) addresses; while letters and diaries (examples of written tradition) have their force in this work, it is orality that resolves matters: visioning is the process that permits singing one’s way into a kind of balance. Louis Hamelin’s *Cowboy* (translated by Jean-Paul Murray) is a quasi-comic novel about a Quebec bureaucrat who finds that the town he has been assigned to is preoccupied with the past (a decade-old murder) and with American tourists and Indians; following the lives of several figures, the novel traces several characters to unhappy ends, and others towards recovery. Written on an even larger scale, Fred Stenson’s *The Trade* (Douglas & McIntyre) dips back into Hudson’s Bay Company history, reading narrative between the lines of official records of the Company’s move into Piegan country. The characterizations work well, several drawn from life: in Stenson’s hands, the Governor is a user, John Rowand (One-pound-one) is an observant if not altogether admirable trader; Ted Harriott is manipulated by others, though not without his own collaboration; and Jimmy Jock Bird is a manipulator of the middle. The tense middle-ground is where the terms of the “trade”—in fur, ostensibly, but “actually” in love, sex, race,

madness, profit, and power—are ground out. If the novel strives too much for a “poetic” beginning, and elongates itself at the end because of the historical data it has found and wants to include, these are lapses in an otherwise chillingly engaging re-encounter with an historical moment.

Which brings me to the four novels that I found the most sustained and fascinating of the year’s publications: Michael Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost* (M&S), Eden Robinson’s *Monkey Beach* (Knopf), David Adams Richards’ *Mercy Among the Children* (Doubleday), and Hiro McIlwraith’s *Shahnaz* (Oolichan). McIlwraith tells the story of her title character, a Parsi woman who grows up in Bombay, marries, leaves India with her husband for graduate school in Oregon, and finds that neither the new world nor the old one offers heaven. For Shahnaz, trauma is multifold. She has been victimized by the men in her life—her father (who goes to work in another city, leaving her to look after her ailing mother), her Bombay neighbour (who turns his back on her difficulties), her Indian husband (who cannot grow when she subsequently grows, when she expresses her desire for greater independence), her American teacher (who sees her as prey)—but also by the major woman in her life, her mother, a brilliant mathematician who never wanted children, who resents her daughter, and who (manic-depressive in domestic captivity) is violent towards her. Shahnaz turns her back on all of them, but a question remains: does this action free her from her past or does she occupy her own symbolic Towers of Silence? McIlwraith’s first novel, this is an auspicious beginning.

Ondaatje’s novel is also set in South Asia, in the midst of the civil war in Sri Lanka. The war is symbolic as well as representational here, and “division”—between powers, between past and present shapes of history, between touching and maiming, between artifice and demonic spectre—is at

once the subject and method of this elegant, elliptical story. Anil, the title figure, is a Sri Lankan/English-American forensic scientist who is brought in to investigate some bones and to find out what story they might actually tell. Burdened by the secrecy to which she is committed and by the story of political violence that she knows ought to be told—burdened by the “ghost” of the past, by the opportunities that an archeologist named Sarath has given her and the weight of both freedom and constraint—she slowly realizes the degree to which she is torn between the satisfactions of restoration and the demons of reprisal. Like many another figure in this book, she discovers she lives at a “borderland of civil war among governments and terrorists and insurgents”—but that the borderland is a place where healing can happen, not just further trauma.

Eden Robinson’s remarkable *Monkey Beach* explores the appeal of both action and tradition in the lives of a brother and sister (Jimmy and Lisamarie Hill) in the Haisla community of Kitamaat. Faced with encroachment, physical violence, rape, and other external incursions, they absorb the wisdom of their grandmother and become increasingly activist in claiming their own place. Coupled with this essentially realist protest narrative is a series of interpolated “essays” (in the manner of *Moby Dick*, in a way) on language, belief, and geography—each articulating an alternative way of understanding the world. At the end of the book, the spirits of the forest (protective guardians) enter the narrative directly—but ambiguously. Actions clearly have consequences here, but for whom is it time to live and for whom is it time to die? That is the novel’s political (and narrative, and visionary) question.

In some respects it is David Adams Richards’s question also. That small towns give rise to trauma as readily as urban centres do seems to be a motif of Canadian

fiction this year; more than most novels, *Mercy Among the Children* spells out movingly how ordinary people's engagement with chaos can rob them of power. The story of murder, physical brutality, economic manipulation, institutionalized prejudice, church hypocrisy, sexual irresponsibility, and more "demons of retaliation" in a New Brunswick river town, the novel fastens in particular on Sydney Henderson, an innocent man accused of murder, whose innocence counts for nothing when scapegoating him can preserve power for the few. In one telling scene, a harpy of a Family Service agent ensures that a family's woodlot will be cut and the wood carted away by the province to pay back taxes, so that the family will have no heat, so that the lack of heat can be used to prove the parents are inadequate, so that the children can be taken from them, so that the Family Services agent will be granted greater authority. The multiple narrative threads of the novel run variations on this motif; there is more probing mystery here than in several other books that actually claim to *be* mysteries by intent. As a Richards character observes at one point, about the power of manipulation, "I see in it the pedestrian moral high-mindedness of accusation unaccompanied by the search for truth. This is an article of expediency. . . ." The novel's four section titles—"Mercy," "Fury," "Love," "Redemption"—describe the arc of the larger story: Sydney's son Lyle's destruction by what happens to his father, and his attempt to retrieve history from lies. There are, however, no easy resolutions here; this is not a narrative of reconciliation and integration, but one more of testament: the *telling* is what matters—it does not resolve trauma, for it cannot take away the past. All it can do is share the fact of its recognition.

For all the eloquence of much of the fiction, 2000 seemed to me to be more a year of the poem. Poetry perhaps lends itself to

dealing with trauma—the lyric as recuperative strategy?—and several collections found arresting ways both to address varieties of melancholia and to reach out of it. Sue Wheeler's *Slow-Moving Target* (Brick) gathers personal poems on making love, learning regret, and expressing fear, for example, ultimately using the experience of kayaking as a metaphor of recovery: you have to bring along what you need and leave the rest behind. It is perhaps stretching the metaphor when the poet also argues that the kayaker should not worry where to stop: *not worry* perhaps, but the coastal kayaker who doesn't ask ahead (metaphorically or literally) can all too easily not find rest. John Pass's lovely *Water Stair* (Oolichan), with some humour and much tenderness, also claims a relation with the natural world, finding support in the solidity of relationship even while it acknowledges the transitoriness of life. Representations of experience, and especially recollections of childhood—a recurrent poetic motif, often melancholic, nostalgic, sometimes resentful—furnish the subject of many another work: as in Sharon Thesen's *A Pair of Scissors* (Anansi), Patricia Young's new and selected *Ruin & Beauty* (Anansi), Colin Morton's *Coastlines of the Archipelago* (Buschek), Tim Bowling's *The Thin Smoke of the Heart* (McGill-Queen's), which conflates childhood and loss; and Phil Hall's recollection of pain, childhood, and illness, vividly phrased, where "breathing" as an act and as a line of poetry coalesce: *Trouble Sleeping* (Brick). The strongest section of Aurian Haller's noteworthy first volume, *A Dream of Sulphur* (McGill-Queen's), tells of boys' imaginations and (with striking use of a rail-line metaphor) reflects on the way men learn that they are expected to shuck aside this time in their lives. Intensity of feeling also marks Karen Houle's *Ballast* (Anansi), which extends the idea of experience to the things we make up to call real. Related poems appear in several of the

year's volumes of *Collected Verse*, including the late Robin Skelton's *One Leaf Shaking* (Porcépic), which contains some previously uncollected work along with poems from the period 1977–90; Susan Musgrave's *What the Small Day Cannot Hold* (Porcépic), poems from 1970–85, with an introduction by Seán Virgo; Doug Beardsley and Al Purdy's *The Man Who Outlived Himself* (Harbour), with interview and commentary; Kenneth Sherman's *The Well* (Wolsak & Wynn), which (like Karen Connelly's *The Border Surrounds Us* [M&S] and Don Coles's *Kurgan* [Porcupine's Quill], the latter telling about a life that is familiar with both zamboni drivers and Tolstoy) relies on the potential for poetry in the declarative line.

That said, several works looked to technique as its own subject, though (as with Douglas Barbour in *Fragmenting Body*, etc, NeWest) sometimes technique was a translucent medium: Barbour asks what "meaning" means, what words such as "now" and "except" imply. His effective tribute to bpNichol, however, necessarily admits to a life outside language as well as to one lived within. Some poems were intense intellectual meditations on feelings and meanings, such as those of Nicole Brossard in *Installations* (Muses' Co), translated by Erin Mouré and Robert Majzels, and Christopher Dewdney's Southwest Ontario poems in *Signal Fires* (M&S). Perhaps the associative erotics of Jacqueline Turner's *Into the Fold* (ECW) can be read in this context also. Anne Carson's two new works—*Plainwater* (Vintage), a collection of essays and poetry, and *Men in the Off Hours* (Knopf), prose and poetry, including an elegy for her mother—respectively use elliptical strategies to express the sensibilities of spirit and body and to affirm the contemporaneity of the ancient world, and demonstrate this affirmation through a series of modern versions (parodies, conscious borrowings) of Hokusai, Dickinson, Audubon, Donne,

Woolf, among others. Other books took up specific formal challenges: Winona Baker's *Even a Stone Breathes* (Oolichan) is told in haiku over four seasons; bill bissett's *b leev abull char ak trs* (Talon) drafts more performance poetry on the page; Adeena Karasick's impressively produced *Dyssemia Sleaze* (Talon) tries out Language Poetry; Clint Burnham's *Buddyland* (Coach House) adapts vernacular rhythms to social protest; Damian Lopes in *Clay Lamps & fighter kites* (Mercury) chooses minimalist strategies (drawing on Goan imagery, Canadian landscape allusions, and Hindu devotional literature) to tell a series of love poems; Seymour Mayne relies in *Light Industry* (Mosaic) on a taste for epigrammatic wit; John Wing Jr. in . . . *and the fear makes us special* . . . (Mosaic) glimpses life behind the masks of comic performance. The selection of the late Jon Whyte's poems in *Mind Over Mountains* (Red Deer), with a short introduction by Harry Vandervlist, is a salient reminder of Whyte's skill as a formal experimentalist, his range of intellect and familiarity with language and language history, all brought to bear on the representation of the Rockies and the understanding of the human presence in place. E.D. Blodgett uses the long line as a medium of transformation in *Speaking you is holiness* (U of Alberta P), while Marty Gervais (less effectively) explores the uses of the short line in *The Science of Nothing* (Mosaic). Douglas Lochhead's first volume in a while, *Cape Enragé* (Wolsak & Wynn), reveals again his talent for noticing the particular, in 100 very short poems prompted by close observation of the beach. Heather Spears, in a book I find it hard to be objective about, called *Required Reading* (Wolsak & Wynn), represents through words and drawings her experience as a daily visitor/witness to the Reena Virk trial in Victoria, a trial of youths raised to adult court for the murder of a schoolmate. Remarkable in its refusal to sentimentalize, and conscious of how it

could be said itself to be using the lives of others, the book powerfully evokes the effects of “detachment” finally fastening on “Not violence but the remains / of violence” But to what end? Perhaps, I think, some oblique understanding about the limits of self.

As though to avoid this dilemma, some books chose deliberately to see the world through a persona. In one of the year’s most arresting collections of poetry, for example, Robert Finley, in *The Accidental Indies* (McGill-Queen’s), adapts the prose poem to animate what it might have been like to accompany Columbus on the first voyage across the unfamiliar Atlantic and into an unimagined West. Eva Tihanyi, in the restrained, pared-back poems of *Restoring the Wickedness* (Thistledown), includes an effective set on Adam, Eve, and Lilith—but the personal is not absent here. Nor is it from the linguistically brilliant, sexually frank explorations of the fictionality/reality of masculine desire in Mark Cochrane’s *Change Room* (Talon), especially in a series that reads writing as body-building, and vice versa. Here the language exercises itself, twists meaning against resistance as though to reveal the consequences of tension. In some books there are times when the personal begins to intrude, as in the numerous “I” declarations of Anne Simpson’s *Light Falls Through You* (M&S), although in a series called “Usual Devices” Simpson’s inventive talent takes over, so that (in this instance) mathematical symbols become a stimulus for reflection during the Trojan War—this is a talent to watch. Mark Sinnett, too, in *Some Late Adventure of the Feelings* (ECW), is a writer to look for again; at first the book’s language might seem plain—the verb “to be” is in high abundance—but that’s the writer’s point; for this is a book about a strong sense of *being*: here the “being” of “being in love” rather than the mechanics of disposition, say—is highlighted as an

ongoing, developing human capacity. In still other books, the personal, front and centre, is the open justification for writing and the simple reason for writing well. Kevin Roberts’ intense account of the chemotherapy and radiation that put his cancer in remission, *Cobalt 3* (Ronsdale), is one such book; here, everything hinges on the reader identifying with the writer *in situ*, and the power of the language is such that the reader does. George Bowering’s *His Life* (ECW) provides another example; it pens a series of equinox and solstice poems, to trace an autobiography from 1958 to 1988. In some sense the series is a memorial tribute to his late wife Angela, and to the power of love; but it is also a self-representation, a recognition of how bravado carries a person through different kinds of trauma—including youthful ambition, uncertainty, and love. This is a book about person, also about the persons in Bowering’s life who helped shape him as a poet, and also about the feelings out of which poetry springs.

And finally, Don McKay’s magnificent *Another Gravity* (M&S) begins in personal perception but manages again and again to transcend whatever is private. At the same time, McKay manages to use “another gravity” to haul flights of imagery back to experience and earth. Whether writing about Icarus as a diver or about a wake (“the black / belly-button swirl that surfaces and writes / and disappears behind the stern of each / departing ship”), McKay makes elegant use of the colloquial. That’s the personal, the real. He also adapts the colloquial to serious abstraction: “I think it makes sense his voice should / sink back into breath and breath / devote itself to taking in whatever air / might have to say on that short flight between the roof / and the rest of his natural life.” Linking the physical with the abstract, to make the abstract comprehensible, McKay somehow renders more calm the troubled and temporary condition of being alive.

## Other Edens

Laurie Ricou

In the introduction to his *The Ecology of Eden* (Random House, \$39.95), Evan Eisenberg acknowledges the “maddening elusiveness” of the words *nature* and *we*. Nature, he notes with hopeful resignation, “may mean all living things on the planet Earth; or all living things except for humans; or the genetic tendencies of living things, as opposed to this cultural expression, or everything in the universe.” The graduate student who hefts the unwieldy clunker “non-human nature” across every page of a dissertation is less cheerful about the confusion. The increasing number of scholars who are trying to *do* ecocriticism, or to teach courses in ecocriticism, will also recognize the slipperiness of the now ubiquitous term *ecology*. Having tried to do it, and teach it myself, I know how difficult ecocriticism is, and how difficult to find examples which are at once good literary criticism and good ecology (which is to say good science)—and good writing.

It is easy, of course, to find books, good books, about nature and the environment. And while it's unfair to put all these to the test of good ecocriticism, the concept might provide, in a journal devoted to “literature,” one descriptor and one angle of interest. There are so many books out there trying to get the “out there” in here that the ecocritics are having difficulty getting heard, or daring to write, amidst those whom Eisenberg terms the “Planet Managers” and the “Planet Fetishers.”

Ben Parfitt's *Forest Follies: Adventures and Misadventures in the Great Canadian Forest* (Harbour, \$16.95 paper) is hardly literary, but it's compelling, partly for the quiet intensity of its alarm, its sense of irony, and its reliance on listening carefully. Parfitt allows his readers to listen to people immediately involved: Stanley Sam, Nuu-chah-

nulth elder, on the machine-driven speed of today's commercial fishing industry; Larry Bartlett, trail guide, on the islanded habitat of the woodland cariboo in British Columbia's Itcha-Ilgachuz Provincial Park; Fred Paley, president of Global Water Corporation, on the world's need for bulk water shipments. The stories come thick and fast in Jack Boudreau's *Crazy Man's Creek* (Caitlin P, \$15.95 paper), a compendium of mountain-man tales from east central British Columbia. This somewhat casual local history jumps from interview to anecdote to newspaper clipping without much attention to sequence, and usually leaves each item to “speak for itself.” The ecocritic will be interested in the stories of unexpected animal behaviour, portraits of the “indomitable spirit,” and the occasional unusual vocabulary. Perhaps the artlessly abrupt shifts fit the blunted reasoning powers of men going stir-crazy in mountain solitudes, a form with analogues in O'Hagan's *Tay John*, Harlow's *Scann*, and Birney's “Bushed.”

Some guide books are so meticulous that they ignore the stories that must have been, and might have been. Such is the case with Rick Hudson's *A Field Guide to Gold, Gemstone and Mineral Sites of British Columbia*, Volume 2 (Orca Books \$19.95 paper), which describes the Van Winkle Bar (near Lytton) in two measured sentences, and completely ignores the startling, massive “streetscape” of mounded boulders that was left at this remarkable site after decades of Chinese placer mining.

Environmental concern may motivate the publication of David Bouchard's *A Barnyard Bestiary* (Orca Books, \$17.95), but it's difficult to imagine the readership (the publicity sheet says “ages 4-8”) for these earnestly banal poems in which barnyard animals—many of them exotic and extinct or nearly so (the Blonde Mangalitza Pig)—speak *in their own voices*. This transition defies many writers; Bouchard seems to put



too much emphasis on “to teach,” too little on “to delight,” although children might pause long enough to learn from illustrator Kimball Allen’s attention to odd angles of engagement and the angles of individual feather and hair. A barnyard bestiary of another sort is Phil Tilney’s *This Other Eden: Canadian Folk Art Outdoors* (Douglas & McIntyre/Canadian Museum of Civilization, \$35.00 paper), published in conjunction with the Museum’s touring exhibition of the works in its collection. An ecocritic will appreciate the attention to context, especially to the history of gardens and their ornamentation, in Tilney’s folksy text, but will be frustrated by the absence of information about the artefacts often affectionately illustrated in full-page, full-colour photographs. “Affectionately” seems the operative word here, but some more detail would hardly make the heart less fond: we want to know about materials, possible tools, paints, and more about the sites which these artworks were made to fit.

Coming from Brandon, I make farm and prairie a primary and inevitable linking. I have always assumed that the art of the farm fits inevitably into prairie. Some superb photographs of the moods and patterns of the prairie farm feature in Courtney Milne’s *W.O. Mitchell Country* (McClelland & Stewart, \$60.00), a tribute to the writer who died in 1998, and to the extent to which Jake and Brian and Mitchell’s poetry and voice have entered the Canadian imagination. These photographs, with text by W.O., by Orm and Barbara Mitchell, and by Milne himself, are not quite ecocriticism, but they are memorable for their sometime attention to minutiae, and to the clarity and caprice of frost and snow and shadow. Milne’s book is effectively complemented by another album, less geographically specific, by photographer Dudley Witney, titled *The Farm: A Vanishing Way of Life* (Key Porter, \$39.95). As its subtitle implies, this book is a sus-

tained narrative in which David Brown’s text tracks a chronology from “home place” to agribusiness. But Witney’s book does not have the lyric eye or quality of reproduction found in the Milne book. And for students of literature, Brown’s essay and the strained earnestness of his captions are far less compelling. The voice of the prairie farm—the inevitably associated adjective is “flat”—speaks amusingly in a pleasant *jeu d’esprit*, *The ABC’s of Farming* by Terry Chamberlain (Thistledown, n.p.). Chamberlain gives us a curmudgeonly, affectionate dictionary of folk definitions, ostensibly to help the urbanite understand prairie farming. They often start in apparent seriousness, then turn wry and look to end with a (flatly?) ironic twist. Ecology is not defined, but “environmentalist,” for example, finds a place with this introductory definition: “Environmentalists are people who are specially trained to worry about the environment, and to make sure the rest of us worry about it too.” Of the books I’ve looked at in the last few years on prairie farms—and I haven’t been systematic—my undoubted favourite is Kent Meyer’s *The Witness of Combines* (U of Minnesota P, paper, n.p.), a collection of meditative essays on the author’s ancestral home on 200 acres of southern Minnesota prairie. These essays are a moving tribute to family and community, inflected with an ecological awareness—about soil nutrients, or the behaviour of wind, or Burning Weeds, and the movement of glaciers. W.O. Mitchell would, I trust, approve.

In her anthology *Fresh Tracks: Writing the Western Landscape* (Polestar, \$21.95 paper), Pamela Banting regrets not being able to attract more contributions from “biologists, geologists, environmental activists, and other scientists working in ecology.” Her comment confirms my sense that ecocriticism usually gets by without much eco-, or ecology, and the genre of nature writing is confused by the definitions of nature.

Focussing on the four western provinces, Banting assembles a variety of forms, including poems that don't always quite look like "landscape" poems, and lots of thinking about the language that we apply to landscape. Maureen Scott Harris's piece is an intriguing consideration of how language situates; Peter Christensen tries to re-create on the page a performance piece, with Robert J. Rosen, titled *Canyon Shadows: Stories*. For Banting, Cowboy Poetry is landscape writing, and so are George Bowering's finger exercises. Anthologies are usually centred in the centre, but there's enough eccentricity in Banting's sense of what is landscape text, that using *Fresh Tales* in a classroom would provoke more than it would limit.

If I wanted a model for writing a work of ecocriticism (until I find the one I was wondering about at the start of this review), I would choose John Elder's *Reading the Mountains of Home* (Harvard UP, \$22.95). Elder presents a book-long reading of Robert Frost's poem "Directive," and a study of the Green Mountains of Vermont. For the moment, no ecocriticism I know of moves so "naturally" from literary analysis to landscape history to personal journals of hiking excursions. Elder's wilderness is nature, and his "nature" includes people and poems. "The answer to the poems' conundrums is in fact the land itself, with its history still inscribed in the processes of the present."

Eisenberg is not an ecocritic, I suppose, but his book makes very satisfying reading because it fuses scientific understanding—of the minutiae of ecology's myriad interdependencies—with attention to myth and metaphor (not as decoration, or as occasional album, but as function). He makes analysis of genre (pastoral, for instance) and analysis of language ("garden," which has the same root as "yard" and "grid") companion to the key question for understanding those multiple meanings of "nature": "What *on earth* are we to make of

this story? [my emphasis]" This is a book of gracious, passionate, insight, and pragmatic, empathetic urging for action, for where and how to make a difference. Read it.

*The American West: A New Interpretive History* (Yale UP, n.p.) is essentially a revision of an earlier work and offers only two references to Canada—one as the great "nothing." It is not especially *new*: its prose is mostly routine, its detail slight and its sense of regional character and culture undeveloped. It might have some passing interest to literary readers in its attention to *narrative*, and to its potential to reshape narrative. But a focus on the frontier is hardly "new," and the hoariest narrative in U.S. cultural studies is not much problematized here.

Mark Howard's young adult novel *The Eye of the Sparrow* (Kelowna: Flowing Mountain P, n.p.) tells of a teenage boy exiled and wandering alone, alienated from an excessively demanding father, and shunned by his peer group. From some early paeans to the spacious beauty of its Okanagan places, the novel turns into fable (reminiscent of the boy-gang mentality of *The Lord of the Flies*) where a fairly standard revenge narrative, and some arch philosophizing wrestle with some emergent attempts to reconcile computer mentality and ecological harmony.

Andrea Lebowitz and Gillian Minton have compiled *Gilean Douglas: Writing Nature. Finding Home* (Sono Nis P, \$21.95). This is a journal/biography/autobiography of the nature writer born in 1900, who lived to age 93, who centred her life on Cortes Island, and is best remembered for the nature essays collected in *The Protected Place* (1979), derived from the newspaper column "Nature Rambles." Impatient with taboos on sentimentalizing in nature writing, Douglas was happy to imagine herself writing in "the language of the heart." Responding to this homing instinct, I especially like her sense of a place where "nothing [is] straight or

formal—nothing that could not live with the lovely inconsequence of forest, river and mountain.”

A compelling countertext to Hine’s book, although it does not claim to be a history (for all that it is informed by historical imagination) is Susan J. Rosowski’s *Birthing a Nation: Gender, Creativity and the West in American Literature* (U of Nebraska P, n.p.). Rosowski re-reads and replaces the frontier myth in a compelling way. For all that this book concerns (U.S.) American national identity, its attention to the female sources of that identity, its centering in that occasional Canadian Willa Cather, its conversations with the landscape, and its steady attention to “the nuances of words as they are culturally, historically, and individually inflected” make it well worth the attention of students of Canadian conversations with the landscape.

Using sets of suspended questions as his preferred analytical technique, David R. Foster in *Thoreau’s Country: Journey Through a Transformed Landscape* (Harvard UP, \$us 27.95) organizes a history of ecological change in rural New England. Presenting a set of summaries of each “field”—daily life, fire, animals—then an unmediated catalogue of excerpts from Thoreau’s diary (not chronologically, but by season), Foster reads and teaches the forest/landscape.

A good deal more wide-ranging and toughly analytical is Rod Preece’s *Animals and Nature: Cultural Myths, Cultural Realities* (U of British Columbia P, \$39.95). Preece’s key argument is a counter-argument to the myth of the eco-aboriginal. The West [as in Euro-American culture] he claims “has been significantly more sympathetic to the natural realm than it has been given credit for”; and “the customary [?] depiction of Oriental and Aboriginal concerns for the natural realm . . . has been greatly overdrawn.” Preece’s argument, carefully explained and extensively docu-

mented, is a genuine challenge to academic and classroom commonplaces. But Preece is also constantly alert to the ways in which diverse cultures offer their own challenging paradigms to re-figure human relations with the non-human world. This is a very literary book to have come from a political scientist, but, although literature is a constant source, I find relatively little Canadian literature. Seton finds a spot, but not Leon Rooke (*Shakespeare’s Dog*) or Timothy Findley (*Not Wanted on the Voyage*), or Bodsworth or Charles G.D. Roberts.

While on the subject of animals, I celebrate Robert Butler’s *The Great Blue Heron: A Natural History and Ecology of a Seashore Sentinel* (U of British Columbia P, \$39.95/\$19.95), a literate, well-written, scientifically attentive study of *Ardea herodias fannini*, the non-migratory sub-species resident on the Pacific Northwest coast. This is the sort of book to which I send my science-resistant students for an understanding of place and region through ecology and habitat, something they just can’t get from novels and poems alone. I might also refer them to Robin J. Marles et al., *Aboriginal Plant Use in Canada’s Northwest Boreal Forest* (Natural Resources Canada/Canadian Forest Service/U of British Columbia P, n.p.), both for its summary (deriving from historical studies and recent work with First Nations elders) of ethnobotanical uses and properties, and for its compiling of plant names, with brief translations, in Chipewyan, Cree and, less frequently, other languages of the northern forest. Sam Benvie’s *The Encyclopedia of Trees: Canada and the United States* (Key Porter Books, \$45.00) would be less useful to my senior students. The book opens predictably with the metaphor of the forest “cathedral,” and seems even more predictable when set beside the lyrical tree-writing of Kim Stafford, or the historical sweep of Pogue Harrison. In an encyclopedia trying to become a coffee table book (or is it the other way around?), the photographs are

often too small, and the descriptions often disappointingly brief—sideways to the ecology of habitat.

Betty Zyvatkas's *Naturally Ontario: Exploring the Wealth of Ontario's Wild Places* (Random House, \$22.95) is essentially a guidebook—not so much of the how-to-identify sort, as of the where-to-find-it variety. Each three-page section, whether in search of wolves or orchids or trilobites, contains how-to-get-there directions, including, it seems, the pointing out of some nicely unpredictable locations—such as the bird-watching possibilities at Kortright's Cafe. The author pays relatively little attention to science, or even to scientific species names, but she does enliven the work with some literary bits, such as a sidebar quoting Lewis Carroll, or an annotated bibliography encompassing some literary and quasi-literary writers such as E.T. Seton, Wayne Grady and C.P. Traill.

As its subtitle signals, the fascination of Jack Glenn's *Once Upon an Oldman: Special Interest Politics and the Oldman River Dam* (U of British Columbia P, n.p.) lies in patient and clear (given the muddled history of the subject) explication of politics (the need for water, the need for votes, the manipulation of information) behind government decision. Particularly distressing is the *déjà vu* resting in the account of official responses to the Peigan people from 1970-1995, a period when I might complacently have expected a different approach to Native land, tradition, and spiritual understanding. Despite opening his book in the guise and voice of the traditional mythteller, and his organizational proposition that "the Oldman River Dam stands as a *metaphor for Canada* in this final quarter of the twentieth century," Glenn makes no reference to Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water*; nonetheless, readers of Canada's finest dam novel must find this book a superb context and a valuable teaching resource.

The University of Minnesota Press has reissued seven of Sigurd F. Olson's books in uniform paperback editions. This project is of particular interest to the readers of *Canadian Literature* because Olson's autobiographical nature essays concern "the vast region beyond the Canadian border," at least as much as they do "the land of the Great Lakes." In longing to hear the music of the "Canadian Shield, the enormous formation of igneous and volcanic rock which extends far into the Arctic," Olson, in *Open Horizons* (1969; rpt. U of Minnesota P 1998, n.p.), celebrates the "Song of the North" as enthusiastically as Pratt or Purdy. In *Of Time and Place* (1982), he ponders the place names echoing and contrasting on two sides of the border. *Reflections from the North Country* (1976)—a late work; Olson died in 1982—is less biographical and narrative: an often unconvincing reach for "what is the answer?" But Canadian journeys are again central. He makes a great deal, for example, of his lifelong "Dream of Hudson Bay," a trope for "all other explorations I have been on," and for "the great dream . . . of finally going into the vast world of comprehension and knowing." Those interested in Olson's border-crossing career, centred on the Boundary Waters/Quetico Park region north of Superior, will want to consult David Backes' *The Life of Sigurd F. Olson: A Wilderness Within* (U of Minnesota P, 1998, n.p.), the Press's companion venture that tempers Olson's "chronic tendency to overdramatize matters" and provides context and pattern to the "scattered" journal entries.

James Prosek gives us a late twentieth-century update of Izaak Walton in *The Complete Angler: A Connecticut Yankee Follows in the Footsteps of Walton* (Harper Collins, \$43.50). This handsome glossary provides almost as much on different ways of life, and on the curiosities of encountering another English language, as it does on

the niceties of angling. Tantalizing is a briefly told story (imagining the genre-crossing attempted by many of the authors assembled in this review) of the great Harold Bloom giving Prosek permission to write a thesis on Walton by means of imagined dialogue with the author, and also incorporating his personal journal.

Susan J. Tweit's *Seasons on the Pacific Coast: A Naturalist's Notebook* (Chronicle Books, \$22.95) is a lovely book to hold and browse, with its evocative pastel illustrations, its sensitivity to the "stories" inhering in some forty species of tree, insect, bird and marine life (organized, as so often, by four "seasons") here recorded in notebook style. I suppose Tweit wouldn't label herself an ecocritic, but her sensing or dreaming that writing nature implies listening to the wordless languages of birds and bushes seems to me a reciprocity more ecocritics should want to find.

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## Word Jazz 3

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Kevin McNeilly

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Josef Skvorecky's memoir *Headed for the Blues* (Knopf \$29.95), like much of his fiction from *The Cowards* to *The Bass Saxophone*, intermittently uses jazz both as a conceit for expressive freedom and as an occasion to think through the politics of citizenship. His sensibility is, by his own admission, central European, and so the racial dynamics that would inform the reception of jazz in a North American context are drastically modified by its displacement onto another continent; the mainstream sweetness of Jimmy Lunceford, for example, can become radically disruptive, both culturally and politically, when it's being imitated in a Prague pub in the late 1950s, in what Skvorecky describes as "a most delicious dialectic" with Dvořák (48). *Headed for the Blues* looks backward—

homeward?—from exile, as reminiscence, but as its title suggests it also projects itself forward into the present, its *telos*. Skvorecky describes autobiography as an attempt "to stifle the uncertainty," to make sense of what he acknowledges are the necessary failings of commitment in his art: not necessarily to politics or to culture, but to life and to what he calls, echoing Goethe, Truth: "The only thing that is certain is that nothing is pure *Dichtung* nor pure *Wahrheit*" (57). Writing and jazz evince for Skvorecky an ongoing struggle with that impurity, and an attempt to wrest, from the aesthetic contest of the selfish and the aleatory, something like meaning.

The double direction of Skvorecky's memoir, at once retrospective and projective, points to an eventual formal convergence, as past works into present. His writing at the outset is marked by seemingly inchoate images and loose, rambling syntax:

Neuilly, a quarter, a street, a movie theater, a scene from a film, the August sun-filtering through the leaves of the chestnut tree onto the beige lace curtain, pregnant women in prison (we're told), as soon as the baby is born, mother goes either to the gallows or to the separate solitude of the women's camp, but the infant, not destined for adoption like the children of Lidice, is dispatched straight to its grave, tiny mounds of soil surrounded by the vigorous tunneling of blindmoles, deserted little graveyards. (3)

Time-frames and locations interpenetrate: we are in France, then Czechoslovakia, then parenthetically in the writer's present (in Toronto?); we are unable to distinguish remembered fact from possible fiction; and, as readers, we are given few handholds, but are simply immersed. The digressive form gradually, over the course of a hundred pages, solidifies into something resembling a narrative, the story of "The Fool," a Czech Skvorecky encounters in Toronto whom he suspects of being a *fizl*, an informant. The

restless uncertainty of his memories modulates into a kind of detective story, as he seeks to determine, unsuccessfully as it turns out, the identity of "The Fool." (Skvorecky simply can't make sense of inconsistent behaviour.) Details of past and present are shot through with commentary on the act of writing, which Skvorecky ironically refers to as "the extravagance of words," and on its relation to the materiality of living; "is it possible," the writer asks, "to live in uncertainty?"

Yes, it is. Indeed, I think nothing is possible but uncertainty if one is capable of the extravagance of words. . . . I can't imagine that a spoken certainty can exist without an unspoken uncertainty behind it. In fact, I think that if I put everything I know into words, that is, all my uncertainty, then the most uncertain thing about it would be the uncertainty as to whether what I left unsaid (because I didn't know it) doesn't represent a certainty—which I yearn for, doesn't everybody? (15)

That yearning—juxtaposed to the information-gathering of the *fizls*, a grandiose and often deadly scheme of deceit that passes itself off as true—is what motivates Skvorecky's centripetal style, the gradual movement toward a definitive declarative form which assembles truth and craft, fact and *poiesis*. In an excursus, he self-consciously clarifies his method:

Back to my story. Of course, I could fabricate, embellish, dramatize, add dialogue. That is a matter of my craft (sometimes, when I read the critics, I have the feeling that I am the only one who does not underrate them). But for the substance of this text, the only thing that is important about this story is its conclusion and not the narrative effects between beginning and end, and I hope to find in that conclusion some small certainty in the sea of my uncertainty. (52)

And what, finally, constitutes that conclusion, the memoir's last words? A single

pithy sentence-fragment, wholly nominal, coherently static: "This testimony" (131). The journal itself, for all its error and slip-page, bears witness to conscious effort, to the deliberate fabling that aspires to make sense of senseless violence and of living in uncertainty. What, finally, can Skvorecky know for certain? That he writes, and that by writing he witnesses his past and present, makes known that he was there.

Near the end of the piece, he argues against the embarrassed revision of inferior or unsatisfying work (and what absolute book could ever satisfy, in writing, the ambition to disclose truth?): "Let these stories stand as *pars pro toto* of the kind of folklore around what could be called the transgression of my youth" (97). Skvorecky is reflecting on responses to *The Cowards*, but this sentence might also be read as justifying the inclusion, as a post-script, of *The Tenor Saxophonist's Story*, a set of ten short tales composed in Prague in the mid-1950s, in the period of Skvorecky's life with which *Headed for the Blues* is predominantly concerned. These are, I think, second-rate stories, falling short of the cynical, Swiftian satire to which they pretend. But that failure, as well as the matter of the tales themselves, is what knits these fictions so closely to memoir; their presence isn't arbitrary, but exemplary. Jazz winds through all ten, representing both self-serving decadence and political affront. As music, it embodies a brash Americanism, but also an unstable fusion of eastern European and southern American sensibilities, as in the admixture of Dixieland, polka, "Ghost Riders in the Sky," and "*C'est si bon*" through which the protagonist and his fellow musicians cycle; or "the bebop of Richard Kambala," which the narrator describes as "horrible music" played for an audience of Prague "hepcats" by a trio of flugelhorn, bassoon and drums to fantastic effect, producing "existentialism in unwritten notes." Jazz is a form of inarticulate philosophizing in nightclubs:

the people that go there for the most part aren't philosophers, but rather select hep-cats and their very superficial lady friends. [The musicians] fell in major seconds and in diminished fifths, down and down, immobile[;] someone put a blue spotlight on them and the people in the room quit talking, just gaped and listened. (248)

Whatever else it might do, Skvorecky's jazz forces us to attend to collisions of art and life, to think a little, no matter how superficial or self-serving we might be.

The last story, emblematically titled "*Dialogus de Veritate*," asks explicitly about this imperative, as Smřický the tenor saxophonist is forced to re-think his quietism—he just wants to play music—when confronted by a dissident pal he hides for a night. The truth he discovers is his cowardice: "I play the sax, and continue living here. I don't want to get involved. Maybe it isn't just a matter of fear. I don't know. All I know is that I don't want to get involved" (280). Skvorecky's point, given the arrests, escapes, exiles and deaths chronicled in the tales, is that our reluctant, self-serving hero—who rightly admits he's a "jerk"—is already involved. Art, and for Skvorecky that means writing, might appear as detached, useless, "extravagant," but it bears witness, however flawed, to our involvement in life, and to the often unwelcome demands that our world makes upon us. Skvorecky's aesthetic emerges in this volume as thoroughly ethical; as the writing confronts *ethos* both as fictional character and as moral subjectivity, a self made in the acknowledgment of one's obligation to, and responsibility for, others.

I find myself troubled throughout by Skvorecky's idolatry and objectification of women, a fascination with "lovely girls" which he openly admits (31) and which, in *The Tenor Saxophonist's Story*, develops into jaded accounts of sexual conquest masked by snide *politesse*: "forgive me, ladies, for the vulgarities that have crept in here and there" (280). These ladies (Geraldine, Lizette, "all

the rest") are nearly always either vain sell-outs, literally prostituting themselves to the political system in order to survive, or (like Milena in the memoir) passive victims of a culture of power they appear not to understand. What troubles me is not the *pathos* of these characters—these women are clearly in a double bind, faced with the both political and sexual discrimination, oligarchy and patriarchy—but Skvorecky's unaltered attitude: a benign leer deliberately, I think, left unchallenged. This lack of redemption is certainly in keeping with his warts-and-all honesty, an unflinching analysis of his own failings. But given the ethical drive of his prose, the demand for a personal form of justice—an articulation of a Truth, however uncertain—and for a worldly reckoning with cowardice, the nostalgic sexism that permeates this book strikes me as its blind spot, unmitigated by excuses of generational or cultural context. The forms of power and disempowerment that the text interrogates are obviously bound up in questions of gender as well as nationality, aesthetics and class; it's a shame that Skvorecky is unwilling to dissect those ties with the same fierce rigour he applies to his other dilemmas of self and state. He could, I think, have known better.

Reading *Stopping Time: Paul Bley and the Transformation of Jazz* (Véhicule \$17.95), I expected to encounter a formally innovative mode of biographical conversation. Montréal-born Bley is a dedicated innovator in contemporary improvised music, and continues to record some of the most striking piano performances in recent times, works of tensile delicacy and dissonant provocation. I anticipated some of that extemporaneous energy spilling over into the prose of this book, or at least some experimentation with the narrative voice. The book is a collaboration with bassist and critic David Lee, who has himself made significant contributions to new music and improvisation in Canada, as a key member

of the Bill Smith Ensemble in the 1970s and 1980s, and also as a writer for *Coda*, a Toronto-based jazz and new music journal. Lee's reviews typically describe not simply the music, but the shape and nature of his response; they work through the often personal and difficult to describe activity of listening, and are as much about the practice of attention and participation as they are evaluations of a recording or a performance.

*Stopping Time* is culled from extensive taped interviews with Bley. What seems to me potentially most interesting in such a process is the extemporaneous shaping that conversation and interchange enable. Given Lee's self-conscious style as a music journalist and his own experience as an improviser, I thought to have some of the dynamics of interaction and cross-talk that go into the making of an autobiography foregrounded in *Stopping Time*. The book is, after all, a particular sort of fabrication, the construction of its subject outside of time, in a coherent historical narrative. This narrative is always out front here, and the book follows a simplified linear chronology quite closely. Bley's career is thoroughly enmeshed in the emergence of avant-garde and Third Stream jazz in the late 1950s and 1960s, as the text and photographs make clear. The chapter titles even consist primarily of the names of those with whom Bley played, a who's who of jazz innovators: "Parker—Mingus—Young," "Coleman—Cherry—Haden," "Russell—Evans—Giuffrè," "Ayler—Murray—Peacock—Bley." Indeed, the inclusion of himself at one point in this list, while no doubt accurate, also bespeaks a rather egocentric immodesty that characterizes much of Bley's account of jazz in his time. He doesn't quite take credit for the "transformation of jazz" in the title, but it is inevitably his influence or at least his presence that catalyzes such groundbreaking work as Ornette Coleman's or Albert Ayler's; he may not have single-handedly trans-

formed the music, but he was always there.

Admittedly, autobiographies are inherently self-centred, but what troubled me as I read this one is the resolute self-effacement of David Lee. Except for a postscript duplicating a fax from Bley to Lee, the nature of their collaboration has essentially been erased from the final text; Lee presents Bley in an apparently unmediated form, as if he were writing or talking directly to us. Perhaps I shouldn't be bothered by the deference of this move; Lee obviously means to honour Bley, and to give Bley's account of his musical life the primacy it merits, to let him speak for himself. There are many precedents for ghost-writing—working from interviews and other oral sources—in jazz autobiography: think of Quincy Troupe with Miles Davis, or William Dufty with Billie Holiday. But given the decidedly deconstructive style of Bley's own music—his crafted dismantling and reconstruction of song-forms, for example, or the careful crystalline distensions in his "free" playing—the standard ghost-writing comes off as duplicitous. Just as Bley's improvisations tend to lay bare their own musical frameworks, to tease out and interrogate their own movements, Bley's autobiography might have done better to work through its own self-making. Rather than a conventional solo, I would have preferred a text more attentive to its doublings and uncertainties, to the complexities inherent in Lee's written recreation of "Paul Bley." (This sort of writing is not foreign to jazz autobiography, either; in a rather different style, Charles Mingus's *Beneath the Underdog* continually attends to its own narrative mechanics, while Michael Snow's reminiscences—see his *Collected Writings*—tend to dismantle their own textual fabric.)

Bley is not unaware of the literary potential in life-writing. When he describes moving with his wife and family to a house in upstate New York, he gestures briefly toward what sounds like a rather romantic poetic:



I've known a lot of poets. I've always been able to relate to the fact that a poet is somebody who has to choose the disastrous course for his life, because he can make poems out of it. You can't give a poet good advice—that would be counterproductive to his output. If a poet said to you that he was going to become a merchant seaman, there's no reason to start giving him fatherly advice, because without even knowing it, he's generating stories for the future. (133-34)

This passage is more a displaced description of Bley converting himself into story, into history, than it is an assessment of his poet-friends. Throughout the preceding chapters, we are reminded of Bley's repeated rejection of common sense or good advice. He fires vibraphonist Dave Pike, for instance, in order to hire Ornette Coleman and Don Cherry, and—for the sake of the music—transforms his band from a palatable nightclub quartet to an audience-clearing avant-garde ensemble, and gets himself fired. Or he turns down a secure job in the Bahamas to accept a low-paying gig in New York with Albert Ayler, Gary Peacock and Sunny Murray (the trio that would secure Ayler's posthumous reputation as a jazz innovator on such classic recordings as *Spiritual Unity*); "I had the feeling," Bley says, "that

the history of jazz hinged on that five-dollar-a-nightjob. The ability to distinguish the important call from the unimportant call is the key to progressing in your musical development" (87-89). Historical "importance" hinges here on narrative retrospect; Bley wants to make history, to write himself into accounts of what matters in this music. (It's usually overlooked by jazz historians, for example, that Ornette Coleman's great quartet was actually the Paul Bley Quintet, minus Bley; the book wants to affirm Bley's contributions to this and other transformative moments.) But rather than work through the means by which this self-fashioning in history takes place, *Stopping Time* gets caught up in this need to affirm, and pretends to an untroubled mode of historicizing that its matter often belies. Certainly, there are events and people and musical accomplishments presented in the book that are substantial, important and transformative, and there is plenty in these pages to interest devotees of Bley's work. Bley is, in many ways, one of the most original musical voices to emerge from Canada. But his autobiography falls short as a performance, and I wish that some of the radical flux and vital contrariety of his musical style might have impacted more forcefully on these pages.

**JOURNAL OF COMMONWEALTH AND POSTCOLONIAL STUDIES** invites submissions for a special issue on Canadian literature for Fall 2002. The editors welcome interpretations of colonial and postcolonial experiences from a range of historical and contemporary texts, both canonical and non-canonical. Readings may involve intersections with other identity categories such as gender, class, and ethnicity. Of particular interest are analyses which interpret colonial and postcolonial specificities of place. Articles must be in English, 4000-5000 words, and conform to MLA style. They should be submitted in duplicate and sent to The Editor, "Journal of Commonwealth and Postcolonial Studies," Department of Literature and Philosophy, Georgia Southern University, P.O. Box 8023, Statesboro, GA, USA 30460-8023, by May 1, 2002. Submissions will be reviewed blind by guest editors who will make selections to reflect the range of the field. Names and addresses should be provided on separate cover pages.

## Travellers and Tourists

Eva-Marie Kröller

Peter Raby's *Bright Paradise: Victorian Scientific Travellers* (Pimlico, n.p.) surveys the accomplishments of Darwin, Hooker, Lander, Wallace, Spruce, Kingsley, North and many others. A fine story-teller, Raby vividly depicts the drama and adventure of their expeditions. He is also attuned to the colourful personalities and lives of these geologists, botanists, zoologists, collectors, and anthropologists, to the rivalries among them and the sometimes shabby treatment they received at the hands of their imperial employers. Raby is equally good at depicting the expeditions themselves and the repercussions they created in the capital. Thus, Hooker's Kew Gardens, its green-houses filled with orchids and palms plundered from their natural habitats, emerge as a teeming laboratory at the service of the Empire, the operations of which were facilitated by the discovery of such substances as quinine (derived from the red cinchona bark and essential in combating malaria). Different as it is, Raby's book makes an excellent discursive companion to Nicholas Thomas's *In Oceania: Visions, Artifacts, Histories* (Duke, n.p.), a work which provides the theoretical underpinnings for some of the colonial *milieux* that Raby evokes so compellingly. In his chapter on Oceanic artifacts in European engravings, for instance, Thomas analyses the decontextualized visual language used to depict the tools and cult objects of Oceanic peoples in the documentation accompanying Cook's explorations and those of others, and he draws parallels between this anthropologically motivated vacuum and the aes-

thetically motivated one of contemporary exhibitions. *Unpacking Culture: Art and Commodity in Colonial and Postcolonial Worlds*, ed. Ruth B. Phillips and Christopher B. Steiner (U of California P, n.p.) has several essays which undertake analyses of material culture similar to Thomas's, and the editors are as emphatic as he is about the need, in describing cultures, to abandon the binary oppositions of "primitive" and "civilized," "authentic" and "fake," "invented" and "genuine" (although Thomas also illustrates how these terms in themselves can give rise to acrimonious debate between native activists and white anthropologists). To mention only a few essays in Phillips and Steiner's collection, Carol S. Ivory describes "Art, Tourism, and Cultural Revival in the Marquesas Islands" by focusing on the effect of regular cruise ship arrivals on village life in general and the production of carvings in particular, while Sandra Niesson writes about textile production and design among Toba Batak women, and the blending of tradition and individual invocation in their designs. There is also work on Native Indian art, the Chinese "dragon-robe," pueblo pottery, and numerous other subjects. Patrick Holland and Graham Huggan's *Tourists with Typewriters: Critical Reflections on Contemporary Travel Writing* (U of Michigan Press, n.p.) sent me to the bookstore to stock up on travel narratives that I had so far missed in my own reading. The most appealing quality of the book is its generous sweep and the caution with which it conceptualizes the mass of collected texts. At the same time, this virtue is also a shortcoming because, in its self-deprecating modesty (the introduction is a model of equivocation about the authors' inten-

tions), it is also occasionally too much of a reader's guide and not enough of a scholarly book. About Pico Iyer's *Video Night in Katmandu*, for instance, the authors write that it is "to be sure, an attractive and superior travel book . . . [w]ell informed (to the point of sometimes appearing too knowing, too up-to-the minute) and stylishly written," before gently scolding Iyer for failing to negotiate cogently between post-modernism and post-colonialism. Nevertheless, given the scarcity of criticism on recent travel-writing, *Tourists with Typewriters* is a valuable and informative book. *Writes of Passage: Reading Travel Writing*, ed. James Duncan and Derek Gregory (Routledge, n.p.) contains essays on contemporary authors Peter Mayle and Neil Miller, but the collection concentrates on the favourite period of travel criticism, namely the Victorian age. Alison Blunt writes about British women during the Siege of Lucknow and illustrates how British newspaper reports about the situation shaped the women's understanding of

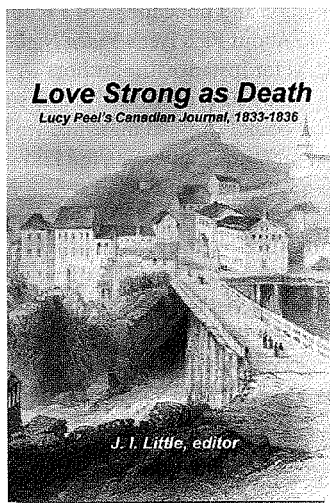
their heroic role. James Duncan, in an essay on the Kandyan Highlands of Ceylon, investigates the role of the picturesque as "a way of world-making." Robert Shannan Pecknam describes *fin-de-siècle* travellers' confusion in attempting to classify Greece as "European, Oriental or Balkan." Derek Gregory examines the "scriptings" of Egypt in Victorian and Edwardian travel narratives, paying close attention to the influence of contemporary guidebooks. Roxann Wheeler on early eighteenth-century narratives about Africa, Laurie Hovell McMillin on "[t]he making of epiphany in Tibet" and Richard Phillips on Richard Burton's construction of a sexual geography (the "Sotadic Zone") round off the collection. Barbara Crossette's *The Great Hill Stations of Asia* (Westview, n.p.) is a chatty survey of places ranging from Simla to Baguio, but the book pales in comparison with Dane Kennedy's erudite and passionate *The Magic Mountains: Hill Stations and the British Raj* (U of California P), reviewed earlier in this journal.

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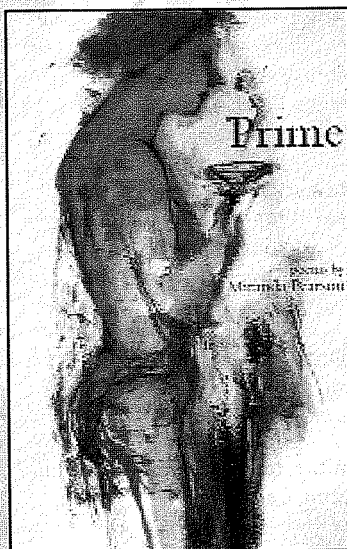
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### Essays, Opinions & Notes

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William **New** is the author of *Land Sliding* and other books on Postcolonial writing; he teaches at UBC, and is currently editing the *Encyclopedia of Literature in Canada*.

Susie **O'Brien**, an Assistant Professor at McMaster University, has published articles on ecocriticism and postcolonialism in *Canadian Poetry* and *Mosaic*. She is co-editor of a forthcoming special issue of *South Atlantic Quarterly* on literature and globalization, and is currently writing a book titled "Imagined Diversities: Postcolonialism, Ecology and Globalization."

Laurie **Ricou** teaches at the University of British Columbia, and will publish *The Arbutus/Madrone Files: Reading the Pacific Northwest* (NeWest Press) in Fall 2001.

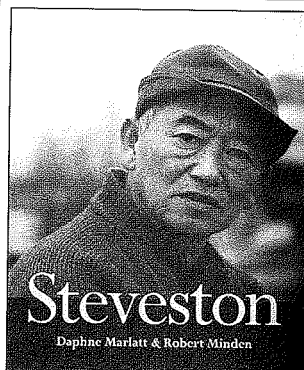
J'nan Morse **Sellery**, Louisa and Robert Miller Professor of Humanities, teaches literature, film, and women's studies at Harvey Mudd College in Claremont, California.

## Poems

George **Bowering** lives in Vancouver, Anne **Simpson** in Antigonish, M. Travis **Lane** teaches at the University of New Brunswick, David **McGimpsey** lives in Montreal, David **Solway** teaches at John Abbott College, Alan R. **Wilson** works at the University of Victoria, Brian **Bartlett** teaches at Saint Mary's University, Sue **Sinclair** lives in Toronto, Harold **Rhenisch** in 108 Mile Ranch, Judith **Krause** in Regina, Eric **Miller** teaches at the University of Victoria, Tom **Wayman** at Okanagan College, Seymour **Mayne** at the University of Ottawa, Paddy **McCallum** lives in Gibsons, Crystal **Hurdle** teaches at Capilano College.

## Reviews

Laurie **Aikman**, Charles **Barbour**, Andrea **Cabajasky**, Bryan N.S. **Gooch**, Sherrill **Grace**, Constantin **Grigorut**, Kevin **McNeilly**, Ian **Rae**, and Jack **Stewart** all teach/study at the University of British Columbia. Albert **Braz** teaches at Queen's University, Alison **Calder** at the University of Manitoba, George Elliot **Clarke** at the University of Toronto, Vincent **Desroches** at Columbia University, Charmaine **Eddy** at Trent University, Susan **Fisher** at the University College of the Fraser Valley, Danielle **Fuller** at the University of Birmingham (UK), Jason **Haslam** at the University of Waterloo, Colin **Hill** at the University of McGill, Paul **Hjartarson** at the University of Alberta. Andrew **Lesk** studies at the University of Montreal. Lawrence **Mathews** teaches at the Memorial University of Newfoundland, Maureen **Moynagh** at St. Francis Xavier University, Norman **Ravvin** at Concordia University. Charles **Dawson** lives in Wellington, New Zealand, Gordon **Fisher** in Vancouver, Sonnet **L'Abbé** in Toronto, and David **Monteyne** in Minneapolis, Minnesota.



## Steveston

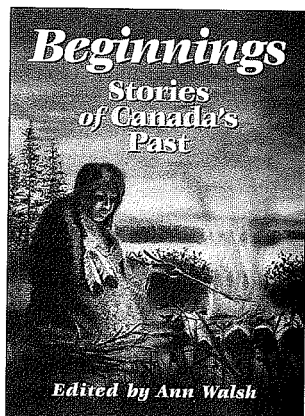
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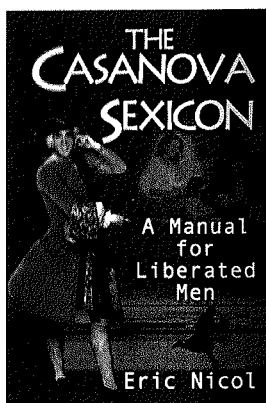
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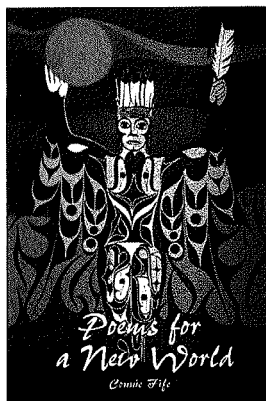
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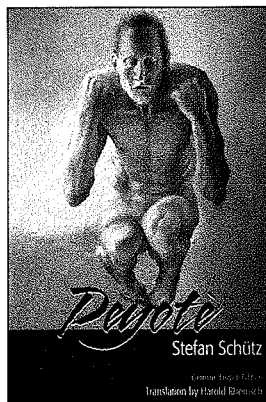


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