

EDITOR'S NOTE

As originally announced and planned, Robert Kroetsch was to have served as co-editor of this special issue of MOSAIC. Because of the number of submissions which dealt either directly or indirectly with his writings, however, he felt that the cause of "Beyond Nationalism" would not best be furthered if he were to act in this capacity. Consequently it was agreed that instead of co-editing the collection he would make an autonomous contribution—the "Prologue" which follows.

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EJH

Beyond Nationalism: A Prologue

ROBERT KROETSCH

Hearing the silence of the world, the failure of the world to announce meaning, we tell stories. "Once upon a time there was...." "In the village of ___ in the year 183____..." "Tonight, as I drove home, a woman in a blue Volvo...." We tell stories and then, hearing our stories told, we ask if their meaning is in the content, or in the telling itself. As critics we elaborate the doubt that our stories were intended to contain.

Criticism, as an extension of the text, liberates the text into its own potential. But that critical search for meaning is, as Wolfgang Iser reminds us in *The Act of Reading*, "considerably influenced by historical norms, even though this influence is quite unconscious."¹ In our time part of that historical norm is the actual writer, standing by, slightly uneasy, somewhat exhausted, not a little uncertain, reluctantly paying attention. The author as reader, having heard the critics, meditates on an extension of the text that is only marginally his. And yet it is that very *margin* that reconnects him with the world.

Canadian writing itself, in the past decade, has been obsessed with intimating that connection to readers and critics and to other cultures; in novel after novel, the quest is, implicitly or even explicitly, genealogical.

Genealogy is a primary version of narrative. Begat begat begat. Characters in Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners* and Robertson Davies' *The Manticore* and Jack Hodgins' *The Invention of the World* conduct searches in Europe for lines of ancestry. A number of novelists find new ancestors in Africa or in the Native history and myths of North America. Michael Ondaatje and

Daphne Marlatt return to Asia for those lines of descent, and write down the literal world as a version of art. A. M. Klein, in *The Second Scroll* (1951), anticipates all these quests (a kind of reverse migration) with a quest that is religious and political and formal in its implications.

The nature of the genealogical patterns, when tested by journey and quest, becomes more and more elaborate, more nearly a maze. Janet Giltrow, in this collection of essays, points to a model in travel narrative; and one could place beside her maternal nineteenth-century settler's wife (Susanna Moodie) the paternal and mapping and bargaining figure of the trader-explorer, David Thompson. There is no single source; rather, a multiplying of possibilities.

The compounding of genealogical relationship, in the Canadian novel of the seventies, manifests itself in complex narrative structure; this becomes the dominant characteristic in a series of major novels: David Godfrey, *The New Ancestors* (1970), Rudy Wiebe, *The Temptations of Big Bear* (1973), Margaret Laurence, *The Diviners* (1974), Audrey Thomas, *Blown Figures* (1974), Michael Ondaatje, *Coming Through Slaughter* (1976), and Jack Hodgins, *The Invention of the World* (1977).

In these novels we have not only myriad embedded stories, but also embedded voices. We have Conradian complexities in which Marlow has lost all of his confidence. The voices threaten to override the voice. The moral and intellectual and emotional complexities refuse the coercion of a "sane" speaking. Like the apprehending (and apprehensive) seeker in *Coming Through Slaughter*, encountering the photograph of the dead musician, Buddy Bolden, the would-be organizing center can only say: "The photograph moves and becomes a mirror. When I read he stood in front of mirrors and attacked himself, there was the shock of memory. For I had done that. Stood, and with a razor-blade cut into cheeks and forehead, shaved hair. Defiling people we did not wish to be. He comes into the room, kneels in front of the mirror and sits on his heels. Begins to talk."²

Our genealogies are the narratives of a discontent with a history that lied to us, violated us, erased us even. We wish to locate our dislocation, and to do so we must confront the impossible sum of our traditions. Like the Spanish-American writers from whom we presently learn so much, we recognize that we can be freed into our own lives only by terrible and repeated acts of perception. We are envious of the huge, ragged, contradictory visions of Borges or Marquez or Fuentes or Llosa or Cortazar.

Michel Foucault, speaking of Nietzsche's friend, Paul Ree, says:

He assumed that words had kept their meaning, that desires still pointed in a single direction, and that ideas retained their logic; and he ignored the fact that the world of speech and desires has known invasions, struggles, plundering, disguises, ploys. From these elements, however, genealogy retrieves an indispensable restraint; it must record the singularity of events outside of any monotonous finality; it must seek them in the most unpromising places, in what we tend to feel is without history—in sentiments, love, conscience, instincts; it must be sensitive to their recurrence, not in order to trace the gradual curve of their evolution, but to isolate the different scenes, where they engaged in different toles. Finally, genealogy must define those instances where they are absent, the moment when they remained unrealized....³

The words have changed meaning for the Canadian writer; the desires have multiplied their directions. The task of criticism, now, is to examine those changes and those new directions without recourse to an easy version of national definition, and without easy recourse to old vocabularies. And the paradox is, again, that from the recognition of difference (or occasion, or signature) comes the illumination outward, as is suggested by the fictions themselves.

The figure of the artist is obsessively present in Canadian writing; the *kunstlerroman* is, often, its sub-genre. In the beginning is the artist, beginning. With the difference that in Canadian writing the artist-figure is often a woman.

From the nameless (Mrs. Bentley) narrator of Sinclair Ross's *As for Me and My House* (1941), female and male-obsessed and male-consuming, to Audrey Thomas' self-surrogate in *Latakia* (1979), female and writing-obsessed and male-devouring, we see the woman as the powerful artist-figure; we see the strong woman, busily writing a journal or a diary or letters, conniving the world into shape and existence, the man in the study or the bedroom or the bathroom, drawing failed pictures or pretending to write, white-lipped or crying, dreaming of his pipe or masturbating while he thinks of his "wife," needing monotonously to be humored or genitally "suckled" in a parody of the nurturing source.

The nameless female narrator in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*, the false artist becoming the true artist, has minimal need of her *Joe*. The novelist-woman in *The Diviners* has a lover who is never at home, thank heavens. And in Alice Munro's *Lives of Girls and Women*, a deliberate parallel to (and parody of?) Joyce's *Portrait*, the incipient woman novelist talks a lot about sex, but is "saved" from relationships.

Ross's Mrs. Bentley invents a failed self in the figure of Judith West. Thomas' Rachel invents a failed female artist in her lover's wife. In the love triangle that leads to the writing act, the male is ultimately ineffectual, the "other woman" doomed.

Ernest Buckler's *The Mountain and the Valley* offers us the best portrait of the young *man* as artist. But even in that novel, the accomplished artist, the artist who completes a work, is not David Canaan, but rather, his grandmother.

These succeeding female artists dwell, to a remarkable extent, in rural worlds, worlds that border on the pastoral—and the pastoral suggests a concern with two subjects only: love and art. This domination of the pastoral scene by women, in Canadian writing, dates back at least to the whining and bitching figure of Susanna Moodie. Today it places Canadian writing in a position of moral leadership at an international level.

If Stendhal established the model of the bright young man from the provinces going on to success in the city, it is Canadian novelists like Munro and Atwood and Laurence who give us the bright young woman going forward on that journey, toward an uneasy urban success. But the story

seldom actually takes us into the city. This is one of those places, spoken of by Foucault, where genealogy must define an absence. Unlike American literature, with its elaborate conventions of the city as nightmare, Canadian writing treats the city as an invisible presence. The stories are written for urban audiences; the metaphoric base is adamantly rural or small-town.

The place of Canadian fiction is a house, an isolated community, a small town—and Sheila Watson, in *The Double Hook* (1959), announced all three as paradigmatic. In these places the self is imagined as a contextual stance (sub-stance, in-stance); familiarity is the norm, or would seem to be the norm. In the city the stranger is the norm. But inversions assert themselves, on this double hook. We somehow know the stranger. We misread the familiar.

Canadians are supremely at home when they travel. The departure and initiation and return of travel literature is basic to the narrative mode; the urban figures in Canadian literature, when we actually encounter them (in Davies, in Thomas, in Atwood, in Mordecai Richler) are, typically, traveling.

The force that brings together the two models, the small place and the impulse to travel, is the quarrel with Eden. Since Columbus and Cortez, the Americas have been entrapped in that quest (be it for something that was lost or something that is to be found) and with it comes, always, the question of originality. *Originality*.

Hodgins' *The Invention of the World* is an elaborate search through multiplying counterfeits for some semblance of the real thing. Thomas' *Latakia* takes us to the earliest of alphabets (Ugaritic; in Syria), only to find it lost in an archaeological scrap heap of artifacts and languages and men and gods; Rachel's eastward quest (contrary to the westward longing of so much North American literature) leads only to her (now lost) lover's cryptic: "That's nonsense," and her own writing down of the immensity of the found losses.

Hubert Aquin, in *Prochain Episode*, his hero a prisoner and a mental patient become a writer, confronts the absolute tension between the dream of doing something totally original and the fact that he must do it in one of the most rigid of narrative forms, the espionage story. Aquin, his hero traveling, seeking versions of Eden, a hero able to imagine but unable to act out the moment of revolution that would create a zero point, a beginning place, an easy definition, a time that both announced and stopped time, turns the Canadian into the hero of the contemporary world and Canada into its metaphor.

Canadians seek the lost and everlasting moment when chaos and order were synonymous. They seek that timeless split-second in time when the one, in the process of becoming the other, was itself and the other. The city of such dreams is unrealizable; the poem of the occasion becomes the unendable long poem such as bp nichol's brilliant irresolution of resolution, *The Martyrology*, or Margaret Atwood's elegiac hymn to survival, *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*.

The escape from definition excites the Canadian beyond all reason. He is the American who is contrary to the American. He is the questing figure

with the blurred photograph of what he must find gripped firmly in his hand, as in Klein's *The Second Scroll*. He is the agglomerate self of all those novels that hear a multiplicity of voices. He is the figure of Odysseus answering "Nobody" to Polyphemus' life-and-death question.

Two consequences attest to the ambiguities inherent in this response.

On the one hand: our concern with self-mockery and self-parody (and Beverly Rasporich, in her essay on the Leacock persona, begins to elaborate those evasions). The self-revelation of self-mockery. The self-protection. The *fool* self that Mrs. Bentley both approaches and denies. The distrust of heroics; the imitation that turns to mimicry. . . . The ending of Munro's *Lives of Girls and Women*, where Bobby Sherriff, supposedly mad, is serving real cake in his real house to the young woman who is about to become a fiction writer: he takes her fork, her napkin, her empty plate: and then "he did the only special thing he ever did for me. With those things in his hands, he rose on his toes like a dancer, like a plump ballerina."

The "madman," come to a powerless wisdom, speaks his enigmatic dance. This in a final chapter called "Epilogue: The Photographer." And the young woman, watching Bobby Sherriff's androgynous⁴ victory, has already decided: "I would try to make lists."

On the other hand: documentation. The lists of names. The family records. The snapshots that at once announce genealogy and preclude finality. T. D. MacLulich's intriguing essay, "Ondaatje's Mechanical Boy: Portrait of the Artist as Photographer," points to the ubiquitous photograph or photographer in Canadian writing. The pretense of authority is mocked, done away with by the amateur "take." The *snapshot* suggests the local, it suggests the magic of recovery, the metaphysics of time stopped, the validation of art by art denied. And it admits, through its lack of intentionality, that even in knowing we cannot know.

Foucault says that "Genealogy is gray, meticulous, and patiently documentary."⁵ It is a naming act, but in a special way: the documentary act precludes all generalization. Document opens up the site; it is the archaeological act that resists the over-arching generalizations of history.

From the elaborate documents of *The Temptations of Big Bear* to the real or imagined documents of Timothy Findley's *The Wars* to the imagined documents of *The Invention of the World*—the lesson is always the same. A reading of the world is at best a misreading of the world.

How does narrative mean?

To proceed by indirection: that meaning-obsessed novel, *The Mountain and the Valley*, that story of the novelist looking for both the tale and the teller, is framed not only by the grandmother's rug but also by a recurring word.

Three times in the opening chapter, David Canaan replies to his grandmother's questions (What are you looking at? What are you doing? What do you see?): "Nothing." At the end of the novel the grandmother repeats her questions. Her grandson replies, again: "Nothing."⁶

Against this nothing Buckler posits a vision that might include the whole of human activity. He announces supremely the predicament we are in: we might exist in a cosmology that is so detailed and complete it enables us to read each object and act and expression not simply as metaphor but as symbol. Or we might live in a world that means *nothing*.

The novel, after Flaubert's word for word (not word for world) telling (a novel, ideally, about nothing), had a crisis about its own story.⁷ Daphne Marlatt turns that crisis into the stuff of her writing, and in the process, in the phenomenology of process, comes close to rejecting concepts of character and plot. She attempts a violent documentation of the perceiving body. And yet, even so radical a book as it is, *Zócalo* is, finally, a travel book, a journey into Mexico in search of narrative itself.

The question of identity is not exactly the Canadian question. That is an interpretive matter for people who already have their story. We ask, rather, what is the narrative of us? We continue to have a crisis about our own story. The very ability to see ourselves is based on the narrative mode: the I telling a story of I, of we, of the they that mirrors us.

This volume of essays is, spectacularly at times, a critical attempt to name, in the world's story-body, the recurrences and obsessions and strategies that become, in turn, the naming of a culture called Canada. The essays speak, persuasively, to their own and varied conclusions. I will conclude by positing beside or against them the endings of some of the stories that originated the essays.

The woman's story leads often to the failure of that classical ending, marriage. In *Lives of Girls and Women*, in *The Diviners*, in *Latakia*, we end with the woman alone. The writing woman, alone, writing. The genealogy that will not allow easy resolution.

Marriage is the model for an ending in *The Invention of the World*; but the ceremony of the wedding is parodic, and death (Horseman) takes the bride and groom for a ride. Parody becomes a way into ending. The ending of Rudy Wiebe's *Big Bear*, unwittingly perhaps, parodies the novel's own moral and historical ambitions.

It is no accident that a number of Canadian novels announce an indebtedness to the model of detective fiction, with its promise of a wrap-up ending, a solution, an untangling, a resolution of mystery.

In *The Manticore* we begin with the question, "Who killed Boy Staunton?" The criminal-lawyer hero leads us into the genealogical maze of all our lines of *descent*. In *Coming Through Slaughter* (with its birth and death title) we hear the question, Who or what killed that "first" artist, Buddy Bolden? And we are told, at the end, cryptically, that indeed ("There are no prizes.") there are no teleologies that shape our endlessness. In Aquin's *Prochain Episode*, the question of who killed whom becomes the question of who couldn't kill whom; the failed secret agent (again, back to Conrad) is sitting in a jail that has become a mental asylum, and he is either writing down or making up the story of his search for his story.

Canadian writing takes place between the vastness of (closed) cosmologies and the fragments found in the (open) field of the archaeological site. It is a literature of dangerous middles. It is a literature that, compulsively seeking its own story (and to be prophetic after all: this will still be the case a century from now) comes compulsively to a genealogy that refuses origin, to a genealogy that speaks instead, and anxiously, and with a generous reticence, the nightmare and the welcome dream of Babel.

NOTES

- 1/ Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore and London, 1978) p. 3.
- 2/ Michael Ondaatje, *Coming Through Slaughter* (Toronto, 1976), p. 133.
- 3/ Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. with an introduction by Donald F. Bouchard, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca, 1977), pp. 138-39.
- 4/ The ex-rodeo star, Laura, in Ross's *As for Me and My House*, anticipates the recurring androgynous figure in contemporary Canadian writing. Long before the appearance of Ross's novel, David Thompson, in his *Travels*, built climactically toward his encounter with the Indian prophetess who comes to his camp, "apparently a young man, well dressed in leather, carrying a bow and arrows...." These two women are among the first of the celestial hitchhikers who travel the wildernesses of North America, be they Kerouac's sexually ambiguous heroes or the cowgirls and whooping cranes of Tom Robbins' *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*.
- 5/ Foucault, p. 139.
- 6/ Three decades later, Hodgins, at the end of the "Maggie" chapter in *The Invention of the World*, has Danny Holland ask if he should go or stay:
 "It doesn't matter," Maggie said.
 "What does that mean," Holland said.
 "Nothing," Maggie said. "There's beer in the fridge if you want it. Have one if you like, but it doesn't matter."
- 7/ After the foregrounding of language out of context, perhaps we are tempted to foreground story out of context. One has an uneasy feeling at times, reading Marquez or Hodgins, that the world invented (or even, with more attractive connotations, "created") is a world lost.