

REWRITINGS AND INFLUENCES

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Re-writing the Grimms

Eudora Welty and Margaret Atwood

. . . with the twins she could barely get a word in edgewise. They would fight her for control of the story – Change the ending, Mom! Make them go back! I don't like this part! They'd wanted Peter Pan to end before Wendy grew up, they'd wanted Matthew in Anne of the Green Gables to live forever. . . . They'd decided that all the characters in every story had to be female. Winnie the Pooh was female, Piglet was female, Peter Rabbit was female. If Roz slipped up and said "he", they would correct her: She! She! They would insist. (RB 350)

This passage from Margaret Atwood's 1993 novel *The Robber Bride* presents an ironic but basically serious version of the aesthetics of the new fairy tale, popularized after the 1960s by such well-known writers as Donald Barthelme, Robert Coover, and Angela Carter.

In the 1960s and 1970s fairy tales underwent a radical change: they were still told and, above all, *written*, but the author intervened and revised the received text as he/she wished, just like "the twins" in Atwood's novel wanted. As is well known, the traditional fairy tale – just like the epistolary novel, the historical novel, the autobiography, the thriller, and any other possible genre – became the basis for new, different works of literature, often feminist, generally labeled "post-modern." The essentially codified structure of the fairy tale, as evidenced back in 1928 in Propp's pioneering study, allowed writers to re-arrange its components, adding, as in every other re-written form, humor, parody, and often a feminist viewpoint.

Becoming aware that everything had been used (as John Barth had indicated in his "The Literature of Exhaustion"), authors chose to exhibit the very art of writing, and they made this metafictional discourse on fiction part of their new fictions.

Donald Barthelme's *Snow White* (1967), Robert Coover's *Pricksongs & Descants* (1969), and Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (1979) can all be seen as postmodern texts which do use the genre of the fairy tale, flout its rules, and, at the same time, work out a *revenge* on the genre, bringing it back to the world of the adults, after it had been relegated to that of the children in the 19th century. One must remember that in earlier times, the fairy tale was not a genre for children, but mainly for kings and courts, or for peasants. Roman Jakobson tells us that Ivan the Terrible had

three blind men sitting by his bed one after the other, in order to tell him fairy and folk tales before he slept (Jacobson 339).

It is particularly instructive to see how two writers coming from different backgrounds and living in different countries at different times reworked one specific Grimm fairy tale, *The Robber Bridegroom*, to create their own novels: Eudora Welty published *The Robber Bridegroom* in 1942 (Gray 2007) and Margaret Atwood's *The Robber Bride* appeared half a century later, in 1993.

We know from both of these writers' memoirs that the reading of the Grimms' *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* played an important role in their education. In her autobiographical essay, *One Writer's Beginnings*, Welty remembers that "there were the fairy tales – Grimm, Andersen" (8) among the books she received for Christmas as a child and read while sitting on the floor.

The same was true for Margaret Atwood:

I was exposed to a large chunk of these tales at an early age, before the manicured versions had hit the stands. When I was five or six, my parents sent away by mail order for the complete Grimm's Fairy Tales. This was the 1944 Pantheon edition... and it was flagrantly unexpurgated. . . . ("Of Souls as Birds" 93)

Atwood was well aware that these tales were "unexpurgated" and that their language was of the sort that called "a spade a spade, a wart a wart, an ugly girl an ugly girl," and she continued: "[t]his wasn't a book designed to please every small child. To some it would have given screaming nightmares. Possibly it had in mind a more adult audience."

Atwood underlined the change that the fairy tales were undergoing. Even today, endings are often different from the ones in the sources: Robert Darnton has shown, for example, how the ending of "Little Red Riding Hood" was originally very different (and did not at all have a "happy ending") in the peasant culture to which it belonged (Darnton 12-13). Cruel and gory scenes were taken out. Atwood in fact enjoyed some of the cruelty and bloodiness of these tales, totally bowdlerized in more recent versions, like the Walt Disney productions.

In spite of the differences in space and time, the Grimms' tales offered a common cultural ground for children, both in Welty's South and in Atwood's Canada: it is well-known that the 1812 edition of the tales was translated into English as early as 1823 and that it influenced different authors and cultures in Europe and in America, providing an example of internationalization or even globalization. In North America it encouraged, among others, such

writers as Nathaniel Hawthorne and Joel Chandler Harris to write “fairy tales” and “folk tales.”

What did Welty and Atwood do with the specific Grimms’ fairy tale they used? They both “subverted” it – to use a term taken from Jack Zipes’ studies—even if in different ways.

The title of the Grimms’ tale was not changed by Welty. Atwood, however, changed it, inverting the gender: the robber bridegroom became the robber *bride*, a bride that robs other brides of their men, not a bridegroom cheating women.

If Welty did not change the title, she still changed quite a lot in her novel, keeping the general structure of the Grimms’ tale, and some of its plot details, while changing their place and function in her narrative, and adding much material to the original story.

To see what happened to the tale, let us look briefly at the original plot: the Grimms’ tale tells the story of a robber who pretends to be a good man and wants to marry a beautiful girl, rich and beautiful in the 1812 version (where she is the daughter of a king), poor and beautiful in another version, in which she is the daughter of a miller. The girl wants to find out about her fiancé, and she goes into the forest, finds the dwelling of the robber, is warned not to enter by a bird (“Kehr um, Kehr um, du junge Braut // Du bist in einem Mörderhaus”), goes into the house anyway, sees her robber bridegroom killing a girl, cutting her up and cutting off her finger, which flies into her lap. Back home, she pretends she had a dream, tells her dream, and finally takes out the other girl’s cut-off finger and proves that her fiancé is a nasty villain. The man is chased away by the girl’s father (or killed).

If Welty kept the title, she freely changed many other elements of the fairy tale. The beautiful girl is neither the daughter of a prince nor the daughter of a miller, but of a wealthy planter of tobacco, indigo, and cotton, in fields worked by his slaves; Rosamond (that’s her name in Welty’s novel) falls in love with the robber and does not mind being robbed *and* raped by him. She does go into the woods and to the robber’s house and is warned away by the ominous bird. But she enters the house anyway and stays there, as a servant, cleaning and cooking in Snow White-like fashion, because of her love for the robber. In fact, one of the most obvious changes is to be found in the character of Rosamond, whose light-headed view of life and whose love for the Robber make her an ironic, or even parodic, character as compared to the original protagonist of the fairy tale.

As Rosamond is the daughter of a planter, one can see immediately that Welty inserted into the text elements belonging to her very real South, including historical-geographic ones (The Natchez Trace) and socio-historical ones (the slaves and the Indians). The cruel Indians have killed the planter's first wife, and they eventually kill his second wife, Rosamond's nasty stepmother, called Salome. In a parodic and grotesque re-writing of Salome's dance, the woman dances to her death because she has defied the Indians' God, the Sun.

If the character of the stepmother echoes the nasty current in fairy tales, as Salome is always plotting against her step-daughter Rosamond, the girl's response to her orders is not fairy-tale like. Rosamond in fact replies to Salome's instruction to get up and milk the cows: "Why should the slaves not milk the cows, for they do it every day and I have never done it before?" (RB 31). This answer takes the reader back into the world of slaves and planters.

Other parodic elements are offered by the presence of an odd "magic helper" (defined according to Propp's pioneering study), in the person of a clumsy and ineffectual character called Goat, who, however, eventually frees Rosamond and her father from the Indians.

What Welty did in fact do was to "subvert," by means of irony, the traditional fairy tale, in a way very similar to what writers of the 1960s and 1970s were to do as well, using the plot and adding different elements belonging to other genres. She enriched the original tale using also characters and stories taken from the genre of the tall tale, in a way I have discussed elsewhere, and by using such myths as that of Love and Psyche (see Mamoli 2011).

In her mixing of genres, Welty also used different language registers, some of them belonging to the "realistic" code, and some of them belonging to the fairy tale. As André Jolles and Max Luethi have taught us, the fairy tale is characterized by abstract time and abstract space. In Welty's novel there are many woods through which the protagonists "ride on and on," through scenery (or in a setting) that has no concrete definition and where there is no passing of time. Horses can go "like an arrow" (32), bandits can gallop "away like the wind" (29), and characters go "on and on" (38) in the forest: the formulaic language of the fairy tale is present along with other kinds of languages. Welty's mixing of genres and of language codes and registers created a very innovative kind of novel, opening the way to what is usually called the postmodern novel.

Atwood did not use the Grimm story in the same way. In addition to the title, *The Robber Bride*, which is used both as the title of the whole novel and

as the title of its fourth section and explicitly refers to the Grimms, she employed the language of the fairy tale in several passages.

In her novel, the robber *bride* is a female figure, Zenia, who is at the center of the lives of three other women (Tony, Charis, Roz), who have been at the same college, and whose husbands or partners Zenia has managed to steal away at different times. The setting is contemporary Toronto, even if, by telling the stories of the girls' lovers and parents, the story widens to include the past, notably the Vietnam War and holocaust Europe.

Zenia is thought to be dead (her three school-friends have actually gone to her funeral, where they assumed Zenia's ashes were being buried, after she had been supposedly blown up in Beirut). Instead, she re-appears in the flesh, causing the three girls to think back on their own pasts and to dread their own futures because of her presence. The death of Zenia is only one of the many lies or invented stories which this character keeps telling her friends in the book.

For Atwood, then, the Grimms' tale was only a starting point, and she went on to develop it from the changed viewpoint of the robber *bride* into totally different directions. However, she gave precise hints of the connection:

The Robber Bride, thinks Roz. Well, why not? Let the grooms take it in the neck for once. The Robber Bride, *lurking in her mansion in the dark forest, preying upon the innocent, enticing youths to their doom in her evil cauldron*. Like Zenia. (RB 352; my emphasis)

The dangerous forest of the fairy tale is no different from the urban jungle, where every balance is always temporary, at risk to be upset by the appearance of a robber bride, in the form of a glamorous young woman (as in "Bluebeard's Egg," where Atwood used another famous folk tale for her short story).

The language of the fairy tale, or, in fact, of different fairy tales, crops up again and again in the novel:

"How long can she protect him?" Tony asks herself. "How long before Zenia descends on them, with *her bared incisors and outstretched talons and banshee hair*, demanding what is rightfully hers?" (228; my emphasis)

Or consider this passage:

All the time she's rehearsing: *Wasn't one enough? You gonna kill my son, too? Get your claws off my child!* She feels like a tigress, defending her young. Or this is what tigresses

are rumoured to do. *I'll huff and I'll puff*, she roars inwardly, *and I'll blow your house down!* (525)

If the story of the Three Little Pigs is unmistakably behind the metaphoric huffing and puffing of Roz, other passages mirror scenes from other fairy tales. For example, "Little Red Riding Hood" is the barely veiled source for the scene when Zenia knocks on Roz's door:

Knock, knock, knock, she goes on Zenia's door. Just making a noise recoups her strength. Open up, you pig, you sow, and let me in!

And clickety-clack, here comes somebody. The door opens a crack. It's on the chain. "Who is it?" says the smoky voice of Zenia. (525)

Other expressions such as "*Mom! who's been in my room*" (95) echo the well-known language of the seven dwarves' or the three bears' questions in "Goldilocks and the Three Bears."

As mentioned above, Eudora Welty's re-writing of *The Robber Bridegroom* (1942) precedes, by half a century, the postmodern re-writing of the fairy tale as practiced by Margaret Atwood in *The Robber Bride* (1993). Welty's re-writing thus shows that she was ahead of her time in experimenting new narrative forms.

There are more differences than similarities in the way in which the two writers used the fairy tale: while Welty added a lot of material, Atwood removed most of the fairy tale elements. But in both cases, the presence of the language of the fairy tale, and the addition of irony to situations, reactions, responses of the characters, show that Welty and Atwood have something in common: the ability to use freely and radically change into a new work a received text which had stayed with both of them from childhood.

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Hard Beauty

The Confluence of Eudora Welty and Alice Munro: Mississippi-South and Ontario-South Portraits of the 1930s

The confluences of Eudora Welty and Alice Munro are many despite the generation and the physical distance that separates their lives and home places. Both began writing at an early age. Both excel in and prefer writing in the short story genre. Both are independent, willful, and mindful of their craft and their privacy. Both are outlanders of sorts: Welty, born of liberal-minded Yankee parents, lived in the nation's most conservative segregationist U.S. state, Mississippi. She was better educated and better traveled than many. Munro grew up on a silver fox and mink farm – a step up from other prospects, her mother thought, but this made Munro an outsider to the landscape and daily routines of her schoolmates. She walked from the country through the poorest section of town each day to and from school. She was better off than folks in Lower Town but poorer than her town peers. Before marrying, moving to Vancouver, and raising children, Munro had two years at the University of Western Ontario, that were, she said, “the only time in my life that I haven’t had to do housework” – a time when she was independent and free (“The Art of Fiction” 402). These and many other similarities evidence the like mindedness of the two writers compelling us to ask, then, how their work, emanating from different places, addresses a set of cultural and historical phenomena stemming from the worldwide depression of the 1930s. Writing always of the complexities of human relationships, Welty and Munro approach their subjects from different perspectives: Welty remains detached, invisible, in her fiction, whereas Munro immerses herself in her characters and their lives. The two authors, confluent but distinctly different, write stories that portray human nature with particulars and truths that Munro calls “hard beauty, familiar strangeness” but from different points of view (“Golden Apples” 76).

Both Welty and Munro are praised as comparable to Chekhov (whom they read along with Proust and Mann) and to the short story writers Katherine Anne Porter and Flannery O’Connor. Both revere William Maxwell – Welty first as an editor at the *New Yorker* and later as a lifelong friend, and Munro as model writer. Both have been recognized for their accomplish-

ments: O. Henry prizes (eight for Welty and ten for Munro); Governor General (three) and Giller (two) awards for Munro; a Gold Medal for Fiction from the National Institute for Arts and Letters and a Pulitzer Prize for Welty. When Munro won the 2009 Man Booker International Prize for lifetime writing, Fiammetta Rocco, one of the judges, said, "There is nobody like her. Nobody so able simultaneously to be quiet – and ruthless. She is, quite simply, the best."

The early stories of each have Gothic elements, yet each author transcended mere regionalist writing without denying the importance of her region's rootedness. Caught by a dust jacket blurb announcing that Welty's *The Golden Apples* "creates a world," Munro recalls thinking that this "doesn't mean – simply to set out the right furniture and catch the exact shades of speech and put the right food on the table and the right concerns in people's heads – so true, as we say, to life" ("Golden Apples" 75). Such details are recorded in the fiction by both writers, but Munro continues,

More than skill must be involved, more than a sharp eye and a quick ear. The story must be imagined so deeply and devoutly that everything in it seems to bloom of its own accord and to be connected, then, to our own lives which suddenly, as we read, take on a hard beauty, a familiar strangeness, the importance of a dream which can't be disputed or explained. Everything is telling you, Stop. Hold on. Here it is. Here too. Remember. ("Golden Apples" 75-76)

So well does this explain Munro's own writing, that Robert Thacker uses the appraisal as an epigraph in his biography of Munro (vii).

Eudora Welty said much the same of William Faulkner, a writer whom she read and reread as Munro read and reread Welty. "[Y]our fiction," Welty said to Faulkner, "go[es] on revealing human life . . . each time we read, as we find again your vision enveloping us like new, to bring us again inside experience we had already known was indelible" ("Presentation Speech" 41). Munro told Thacker that she read Welty's *The Golden Apples* "not really to find out how she did it, just to let it sink in. It was the kind of writing I most hoped to do. . . . I read it for just the transcendence, almost to get into that world" (Thacker 141-42). While reading it, she was, she said, "stabbed to the heart . . . [b]y the beauty of our lives streaming by, in Morgana and elsewhere" ("Golden Apples" 75).

In the 1930s, after sojourns in the upper Midwest of Ohio, Wisconsin, and Chicago, and New York City, Welty, an adult, traveled to Mississippi collecting observations of the Works Progress Administration projects (newly opened farm-to-market roads, new air fields hacked out of old cow pastures) for state reports (*One Time* 3). She took photographs as she worked, but not

as part of her work. She wrote society columns for the Memphis, Tennessee, newspaper, wrote for a short-lived Jackson newspaper, and for the local radio station. She interviewed people for the Mississippi Advertising Commission and researched state history for her friend Bill Hamilton in graduate school at Duke University. Welty had spent a year at Columbia Graduate School of Business in New York City where she had seen lines of men out of work. When her father died in 1931, Welty returned home, and she and her mother managed the household with the benefits of his annuities, income from a boarder, and Welty's part-time work. But Jackson was the state capital, and as Welty was of a middle class family, well educated, independent, and confident, she was able to observe the effects of the Depression with some distance. She was "naïve," she said, "inexperienced, right out of school" ("Eudora Welty: 'I Worry'" 145). In *One Time, One Place*, subtitled "Mississippi in the Depression," Welty's first book of photographs, she clarifies that what she saw and photographed was the "real State of Mississippi," the place and the people, "not the abstract state of the Depression. The Depression, in fact, was not a noticeable phenomenon in the poorest state in the Union" (3). She set her novel *Losing Battles* in this period, for she wanted "a bare stage" to portray "a family who had *nothing*" to "show people at the rock bottom of their whole lives . . . when they had no props to their lives, had only themselves, plus an indomitable will to live even [when] losing battles . . . of poverty, . . . family troubles, and disasters." "All they had was one another" ("The Art of Fiction XLVII" 82; "'The Interior World'" 50; "Eudora Welty: A Writer's Beginnings" 133).

Welty's characters in her first collection of stories are isolated, lonely, and directionless because of their failures to build relationships, not out of destitution. She grants her hitch-hikers free will; they are "tramps . . . full blown, abandoned to this," thinks Tom Harris ("Hitch-Hikers" 79). Sara and Jason Morton of "The Whistle" are tenant farmers who are ruined – not primarily by the failing economy – but by the cold. That "[t]he old Farr furnishing store did little business now," is due to the deficiencies of the town's patriarchs, not the Depression ("Clytie" 107). It had been my impression that Welty's stories in her first collection were set in the 1930s, but in review, I find that they depict small town-1920s instead – people still have cars to drive to the neighboring town for a coca-cola, to buy hamburgers, to meet for dancing, to have a weekly shampoo and set, and eat three meals a day. Only "Flowers for Marjorie," set in New York City, depicts the "ruinous air" of the Depression.

‘Work?’ [Howard] said sternly, backing away from [Marjorie], speaking loudly from the middle of the room, almost as if he copied his pose and his voice somehow from the agitators in the park. ‘When did I ever work? A year ago . . . six months . . . back in Mississippi . . . I’ve forgotten! . . . I wouldn’t know what to do now if they did give me work. I’ve forgotten! It’s all past now. . . . And I don’t believe it any more – they won’t give me work now – they never will –.’ (122)

In her fiction and her photographs, Welty shows the “reality,” the “gestures” of the feelings, not of the conditions of poverty, gestures that transcend time and place (“Eudora Welty and Photography” 195; *One Time* 8).

Munro, born in 1931, says her “first memories” are of the “end of the Depression which meant that things were not normal. . . . There were a lot of people out of work, a lot of bootleggers, a lot of lives that had gone . . . awry. The whole aspect of the town had that kind of ruinous air. You’d be going by” what had once been a park “but now the grass was never cut anymore because you couldn’t pay anybody to do it. You didn’t have any money.” There was “a band of factory buildings, out of work people. Between the farm and school,” was “faintly desperate society” (“Interview with Hal Wake”). History bears out Munro’s experience. Overall, in Canada during the Depression, one in five persons were unemployed; one in 8.7 received relief aid, and except for Saskatchewan, relief and aid were the responsibilities of the municipalities, not the federal government (Bryce 58). Like Mississippi, which was poor before the Depression, the Maritime provinces had comparatively “less distance to fall” than other regions of the country (“Great Depression”). Munro was recording reality not only as she saw it, but even more so as she remembered it, using the filters of personal memories of feelings.

One of the “key essentials” of the story “Images,” Munro tells us is the “roofed-over cellar” she “went past every day on my way to school. A bootlegger and his wife lived there – they weren’t the only people to have contrived shelters like these during the Depression” (“Introduction” xix). In the story, the young girl who is checking traps with her father describes the experience. She begins both matter-of-factly and judgmentally. She notes that her father is polite and even complimentary to the thin, dark tramp, Joe, they have been invited to visit. Remembering how Joe had once mysteriously come out of the brush toward her father, the young girl, now in Joe’s cellar, becomes “transfixed” and then feels “recognition” (“Images” 55). It was “a cellar with a roof on. My father said, ‘Looks like you fixed it up all right for yourself, Joe.’” He answered, “It’s warm. Being in the ground the way it is,

naturally it's warm. . . . I got all the room I need here. I fixed it up comfortable" (56). The young girl who narrates describes Joe's cellar:

It was not completely dark. . . . It was all one room, an earth floor with boards not nailed together just laid down to make broad paths for walking, a stove on a sort of platform, table, couch, chairs, even a kitchen cupboard, several thick, very dirty blankets of the type used in sleighs and to cover horses. Perhaps if it had not had such a terrible smell – of coal oil, urine, earth, and stale heavy air – I would have recognized it as the sort of place I would like to live in myself, like the houses I made under the snowdrifts, in winter, with sticks of firewood for furniture, like another house I had made long ago under the veranda, my floor the strange powdery earth that never got sun or rain. ("Images" 56-57)

Munro's "Walker Brothers Cowboy" tells of a similar father-daughter journey, told by the young girl. "[U]ntil last winter we had our own business, a fox farm. . . . Prices fell, my father hung on hoping they would get better next year, and they fell again, and he hung on one more year and one more and finally it was not possible to hang on anymore, we owed everything to the feed company" ("Walker Brothers" 6). They move and her father, who seems to the girl "to have been at home in the world as long as it has lasted," is now a "peddler knocking on backwoods kitchens" for Walker Brothers (5). Her mother, who "has no time for the national calamity, only ours," tells the neighbor, "We poured all we had into it . . . and we came out with nothing" (6). The ruins of Munro's earliest memories are described in the story, and in the course of the day's journey, she learns of the adult world and of individual dignity. When a tramp speaks to them, she is "too alarmed to catch" his request, but she tells the reader, "My father says he is a bit hard up himself. 'I'll roll you a cigarette if it's any use to you,' he says" and does so. The tramp "takes it and walks away. My father also rolls and lights and smokes one cigarette of his own" ("Walker Brothers" 4). This is not the essence of the story, of course, but the way that Munro can show us the real world of the thirties while ferreting out the mysteries of living in that world, the adult world.

Welty thought she might be an artist, then a photographer, and found success as a fiction writer. Munro was on her "third novel" by age fifteen, she says, but "[i]t takes nerve, to write a novel. So in the meantime, I thought, why not write a story. Just for practice, just to get myself in gear. Just whatever comes into my head. And I've been writing stories ever since" ("Stories"), now more than one hundred. Munro, as did Welty, began in her home place, moved away, returned, but never forgot and had never truly gone away from Ontario, the southern-most province, even if Wingham and Clinton, where she settled upon her return from British Columbia, are "southwestern"

Ontario, or Sowesto, Margaret Atwood tells us. Still it is the south of Canada. In "Home," Munro said she hadn't, as she had feared, "'used up' . . . that town's 'secret, plentiful messages' . . . , [for] she rediscovered anew her home place, a place where 'everything was touchable and mysterious'" (qtd. in Thacker 8). Welty said that Southern writers feel "passionately about Place. Not simply in the historical or philosophical connotation of the word, but in the sensory thing, the experienced world of sight and sound and smell, in its earth and water and sky and in its seasons. Place . . . fire[s] the imagination" ("From Where I Live" 245).

The difference between Welty's and Munro's writing, despite the confluences, is not place, not region – both of these are precisely rendered – but rather the point of view through which the gesture or the generative anecdote take on significance. Mona Simpson reads Munro's stories "deeply, personally, to learn how to live." Reading Welty, however, we seem to come from the outside, as observers, like the stories' narrators. Reading Munro, we are almost always thrown into the first person and see the world from inside. The writers' fictionalizations of their mothers serve as an example of this difference.

"The material about my mother is my central material in life," says Munro ("The Art of Fiction" 405). In Munro's story "Boys and Girls," the protagonist (a young girl) tells the reader, my mother "was kinder than my father and more easily fooled, but you could not depend on her, and the real reasons for the things she said and did were not known. She loved me . . . but she was also my enemy" (4). In "The Ottawa Valley," the female narrator recreates for us a scene of her childhood: "I demand of her now, that she [my mother] turn and promise me what I needed. But she did not do it. For the first time she held out altogether against me" (96). And then in the final paragraph a page or so later, the narrator as adult becomes the author and addresses the reader in the fashion that Ellen Douglas employs in *Can't Quit You Baby*: "If I had been making a proper story out of this, I would have ended it, I think, with my mother not answering and going ahead of me across the pasture. That would have done. I didn't stop there, I suppose because I wanted to find out more, remember more. I wanted to bring back all I could. . . . The problem, the only problem, is my mother. And she is the one of course that I am trying to get; it is to reach her that this whole journey has been undertaken" ("Ottawa Valley" 97-98). Fiction and autobiography seem inseparable when the narrator slips into the persona of the author. The story's narrator continues her self-interrogation regarding her mother:

With what purpose? To mark her off, to describe, to illumine, to celebrate, to *get rid of* her; and it did not work, for she looms too close, just as she always did. She is heavy as always, she weighs everything down, . . . she has stuck to me as close as ever and refused to fall away, and I could go on and on, applying what skills I have, using what tricks I know, and it would always be the same. ("Ottawa Valley" 98)

While Welty's mother, Chestina, may sometimes be central for Welty's fiction ("A Curtain of Green" comes first to mind), Welty does not admit to this in the same way as does Munro. Welty says, "I never in my wildest dreams thought I would write anything autobiographical. . . . I never expected to write about my mother"; she admits that "many things" from her life "were used in the stories, but they were very much transformed" ("Eudora Welty" 146). This is another essential difference between the two writers. Welty volunteers little, maintains what appears to be southern decorum and modesty, answers the professional questions, and scolds interviewers who ask personal ones. Munro consciously plumbed her personal histories because her past was what she had that relieved her from the present entrapments of marriage and motherhood in British Columbia. This became particularly so when she returned home the season after her mother died. (She had suffered a form of Parkinson's disease for eighteen years, beginning when Munro was ten.) As her grandmother and great aunt sorted her mother's clothes for re-use, they told her "minutely about" her mother's death. Munro says, "I had to write it in a completely different way . . . to get as much human truth out of . . . this event as I could and so it was a different tact to take than I had done before and also quite painful to do. Stories that come out of my personal stories are still stories" (Interview with Hal Wake).

Not until her penultimate fiction, *The Optimist's Daughter*, after the death of her mother at the end of a protracted decline and a long period of not writing, did Welty deliberately approach her family material. In the earlier work for the most part, Welty herself seems invisible, and the human relationships at the heart of her fiction are seen from the outside. Chestina Welty's death was one of those "sad things . . . those things we can't ever change but must try through fiction to make something with" Welty told a friend (qtd. in Marrs 371). She writes more formally that "part of the universal experience of personal loss is the urgent wish to find a way back through the exercise of memory and the acceptance of the responsibilities of feeling and understanding, to apprehend, absorb, and save some essence of the life that is just over" ("Foreword" 310). Munro understood this when she was just a novice. Welty downplays the autobiographical nature of her novel; though the story was not "'like' my own, it was *intimate* with my own – a

closer affinity. Writing it involved my deepest feelings, their translation into the events of the story was demanding of my ability as no other novel, so far, has been" ("Foreword" 310-11).

Both Munro and Welty write from character, and their stories take their cues from a gesture or an anecdote remembered. Munro explains,

The start . . . gets lost and is usually unrecognizable in the final story. Suppose you have – in memory – a young woman stepping off a train in an outfit so elegant her family is compelled to take her down a peg (as happened to me once), and it somehow becomes a wife who's been recovering from a mental breakdown, met by her husband and his mother and the mother's nurse whom the husband doesn't yet know he's in love with. How did that happen? I don't know. ("A Conversation")

The beginning leads to questions that give rise to stories. The genesis of Welty's first story is the phrase "borry some fire," spoken by a country man leaving his wife at their isolated home to borrow fire ("Looking Back" 300). The story is not about Sonny but about the lonely salesman who did not have, and knew he never would have, the love and comfort felt by the man and his expectant wife ("Death of a Traveling Salesman"). Only the instigating phrase comes out of the Depression, but even that shows human compassion and community. Welty explains her photographs, which I take to mean the moments captured in memory, saying, "I learned that *every feeling waits upon its gesture*; and I had to be prepared to recognize this *moment*" (*One Writer's Beginnings* 928). Both Welty and Munro cherish the awareness that gestures exist, and if noted, can be catalysts for questions for which the writers can seek answers. Their answers, in specific detail of their stories, rise above the particular, certainly beyond any geographic region, and allow either the comfort afforded by the pleasure of observing the recreated world from an objective distance or the disquietude of experiencing the normally unspoken – because unrealized – realities of one's life.

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CHARLES REAGAN WILSON

Parallel Spiritual Worlds

Alice Munro Country and the American South

In Alice Munro's story "Baptizing," in her book *Lives of Girls and Women*, the protagonist, Del Jordan, is in love with a young man, Garnet French, who discovered evangelical faith while he was in prison. They meet at a town revival, and he soon has her attending the Baptist Young People's Society. Munro presents the details of the experience – the prayers, hymns, the sour smell of the church building, even the ping-pong game afterwards that provided fellowship. Yet in recounting the realistic details, Del thinks, "I had that strange and confident sensation of being in a dream from which I would presently wake up." While at the church, she was "always amazed and lonely as someone thrown up in a shipwreck." She uses the word "unreality" to describe this churchly experience. In truth, her attraction to Garnet is not, as she says, to "the regenerate Baptist" but to "the dark side, the strange side of him" (*Lives of Girls and Women* 236, 237, 241).¹

The story illustrates Munro's complex engagement with matters of the spirit – both the importance of religious life to her community and recognition of a mysterious world beneath or beyond the daily one of ordinary behavior, a world sometimes of "the dark side" indeed, or at least the uncanny.

Garnet insists that Del be baptized before their relationship goes any further, and Del refuses. The conflict comes to a head when Del and Garnet are swimming, and he says she must join the Baptist Church and be baptized. "You know how they do it in our church? Baptizing?" he asks. "Dunk you right under the water. They got a tank behind the pulpit covered up. That's where they do it. But it's better to do it in a river, several at one time." She persistently refuses his demand that she be baptized, and he decides he will baptize her himself in the river where they are swimming. He forces her head under the water and, in his violent rage, holds her there. "I thought that he might drown me," she says. "I really thought that. I thought that I was fighting for my life" (*LGW* 259-61).

¹ Henceforth, Alice Munro's *Lives of Girls and Women* will be referred to as *LGW* in parenthetical references.

This scene is characteristic of Munro's use of epiphany to bring clarity to her characters and their stories. In this case, it leads to Del's awareness that she could not enter Garnet's Baptist world. Epiphany is strongly rooted in religious contexts, expressing spiritual illumination, and one writer of the American South is especially associated with it. Flannery O'Connor often used violent scenes to try to stir her readers out of a modernist spiritual indifference: "to the hard-of-hearing you shout, and for the almost blind you draw large and startling figures." She saw in modern life "distortions which [were] repugnant" to the Christian writer, such as herself, who has "to make these appear as distortions to an audience which is used to seeing them as natural, and he may well be forced to take even more violent means to get his vision across to his hostile audience" (O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners* 33-34). Munro's "Baptizing" reminds me of O'Connor's scene in *The Violent Bear It Away* where Francis Marion Tarwater drowns the dimwitted Bishop while baptizing him, although O'Connor's baptism is characteristically more violent than Munro's.

Unlike O'Connor, Munro does not write from a specifically religious perspective, but I want to argue that Munro makes spiritual matters more central than critics sometimes acknowledge. Some commentators emphasize Munro's fascination with the ordinary in life, while others see gothic elements. But spiritual matters are too often underexplored in Munro criticism. She has acknowledged her debt to Faulkner, Welty, and O'Connor, and I believe she has created a fictional world with spiritual dimensions that parallel those of southern writers.²

Baltimore editor H. L. Mencken coined the term "Bible Belt" to describe the American South, first using it in a 1924 newspaper article. "The old game, I suspect, is beginning to play out in the Bible Belt," and at other times he referred to the "Bible and Lynching Belt" (Shapiro 2). Mencken used the term derisively, but it accurately describes the American South as a place of high religiosity, which has proven an enormous resource to its writers. The South has had by far the nation's largest percentage of people who attend church on a regular basis and give money to religious institutions. The re-

² For a general discussion of religion and culture in Canada, see William Closson James, *Locations of the Sacred: Essays on Religion, Literature, and Canadian Culture* (1998). For a discussion of Munro and the South in general, see J.R. Struthers, "Alice Munro and the American South" (1978; 21-33), and Nora Robson, "Alice Munro and the White American South: The Quest" (1984; 73-84).

gion's predominant faith is evangelical, meaning, in this case, that its adherents prize religious experience. A strong inheritance of Calvinism has left a dim view of human nature and its tendency toward sin, but an equally strong Methodist Wesleyan legacy points southerners toward hope for redemption. The assurance of redemption then promotes a reformed lifestyle, with righteous moralism pervasive. The South's Bible Belt of the early and mid-20th century was defined by religious orthodoxy, with doctrinaire attitudes typical. "Fierce sectarian debate often obscured a consensus on fundamentals," historian Kenneth K. Bailey has noted. "In such concepts as heaven and hell, God and Satan, depravity and redemption, there was little dispute" (2-3).

Southern writers found religion a rich resource. The region's most acclaimed writer, William Faulkner, wrote about religion, he said, because it was all around him, growing up in rural and small town Mississippi in the early 20th century. "It's just there," he said, and biblical characters, stories, and themes pervade his work (Gwynn and Blotner 41). He saw Calvinism as a particular burden for his characters, portraying it as limiting human potential, a source of absolutism, fatalism, and self-righteousness. In recounting the founding of his mythical Jefferson, Faulkner's character Chick Mallison notes that the Episcopal and Presbyterian churches were the oldest in north Mississippi, but "the Baptists and Methodists had heired from them, usurped and dispossessed" the others. Mallison described the predominant Baptists as "incorrigible nonconformists, nonconformists not just to everybody else but to each other in mutual accord" (Faulkner, *The Town* 306-07). The religious world that Faulkner explored was a rich one. The community church occupied a central place in it. He was not as interested as Flannery O'Connor was in the wild emotional spirit of the newer sectarian groups. Rather, Faulkner focused on the traditions, rituals, and behaviors of what he called "the spirit Protestant eternal" as he saw it existing in his mythical Yoknapatawpha County since its beginning (Faulkner, *Mosquitoes* 11). Institutional religion in that county was present from early on, with three churches present when only thirty homes dotted the countryside. Faulkner says the first ministers came "roaring with Protestant scripture and boiled whiskey, Bible and jug in one hand" and "a native tomahawk in the other" (Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun* 89). The Bible had a near mystical attraction for Faulkner's characters, reflecting its centrality as religious authority in the South. The respectable Methodist deacon Coldfield in *Absalom, Absalom!* waits in his room for Confederate troops to march outside, reading from the Bible "the passages of the old violent vindictive mysticism" (82).

Alice Munro's spiritual geography was perhaps less intense than that of Faulkner and certainly than that of Flannery O'Connor, but it was nonetheless an important part of her realistic picture of a regional society. Religion has been a key component of Protestant Canadian culture, and certainly so in southern Ontario, Munro's country. Historian William Westfall argues that religion in Ontario was the central factor shaping society, so much so that it produced what he calls a "Protestant culture." Westfall sees a strong Victorian legacy in Ontario, through church institutions and ethical convictions, resulting in a "heavy moral atmosphere that seemed to stifle individual freedom and creativity" (Westfall et al. 2). Northrop Frye stressed that in the 19th and early 20th centuries "the effective religious factors in Canada were doctrinal and evangelical, those that stressed the arguments of religion at the expense of its imagery," echoing the South's outlook (227). Robertson Davies referred to this outlook when he had one of his characters note that the worst Christians were those who "have the cruelty of doctrine without the poetic grace of myth" (226). Westfall adds, however, that religion in Canada also "provides a structure of metaphors that serves as a means of liberating the central characters from the very prison house that religion seems to have done so much to create" (Westfall et al. 3). In any event, historian Arthur Lower concludes that in the 20th century, Canada, in general, was "a strong church-going country" and "a country of intense religiosity" (86). Observers have sometimes used the term "Bible Belt" to refer to areas of Canada with high rates of church membership. Although southern Ontario is not usually included in Canada's "Bible Belt," I see intriguing, if speculative, connections to the American Bible Belt. Mencken's use of "Bible Belt" is popularly associated with the rural South, but in fact he included the rural Midwest in his classification as well. Historian Donald Mathews sees the Midwest providing the "suspenders" of the Bible Belt," and a little imagination can suggest those longitudinal suspenders stretch north into southern Ontario (Goldhaber 1997; Tweedie 865-76). Munro and the southern writers may be connected by a transnational, rural spiritual geography, rooted in time – the early and mid-20th century – and place – rural areas of North America. They share a predominantly Protestant evangelical and orthodox religious tradition.

Munro's southwestern Ontario bears the strong imprint of a Scots-Irish presence with religious implications. Many of Munro's ancestors were Scots-Irish, and her book, *The View from Castle Rock*, identifies Scottish characteristics among her ethnic Ontario cultural ancestors, including their

intense Calvinism. Historian Barry Vann argues for Scots-Irish “geothological imaginings” that affected the sacralization of place in the South of Scots-Irish settlement. He quotes an 1889 address to the Scotch-Irish Society that said Scots-Irish, wherever they traveled, “would cherish with affectionate veneration the honour of their sacred sires, and keep the sacred fires of family love brightly burning on their domestic altars as long as a drop of the old Scotch-Irish blood should trickle through their veins” (155). Munro’s stories share Faulkner’s sense of Scots-Irish embodied Calvinism’s moralisms, deeply rooted in a regional society, as a restrictive factor for her characters’ development. As with Faulkner and other southern writers, the depressed economic conditions of her Ontario provide a place where fatalism promotes moralistic judgments. “If I’m a regional writer,” Munro says, “the region I’m writing about has many things in common with the American South. . . . A closed rural society with a pretty homogeneous Scotch-Irish racial strain going slowly to decay” (McCaig 39-40).

Munro’s story “Walker Brothers Cowboy” portrays her fictional landscape of Tuppertown, “an old town on Lake Huron, an old grain port.” We see a factory with boarded up windows, “then the town falls away in a jumble of shed and small junkyards, the sidewall gives up and we are walking on a sandy path.” The narrator’s mood reflects the landscape and the sense of being trapped. Del Jordan’s mother uses a key Calvinistic word when she observes that “fate has flung us onto a street of poor people” (*Dance of the Happy Shades* 1, 2, 4).³ This also reminds us that Munro country is working class and often poor, with Depression-era settings reminding us of the Farm Security Administration photographs of the decaying South in the last days before modernization’s transformations in the mid-20th century.

Alice Munro’s spiritual geography was perhaps less intense than that of Faulkner and certainly than that of Flannery O’Connor, but it was nonetheless an important part of her realistic picture of a regional society. Revivals, baptizings, and funerals appear as prominent social events. The church is certainly a contested site for her characters, but its serving as a frequent source of conflict indicates its important role in her characters’ lives. Religious folklore pops up periodically. Uncle Benny, in *Lives of Girls and Women*, refers to a rainbow as “the Lord’s promise” (4) that there will never be another great flood. Munro can picture the obsessive side of religiosity.

³ Henceforth, *Dance of the Happy Shades* by Alice Munro will be referred to as *DHS* in parenthetical references.

"She was a religious fanatic," says Del Jordan's mother of her own mother. She recalls finding her "on her knees, bent down on the bed, praying. The family was poor, but when Del's grandmother inherited some money she spent it on the Good Book to give to "the heathen." "My mother took her money and she ordered a great box of Bibles. They came by express. They were the most expensive kind, maps of the Holy Land gilt-edged pages and the words of Christ were all marked in red. *Blessed are the poor in spirit.*" Del's mother, at age eight had no mittens, but was "tramping all over the country" giving away Bibles and turning her permanently against religion (LGW 4, 84-85).

Munro shows this Ontario regional folk religion as being anti-Catholic as well. Young Del goes with her father to a friend's house, and she sees a picture of the Virgin Mary on the wall. "We have never known any Roman Catholics at all well, never well enough to visit in their houses." To make it even more stark, her father has a drink of whiskey with his female friend, which would not have been seen in Del's normal moralistic Protestant world. In thinking about Catholics, one of Munro's characters uses a phrase that shows their marginalization: "so-and-so digs with the wrong foot" (DHS 14). This saying reminds me of a sign in front of the Anchor Baptist Church in north Mississippi: "There is no hope, in the Pope," and despite Flannery O'Connor's sophisticated Catholic theological appreciation of fundamentalism's religious seriousness, anti-Catholicism long characterized the South's evangelical culture.

The Bible is a taken-for-granted item of everyday life in Munro country. In describing the people of her little postage stamp of native soil, the Flats Road in southwestern Ontario, she notes that one character kept a little donkey, "like the illustration to a Bible story." The father of Del Jordan's friend Naomi, in *Lives of Girls and Women*, "reads the Bible till his eyes fall out." He sits on his bed one day, opening "a large-print Bible with the place already marked and began to read in a piercing elderly voice, with some odd stops, and difficulties of phrasing" the parable of the five wise virgins and the five foolish virgins. To be sure, Del has always disliked this parable, but she was well aware of it. Moreover, Del admits that the Bible gave her a "secret pleasure – poetic flow of words, archaic expressions. *Said unto; tarried; Behold the bridegroom cometh*" (LGW 171-72). This has certainly been true as well for writers of the South. Susan Ketchin, in her book about contemporary southern writers and religion, notes that "We became as southerners in the evangelistic Protestant South intimately familiar with the resounding beauty of the biblical language and the unmistakable rhetoric of sermons,

the rhythm and meter, symbols, the metaphors, the cataloging of images, and the building up of tension in the narratives" (84-85)

Munro's chronicling of religion's role in her regional society reflects her realistic concern to evoke the details of daily life. Margaret Atwood notes that Munro is interested in "what people eat, what they wear, what appliances they are using," and these are "all important to her" (Awano 93). Religious life is a crucial component of that, just as in the American South. North Carolina writer Reynolds Price observes that southern culture "provided us with a daily world in which religion played an omnipresent role," (qtd. in Ketchin 83) which was "immensely important" to those who would later become writers. It embodied a concrete sense of "the relation of human creatures to the Creator" (86), but that relationship grew out of the particularities of daily life. It relies "very intensely upon where we came from and when we came from and who was behind us, who was cooking the meals and who was taking us places on Friday nights or Saturdays and Sundays" (86). Price insists that "those things that make us most fully human largely occur, and are taught, in the way that table manners are taught." From mother to child. From father to son or father to daughter" (87). He characterized the southern version of this as "that very complex bittersweet marination in religion that was available right on down through the 50s and 60s to the standard southern child" (Ketchin 86).

Faulkner presented the religious framing of his Yoknapatawpha County, and his fellow Mississippian Eudora Welty did so as well with her communities. "It is in a churchly society that most Southerners are brought up," she once said, "and it is what they mention in every other word in their conversation. In a small town like Banner, if the Baptists couldn't be against the Methodists, they'd have nothing to talk about" (Gretlund 395). One of the most revealing Welty scenes in this regard portrays and comically lampoons denominational rivalry. In *Losing Battles*, a storm sweeps through the community, picking up the Methodist Church in one piece, carrying it through the air and setting it back down right next to the Baptist Church. "Thank the Lord nobody was worshipping in either one," said Aunt Beck. Mrs. Moody noted that "those Methodists had to tear their own church down stick by stick so they could carry it back and put it together again on good side of the road where it belonged," said Miss Beulah. The final word of the situation was, "A good many Baptists helped 'em" (238).

Munro's most sustained examination of religion in her community of Jubilee is in the story "The Age of Faith." Her religiously skeptical mother nonetheless allows Del Jordan and her brother to be baptized in the United

Church, which is a key Canadian church formed in the 1920s from a merger of four Protestant denominations with the mission of trying to bring institutional religion to the scattered regional populations in places like southwestern Ontario. In Jubilee, the United Church was “the most modern, the largest, and the most prosperous church building.” There were four other churches. The Catholics, of course, were regarded as the most extreme, seeming, Del says, as “bizarre and secretive as Hindus, with their idols and confessions and black spots on Ash Wednesday.” The Baptists were also extreme, “but in a completely unsinister comic way.” Unlike the South, where the Baptists are the largest religious group, in Jubilee “no person of any importance or social standing went to the Baptist Church.” Del thinks the Baptist Church “had more vulgar cheerfulness about it than anybody else’s” (*LGW* 104-05). Compare this with Faulkner’s view of the Southern Baptists as religiously stunted, aspiring to some spiritual meaning but one that “got warped and twisted in the process” (qtd. in Gwynn and Blotner 190).

Although Scots-Irish Presbyterian folk theology clearly contributed to Munro’s sense of small town moralisms and fatalistic conformity, the Presbyterians of Jubilee were a small marginal group, as most of that denomination had merged with the United Church. The United Church’s prosperity was seen in “glossy golden oak” pews, a powerful pipe organ, and stained-glass windows that “showed Christ performing useful miracles” (although Del laments they did not show Jesus converting water into wine). Del decides to attend the United Church to shock her mother, but participating in the worship leads her to consider “the question of God.” Actually, Del observed, “the question of whether God existed or not never came up in Church. It was only a matter of what He approved of, or usually of what He did not approve of,” again suggesting religion’s role in reinforcing moralistic conformity.” Del is suddenly taken, though, with interest in the Anglican Church, largely at first because it had “the only church bell in town, and that seemed to me a lovely thing for a church to have.” She attends the Anglican Church service, but sneaks in hoping no one will see her, because it is not a very socially prominent institution in southwestern Ontario. A print of Christ appeals to her because he “looked more regal and more tragic, and the background against which he appeared was gloomier and richer, more pagan somehow, or at least Mediterranean.” She was used to seeing Christ “limp and shepherdly in Sunday-school pastels.” She discovers in the Anglican Church “the theatrical in religion,” just “what all those Methodists and Congregationalists and Presbyterians had fearfully abolished” (*LGW* 105-10).

In trying to find an answer to the question of God, Del puts him to the test. She is somewhat inept in her homemaking class at school, so she prays that she can avoid having to thread the sewing machine needle in class. After much engagement with her teacher, the teacher decides she is hopeless in such matters and takes her off the sewing machine, seeming to prove prayer works. She comes in time to realize the triviality of such instrumentalism, and the lesson is clarified further when her brother wants her to teach him to pray to save his dog. She decides realistically that praying was not going to stop her father from killing the dog who has become a sheep killer in farm country. "I saw with dismay the unavoidable collision coming, of religion and life" (*LGW* 113, 127).

Munro adds more complexity to her spiritual envisioning of southwestern Ontario by hinting at ways awe and reference can be glimpsed in the concrete experiences of her place and people. She notes that even her religiously skeptical mother is not "prepared to say *Nothing* and see herself and every stick and stone and feather in the world floating loose on that howling hopeless dark" (111). And yet the glimpses of worlds of dread could nurture an appreciation of the mysteries of the world around her characters. Del's wisdom at the end of "The Age of Faith" puts this sentiment in formally religious questions:

Could there be God not contained in the churches' net at all, not made manageable by any spells and crosses, God real, and really in the world, and alien and unacceptable as death? Could there be God amazing, indifferent, beyond faith? (*LGW* 128)

Munro presents hints of the numinous less with explicit language about God than in images, scenes, and characters that suggest what has been called a southwestern Ontario gothic.⁴ The Flats Road is the poor outskirts of Jubilee where Del's family lives during part of her youth. Uncle Benny is a neighbor who embodies a mysterious world where unnatural things can happen. Dishes smash themselves on the floor at night. A stew flies off the stove by itself. There are rappings on the wall. "Resting alongside our world was Uncle Benny's world like a troubling distorted reflection," Del says.

[T]he same but never at all the same. In that world people could go down in quicksand and be vanquished by ghosts or terrible ordinary cities; luck and wickedness were gigantic

⁴ Coral Ann Howells, in *Alice Munro: Contemporary World Writers* (1998; 2), uses the term Ontario gothic.

and unpredictable; nothing was deserved, anything might happen, defeats were met with crazy satisfaction. (*LGW* 12, 30)

Munro presents here a mysterious spiritual world that is a separate place from the prosperous religiosity of the United Church or the drama of the Anglican Church and certainly a separate spiritual realm from the narrow moralistic conformity of her small town churchly society.

In Munro's portrayal of death, we see her bringing together her concern for the ordinary and the otherworldly. In "Princess Ida," she tells of her mother's affection for her teacher, Miss Rush, who has many appealing qualities and bright future. "What had happened to Miss Rush, then, with her beauty and her embroidery and her piano playing? She had married, rather late, and died having a baby. The baby died too and lay in her arms like a wax doll...." Del's summary judgment here is that "stories of the past go like this, round and round and down to death; I expected it." The youthful Del is troubled by the reality of death and refuses to engage in the small town custom of touching the corpse of Uncle Craig. It brings an encounter with that mysterious other world that Del seems to glimpse but does not always embrace. "I wanted death pinned down and isolated behind a wall of particular facts and circumstances, not floating around loose, ignored but powerful; waiting to get in anywhere" (*LGW* 88, 53). She bites Mary Agnes Oliphant's hand when she tries to push Del to see the corpse, even – in a good Gothic image – tasting the blood from the bite.

Del's violent reaction is condemned by others at the funeral, but fear of death does not exclude her from the broader community trying to deal with mortality through the rituals of death that provide a shred of human dignity in the face of the abyss. Del has a vision that comes out of this experience of death.

To be made of flesh was humiliation. I was caught in a vision which was, in a way, the very opposite of the mystic's incommunicable vision of order and light; a vision, also incommunicable, of confusion and obscenity – of helplessness, which was revealed as the most obscene thing there could be. (*LGW* 65)

Yet this vision is, again, but a glimpse into a dark spiritual world. Del says that "like the other kind of vision this could not be supported more than a moment or two, it collapsed of its own intensity and could never be reconstructed" (*LGW* 65).

Munro's glimpses of gothic otherworldliness in later works would lead to her fascination with dark houses and the hauntings of dead mothers in their

daughters' lives.⁵ This attraction to the gothic and the grotesque connects with southern writers. The decaying body at the center of Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" and the dark house at the center of *Absalom, Absalom!* are only the most obvious examples of Faulkner's use of gothic tropes in picturing mysterious and dreadful forces at work in his characters' decay in the early 20th century. Patricia Yaeger's book *Dirt and Desire* draws attention to how southern women writers have, in particular, used the grotesque to illuminate a dark side of the South. But Yaeger fails to see the gothic and the grotesque as specifically spiritual imaginings of worlds that balance the realism of 20th century southern writers, just as we see it embodied in Munro country. According to William Van O'Connor, the grotesque, for modern writers, "is the closest we can come to the sublime" (19).

Munro is not the only Canadian writer whose spiritual geography connects with those of southern writers. Critics have noted the influence of Faulkner on Margaret Laurence, for example, and she has acknowledged his Yoknapatawpha works as a model for her Manawaka fictional world. Other scholars have compared her work to that of such southern writers as Carson McCullers, Peter Taylor, Eudora Welty, and Flannery O'Connor.⁶

The comparison with O'Connor summons Laurence's similar use of religion in her writing within a regional framework. Laurence calls Manawaka a prairie town; regionally, it *is* a western place. Its small town life resonates, though, with the American South, including the presence of evangelical Protestantism.

In Laurence's *A Jest of God*, religion is a part of everyday life, as with Munro, as prayers, hymns, and Bible passages are commonplace. In arguably the most memorable religious scene in Laurence's fiction, Rachel Cameron, the novel's main character, goes with a friend to a Pentecostal worship service at the "Tabernacle of the Risen and Reborn." The emotion of the service is a terror to her, as she observes worshippers speaking in tongues, but she is led to understand, through the experience, the difficulties of all human communication. The novel shows Cameron in a lonely quest for meaning, faith, reassurance, and God in a moralistic, fatalistic, and hypocritical community. As Clara Thomas notes, Rachel sees herself and her life as "grotesques." In

⁵ Susanne Becker's *Gothic Forms of Feminine Fiction* (1999) explores the gothic mother-daughter relationship for both Canadian and southern writers.

⁶ For references to Laurence's connection to southern writers, see Greta M.K. McCormick Coger, *New Perspectives on Margaret Laurence: Poetic Narrative, Multiculturalism, and Feminism* (1996; xx, xxiv).

her mind, "all the life that she can see is distorted, chaotic, terrifying, an enormity of injustice." Still, as Thomas observes in evoking the importance of epiphany for Laurence, ultimately "there is a flash of life in her darkness," which leads her to embrace her own strength as a source of meaning (Thomas, *The Manawaka World of Margaret Laurence* 89-90). Epiphany suggests again Flannery O'Connor who used it so often. O'Connor leads back, in closing, to the importance of regional contexts for Canadian and southern writers, noting that "the writer operates at a peculiar crossroads where time and place and eternity somehow meet. His problem is to find that location" (O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners* 59). Munro has found that location in southwestern Ontario and Laurence in western Canadian prairie country, paralleling in both cases the religious landscape of the American South.

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DANIÈLE PITAVY-SOUQUES

“A Wordless Unease”

*Some Aspects
of the Relationship between Art and Politics
in the Works of Southern and Canadian Writers*

*The power that I felt was not in the thing itself, but in
some tremendous force behind it, that the carver had
believed in.*

(Emily Carr, “D’Sonoqua,” *Klee Wyck* 36)

I

Beyond the intimation of echoes and the possibility of influence, the reader of texts written by Southern and Canadian writers experiences a kinship between them that belongs to the spirit and to a certain vision of art. This kinship, I will argue, rests on a comparable attitude toward fiction writing, born of similar specific experiences. Through the way they relate to history, to the land and its landscapes, and to the different peoples that live there, Canadian and Southern writers share a dramatic multi-faceted experience that has led them to consider that the true nature of fiction writing, and consequently the role of the writer, is to destabilize the reader by opening the width and depth of the world. Theirs is a visionary experience that feeds a desire to explore, through fiction, the new territories opened up by the strange relationship the human mind entertains with the world around them. Theirs is a technique of disruption and disorder that questions the given, the visible, and they write highly political fictions that aim at undermining the establishment and at exposing hypocrisy, exploitation, and organized cruelty toward the poor and despised. Their works claim a concern for the different, the Other.

Comparable backgrounds have provided the political, geographical and “atmospheric” roots of this kinship, those shared elements and situations that have shaped mentalities, policies, and creativity. First, due to a long history of, respectively, slavery and colonization, the South and Canada are on the defensive: they feel threatened in their identities by the Establishment and share a similar double attitude of fear and arrogance that fosters dissent and

inventiveness. Then, both countries are subjected to the extreme violence of nature: climatic violence with harsh dark winters in the North and wild hurricanes in the South, the geographical challenges of the landscape, the ever threatening presence of the wilderness. Finally, because of centuries of hardship, oppression, and silence, among those writers sprang the first dissenting voices of previously silent minorities in North America (women, Native Americans, and African-Americans); relentlessly they examine the past and the present and write highly political fictions that denounce evils and offer the possibility to “rehumanize” the world. In other words, they belong to Dark Arcadia, pitting freedom and transgression against obedience and decorum, as we shall see.

Drawing on examples from Canadian and southern (short) fiction, I will argue that despite the use of different techniques that leads to all kinds of oblique strategies, the writers’ subversive attitudes are in resonance with one another and create specific echoes that are unique in North American literature. The first part of this essay will examine some aspects of this intriguing kinship from the perspective of the relationship between the land (the geographic specificity of Canada and the South) and place (metaphorically a space where people meet, learn and love, where things happen and where revelation comes). Of special interest will be the way the treatment of land and place reflects a preoccupation with the self and its avatars, an extreme susceptibility to otherness, to the strangeness of life. “Life *is* strange. Stories hardly make it more so,” Eudora Welty writes (“Place” 128). The second part of this essay will compare two 19th century stories as they exemplify the ambiguities of the relationship between the two literatures.

The notion of two Arcadias as proposed by Simon Schama in *Landscape and Memory* will be used as a critical tool since it seems appropriate to grasp the complexities of both literatures. “There have always been two kinds of Arcadia,” he writes, “shaggy and smooth; dark and light; a place of bucolic leisure and a place of primitive panic” (517). Both forms of Arcadia coexist and are mutually necessary. Dark Arcadia means chaos, and also creativity and sexuality, whereas Light Arcadia means order and control, and also destruction through absurd rationality. Although acknowledged by other writers in other parts of the United States and other Western cultures, this coexistence takes a specific resonance in the South and in Canada. This comes from those aspects of the land that attract the artists. As a natural landscape, the wilderness represents both a permanent threat to human lives and a challenge to the imagination with the treacherous waters of black bayous (Kate

Chopin), the inexorable entanglement of vegetation (Welty, Atwood), primeval forests (Faulkner, Isabella Valancy Crawford, Emily Carr), and ominous geological/paleontological vestiges (Robert Kroetsch). As a mental landscape, the wilderness for those writers is associated with the dark Other – African Americans in the South, Native Americans in the North and the South, and that instinctive part of the self, bent on destruction. The wilderness, which is often endowed with some supernatural force, is seen, felt, and feared. In Canada, painters provided a powerful counterpoint to the writers’ vision. The Group of Seven became famous in the late twenties and early thirties for their representations of the Canadian wilderness. Emily Carr defined British Columbia, that ultimate Canadian Province, by stressing the reversibility of land and ocean, painting the womb-like rain forest like the Pacific and the totem poles scattered along the shore like the ghostly soul of surviving islanders. For indeed, the wilderness is the place of creativity and of sudden illumination. One aspect of the kinship between Canada and the American South lies in the way writers from both landscapes emphasize and dramatize the borderland between the two Arcadias, that moment of moral, artistic and metaphysical revelation, which is at the core of their works. This is the moment of intense creative investigation when, with a strong feeling of guilt, the artist feels an impulse to dig to the roots of the subconscious to bring to light what it is forbidden to see (Milner 235), when only through the experience of evil and darkness light is allowed to explode, an ontological moment closely linked to the revelation of the Other. “All history is a negotiation between familiarity and strangeness,” says Simon Schama (“Clio at the Multiplex” 40), a sentiment that also influences Wiebe’s *Discovery of Strangers*, which carries as an epigraph two lines by Rainer Maria Rilke, “Strangely I heard a stranger say,/ I am with you.” Novelists have long practiced such negotiations between strangeness and familiarity in their representation of life as mediated by their personal vision of the world and this long before Freud gave it a name: *Das Unheimliche*.

II

A physical and symbolic conjunction between time and place provides a stimulating dialogue across Canada and the South, since avant-garde writers use it to address the question of representation. My two examples here are stories written, one generation apart, by Eudora Welty and Margaret Atwood. Through their innovative approach, which is a splendid metaphor for the

fruitfulness of Dark Arcadia; they fictionalize the necessity of death and guilt for the creation of life-giving art.

Eudora Welty uses the Natchez Trace, a real place of tangled and overabundant vegetation that still exists in parts, as a symbol of the rough making of the American South. As a place of evil and greed, it is outside the law but also resonant with the sinister echoes of slavery, that excess of law and order. In “A Still Moment” (1942), one of her best stories, the Trace becomes a place of ontological revelation. Here, Welty sharpens her reflection on the Other and the visible when it is affected by the presence of an absence, and on the necessary rite of deconstruction in representation (deconstruction to be understood both literally and critically with Derrida). She presents a remarkable construction of the artist and the creative act through three historical characters and stages the action somewhere along the Natchez Trace, the highly emblematic place for American creativity in her fiction, sometime in the 19th century. In the center, there is a triple figure of the artist: Audubon, the bona fide artist, a painter and a naturalist, and two other figures that represent the darker sides of the artist, Lorenzo, the preacher, intent on saving souls, and Murrell, the bandit, intent on ruling the world. All three men are consumed by a passion to possess their objects to the point of removing lives or souls (we are in Dark Arcadia). This is what Audubon does when he kills the beautiful white heron in order to paint it. His meditation on representation asserts deconstruction as an aesthetic necessity: “He knew that the best he could make would be, after it was apart from his hand, a dead thing and not a live thing, never the essence, only a sum of parts” (“A Still Moment” 239). Faced with this “murder” inextricably bound to creation, Lorenzo, the philosopher – the thinking side of the artist – words the very questions that postmodernists will raise later:

He could understand God's giving Separateness first and then giving Love to follow and heal in its wonder; but God had reversed this, and given Love first and then Separateness, as though it did not matter to Him which came first. Perhaps it was that God never counted the moments of Time; Lorenzo did that, among his tasks of love. Time did not occur to God. (“A Still Moment” 239)

“Separateness” in this context signifies the attempt to reject the principle of causality, the effort to run away from the oppressive world of narrative causality. Audubon’s gesture is a liberating gesture. So, if time no longer prevails, the logical organization of the narrative sequence no longer matters. And indeed the text is about “a still moment.” Moreover, inasmuch as the necessary similitudes or dissimilitudes disappear, representation can move

farther away from the original. It becomes, in effect, a reflection on the distorting power of absence over presence. Margaret Atwood’s “Death by Landscape,” collected in *Wilderness Tips* (1991), provides a counter-point to “A Still Moment.” Atwood’s summer holidays with her parents gave her first-hand knowledge of the wilderness up north, and her text is a brilliant reflection on the essence of the wilderness. The story is built on a first movement from the outside to the inside, from Light Arcadia to Dark Arcadia, and this overall structure, which the story shares with the paintings of the Group of Seven, encapsulates story’s meaning. In fact, Atwood leads her readers from a camp devised to initiate middle-class girls into that founding component of Canadian identity: the experience of the wilderness. In this respect, Atwood is not so far from Faulkner’s attitude towards the South in *Go Down, Moses*. The initiation rests on stereotypes – camping and a canoe trip, playing Indians, the original inhabitants of the wilderness – and on superimposed, fake signs such as rough face-painting, imitation vestments, and rituals. Likewise, the different episodes of the first day and night are what one would expect to experience in a well-organized Canadian summer camp. The real challenges begin when Lois and Lucy, the two friends, leave the group to climb up to Lookout Point, “a sheer drop to the lake and a long view over the lake” (121), and step through the looking-glass to be confronted with their own demons: the fear of heights and of getting lost for Lois, the lure of suicide for Lucy. They have left Light Arcadia to enter Dark Arcadia. The proliferation of signs in the camp is replaced by a traumatic absence of signs when Lucy disappears never to be found again (like Chopin’s *Désirée*). Now alone, Lucy is overcome by an intense experience of the wilderness where “you can become lost almost as soon as you step off the path” (128). Being lost in and by a presence that swallows up, kills, and absorbs like a Leviathan, is an image often found in Canadian poetry, as Northrop Frye notes (36-37). Lois realizes how playing Indian in order to appropriate the Native Americans’ relation to nature through mere signs is wrong and false; she is now confronted with the wilderness as the other side of the self. Only by losing herself in herself can she open up to the destabilizing effects of the wilderness that will lead to an endless questioning of its essence. The text ends with a long meditation of Lois on the paintings of the Group of Seven that she has never stopped acquiring after the disappearance of her friend. The meditation caps a reverse movement from the inside to the outside, in resonance with “A Still Moment.” As with Welty, death must be sublimated to reach the

superior awareness of life that art provides. Aesthetic necessity forced Audubon to kill the bird in order to recompose the picture that would give the illusion of life.

Atwood's story evokes the powerful life-giving quality of Dark Arcadia, since it is only due to her sense of guilt over the death of her friend in the wilderness that Lois can experience the living presence of Lucy in the paintings. Yet, as in Welty's story, this unseen presence, like Lucy's voice which "she is always listening for" (128), is but an echo, not the thing itself, a reflection on the distorting power of absence over presence. Atwood suggests what her post-modern writing techniques abundantly exemplify, namely that in art the linear conception of time no longer exists since death is abolished. Lois's further discovery is that realism as it is evidenced in English-inspired early Canadian paintings is abolished in the landscapes of the Group of Seven. Because nineteenth-century Canadian painters imitated European models and tracked similitude rather than specificity, they produced still landscapes that reflected a colonial reality. Conversely, the Group of Seven was intensely receptive to the specificity of Canadian landscapes, especially to the wilderness. In their paintings, as described by Atwood, the classical division of space into foreground, middle ground, and background no longer exists: rational control that would reassure the viewer is eliminated. Instead, the painters privilege immediate confrontation and represent mental landscapes that invite the viewer to step into the picture for a labyrinthine exploration of something that always eludes grasping, naming, or understanding – an endless movement of the mind. "She wanted something that was in them, although she could not have said at the time what it was. It was not peace: she does not find them peaceful in the least. Looking at them fills her with a wordless unease" ("Death by Landscape" 110). In those pictures, something is alive and becomes all the more frightening as it eludes definition, despite seeming close to something once known and familiar. The powerful attraction of the landscapes of the Group of Seven, Atwood suggests, comes from the uncanny, which Freud defines as "that class of the terrifying that leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar" (123-24). Because of it, the paintings draw every modern viewer into a personal ontological reflection on art, reality and the real, the sayable and the unsayable, and even more, as Lois's story shows, into a challenging and disturbing introspection. Thus, Atwood masterfully fictionalizes the problematics of the abstract quality of those paintings, which, despite an apparently figurative representation of the mood and identity of Canada, have long startled and haunted their viewers by creating the pure vibration of color (reds and blacks) that is the

very soul of Canada. Isabella V. Crawford was the first to celebrate them and to emphasize how they capture the new moods of 20th-century art:

And these paintings are not landscape paintings. Because there aren't any landscapes up there, not in the old, tidy European sense, with a gentle hill, a curving river, a cottage, a mountain in the background, a golden evening sky. Instead there's a tangle, a receding maze, in which you can become lost almost as soon as you step off the path. There are no backgrounds in any of these paintings, no vistas; only a great deal of foreground that goes back and back, endlessly, involving you in its twists and turns of tree and branch and rock. No matter how far back in you go, there will be more. And the trees themselves are hardly trees; they are currents of energy, charged with violent colour.

. . . She looks at the paintings, she looks into them. Every one of them is a picture of Lucy. You can't see her exactly, but she's there, in behind the pink stone island or the one behind that. . . .

Everyone has to be somewhere, and this is where Lucy is. She's in Lois's apartment, in the holes that open inwards on the wall, not like windows but like doors, she is here. She is entirely alive. (128-29)

Another aspect of the dialogue between Canadian and Southern writers concerns the way they indirectly address political issues. On closer inspection, the two Arcadias are not so far apart. Each has a positive and a negative aspect. Used as a critical tool to read literature, they function like two mirrors placed *vis-à-vis*, reflecting in reverse each other's pictures endlessly repeated and multiplied with differences that come to nought in the end. Signs are what matters here and even more the slightly delayed perception. I will insist on the delay, on that suspended moment of change. As confusion arises (psychological, moral, political, and ontological), uncertainty becomes a questioning of the self through the revelation of the Other. The writers aim at destabilizing the reader through the delayed realization of the real issues of the text, at upsetting certainties and the prejudiced common viewing of their works. In this perspective, daring strategies often too quickly dismissed or misunderstood need be reconsidered to grasp the issues at stake.

III

A concern with the moral nature and the nature of humanity in relation to identity is powerfully dramatized in two much anthologized stories, written

at about the same time by two women writers born the same year. One is a French-Irish Southerner, Kate Chopin (1850-1904), whose work was brought to the forefront of feminist studies in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s; the other is an Anglo-Irish Canadian, Isabella Valancy Crawford (1850-1887), whose bold poetic imagination Northrop Frye heralded as being at the root of a distinctive Canadian poetry. "Extradited" appeared on September 4, 1886 in the *Globe*, and five months later Crawford died of a heart attack. "Désirée's Baby" was first published on January 14, 1893 in *Vogue*.

Both writers wrote from first-hand knowledge of their themes and backgrounds and addressed the burning social and political issues of a specific time and place in the history of their countries. Yet, because they differed, not in terms of the education they both received (which was considerable for women of their time), but in their poetic and social sensibilities, they emphasized those problems differently. Chopin came from an established, well-off family, whereas Crawford was the daughter of cultivated, unsuccessful Irish immigrants. Brought up with the liberating equalitarian idealism of nineteenth-century Europe, Chopin was a militant feminist whose fiction became a plea for the abolition of every form of enslavement: race, sexism, and tradition. "Désirée's Baby" denounces slavery, the victimization of women, and the opprobrium attached to miscegenation under the cover of an antebellum story. Chopin's readers were not blind to her true subject: the racial violence and injustice that tore the South in the wake of Reconstruction. More radically, Chopin invites her readers to reconsider what defines the identity of a mixed blood person in the light of what was practiced in more tolerant countries like France. The highly melodramatic structure of the story, in which everyone ends up being a victim, manifests her anger. In contrast, Crawford was, and essentially always remained, a *poet* responding to the dramatic beauty and idealism of a new country opened to immigrants. "Extradited" addresses the issue of Canada's ambivalent image in her century, a place of refuge and a place to plunder, a society whose dominant religion distorts Christian ideals and severely controls women. Crawford dramatically celebrates the romantic theme of strong male friendship facing the dangers of pioneering new territories and exposes at the same time the spiteful role forced on women as wives and mothers. Her story presents an ironic inversion of the domestic idyll in which the American Joe, a farmhand, appears to threaten the marriage of Bessie and Asam, a threat deflected by the jealous wife who has Joe arrested for a long-forgotten misdeed in the U.S. Widely perceived as The Promised Land, Canada welcomes and shelters all kinds of

newcomers and provides “regeneration,” as Crèvecoeur said of the American Dream (62-63). In another, less charitable version of the same image, Canada is seen as a land of plenty whose natural riches are violently exploited. Crawford denounces certain forms of hypocrisy attached to Presbyterian immigration in the West making a virtue of money-grabbing and of enforcing strict rules that victimized women. At first reading, Crawford’s Bessie appears as a monster and Chopin’s Désirée, a pure victim, yet echoes in plots and devices, the use of clichés and symbolic vocabulary, and the treatment of landscape, all betray a comparable challenging construction of the duality of Arcadia.

The writers’ most effective technique to undermine the apparently happy picture of life on the Canadian frontier and in plantations in the South rests on their manipulating the common narrative device of the letter so as to make it portentous. Whether it is overly present (as in Chopin) or only indirectly referred to as in Crawford, the letter becomes the sign of an excess of law and regulation that brings chaos where a successful social organization seemed to prevail. Light Arcadia has turned repressive and murderous. It encapsulates the political strategies of the writers, such as tracing moral iniquities to the lure of money (slavery, rewards to turn in lawbreakers), exposing the mutilating effects of prejudice and limited education in conformist societies, or promoting love and generosity to foster new behavior. Crawford castigates moral abasement in a society of Pharisees, which condones, even encourages, “delation” with money, a society where making money means virtue and wipes out the New World notion of giving a new chance in life. With Bessie, Crawford indicts the education of girls in Presbyterian Canada; some eighty years later, similarly devastating effects will be presented in Margaret Laurence’s *The Stone Angel* (1964), a landmark in Canadian women’s literature.

She held a quiet contempt for her husband, the unlearned man who had won the pretty schoolmistress; and, *hedged in by the prim fence of routine knowledge and imperfect education*, she despised the large crude movements of the untrained intellect, and the primitive power of the strong and lofty soul. (Crawford 39; my emphasis)

Crawford’s Bessie is a victim of her narrow repressive education: she is like a hooded hawk trained to swoop down on its prey and get a reward for it (original meaning of the word). By contrast, Sam, her husband, is presented as the good Canadian frontiersman: a generous hard-working immigrant, whose Irish virtues are forgiveness and a genuine desire to acknowledge the other’s work toward regeneration.

On the other hand, the contents of the letters are part of Chopin's strategy in "Désirée's Baby." With three letters, she draws an anatomy of love – filial, conjugal and motherly – and dramatizes, with the agony of miscegenation, true motherly love as self-sacrifice carried to the point of accepting social disgrace, even obliteration. Madame Valmondé claims her adopted daughter, Désirée, and her black grandchild without any reservation. As she is dying, Armand's mother thanks her husband for his love and gratefully accepts obliteration for her child's sake, for she "belongs to the race that is cursed with the brand of slavery" (194). In Chopin's text, there looms the implicit legalistic background regulating degrees of color according to parents and ancestors, forbidding interracial marriages even with "free people of color," and in a more sinister twist, the right of a plantation master to add to his human chattel his own children born of a colored woman.

The duality of Arcadia structures the two stories with a similar dramatic pattern. At first, ordered and well controlled Light Arcadia seems to prevail: a large pioneer clearing in Western Canada, and a successful cotton plantation in the South. Then, a family incident reveals the sinister aspect of this Arcadia, where legalism smothers love and imagination, where Bessie and Armand believe they can appropriate the law, where economy rests on destructive profit with the over-exploitation of man in the South, of forests in Canada. As the text exposes the evil effects of this excess, a new in-between mental space appears, fraught with long repressed feelings and murderous impulse: the *Unheimliche* ushers in Dark Arcadia that brings tragic triumph over death.

Chopin's strategy pits the cruel reality of life in Southern plantations at the time of slavery against the illusion of a benevolent Old South created as self-justification by the defeated South. Armand is a cruel master enforcing strict rule toward his slaves (objects of punishment and sexual pleasure); his passion for Désirée lacks real love, and his violence seems to betray unexpressed darker fears. When the mixed blood of the baby becomes manifest, the *Unheimliche* takes over. In that in-between space that marks the passage between the two Arcadias, something that "arouses dread and creeping horror" (Freud 122), grips everybody: miscegenation and its origin. Armand is unable, or unwilling, to question his own identity, and so Désirée must be black since their child is black. The dramatic dialogue between husband and wife convinces the reader of Désirée's racial identity and reveals the complexity of miscegenation (some could "pass" for white). Above all, as it hints at Armand's true identity, it suggests that long repressed fears and creeping

horror are resurfacing and dictate his determination to get rid of that black offspring and its mother.

With her baby in her arms, Désirée's walking to her death into darkness and the black waters of the bayou is a masterpiece of controlled pathos. In her light use of clichés and local color, Chopin puts into perspective the fallacies of romantic imagery about plantation life. A very short paragraph functions as a warning: the lovely peaceful landscape at sunset is a lure, as idealized as the Currier and Ives lithographs it brings to mind. Yet ominous echoes are present. Consider the economic prosperity of cotton plantations based on slavery; unjustly treated literary heroines, the cruelty of the actual Louisiana landscape with very real, dark water monsters like man-eating crocodiles and deadly mocassins:

It was an October afternoon; the sun was just sinking. Out in the still fields the negroes were picking cotton.

. . . Her hair was uncovered and the sun's rays brought a golden gleam from its brown meshes. She did not take the broad, beaten road which led to the far-off plantation of Valmondé. She walked across a deserted field, where the stubble bruised her tender feet, so delicately shod, and tore her thin gown to shreds.

She disappeared among the reeds and willows that grew thick along the banks of the deep, sluggish bayou; and she did not come back again. (Chopin 194)

Conversely, Crawford's celebration of the wild power of Canadian nature in spring gives an epic dimension to the death of the hero. The poet chooses the rise of the river at the time of the spring thaws for its dramatic possibilities and economic implications, because this is when Canadian loggers send whole tree trunks downstream to be carried by the power of the current. As the detective is putting manacles on Joe, Sam's toddler falls into the river. Only Joe can swim and therefore dares to save the child:

It was a terrible fight between the man and the river – and the man subdued it unto him. He turned back to shore, the child in his teeth, both arms – one with the shining handcuff on it – beating the hostile current with fine, steady strokes.

Another moment and he would be safe on shore, a captive and ashamed. . . . [H]e half rose to step on the bank. Then there rose a bewildering cry from Sam and the men watching him: he turned and saw his danger.

With one sublime effort he flung the child on the bank, and then with the force of a battering ram the first of Piner's logs crashed upon him. It reared against him like a living thing instinct with rage, and wallowing monster-like led its barky hordes down the rushing stream, rolling triumphantly over a bruised and shattered pigmy of creation, a man. (46)

I am suggesting here that we read the two stories from an economic perspective because it reveals their modernity as they trace the root of the dehumanization of the world to a perversion of economy. But consider also the even more complex relation Crawford and Chopin fictionalize between money, heroism, and redemption, which adds an unexpected facet to the dialogue between Canadian and Southern literatures. This feature is due in part to their authors' awareness of women historically having been themselves objects of transactions. It reflects their vision of transcendence as artistic necessity, something shared by great artists in the South and Canada, irrespective of gender. Only the villains, Armand and Bessie, are not redeemed, as Crawford stresses by her the ironical play on aborted transaction. Betty feels frustrated and cheated of her reward: "'It don't seem that there's any reward for doing one's duty; oh, it's a downright shame.' . . . [S]he always had the private luxury of regarding herself as an unrewarded and unrecognized heroine of duty" (46-47). Likewise, Armand feels cheated by God: "He thought Almighty God had dealt cruelly and unjustly with him; and felt, somehow, that he was paying Him back in kind when he stabbed thus into his wife's soul" (193).

With a textual restraint that suggests far more than the two writers say, they create emotion as they write of the ambiguity surrounding the relation between humans and nature. On the one hand, man exploits nature; on the other hand, nature can be deadly. Crawford, the poet, is at her best when she describes the two aspects of the relation Canadian pioneers entertain with the hardships nature inflicts upon them. Compare the two paragraphs quoted above: although nature is dangerous, it challenges man's courage and virtue, and in this respect corresponds to the myth of Canada as The Promised Land. Because Joe felt bound in his newly found honor to discard his own interest and perform a physical and moral feat to save the child of the man who has befriended him and given him a chance to be regenerated, his fight with the Canadian river in spring is celebrated with terse heroic and biblical undertones – the courage required of pioneers to survive in wild Canadian nature. But when cupidity and uncontrolled exploitation of nature's riches prevail, when the beautiful forests are depleted and the lovely rivers savagely invaded and put to monetary use, then terrible monsters waken. Crawford's angry rejection of obsessive greed and of the degrading system of rewards that has been at work throughout the text, culminates here with her use of epic imagery. Canadian nature becomes the scene of brutal primitive violence, and the horrendous age-old world's history of invasion, spoliation, and destruc-

tion, evoked with remarkable poetic economy, sends the reader's imagination recoiling with horror. A further parallel between Crawford and Chopin concerns the paradoxical representation of heroism in their texts because it raises the question of redemption interestingly linked with the Other, the finer side of the self. Joe dies a hero, as Canadian nature offers redemption at the cost of life. The American thief, who had sought regeneration in the Canadian wilderness through clearing and cultivating a patch of land, risks his own life to save another one and dies a Canadian death when crushed by the drive of logs. In the unreserved admiration felt by Sam and the police, there enters something that accepts Joe's newly won Canadian identity.

On the contrary, Kate Chopin, the feminist who knew the horror of slavery, sides with women and black people. Confronted with racism and slavery, both young mothers in Crawford and Chopin choose heroic deaths that reciprocally illuminate each other. The self-sacrificing death of Armand's black mother choosing obliteration from her son's affection in order to save her child from the opprobrium attached to the black race tragically redeems Désirée's gesture and reveals its true dimension as heroic love for her black baby. Here, as in most of her stories, Chopin denounces the great scandal of the South: sexism, racism and slavery. She denounces the age-old prejudice against women ("a preconceived judgment passed in advance") transmitted in Western culture through such myths as the Greek myth of Pandora or the Judeo-Christian myth of Eve, in which Woman is the cause of evil and is essentially guilty. And indeed, Armand immediately assumes Désirée is the guilty one. This is why he refuses to look at her, speak to her, or say goodbye: the victims of racism have no existence, as the text suggests of Armand's mother. Moreover, "Désirée's Baby," like "Extradited," plays on the word "shame" and the reversal of its meaning, from a personal painful emotion caused by consciousness of guilt to the general opprobrium of others. In other words, innocent Désirée feels shame; though guiltless, she is overcome by disgrace, and cannot go home, for the victims of racism have no home. "I am like a motherless child," the song says. In the agony of her despair, Désirée is lucid enough to envision the fate that awaits her black child after the death of her aged parents, and heroically, she sacrifices her own life and comfort to save her son from slavery. We do not know if Kate Chopin knew of the real event dramatized by Toni Morrison; at any rate, her story prefigures *Beloved* and Morrison's recent tragic novel, *A Mercy*. Therein, with the promise of education and a better life, a free Black mother gives her young daughter to a generous white planter, and pines for her lost child all her life, tragically unaware that the adolescent was sold as a slave by the heartless widow.

In spite of their apparent opposition, the endings of Crawford's and Chopin's texts show undeniable similarities. Just as Joe dies a Canadian death, victimized by the new forces of money that send the uncontrollable monstrous logs down the river, he is nevertheless regenerated by the selfless sacrifice of his life and by the generous love and respect the male community offers him. Joe is no longer a runaway thief but becomes a hero, even if he pays the ultimate price for this. With Chopin, Désirée dies an American slave mother's death. She is victimized by the iniquitous laws of slavery, of racism, and of sexism in the South. Although she is not a slave herself, she chooses the fate of her black child doomed by and to slavery. Her selfless sacrifice, at the price of a horrible death, is redeemed by the selfless love of a black mother.

The 19th-century narrative code of dramatic reversal at the end brings here unusual depth and shatters the reader into a new humanizing awareness. Both texts spring from the deadly chaos of Dark Arcadia –treacherous and cruel, yet also life-giving and creative – that associates death, heroism, and redemption with nature. What Frye writes of Canadian poets is also true of Southern writers: "Death is the one point at which man and nature really become identified; it is also, in a sense, the only event in which the genuinely heroic aspect of human life emerges" (33).

I will conclude with Roland Barthes, who taught so many readers how to read a text, by quoting from the review he wrote about Kristeva's *Semiotike* in 1970 for *La Quinzaine Littéraire*, under the title *L'Etrangère*, (both the Stranger and the Foreigner). There he captures what he saw as the unsettling impact of Kristeva's work. The greatness and true originality of the best writers from the South and Canada, I submit, come from a similar mental attitude, in which displacement becomes a form of power:

Kristeva changes the order/place of things, she always destroys the latest preconception, the one we thought could comfort us, the one we could be proud of. She subverts authority, the authority of monologic science and filiation. What she displaces is the already-said.

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IAN MACRAE

An Open Field of Possibility

*Reading Jack Hodgins' The Invention of the World
in Dialogue with the American South*

*There is a lot of west in my poems. A lot. The rain forest, the sound of the people's
heads, and the kind of interior music there is here on the coast.*
(bill bissett qtd. in Ricou 106)

*The task of the narrator is not an easy one, he said. He appears to be required to choose
his tale from among the many that are possible. But of course that is not the case. The
case is rather to make many of the one.* (Cormac McCarthy, *The Crossing* 155)

AN AMERICAN, HEMISPHERICAL FRAME

Literary and cultural traditions have never been self-contained or exclusively local, of course; early in the twenty-first century, that affinities exist between writers that transcend national languages and literatures is hardly a case that needs be made. My essay's twinned epigraphs toggle us between the local and the global, between regional music and wider narrative fields, and between poetry and prose, suggesting any number of questions. How has "the one" story, that of Euro-American foundings, or "foundational fictions" in the Americas, a colonial master narrative, been made into "many," that is, been narrated in different cultural, historical, and linguistic contexts? And what does it mean to read these stories comparatively, across national lines, by taking up a series of specific and discrepant texts across conventional boundaries of language, culture, and political jurisdiction? Is this, as Edward Said (1993) argues, a way of challenging provincialism, insularity, and "reductive nationalism," and of teasing out literary relations as they actually exist "on the ground"?

More specifically, and with respect to this volume's shared program, what are the relations of Canadian literature with literary cultures in the American South? Is there such a thing as an "inter-American" literature – a network of critical and creative cultures marked by similarity with critical difference? If so, what would such a thing look like, what can it tell us, and by which methods can it be made visible, and hence available to criticism? Can we ground this almost impossibly broad literary-critical category in particular regional

historicités, as in specific literary texts – that is, in both a politics and a poetics of the American (hemispherical) novel? How, in short, can bissett’s “rainforest,” which is also part of Jack Hodgins’ “interior music,” be brought into meaningful dialogue with writers and texts from an “American South” that, in this analysis at least, includes works from Brazil, Colombia, Cuba, and the United States?

This essay takes up Jack Hodgins’ early novel, *The Invention of the World* (1977), in pursuing these questions. A work in comparative literary history, it situates Hodgins’ work with respect to two locations of culture: the story of European-American “origins,” and how this theme has variously been constructed and dissembled in four canonical 20th-century American texts, by Euclides da Cunha, William Faulkner, Gabriel García Márquez, and Hodgins; and secondly, with regard to the question of literary inheritance, dialogue, or influence in the Americas, how these writers structure and strategize a sense of textual history in their works. This essay seeks to situate an accomplished Canadian text in a broader inter-American arena, and to bring *The Invention of the World* into dialogic relation with a series of inter-American “foundational fictions”: *Os Sertões* (*Rebellion in the Backlands*, 1902), *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), and *Cien años de soledad* (*One Hundred Years of Solitude*, 1967).

As the reader will by now be aware, this essay uses the adjective “American” in what Gustavo Pérez Firmat calls “its genuine, hemispheric sense” (2) – to extend not from sea to shining sea, but rather from pole to pole, and to speak of a paradoxical continuity in the fields of history, politics, and culture. This discourse of inter-American literary studies is both relatively new and increasingly well-established (see, for example Benítez-Rojo [1992], Chevigny and Laguardia [1986], Cowan and Humphries [1997], Fitz [1991], Moya and Saldívar [2003], Parkinson Zamora [1997], and Pérez Firmat [1990]). It is in this context that Earl E. Fitz articulates “a community of literary cultures related to each other by virtue of their origins, their sundry interrelationships, and their socio-political, artistic, and intellectual evolutions. Their very real differences notwithstanding, the nations of the New World share enough of a common history that they can legitimately be studied as a unit, as different manifestations of the Americanism or New Worldism that each represents” (xi).

In this essay, I take up a specific series of texts, from diverse linguistic and cultural traditions that provide representative stagings of my central concerns. I think we can read *Rebellion in the Backlands*, *Absalom, Absalom!*, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, and *The Invention of the World* as “foundational fictions”: synoptic creation stories of colonial and Creole cultures in

the Americas.¹ Djelal Kadir identifies this “quest for beginnings” as constitutive, “in a highly suggestive way,” of American discourse, its “paradoxical supreme fiction” (3). This is more or less the one, or the “same” story, the same larger structure and narrative mode – with critical differences, of course – which Euclides da Cunha tells, with Antônio Conselheiro, in *Rebellion in the Backlands*, which Faulkner tells, with Thomas Sutpen, in *Absalom, Absalom!*, and which García Márquez retells, with the Buendías in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, and which Hodgins retells (reinscribes, recontextualizes) with Donal Brendan Keneally (and then Maggie Kyle) in *The Invention of the World*.²

There is a conversation going on between these texts, manifesting itself in strong elements of internal allusion and complex echoing effects among scenes and speech types. This repetition with difference is far from mimetic; the dialogue is “real” in that each casts the others in new light. The same tightly-knit thematic complex is present – origins, genealogy, a tortured sense of the past, the entanglements of kinship. Each text tells of a charismatic founder seeking to start over again in what is only an apparently new world; of a people who seem innocent of history, which then appears overwhelming, and apparently “cursed”; of an anguished and insular founding community, in which the establishment of legitimate family, history, and community is perpetually threatened; and of a downstream redactor, archivist, or scribe compiling and annotating texts, editing and exhausting an archive of oral and written histories in search of interpretation (Quentin Compson, Melquíades, Strabo Becker, da Cunha himself).³

These are regional texts in an American tradition identified by Carlos J. Alonso (1990) in that they are set against the background of a specific geographic region, arise from a “persistent meditation on cultural autochthony,” treat the crisis of identity of Europeans in America, and purport “to represent synecdochically the entire culture of which they are merely a fragment” (Alonso 4). These writers combine intensely local elements with large-scale

¹ This appellation picks up on Doris Sommer’s work (1991) *Foundational Fictions*, but takes up where her texts leave off: these are 20th-century novels, not 19th-century romances. Other texts could be added to this list, of course, by Toni Morrison, Patrick Chamoiseau, João Guimarães Rosa, for example.

² For reasons of readerly access and familiarity, I will use English titles and translations in what follows.

³ The importance of the archive and the amanuensis in American literature derives from Roberto González Echevarría, *Myth and Archive* (1990), and will be discussed in more detail below.

Western myths and themes, and thereby transform their own “local backyard(s) into an image of the whole created universe” – as W. J. Keith once said of Jack Hodgins’ work (31).

THE ECSTASY OF INFLUENCE

This essay reads Hodgins’ novel with and against the critical and creative writings of a number of his important precursors, including those he explicitly acknowledges, including Faulkner and García Márquez, and those he might not (such as da Cunha, Oswald de Andrade, José Lezama Lima, Jorge Luis Borges). I aim with this reading to go beyond the direct, causal, or “genetic” links of literary influence, at least in the vulgar and anxious sense of writers in a struggle for supremacy, as made familiar by Harold Bloom. Partially as a result, this essay will follow what might seem a wandering path, in that after introducing Hodgins’ novel, a number of important figures, essays, and texts in early 20th-century Brazilian literature will be considered, before a “return,” by means of Faulkner’s and García Márquez’s well known novels, to Hodgins’ *The Invention of the World*. Given that no brief survey can do justice to the complexities of the assembled texts, and that this synoptic argument covers a fair bit of literary and cultural history, this essay will assume the reader’s basic familiarity with the works of Faulkner and García Márquez (in which their own close relation is most directly expressed⁴), and will concentrate on the texts that book-end the series in chronological terms, by Euclides da Cunha and Hodgins.

In Bloom’s *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973), the voice of the canonical strong poet holds such an overbearing presence that the present-day writer must resort to “creative misprision” – the necessary misreading of significant pre-texts – in order to forge a new expression. Hodgins’ anxiety is not a Bloomian one of agonistic and competitive influence, this essay suggests, but one of “origins,” in the sense put forward by Lois Parkinson Zamora in *The Usable Past* (1997): as a search for precursors, not their evasion or elision; a creative articulation of meaningful relationships, not a quest for utter originality.

⁴ As Parkinson Zamora has noted: “It is in *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Cien años de soledad* that Faulkner and García Márquez are most clearly aligned, for these novels are explorations of the history and myth of America” (“End of Innocence” 24).

Hodgins himself has addressed these subjects directly, particularly in his early years, when in response to critics trying to situate his work – its outlandish characters, and its outrageous inclusivity – he would observe that Vancouver Island is on the same coastline that runs “all the way down to the tip of South America” (*Beginnings* 47) and that this “coastline that goes past Vancouver and past my house goes right down past Fuentes’ Mexico and Vargas Llosa’s Peru and Márquez’s Colombia, and I don’t want to make too much of it but there is that connection which is as tangible as the CPR lines across Canada, as far as literature is concerned” (Hancock 52).

Growing up on Vancouver Island, Hodgins has said, “you’re faced with the choice of being influenced by nothing, and writing in a vacuum . . . or by deciding that all literature in the world is equally yours.” Hodgins recalls attending a lecture given by a British-born poet, who heaped scorn on “these ridiculous South American *things* that Canadian writers are writing”:

I wanted to scream out that if you had grown up in Canada, perhaps you’d realize that Jane Austen is every bit as foreign as García Márquez. And if you had grown up on the West Coast, you’d realize that all literatures were equally foreign. That South American literature is not one bit more foreign to me than British literature or American literature, or, almost, Ontario literature. And that’s not something I’ve had to rationalize, that’s perfectly natural. (Hancock 52)

This decision – to cut himself off from nothing, to see all of literature as “equally foreign” and therefore as equally one’s own – is a familiar tactic in American literary history, as we shall see.

The Invention of the World is a large, polyglot, often comic novel, written in multiple modes or narrative styles. The novel is broken into eight sections and a prologue, and follows no linear pattern, but rather hopscotches across time and geography, bringing together two principal narrative and genealogical lines – one male, one female; one going up, the other down; one descending into cataclysm, the other rising into a redemptive new beginning, in a section titled “Second Growth.” The novel’s title foregrounds its preoccupation with European beginnings in America, going so far as to recapitulate the title of Edmundo O’Gorman’s seminal interpretation of American history, *The Invention of America* (1958). It is as if Hodgins is clarifying the nature of the object under scrutiny in advance, so that it may be held up for critical examination: a homage that is also a critique.

In charting the beginnings of an Irish settlement on his imaginary equivalent of Vancouver Island, Hodgins brings much of this “equally foreign” literature conspicuously ashore. He narrates the beginnings of settler-colonial culture in the Americas in an overtly intertextual manner, drawing on

Biblical, classical, and Irish texts, and myths, combining these with oral histories into a heterogeneous, often hyperbolic whole. There are references to Finn MacCool, Cuchulain-Conchubar, *The Cattle Raid of Cooley*, and other heroes of Ireland's mythological tradition; to Genesis and Revelation, as to Eden, Moses, and the Promised Land; to Apuleius, Taurus-Europa and Persephone; to Shakespeare, Browning, Milton, and a host of others. The novel inscribes on a range of intertexts, perhaps too many to separate and catalogue, and does so in a hybrid mixing of influences, modes, and styles. Each intertext brings with it its own complex textual history, and is often itself an ancient amalgam of history and legend. Hodgins' radical inclusivity incorporates a range of textualized histories that have contributed to a specific regional culture, while searching for – not evading – significant precursors and relations. The resultant text affords no possibility of any objective presentation of the founding, or origin, of Donal Keneally's utopian community called "Revelations Colony of Truth."

Language itself is a basic problem for settler cultures in the Americas, and in this novel, Hodgins takes on the primary and double-edged problem of writing "in a European language about realities never seen in Europe before" (González Echevarría, *Alejo Carpentier* 26). On the one hand, a range of writers and critics have framed the European settler-colonial languages as imported, amnesiac, eager to settle, still struggling to find the proper names for things. The historic and on-going violence that marks the European-American founding undermines the settler's sense of self and place, and troubles the question of rights and title to land as to language. For the Cuban critic and novelist José Lezama Lima: "Therein lies the gist of the American's terrible complex: the belief that his expression is not accomplished form, but rather a problem, something to be resolved" (qtd. in Alonso 1). On the other hand, there is "an elation which sees everything as renewed," as the St. Lucian poet, Derek Walcott, characterizes the hemispherical writer's lot: "There is a force of exultation, a celebration of luck, when a writer finds himself a witness to the early morning of a culture that is defining itself, branch by branch, leaf by leaf, in that self-defining dawn" (38, 79).

Hodgins' response to these historical conditions, as we have seen, is to address all of literature as if it were "equally foreign" and hence equally one's own. A number of prominent American commentators have come to remarkably similar conclusions. T.S. Eliot, in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," reasoned that "the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the litera-

ture of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order" (431). As Borges, in "The Argentine Writer and Tradition," working downstream from Eliot, explains: "I have observed that in our country, precisely because it is a new country, we have a great sense of time. . . . I believe our tradition is all of Western culture, and I also believe we have a right to this tradition" (183-84). The call in both cases is to hold no truck with an anxiety of influence – a fraught and competitive bid against exalted forebears for remembrance, a struggle "suggesting unjust imprisonment" and pursuit of an "unhappy freedom" (Bloom *xiii*) – but rather to move toward a genuine, "perfectly natural" feeling for "the whole of literature," even "the universe."⁵ The process is akin to what Jonathan Lethem has more recently called the "ecstasy of influence" (2011), a grand and mongrelized acceptance of widespread currents and borrowings in the fields of identity and culture. As Borges emphasized to his fellow Argentine writers: "I repeat that we must not be afraid; we must believe the universe is our birthright and try out every subject" (185).

In the 1920s in Brazil, Oswald de Andrade and the innovators of Brazilian Modernismo adopted a related, non-coincidentally convergent approach, for what I argue are similar historical and decidedly *American* reasons: not a denial of tradition, nor a sense of stifled belatedness, but a concerted incorporation of prior writers, methods, and modes. Andrade displaced any purported anxiety of influence with celebration, satire, humor and irony, making clear his method and intentions in his seminal essay, "The Anthropophagite Manifesto," published in 1928: "Only anthro-pophagy unites us. Socially. Economically. Philosophically. . . . The transformation of taboo in totem. Anthropophagy" (96-8).

Influenced by Cubism and Surrealism, and by the European vanguard movements more generally, this is a tongue-in-cheek call for an exhaustive inclusivity: both Amerindian and European, classic and contemporaneous, outlandishly comic and deadly serious at the same time. The anthropophagite

⁵ Eliot's call to incorporate the literature of one's own country into a "simultaneous order," much like Borges' subscription to "Western culture," pays little attention to indigenous literatures of the Americas. Similarly, indigenous traditions circulate largely outside the orbit of Hodgins' invented world. The exception is the section involving Julius Champney, who is watched by an "old Indian woman" as he climbs the hill in town to a totem pole at the top, thinking of old Haida raiding parties, and hearing the voices of executed indigenous people shrilling in his head. In 1853, two indigenous men were hanged near Nanaimo for the killing of Hudson's Bay Company shepherd Peter Brown.

ethic and aesthetic is summarized in Andrade's aphorism, written in the original in English: "Tupi or not Tupi: that is the question."⁶ This witty, pithy, instructive saying celebrates and pokes fun at Shakespeare and the Americas both, drawing upon Brazilian indigenous traditions (the Tupinambá) and the canonically European, to rework a familiar formula into a new formulation that is the same as the old one – only different, that is, Americanized.

The "answer" to the problem of influence in the Americas for Andrade is that all that has gone before must be swallowed whole, digested, recombined into a new body, and into new aesthetic formulas that express a New World culture, identity, and aesthetic: hybrid, mongrel, built of multiple pasts (including Amerindian), unashamed by new experience or by new forms of expression, by rainforests or hybrid complexions. Cannibalism functions here as a metaphor for the desire to incorporate otherness in constituting a new, distinctly American corpus. Hodgins' method in *The Invention of the World* is not dissimilar, drawing explicitly and comprehensively from a range of traditions in order to form a new, polyglot American expression.

REBELLION IN THE BACKLANDS (*OS SERTÕES*)

With this expansive – yet for Hodgins "tangible" and "perfectly natural" – notion of the American South in mind, I would like to consider the backlands or *os sertões* of northeastern Brazil in greater detail, and in particular a crucial text that maps this terrain, by Euclides da Cunha. The backlands is a large, dry, scarified region subject to prolonged and periodic drought, where, in 1871, a charismatic preacher named Antônio Conselheiro began to wander. He would pause to preach in every town and rebuild wells, churches, and graveyards, thereby tending to the essential trinity of life, faith, and the afterlife. He soon began to accumulate followers as others might gather alms. When his flock grew larger than many of the small regional crossroads he visited, Conselheiro ("the Counselor"), founded a village on the site of an abandoned ranch named Canudos, and renamed it Belo Monte, "Mount

⁶ The Tupinambá were living around Rio de Janeiro and widely extended regions at the time of European arrival. Treated in Jean de Léry's early text, *History of a Voyage to the Land of Brazil, Otherwise Called America*, the Tupi's ceremonial anthropophagy helped reify the myth of Amerindian cannibalism, the trope celebrated by Andrade. De Léry's wonderful book is the little "breviary" which Claude Lévi-Strauss carried in his pocket when he arrived in Brazil; see his *Tristes Tropiques* (1955).

Beautiful” (1893-1897).⁷ Nestled in a bend in the Rio Vaza-Barris and surrounded by water on three sides, the location provided both a sound defensive position and a rich alluvial plain. The land itself was decent, the economy in better straits than in surrounding towns, and here the backlanders, known as *sertanejos*, managed to evade the political strongman and the oppressive, landowning oligarch which dominated the backlands’ political economy. In Canudos, they enjoyed an autonomy which elsewhere they lacked.

By all accounts, Canudos provided a viable and relatively dignified existence to those who lived there, and soon enough, some 35,000 people did. The plantation grew quickly to become a town one-tenth the size of São Paulo, the second largest city in the state of Bahia and a newly important regional hub. Canudos came to be seen as a communitarian realm set apart from the state, and an anti-Republic, in the eyes of law-makers on the coast and to the south. Such a sizeable migration was bound to affect the region and to upset the status quo. The landowning class, already facing large-scale emigration, found themselves without the cheap supply of abundant labour upon which their agricultural system of sugarcane-producing *fazendas* had come to depend. Regional political bosses, accustomed to delivering mass votes *en bloc* to Republican officials in return for political favours, had lost their means to programmatic ascension. The local churches emptied when O Conselheiro appeared. This eccentric proliferation of the paths to faith and the means of production was bad for business as usual; the coastal, urbanized elites decided that Canudos had to be crushed.

Euclides da Cunha, a writer, journalist and intellectual, was embedded with the third military expedition for *O Estado de São Paulo* and stayed on to witness the fourth and final assault on Canudos. The resistance of the desert-hardened backlanders was fierce, however, and such was the gulf between the lives of these people and the government’s conception of them that the only viable solution to the problem of their resistance proved to be conspiracy: international agitators must be at work on Brazilian soil, fomenting dissent against the nascent Republic. The internal debates are beyond the scope of this essay, in which my point, as da Cunha took pains to make clear, is that the Republican leaders knew not the backlands or its people: “We were not acquainted with this society; it was not possible for us to have been acquainted with it” (161). And so the coastal elite “did what all intellectuals do when they fail to understand something: they invented a theory,” as Mario

⁷ For a thorough English-language history of Canudos, see Levine, *Vale of Tears* (1992).

Vargas Llosa explains (134): foreigners must be responsible for this transgression against the state, and the “rebellion” must be crushed. Da Cunha’s text is the story of this invention, of its catastrophic effects on Canudos, which was razed, and of the dawning realization that the theory his society has invented to explain itself to itself is in fact a fiction, one that is unable to comprehend the actual conditions of backlands’ life and culture.

After the war, troubled by what he had seen, da Cunha wrote *Os Sertões* in order to explain the massacre, which was also to decipher the foundation and constitution of his country. Published in 1902, and translated by Samuel Putnam as *Rebellion in the Backlands* in 1942, this is a hybrid text, a polyglot’s masterpiece, not only a superb piece of journalism and military history, but also a treatise on the geography, geology, climatology and anthropology of the backlands region (Kadir 1986). This is a text with a totalizing impulse: to comprehensively describe and exhaust a world. A phalanx of authors and theories is cited directly, as works of ethnology, history, folklore, psychiatry, neurology and sociology, not to mention meteorology, hydrology, geology, botany, and zoology, are incorporated into an omnivorous, burgeoning form. It is an excessive corpus that refuses to be synthesized or adequately reconciled. As Kadir (1986) explains, *Os Sertões* ends famously, in the “intellectual catastrophe” of ellipses, with the author admitting that the entire complex needs another interpreter, another approach, another theory to solve the problem of national formation in the Americas. Backlands’ culture, a distinctly American mix of Native Indian, African, and European, cannot be interpreted by means of any number of theories imported from abroad. It is the lacuna signified by these ellipses that Oswald de Andrade aims to fill with his theory of anthropophagy, an early form of an ecstatic relation to influence in the Americas, which da Cunha’s text also explicitly practices.

The Cuban Lezama Lima, in a series of five lectures delivered in Havana in January 1957 and published as *La expresión americana* (*American Expression*) in 1959, identified this hyperbolic heteroglossia as the characteristically anxious American strategy of “no rechazar”: “the non-negation, non-rejection of every discourse, including that of the colonizer” (Levinson 52). As Brett Levinson (1993) explains, this aesthetic of abundance is also a discourse of need, of absence and of desperation, one that reflects the alienation and uncertainty of a strange people in a land that was new only unto them. It is a style that for Lezama Lima is uniquely American in the way that it “inherits,” through translation and transformation, the hegemonic European corpus in a manner that is not strictly oppositional, nor that is “easy” and without resistance. Rather, Lezama Lima’s American expression works to self-consciously fragment and recombine the shards of colonial culture into new –

and newly Americanized – aesthetic formulas. This approach to literary history is decidedly eccentric, “in the sense of decentered, moving out or away from a center” (Parkinson Zamora, “Magical Ruins” 82). It is both subversive, in that it destabilizes the colonial inheritance, and self-doubting, in that it proffers no local discourses (save the the outrageously amalgamated) to interpret local conditions. It is a way of Americanizing an imported corpus, of bringing together the tensions and contradictions of a heterogeneous history that cannot easily be reconciled.

I think we can see that William Faulkner’s rhetorical profusion in *Absalom, Absalom!* is exemplary in this regard. So too is the language of Gabriel García Márquez in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, which appears to incorporate all of prior history, as is that of Hodgins’ in *The Invention of the World* – though few can surpass the anxious extremes of inclusivity to which Euclides da Cunha aspires.

FOUNDATIONAL FICTIONS IN THE AMERICAS

We remain a long way from Canadian literature, however, and a long way from Hodgins’s rainforest; and there seems to be no direct, genetic, or causal link between *Rebellion in the Backlands* and the work this essay remains most interested in, Hodgins’s *Invention of the World*. Paradoxically enough, this is precisely my point. The acausal or indirect relationship between Hodgins and da Cunha, or between da Cunha and Faulkner, is important to my argument in that it provides a means to transcend any narrow notion of a national, linguistic, or influence-oriented poetics and enables us to ground the imaginative structures of an inter-American novelistic series in the specificities of regional historical experience. In *Rebellion in the Backlands*, the entire historical and cultural ensemble of American foundational fictions is taken up and transmuted into literary form. The text is fundamental to my argument in that it bridges these strictly literary and social-historical concerns.

Faulkner poses another, related answer to the problems of European-American foundings, and of Euro-American literary dialogue, in *Absalom, Absalom!* In this text, characters and events are enfolded into a range of mythological and literary topologies (the Old Testament, Shakespeare, Greek and Latin classics, even the Arabian Nights [134]), lending the novel additional resonance and meaning extending far beyond the region, as if the entire European and classical inheritance were brought to bear. Thus Charles Bon and Henry Sutpen are figured as the biblical Absalom and Ammon, in a

struggle to the death over a sister, but also Polyneices and Eteocles, sons of the cursed family of Oedipus (Lind 23), with Sutpen as David, and so on. The various voices of the text align themselves with different traditions – Miss Rosa: doom-laden, vituperative, permeated with Judeo-Christian imagery and an Old Testament style fury; Mr. Compson: more distanced, steeped in the Greek classics, perversely insistent on misconstruing the past, his classicism hinting at decadence, nostalgia, and a denial of the present; Shreve: gruff, laconic, at an even greater distance from historical events, a facilitator who coaxes insight and meaning from his conflicted partner (Wadlington 1987). At the centre of the text is Quentin, of course: emotional, overwhelmed by history, drawn dangerously to the past, given to extrapolating the meaning of Sutpen's rise and fall to the level of a Southern history. Quentin is home to a "commonwealth" of voices. He struggles, and fails, to interpret and reconcile the past.

Absalom, Absalom! responds to an anxiety of origins, to this challenge posed by American literary history, with a startlingly heterogeneous, polyphonic text "traversed by many voices" (Ross 81). Faulkner's "solution" is akin to da Cunha's: the past cannot be deciphered by the novel's emplotted (diegetic) narrators, and Quentin commits suicide at Harvard – another intellectual and human catastrophe – some six months later in narrated time, in *The Sound and the Fury* (1929).

García Márquez takes up a similar series of questions with a related set of techniques in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. History here is represented above all in Melquíades' room, an archive untouched by time, and seen, in the right light and by certain eyes, as never dirty – an abode in which the entropy which undoes the Buendía line is resisted. Melquíades has encoded his history of the family in Sanskrit, his "*lengua materna*" (557), which signifies a Proto-Indo-European language which underlies Hellenic, Latin, Germanic and Celtic traditions, and by extension all of European history, and the Euro-American (colonial) inheritance.⁸ All of Macondo's history is contained in Melquíades' parchments, which "had concentrated a century of daily episodes in such a way that they coexisted in one instant" (382). The figure is of a Borgesian Aleph – a totalized, spatialized cosmos, "the only place on earth where all places are seen from every angle, each standing clear, without any confusion or blending" (Borges 23) – transposed onto a temporal plane. It is an image of Borges' American maxim, "the universe is

⁸ See, for example, Sylvain Auroux, *History of the Language of Sciences* (2000), and Robert Beekes, *Comparative Indo-European Linguistics* (1995).

our birthright,” with all of history transparent, accessible, and easily at hand. When Aureliano Babilonia deciphers the text of Melquíades’ history, he enters into a “true present,” in which his reading and being coincide. This is a forbidden knowledge that brings about the end of both house and line.

What is worth emphasizing in the context of Hodgins’ dialogue with the American South is the extent to which his novel accords with, but also innovates or registers difference against, the series of texts to which he responds. As a review of Hodgins’ earlier, unpublished work (1983) makes clear, and as he has been generous to acknowledge, his debt to both Faulkner and García Márquez is substantial (see, for example, Jeffrey 1989, Fink 1985, New 1996).⁹ *The Invention of the World* takes up and deploys these novels by Faulkner and García Márquez as models, a series of speech types, structures, and strategies, that can be creatively re-deployed in a new context, or cannibalized in the creation of his own novelistic “world.” *The Invention of the World* ironically incorporates the prophetic, oracular modes of creation myths, the dead, monotonic seriousness of historical epics (and of Faulkner); the hyperbolic accounts of legend, the “magical” instances of amnesia of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*; and the apocalyptic and eschatological modes of each. Hodgins’ novel takes up the syntax and organizing principles (exodus, quest, journey, mythological birth, cataclysmic battle, etc.) of these foundational fictions, and turns the form and style of his models into what Bakhtin (1981) has called “a codifiable discourse,” one that can then be inverted, doubled, “monkey’d with” – to use one of Hodgins’ characteristic phrases (Struthers 184). *Invention* ironizes and pokes fun at *Absalom, Absalom!* and *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, while at the same time incorporating their structures and organizing principles; the novel pays an explicit homage while instituting a critical distance. Hodgins’ *Invention*, like these other works, is a suitably specious foundational fiction – pleasing, plausible, but also intentionally misleading and fallacious – in that this quest for origins, to begin again in the Americas, is always already an impossible search.

BIBLICAL FORM

Os Sertões traces the rise of Canudos from its inception as a founding village with communitarian promise to its fall as a city of guerrilla warriors destroyed in the revelation of an absolute apocalypse. The text begins where

⁹ “Faulkner . . . was and is my great hero,” says Jack Hodgins (Hancock 51), while García Márquez addressed Faulkner as “mi maestro” in his Nobel speech.

time begins, quite literally, with a geological exposition of the history of the earth; and it ends where time ends, again quite literally, at least for Conselheiro and his followers, in absolute destruction. The transformation within the book is from a promised land into its opposite, an inferno, or from Genesis to Apocalypse; this is the Bible's "familiar model" or ideal form (Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending* 6). This too is the familiar form deployed by Faulkner and García Márquez in their own foundational fictions, which is in turn doubled in Hodgins' own creation story, as discussed below.

These four texts are founded upon a utopian design and written in an apocalyptic mode, with the retrospective glance of a totalizing history; they comprehensively describe and exhaust a world, and chart its course from beginning to end. These are "spiritual encyclopedias," in Kermode's phrase, comprehensive maps and guides to a specific region, and "behind all of them is a Bible, thought of as complete and authoritative, a world-book credited with the power to explain everything: a key to creation" (Kermode, *An Appetite for Poetry* 216). Da Cunha, like Faulkner, simply inverts the normally positive valence of the Judeo-Christian creation story, turning the backlands into the site of anti-creation, with Conselheiro as paradigmatic "Anti-Christ" (242): "One has but to imagine a buffoon maddened with a vision of the Apocalypse" (221).¹⁰

Faulkner and García Márquez organize their foundational fictions around a founding family; as in the Book of Genesis, genealogy and genesis, or beginnings and begettings, are indissolubly linked (Fokkelman 1987). Genealogy, encoded in the biblical keyword *toledot*, functions as a metaphor for both biological and cultural continuity, reproduction, and survival.¹¹ In Genesis, as in Faulkner, García Márquez, and Hodgins, a complex regional history is schematized as genealogical concatenation, and the concern remains with the people who were there at the beginning, the line they engender, the questions of primogeniture and continuation which surround it. The stories of these founding families – the Sutpens, Buendías, Donal Keneally and his brood, and later Maggie Kyle – correspond to the profounder historicities of their respective regions.¹²

¹⁰ "Imagine-se um bufão arrebatado numa visão do Apocalipse" (133).

¹¹ As Gerald Martin comments of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*: "If we take the term *estirpe* – stock, lineage – literally, we have merely been lured into the same ideological misreading as the characters themselves: it is a historical era that is over, not a biological line" (106).

¹² Antônio Conselheiro was also considered the "father" of his flock, and da Cunha writes of him as the head of a grotesque, deformed family.

Unlike *Absalom, Absalom!*, or *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, or even da Cunha's work, for that matter, Hodgins' is a tale of two families, two genealogies, two founding figures, two beginnings and two ends. The parallel narratives unfold some sixty to eighty years apart in time, but converge in space, in the same house, "The House of Revelations." This is the headquarters of Keneally's millennial, Eden-seeking commune, which is later bought by Maggie Kyle – symbolic matriarch of the second line – and renamed "Revelations Trailer Park." It is a parody of both Eden and apocalypse and a clear index of the second line's fall from quasi-sacred to profane narration.

Donal Brendan Keneally is the novel's founding patriarch, a master orator and landscape architect, a wellspring of local skill and technique. He is named Brendan after the Irish Saint, for his mother dreamed that he would travel to America. He is a hypnotist and master conjurer," a "villain, god, demon, magician, con-man" of uncertain paternity (343), who deceives an entire Irish village and leads them on an ill-fated quest to found a New World Eden, in a section of the novel unequivocally titled "The Eden Swindle." Keneally ruins all the lives he touches and leaves those downstream from him obsessed with and agonizing over his meaning. Yet he retains the prestige of the origin, as in the biblical covenant: he was there at the beginning, and his story makes all other stories possible. An anti-Christ with a dark design, the "imploded star" at the center of this text (364), the principal actor in an outlandishly inverted Judeo-Christian creation story, Keneally is this novel's Sutpen.

In marked contrast, Maggie Kyle is a thrice-married woman from a dead-end bush town whose children and partners have abandoned her. She is surrounded, in the present-tense of the novel's telling, by an assorted cast known as Kyle's Kooks or Krazies. Maggie's "new pioneers" form an imperfect yet functional community; she "could never find another group so sure to make her feel that this was the way for thing to be" (46). They are her "family," in a new configuration that proves meaningful: "This was what she wanted for herself, she said, a solid base from which to rise" (46). Neither of the two "families" in this novel (Keneally styles himself "Father" of an extended family) is traditionally or biologically affiliated: one is bonded in fear and blind faith, the other is functional if non-biological.

The two charismatic founders are not linked directly, through action or plot, and hold no conversation together (Keneally dies before Maggie is born). The coexistence of different periods within the novel poses a technical problem for Hodgins: how to link these sections so that the text retains its coherence as an architectonic whole. *The Invention of the World* asks that textual relationships be considered not in terms of the unities or continuities

of plot or character or chronology, but rather with respect to the repetition of theme, scene and incident, the locus of place and not the unbroken flow of time. This is a novel that contains its own antitype, an opposite and contradictory saga; the two founders are integrated into networks of community and events that eccentrically repeat, overlap, and echo one another. Parallels are extensively woven, such that a pattern of typological repetition with significant difference is structurally encoded within the novel's doubled form. This doubling entails an emphasis on amplification, reverberation, radiation, eccentricity, irregularity, adjacency, and play, to borrow terms from Said (1993), and may be the novel's most potent innovation within the context of Hodgins' dialogue with the American South. Maggie's life and quest cannot be understood without the balance and relief provided by the mythical, Edenic longings, the collective fears of an earlier community that are buried in Keneally's cataclysmic end.

Keneally's foundational story, historically the first, articulates the mythical origin and the Genesis-to-Apocalypse biblical superstructure associated with da Cunha, Faulkner, and García Márquez. The second founding, Maggie's, rather than carrying epic and patriarchal cadences, is prosaic, quotidian, lived, human, and profane. It is a repetition with significant difference, a return with a new intention and method. The formulation closes off an American obsession with *origins* – passive, quasi-mythical, sacred, “useful for veneration but not for work” (Said 1975) – and gives way to Maggie's *beginnings*: fragmented, discontinuous, multiple, lived, and human. The first impulse is homogenizing, nationalistic, patriarchal, vertical, authoritarian. The second is plural, diverse, dissembling, and marked by the horizontal bonds of a different, and in this case deeper, fraternity.

THE ARCHIVE IN AMERICAN FICTION

The two discontinuous lines in Hodgins' novel cohere above all in the figure of Strabo Becker, an amateur historian and writer, who is researching a book about Keneally and his alleged crimes. We encounter Becker in the short Prologue in his job as a ferryman, which foregrounds the fact that we are on an island, a space apart, and that he will be our guide. We may picture him in his cabin, surrounded by “scrapbooks and shoeboxes of newspaper clippings and cardboard boxes of old photographs . . . crates of cassette tapes . . . dozens of notebooks . . . he thinks that what he has here is at least the equivalent of all that exists outside his walls” (9). This is his “gathered hoard,” a “confusion of tales and lies and protests and legends and exaggerations” (10), a locus of false equivalences. More aptly still, it is a figure of the novel's

archive, in the sense put forward by Roberto González Echevarría in *Myth and Archive* (1990). This is the novel's source, a fragmented, heterogeneous, discontinuous, and contradictory "chaos" of reports, memories, newspaper clippings, and incidents, which Becker will analyze, interpret, and obsess over:

Becker the caretaker-god sits deep into night, every night, in his nest of deliberate clutter. He touches, he listens, he reads, he worries. He will absorb all this chaos, he will confront it and absorb it, and eventually he will begin to tell, and by telling release it, make it finally his own. (11)

There is a kind of "active memory" contained in Becker's fragments, a "repository of narrative possibilities," a record of the "variety of beginnings at the origin" (González Echevarría, *Myth and Archive* 2, 4). Becker (and behind him, Hodgins) deploys this figurative archive in an American context to create his own precursors and traditions, as a sum total of the local, historical past. These are the voices of the community – those who were there, who remember or were affected by Keneally. Their memories, and the oral history which recounts them, in this sense "authorizes" and underlies the novel, or at least Becker's telling of it. Rather than being content with merely channeling the canonical and inherited literary traditions (Irish, Greek, Hebrew, and so on), Hodgins extends his novel's retelling of a community's beginning on the west coast of Canada to include the spoken language, newspapers, and memories of local people. This is how he incorporates bissett's "rain forest, the sound of the people's heads, and the kind of interior music there is here on the coast."

The "Scrapbook" section lays bare these oral and written records. The fifth of the novel's nine sections, it is centrally-placed, a microcosm in structure and process of the whole. Compiled by Becker and belonging to him, the "Scrapbook" is presented in different typefaces, and contains newspaper articles, editorials, and letters to the editor, dated and undated fragments, photographs, a nursery rhyme, the transcriptions of tape-recorded conversations. Becker's archive is emphatically intertextual, polyglot, multi-voiced, even multi-media. It is a catalogue of conflicting accounts, memories and half-truths which mixes fact and legend and which compiles the voices of the community to generate multiform, contradictory, yet still revealing perspectives on Keneally. It is another, localized case of an excessive heteroglossia, a radical inclusivity that exemplifies the American need and anxiety of artists, in what Hodgins, in 1976, could still consider "unexplored territory," to create their own precursors and traditions and to forge a "usable past" (*The Usable Past* xii).

“Scrapbook” is the novel’s homage to oral tradition, to communal memory and a communitarian perspective. And yet, it is no simple paean to what David Jeffrey has termed the “island mind.” Accounts contradict each other; people are unwilling to face their memories; people lie and cheat and accuse and fabulate, they tell stories, make myth, evade the past – that is, they do the things that Hodgins’ people normally do. Becker includes a skeletal chronology to Keneally’s life at the start of “Scrapbook,” and the dates, in general, seem to hold. On closer inspection, however, the date given in Keneally’s originary myth – “In the beginning, in the first year of the century, the Revelations Colony of Truth arrived on its land on January the sixth” (149) – will not reconcile with Becker’s Scrapbook arrival date, which is 1899. In this case, Becker’s millennial impulse, part of an inherited tradition, has trumped historical accuracy, or so it would seem. Margaret Atwood, discussing her own novelistic reconstruction of history in *Alias Grace*, notes that human beings in the act of remembering “are subject to error, intentional or not, and to the very human desire to magnify a scandal, and to their own biases” (*In Search of Alias Grace* 32).

There will be no unmediated access to historical truth in this novel, in which even the mechanical intervention of the tape recorder proves unreliable, transmuting oral record into something else. As one informant tells Becker, “I just talk like me until I start talking into that machine and start thinking about what I’m saying, and then it doesn’t sound like me talking any more” (251). In this novel, notes Linda Hutcheon, “recording (like writing) distances and alienates” (57). An informant named Guthrie tells Becker: “You’re a fool and more than a fool if you believe one word anybody tells you about that Keneally. They’ll make it up, they’ll lie just to please you. . . .” Then another emphatically interjects: “Everybody knows Guthrie is a big goddam liar” (279; underlining in original). Virginia Scully shoos Becker out of her place saying: “You’re wasting your time with all this, because the best you can hope for is ignorance and prejudice. None of us will ever know what really went on in that place” (288). The conflicting accounts emphasize distortion, exaggeration, falsity, duplicity, concealed motives and strange intentions: the origin of the Colony remains undefined, even undefinable. Becker’s trove of documents cannot uncover the origin of the Colony, and he must explicitly fictionalize in order to fill this void in his book, that is, to invent the world.

What Becker’s archive in fact reveals is that it contains no secret history except its own fragmented mediation, its constraints, and its limits. Becker constructs his own fictive project, the novel we are reading, from the ruin of this collective fiction. The “Scrapbook” section lays bare the process by

which historical event is transmuted into myth, and by which Keneally has been transformed into a fictional construction, through the community's willingness to grant him a transcendent, mythical value – to believe in a God. Once this mythical belief in origins is dispersed, Maggie Kyle's fresh project is set to begin again.

The drama of Becker's writing goes largely unrepresented in the text, though it is its constitutive element. It is present only in the broadest outline, as an envelope of structure at the book's beginning and end: the first and last sections of *Invention* begin with identical offset phrases, "Becker tells you this." In this way the novel establishes and then disperses Becker's stable narrative voice. As he comes to realize the vanity of his quest and to suspect that his totalizing quest for a comprehensive knowledge is bound to fail, he attains a knowledge painfully won by da Cunha and one that proved fatal for both Quentin Compson and Aureliano Babilonia. This transformation is at the core of the book's movement from (originary) myth to literature. In the end Becker releases Keneally's story, declaiming even the possibility of ownership:

Believe what you want, trust me or not, this story exists independently of both of us. Donal Keneally is dead. His story has returned to the air where I found it. It will never belong to me, for all my gathering and hoarding. (437)

Becker's realization of the indeterminacy of narrative and the fallacy of unmediated expression reveals a genuinely literary intention, in the sense that "literature finally comes into its own, and becomes authentic, when it discovers that the exalted status it claimed for its language was a myth" (de Man 14). It points to the fact that the thrust of *Invention* is anti-mythical, against counterfeits and conjured realities, origins and Edens. Becker's creation is arbitrary, artificial, and slowly becomes aware of itself as such. Eager to engage in the heroic feat of organizing the chaos, Becker learns that he has no access to any such thing, that the new start is always already history. The novel transforms "the story of that defeat into victory," dismantling "the central enabling delusion of Latin American writing: the notion that in the New World a new start can be made unfettered by history" (González Echevarría, *Myth and Archive* 4).

I would like to put "Latin" under a crude sort of erasure here, to include any number of texts written north of the forty-ninth parallel. Surely Becker's transformation is related to similar ones experienced by archival narrators in Carlos Fuentes' *Aura* (1962), Augusto Roa Bastos' *Yo, el Supremo* (1974), and Alejo Carpentier's *Los pasos perdidos* (1959). But what I have called his "archive" is also roughly analogous to the cassette tapes and notebooks

from which Professor Madham pieces together Robert Kroetsch's *Gone Indian* (1973), the drawings and chronicles from which Rudy Wiebe fashions *A Discovery of Strangers* (1994), and *The Histories* of Herodotus with which Michael Ondaatje both anchors and disperses narrative in *The English Patient* (1992).¹³ As Kroetsch explains, with the archival approach to writing and history, "A doubt about our ability to know invades the narrative. What we witness is the collapse, for North American eyes, of the meta-narrative that once went by the name Europe" (23). Part of my point in opening this dialogue with the American South is that neither Kroetsch's insights into "North" America, nor González Echevarría's into "Latin" America, are in need of this limiting modifier. In certain cases at least – Oswald de Andrade, Lezama Lima, Faulkner, da Cunha, Borges, Hodgins, García Márquez – we can begin to use the adjective "American" in hemispheric sense: to extend not from sea to shining sea, but from pole to pole, and to speak of a paradoxical continuity in the fields of history, politics, and culture.

TOWARD AN "OPEN FIELD"

Whereas *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is hardly a linear text, nor, for that matter, is *Absalom, Absalom!*. Hodgins takes the rupture of the linear and tightly knit novels of the realistic tradition to a further level of development, segregating the text into discrete units of time, geography, and narrative mode or genre. *Invention*'s fragmented sections suggest a vision of diversity and plurality, as horizontal relationships of pattern and eccentricity replace vertical relationships of filiation, legitimacy, and kinship. The structure proposes a concept of identity not as root, racinated, telluric, vertical, patriarchal, but as branching, extended, sideways, rhizomatic – and above all communal, mutually supported, thickly inter-woven. By a similar analysis, Hodgins' relationship with his significant precursors is not one of originality, but rather of difference marked by play, reverberation, radiation, amplification, and eccentricity. Such a handful of concepts, as put forward by Edward Said, implies a set of governing notions with respect to literary creativity and

¹³ One thinks also of the archives that Marian Engel's narrator searches through in *Bear* (1976), "with its yellowing paper and browning ink and maps that tended to shatter when they were unfolded" (12); the "boxes and boxes of snapshots and portraits; maps and letters; cablegrams and clippings from the papers" from which an anonymous amanuensis cobbles together Timothy Findley's *The Wars* (11); as well as the coiled birch bark that Oskar scribes with his goose quill in Douglas Glover's *The Life and Times of Captain N.* (1993).

influence that are entirely opposed to traditional, linear notions of filiation, and “completely modify a linear (vulgar) idea of ‘influence’ into an open field of possibility” (*Beginnings* 15).

“An open field of possibility.” Perhaps here is an apt way to categorize Jack Hodgins’ dialogue – and even the larger Canadian dialogue – with the literary cultures of the American South.

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WILLIAM V. DAVIS

Crisscrossing the Continent

From Black Mountain to Vancouver

*To read the universe as a palimpsest, from which one writing has been erased to make room
for another, and yet to find the one writing in the other, is to see history anew. . . .*
(Robert Duncan)

I

*. . . what is requisite is that man, in conjunction with other men, should merge himself in the
world as a historically concrete entity, so that, amid the universal homelessness, he may win
for himself a new home.* (Karl Jaspers)

Precisely in the middle of the last century, in 1950, a middle-aged American poet broke on the scene with an essay that helped to change the course of American and Canadian poetry. The poet was Charles Olson and the essay was called, and called for, “Projective Verse.”

In this essay, which has been described as “probably the most influential poetic manifesto ever written” (Malkoff 79), Olson, “the central figure of postmodern poetics” (Altieri 102), defined and described the kind of “improvisatory” and “postmodern” poetry that he felt was needed to reinvigorate poetry – and he clearly felt that poetry needed to be reinvigorated. Olson took clues from several poets who preceded him. In particular, he looked to the example of Ezra Pound and his *Cantos*, that long, free-verse treatise in which a spillage of heterogeneous words and ideas spew forth in a seemingly pell-mell rush of non-stop thought. In Pound, who had called for poets to “compose in the sequence of the musical phrase,” not in meters or with the metronome, and to give “direct treatment” of the “thing” (3), Olson found a clear example of what he wanted to do, indeed what he was already doing.

Olson’s other primary poetic source was William Carlos Williams, who had called for “No ideas but in things” (6). In Williams’s long poem *Paterson*, with its focus on a specific place, Paterson, New Jersey, and on a larger than life protagonist, Olson found a source for his own obsession with his hometown, Gloucester, Massachusetts, and for his own autobiographical larger than life protagonist, Maximus. In addition to these two established sources, Olson found other, contemporary support among a group of younger

poets, who quickly turned to him and to his poetic theses and proscriptions. Adopting a phrase from Robert Creeley, one of his disciples, who had proclaimed that “form is never more than an *extension* of content” (Butterick 79), Olson called for poems to get “rid of the lyrical interference of the individual ego” and “of the ‘subject’ and his soul.” These heavily subjective requirements were to be replaced by poems which were composed “by field” and based on the “breath” (*Collected Prose* 247, 239).¹ The whole process, Olson felt, might be “boiled down” to several statements, which both posited the position he advocated and called for the continuation of it throughout the poetic processes. These statements, Olson said, had been “pounded” into his head by Edward Dahlberg, the outspoken critic, who was an early mentor to Olson. The rather insistent prescriptions were: “ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION,” and each perception must “MOVE, INSTANTER, ON ANOTHER” (*CP* 240).

Olson’s essay attempted to reverse – and, indeed, quite literally to *reverse* – what poets had been doing for centuries, to set them a new task and point them in a way that led fruitfully forward. Olson argued that “a poem is energy transferred from where the poet got it . . . by way of the poem itself to . . . the reader.” It is a “high energy-construct,” what he called an “energy-discharge.” He argued that poetry, “if it is to go ahead, if it is to be of *essential* use,” “must . . . catch up and put into itself certain laws and possibilities of the breath, of the breathing of the man who writes as well as of his listenings.” In short, Olson’s goal in “Projective Verse” was to do several things: “to show what projective or OPEN verse” (which he also called “COMPOSITION BY FIELD”) is, “what it involves, in its act of composition, how, in distinction from the non-projective, it is accomplished,” and to “suggest a few ideas about what stance toward reality brings such verse into being, what that stance does, both to the poet and to his reader” (*CP* 239-40).

Stressing the syllable and the line as the “single intelligence” (*CP* 242) of a poem and acknowledging the need for the spontaneous and a lack of the

¹ Hereafter, all references to Olson’s *Collected Prose* will be included in the text, in parentheses, designated as *CP*. It might be worth noting here, however, that George Bowering and the *Tish* poets were to put another twist of emphasis on Creeley’s famous phrase. In *Craft Slices*, Bowering has described the circumstances in which he apparently first heard the phrase, with “content”, pronounced as “*content*” (14). Clearly it is intriguing to think of this word with both syllables emphasized.

logical, Olson described what he called the “two halves” of a poem as: “the HEAD, by way of the EAR, to the SYLLABLE” and “the HEART, by way of the BREATH, to the LINE” (*CP* 242).² In an “open poem” “every element . . . must be taken up as participants [sic] in the kinetic of the poem” (*CP* 243). And, thus, “composition by field” brought “into being an open verse as formal as the closed [yet] with all its traditional advantages” (*CP* 245) intact.

Olson coined the term “objectism” to synthesize the older terms Imagism, Objectivism and Projectivism. Although it might be debated whether Olson’s “objectism” (which is more traditionally known as “objectivism” to distinguish it from “subjectivism”) was not every bit as subjective as the “subjectivism” of those he criticized or opposed, he argued that it avoided “the lyrical interference of the individual as ego.” And he defined and described his “objectism” in terms of the “relation[ship] of man to experience,” which allowed man to access the “secrets objects share” and thus provided him with a means to take himself into “dimensions larger” than himself (*CP* 247). If “projective verse” is “driven hard enough” along the course Olson thought it “dictated,” he argued that it could again “carry much larger material than it has carried . . . since the Elizabethans” (*CP* 248). But he acknowledged that “we are only at its beginnings” (*CP* 248).

II

. . . a bard is to be commensurate with a people. . . . His spirit responds to his country’s
spirit. (Walt Whitman)

From these beginnings and from the larger than life influence of Charles Olson (who stood 6’ 8” tall and called himself Maximus and his major work, written over a twenty plus year period and running to more than 600 pages, *The Maximus Poems*) sprang a tradition that would extend throughout the United States and then quickly make its way to Canada. This tradition, especially as it impacted a group of young poets in Canada, has not yet been

² Many of Olson’s statements are not only arbitrary but arguably confusing, or at least inexplicit. As Louis Dudek, one of the *Tish* poets, said, “Whatever writing that ‘comes from the breath’ might mean, it is utterly confusing as a theory of metrics.” Even so, he argued that “Olson’s directives . . . released a number of young writers, gave them a sense of freedom, and pushed them to write in a certain way for a time.” And, thus, “‘Projective Verse’ created a definite school in Canadian poetry” (44-45).

documented in any definitive way – and I cannot hope to do that here. What I would like to suggest, however, is something of the trail that led from Charles Olson and the American poets who surrounded and were influenced by him to the Canadian *Tish* movement, which advocated for and illustrated in practice its American sources and which championed the poets associated with the Black Mountain School and its phenomenological philosophy.

Charles Olson was rector of the experimental Black Mountain College in North Carolina in the early 1950s and during his tenure there he invited Robert Creeley, Robert Duncan, Denise Levertov, and others to join him at Black Mountain. From this College and this “school” of poets, and especially through the person and the example of Robert Duncan, who was the primary conduit between Olson and Black Mountain, the “Tish” movement began.

If Olson was himself essentially an amateur phenomenologist and a potential mystic, as well as a powerful poet and an insistent mentor to all who came under his influence, Robert Duncan was perhaps Olson’s principal disciple and advocate. Duncan referred to himself as “a muse poet” (“Interview” n. p.), and he quickly became “American poetry’s occult priest” for the young Canadian poets (see Bowering, *Craft Slices* 34). Even more than Olson, Duncan was intrigued by mysticism and metaphysics, by cultivating what he called “the metaphorical ground of life,” and by exploring the “correspondence between inner being and outer world,” an arena that he felt created “a metaphysical aura” and which remained, for him, the authentic “sign of the poem” (qtd. in Allen 433). All of these ideas were attractive to his young Canadian disciples.

In *The Opening of the Field* (1960), a book with a suggestive title and one that contained several of what would come to be seen as his best and most important poems, Duncan detailed some key concepts of his philosophy. In “Often I am Permitted to Return to a Meadow,” he described the “return” indicated in his title as if it were “a given property of the mind” (*Selected Poems* 44).³ In “Poetry, a Natural Thing,” he called poetry “a spiritual urgency” that “feeds upon thought” (*SP* 53). And “A Poem Beginning with a Line by Pindar” (a section of which is dedicated to Olson) opens with the “god-step at the margins of thought” and it moves, through “magic” and

³ Hereafter, all references to Duncan’s *Selected Poems* will be included in the text, in parentheses, designated as *SP*.

an “accumulation of metaphor,” to a “dawn” and a “morning” that is “no-where” but that seems to be spinning out everywhere (*SP* 54-62).⁴

But Duncan perhaps put Olson’s theories into practice best in a poem called “The Continent,” the final poem in his volume *Roots and Branches*, a title which, for our purposes, is most suggestive, implying as it does on the one hand a root or source and, on the other, the growth that that source initiates. “The Continent” is a poem which suggested and detailed the very breath and extent of everything that Olson felt was needed, and what both Olson and Duncan had been calling for. In “The Continent” Duncan, conceiving of his theme as “a decorative frieze / out of earthly proportion to the page,” a theme needing “vast terms” to be accomplished, wrote: “The artist . . . works abundancies” (*Roots and Branches* 172).⁵ And this theme emerges in the poem itself (which I here freely adapt, and perhaps somewhat take out of context) “as if the very Day moved northward” (*RB* 174). And thus, “a continent / looms” (*RB* 175) and, “Time zone by time zone // across the continent dawn . . . comes” – until “the margins of the page flare forth” and “There’s only the one page,” “only / the one continent” (*RB* 173). Duncan’s “Continent” is a “port of / recall” (*RB* 173) – that is, both a return to awareness and a restorative, a means of restoration and/or a reestablishment; it allows for (or demands) new beginnings.

III

. . . in the care with words, a world occurs, made possible by that care. (Robert Creeley)

Duncan was the direct conduit between Black Mountain in America and British Columbia in Canada. But, before I turn to this literal connection and to Duncan’s significant influence on the young Canadian poets, let me briefly sketch the basic Canadian poetic scene at the middle of the 20th century. In his introduction to *Other Canadians* (1947), an anthology of the “new poetry” being produced in Canada between 1940 and 1946, John Sutherland described the “oedipus complex” (6) which had conspicuously held Canadian poets tied to British traditions and to British poets, so much so that it

⁴ In “Winter 1972. Vancouver,” one of the poems in his insistently autobiographical long poem *His Life* (2000), Bowering asks “Was Whitman right?” and then, “Was Duncan right?” The poem ends, “He makes a poem / ending with a word called Pindar” (59).

⁵ Hereafter, all references to Duncan’s *Roots and Branches* will be included in the text, in parentheses, designated as *RB*.

would have been “utter nonsense” (8) to suggest that there was any “tradition” in Canadian poetry itself at the time. Sutherland believed that it was time – and past time – for Canada “to grow up” (16), to assert itself. And he saw “abundant evidence that forces [were] at work from south of the border which must produce a drastic change” (17). He concluded that it seemed “quite apparent” the American example would “become more and more attractive to Canadian writers” (18).

Although Sutherland didn’t make any specific prophetic predictions, several young Canadian poets were perhaps even then looking to the south, and at least one professor was, too. In 1959, Warren Tallman, a professor at the University of British Columbia, invited Robert Duncan to give a reading at his home. This reading created considerable excitement and, as a result of its clear success, Tallman created a Festival of Contemporary Arts and invited Duncan back to inaugurate it.⁶ At that time, the early 1960s, interest in Tallman’s Festival (which by 1963 had also spawned the Vancouver Poetry Conference) grew quickly. The young Canadian poets, excited by the now regular visits of various American visiting bards – which by then included not only Duncan and Creeley, but Olson himself, as well as other well-known American poets, among them Allen Ginsberg – inspired another new and important mentor for the young Canadians, Robin Blaser, an American recently arrived in Vancouver. Like Olson and Duncan, Blaser became influential both through his criticism and with his long poem *The Holy Forest*, a poem he began in the 1950s and worked on throughout his life, a poem, like Olson’s *The Maximus Poems*, that remained incomplete at the time of Blaser’s death. Like Olson, and like Duncan and Creeley, Blaser was “committed to a poetry that bears witness to ‘What Is,’” and his work, like theirs, “unfolds,” as Nichols says, “as a phenomenology of perceptual experience.” Blaser, then, like Tallman, quickly became not only an important mentor but also a powerful influence on the young writers then congregating in Vancouver. And as a direct result of all of these influences, both the American sources and the Canadian support of those sources, several student poets at the University of British Columbia, among them George Bowering, Fred Wah and Frank Davey, decided to start a magazine-newsletter to showcase

⁶ Tallman would later bring a number of American poets to this Festival, among them another Black Mountain disciple of Olson’s, Robert Creeley.

the new work that they were doing, based on both their American and Canadian examples. They called this small magazine *Tish*. *Tish* was begun in 1961. It had the expressed purpose of only publishing poems “which it felt were written in the spirit of the Black Mountain poetic of projective verse” (Knight 7). The first nineteen monthly issues were published by the student poet-editors.⁷ Its influence – both positive and negative – created excitement and added new life to the Canadian literary scene. And the reverberations that *Tish* began can still be felt throughout Canadian literature, specifically in poetry, but in the other literary genres as well. Indeed, these reverberations reached eastward across Canada and then back and forth between Canada and the United States in an almost reciprocal interchange. As one critic, surveying Canadian poetry, has rightly said, “the energy, imagination, and inventiveness of the 1960s and 1970s, although less explosive [than the American], made Canadian writing some of the most significant and innovative in the Americas” (Boughn 125).

IV

We published Tish from the fall of 1961 till the summer of 1963, when we were schoolchildren at UBC. (George Bowering)

According to one popular source, the word *Tish* “was intended both to imitate the breath sound and (because these young poets saw themselves as artistic rebels who rejected the discreet romanticism of conventional Canadian lyrics) also to resonate scatologically” because, as Duncan and his young disciples believed, even any ordinary thing might be a suitable subject of a poem. And even though the *Tish* poets were “attacked by some critics at the time as unpatriotic, in that they adapted their poetics from conventions current in the United States, the *Tish* Group, over subsequent decades, came to be hailed as innovators in technique and the forerunners of a postmodern sensibility in Canada” (New n.p.).

Bowering himself has described the beginnings of the *Tish* movement and debunked the legends that have grown up around it on several occasions. In 1985, he wrote: “Bursting with our information and joy [in the early 1960s], we said what is there to do but begin a poetry newsletter, fill it with our poems and especially poetics. We wanted to make statements. Tallman said

⁷ The journal itself, under other editors, continued to exist until 1969.

go slow, you've got an apprenticeship to serve. You've got orders to serve, said Duncan, go ahead. He was there the night we made our decision to print and distribute [it] gratis [and] he gave our newsletter its name on the spot." Bowering added: "I have in the past decade heard many fanciful notions about the origin of the name. I even read that one Ontario journalist-poet said that it was "Shit" spelled backward. I would like to argue that it is "Hsit" spelled backward. The real truth is that the name was suggested to us by Mary Roberts Rinehart, who was, in 1961, giving us a series of lectures on Percussive Verse in Warren Tallman's living-room. . . . The name of the magazine was really an acronym, standing for Truth Is Sure Heavy, the title of a 1961 poem by the Okanagan Falls Brown Mountain [a name the young Canadians gave to themselves early on, one perhaps influenced by the American Black Mountain group] poet, Fred W[ah]. . . . What started in 1961 as a small regional poetry movement is now a seemingly unstoppable raid on the Canadian poetry sensibility" (*Craft Slices* 31, 15). And, in 1993, Bowering added even more detail: "We were, around 1961, a crew of young poets who created what Canadian-literature professors would call the Tish Movement. As far as we could see, Charles Olson was the main US American poet. . . . [T]he geography, history, and economics of Vancouver became the grid of our poetry. . . . Charles Olson, Robert Duncan, Denise Levertov, and Robert Creeley were important to us. . . . [T]hey are the history of the New World for us" ("Alphabiography" 309-10). It might, however, have been the case, as Hartley has said, that Bowering and the other *Tish* poets "embraced Olson's poetics in part because it advocated what they needed to do anyway: come to their own understanding of a place" (100).

The most definitive collection of essays on the *Tish* group is *The Writing Life: Historical & Critical Views of the Tish Movement*, edited by C. H. Gervais. In his Preface, Gervais called the *Tish* poets "the most cohesive writing movement in Canada" (7), and he credited them with the creation of a "big moment in Canadian literary history" (8), a major shift in Canadian literary consciousness. Warren Tallman was initially responsible for bringing Duncan and the other American poets who were to become the models for the *Tish* movement to Canada; they brought along with them their American "language lessons," and the young Canadians picked them up quickly. Thus, this "new wave" of poetry moved across the country, west to east, and its influence became "undeniable and considerable" (9).

In his introduction to the volume, Frank Davey deals with the "facts" of the *Tish* movement in terms of the rumors, legends and superstitions surrounding it, most of which "survive mainly because of ignorance" (16).

Davey stresses the centrality of the Tish “concept of community” and the “act of writing” as a “poetics of dwelling” in line with the philosophical tradition of the “historical immersion” advocated by Karl Jaspers and the “existential indwelling” (*Wohnenlassen*) of Heidegger (19). Tish was “a movement that espoused a poetry of individual articulation, place, and community” (21), and its adherents saw themselves as the “servants of language and polis.” They shared the common goal of “making the grounds of life in their community ‘speak’ to all its inhabitants,” (20) and they saw themselves as an “inseparable part of the social, cultural, and political life of [their] culture” (22).

Several other essays in this collection are significant and relevant for the purposes of understanding the Tish movement. In “Wonder Merchants: Modernist Poetry in Vancouver During the 1960s,” Warren Tallman, after detailing the enthusiastic reception of and response to Duncan and Creeley during their visits to Vancouver by the young Canadian poets in the early 1960s, described the essential lessons that the Canadians learned from Olson, via Duncan in particular. Tallman defined these debts in terms of the distinction between perception, which attempts “to take form” by focusing attention on external objects and events, and proprioception, a term and a concept adopted from Olson (see Olson’s *Additional Prose* 17-21), which consists of a “sensibility” from “within” (31). Tallman further described the contrasts this way: “It’s snowing. The eyes of perception take the snow in *out there*. The eyes of proprioception become an inner threshing floor on which a snowman will be enacted. The perceptive writer sees himself in the midst of the surrounding world as object. The proprioceptive writer sees the surrounding world in the midst of himself as subject – ‘sensibility within the organism’” (31-32). Therefore, in a proprioceptive sentence, “*self* becomes the subject, the *writing* becomes all verb, and the *object* is life” (33). For Tallman, Bowering’s *Autobiology*, in which he “is able to regress to stories his body remembers,” tells “the story of his *life*” rather than “the *story* of his life” (57). It is, therefore, a perfect paradigm of the proprioceptive poem.

Frank Davey contributed four essays to the collection, two of which are relevant here. In “Anything But Reluctant,” Davey stressed *Tish*’s “determination to remake poetry [as] a natural and spontaneous human occupation and rid it of the obscure and obviously ‘poetic’ creations of would-be ‘artists’” (141). In “Introducing *Tish*,” Davey described the conception of *Tish* as “a record of on-going literary activity,” (150) “sparked” by Robert Duncan, whom he called, in referring to Duncan’s lectures in Vancouver in July of 1961, a “walking and talking university of verse lore” (151). Davey also

detailed the origin of the term “Tish” and the founding of the magazine. *Tish*, he said – in a comment that predates Bowering’s description of the origin of the term above – was modeled on Cid Corman’s *Origin* and LeRoi Jones and Diane Di Palma’s *The Floating Bear* (both American literary journals), and it took its anagrammatical title from Duncan’s references to the use of the word “shit.” Since the young Canadian poets felt that many modern Canadian poems were “synthetic” and “impersonally fashioned,” they simply “adopted the phonetic inversion suggested by Duncan himself” (153) and called their journal *Tish*. For Davey, *Tish*, which “began as a documentation of the energy gained in a particular place” (157-58), marked a turning-point in Canadian poetry.

V

I compose what I call myself from a world. . . . I pose a creative process in which I assemble me from the surrounding facts. . . . (Robert Duncan)

With this as background, I want to turn now to George Bowering, one of the young Canadian poets who heard Olson and Duncan read in Vancouver in the early 1960s, who studied with Creeley, and who took to heart the teachings of Blaser and Tallman, and was among the group, inspired by all of these influences, that funded the magazine *Tish*. Bowering, who has called himself “an ex-tisher who became a Canadian poet” (*Craft Slices* 100) has, since then, had a long, prolific and distinguished career, as a poet, a fiction writer, and as a critic.

Bowering was born in British Columbia and studied at the University of British Columbia, where Creeley became his Master’s degree thesis adviser. The first collection of poetry that Bowering published was called *Sticks & Stones*.⁸ The book, dedicated to Duncan, as “the man who teaches people to

⁸ The 1989 edition of *Sticks & Stones* indicates that the original publication of *Sticks & Stones* “has been one of Canada’s great literary mysteries for almost three decades. Rumoured to have been published . . . in 1962 . . . this book has remained hidden from public view while Bowering’s literary career blossomed. Here, for the first time, is the complete unabridged publication of *Sticks & Stones*” (back cover). This 1989 edition contains an “Endnote” by Roy Miki, the editor of Bowering’s *Selected Poems 1961-1992* (1993). In this Endnote, entitled “Was It a Real Book or Was It Just Made Up” (a reference to Creeley’s essay, “Was That A Real Poem, Or Did You Just Make It Up?”), Miki recounts the mysteries surrounding the original publication of the book, which he calls Bowering’s “most mysterious book” (55).

listen,” contained a preface by Creeley. Two of the poems make explicit references to the tradition we have been tracing. “Wrapped in Black” (25) refers to William Carlos Williams – whom Bowering once described as “the father I chose” (*Errata* 50) – waiting “for death” (Williams died in 1963), “lying in / dying / like a poet.” “Somnia” (16) refers to Olson and “the Maximus poems / making sense all seasons . . . / breaking April over eastern sky / from Gloucester to morning.” In short, as can be seen even here at the outset, Bowering took “a phenomenological position that attempts to respond to the flow of consciousness at the moment of [its] occurrence” (Toye 47), and he has followed this kind of “flow” throughout his career, just as Olson, Duncan, and Blaser had. Indeed, Bowering’s inspiration was immediate and direct. He described the situation this way: “In the early sixties the young Vancouverians were reading Olson as much as they could, quoting him . . . holding discussions about his pronouncements. They found him very difficult to read, this huge Yankee, but they knew that he was announcing the ‘new’” (*Left Hook* 77).⁹ In addition to the wide reading they were doing, the literal presence of the American poets in Vancouver was especially important to these young Canadians. As Bowering said about Duncan’s visits, they were “generative” (*Left Hook* 99).

Bowering’s poetry is difficult to excerpt and to comment on briefly, since his long career and his elaborate canon, like Olson’s, Duncan’s and Blaser’s, really, ultimately, needs to be understood as one long uninterrupted poem – and, indeed, several of his most important poems are themselves long poems.

However, Miki argues that the poems in *Sticks & Stones* “are the pure product of the *Tish* group days.” He adds that most of the poems were composed “from August 1961 to May 1962” and that the book itself was probably originally printed at the “end of May, 1962” (59). As Miki says, “There’s the pun on ‘words will never hurt me,’ ‘sticks and stones and words,’ and so forth, but the main notion was that you built poems out of actual things – and some poems . . . carry that image through, of poems made of actual things,” (interview with Bowering, “10 April 1985,” qtd. in *Sticks & Stones* 59). He confirms that “The dedication to Robert Duncan acknowledges the importance of Duncan for the *Tish* group.” He also corroborates the fact that “Robert Creeley . . . was Bowering’s supervisor for his MA thesis” (59).

⁹ In spite of such pronouncements by the poets themselves, not all critics subscribe to the belief that there was an overt and specific “influence” running between the American Black Mountain poets and the young Canadians. Wiens, for example, argues that “the Black Mountain influence has been exaggerated” and that the “‘modernism’ which developed in Canada during that period was a nebulous and internally differentiated creature; and that the failures of the young poets at this time were at least as productive as their successes” (84).

As Bowering himself has said, “I got into the habit of writing long poems.” And, he added, since the 1960s, “I have been writing long poems longer and longer ever since” (“Alphabiography” 308).

What I want to concentrate on here are several of these long pieces, each of which, like *Sticks & Stones*, is crucial to Bowering’s early career and thus important to the tradition he grew out of, the “tradition” that he and others established among the young poets in Canada in the early 1960s, the tradition that I have been trying to document.¹⁰ The first of these texts is a book-length poem, *George, Vancouver: A Discovery Poem* (1970). In addition, I want to consider Bowering’s *Autobiology* (1972), a collection of forty-eight numbered and individually titled sections, really a series of prose poems, “bio-texts,” or “historiographical metafiction.” Indeed, “Biotexts” seems to be an appropriate term for these so specifically biographical or autobiographical texts. In *Errata*, which one critic has described as “an example of the poetics of extended form presented in an extended form of poetics, that is, in the . . . form of the serial poem as prose argument(s)” (Barbour 27), Bowering himself wrote: “I never wanted to write an autobiography. I think that certain works I have done with what looks like my life story should be called biotext[s]. . . . Autobiography replaces the writer. Biotext is an extension of him” (*Errata* 34).¹¹

¹⁰ I am mindful of the caution that Bowering himself has given with respect to readers and critics who attempt to describe or document traditions. In the first entry of his *Errata*, for instance, Bowering wrote: “People who posit ideas such as The Canadian Tradition or The Northern Experience should travel less and spend time in more places.” Even so, this entry begins, “In the theatre, each member of the audience sees a different play because no two people are sitting in the same seat” (1). Poets and their commentators, both historically and notoriously, have often sat in different seats.

¹¹ Although she does not discuss any of Bowering’s work in commenting on his term “biotext,” Saul interprets Bowering’s term. A “biotext,” she says, “captures the tension at work between . . . the fragments of a life being lived, the ‘bio’ (with its emphasis on the self, the family, origins, and genealogy), and the ‘text,’ the site where these various aspects are in the process of being articulated in writing. Rather than admitting a gap between self and text, ‘biotext’ foregrounds the writer’s efforts to articulate him or her self through the writing process.” And thus, “the text itself comes to life” (260). Therefore, “rather than presenting finished versions of a life, these texts focus on the process of writing a life – the raptures, gaps, and workings of memory,” and they incorporate “elements of the epic, the lyric, and the documentary while challenging the very assumptions invested in these genres” (260-61). Similarly, in making use of a trope that is particularly relevant in terms of the title of this paper, Newman describes the process of “life-writing” as one that “crosses and recrosses the borders

VI

I do not compose poetry to show you what I have seen, but rather because I have seen. That is, this poet's job is not to tell you what it is like, but to make a poem. (George Bowering)

Autobiology begins with a chapter called "The Raspberries," a Gertrude Stein-like¹² reminiscence:

When I was thirty I had free raspberries in the back yard & I loved them. In the back yard & I ate them. & I ate them in the kitchen out of an aluminum pot. When I was thirty I loved raspberries, I loved to eat them. I loved the way they were made of many pieces in my mouth, & they came from the outside of the bush & the inside. They came from the outside in the sunshine & from the inside in the darkness, & that is where they went again. But inside in the darkness is where we are told the subconscious is & that is why I could not eat raspberries. (*Autobiology* 7)¹³

Much of the *Autobiology* is made up of such sequences based on specific memories. Indeed, as Bowering writes, in "The Verandah," "so much depended on not now . . . but my memory" (*A* 18).¹⁴ In this way, "[t]he word from my hand follows the release of my eye from the dream of my release from the ground but just" (*A* 13). And then he adds, "I began to think I was a super man . . . because I could not be ordinary or what was the use of being here inside my mind instead of out there where they all were?" (*A* 14).

In the chapter called "Composition" he writes:

between auto/biography and fiction in order to question static and holistic conceptions of the writing subject" (333).

¹² In *Errata*, Bowering describes his indebtedness to Gertrude Stein and suggests that, finally, they might be evaluated similarly. He said: "I have known the name of Gertrude Stein all my life, and read her seriously for twenty years. I guess that when all is said and done I will settle for what they gave her: I will be someone who did not write books . . . to be placed in the mainstream of Canadian literature, but all the same someone whom they cannot write a history without mentioning. He was always pottering around in his garden, they will say, and once in a long while someone would come around and, well not really admire, but perhaps enquire about the odd-looking shrubs" (16).

¹³ Hereafter, all further references to Bowering's *Autobiology* will be included in the text, in parentheses, designated as *A*.

¹⁴ Here it seems almost certain that Bowering is echoing William Carlos Williams' "The Red Wheelbarrow" and suggesting, as Williams had, that virtually *everything* depends on memories. Bowering's reference to "The blood of the white chickens" (*A* 65) seems to be a further specific reference to Williams' poem and to the "white / chickens" in it. This is especially the case when one remembers Williams' continuous stress on "no ideas but in things."

Consciousness is how it is composed. Consciousness is how it is composed. . . . Consciousness is how it is composed. . . . Consciousness is how it is composed. . . . It is composed & not by us because we are in the composition. I say consciousness is how it is composed. (A 33)

Later, he adds, "Composition is not there . . . & you are here & that is where & you might believe when. . . . Consciousness is how it is composed" (A 38).

Throughout *Autobiology* Bowering makes references to specific times and places in his past, his history, and then brings them into the present, into an immediate moment of consciousness. He writes, "I found myself for the first time in the present. . . . [B]ut I was already not the same & each time thereafter I was only by memory & the gift of the present not the same . . . because the present continues not moving" (A 19-20). And then, later, he writes:

The next place is really a series of places so that the next place is really time, that is, a series . . . that is certainly, there . . . & we always had a town or city nearby, & though we thought it was always different we always acted as if it was the same, perhaps, because we were, where we were, was always the same, though we spoke always of the difference, from time to time, of the place, & so, there you are. The next place, then, is always, a series of times, & we were always careful about time, & here I am, speaking of "we," so there we are. (A 75)

At the end of the book, Bowering poses several Stein-like unanswered and unanswerable questions. These questions are posed as statements and left hanging: "I am in the middle of a stream & my body is the stream & what is the boat. . . . If this is the stream & I am still to float what is the boat. What is the boat" (A 101-02). This is the essence of his *Autobiology*.

In the Prologue to his novel *Burning Water*, Bowering wrote:

When I was a boy I was the only person I knew who was named George, but I did have the same first name as the king. That made me feel as if current history and self were bound together. . . . When I came to live in Vancouver, I thought of Vancouver, and so now geography involved my name too, George Vancouver. He might have felt such romance, sailing for a king named George the Third. What could I do but write a book filled with history and myself, about these people and this place? (9)¹⁵

¹⁵ Bowering added, "so I wrote a poetry book about Vancouver and me. Then a radio play about us. . . . But I was not satisfied. The story of the greatest navigational voyage of all time was not lyrical, and it was certainly not dramatic. It was narrative. So I began to plan a novel, about us, about the strange fancy that history is given and the strange fact that history is taken. Without a storyteller, George Vancouver is just another dead sailor" (*Burning Water* 9).

Like his *Autobiology*, *George, Vancouver*, his first long poem, also fits into the *genre* of Bowering's "georgeographical verse" (Gervais 12). Dedicated to Warren Tallman – with another bow to William Carlos Williams and his poem *Paterson* – Bowering's poem conflates his own name, George, with that of the historical figure, Captain George Vancouver, the 18th-century explorer who sailed during the reign of King George III, and with the location, Vancouver, where the poem is set. It is, in this sense, as the sub-title to the book makes plain, a tripartite "discovery" poem. As Bowering has said elsewhere, in addition to remembering "Captain Vancouver's visits to our coast," he had to "cover the ground [himself] and bring any myths to life." He also had, he said, to "discover – and invent – our land for [himself]" ("Confessions" 79).

Bowering has described how "North is . . . an important concept for Canadians. . . . North is supposed to be mystical, national, psychological" ("Alphabiography" 308). In short, Bowering had an equal investment in the poem and the personages (primarily himself and George Vancouver) and in the place. As Hartley has quite rightly said, Bowering "reworks his life in connection with a well-known historical figure . . . and a well-known geographical location, simultaneously rediscovering both Vancouvers as they intersect with Bowering as both poet and persona" (97-98). Indeed, Bowering's poem was to become his own "northwest passage" and, in a metaphorical way, the result of his own vicarious "voyage" from Black Mountain north to Vancouver, Canada.

Consisting of thirty-three poems, several of which purport to be journal entries, definitions, or catalogs of "this Voyage of Discovery" (*George, Vancouver* 29)¹⁶ or, in several instances, historical notes or references to events or circumstances in England at the time that Vancouver was in the area and charting the territory, the poem begins with both a physical and a metaphysical reference, an impossible possibility:

To chart this land
hanging over ten thousand inlets
& a distant mind of as many narrows,

an impossible thing----
no music

¹⁶ Hereafter, all further references to this book will be included in the text, in parentheses, designated as *GV*.

sounds as many changes with such
common theme.

.

That is the possible.

.

The charts will
take care of themselves. (*GV* 5)

The rest of the poem “charts” two journeys of “discovery,” that of Captain George Vancouver in the 18th century and that of George Bowering in the 20th.¹⁷ As Bowering, conflating himself with Vancouver and mixing the physical and the imaginative “territories” of their dual discoveries together, says, “There is that meeting edge / . . . across the ground of the continent” (*GV* 6). It is an “edge” here brought together.

Clearly merging his own voice anachronistically with that of his imagined predecessor, Captain Vancouver, Bowering says, “I, George, / sail beneath a suspended bridge,” one that is visibly “invisible in the fog” and with “the pressure of all that / continent, trackless” (*GV* 14) before him. And, as he also says, Captain Vancouver often “seems lost in the poem” (*GV* 15). This is an intriguing statement since *both* George Vancouver and George Bowering seem to flit in and out of the poem, being found, then lost, then found again as we read along, journeying as it were with them – and even, occasionally, getting somewhat lost ourselves. In so conflating himself with George Vancouver, and thus exercising the inherent “biotextual impulse” (Hartley 106) of the poem, George Bowering suggests another way in which he and Vancouver can be paired. In saying that “Vancouver’s job was to look at the coast / north to the passage, / & check on foreign squatters (*GV* 19), George Bowering, likewise, might well be thinking of his own “job” as a Canadian writer, one who needed to guard “the passage” of the poetic “information” being passed back and forth between America and Canada, one who needed to check on the “foreign” (American) influences which were

¹⁷ It is perhaps worth mentioning that George Vancouver, before he made his own voyages of discovery, served under Captain James Cook on Cook’s third voyage (1776-78) on his *HMS Discovery*.

making their ways “north” through the overland “passage” across the continent. Later on, in keeping with this increasingly complicated metaphor, Bowering, in the guise of an historian or a reporter, says, “The North West Passage / is the waterway / to the Kingdom of God . . . deep inland / up Cook’s River. . . // & you, Vancouver, will lead us” (*GV* 31). Vancouver, Bowering says (and perhaps he is also here thinking – even primarily – of himself), “went to the end & came back” (*GV* 36). And thus the journey he (they) undertook took them “That far south, / this far north” (*GV* 37).

At the very end of the poem, Bowering refers to “invit[ing] the fog / of the . . . current” and to sailing with a “map in their minds.” But he immediately cautions and reminds himself that much of this – his – journey “is conjecture” and that, in his poem, these are the “orders / I take and give” (*GV* 38). In the final entry in the sequence and the book, Bowering writes,

Let us say
this is as far as I, George,
have traveled,

the line
obscured still . . . (*GV* 39)

Here, at the end of the poem, he acknowledges that he has “seen some / of what lies in the mind,” and that it has permeated his consciousness “like fish odor” and, keeping to the metaphor he has used since the outset, that it has gone “into the life-giving fog of that coast” (*GV* 39). With this, the poem, having rocked back and forth on the tides of their separate times, George Vancouver and George Bowering meld and merge into each other in the mysteries of an all-pervasive fog, giving new life to their dual, mutual, territory.

VII

I see – it’s some idea about life, some sort of philosophy. (Henry James)

In 1959, shortly before he was to make his powerful impact on the young Canadian poets in Vancouver, Robert Duncan wrote:

These are the threads. And the weaving now of the design is so close, so immediate and so intertwined, with so many undiscovered threads, that I must trust the figures as they emerge, have faith that there is the wholeness of form. . . . There is a wholeness . . . that we will never know; we are always . . . the moment of that wholeness . . . but it, the wholeness . . . goes back into an obscurity and extends to and into an obscurity. (qtd. in Allen 436).

Perhaps it has always been the case that the “threads,” and the “weaving” of any final “design,” are inevitably “so intertwined” that the final figure in every literary carpet “goes back into an obscurity.” As Henry James said in commenting on “The Figure in the Carpet,” “the issue of the affair, can be but whether the very secret of perception hasn’t been lost. That is the situation” (45). Likewise, it is the situation here, and we “on the evidence” (46) are left to come to our own conclusions, just as James’ readers were.

I hope that I have adequately presented the “evidence” here and have provided – and come to – an appropriate “conclusion” with respect to the complex relationships in the rather elaborate crisscrossing of the North American continent from Black Mountain to Vancouver, and between the American poets and their Canadian counterparts, but that, ultimately, will be for others to decide. Whatever the final decisions may be, let me here give the last word to George Bowering:

Well was that the end yes & no. It was the end of the mystery & the end of the decade & the end of the Black Mountain Influence & the end of the geographical mystery of Canadian literature & it was in a way the end of Canadian literature. (*A Short Sad Book* 139)

...

I just want to know it’s not over, not (*Errata* 23)¹⁸

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¹⁸ Note the absence of any final period here – which is the way Bowering left it.

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